

The Spiritual Canticle (SC)

Introduction

Those who wish to express deep thoughts and feelings have often done so by means of a canticle. We find such canticles in both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, for example: the canticle of Moses which proclaims the liberation of the people; that of Hannah after her long awaited child birth; there are those that proclaim the goodness and faithfulness of God such as that of Zachery or the exultant joy of the Virgin Mary. All are personal expressions of someone who has been touched very deeply by God and drawn by Him to the heights of sanctity.

Above all the Song of Songs, the greatest of all canticles, reaches the highest form of mystical poetry in acclaiming human love as well as the nuptial union of the soul with God.

Throughout the centuries, the spiritual canticles have expressed similar sentiments. St. Bernard, St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila have left us outstanding and deep mystical poetry. N. Barré's spiritual canticle follows the same lines. It has been preserved in the municipal archives of Rouen. It consists of forty six verses and uses the same type of metrical verse as St. John of the Cross, which lends itself more easily to the expression of emotion.

We do not know the date of its composition. The Rouen manuscript is undated. N. Barré refers to it in some of his letters, especially Letter 13, where we find modifications of verses 37, 38, 39 and 40. This letter is not dated either. Since the manuscript is in Rouen, we can suppose it was written before he left Rouen for Paris in 1676.

The style in which it is written obviously reflects the style of the period as well as that of St. John of the Cross.

N. Barré often uses paradoxes in his writings e.g. "this absence of all taste is a delightful taste"(26); "this night is splendid day"(26).

We find similar paradoxes in the poems of John of the Cross: "to be able to hear without hearing..."; "this knowledge comes from ignorance...".

N. Barré uses numerous images: God is a "circle"; the soul in whom God is at work is like a dying person being cared for; "like a feather drifting in the wind"; John of the Cross compares God to "lamps of burning fire" and the soul to a "secret store-room".

The vocabulary is sometimes difficult to grasp. N. Barré tries to express what is inexpressible. It is hard to find words to describe the way in which God totally possesses the soul. The same idea is expressed in different ways in order to highlight different aspects of it.

The theme of the Spiritual Canticle could be summarised as follows:

The soul, totally free with regard to the mind and the senses, is given over to do what is pleasing to God; it experiences the fulness of happiness and is totally at one with God.

The first three verses are addressed to God, asking the Holy Spirit to reveal some of God's action in the soul. The following 41 verses represent an effort to "discover the secret".

A necessary purification arises from the experience of "night", self-emptying, solitude (4,9,11). The soul is now grasped by a bond from beyond the realms of time (6).

However, God is present. The soul accepts God's action totally; putting nothing in the way (12), allowing itself to be engulfed by the ineffable love of God. In verse 14, we move into dark contemplation where all feelings are absent (18).

But transformed by love, the soul rejoices in the pleasure experienced as well as in the self-emptying. It is completely at ease with the loving peace and real freedom experienced (16). It is given over fully to whatever God wants (20). It has no other desire except to be God's instrument.

Through His presence, God transforms the soul. N. Barré tries to find the most apt words to describe the fusion of "being with being" (12, 13). It is signified by peace, happiness, delight; it is at one and the same time the poverty of "non desire", "not doing" and "not seeing" (24, 26) and the richness of the "divine seal" (30). It is not without sadness (27, 28) but "its suffering is full of life" (29), all is accepted out of love (38).

Love gives rise to mutual possession. Henceforth God and the soul are totally one, in a type of mystical marriage. The soul desires only to obey her Lord (40). In a certain sense she becomes God (42). Thus divinised, the soul relies totally on Providence. It loses nothing of its own being while in God's being. It is the triumph of love and of God's true peace (43).

In the last two verses (45, 46), N. Barré prays that each one may experience the happiness of mystical union described in the canticle. He almost forces God's hand to bring this about in appealing to His love.

The main ideas which N. Barré explores here are also found in his other teachings. It is not a question of lofty speculation or a type of personal spiritual autobiography. It consists of fundamental convictions, arising from pastoral experience, which he wishes to share with others. The following are some examples of this spirituality from other sources, such as: Letters, Maxims, Reflections and Recommendations:

. detachment from all things

"complete solitude, total unity, detachment from all things...." L 5

"One has to give all in order to have all, let go of what is false in order to have what is true, leave one's nothingness for God" L 43

"Those who desire the true life of Jesus will let go totally of their own way of thinking and judging" MAP 72, RR 1

. attachment to God alone

God alone suffices. Everything else is but a means, a direction, a way; but God is the centre and aim of all our actions" L 9

"God is determined to take hold of you totally and possess you forever" L 16

"Those who cling to their own judgement and way of thinking will not feel the impact of God's Spirit" MAP 42, RR 1

. abandonment

"Allow yourself to be guided by the Spirit like a feather drifting in the wind"

L 9. "It is necessary to be totally and entirely abandoned to God in time and eternity" L 43. "Trust your salvation to God's infinite and loving Providence" L 29

. inner peace

"Taste and savour the sweetness and truth of a life that is more than human" L 31 "Cling to truth, glory, greatness, real happiness, pleasure, in other words: to God" L 35, RR 8

We find an outline of a similar type of spirituality in Letters 26 & 28.

