

Analecta Cracoviensiā

rocznik 57 • 2025 • strony 53–78

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“Más perfecto grado de perfección a que en esta vida se puede llegar”. The aim of spiritual development in the texts of John of the Cross

 <https://doi.org/10.15633/acr.5703>



Abstract

"Más perfecto grado de perfección a que en esta vida se puede llegar". The aim of spiritual development in the texts of John of the Cross

This study offers a theological—spiritual interpretation of the experience expressed in John of the Cross's "The living flame of love." It builds on M. Hlaváčová's thesis, which analyzed the link between the Johannine Christology of the Incarnate Word and its reinterpretation in John's poem "In principio erat Verbum." While Hlaváčová highlighted the "mysticism of the Incarnate Word of God" inspired by John's Gospel, this study further investigates the motif of the Word-Spouse in "The living flame of love." It shows how this spiritual experience forms an arc of John's vision of salvation: its origin in "In principio erat Verbum" culminates in "The living flame," where union with God is described through the touch of the Word-Spouse-Christ at the core of existence. This touch opens the human subject to a "Pentecostal experience" of the Spirit, symbolized by flame. This study explores how such ultimate transcendence is perceived and reflected by the human subject.

Keywords: Christian spiritual experience, spirituality, John of the Cross, The living flame of love



The contemporary resurgence of interest in spirituality and the subject of spiritual experience can inspire theologians to reflect deeply on how to respond adequately to this profound yearning for authentic spirituality. To do so, we must use the tools, methods and insights of our discipline. This is of particular significance for the role of Christians in society, as it pertains to the mediation and transmission of the most valuable aspects of our religious tradition. The present study focuses on exploring the nature of spiritual development and experience, as captured by one of the classics of Christian spiritual literature, John of the Cross, in his text *The living flame of love*.¹ He is one of the few writers in the Western Christian tradition who systematically focuses on expressing what the human subject experiences during and at the culmination of the process of spiritual growth.

The present study constitutes a continuation of the research of M. Hlaváčová, *The incarnation mystery in the writings of John of the Cross as a reverberation of Johannine christology*.² The “mysticism of the incarnate Word of God” inspired by John’s Christology is a salient feature of the spiritual experience articulated in the oeuvre of John of the Cross. Hlaváčová argues that the Spanish mystic offers an original reinterpretation of the New Testament spiritual experience of the relationship between man and God in the categories of “living” and “dwelling.” These categories draw inspiration from the Johannine tradition, where they articulate the relationship between the Father and the Son, which serves as a paradigm for the relationship between Christ and his disciples. Hlaváčová has demonstrated that to achieve a comprehensive understanding of spiritual experience, as depicted in Christian spiritual texts, it is necessary to examine its relationship with the experience outlined in Scripture. The following study explores the interconnection between the Christological and pneumatological dimensions of the experience in *The living flame of love*. The present study will proceed from an examination of the “mysticism of the Incarnate Word of God” as expounded by John of the Cross to an exploration of the “mysticism of the Word-Betrothed” and its pneumatological implications. In the category of “Word Incarnate,” John of the Cross employs biblical images to depict fundamental aspects of the Spirit’s workings in the

1 John of the Cross, *The living flame of love*, in: John of the Cross, *Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross. Revised Edition*, Washington 1991, pp. 641–715.

2 Cf. M. Hlaváčová, *The incarnation mystery in the writings of John of the Cross as a reverberation of Johannine Christology*, “Acta Universitatis Carolinae Theologica” 1 (2024), pp. 117–134.

human interior, with the aim of describing the spiritual experience in Christianity at its highest level, which the author terms “of the highest degree of perfection one can reach in this life.”

It could be argued that John of the Cross’s description of the ultimate spiritual experience in *The living flame of love* refers to a fundamental biblical experience grounded in the profound relationship between God, the Creator of all reality, and creation in Christ. The relationship under discussion is characterised by its personal nature, with the Christological with the pneumatological and Trinitarian dimensions of experience being seamlessly integrated. This integration is exemplified not only by references to the motif of resurrection³ or the Glory of the Incarnate Word⁴ but also by the theme of the Spirit of God. This activates the human capacity to respond to God’s invitation and enables the individual to participate in the co-creation of reality, in a manner similar to the event of Pentecost. This phenomenon is concomitant with the empowerment of the Apostles to transmit the experience of God’s actions in the history of salvation.

The reference to the Incarnation of the Word is intentionally accompanied by images of the “flame of the Spirit,” the “awakening of God in the soul,” and the “breathing in the Holy Spirit.” It is evident that the pneumatological dimensions maintain a consistent connection with the overarching theme of the Incarnate Word, which is articulated within the text. This thematic element is manifested in the poem *The living flame of love* through the concept of the Word of God-Betrothed, which is intricately intertwined with the human soul, thereby establishing a profound partnership. This partnership is further elaborated by the mystic’s experiences, which are delineated in the poem, thus facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the human subject’s journey.

Prior to the interpretation of the text of *The living flame of love*, it is necessary to provide a concise terminological note on the concepts of mysticism and union with God, which are inextricably linked to this study. In this context, the term “mystical” is employed to denote a particular mode of experiencing the presence and agency of God in human life. As posited by the Spanish theologian Ciro García, an alternative definition is *conocimiento experimental de Dios*, which may be translated as “experiential knowledge of

3 Cf. I. Matthew, *Visualising christology: “Llama de amor viva” and the resurrection*, “Teresianum” 68 (2017) issue 1, pp. 87–125.

