

# TRANSCENDENT EXPERIENCE OF ST. LAURA MONTOYA Y UPEGUI

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## ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the life and written work of the Colombian Catholic mystic St. Laura Montoya y Upegui (1874–1949), known also as Mother Laura. The life of this mystic was marked by a mystical experience from her early childhood. In the work she left us, especially in her autobiography entitled *History of the Mercies of God in a Soul* [Historia de las misericordias de Dios en un alma], she tries to talk about her unique experience, although this task is not easy. She tends to speak about her mystical experience with God mainly through specific images of her own inner world. The aim of this study is to bring these images closer to the reader, analyse them and reconcile them with the aesthetic qualities of the narration, which helps to form more complete and complex image not only of the mystical experience, but also of the work by St. Laura.

## KEYWORDS

Mysticism. St. Laura Montoya y Upegui. Transcendent experience. Images of inner world. Aesthetic qualities of the narration.

## DOI

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Spanish written literature is characterized by a rich spiritual tradition, especially in the works of St. Teresa of Ávila (also known as St. Teresa of Jesus) (1515–1582) and St. John of the Cross (1542–1591). In recent years, the Colombian author Laura Montoya y Upegui (1874–1949), known as Mother Laura of Saint Catherine of Siena, is beginning to arouse more significant interest. The subject of interpretive attention is mainly her spiritual autobiography called *History of the Mercies of God in a Soul* [Historia de las misericordias de Dios en un alma]. The author wrote it between the years 1925–1933, but it is also available to current readers in the edition from 2017. In it, St. Laura Montoya reveals with her unique language her deep inner world, the

repeatedly experienced encounter with God in a mystical experience and the poetics composed of the original inner images that represent the focus of this interpretation. She wrote it on the initiative of her confessor Esteban Le Doussal, a priest from the Congregation of Jesus and Mary (the so-called The Eudists) in order to explain to the fellow sisters of her congregation her own experience of the transcendent. This more than a thousand-page work of epistolary character is a brilliant example of the so-called poetics of ineffable, both personal and intimate spiritual experience of the author. The interpretation in certain passages acquires a strongly mystagogical character. Laura Montoya uses introspection to illuminate the process of her spiritual maturation, immerses herself in memories, composes particles of a mosaic of her own spiritual story, and names the vibrations of her interior. The autobiographical dimension of the text stimulates its expressive impact and makes it credible, even inspiring.

## God's pedagogy

The spiritual path of St. Laura Montoya was marked with the phenomenon of pain. She suffered because she was underestimated and humiliated. Injustice, which she did not understand as a child, was later included in her work as the concept of *God's pedagogy* ["pedagogía de Dios"]. "Look, venerable Father, as God has shaped me. I did not understand, I believed that poverty could be the reason responsible for my humiliation and suffering. Now I see that it was purely God's pedagogy. Other poor people do not have to experience so much cruelty"<sup>1</sup> (*Autobiography* 2017, loc. 1230–1231)<sup>2</sup>. The wide range of pain was caused by various circumstances of life: she failed to find a confessor who would understand it, nor could she find proper spiritual guidance. During her teaching career she experienced indifference and slandering or finger pointing, to a large extent she was also marked by the rejection of her application to join the Carmelite Order, etc.

The unfortunate and often unfavorable life events encourage us to look at Laura Montoya's work through the aesthetic expressive quality of tragedy. The life of the mystic was marked by suffering that was her real experience. The essence of this aesthetic quality is not formed only by physical or mental suffering, but also moral

1 "Mire, reverendo padre, ¡cómo me formaba Dios! Yo no lo entendía; ¡creía que mis humillaciones y sufrimientos se debían a la pobreza! Hoy veo que era puramente la pedagogía de Dios. Los demás pobres no tienen que experimentar estas durezas."

2 All the citations are translated by the authors of this paper – unless otherwise stated. Since we are working with an electronic version of the book (Editorial Pontificia Universidad Javeriana from 2017) purchased from Amazon, in order to read it, it is necessary to use the Amazon Kindle application, which does not have page numbering. Therefore, in order to identify the citation, we use the so-called locations that locate the quoted text in the e-book (1 location = 150 Kb of information). For all citations from the mentioned edition of the autobiography, we will therefore use the following notation with the relevant location numbers (*Autobiography* 2017, loc. 1231–1232).

suffering. This can be manifested in a certain conflict, e.g., in the struggle between good and evil, which results in purification, the so-called catharsis (Plesník et al. 2011, 361–362). Thus, difficult experiences represented certain stages of her spiritual growth for the mystic. They shaped her and led her to free herself – from relationships and emotional ties, to stop being dependent on everything that binds her to earthly stuffs. She herself points to this in her spiritual biography: it was the only possible way to move forward on the path to perfection, which was her lifelong goal. The victory in this effort was that “humiliation eventually ceased to humiliate her, and love for one’s neighbour, without distinction, increased significantly”<sup>3</sup> (*Autobiography* 2017, loc. 15648).

