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VALUE OF IMAGES AND SYMBOLS IN THEOLOGICAL AND SPIRITUAL REFLECTION ON CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

Abstract

The article explains the concept of a spiritual experience in the context of a broadly understood experience. The author highlights the anthropological aspect of symbols and links them with human spiritual consciousness. The article concentrates on symbols occurring in the Bible and their use in symbolic acts performed by the prophets and by Jesus Christ. It shows the spiritual role of symbols in the Gospel of John and defines the role of symbols in spiritual experience realized in the context of prayer, liturgy and mysticism.

Keywords: spiritual experience, symbol, spiritual consciousness, spiritual function

WARTOŚĆ OBRAZÓW I SYMBOLI W TEOLOGICZNO-DUCHOWEJ REFLEKSJI NAD CHRZEŚCIJAŃSKIM DOŚWIADCZENIEM DUCHOWYM

Abstrakt

Artykuł objaśnia pojęcie doświadczenia duchowego w szeroko rozumianym doświadczeniu. Naświetla symbol w aspekcie antropologicznym i w powiązaniu ze świadomością duchową. Ukazuje symbole w Biblii i ich zastosowanie w czynnościach symbolicznych pełnionych przez proroków i przez Jezusa Chrystusa. Ukazuje rolę duchową symboli w Ewangelii według św. Jana. Następnie określa rolę symboli w realizacji doświadczenia duchowego w kontekście modlitwy, liturgii i mistyki.

Słowa kluczowe: doświadczenie duchowe, symbol, świadomość duchowa, funkcja duchowa

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INTRODUCTION

Paul Ricoeur's statement, well known not only among philosophers of culture, that "symbols give us food for thought", i.e. that they imply an act of cognition, was complemented on the grounds of theology which defined also other functions performed by symbols, such as that of "causing something" within a given cultural system in which they are defined. In other words, symbols "offer access to another mode of action" in a new community, as, for example, it is done through the sacrament of baptism which involves a symbolic act that transcends a baptized person to "a new way of being" (Labbé 2000, 578). The value of liturgical symbolism which harks back to the ability of images to use a symbol, which helps express its hidden meaning, is widely acknowledged in today's theology. Still, most theologians pay a lot of attention to the cognitive value of symbols, for example when striving to explain the "symbols of faith", however, they at the same time, give little thought to spiritual experience considered through the prism of symbolism. What is the relationship between symbols and Christian spiritual experience? Is it possible to present God and the relationship with Him through symbols? What is the function of symbols in this experience: does a symbol have only an expressive function or a deeper one, inscribed in the process of man's spiritual transformation and receiving a new identity in Christ?

1. THEOLOGY OF SPIRITUAL LIFE: A SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE AND THE LANGUAGE OF EXPRESSION

The theology of spirituality being a theology of spiritual life is a discipline which, based on the principles of Revelation, studies Christian spiritual experience, describes its gradual development as well as defines its structures and principles (Bernard 1983, 68). Christian spiritual experience is the experience of the relationship with Christ based on faith, hope and love animated by the Holy Spirit. This experience has both a personal and ecclesiastical dimension, since man being in baptism reborn to a new life in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 5:17) is individually called to attain Christian maturity and holiness, and he follows this spiritual path together with the others in the Church, because "it has pleased God to make men holy and save them not merely as individuals, without bond or link between them, but by making them into a single people, a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness" (Second Vatican Council 1965b, 9). It is in the Church that man listens to the word of God that awakens and strengthens his faith and unites him with Christ in the Eucharist, at the same time he gains an intense awareness of belonging to the community of the faithful and from there he is sent to be a witness of faith.

