

# THE PURIFYING LOVE OF GOD

**I**N THE WRITINGS of St. John of the Cross we find a very helpful image that he uses to assist us to see more clearly the way in which a soul grows in its union with God. In this image, God is represented as a fire and the soul as a piece of wood, like a piece of firewood. When God's fire first comes in contact with the wood the wood experiences the warmth of God's love. But then, as the fire penetrates more deeply into the wood, it begins to encounter things that are contrary to the fire's own nature. It encounters things like moisture and sap and, in order to penetrate more deeply, the fire has to expel these things that are contrary to its nature and the wood begins to hiss and crackle and pop. Then finally, after those elements which are contrary to the fire are driven out, the fire so permeates the wood that the wood glows with the fire in a way which makes it difficult to distinguish between the two, because the nature of fire has so completely penetrated the nature

of the wood.

*“There is a principle of the interior life which St. Thomas mentions on many occasions: We become like the things we love.”*

This is a helpful image in thinking about the progression of a soul in its union with God. It's interesting to note that the three successive stages correspond in a way to the three sets of mysteries of the Rosary that we pray: the joyful, the sorrowful and the glorious. When we begin our journey with God, very often He gives us a period of joyful encounter. The fire of His love enlightens our minds and warms us and draws us to Him. At the beginning of our journey, God often gives graces of sensible consolations and a sense of His presence. But then as God begins to penetrate more deeply into the soul, the fire of God's love becomes more of a purifying fire, a fire which needs to drive out all that is contrary to this union of love. In this stage of the spiritual life we can experience God in a way where it might seem as if He were against us. In a way God becomes a source of pain as He works to drive out from us all that is

contrary to His holiness and His purity, and our souls begin to hiss and crackle and pop, as it were. And then finally, in the last stage there is this harmonious fusion of the nature of the fire and of the wood as God's love completely fills and penetrates and transforms the soul.

What is important to see in this image is that in all three stages it is the same love of God that is at work. We might be inclined to believe that in the second stage God's justice takes over but, in fact, it is still His love that is at work. Very often in this middle stage souls will complain that they feel as if God has abandoned them, that He is no longer present as He used to be, whereas the truth is that His love is still working, and in fact working at a deeper level. The purifying love of God can actually leave us with periods of dryness and a sense of separation from God. And we are more likely to fail to see this action of God in the soul as an effect of His love if we have false notions about the nature of true love; if we think that love must always feel good. God has His sights set on what is **truly** good for us and His love will not leave us with vain attachments and illusions which are harmful to us and incompatible with His holiness and purity.

This purification by fire which we need to undergo is, above all, a purification of our disordered desires. St. John of the Cross, in his writings, has much to say about how much harm inordinate desires cause our soul. These desires cause our souls harm, in the first place, because they deprive us of fixing our attention on our true good and of pursuing and uniting ourselves to it, which is God. And then they also cause us various kinds of positive harms: St. John of the Cross says that these inordinate attachments *wear* our souls — we grow tired of always trying to fill our souls with things

that can't satisfy them. They also *torment* our souls because they cause us to lose our peace when we cannot always have what we desire. And then our inordinate attachments *darken* our souls because our desires overwhelm our intellects and cloud them so that we can't judge correctly about what is truly good for us. And, finally, our disordered desires *defile* our souls by attaching them and mixing them with creatures which are beneath our souls.

There is a principle of the interior life which St. Thomas mentions on many occasions: We become like the things we love. If we love carnal things, we become carnal men; if we love spiritual things, we become spiritual men. If we love and become attached to little, petty things, we become little, petty people. St. John of the Cross in one place gives some examples of small disordered appetites that can greatly hinder us and present substantial obstacles to our spiritual growth. He writes: "Some examples of these habitual imperfections are: the common habit of being very talkative; a small attachment one never really desires to conquer, for example, to a person, to clothing, to a book or a cell, or to the way food is prepared, and to other trifling conversations and little satisfactions in tasting, knowing, and hearing things and so on. Any of these habitual imperfections to which there is attachment is as harmful to progress in virtue as the daily commission of many other imperfections and sporadic venial sins that do not result from a bad habit. These latter will not hinder a person as much as will the attachment to something."

