

The Living Flame of Life and Love for the 21st Century

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The 20th century was marked by rapid change, amazing advances in science and technology and cataclysmic wars. While it was a century of amazing progress, it was also an age of death, destruction and cruelty. It was also a time when institutions faced change and challenge. The institutional Church knew upheaval and its authority faced intense questioning.

In the face of all this the following words of Pope John Paul II have a prophetic ring of hope: "The tears of this century have prepared the ground for a new springtime of the human spirit."

His words echo Newman's vision of a second spring but even more so draw our attention to a passage in the *Song of Songs*:

Arise my love, my dove, my beautiful one
and come away;
for now the winter is past,
the rain over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth;
the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtledove
Is heard in our land.
Song 2:10ff.

The *Song of Songs* was the favourite book of scripture for the Carmelite mystic John of the Cross. He saw in that book which celebrated the goodness of creation and above all the wonder of human loving, a pathway to our loving union and intimacy with our God and with each other.

O living flame of love
that tenderly wounds my soul
in its deepest centre! Since
now you are not oppressive,
now consummate! If it be your will:
tear through the veil of this sweet encounter.
How tenderly you swell my heart with love.

The *Living Flame of Love* is one of John's later poems that condenses his teaching showing the powerful action of God's love in his life. The poem also celebrates his deep friendship with Anna de Penalosa, one of many friends who enriched his life. Friendship for John was a key dynamic in his story.

John's poem shows a great joy, a profound sense of longing. However for most of us life is not poetic, it can so often feel prosaic in the extreme. How can we connect such poetry and the reality of everyday life at the onset of the 21st century? How can we bridge our present day reality and our innate desire for something more, for the transcendent?

An American Carmelite friar, John Welch, believes that our Carmelite tradition has something positive to say in answer to these needs, these longings:

The Presence whom Carmelites have been contemplating for almost 800 years is a night that guides, an absence that reveals, a flame that heals. The Carmelite tradition offers a language for the soul helping to disclose this presence deep within our lives. It is a language of attentive stillness awaiting the lover's approach. This Carmelite way born of the attempt to live in allegiance to Jesus Christ is an ancient path for today's pilgrims.

(John Welch O.Carm.)

Welch calls us to question the way we live now. Our culture is lived very much on the surface. Public relations take over from personal relations and spin edges out substance. Images and sound bites prevail and the constant search for the new and sensational can wear us out. This way of life undermines any sense of inner awareness and can overwhelm what is genuinely human and life enhancing. We lose out on the capacity to wonder and deeper emotions like compassion can be ignored. As we lose the capacity to wonder, we also find that our imaginations lose their freedom. We need the facility to make connections so that we can think and view life in ways that go beyond narrow logic. We all need to develop a poetic sense so that we can celebrate life. The more our imaginations have freedom the better we are able to know ourselves and to realise that we are meant to be artists collaborating with God in shaping our own uniqueness - becoming the work of art that God longs us to become. This desire to find fulfilment is not something self-absorbed or narcissistic but rather helps us find energy to reach out to the needs of our world. Journeying into our hearts we encounter inner riches and realise that we cannot be content with the current cultural orthodoxy - there has to be more to life.

As Carmelites we do have resources in our Rule that can help us speak to our contemporaries. The skill of listening is an art that needs to be valued. Listening, pondering, treasuring in the heart are values that matter to Carmelites. Our Rule asks us to immerse ourselves in the scriptures, to ponder the word of the Lord day and night. I believe that such a stance opens us to the presence of God who is unconditional love. Such listening is contemplative prayer and it flourishes when we carve out solitude and stay in silence. Solitude and silence are not escapism but rather means to finding a place - the heart - where we can be still even if it is only for a short time. Silence helps us have something more significant to say, while a chance to be alone helps us face into our lives so that we can be objective and let go of false gods and idols that can crowd our lives. This freedom helps towards purity of heart and helps us to find space for Jesus Christ and his great project which is the establishing of God's reign. A heart open to God enables us to love those who are precious to God - our neighbours, our brothers and sisters. Once we become conscious of the gift of God's love we want to share it with others.

The openness to the other which is the mark of the true disciple finds its authentic expression in Community. For Carmelites the times of solitude and silence were a preparation for coming together in Eucharist and meals eaten in common. When we live in a society that is fragmented, violent and suspicious, the reality of people living in a community of friendship is a potent sign. It becomes a source of healing and a reminder that there are alternatives to the scramble for power, wealth and money. In the post-Communist world there is a terrible

hardness that flows from the philosophy of the unbridled market. Capital comes before people and serious inequalities occur. A booming economy is often at the cost of an underclass. If the market sets the agenda all too many can be excluded. In Britain today access to tertiary education is restricted as the poor cannot buy their way in, while in Ireland wealth in one area is on the back of an excluded urban poor. In all of this human relationships suffer as for some quality of life is seriously eroded. The stranger at the door, the refugee is feared and a new form of nationalism is quick to value difference rather than celebrate cultural diversity. The great 16th century reformer and Doctor of the Church, Teresa of Avila, saw renewal of Carmel as being expressed by the quality of human relationships. "All must be friends, all must be loved, all must be held dear, all must be helped." If we are a community of friendship and simplicity our energy will be freed to work for justice.