A spiritual experience that man shares when he responds positively to God's call to holiness is a different form of experience than: a) an empirical experience,

i.e. immediately accessible sensory perception of an object which is preliminary to its cognition, not through deeper reflection and research but through sensation (e.g., a view of the sea which evokes the feeling of wonder at its infinity). This type of experience marks the beginning of all cognition; b) an experimental experience typical of empirical sciences, namely, a provoked experience (e.g. one consisting in exposing a young plant to different conditions) and an analysis of the effects (plant growth or withering) using scientific methods and tools. Christian experience is to some extent analogous to the first and second type of experience, because it refers both to the sensory and intellectual experience and, at the same time, it is an experience of a higher degree than the two above-mentioned types, because it consists not only in experiencing an object but it also involves a living person and such a person's staying in a relationship with God (God's Persons) and with others, and thus, a personal nature of this experience, which therefore, should be considered on the level of (religious) experience identified by Jean Mouroux as *expérientielle* (neologism: being experienced) and by Wolfgang Beinert as "existential" (Ratzinger 2012, 83). Mouroux defines this third level of experience as something "grasped and created in all its structural elements and in all its principles of operation by human consciousness and through the purity of love which is giving itself" (Mouroux 1956, 20).

Mouroux, who aims at presenting experience as the basis of theology, points out three essential realities: the Church, Jesus Christ and Christian life. Expanding on the issue of Christian life, Mouroux mentions further three elements which he considers to be constitutive for a fuller clarification of Christian experience, namely, "affectiveness", "spiritual feeling" and "teleological virtues" (Mouroux 1956, 286-287, 307). He also enters into a detailed explanation of their role in this experience.

In an authentic spiritual experience, the objective should form the subjective (García 2001, 229). Man should respond to God's call with faith leading to a more mature personal relationship with Christ in the Holy Spirit.

In the light of such a concept of Christian spiritual experience and its essential elements, it seems plausible to ask about the language used to express it, including the language of symbols and images. In the first place, it appears to be the expression of a given individual's cultural environment together with its values and manifold manifestations that he shares, as well as that his intellectual and spiritual formation, etc. That language cannot be defined with more precision without taking into account the spiritual consciousness of man, which constitutes the basis of his spiritual life and manifests itself in understanding himself in faith before God and others, in the will to cooperate with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and His grace not only in prayer, but in various circumstances of life and in emotional sensitivity to the "visitation" of this grace as well as in man's responding in manifold ways to the good experienced from God and other people.

Posing a question regarding the manners in which Christians can participate in the mystery of Christ, Charles Bernard points out three different ways of spiritual

contact determining three types of language: 1) life experience of Christ's mystery or God's presence in the world and its expression in the language of symbols and images pertaining to human life; 2) experience of God and His mystery available in faith practiced in the community of the Church, associated with religious tradition and culture and usually expressed in a more or less speculative language provided by theology; 3) mystical experience, i.e. the experience of the "pure presence" of God expressed in a language referring to selected images and symbols (Bernard 1978, 656). Understanding of Christ's mystery invariably takes place in a holistic context, in complex situations, so it has an everyday life's dimension. Depending on the experienced situation, man can unite with God and define Him figuratively or symbolically as, for example, his "Strength", "Rock", "Fortress", or "Deliverer" (Psalm 18:2). As will be demonstrated later, this language is even more often used by mystics. In a vivid, intense life relationship with God, the language of symbols and images seems to have an advantage over the conceptual language, which is unable to render the character of this experience of God.

2. SYMBOL AND ITS USEFULNESS IN SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

What are symbols and what attributes of symbols can be useful in gaining and expressing spiritual experience? There are many definitions of symbols depending on the stance and the perspective adopted by researchers. A symbol falls into the category of signs and, as all signs, it denotes something, points to a certain reality beyond itself (*signum significativum*) and represents something/someone else (*signum representativum*), it substitutes it/him. While a sign, for example, a conventional sign created by a particular community (e.g. a road sign) is meant to convey specific information and it exhausts its own content in this information, a symbol is a sensorily perceptible sign, but at the same time a specific, "non-transparent" sign (P. Ricoeur) referring to something inexpressible, it is characterized by the "excess of meaning" (Kłoczowski 2003, 168). A religious symbol is on the borderline between transcendence in which it somehow participates (P. Tillich), the world of external forms and man, and it renews in man the relationship between this visible world and the religious and spiritual reality.

