

Light & Heat

The heart's deepest need makes us long for union with God. Two paths lead to this union, two separate paths, though they end at the same goal. The first is the path of knowledge and love. This path our own souls point out to us. The other we know only because Christ has shown it to us.

The act of knowing is an act of union. By knowledge we penetrate the nature of an object and make the object our own. We mentally absorb it, and it becomes part and parcel of ourselves. Love is also an act of union, of union, and not merely of the desire of union. It is an actual union, for so much of a thing as we love that much belongs to us. Since there are more ways than one of loving, we call this kind "spiritual" love. But the word is not quite right, since it also applies to the other mode of union by the second path I spoke of. The difference is that while this first instinctive kind of love invokes a union, it does not join being with being. It is union by conscious knowledge and willed intention.

Does any material form exist that provides a likeness for such a union? Yes; the very wonderful one of light and heat.

Our eyes, without approaching or touching it, see and take in the candle flame. Eyes and candle remain where they were, and yet a union is effected. It is not a union of mingling and absorption, but the chaste and reverent union of the soul with God by knowledge. Since, as Scripture says, God is truth, and since whoever knows the truth, mentally possesses it, so by right knowledge of him our minds possess God. God is present in the intellect whose thoughts of him are true. This is what is meant by "knowing God," To know God is to be one with him as the eye becomes one with the candle flame by looking at it.

But the light of the candle flame cannot be separated from its heat. Though again the candle remains where it was, we feel on our cheek or the back of our hand a radiating warmth.

This union is a likeness for that between us and the Divine Flame by love. God is good. Whoever loves the good possesses it spiritually, for the good becomes ours by our loving it. Just so much of goodness as we love, just that much do we possess. "God," as Saint John tells us, "is love. And he that abideth in love abideth in God, and God in him." To know, to love God, is to be one with him; and our eternal beatitude will consist in looking upon God and loving him. Looking, loving, does not mean that we stand hungering in his presence, but that to our innermost depths we are filled and satisfied.

Flame, which is a figure for the soul, is also a figure for the living God; for "God is light and in him there is no darkness." As the flame radiates light so God radiates truth, and the soul by receiving truth is united with God, as our eyes by seeing its light are united with the flame. And, as the flame radiates heat, so does God radiate the warmth of goodness; and as the hand and the cheek by perceiving the warmth become one with the flame, so whoever loves God becomes one with him in goodness. But also, just as the candle remains free and disengaged in its place, so does God abide unmoved "dwelling in unapproachable light."

Flame, emitting light, emitting heat, is an image to us of the living God.

All this comes very much home to us on Holy Saturday when the Easter candle, which symbolizes Christ, is lit. Three times, each time in a higher tone, the deacon sings "Lumen Christi," and then lights the Paschal candle. At once every lamp and candle in the church is lighted from it, and the whole building is alight and aglow with the radiance and warmth of God's presence.