4 Cf. M. Hlaváčová, *The incarnation mystery in the writings of John of the Cross*.

God.” It is imperative to comprehend the mystical experience as a distinct modality of actualising the history of salvation, in natural harmony with the tenets of the religious tradition to which it belongs. Mystical experiences constitute a fundamental source of spiritual theology, defined as a theological discipline that systematically studies the process of human spiritual development. The term “union with God” is employed by the Spanish mystic to denote the aim of spiritual maturation.

The concept of union with God is said to represent the ultimate phase in the spiritual journey, which comprises three distinct stages: purification, enlightenment, and union. The human person is invited into a relationship and accepts the divine invitation to respond with a faith that has two dimensions: the dimension of trust in the one who speaks, and the dimension of vital acceptance of the message itself (its content). It is posited that individuals who have undergone active and passive purification may experience a profound and intense manifestation of the divine presence. Consequently, a significant number of writers who are classified as mystics employ symbolic language, a technique that facilitates the articulation of the profundity of the authentic spiritual experience.

The development of John of the Cross’s spiritual life is described in accordance with the traditional tripartite scheme of the spiritual journey,⁵ although the mystic’s own writings place greater emphasis on the purifying and unifying stages. This is the path of human sanctification, the goal of which, as John of the Cross repeatedly states, is union with God in love. According to Ruiz, the Spanish mystic posits that love constitutes the fundamental force to which all other dimensions of union are related.⁶ This includes the transformation of the human being, the likeness to God, and deification.

Context and symbols

Like all the other three major writings of John of the Cross, the book consists of a commentary on one of his poems. Here, too, the Spanish mystic chose

5 On this topic see also: C. Betschart, *La crescita spirituale nella scuola carmelitana*, “Mysterion” 10 (2017) no. 2, pp. 71–183.

6 Cf. F. Ruiz, *Síntesis doctrinal*, in: *Introducción a la lectura de San Juan de la Cruz*, eds. S. Ros, E. Pachó, T. Egido, C. Cuevas et al., Salamanca 1993, pp. 219–220.

to express his spiritual experience first in poetic form, and only later to add a broader explanation in the form of a commentary on each verse. The commentary thus offers the author's own hermeneutical key to the interpretation of the spiritual experience. The theological framework of this experience is pneumatological and Trinitarian. The author's interest lies in "the highest degree of perfection one can reach in this life (transformation in God)."

The main symbol with which the mystic works to express his spiritual experience is the action of fire (the Spirit of God) on wood (the human interior), which is gradually transformed until it itself becomes a flame. This living flame acts in the centre of the human being ("de mi alma en el más profundo centro"⁷).

The whole writing is strongly pneumatological and Trinitarian⁸ and describes God's indwelling (*inhabitación*) and action in the soul: it shows how God completely takes the initiative in the human interior and what happens in the soul thanks to his action. The divine action on the human subject is depicted as "cautery," "touch," "light and heat," "breath" etc.⁹

It is in this context that John sets before his reader the aim of spiritual development (the most perfect degree of perfection that can be attained in this life). According to him, it is a state in which, above all, love is "sorted out" and "strengthened". For there is nowhere to go but to grow in intensity (the "greater flame of love"). The flame, then, is the basic symbol that, according to John of the Cross, expresses this process of strengthening and grounding in love."

In his previous work, *The spiritual canticle*, John of the Cross focused primarily on describing how transformation into love happens and what it means to be transformed by love. In *The living flame of love*, however, he is primarily concerned with the next phase: what it means to become a flame of

7 Juan de la Cruz, *Llama de amor viva*, critical edition by E. Pachó, Burgos 2014, Canción 1.

8 Cf. G. Castro, *Llama de amor viva (obra)*, in: *Diccionario de San Juan de la Cruz*, ed. E. Pachó, Burgos 2009, pp. 888–890; F. Ruiz, *Cimas de contemplación: Exégesis de "Llama de amor viva"*, "Ephemerides Carmeliticae" 13 (1962) no. 1–2, pp. 284–289.

9 For a discussion of symbolism and language, see: *Hermenéutica y mística: San Juan de la Cruz*, eds. J. Á. Valente, J. Lara Garrido, Madrid 1995; F. Sobrino Matamala, "Llama de amor viva" de San Juan de la Cruz. *Lenguaje y experiencia de fe*, Burgos 2013; C. Cuevas, *Estudio literario*, in: *Introducción a la lectura de San Juan de la Cruz*, pp. 125–201; A. Escribano, *Lenguaje y simbología en "Llama de amor viva"*, in: *Llama de amor viva. Actas del IV Congreso Mundial Sanjuanista*, eds. J. S. Fermín, R. Cuartas Londoño, Burgos 2021, pp. 113–140.

love and burn with love¹⁰ — that is, to vividly participate in an interpersonal relationship within what Ciro García calls “intercomunicación personal”.¹¹

It is an experience that fundamentally goes beyond the phase that John of the Cross described in his writing *The spiritual canticle* as “comunicación y transformación de amor”¹² (union through love).