In the light of Revelation, man created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26) is in a way "his offspring" (Acts 17:28) and, due to his dual, bodily and spiritual structure he can be considered a symbol. The sense of human life and activity is not exhausted in man himself, or in his visible reality. This sense finds its fulfillment in his originator, his archetype. This archetype is contained in Christ, who is the "image of God" and the "firstborn of all creation" (Colossians 1:15), in whose resemblance man was created and in whose resemblance he is to realize himself, to find his full meaning. "The essence of Christian existence," wrote Ratzinger, "is to accept one's existence as a relationship and to live in such a way as to be able to enter into that unity [with God], which is the basis of all reality"

(Ratzinger 1994, 177). Symbols are inscribed in the relational anthropology and according to its assumptions it can be used in the realization of a spiritual experience.

It appears that Christian, i.e. spiritual anthropology today fails to pay due attention to the discovery that human conceptual thinking which finds its expression in conceptual language does not fully express the human spirit, which also expresses itself in images and symbols, and that those two ways of expression do not have to be contradictory. This is confirmed by the conception by Gilbert Durand, a prominent thinker and researcher of symbols, that “the original structures of symbolic imagination, manifesting themselves in mythologies, rituals, customs, in art and in the literature of various peoples and nations, have a universal character” (Rowiński 1986, 10). That thesis is substantiated by Durand in a book *Les structures anthropologiques de l'Imaginaire. Introduction à l'archétypologie générale* (Durand 1960, 31).

This conception has been recognized by the above-mentioned scientist, Bernard, who claims that imagination has ontological significance, and does not merely play the role of a mediator between detailed sensory impression and the universality of a concept. This French theologian of spirituality claims that “imagination’s activity originates in the total consciousness and it participates in its creative movement; by symbolizing its movement, the consciousness simultaneously expresses the ideal content and an affective reaction” (Bernard 1973, 1121)², for example, the “act of ascension” is symbolized by a “mountain” and, by evoking this symbol, consciousness, in whose movement imagination which produces images and symbols participates, becomes affectively engaged in life and it associates an image and symbol with the wealth of its activities. Imagination derives its dynamism from consciousness and it aims at transferring into the spatial perspective what has taken place, or what is to take place at a specific time, and what is marked by the realism of life.

Symbols - according to Bernard, who applies them to a spiritual experience - presents “a reality that exists in itself and which becomes capable of signifying another reality belonging to a higher ontological order” (Bernard 1983, 186), e.g. heaven as a symbol of God’s dwelling. A given sensory form can become a carrier of not only one, but several meanings corresponding to different levels of life, e.g. when bread, which is the food of natural life, becomes the “bread of life”, i.e. the food of supernatural life.

Thanks to the life’s dynamism, which is the basic element of the symbolization process, human spiritual consciousness establishes a sensory contact with the world and from the perception of a detailed relationship with it, i.e. with an object perceived by the senses, it can rise to a spiritual level, e.g. when looking at the sun, a symbol of God (1 John 1:5), glowing with light, man can rise spiritually

² In classical psychology, it was assumed that the power of imagination, as a sensory, organic power, has its location in the body, and more specifically, in the brain centres (Pastuszka 1961, 104).

to a temporal union with Him. With the help of a symbol (e.g. that of a father) spiritual awareness can elevate itself from the level of interpersonal relationships to unity with God (as the Father) or with the help of a symbol expressing community relations (e.g. a feast) it can rise to the ethical and spiritual level expressing the reality of salvation (the feast of eternal life) (Bernard 1983, 187). In each of these cases, spiritual consciousness ascends directly to the living God, independently of the discursive intellect and without the act of reasoning. All that ascending movement of human consciousness constitutes man's pursuit of God in faith supported by imagination and God's grace without which even temporary reunification with God is impossible. The dynamism of movement rests on the "traces" of God in creatures and the image of God in man, that is, it is based on the order of creation.