The Spiritual Canticle, which is N. Barré's most mystical work, is also the one which portrays the greatest joy. Even though written in a difficult style, it is possible to detect a joyful spirit. It should provide a good guide for true contemplation.

SPIRITUAL CANTICLE

1

Divine Being, in possession of my soul,
Holy Spirit, hidden in my inmost being,
Sacred flame, consuming from within my bones,
Spirit of the spirit of my flesh,
Whom I no longer need to strive to find
So wrapt am I in you, within, without;
We think of you as more sublime
Than are the highest heights of heaven,
When all the while your dwelling is
Within the deepest depths.

2

God of immensity and power,
Whose nature is so all encompassing
That we, to find you, neither need to search
Outside ourselves, nor penetrate the depths
Of any mortal thing,
Who of yourself and in yourself exist,
Yet shrouded from our sight by a dense veil;
Immutable, unchanging in your being,
Circle without start or end,
Uncircumscribed, its centre everywhere!

3

God of all depth and mystery,
Who dwells in the darkness
Of light inaccessible,
Before whom all creation silent falls,
The soul, in its unknowing,
Sees only by the light of faith.
Might I then brave
The charge of indiscretion
Were I to breach its silence,
And dare to lift the veil of secrecy?

4

The soul of one transported
To this sublime and most ecstatic state
Of contemplative love
Cannot accept that this be named
A passing state
Of fleeting longings, feelings, insights.
But now her eyes no longer pierce

The cloud that hems her senses in.

5

More accurately it is a state
Surpassing all that human powers
Can, of themselves, encompass,
Knowing neither rule nor law;
The soul is drawn out of herself
Into the realm of being pure,
Her spirit now abstract and bare,
Confronted with her nothingness;
Reduced to such great poverty,
She neither has nor desires aught,
So that, in God, she may find all.

6

At last, by self-denial purified,
Her will through love surrendered,
The soul seems dead to all that is created,
Beyond the reach of all that, of the flesh or spirit,
Can touch, move, strike or draw her any more.
For now, a bond, reaching out
From far beyond the realms of time,
Has grasped her to itself,
And snatched her from the passing things of earth.

7

No longer opaque images
Of hearing, feeling or of sight
Can exercise their power upon this soul.
The objects of this passing world
Are lost, forgotten, all discounted,
For she is dead to passing things,
Their hold upon her heart's affections disempowered.

8

This favoured soul has passed beyond
Their most alluring charms:
A holy and a mystic death
Has left her, as it were, insensible.
A total, yet a gentle loss to self
Has left her naked,
Stripped of power before these earthly charms,
Impervious now to their appeal,
No longer able to relate to them.

9

Likewise she is stripped within,
Naked, as it were, incapable
Of love or understanding,
Of taste, of insight or of sight.
No more transports of delight,
She cannot hear or taste or see;
Her former self, as if enthralled,
No longer has the power to act,
But opens passively before
The advances of pure love.

10

God, for her, no longer is
Greatness or principle of life,
Not majesty, not light, not dark,
Not strength or love or wisdom
Nor manna nourishing the soul;
No thought, no expression that she can conceive
Serves to name or encompass this pure invisible Being
Whom she loves,
For all our concepts fail to do it justice.

11

She is nothing within but what is herself,
In total simplicity
And contemplative union,
And not so much herself, in fact, as the object of her love.
For her, it seems, that all is lost,
That her very being has ceased to exist,
She no longer is, not lives, nor functions,
Has neither being nor location.
And her spirit, in its wisdom, deems
That nothing is, save what is in God.

12

And yet, it lives and has existence,
Not it, but God himself in it:
Her spirit has been buried,
Swallowed up in God's own Holy Spirit.
God comes to dwell in its poverty,
Spirit adhering to spirit, as one.
Being to being, God clings to the soul.
Her spirit consenting to this mighty action,
Endures out of suffering pure.
And that is its only action.

13

All spiritual savour is gone,
All sight, all touch,
All that is sensible to the flesh,
Only pure, authentic union remains.
God is, the spirit is, and nothing else,
No feelings, no taste,
No knowledge of these things.
All human perception must retreat
Before these great exchanges can take place
Without our comprehending them.