The action of the Spirit of God in the human subject

The union with God has the character of a selfless gift from a divine agent and brings about the integration of the different components of the personality (sensual and spiritual components, moral and theological dimensions, etc.).¹³

John of the Cross works with the symbolism of fire, especially in the first chapter of his writings: the work of the divine Spirit is done in the manner of fire, which transforms the wood in the fire so much that it burns itself. In the very first paragraphs of the chapter, the Spanish mystic uses this symbol to express the next stage of the process: after distinguishing the “habitual state” (*habitus*), which is the constant transformation of the interior by the Spirit, from the “acts” (*actos*) in which the soul itself is on fire, he tells¹⁴ that these acts cannot be attributed to the human interior, since

Thus in this state the soul cannot make acts because the Holy Spirit makes them all and moves it toward them. As a result all the acts of the soul are divine, since the movement toward these acts and their execution stem from God.¹⁵

John of the Cross is aware that he is using bold expressions, which is why he also emphasises that everything that has been said so far is the language of God, through which God speaks to “purified and inflamed” souls. The mysticism of the Incarnate Word is thus continued in the mysticism of God’s

10 On the difference in content between *The spiritual canticle* and *The living flame of love*, see also John of the Cross, *The living flame* 3, 23.

11 Cf. C. García, *La mística del Carmelo*, Burgos 2002, p. 119.

12 Juan de la Cruz, *El cántico espiritual* 3, 38.

13 Cf. C. García, *Juan de la Cruz y el misterio del hombre*, Burgos 1990, pp. 220 and 228.

14 On the distinction between *habitus* and *actos* in John of the Cross, see F. Ruiz, *Cimas de contemplación*, p. 266, note 8.

15 John of the Cross, *The living flame* 1, 4.

speech, which sets on fire the interior of man, who has allowed himself to be transformed by divine love to the point of becoming a partaker of a flame.

In this communication, the “Father, Son and Spirit” are communicated to the soul to experience a trace of the divine life. At the same time, John of the Cross emphasizes that in this state, the divine reality is experienced as truly alive in this state (*vivamente gustaban a Dios*): there is a living experience of the living God in which the different components of humanity participate: God is experienced alive by the spirit and the senses, they gain an experience of what it means to live the life of God (“My heart and my body rejoiced in the living God”).

Spiritual experience and the “home of the body”

Another characteristic of the peak experience in John of the Cross is the actual empowerment of man, in the various dimensions of his existence, to unite with God. St. John of the Cross speaks of God’s “favouring the flesh” in order that man may endure the “fire of glory”, that is, to encounter the attributes of the divine life shared with man in this experience. Of the three “veils” that have hindered the union of the human interior with God, two are now removed and no longer constitute an obstacle to the divine encounter: the veil of the “temporal” (attachment to creatures) and the veil of the “natural” (our inclinations and natural acts). The things that make up the natural world do not constitute the final meaning and purpose of life. There is no dependence on others, nor is there any seeking of support in one’s own ego (“only their God is everything to them”).

The remaining sensual veil, the “earthly house” of the body in which the human subject lives his existence, cannot be discarded even in this culminating stage of human spiritual experience, for it unites the body and soul. At the same time, it stands between God and the soul as something subtle through which the divine shines through. This experience causes the desire to enter fully into the sphere of divine life, which means leaving this “earthly home of the body.”

Tear then the thin veil of this life and do not let old age cut it naturally, that from now on I may love You with plenitude and fullness my soul desires forever and ever. Tear the delicate veil of this life and do not let it go so far that age and years will naturally put

an end to it, so that from now on I may love you as fully and as much as my soul desires, without limit and without end.¹⁶

The inner experience is so strong that, even when it manifests itself on the level of the body, for example in the form of stigmata, it is an experience that has lost the character of pain. However, it is usually a purely inner experience that does not need to manifest itself in any way because it is only at the level of the soul. Our natural faculties cannot arrive at this experience by themselves; they must be left aside, because it is an experience that comes from another level of reality and can only subsequently reach the ordinary human senses and faculties.

The phase of spiritual life in which he finds himself after purification brings about an inner harmony with the Divine Spirit, or something akin to a “natural” harmony. Even so, it would be impossible to sustain participation in the divine life if God Himself did not communicate “gently”.

He shows Himself gently. As God shows the soul grandeur and glory in order to exalt and favor it, He aids it so that no detriment is done, fortifying the sensory part and unveiling His grandeur gently and with love, without using the senses, so that a person does not know whether this happens in the body or out of it.¹⁷

Transformation of the perception

Another characteristic of this culminating phase of spiritual experience, according to John of the Cross, is the transformation of the character of perception, in the sense that in this phase, “purified” of the ego, the painfulness of the experience caused by the incompatibility of the contents and modes of perception of the human subject in relation to the quality of the divine subject that is made known here has disappeared. This incompatibility, which causes pain, is now replaced by an experience, which John of the Cross describes above all as a constant movement of love, a “play of love” which touches man in order to awaken love in him.”

¹⁶ John of the Cross, *The living flame* 1, 36.

¹⁷ John of the Cross, *The living flame* 4, 12.

Although it has a purely spiritual core, the whole person can participate in this experience (“the whole sensual nature rejoices, all the limbs and bones, and all the marrow”). All the components of the human being draw from this experience, which, according to John, spreads from the cross of the Spirit to the soul, to “the tips of the fingers and the toes”.

In the second chapter of *The living flame of love*, the mystic describes the state of the ultimate experience that is reached by “possessing God through union” and when “the whole old man” is dead. In doing so, the focus of the human faculties and “all the desires of the soul” are radically changed. They are oriented toward God, and “because the soul does its acts in God through union with Him, it lives the life of God, and so its death has been changed into life.” Reason is guided and informed by “another higher principle” of the supernatural light of God, the will is guided by “the power strength of the Holy Spirit” and “lives a life of love”, while memory is saturated by the experience of eternal life:

Accordingly, the intellect of this soul is God’s intellect; its will is God’s will; its memory is the memory of God; and its delight is God’s delight; and although the substance of this soul is not the substance of God, since it cannot undergo a substantial conversion into Him, it has become God through participation in God, being united to and absorbed in Him, as it is in this state.