A certain Carmelite priest, Fr. Marc Foley, has a very good comment on this passage of St. John of the Cross. He writes: "When I first read this passage, I asked my-



self, 'Is St. John of the Cross serious? These are just peccadilloes! How could he assign so much importance to trivialities?' I think John might respond to my puzzlement with the following: 'Marc, you're right. The things that I mention are trivial in nature, but they are the very things out of which we fashion a way of life and in which we invest enormous amounts of time and energy. That's where the tragedy lies.'<sup>1</sup> The tragedy of being addicted to trivialities is that our lives become trivial. We become like the things we love. It is easy to

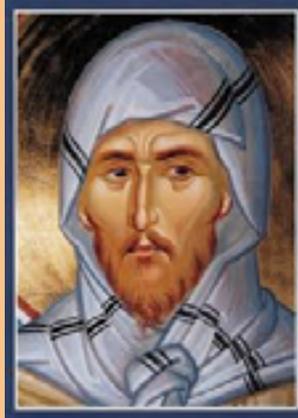
become trivial, just love things that are trivial and become attached to things that are trivial ... like the way your food is prepared.

If we submit ourselves generously to the purifying fire of God's love, we will free ourselves more and more from all these disordered affections which weary, torment, darken and defile our souls and which keep us from entering into a more habitual union with the God who can really satisfy our desires and bring us true light and peace. ❖

<sup>1</sup>Marc Foley, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel: Reflections*, ICS Publications, 2013, p. 50.

## ST EPHREM AND THE HARROWING OF HELL

The Maronite liturgy draws much of its beauty from the writings of St. Ephrem the Syriani (+ 373 AD). This Doctor of the Church is unique in that most of his theology is written in the form of poetry. St. Ephrem lived in an age and region where heretical teachings (such as Arianism) were popularized through songs. He countered these with hymns that expounded the true faith and reflected on the mysteries of God's revelation. In the following hymn, he reflects on our Lord's death and descent into hell:



*Our Lord subdued His might and constrained it, that His living death might give life to Adam. His hands He gave to the piercing of the nails, instead of the hand that plucked the fruit: He was smitten on the cheek in the judgment hall, instead of the mouth that ate it in Eden. And because his foot bore Adam thence, His feet were pierced. Our Lord was stripped that He might make us modest: with the gall and vinegar He made sweet the bitterness of the serpent, which he had poured forth into mankind.*

*Response: Blessed is He Who gave me the victory and*

*quicken the dead to His glory.*

*Death: "If Thou be God show Thy power; and if Thou be man, feel our power. And if it be Adam that Thou seekest, get Thee hence! Because of his transgressions he is shut up here; Cherubim and Seraphim await not, in his stead to pay his debt. There is none among them mortal, so as to give his life in his stead. Who can open the mouth of hell, and plunge and bring him up from her, who has swallowed him and keeps a hold on him, and that forever!"*

...

*Death ended his speech of derision: and the voice of our Lord sounded into Hell, and He cried aloud and burst the graves one by one. Tremblings took hold on Death; Hell that never of old had been lighted up, into it there flashed splendors, from the Watchers [Angels] who entered in and brought out the dead to meet Him, who was dead and gives life to all. The dead came forth, and the living were ashamed, they who thought that they had conquered the Life Giver of all. (From the Nisibine Hymns: XXXVI) †*

As we enter into the joy of Easter, may we hold fast to our hope and the consolation that, as Christ rose from the dead, so shall we who follow the path He traced out for us to Paradise. Have a blessed Easter!

† Paul A. Boer, editor. *Hymns and Homilies of St. Ephraim the Syrian*, Veritatis Splendor Publications, 2012.