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“HUMBLE AND HIGHEST CREATURE” Walking with Mary, Mistress of Integral ecology

6. Mary, Bush that burns but not consumed

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Energy is everything, yet it is at the same time something extremely elusive. Our life depends in many of its fundamental aspects on the availability of energy, especially electricity. Yet energy cannot be seen or touched, except in its effects: light, heat, movement...

"God said, let there be light! And light was": this is the first word/action performed by God according to the book of Genesis. Light, therefore, is the first creature. The decision to start creating from light has its own logic: how could we see what is there and what is missing in the universe if there was no light?

In nature, human beings draw light primarily from the stars, which God himself created not only to illuminate, but also to regulate the passage of time. It is light and warmth from which, in ancient times, human beings could benefit but not control, and this is precisely why the stars, in ancient religious traditions, were gods or symbols of gods: to whom we owe everything, but who are beyond our control.

Light and heat are also available to the human being in fire, which, however, as an element of creation, is still an ambivalent reality, capable of inexorably destroying what it comes into contact with. Fire must be controlled in order to serve the good. Only a controlled fire becomes an instrument of life: to illuminate, to heat, to cook, to purify, all indispensable elements for a life worthy of being human.

Throughout Scripture, the person who proves most adept at wielding this power is God himself.

In the book of Exodus, the people on their way are guided by God during the night by a pillar of fire (Ex 13:21). In the account of Isaiah's vocation, an angel purifies the prophet's mouth by touching it with a burning coal (Is 6:66). In the Gospel of John, the Risen Jesus lights a fire and cooks fish for his friends on the shore of the Sea of Galilee (Jn 21:9). Luke's gospel reports this expression of Jesus: "I have come to bring fire to the earth; and how I wish it were already kindled! There is a baptism that I must receive; and how anxious I am, until it is accomplished!" (Lk 12:49-50).

Jesus is passionate about the salvation of humanity. He is impatient that God's love may spread like fire over the whole earth. As in the preaching of the Baptist (Lk 3:16), fire is also associated with baptism in Jesus' words. The disciples and apostles, gathered together at Pentecost, receive this baptism of fire, which sets them aflame with passion: it enables them to make themselves understood by all, it impels them to go out, to set out to spread the good news of salvation throughout the earth (Acts 2:3).

Fire, together with wind, another reality beyond the control of human beings, is therefore associated with the Spirit, that is, with love. And in this association, the nature of that energy is revealed to us, which, to quote Dante, alone has the power to move the sun and the stars. The Spirit is given to believers as a source of unity, as a force that enables them to face difficulties and overcome darkness, all kinds of darkness, even the darkness of death.

Elisabetta De Luca's 'Madonna unveiled' seems to be woven in fire. Her body, advancing towards the viewer, seems to be moving out of the limbs of a flame. Her arms raise, to the right and left, a single tongue of fire from which her face emerges and which simultaneously acts as a veil, veiling and revealing her fiery nature. Likewise, Mary is a woman of fire, all filled with the Spirit and love.



Not for nothing did the Fathers of the Church recognise in the biblical image of the burning bush a prefiguration of the mystery of Mary's divine maternity. For, how is it possible that a creature can contain the Creator in her womb without being burnt by his power, annihilated by his greatness? It is possible because God's power is the power of love (1 Jn 1).

The story of Moses, on the other hand, is also a mystery of the encounter between human frailty and the power of God. In his youth, when he was still living in Pharaoh's court, he had experienced the fire of passion for the salvation of his people and was burnt by that fire. In order to defend one of his brothers, he had killed a man and this fact had forced him into exile (Ex 2:11-21). In his maturity, at the very place of his exile, God manifests himself to Moses to reveal to him his passion for the people he has created.

The fire of God's passion for the people, however, is a fire that does not consume! How is this prodigy possible? It is possible because passionate love, which the Greeks called 'eros', in God is never separated from gratuitous and merciful love, or 'agape'. It is a mystery to which human beings are invited to approach with respect, taking off their sandals.

Respecting God, however, does not mean being afraid of Him and His power, but rather the desire to meet Him authentically and recognise Him for what He is, without manipulation. The Church Fathers also used the image of the burning bush to describe the prodigy of God's incarnation in Jesus: how is it possible for divinity to fully inhabit humanity? Because God is love, he is fire that heats and purifies, but does not consume.

Thanks to the incarnation of the Son, the fear of God's omnipotence is dispelled forever: He is a child, crying and unable to speak. He entrusts himself totally to our hands and our voice to announce his salvation in the world. Just as He entrusted Himself to Moses to deliver the people from Egypt, just as He did with Mary in the mystery of the incarnation, this child entrusts Himself today to each one of us, He is present in all those we meet, in them He awaits us, so that we may do our part, collaborate with Him in the regeneration of the world (Lk 9:48).

The transition to modernity was made possible by the development of the ability to control and even produce energy autonomously, no longer depending on the sun, the wind or the whims of fire. The ambivalent, not to say ambiguous, outcomes of technological development, however, remind us of the unsustainability of a manipulation of reality created without limits and boundaries.

We are maturing in the realisation that no one is saved alone.

The energy of love, which is the Spirit, is the only unambiguous force, which under no circumstances destroys. This is the fire that burns but does not consume.

We need energy to live, but we need it all the more that the criterion governing its distribution is fraternal love, which is also respect for neighbour and nature, social justice, solidarity. Let us ask Mary, the woman of fire, who most of all knew the secrets of the power of God's love, to be our guide again and always.