The inner man is “absorbed into the life of God”,¹⁸ he lives “in festivity inwardly and outwardly, and it frequently bears on its spiritual tongue a new song of great jubilation in God, a song always new, enfolded in a gladness and love arising from the knowledge the soul has of its happy state.”¹⁹ At the same time as this state of happiness, there seems to be a recognition of the uniqueness of the divine sharing that is taking place.²⁰

In the third chapter of his writings, the Spanish mystic devotes a great deal of space to explaining that the faculties do not merely possess a general and undifferentiated knowledge of God (which he has spoken of in previous

¹⁸ John of the Cross, *The living flame* 2, 35.

¹⁹ John of the Cross, *The living flame* 2, 36.

²⁰ Cf. John of the Cross, *The living flame* 2, 36.

writings as the content of the contemplation we seek).²¹ Using the image of the lamps of fire, he describes “the knowledge of God and love for him,”²² which involves both participation in the divine life and sharing in the attributes of that divine life.²³ He gives you gifts according to who He is:

Since He is omnipotent, He omnipotently loves and does good to you; since He is wise, you feel that He loves and does good to you with wisdom; since He is infinitely good, you feel that He loves you with goodness ... since He is a strong, sublime, and delicate being, you feel that His love for you is strong, sublime, and delicate; since He is pure and undefiled, you feel that He loves you in a pure and undefiled way.²⁴

There is no longer a separation between human and divine agency, everything happens at the same time. The soul itself becomes luminous thanks to this transformation and participation (“the movements of these divine flames... are not made by the soul alone, transformed into flames by the Holy Spirit, nor are they made by him alone, but by him and the soul together”).

This movement has the character of lightness and playfulness and is accompanied by both movement and stillness. It is about the movements of the soul into the experience of participation in the glory of God, when the soul is, at the same time, “firmly established in God”. The faculties of the soul such as memory, will and reason are filled with God—our capacity is enormous: the thirst of the intellect, the hunger of the will and the delight of memory for God are fulfilled here.

21 Cf. e.g. *Ascent to Mount Carmel* II, 10 ,4; 14, 6 ecc. On the subject, see e.g. J.A. Marcos, *La atención amorosa en clave de presencia: Juan de la Cruz*, “Revista de espiritualidad” 64 (2005), pp. 255–258.

22 John of the Cross, *The living flame* 3, 3.

23 In his commentary on the third stanza, the mystic oscillates between the image of the flame and the waters of the Spirit. In describing how the action of the divine Spirit of love spreads to the different dimensions of humanity, he moves freely between the two images: “these lamps of fire are living waters of the Spirit’ like those seen above the apostles; although they were lamps, they were also clear, pure waters” (John of the Cross, *The living flame* 3, 8), after the model of the prophet Ezekiel, so that “it is fire, it is also water” (ibidem). We may think that water describes rather the descending dimension of the endowment (“living waters of the Spirit” in fact “quench the thirst of the spirit,” ibidem), while fire refers again to the result of the transformation, “the transfiguration of the soul into God”: the flame rises up “in the love of God” and the soul “becomes God of God by partaking of him and his attributes, which are what are here called lamps of fire” (John of the Cross, *The living flame* 3, 8).

24 John of the Cross, *The living flame* 3, 6.

God, where He has the opportunity, gives much and delights in man. After the phase of trial and the “dark night” comes the period of man’s fulfilment, “the Most Holy Trinity will come to him and make His abode in him,” and “enlighten his understanding with the wisdom of the Son, and enlighten his will with the Holy Spirit, and the Father will enfold him mightily and powerfully in the abysmal embrace of His sweetness.”²⁵

The gentle touch of the ineffable Word in the deepest centre of the soul

The fire of love thus touches the soul here, in its deepest centre (*en la sustancia del alma*),²⁶ in its essence, or at its very bottom:

This feast takes place in the substance of the soul, where neither the center of the senses nor the devil can reach. Therefore, it is the more secure, substantial, and delightful the more interior it is, because the more interior it is, the purer it is. And the greater the purity, the more abundantly, frequently, and generously God communicates Himself.²⁷

This action takes place in the “deepest centre of the soul” (*centro más profundo*), i.e. where we can find ourselves if we use all the strength of our being and focus of our affection. However, if the “centre of the soul is God,” and the inclination, strength and faculties (*inclinación, fuerza y virtud*) of the soul is love, then in this process there is an ever-increasing enlightenment of love until the soul’s capacity to receive it is fulfilled and it resembles God.²⁸

25 John of the Cross, *The living flame* 1, 15. Throughout the text of *The living flame of love* it is emphasised that one of the distinguishing features of this phase of experience is its gentle character (as regards the human subject’s perception). John of the Cross returns to the time of inner purification from the self-centered motives of the spiritual life in the first of the thematic digressions of the writings, in the passage of *The living flame* 1, 11–26, which connects the writings with the Ascent to Mount Carmel and the Dark Night. The flame of God’s Spirit is experienced as “dark,” “it is painful,” “it is agonizing,” “it is dry,” cf. John of the Cross, *The living flame* 1, 20.

