

THE LIVING FLAME OF LOVE Lesson 1

READ: The Living Flame of Love (St. John of the Cross, Complete Works) Read the prologue and poem, then the section on Stanza no. 1.

Also, *each day* before your half -hour prayer time read the four stanzas of the poem aloud slowly and prayerfully.

REFLECT: Meditate/Journal for a few minutes on each of the following thoughts:

....on how these intense acts of love are more meritorious and valuable than all one's previous works. (see sections 3, 4 and 36)

....on what is necessary for one to be able to receive this divine enkindling. (sections 5, 6, 9, 15, 36)

....on how a soul can be so glorified that it appears to be God. (sec. 13, 17 and 35)

....on how the same flame of love can cause such different effects of pain and delight. (sec. 18 through 26)

RESPOND: Write briefly on the following topics; do one each week. Be ready to share.

- 1. Contrast the experience of the "living flame of love" with the usual (and more ordinary) state of union. (that is, the transient state vs. the habitual state)**
- 2. Summarize the benefits which are received by studying this particular work of St. John of the Cross. (from what you have read thus far)**

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3. What parts of this material do you think would be the most “incredible” to the average Christian?

4. Write out a brief description of what you think purgatory might be like, based on what you have read in this lesson.

REACT: Consider the Feast of Pentecost which we celebrate each year. Do you think that the “flames of love” of which St. John of the Cross speaks are the same as what the disciples experienced on Pentecost? Be ready to defend your opinion.

THE LIVING FLAME Lesson 2

READ: Stanza 2

REPLY: Answer the following questions as briefly as possible:

- 1. In this stanza, to whom does the soul attribute the divine work of union? (section 1)**

- 2. To which Person does the *hand* refer? the *touch*? the *cautery*? (1)**

- 3. What factor determines how the consuming fire of God burns each person? (section 2)**

- 4. What effects does this gentle burning have on the soul? (sections 2,4, and 18)**

- 5. What is God's purpose in granting this communication? (3)**

- 6. What is the paradox of the wound caused by this cautery of love? (7)**

- 7. Is there any intellectual or imaginative form or figure involved in this cautery which John calls the highest degree possible in this state? (8)**

- 8. Is there another cautery in which an intellectual form appears? If so, what kind? (9)**

- 9. What do we call the exterior wounds mentioned in section 13?**

- 10. What does one experience interiorly from these wounds? (13)**

- 11. Can the same wounds occur only on the interior? With what effect? (13)**

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- 12. Why is this touch of God called “substantial”? (20)**
- 13. What does God communicate to the soul in this touch? (21)**
- 14. What effects are had when this unction overflows into the sensory body? (22)**
- 15. For what does one feel compensated upon receiving this “taste of eternal life”? (23)**
- 16. What are some of the trials of one who reaches this state? (25)**
- 17. To what state after death could this purification be compared? (25)**
- 18. Why are there so few who reach this sublime state? (27)**
- 19. What are some of the qualities of a person to whom God grants such favor? (28)**
- 20. What two kinds of life does John describe? (32)**
- 21. What effects does this transformation have upon the intellect? the memory? (34) the will? (34)**
- 22. Explain how the soul has “become God”. (34)**
- 23. What does one experience in this happy state, and why? (36)**

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REFLECT: Do I willingly accept the ordinary trials of life by which I am tested, strengthened and purified? Read Jer. 12:5 and Tobit 12:13

What are some of the interior and exterior trials I have undergone so far? How did I respond?

RESPOND: Make a list of your present trials and tell how you hope to handle them.

Write a prayer of holy resignation and intention to accept God's will more graciously and gratefully.

THE LIVING FLAME OF LOVE Lesson 3

READ: Stanza 3, sections 1-62

REFLECT: When the “caverns”, i. e., the faculties of memory, intellect and will, are not purged and cleansed of *every affection for creature*, they do not feel the vast emptiness of their deep capacity (for God), nor do they note the lack of the immense goods possible to them, **BUT....** toward the end of one’s illumination and purification, just before reaching union, there will occur intense feelings of yearning for God. The faculties, now emptied of *all affection for creatures*, the spiritual pain of this void and thirst for God can be terrible.

With the above in mind, let us reflect carefully on our personal desires, remembering that what we *say* we want in life is often belied by our actions. In what or in whom do we seek satisfaction or fulfillment? Where do we focus our attention, our energy, our resources, our talents and abilities and our time? *If our “thirst” is quenched on anything or anyone other than God himself, we will not experience thirst for him !*

REPLY: Try to complete the following statements based on the reading assignment.