In the literary reflection of the spiritual path at St. Laura can be clearly identified the desire for perfection.<sup>4</sup> According to her own words, it can only be achieved through suffering. This knowledge is illustrated by the experience of spiritual exercises for teachers in Medellín in 1895. “During these exercises, I understood what suffering means. From day one, God wanted me to see the total distortion of my inner being. All the sins of my life were thrown at me like rabid dogs and mined to me by the scouts of the whole mountain range”<sup>5</sup> (loc. 2352–2353).

Over time, Laura understood God’s intention to perfect her soul. She, therefore, turned more to prayer and the practice of virtues: “[My] soul yielded only to God’s intervention, to the divine Sun of my life”<sup>6</sup> (loc. 1239). Such a resort to prayer evokes contemplation, more precisely focused thinking, thinking and contemplation not only on the “things of man” but also on the various mysteries of the world (Plesník et al. 2011, 95). Contemplation – psychic-spiritual activity – is related to thinking about the meaning of the existence, with the effort to get closer to God. In religion, it is associated with the transcendental positions of human existence (96). It is the prayer of the mystic that provides the opportunity to communicate with God: “A meditating Christian does not seek to identify with God (in humility he sees himself as an imperfect being), he only seeks to approach the Almighty in a contemplative depth and beg forgiveness and blessing” (96). In the theory of expressive qualities, contemplation is associated with a certain chasm that exists between the subject and the object. The contemplative, in this case the praying mystic, seeks to receive into her own soul the radiance of the Almighty. The fact that St. Laura tries to describe this experience with prayer, also draws our attention to the sacredness of her statement, more precisely an effort to express the sacred as a source of maximum respect and awe (295).

3 “Las humillaciones dejaron de humillarme y el amor del prójimo, sin distinciones, creció mucho.”

4 Evelyn Underhill identifies on a symbolic level three areas appealing to the great manifestations of human unrest: 1. the desire that makes man a pilgrim, 2. the desire of the heart for the heart, that is, for the perfect partner, 3. the desire for inner purity and perfection – that leads one to asceticism (2004, 161).

5 “En estos ejercicios supe lo que era sufrir. Desde los primeros días quiso Dios que me viera en toda la deformidad de mi ser interior. Los pecados todos de mi vida se me echaron encima como perros rabiosos y me pesaban como montañas.”

6 “mi alma era flexible solo a la acción de Dios, divino Sol de mi vida”

For a certain period (from years 1900/1901 – she is not sure – until 1906), Laura's life was permeated by darkness, a period of abandonment and emptiness that was associated with the absence of God's presence. She thus experienced that familiar *dark night of the soul* ["la noche oscura del alma"], as described by St. John of the Cross. Evelyn Underhill understands the dark night as a gradual dissolution of the state of mystical enlightenment<sup>7</sup>, when the consciousness comes to the surface and the I is still separated from the Absolute. "This consciousness is so deep and powerful that it dampens all consciousness of the transcendent and plunges the self into a state of negation and misery" (2004, 423).

St. Laura called this period of not feeling God's presence *a grip of a demon* ["cerco del demonio"]. "The state of my soul was the state of the deepest darkness. I seemed to miss God Himself. I spent the nights in a dark cave. I trembled with bitterness, as if I had severe cramps"<sup>8</sup> (*Autobiography* 2017, loc. 3226–3227) and on the other point she adds "In my pain I felt like a blind man without light and love"<sup>9</sup> (loc. 3294). "Bitterness", "darkness" and "dark cave" represent the absence of God's presence, which Laura found very difficult – underlined it by comparing herself to a blind man who did not feel love and never saw light.

The life period of the mystic, marked by feelings of emptiness and loneliness, can be interpreted in terms of expressive aesthetic qualities with the melancholy expression of the statement, which Plesník et al. defined as a "sad expression of life attitude, evoked by an awareness of transience and loneliness" (2011, 364). On the one hand, melancholy is associated with the transience of being, on the other, it evokes a certain reconciliation and humility, but also nostalgia and sad memories.