3. VALUE OF BIBLICAL SYMBOLS IN JUDEO-CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE

The issue of the symbolic dimension of a spiritual experience cannot be properly substantiated without reference to the Holy Scriptures which are "the source of pure and constant spiritual life" (Second Vatican Council 1965a, 21). The Bible abounds in images and symbols, but also in similes, metaphors, etc., which from the beginning shaped the Judeo-Christian symbolism. In the whole Bible, the very term "symbol" appears only once when it is used with the reference to the copper serpent placed by Moses on a high stake when Israelites became threatened by venomous snakes in the desert (Numbers 21:6-9). It appears as a "sign of salvation" (Wis 16:6; LXX MD 16:6 – "the symbol of salvation"), a sign announcing the crucified Savior (John 3:14-15). According to François Marty, this symbol appearing only once in the Septuagint proves that the Israelites' imagination was focused on the fulfillment of the covenant between God and Israel (Marty 1977, 1366), on the future Messiah.

A deeper understanding of the nature of symbols in the Hebrew world would require a more insightful analysis of the culture of the people of Israel, their historical experience, especially the experience of the relationship with God in different contexts as well as of the category of the covenant due to which the Israelites enjoyed their own spiritual identity, their own religious symbols (e.g. the Ark of the Covenant, Tabernacle) and due to which they experienced their relationship with the transcendence, with God, in their own, unique way, unlike other nations. For example, they did not make any images to represent God (Ex 20:4-5, Dt 5:8-9), as other nations, but they appealed to the word by which God Himself had previously spoken to them by chosen persons. Despite this key significance of the word, the Bible does not oppose images. The visible and the invisible were never confronted in religion and no attempts were made to endow the cult of Yahweh with a spiritualist character, aiming for the spiritual direct worship of the invisible God. Images are considered inadequate to express God and His message.

However, it can be argued that certain symbolic, signifying acts performed by prophets bear a degree of affinity with images. According to Wojciechowski,

they were intended to provide explicit means of communicating to people God's decisions and His commandments conveyed in the words and signs of prophets (Wojciechowski 1991, 12). For example, God instructed Ezekiel to put a cauldron on fire, pour water into it, put meat and bones of cattle into it and cook it until the cauldron began to boil and until its contents overcooked. By means of this "image", or rather by *verbum visibile*, because the image itself does not appear here, separately, but in connection with the message expressed in the word, God wants to move and even shake the imagination and conscience of those whom He addresses. In this case, the purpose is to show the days of horror and defeat awaiting Jerusalem from the hand of Nebuchadnezzar. The Old Testament contains many other similar symbolic acts (e.g. 1Kgs. 11:29-39; 1Kgs. 22:10-12; 2Kgs. 13:14-19; Jer 28).

Jesus Christ also recurrently performed symbolic acts, as for example, when He cursed the barren fig tree (Mk 11:12-14) when He washed his feet in the Upper Room (John 13:1-11), or when He blessed the children, promising them the Kingdom (Mt 19:13-15). In the context of a spiritual experience, it is worth mentioning here another act of Jesus, deeply related to a spiritual experience. The Risen Christ, appearing to the Apostles in the Upper Room, breathed on them and said: "Receive the Holy Spirit!" (John 20:22). In this case, the breath of Jesus is a symbol of giving the Holy Spirit to the disciples. Thus the physical act is followed by its spiritual effects (Wojciechowski 1991, 200-201), so that the Apostles, in the power of the Spirit of God, may fulfill the mission entrusted to them to proclaim the Gospel, forgive sins, etc. (John 20:23). In this particular case, it is a matter of establishing the sacrament of penance and reconciliation, because the visible act of Jesus is connected with the causative effect (Testa 1998, 228) performed by Jesus and instructed to the apostles and their successors to be repeated in the Church in order to give the sanctifying grace to people. The other symbolic acts mentioned above do not demonstrate the same effectiveness as the real act of God in the sacraments.

