

breathe no less than their bodies, he tells us, then many people who are now perishing would be saved. (*Robert Bellarmine Spiritual Writings*, pp. 53-4, 98)

In his work, St. Robert Bellarmine seeks God in the Heavens, the moon, the sun and the stars. The Holy Ghost says "Seek God and your soul shall live" (Ps. 68:33) If the mere body demands sustenance three times a day, he reminds us, what should we provide for the soul? If prayer, like air, nourishes the soul, then contemplation is its sleep, its rest in the weary strife of life. By simply making the habit of looking for the mind and vestige of God in all created things, by taking the time to see Him "as He can be seen in this valley of tears," we find rest for the soul. (*Ibid.*, p. 53)

Bellarmino's Consideration of Fire

St. Robert Bellarmine has many beautiful things to say about fire. Fire purifies precious metals, just as suffering purifies chosen souls; Fire brightens black iron just as God leads sinful souls to a knowledge of truth; Fire makes cold iron glow, just as God's grace makes man's works and deeds effective; Fire makes hard iron soft just as God's grace conquers a stubborn heart. (*Ibid.*, p. 106-18)

As it reaches its apex of power and light, fire reminds us of God's omnipotence and wrath when He is provoked. God's hatred of sin is like a consuming fire.

Each spring, my father would burn off the pastures on our Kansas farm. I will never forget the year that the small line of grass fire, whipped by a wind that rose unexpectedly, suddenly became what seemed to a child an immense sea of fire that threatened the barn, the house, our safety. It was frightening to see God's omnipotence in the fire, and I remember thinking how horrible it would be to burn forever in the fires of hell. It was a lively reminder that it is, indeed, "a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31).

A much more recent and dramatic image of a raging fire comes to mind: the flames we all saw

that consumed the World Trade Center on September 11. In one celebrated picture, the image of a devil's face leaped out of the flames and mocked the world. It seemed to me, as well as to so many others, like the fire of hell itself on earth.

However, according to St. Robert Bellarmine, there would be a small inaccuracy in this thinking. For the fires of hell burn - but they are not illuminated. "Those wretches, bound hand and foot by eternal chains," St. Robert Bellarmine tells us, "will lie forever in the same place, deprived of the light of the sun, moon, and stars, scorched by burning fire." It is a horrendous meditation: a fire that burns without the consolation of light. For the condemned soul suffers not just physical pain, but also from the lack of all good things, including light, which is symbolic of truth. Lucifer rejected the truth. Men who follow Lucifer and know the truth without loving it will burn in a fire without the consolation of light.

On this more sober note the meditation on fire ends. To the reader inspired by this school of exemplarism, however, it offers an invitation to climb more rungs on the ladder of creation that leads man to God. Fire is symbolic of the love of God that consumed the youngest seer of Fatima, little Jacinta Marta. In her last days of suffering at a hospital in Lisbon in 1919, she could not contain herself in a transport of apostolic zeal and cried out: "Oh, if I could only enkindle in everybody's heart the fire that I have here in my breast burning me and making me love the Heart of Jesus and the Heart of Mary so much." This is the consuming fire of love and self-sacrifice that transforms men into other Christs, into saints.

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Votive Candles, Fire, and the Love of God

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The candle has a deep symbolism with a long and beautiful history in the Church. The great Pascal candle represents Christ, the true Light, and the smaller candles stand for each individual Catholic who strives to become "another Christ." From the earliest times in the Church, candles were used in the conferring of all Sacraments except Penance, as well as at many other exceptional functions. For example, at Baptism, the burning candle placed in the hand of the godparent represents the child receiving the light of Christ. At excommunications, a candle is snuffed out - a tragic representation of a life being excluded from the precious life of grace in the Catholic Church.

The votive candle has its own very beautiful meaning that came from the Old Testament practice of sacrifice. Just as the incense that sent up its cloud of perfumed smoke Heavenward was a symbol of prayer, the candle consuming itself is a representation of sacrifice. The candle burnings its life out before a statue is symbolic of a person's love for God and his own desire to offer his sacrifices, and if need be, his life itself for the glory of God. The lighting of these simple votive candles is a Catholic way to prepare the soul for a life of dedication and to offer the best of what he has to God. It is a symbol of the personal holocaust that souls are moved to make of themselves for the love of God.

After Vatican II, "adaptation to the modern world" was the motto on the lips of almost everyone. This adaptation took several forms, and one was the practical pretext. In the name of efficiency and practicality, altar linens (hard to iron) and elaborate altar-pieces (hard to dust) were replaced with sleek modern slate tables. Push-button electronic doorbells replaced brass bells.