14

This contemplation in the dark,
Defying power of knowledge and of speech,
In which the soul can only glimpse
Surrounding darkness, limits, cloud,
Is simple union, pure yet arid,
Suffering active yet divine,
Holy excess of blinding light,
An end to all discourse and action,
Only outward signs remain,
Enigmas, mysteries,
And acts of love that scarce can be perceived.

15

The time has gone for taking pains
To die to self and renounce the world,
Withdrawing painfully within;
The time is now no longer ripe
For choosing one's own way to God
Or being in his presence.
Definitively now in God,
Our very essence clings to his,
Possessing him, yet sensing not his presence.

16

Time and place no more exist,
And all fixed objects pale;
Elaborate preparations too give way
As God invades this soul,
Depriving her of power to speak and act,
Flooding her with his own holy presence.
Her customary need to act suspended,
She no longer tries or needs

To play an active role.
She feels her inner self expand
In utter freedom, love and peace.

17

This is not the time to ask
The soul whom God thus leaves in thrall
What she wishes or desires,
What is happening inside,
By what desires or by what laws
Her life is governed and consumed,
For she has no way of knowing.
And the love which has transformed her
Now inhibits understanding.

18

As if inert, deprived of sight,
With all desires, emotions fled,
The soul thus gently captured knows
No burning pain, no violence.
The self has ceased to be, and now
Her whole existence lies in God.
This ravishment is not described
In any books on ecstasy.

19

The soul exists, and God in her.
Her being now subsists in his
And feels no separate emotions.
For her the concepts "me" and "mine"
Have meaning now no more,
For all that was in her of self
Has given way to God within.
He is her goal and her foundation,
She is his responding depth.

20

And there, God present to this soul
Can freely bring about in her
Whatever good He pleases,
Becoming her source and principle of life.
If people fail to tell in full
The effects of his action,
It is because they cannot see
Or do not understand.

Here all attempts to sense or grasp
Are rendered useless.

21

In a word, all we need to know is that,
In the innermost recesses of the spirit,
He decrees, prescribes and carries out
A work which his hand withholds from our eyes;
That the human spirit has never yet
Been so malleable in his hand,
So open to his light;
And that there will never be matter
Quite so disposed to the workings of the supernatural.

22

Unseeing, the spirit sees, yet knows not,
It contemplates, yet contemplates not,
Speaks at length, yet does not utter,
Exists, yet has no sense of its own existence.
God lives in it and it in God.
He is its centre and its milieu.
The spirit bows before the workings of God's grace.
It possesses yet possesses not.
God seems to take its place,
Going far beyond coming to its help.

23

Such supernatural deeds of God
Are not for human tongue to tell
Nor pen to elaborate.
For what takes place
When God becomes at one with us
Can neither be described nor felt.
All good redounds to the soul,
All peace, all contentment.
All sense is lost, all sensation suspended
In a pure appeasement of all desire.

24

Then this darkness, these shadows,
These deep abstractions,
These pure denials,
Are to the soul as cherished gifts.
Her inner being is at peace.
Nothing delights her heart as much

As these things of the spirit.
In non-desire is her desire;
And her eternal riches lie
In having nothing and desiring nothing.

25

No insight, no understanding,
No taste, no sight, no savour,
No privileges, no favours.
She is pure, essential being for God.
This perfect oneness of the soul with God,
Through total renunciation of herself,
This state of belonging to God,
This total nakedness,
Draw forth, as from their source,
All the riches of eternity.

26

This tastelessness is full of savour,
This darkness better than light.
This absence of love the most sublime love of all,
This non-seeing, the most admirable insight:
The soul sees everything, yet sees nothing,
Knows all, yet knows nothing,
Possesses everything, without fear of loss,
Accepts all that comes, with no admixture of self,
Loves and openly delights in it.
Does everything, yet does nothing.

27

For, while it may seem to the soul
That, for the moment, she is inactive
And that all her stricken powers
Are suffering most purely in the crucible,
She must nevertheless not conclude
That her inactivity is itself a death.
The change which God is effecting in the depths of her being
Shows to what extent she is responsive
To God's deep and hidden action.

28

It is true that the great things
Being effected in her clearly show
That her pain is unmitigated,
That she is undergoing the action of the divine,

Yet not like an inert body
From which the life and spirit have gone forth,
Nor like a rock or piece of crystal,
Transfused for an instant
By the brightness of a flame
Yet having of itself no principle of life.

29

This suffering is full of life.
Her being senses that it is being treated,
With gentle freedom, according to its most secret desires,
And consents that her God
Should have total liberty
To carry out in her
Whatever is pleasing to the divine wisdom.
And, when God takes action,
She relinquishes her personal activity.

30

This powerful God takes pleasure
In effecting changes in her very being,
Communicating with her directly
In the fine point of her soul,
Enabling her to know and love.
He delights in transforming her, drawing her,
till nothing of herself remains.
As he places his seal upon her heart
The only response required of her
Is that of total abandonment.