A spiritual experience is the experience of a personal relationship with God. This relationship can only be conceived of analogically based on a relationship with another person, with others. A question arises whether it is possible to distinguish in this experience of the spiritual relationship with God some categories which might help to understand and adequately express it? Saint Paul points to the attitude of Abraham as a model, a prototype of faith for Christians (Rom 4:3), claiming that the promise of salvation received by the patriarch was granted to him thanks to his faith (Romans 4:16) and that it can also be given to his "offspring". The attitude of faith adopted by the Israelite in the Old Covenant can be more precisely defined by such elements of experience as: "seeking the Lord" (Am 5:6), "thirsting" God (Psalm 63:2), "waiting for the Lord" (Psalm 27:14), wanting to "see God" (Ex 33:18-20), who sees everything (Dt 9:13), etc. This type of spiritual desires is found especially among prophets and pious Israelites who pray with psalms. Pierre Grelot refers to the above-mentioned phrases as "discreet means of symbolic speech" (Grelot 2001, 159).

Among the writings of the New Testament, it is the Gospel of John that is particularly rich in symbols endowed with a deep theological and spiritual meaning. Those include, among others: the temple as the symbol of Christ's body of (John 2:21), the living water as the symbol of the Holy Spirit (John 7:39), the healing of the man born blind and the resurrection of Lazarus as symbols of light and life from Christ (John 8:12; 11:25), the Mediator of Divine life. Jesus, through the Paschal Mystery, became the "Giver of [new] life" (Acts 3:15) given to the faithful in the "living bread" (John 6:51) received during the Eucharist. Whoever receives it with faith already shares in the everlasting life (John 3:36). Grelot reads Christ's statement: "I am the way, the truth and life" (John 14:6) as presentation in the symbolic language of Jesus' relationship to people as the mediator of their salvation (Grelot 2001, 194). The above mentioned elements of spiritual experience: "seek God" (John 5:30b), "see God" (Mk 9:2-8) can also be found in the very attitude of Jesus. The disciples, who are called to participate in it should "seek the kingdom of God" (Mt 6:33), "wait" for its fulfillment (Luke 23:51), etc. It should be emphasized that the element of "seeing" in the experience of disciples' relations with Jesus acquires a new significance after the resurrection, when, apart from relating to the perception of the external figure of Jesus or the spiritual link with the historical Jesus, but, through its being the "vision" of the Risen One, it becomes the "key to the interpretation" of the whole experience of faith (conf. Acts 4:20; Grelot 2001, 171).

4. ROLE OF SYMBOLS IN THE REALIZATION OF A SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

Christian spiritual experience is based first and foremost on the mystery of the redemptive incarnation of the Son of God experienced in the community of the Church and it draws from it the power of the Spirit to develop itself and obtain its full shape. This experience should be considered both in the context of prayer and sacramental life as well as on the level of mystical life, which represents a spiritual experience of a higher level, indicating in each of these cases the role of symbols in the realization of such an experience.

a) The function of Symbols in Prayer

During prayer, man establishes contact with God in Christ with the power of the Holy Spirit. Saint Teresa of Jesus, referring to the symbol of the "fortress", pointed out that the search for God should be carried out in the inner sphere of the spirit (Teresa of Jesus 1987, I, 1, 3), in the "inner man". This symbol invites man to detach himself from things which retain him in the sphere of everyday life, from all things that are useful and pleasant, and to follow the call of grace. By penetrating one's own self and meditating on the word of God with faith, the meditator is called to communion with the Word made flesh (John 1:14), with the person of Jesus Christ.

Classic meditation which involves the three powers of the soul, e.g. Ignatian meditation, contains an indication that before contemplating an evangelical scene, a person should imagine a specific place (*compositio loci*) in which it took place. This indication applies even to things that cannot be directly visualized (e.g., sin), and which Ignacy Loyola advises to present to oneself through their consequences (the state of one's own soul after sin) (Loyola 1991, 47, Introduction 1). This recommendation is not simply meant to prevent imagination from exerting its distracting influence on the spiritual powers, but to help man establish a personal relationship with Christ thanks to imagination. Such a relationship, when underpinned with love, will arouse in the meditator a desire to cling to Christ. This exercise, often practiced at the beginning of meditation and contemplation, contributes to the integration of human imagination with the higher powers of the soul in spiritual life (Bernard 1981, 352-353).