The candle of the sanctuary light in many churches died. Alleging practical reasons (fire hazard), the priest could simply push a button and a little electric red bulb would turn on. How modern! How clean! How safe! These superficial pretexts were adopted by countless modern men who either do not understand or want to destroy the symbolism that was behind those wise and centuries-old ceremonies and practices.

And the votive candle? In advertisements for replacing these we find a modern interpretation: the electric candle. Why? Because, ads explain, they are safe, clean, zero maintenance, oh, and of course, profitable - with a little extra emphasis on the last adjective. Why not? The ads have no answer, but I do. The electric candle extinguishes the fire; it eliminates the wax, it does away with the wick, the flame, the very candle itself. Killing the symbol, it also kills what the candle symbolized: the idea of self-sacrifice, of being consumed for the love of God, of personal holocaust. The electric candle is not as efficient as it seems. It does not have this rich symbolism. On one hand, it does not tell the souls of the faithful its message that it burns and is consumed for the love of God. On the other hand, the faithful cannot express themselves through the candle. The electric candle is reduced to an object of decor, a money-making device, empty of the candle's rich symbolic significance.

This abandonment of a small symbol that carries an immense message reflects a whole mentality: the rejection of the transcendent in the name of a disputable efficacy.

Meanings of the fire

If you find the symbolic wearisome, I would advise you to stop here. But I know that even today there are many modern "medieval men" who like to seek the ultimate meaning of things. For the medieval man was like this: in everything he sought to find the relation of the created thing to the Creator.

From the votive candle, let me go on to examine its most symbolic component, fire. Those flames that make the votive lamp so fascinating and magnetizing are worthy of consideration.

The simple fire one lights at a campsite or hearth can lead one to a reflection on the three stages of thought. For example, in the first stage of building a fire, it takes a certain amount of effort for the wood to catch fire. If the wood is green, the fire takes hold more slowly, giving off more smoke than flames, and little light or heat. If we think of the fire as representing truth, then the green wood would be like the man who is at the beginning of his intellectual life. At first he has difficulty accepting the truth, for the smoke of the errors dominates. This is the first stage of thought: cogitation.

After a while, however, the wood dries, the smoke dissolves, and the flames appear and begin to consume the wood. This is the second stage of thought, meditation, when only the pure movement of the blazing flames exist. It represents God's truth that dominates the soul completely.

Finally, the flames die down and only thing that remains is the blazing charcoal that emits the most intense heat. This represents contemplative thought, which leads to the most elevated form of love of God, called the "the transforming union." There is no longer resistance to God in the soul -- no more smoke, no more agitation. The soul is transformed into another Christ, just as the wood has become transformed into the blazing charcoal, a living fire. This explains the cry of St. Paul: "Now I no longer live, but Christ lives in me."

Some years ago, when I was a student in college, I heard this beautiful explanation of fire in a talk given by a professor of theology. The students were all eager to make a campfire to have a practical experience of seeking the more profound meaning of the fire.

Later, I learned he was simply following a medieval school of thought called exemplarism, whose best-known teacher was St. Bonaventure, the great Franciscan Doctor, contemporary and

emulator of St. Thomas Aquinas. While Aquinas demonstrated the proof of God's existence through logic, Bonaventure invited man to see and know the Creator better through all the living things that He made. Thus, by contemplating a fire consuming a log, we can find a symbolism that permits us to draw closer to God and love Him more in His creation.

The two methods meet: St. Robert Bellarmine

With the revived interest in apologetics, St. Robert Bellarmine has become known for his clear logic and skill in defending the tenets of the Faith. One of his better known works, *The Controversies*, has long been considered Catholicism's most complete answer to the theological issues raised by Protestant reformers. But it was a spiritual work, *The Mind's Ascent to God by the Ladder of Created Things*, which described the ascent of the human mind to God through nature, that he loved the most. It was written at the end of Bellarmine's life in his free time during an Ignatian retreat in September 1614. The work has recently been republished in *Robert Bellarmine Spiritual Writings*, translated and edited by John Patrick Donnelly, S.J. and Roland J. Teske, S.J. for Paulist Press, New York in 1989.

In this spiritual work, he regards all creation with non-earthly eyes: "The Heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows his handiwork." (Ps. 19:1) He sees the ground below his feet, and it reminds him that just as earth provides footing and safe ground for us to stand on, our minds can find *terra firma* and safety in God alone. Water cleans and refreshes our bodies, but it is the water of Baptism that cleans and refreshes our souls. And just as water quenches the thirst of our bodies, it is the Living Fountain, the source of all life that quenches the thirst of our souls for eternal happiness. Even air is an "outstanding teacher of behavior for men," instructs St. Robert Bellarmine. For as the body lives by breathing air, so the soul lives by praying. If men only realized that their souls need to