This unhappy period of her life lasted several years, and St. Laura also brought it with her to the Urabá region, where she regularly opened her heart to the superior. It was he who first explained to her the principle of the simple soul on the path of approaching God. "He told me that this suffering cleansed my love in some way and that it allowed God to make my soul simple, and that was the next step in union with Him"<sup>10</sup> (*Autobiography* 2017, loc. 13878–13879). Thus, all the effort of the dark night leads to the necessary mystical act of absolute self-surrender (Underhill 2004, 454) – the soul of the mystic needs to be "emptied" in order to be filled by God's grace.

After six years of living a *dark night*, Laura has entered the next stage – she interprets it as a state of "absolute relaxation" ["una absoluta desocupez"] of her being for God. Nothing was more important to her, and therefore she did not consciously build

7 Evelyn Underhill speaks of enlightenment as an awakening to the consciousness of the Absolute, a certain sudden and surprising change in which the mystic "acquires consciousness of the world that has always been there and in which his essential being – its foundation, which is divine – has always rested" (2004, 271).

8 "El estado de mi alma era el de la más profunda oscuridad. Parecía que hasta Dios me hubiera faltado. Pasaba las noches como en una caverna oscura; temblaba de amargura como si tuviera fuertes convulsiones."

9 "Mi dolor era como un ciego sin luz ni amor."

10 "Me dijo que esas penas habían hecho cierta purificación en mi amor y que entonces Dios había simplificado mi alma, lo cual significaba un nuevo aumento de unión con Él."

relationships, did not engage in activities, no matter how good they were, her only intention was to build a void within herself that would be filled by God. This period brought strange things to her prayers (as she called them herself): sometimes it was a feeling that she understood the eternal unity of the Word with the Father (“it was not just light: it was like an encounter with God’s fatherhood” (*Autobiography* 2017, loc. 3990), other times as if God had covered her with his fatherhood and appointed her the mother of unbelievers, who “hurt her like real children” (loc. 3995) – Laura figuratively named them “my wound” [“mi llaga”].

## Transcendent experience in images

Against the background of the life and experience of St. Laura with the transcendent, we will try to present selected images from her spiritual autobiography. It is necessary to add that in the description of the experienced and difficult to express, the mystic is forced to use ordinary human language and often the analogy. In mystical experiences, however, she resorts mainly to the use of images. In figurative language, there is an important relationship between image and expressed reality, with authors most often using comparisons, metaphors, or allegories (Dinzelbacher 2006, 659).

When thinking about the imagery of the transcendent experience of St. Laura, we were inspired by the term *inner image*, as characterized by Magda Kučerková and Miroslava Režná in the study “Inner Images in Christian Mystics. Literary-Semantic Characteristics” [Vnúťorné obrazy u kresťanských mystikov. Literárno-sémantická charakteristika]. By it, the authors understand

an image that was created in the consciousness of a mystic during a contemplative state and which the author-mystic seeks to form(ulate) in his work in a such way that he would like to preserve the semantic-value identity of the “seen” [...] the written recording of these images always takes place in the author’s belief that he is not humanly able to contain the revealed mystery in the fullness of meaning and expression (2014, 5–7).

It looks like that the images of the mystical work of St. Laura Montoya can also be explored through aesthetic expressive qualities, or more precisely categories, that Plesník et al. define as “the designation of the quality of the statement that we experience in perception as its effect, the scope” (2011, 15). We think about how the mystic’s statement affects us and what it is like. In theory, these are expressive qualifiers that have been defined conceptually within the framework of scientific discourse (e.g., tragic, nobility, etc.). The roots of this system of expression are mainly connected with the Slovak literary linguist František Miko, who created it in the

1950s.<sup>11</sup> Laura Montoya's autobiography shows that her statement is often intuitive, subjective, and melancholic, and that is why we would like to try to reconcile the images that the mystic creates in the work with various aesthetic expressive qualities.

At the same time, it makes opportunities to look at the work of St. Laura through phenomenology: "The essence of phenomenological analysis lies in the fact that the researcher tries to enter the inner world of the individual in order to understand the meanings the person attributes to the phenomenon under investigation" (Knapík 2019, 121).<sup>12</sup> The scope of our work will not allow us to look at the topic in this context, but it is a stimulus for future research. The following division of the subchapter presents selected interior images by Laura Montoya.