1. Beware of a spiritual director who is _____.
2. Pure contemplation lies in _____.
3. The highest wisdom and language of God is _____.
4. Meditating and reflecting imaginatively is good for _____.
5. When *drawn* into recollection one should be _____.
6. To reach the supreme Good one must withdraw from particular _____.
7. The knowledge of God is general and dark to the _____.
8. God infused love in the will when one is empty and _____.
9. The Holy Spirit is the principal guide and director of _____.
10. Sometimes God infuses in the will and sometimes _____.

Discussion question: What are the obstacles to reaching contemplation (infused prayer) for secular Carmelites? Can they be overcome, and if so, how?

THE LIVING FLAME OF LOVE Lesson 4

READ: Stanza 3, nos. 63-85, and all of Stanza 4.

REFLECT: Meditate/Journal for a few minutes on each of the following:

“The words of wisdom are heard in silence.”

“God cannot be grasped by the senses.”

“It is in the soul in which less of its own appetites (desires) and pleasures dwell, where God dwells more alone, more pleased, and more as though in His own house, ruling and governing it.”

“How impossible it is for a person with desires to judge the things of God as they are!”

(Wisdom) “Remaining in itself the same, it renews all things.”

“He who watches over Israel never sleeps.”

REPLY: Answer the following questions briefly:

- 1. According to John, in what ways does the devil divert the soul from contemplation? (sections 63-64)**
- 2. In what ways can we ourselves block or thwart contemplation? (section 66)**
- 3. What is denoted by the term “the deep caverns of feeling”? Why is it used in this way? (69)**

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The Living Flame of Love Lesson 4

4. In what two ways can the soul be in obscurity without being in sin? (71)

What does John mean by “the animal man”? (sections 74-75)

**When is the soul’s desire for God supernatural and therefore more meritorious?
(75)**

**Name three divine attributes which God communicates to the soul in union with
him. (78)**

**What are the three chief qualities of excellence concerning the soul’s love of God?
(82)**

What are the three qualities of the praise the soul renders to God in this union? (84)

**Why does it seem to the soul which is being moved and awakened that it is God who
moves and awakens? (Stanza 4, nos. 4-7)**

**Give two reasons why a person does not faint or become afraid in this powerful and
glorious awakening. (Stanza 4, no. 12)**

THE LIVING FLAME OF LOVE - Assignment for the poem

READ: Silently read St. John of the Cross' poem, The Living Flame of Love, which you will find on the next page. Re-read the poem aloud, slowly and expressively. If possible, do this several times... Next, read the excerpt from his commentary, which you will find at the bottom of the page. Re-read this part carefully.

REFLECT: Meditate/Journal on each of the following thoughts:

Can you yet relate personally to any of the sentiments expressed in the poem?

What do you think would be necessary for someone to arrive at an intimacy with God which would produce such feelings?

What is "this state" to which St. John of the Cross refers in the excerpt? (persons who have reached *this state*)

Give some thought to your own eventual death. How would you want it to be? What are you doing to prepare for it?

RESPOND: Examine your present prayer time allotment, and the places and circumstances you are accustomed to choose for prayer. Are they conducive to an intimate experience of God? If not, make adjustments, lovers need quality time alone to grow in love!

Spend a few minutes in prayer, asking for the grace of a happy death, that is, one in which you are not only in the state of grace, but in a state which makes of it a wonderful encounter with the Beloved.

Optional: Read the poem in the original Spanish. (see the Collected Works of St. John of the Cross)

Optional: Memorize the poem in English or in Spanish.

The Living Flame of Love – St. John of the Cross

O living flame of Love
That tenderly wounds my soul
In its deepest center! Since
Now You are not oppressive
Now Consummate! if it be your will:
Tear through the veil of this sweet encounter!

O sweet cautery,
O delightful wound!
O gentle hand! O delicate touch
That tastes of eternal life
And pays every debt!
In killing, You changed death to life.

O lamps of fire!
In whose splendors
The deep caverns of feeling,
Once obscure and blind,
Now give forth, so rarely, so exquisitely,
Both warmth and light to their Beloved.

How gently and lovingly
You awake in my heart,
Where in secret You dwell alone;
And in your sweet breathing,
Filled with good and glory,
How tenderly You swell my heart with love..

Excerpt from the saint's commentary on the above poem:

“It should be known that the death of persons who have reached this state is far different in its cause and mode than the death of others, even though it is similar in natural circumstances. If the death of other people is caused by sickness or old age, the death of these persons is not so induced, in spite of their being sick or old; their soul is not wrested from them unless by some impetus and encounter of love, far more sublime than previous ones, of greater power, and more valiant, since it tears through this veil and carries off the jewel, which is the soul. The death of such persons is very gentle and very sweet, sweeter and more gentle than was their whole spiritual life on earth. For they die with the most sublime impulses and delightful encounters of love, resembling the swan whose song is much sweeter at the moment of death.”