26 For the theme of the centre, essence or bottom of the soul in John of the Cross, see E. Pachó, *Alma humana*, in: *Diccionario de San Juan de la Cruz*, ed. E. Pachó, Burgos 2000, pp. 67–68.

27 John of the Cross, *The living flame* 1, 9.

28 Cf. John of the Cross, *The living flame* 1, 14. The mystic notes that few people have this experience, however, so this description of the experience may come across as “too much” or too little, which is actually a pity because when we are purified and “proved ourselves in the fire of trials and tribulations.”

God the Father is the originator of the whole action — the Son is here His hand, which gently touches the inside of the human being:

O You, then, delicate touch, the Word, the Son of God, through the delicacy of Your divine being, You subtly penetrate the substance of my soul and, lightly touching it all, absorb it entirely in Yourself.²⁹

John of the Cross takes care to bring out the paradoxical character of the experience of God’s touch through the Word. Although it is a supremely spiritual experience, it emerges as perceptible, and the human subject is now empowered by God to perceive it.

This new kind of divine communication through the touch of the Word is experienced by man as a contrast of intensity (“strength and power”) and gentleness (*suavidad*) that characterises spiritual experience at this stage. The comparison to a tactile experience refers to the fact that, although it is an experience of transcendence, it is perceptible and brings pleasure (“they will be able to perceive you and enjoy you”). The prerequisite for such perception is the state of transformation and likeness to God mentioned several times (“the subtle meets the subtle”).

The imageless character of the peak experience

The Trinitarian aspect of spiritual experience, as the Spanish mystic describes it in his commentary on the second stanza of *The living flame*, involves a “third grace”, the transformation of man through the work of the Trinity. This grace takes place in the inner core of the human being (the soul) and is characterised by the fact that, unlike other experiences, it is imageless, without form or shape.

Particularly noteworthy is the passage describing the experience of the human subject in this place, which the mystic describes as “the centre of the heart of the spirit”:

²⁹ John of the Cross, *The living flame* 2, 17.

Who can fittingly speak of this intimate point of the wound, which seems to be in the middle of the heart of the spirit, there where the soul experiences the excellence of the delight? The soul feels that that point is like a tiny mustard seed, very much alive and enkindled, sending into its surroundings a living and enkindled fire of love. The fire issuing from the substance and power of that living point, which contains the substance and power of the herb, is felt to be subtly diffused through all the spiritual and substantial veins of the soul in the measure of the soul's power and strength. The soul feels its ardor strengthen and increase and its love become so refined in this ardor that seemingly there are seas of loving fire within it, reaching to the heights and depths of the earthly and heavenly spheres, imbuing all with love. It seems to it that the entire universe is a sea of love in which it is engulfed, for, conscious of the living point or center of love within itself, it is unable to catch sight of the boundaries of this love.³⁰

The sensation is experientially associated with the “finest pleasure”, and from the centre it spreads out through the “vessels of the soul”. It is the nucleus, the centre of the heart of the spirit, from which the warmth spreads and grows, and in which “love is refined”, is very small. St. John of the Cross uses the image of the mustard seed to express the revolutionary dynamic of growth: from the littleness that contains the “essence and power”, where all the potential of life is hidden, everything is truly born; here is the seat of the fire of love that spreads “spiritually and substantially” throughout the organism of the human interior.

An essential part of this inner experience is the connection between one's own birthplace of the “fire of love” and the boundless nature of this experience. The experience encompasses all dimensions: depth and breadth, intimacy and connection to the whole. There is a starting point, a centre of love, from which the fire of love spreads and reaches to the top and the depths of all creation (“love fills it all”). The mystic experiences his inner self in the flow of love without seeing how far this experience goes: he “sees neither the end nor the goal where this love flows”, but he perceives within himself the place where love has its origin in man, where its starting point and its centre are.

This touch of the Word, though perceptible, has at the same time “no volume or weight, because the Word that does it is far from all measure and manner”—there is no measure, manner, material form or shape, there is only its divine

³⁰ John of the Cross, *The living flame* 2, 10.

essence. Therefore it is also ineffable when God touches man. God touches us with His utterly simple and infinite being, which, according to John of the Cross, is “infinitely gentle” and loving and communicates in touch what divine life is. Because touch is of the essence of God, it cannot be expressed and described, according to the mystic, but it can be perceived, experienced and silenced, and it is in the ground of the soul:

The delicateness of delight felt in this contact is inexpressible. I would desire not to speak of it so as to avoid giving the impression that it is no more than what I describe. There is no way to catch in words the sublime things of God which happen in these souls. The appropriate language for the person receiving these favors is that he understands them, experience them within himself, enjoy them, and be silent.³¹

The receptivity of the human subject in mystical experience

Whereas in the previous stage we could make an effort and engage our senses in the spiritual life, here we simply cannot work, because God works for man and man is the recipient of God’s operations. As in the whole other tradition of mystical literature, St. John of the Cross says that in contemplation God gives knowledge and love simultaneously (*noticia amorosa*),³² without man doing anything; the human subject only receives knowledge, which has the character of a “peaceful and tranquil good”, communicated “secretly” and “in spirit”.³³ Here, the Spanish mystic associates the state of contemplation with an attentive and loving gaze, with “simple, loving awareness”: simply opening our eyes, consciously and lovingly, to what is right in front of us.³⁴

At the “bottom of the soul”, or in the “substance of the soul” is found the ability and power (*virtud y fuerza*) to experience “the wisdom and love and communication of God”. In this way, man becomes a depository of divine greatness. This reception takes place “far from any general thought” and

³¹ John of the Cross, *The living flame* 2, 21.