31

This does not mean that she is inert,
But that, in this state,
Her spirit moves so gently
That it seems annihilated,
Possessing no life anymore,
All efforts now unnecessary.
Its action is so imperceptible
That, in the midst of this mystical death
Of all that can be perceived,
The soul seems no longer to exist.

32

And yet, however distracted and apparently senseless
The soul in this state of in-dwelling may be,

To live by love and delight in it
Is still a living act.
For she does delight in it to the full.
When God unites her totally to himself,
The soul, aware of the gift of God,
Opens herself totally to receive his advances.
This gesture of self-abandonment
Is itself sufficient action.

33

No action, however vital it may be,
Requires of the lover
Such a specific, active response
Or comparable action.
The mouth and the palate, which are well disposed,
Without further action being required,
Can taste of the flavours of the food
As soon as it touches them, however briefly.
In a similar way, a subject is rendered sensitive
Simply by making contact with its object.

34

The person semi-conscious,
The weary invalid,
Unable to do anything to help himself,
Can still detect the fragrant oil or water.
With eyes almost unseeing
He still can sense the movement 'round his bed.
He knows that he is being moved.
As others now control his life,
His life consists in letting go,
Accepting all these ministrations.

35

Similarly, the soul that dwells in God
Endures and accepts, as a matter of life and death,
All the attentions of the loved one,
Relieved of the need to play any part.
God is at work: that is enough.
Her spirit is at a loss,
And neither can nor wishes to
Commit such an outrage
As to believe it can describe
The riches of this state.

36

All we humans need to know is that,
In truth, in this holy state,
Souls are one with God
And remain in his presence;
That they have nothing to desire
Of all that sense can offer
To their heart, their taste, their sight.
And that, having nothing,
In their poverty and nakedness,
They nonetheless possess all good.

37

They belong to God and God belongs to them;
The Spirit carries them where it will,
Acts in them, possesses them, moves them
Like faithful servants.
No feather borne hither and thither upon the wind
Moves with such grace and freedom
As do they who allow themselves
To be carried by God
Without resisting.

38

Whether God raises them up or sets them down,
Carries them here or there
In a thousand different states,
Of power and weakness,
They accept it all out of love.
Knowing always where to find
Their peace, their rock, their good.
Once God alone is in command,
His work in them
Will always know fruition.

39 Whatever happens to these souls or others,

They hold is for their good.
The purity of their most ardent love
Has one judge only - Love itself;
Their one desire: to hear, learn and obey
What Love enjoins upon them.
As soon as his design for them
Have been made manifest,
These souls, leaving all else aside,
Have carried out his plan.

40

At the first sign or revelation,
The slightest indication,
Of what his wishes are,
They obey him like a king.
Enough that Love should wish it,
His will alone the law
Which guides these lovers' lives.
Love alone suffices, they need no other,
Their sole existence, it would seem, in him.

41

Anchored in the source of their being,
God is on their side, they need no more.
A holy excess of love, it must be said,
Has made them all divine.
Might I dare go so far here as to say
That they are nothing now but God
And that, by a mystic death effected,
What was of them no longer is,
But, by an ecstatic interchange,
God has transformed their being into his.

42

Yes, these souls have now become
One in nature with their Lord,
Sharing in his happiness
And, like him, pure and naked.
Through these communings with their Lord,
And clearly to a lesser degree,
They share something of his essence.
No yawning gap between them,
Albeit in different measure,
They are in some sense God,

43 Nothing to them is gentle or pleasant,
Nothing can excite their emotions.
Nothing, of all the holy movements of the heart,
Takes them by surprise.
Peace, the Cloud, or tranquility,
Nakedness or equanimity,
To live for God, to be one with his being,
To have no sensible feelings of love,
No knowledge apart from him,
These are the glories of this state.

44

Never to forsake one's centre within,
But to find one's being always in God;
To neither have nor see another way
But to be brought to life by the object of one's affection;
Sensing God at work in one's being, to desist from taking control and
Leave all to Providence
Acting no longer on the purely human plane;
This is what constitutes the difference
In this dark state where God dwells.

45

O God, by whom everything is created
O foundation of all that exists,
O divine milieu, in whom everything has its existence,
O King, the master of all that is,
O pure and sovereign Spirit,
Whose hand holds all in being,
Life which enlivens every soul,
In your bountiful goodness,
Be for us the spirit, the source and the flame
Which inspires our will.

46

Give us a holy desire
To die to the passing things
Of the world and of the senses,
In order to make room for your life in us.
May we, in you,
Die and recognise our nothingness
Lose ourselves and cease to exist,
So that you may act instead in us.
Your love for us would indeed be small,
Or our sins very great,
If you were to deny us this good.