If the Word of God, which provides the basis for authentic Christian spirituality, is contemplated, for example in the *lectio divina*, it evokes faith that brings hope of participation in spiritual, eternal goods (Hebrews 11:1) and animates the love of God in the meditator's heart. It triggers in human soul a supernatural, spiritual dynamism, which is not only aimed at acquiring knowledge. Due to the fact that the will is moved by rational reflection on God, His love etc. and drawn by His grace, the meditation acquires a lively and affective character. Apart from cognitive awareness, affective awareness is also formed in prayer. It is "the [consciousness] which, in the face of what is stated by the reason, expresses more the point of view of our "I" (Alquié 1979, 14). Such a vivid subjective consciousness is not attained in result of intellectual analysis. In the case of Ignatian meditation, it is recommended that the stirrings of the will (faith, hope, love, feelings of adoration, admiration, etc.) should be allowed to control the soul during meditation and to lead it to a loving relationship with God, because they constitute the essence of prayer (Lercaro 1969, 65-66).

This kind of intense feelings for God can be better expressed with the help of symbols, as it was done by those "thirsty for God", who confessed, for example: "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God" (Ps. 42:2). In this case a symbol mobilizes human spiritual forces and becomes a factor helping man to cling to God through the theological virtues, by supporting a holistic orientation on Him, i.e. of both sensory and spiritual authorities. A symbol makes man realize the need to detach from things that confine him at the sensory level, in a relation to people and things.

Meditation of the word of God is associated with the ability to grasp the spiritual meaning conveyed by it. This meaning was being unfolded by ancient exegesis, which differentiated between the literal and spiritual sense, as well as by medieval exegesis, which specified three aspects of the spiritual sense: allegorical, moral and anagogical. "Generally speaking, the spiritual meaning is, according to the principles of the Christian faith, the meaning expressed through biblical

texts, read under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the context of Christ's Paschal mystery and the new life to which this mystery gives rise" (Papal Biblical Commission 1994, II B, 2). The Scriptures find their fulfillment in Christ, and therefore, He is the real Savior and, at the same time, a symbol, the only way leading the faithful to the understanding of the full plan of God prepared in the history of the Old Covenant and realized in the "fullness of time" with the power of the Holy Spirit in the Paschal mystery. Interpretation of the spiritual meaning conveyed by various biblical symbols in relation to Christ in the Holy Spirit should be carried out within the faith of the Church, in communion with its pastors and taking into consideration its current biblical hermeneutics (Benedict XVI 2010, 29).

b) The Function of Symbols in Liturgy

Discovering the spiritual sense of the word of God allows us to participate more deeply in the liturgy of the Mass, whose structure consists of visible signs, symbols appearing in the form of objects (altar, pulpit, altar cross, candles, incense) as well as symbolic acts: gestures, rituals, and the uttered words explaining their meaning. "According to the divine pedagogy of salvation, their meaning has its roots in the work of creation and in human culture, it becomes more and more evident in the events of the Old Testament, and it fully reveals in the person and work of Jesus Christ" (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1145). As the signs of God and of the Church addressed by the priest to the liturgical assembly and to each participant of the liturgy, they express God's action and enable those participants to experience the paschal mystery of Christ in the Eucharist. They demand concentration, attention, application of the senses and imagination as well as involving the participants' spiritual powers in order to enable them to capture their symbolic meaning in the course of liturgical celebrations so that they can be introduced by the Holy Spirit into the spiritual reality and receive the sanctifying grace (Nadolski 2006, 1487). Through them, i.e. signs perceptible to the senses, "the sanctification of the man is signified [...] and is effected in a way which corresponds with each of these signs; in the liturgy the whole public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and His members" (Second Vatican Council 1963, 7).