³² Cf. John of the Cross, *The living flame* 3, 33.

³³ Cf. John of the Cross, *The living flame* 3, 33.

³⁴ Cf. John of the Cross, *The living flame* 3, 33. This is why, according to the Spanish Carmelite, it is also essential that the attendant does not recommend “object” meditation to a person in a state of contemplation.

“beyond any manner”, and yet here the human reason receives the wisdom of God because it has united itself with God’s reason. From this union then follows the opposite movement of giving, from the human soul to God: we give God his goodness, his light and the warmth of his love, and (according to the way in which they are shared here) other divine attributes.

God makes Himself known “in many ways,”³⁵ but this one is extraordinary: the dynamic of spiritual experience in the fourth stanza of *The living flame* moves from the perception of “smell” to the perception of “movement.” Smell carries with it a perception/remembrance of the source of all life (“all things are life”, “live in him”, *ibid.*) and of the movement of life (“in him... they move”, *ibid.*). The knowledge one comes to here, in one’s inner being, is the knowledge of the source of all life and how the existence of everything else is connected to it. John speaks of a “supernatural” perspective, because God as the source of life is not known from his creatures, but rather the reverse: it is through God that creatures are known. The soul is “moved by God”, and “the divine life and being and harmony of the whole creation is revealed to it in a completely new way.”³⁶

John of the Cross links the act of knowing God about himself (“what God is in himself”) and his presence in what he is the creator of (“in all his creatures”): one sees both “at the same time, “as one who opens a palace sees by a single act the excellency of the person who is inside, and at the same time sees what he is doing.” However, at the same time, one also cannot say what one knows here because it is the communication of God’s excellency. This transcendence of God is communicated again in the substance of the soul, “which is its womb”, where it hears the “immensely powerful voice” of God’s excellence and of his innumerable attributes.

The mystic describes the whole act here as a process of giving and receiving divine knowledge and love: while God gives Himself to the soul, man is simply and lovingly to receive and understand. This reception, however, does not take place on the natural plane, because something else is being made known, hence the mystic’s emphasis on passive reception (“not a doing natural act”, abandoning one’s natural activities, remaining in “passive loving awareness”), because God is communicated supernaturally at this stage. To receive the

³⁵ John of the Cross, *The living flame* 4, 4.

³⁶ John of the Cross, *The living flame* 4, 6.

supernatural means to conform to the divine subject, and thus to be free from everything else. One is to remain unattached in one's soul to individual perceptions, feelings, and thoughts, to remain inwardly in the contemplative insight/listening: detached from everything and standing alone before God without any support.³⁷ This state is accompanied on the part of the human subject by a feeling of solitude and inner inactivity, self-forgetfulness and listening, and to this is added peace, calmness and luminosity—as it is with God.³⁸

At this stage, according to John of the Cross, there is nothing to lean on, there is only “deep silence” for the sake of “deep and gentle listening”, where “God speaks to the heart in this solitude” in “supreme peace and tranquillity”. This peace speaks and the soul remains in silence and listening. The loving awareness itself (*advertencia amorosa*) disappears and what remains is the “simple and idle state” of peaceful rest (*sosiego*) and inner absorption (*absorbimiento interior*).³⁹ Contemplation here means receiving a communication from God that is not through the senses but through the language of God. This language presupposes the above-mentioned detachment from any particular knowledge and perception:

will raise my mind above all activity and knowledge belonging to my senses and (what they can retain, leaving all below, and will fix the foot of the fortress (my faculties), not allowing these faculties to advance a step as regards their own operation that they may receive through contemplation what God communicates to me; for we have already asserted that pure contemplation in receiving. It is impossible for this highest wisdom and language of God, which is contemplation, to be received in anything less than a spirit that is silent and detached from discursive knowledge and gratification... from particular knowledge and apprehensions.⁴⁰

In this state of contemplation, the Spirit of God's wisdom is infused into man in “idle tranquillity”. The spiritual experience of the human subject will then be similar to the character of the Giver, the divine subject, namely, it will have the attributes of loving-kindness, peace, solitude, sweetness, and inebriation:

37 Cf. John of the Cross, *The living flame* 3, 34.

38 Cf. John of the Cross, *The living flame* 3, 34.

39 Cf. John of the Cross, *The living flame* 3, 34–36.

40 John of the Cross, *The living flame* 3, 36–37.

This wisdom is loving, tranquil, solitary, peaceful, mild, and an inebriator of the spirit, by which the soul feels tenderly and gently wounded and carried away, without knowing by whom, nor from where, nor how. The reason is that this wisdom is communicated without the souls own activity.⁴¹

The passivity of the human subject is functional because it creates space for the reception of a different kind of knowledge, one that goes beyond the ordinary capacity of reason. ("The reason is that God transcends the intellect and is incomprehensible and inaccessible to it. Hence, while the intellect is understanding, it is not approaching God, but withdrawing from Him"⁴²).

Participation in the life of God

This state brings with it the consciousness of participation in the divine life ("the soul has become one with him, it is in a certain way God through participation"⁴³), so that through this union then what God does in man, man does in God for God: "being the shadow of God through this substantial transformation, it performs in this measure in God and through God what He through Himself does in it."⁴⁴

John of the Cross describes another progression of the action of union, with its dynamic of the mutual gift between the human person and the Spirit of God: "The more it is united in God, the more it gives itself to God in God."⁴⁵ In spite of the obvious inequality of the two partners (divine and human), a mutual gift and love is formed and developed in the relationship, as in a married couple (*amor recíproco*):

A reciprocal love is thus actually formed between God and the soul, like the marriage union and surrender, in which the goods of both (the divine essence which each possesses freely by reason of the voluntary surrender between them) are possessed by both together. They say to each other what the Son of God spoke to the Father through St. John:

⁴¹ John of the Cross, *The living flame* 3, 38.