In the 19th century Thérèse of Lisieux, in reminding us that God's love is an expression of exuberant generosity, said quite simply that such love is all free - "*It is all grace*". Our response to such generosity and compassion should then be actions of love, generosity and compassion to the people we encounter.

John of the Cross in his poem *The Living Flame of Love* celebrates not just the generous love of God but a tender intimacy. Through his sufferings, through times of misunderstandings, John experienced a closeness to God that he was able to express in sublime lyric poetry. He found God when he had travelled through a darkness that led him to a new level of encounter. He trusted, lived through times of abandonment coming to light. This darkness, often akin to depression, can be the experience of many people today. The negative structures of our society can sap us of energy and when the collective darkness of society touches us it can seem impossible to break out into light. And yet in the Carmelite tradition even before John and Teresa there was a conviction that all Christians are called to taste something of the reality of God in moments of intimacy. These moments of gift - grace - will have their special quality but they will be significant and life enhancing. They will come at times when we are cast adrift by bereavement, redundancy or misunderstanding. They are epiphanies, sudden showings of satisfying connections that help us journey on. I remember some time ago seeing a sunset as I sailed out of Calais on a winter's evening. The quality of light over the land and floating into the sea was healing and hopeful.

John of the Cross was able to articulate the joy of being in close relationship with God in his poems. He found words that surprised him by their power. However, what stands out is the way he uses the language of tender fulfilled human loving. He tells us that human love at its most sublime is the best image for telling us how we can relate to God.

The way we love each other and the way we love God is reciprocal, the one affecting and enhancing the other. The journey into God that John sings of is a journey where possessiveness goes and faith, trust and love find freedom to flourish. Growth and maturity take place in our innermost being as we open up to God and this enables our human relationships to be expressed in a way that is gentler, deeper and more understanding of the other.

John's life was one that gave space and time to love and friendship. He felt a freedom in intimacy; he neither wanted to possess nor be possessed. He could celebrate friendship and was honest in the joy such relations brought him. The

mystics, because they are open to the loving wisdom of God and allow the love of the Spirit freedom, achieve a humanity that is creative, sensitive and spontaneous. Perhaps one of the great contributions of teachers such as John of the Cross for today could be that in enabling people to grow in loving trust of God and experience unconditional love, men and women would gain confidence in the possibility of achieving a fully loving relationship. Mysticism could well be a school for marriage!

There has never been more talk about relationships and yet there has never been greater difficulty, it would seem, in living them out. It appears that we do not know what we want from each other and the hurt and the anger all this causes is terrible. Can John's *nada* lead to a *todo* for people wanting to find love and deep relationships? I believe it can, because John will help us discover the other in all their beauty and he has so much to say to the devices and desires of our hearts.

William Johnston writes of intimacy in his new book *Arise my Love* in a way that is akin to John of the Cross. Johnston sees Christ's indwelling in us as expressed in John's Gospel as a pointer to human intimacy. He sees Christ's words "On that day you will know that I am in the Father and you in me, and I in you" (John 14:20) as also pointing to the possibility of affective communion of mind and heart between human beings. We only find our true self by the gift of our self to the other.

However, as Carmelites we know that our moments of intimate communion with God are not meant to be isolated from the whole context of our life. The closeness to God gives an energy that should take us back into the context of our lives. When Elijah encountered the living God on Horeb he was sent back to anoint kings, find his successor and offer leadership to the thousands who were faithful to the living God. As Titus Brandsma said, we leave God for God.

Again, if we have encountered the living and loving God we become aware of God's reckless foolish capacity to love and forgive. We should be able to go beyond the bounds of orthodoxy so that we live love rather than correctness or respectability. Archbishop Romero as he encountered God in the sufferings of his people ceased to be a safe pair of hands and trod the road of risk that led to his martyrdom. If all is love we have to risk giving. If we have come to know God we are changed utterly, the log that once smouldered can now burst into flames. Our new century needs people suffused with the energy of love so that we can create life giving alternatives, societies that are guided by wisdom rather than caution and self interest. We cannot afford to let the tyranny of arrogant certainty set the agenda, the truth that is Jesus Christ must set us free. God's foolish forgiveness is needed if we are to achieve reconciliation. The problem of Northern Ireland cries out for the psycho spiritual healing of all the peoples so that hurtful memories can be healed and each side can in love and warm laughter accept each other. Fear must be replaced by love and everyone will need to give something so that the rebuilding can begin.

Our institutions are going through dark nights, position and prestige are being swept away but the kingdom that Jesus came to proclaim needs to root itself in our hearts and its growth will come through vision and wisdom. Jesus communicated his message through his powerful and compassionate imagination. He was one with the people, he was one of them. He had the wrong accent, no status and yet he spoke with authority. He spoke to the heart, he felt

deep compassion for those he encountered and he loved and inspired love. Let's be people of the gentle breeze of genuine welcome but above all people of heartfelt humour.