The words uttered by the celebrant *in persona Christi* and in the power of the Holy Spirit: "Take and eat, this is my Body ... Drink from it [the cup] all, because this is my blood of the covenant ..." (Mt 26:26-28), make that bread and wine cease to be mere signs and become the real and true Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. All other signs, gestures, rituals and words point to this transcendent act of God's entering into the human world and self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ for the salvation of man and the gift of new life, the fruit of the resurrected Lord. The symbol of the Eucharist is the Paschal Lamb, foreshadowed by the lamb consumed by the Israelites during the night of their liberation from the Egyptian captivity (Ex 12:1-20, Rev 5:6) and the pelican appearing in medieval iconography, feeding its chicks with its own blood.

c) The Function of Symbols in Mysticism

Images and symbols can be found even more often than in ordinary spiritual life, in descriptions of spiritual experiences. Mystics have a sense of disproportion between their experience and the means of its expression offered by the static language of closed concepts. Being aware of the impossibility of expressing the dynamism and the affective nature of their experience, they reach for symbols. Those symbols are very helpful, although still insufficient to express the whole nature of this experience, especially of its higher stages, of the end and God, because the only proportionate means of achieving unity with God is faith (John of the Cross 1986, II, 9, 1). For example, when a mystic says that God is light (1 John 1:5b), he does not mean to compare God to light on the basis of an external reference, but rather, to express his intense experience of God, the feeling of being enlightened by Him. This way of defining God does not preclude defining God in an “objective language” (“God is ‘truth’”), but it complements this second term and in a way deepens its sense, because it grasps the experiential cognition and emphasizes the dynamic orientation of the mystic towards God.

Following a spiritual path requires a complete purification and transformation of consciousness in order to unite man with the will of God. Symbols, by renewing the relationship between the sensory world and spiritual reality, help in integrating the senses and drives with the aspirations of the will, which is directed towards God with love. The goal is to transform the sensory sphere so that it can interact with the aspirations of the spirit, as the psalmist confesses: “My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God” (Ps. 84:3).

God reveals Himself more and more to those who follow the spiritual path. St. Teresa of Jesus, who used a rich symbolic language, presented Jesus Christ as a Friend, whose presence she often felt, and as a King who drew her towards the center of her soul with His grace. The center of the soul, according to *The Interior Castle*, is the “place” where God’s image is present and the place where God is felt as immanent and transcendent; the immanent “Bridegroom” with whom the Saint establishes an ever closer spiritual bond and the transcendent God who is inconceivable (Tanni 1997, 157-159). The three mentioned symbols: “friend”, “king” and “bridegroom” are taken here from interpersonal relationships and raised to the spiritual relationship of man with God.

Inspired by the *Song of Songs*, mystics define their deep relationship with God as “spiritual weddings” which are a special grace of God. “And he [Jesus] brought me into such a close communion with Him, and my heart was wed to His heart in a loving way, and I felt the slightest stirrings of His heart and He heard mine. The created fire of my love was joined with the ardor of His eternal love”, wrote Saint Maria Faustina (Kowalska 1981, 1056).

CONCLUSION

To summarize this reflection on the significance of images and symbols in the theological and spiritual reflection on Christian spiritual experience, it should be noted that a symbol appears here as a tool performing several important functions:

a) First, it is a tool for expressing a spiritual experience which, being an experience of the human relationship with the living God in Christ, cannot be expressed in the language of closed concepts and dogmatic statements, but it requires images and symbols conveying certain feelings. The use of pictorial and symbolic language in the description of a spiritual experience allows to reveal the spiritual aspects of this experience and inclines one to participate in it. It conveys a certain cognition of an experimental nature. This especially refers to mystics. Images and symbols are also effective means of influencing the imagination and feelings of man and in the process of spiritual formation can lead him from sensory to spiritual things.

b) By opening man to a spiritual experience, a symbol corresponding to a typically human ability to symbolize and greater or lesser sensitivity, if it is associated with the theological life, is able to dynamize the movement of people's spiritual experiences, helping them to involve not only their spiritual but also sensory authorities which must be subordinated to the first ones. This kind of dynamic experiences supported by symbols can be experienced by people participating in church liturgy as well as in individual prayer.

c) Finally, symbols are helpful in the spiritual transformation of a person and helps such a person to achieve a coherent personality, which is possible due to the fact that, being stretched between the sensory and the spiritual, it unites those extremities of the reality. In the process of transformation, symbols help maintain the continuity between the various levels of life (biological, interpersonal, spiritual) in the acquisition of a new, more coherent personality of a "new man". The sign of this transformation is, among others, application of external senses to the perception of a spiritual experience, or acquisition of spiritual senses.

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