⁴² John of the Cross, *The living flame* 3, 48.

⁴³ John of the Cross, *The living flame* 3, 78.

⁴⁴ John of the Cross, *The living flame* 3, 78.

⁴⁵ John of the Cross, *The living flame* 3, 78.

Omnia mea tua sunt et tua mea sunt et clarificatus sum in eis (All my goods are yours and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them).⁴⁶

Man gives to God the Spirit that he has received from God: “In this gift that the soul gives to God, he freely gives him the Holy Spirit as his possession.”⁴⁷

From an experiential point of view, according to John of the Cross, this interior state is accompanied by the joy of man’s self-giving, through which he transcends himself: it is the joy of God in God himself. At the same time, he returns to the content of the experience, which is the communication of the Trinity (the communication of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit in the soul), which is accompanied by the “light and fire of love” in the soul. This gift is distinctive because it involves a totally selfless love for God: one loves God for who He is, not because one is endowed with special divine gifts.

The last chapter of *The living flame of love* comments on two remarkable effects of union on the human heart. The first is described by John of the Cross as God’s remembrance in the soul, which again takes place with gentleness and love, “in the centre and in the depths” of the soul, in its essence, that is, in a space that is exclusively for God. The image of the reciprocal relationship between God and man, expressed as the indwelling of God in the soul, returns here. John of the Cross then intensifies the image of the mutual intimacy between God and man. The image of the partnership between God and man emerges: God himself dwells within the human subject, not as “in his house”, but his Word is now the sole Lord of the soul and dwells in it in a specific way: namely, in the symbolic womb of human existence, with which he is now *estrechamente unido*. The mystery of the love of the divine Trinity for man, which was manifested in the incarnation of God’s Son-Word, now returns in an intensified form in the text of *The living flame of love*.

The second effect that man experiences in his midst is the breath of God, in which God participates “full of goodness and glory”. In this, the soul is like a person awakening from a dream, absorbing the breath of the divine life that is communicated here. St. John of the Cross reiterates (and intensifies) the fact that everything here happens with surprising subtlety: the immense

46 John of the Cross, *The living flame* 3,79, cf. also Jn 17:10.

47 John of the Cross, *The living flame* 3, 79.

power of love and tenderness is always manifested as “mansa” and “delicada” in relation to the human subject.

The Spanish mystic approaches the transformative aspect of experience through the motif of “sight”. The sight denotes a transformation of the cognitive perspective: awakening transforms the mystic’s view of reality, which participates in God’s loving gaze on creation (“el mirar de Dios es amar,” the mystic wrote in *Spiritual canticle* 31, 5–8).

The metaphor of divine marriage as an image of the partnership between God and man

This touch of the Word in the essence of the soul fundamentally transforms the human subject to resemble his divine Partner (Christ, the Son of God) and to live the divine life in which he shares thanks to the Son and his Spirit.

This sharing takes place to the extent of an intimate participation in the experience of Pentecost, in which the divine life was manifested as so intense and powerful that it radiated outwards from the core of the believers. From the beginning, the writing is accompanied by the symbol of the ardent flame of divine love, which later, in *The living flame* 2, 10, penetrates everything and transforms into itself everything it touches. There is no place in it for alienation, non-acceptance or hatred, which are contrary to its nature.

The metaphor of *matrimonio espiritual* is an example of his fundamentally relational spirituality. In describing the divine indwelling of the human interior, he emphasises the element of necessary freedom that the divine Partner requires to manifest Himself at the centre of the human interior: “In some souls He dwells alone, and in others He does not dwell alone. Abiding in some, He is pleased; and in others, He is displeased. He lives in some as though in His own house, commanding and ruling everything.”⁴⁸

The difference is in the degree of deprivation: if the human interior is not focused on other impulses and reactions (“less desires and self-pleasure”) than on the impulses of the divine life, divine inhabitation can develop. The divine subject is then “most alone and most loved and dwells there as in his own house.” This whole section of the description of the experience of the

⁴⁸ John of the Cross, *The living flame* 4, 14.

divine marriage is accompanied by an antithesis, tending progressively towards the superlatives that are evident in the original Spanish version (“secretoissimamente, ... más íntimo e interior y estrecho abrazo”):

Thus in this soul in which neither any appetite nor other images or forms, nor any affections for created things, dwell, the Beloved dwells secretly with an embrace so much the closer, more intimate, and interior, the purer and more alone the soul is to everything other than God.⁴⁹

The description is rather an allusion to the relational reality, which excludes everything that is incompatible with it: neither the senses nor other external agents have access to this “extremely hidden” (*secretissimo*) knowledge; only the soul perceives the “intimate embrace” of the divine mystery. To describe the difference between several variants of the ultimate experience, the author doubles the image of the awakening (*recuerdo*): God is always present in the “womb” of the soul, but his presence is not always equally evident on the part of the human subject.

The peak experience of a well-disposed human interior corresponds to the experience of the awakening of the divine in the centre of the human soul, which is not necessarily a stable present (“if they were still communicating knowledge and expressions of love, it would already be in glory”).

