

The Living Flame

Deep Calls to Deep · Praying the Scriptures with St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila

What We Found

God introduces himself in fire: the unconsumed bush (Exodus 3:2), Sinai in smoke (19:18), fire falling on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:38). At Pentecost tongues as of fire divide and rest "on each one of them" (Acts 2:3-11): the mountain's fire becomes personal, and the Spirit-given speech carries the message into every language. Pentecost's fire immediately bears outward fruit.

The doctrine under the image is Romans 5:5: "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." Already poured, already given in baptism: the Spirit's indwelling love is the true endowment of every baptized life kept in grace, and the transforming depths St. John describes are that same gift brought, by God's free hand, to full flame. The command that follows is simply "Do not quench the Spirit" (1 Thessalonians 5:19). The evidence of real fire is not phenomena but charity: tongues without love are noise (1 Corinthians 13:1), and "You will know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:16).

Our water thread ends here, in the reading this study has proposed from the Church's own symbols: the desert gave water, the water was the Spirit, and the Song joins the images: love's "flashes are flashes of fire... Many waters cannot quench love" (Song 8:6-7). St. John of the Cross names the flame outright: it is the Holy Spirit, the same fire that once made the green log smoke and weep (the nights) now setting it alight. The water was always on its way to flame.

Voices of the Church

ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS

"O living flame of love that tenderly wounds my soul in its deepest center!" In his commentary John says plainly that this flame of love is the Spirit of its Bridegroom, the Holy Spirit, whom the soul feels within itself as a fire that burns and flares, bathing the soul in glory. And he explains the whole journey in one image: the same fire that first made the log smoke, blacken, and weep out its moisture (the nights of Sessions 5 and 6) at last sets it aflame, so that the wood does what fire does. The darkness and the flame were always one love at two stages of its work.

The Living Flame of Love, stanza 1 and his commentary on it.

ST. TERESA OF AVILA

Teresa describes the famous grace called the transverberation: she saw, in vision, an angel with a small golden dart tipped as if with fire, which he plunged repeatedly into her heart, leaving her wholly on fire with great love of God; the pain was severe, she says, and so was the sweetness, and she could not wish to be rid of it. She is careful, in this chapter and in her later counsels on such favors, to insist, in substance, that they are God's to give, prove nothing by themselves, and matter for the love and humility they leave behind. The wound she prized was the love.

The Life, ch. 29.

ST. THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX

Searching Scripture for her place in the Church, Thérèse found it in 1 Corinthians 12-13: since the Church is a body, it must have a heart, and that heart must be burning with love. "In the heart of the Church, my mother, I shall be love," she wrote, and so, she said, she would be everything. A cloistered woman not known for extraordinary phenomena (though her writings record their own quiet graces), dead at twenty-four, she is proof of tonight's test: the fire's evidence is charity. The Church, agreeing, put her sentence in the Catechism and made her a Doctor of the Church.

Story of a Soul, Manuscript B; quoted in CCC 826.

Live It This Week

- Memorize Romans 5:5 and pray it each morning with one added word: today. "Poured into my heart... given to me: today let it burn."
- Do the one concrete act of charity you named at Q4, and tell no one except God.
- Pray to the Holy Spirit directly each day this week (many Catholics rarely do): Come, Holy Spirit, kindle in me the fire of your love.

MEMORY VERSE · ROMANS 5:5

"God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."

Before next session: Read Luke 10:38-42. Come ready to speak for either sister.

Catechism references for this session: CCC 696, 733-735, 2011.