A more common form of experience within this final stage of human spiritual development, according to John of the Cross, seems to be the divine indwelling of the essence of the soul, in the manner of “rest”, “as if he were asleep”: “Though she felt and tasted him, he was like the beloved who is immersed in sleep,”⁵⁰ “ordinarily he is there as if he were asleep... in the substance of her soul.”⁵¹ The human subject, on the other hand, has the capacity to perceive this divine presence (“She feels it very well and usually enjoys it”).

From the immediately following paragraph of *The living flame*, it would seem that far from everyone who aspires to this journey to the summit of the spiritual life, reaches this stage of union with God, in which the divine life is experienced not only as a constant presence but also as a mutual recognition and expression of love at the level of the essence of the human soul.

49 John of the Cross, *The living flame* 4, 14.

50 John of the Cross, *The living flame* 4, 14.

51 John of the Cross, *The living flame* 4, 15.

The union that occurs may remain at the level of occasional, pleasurable experience, but the predominant state is one in which the divine indwelling in the soul remains hidden to the human subject, “not normally felt... they do indeed have certain actions and movements of a spiritual nature, but these are not wholly and purely spiritual”.⁵²

A specific part of the culminating stage of spiritual experience that the Spanish mystic is still willing to hint at is the degree of union between the divine and human partners, which John of the Cross expresses by saying that “everything that is done and is done is perfect, because he does everything; it is like someone waking up and taking a breath”.⁵³ The mystic speaks of a specific joy (*extraño deleite*) in the perception of divine life, which he expresses with the image of “the breath of the Holy Spirit in God”. The human subject perceives, in his centre, the flowing divine life (breath) that comes to him and communicates the purely divine quality of God’s goodness, glory and tender love for man.

Conclusions

In the final paragraphs of *The living flame of love*, the Spanish mystic returns to the very beginning of his work, in which he tried to express and transmit his experience of the mystery of the Divine Incarnation, as he described it in the Romance of the Incarnation. If we have seen how in The Romance of the Incarnation he depicted the moment of the Incarnation of the Word of God, in *The living flame of love* this Word is given greater space as Verbo Esposo, which touches human existence at its core. There is a transformation in the relationship, where participation in the divine life opens the human person to the experience of knowing the divine essence, which is love. The latter is itself a communication and a gift that transforms the human inner being and makes possible the development of a human knowledge that transcends sensory knowledge (which is why it is difficult to express in the coordinates of discursive knowledge and the language of precise conceptual definitions).

⁵² John of the Cross, *The living flame* 4, 16 (own translation).

⁵³ John of the Cross, *The living flame* 4, 16 (own translation).

The Word of God appears as an active agent in the process of human transformation of man, created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26). Man, who is endowed by God with the potential to participate in the divine life of his Creator, is endowed by the mystery of the Incarnation of Christ with the Spirit, who gives him knowledge and insight into God's life (*inteligencia y noticia de Dios*) and kindles in him love as it is in God. This breathing of the Spirit goes from the essence of God to the essence of man and is linked to absorption in the Holy Spirit.

John of the Cross's supreme spiritual experience thus affects all dimensions of the person, from the body and human abilities to the soul's essence. These all participate in God's life in two ways: hidden or perceptible. The prevailing state is one in which God's presence in the human heart remains hidden (God 'rests' in the soul). When God "awakens" in the soul, this is accompanied by formlessness and is simultaneously a clear, perceptible and fulfilling experience.

The experience of spiritual marriage (*matrimonio espiritual*), which takes place at this stage of the spiritual process according to John of the Cross, involves a *unión efectiva*, that is, a total transformation of all the dimensions of human existence. This union is embedded in the dynamism of the life of God, opened up in Christ by the incarnation of the Son of God. The Word of God, then, in its essential quality (as reality-creating *dabar* and as the *Logos* of God incarnate in the reality of the world in Jesus Christ), is inseparably linked to the power of the Spirit of God (*rúah*). Together they transform human existence from its deepest centre, enabling the human interior to encounter its identity as the creative Word, the ground of all that is. Man's participation in this identity is only possible thanks to the Incarnate Word, who becomes the partner of the human soul and who, through the power of his Spirit (which also proceeds from the Father), accompanies the community of believers and enables them on their spiritual journey of following Christ and immersing themselves in his Paschal Mystery until the experience of Pentecost. The relationship between Christ and his disciples would be incomplete without including the experience that brings the Paschal Mystery full circle: the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples at Pentecost.

It is this experience of "mysticism of Pentecost" which, in my opinion, is the goal of spiritual development and the original contribution of the mystic's text *The living flame of love*: its imaginary culmination of the mysticism of the Incarnate Word, which here passes into the "mysticism of the Pentecost"

who participates in the believers his Spirit to the extent that they are transformed and enabled to respond at the level of the divine identity shared in the Son of God: at the level of love. For him, the mysticism of the Incarnate Word of God is linked to the mysticism of “awakening of the Spouse-Word” in the essence of the soul and to the experience of the “breath of love” of the Holy Spirit, which presupposes that the otherness of the divine and the human subject within the relationship allows for a fearless reciprocal movement of surrender and acceptance of the otherness of the other within the relationship.

This experience of the unique gift of the Spirit of Christ, entrusted to the service of others, can then enable every other Christian disciple to communicate this “immensely powerful”, “immensely subtle” and “immensely sublime” experience of God to the next generation.

This work was supported by the project GAUK no. 400221 and the Charles University Research Centre program no. UNCE/24/SSH/019.

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