## Experience with an anthill

At the beginning of the autobiography, Laura Montoya uses a parabola in order to describe her first mystical experience with God: she talks about the "experience with the anthill" ["golpe del hormiguero"]. One morning, she watched the ants tenaciously carrying leaves from a nearby tree to an anthill. The waves of love she felt during this play with ants: "sometimes I loved them tenderly"<sup>13</sup> (*Autobiography* 2017, loc. 866) at one point erupted into something much more intense. As it was extremely difficult for her to express the experience, she resorted to an internal monologue, from which in some points it is possible to feel the despair of her own inability to talk about the ineffable. This is underlined using exclamation or repetitive construction:

I was struck by a ray; I can't say more! That ray was the knowledge of God and his greatness, so deep, so majestic, so loving, that today, after so much study and teaching, I know no more about him than I knew then! And what was it like? That cannot be said!<sup>14</sup> (loc. 867–869)

11 Within the theory of literature and literary-theoretical interpretation of an artistic text it meant a conceptual-methodological shift, within translation (especially thanks to A. Popovič) it established itself as a criterion for translation quality and from the seventies to the nineties it began to be used in order to explain various phenomena (e.g. interpretation of non-traditional aesthetic creations, etc.). When creating the model, F. Miko was inspired by the already existing model of language functions of K. Bühler from the work of Sprachtheorie from 1934, which is also related to Jakobson's hexadic model. See more <http://hyperlexikon.sav.sk/sk/pojem/zobrazit/vyrazova-sustava>.

12 The inspiration for our future reflexion about Laura's written work is the journal World Literature Studies, especially no. 3 from 2020 entitled "The language of transcendent experience in literary-phenomenological interpretation". In this journal, the authors look, among other things, at the works of mystics through the prism of the phenomenology of Jean Luc Marion, specifically through the phenomenality of giving and the theory of the so-called saturated phenomena.

13 "a veces acariciándolas con grande cariño"

14 "¡Fui como herida por un rayo! ¡Yo no sé decir más! Aquel rayo fue un conocimiento de Dios y de sus grandezas, tan hondo, tan magnífico, tan amoroso, que hoy, después de tanto estudiar y aprender, ¡no sé más de Dios que lo que supe entonces! ¡Cómo fue esto? ¡Imposible decirlo!"

This honest, non-forgable, and authentic statement about the experience with the anthill, more precisely, the feelings that the mystic experienced are underlined by the fact that Laura does not use traditional expressive techniques. On the contrary, what is valuable is her original perception or individual experience, which she confirms with words that she does not seem to be able to express such an experience at all. "The authentic expression purposefully focuses on an open and honest presentation of the creator's feelings" (Plesník et al. 2011, 54).

In addition, Laura describes her lived experiences subjectively and these are therefore conditioned by her personal feelings. She applies subjectivity in the creation of the content of expression, for which she uses mainly language. The transcendent experience should be seen as a phenomenon incomprehensible by the cognitive processes of the ordinary person because it transcends them. In Laura, as in other mystics, the surrender of God is accompanied by a flood of love, even an indescribable ecstasy. The lived experience is often depicted more lyrically and, in St. Laura, transgresses with the chaotic nature of the statement (Laura turns to several recipients, on the one hand it is her confessor, Father Le Doussal, on the other hand God himself) and the (un)conscious use of symbols (e.g., light, fire, etc.), but also by ineffability.

Laura's experience with the anthill shows signs of a fleeting knowledge of the existence and presence of God, which she could not explain due to her young age – her quite natural reaction was crying and screaming.<sup>15</sup>

## Experience with carpenter's workbench

A similar case is Laura's other experience, this time with the feeling the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, lived again in childhood – in the twelfth year of life. She named it the "experience with carpenter's workbench" ["golpe del banco"]. Although she used to receive Communion almost daily, she perceived it only as a certain duty of daily need. She again uses the parabola to describe her feelings as faithfully as possible: "But all this was as if out of a superficial faith (forgive me the word, I cannot find other), as if it were cold, insufficient, in short, inexperienced (another, of which I do not know whether it is not bold)"<sup>16</sup> (*Autobiography* 2017, loc. 1400).

In the manuscript, Laura emphasizes such words as "superficial" and "inexperienced", as if she would like to indicate that she is not satisfied with their

15 In this context, it could be a paradox of *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, which is also characterized by M. Kučerková in her study "Interpretation of the Mystical Experience Against the Background of the Phenomenology of Jean-Luc Marion" [Interpretácia mystickej skúsenosti na pozadí fenomenológie Jeana-Luca Mariona]. She understands the paradox mentioned above as an encounter with radical otherness, exceeding the boundaries of the natural order, more precisely ordinary structures of life. "On the one hand, therefore, it attracts and captivates human existence, it attracts to participate in eternal being; on the other hand, it confronts it with immeasurable and unrecognized energy that arouses respect, perhaps fear or anxiety" (2020, 24).

16 "pero todo esto era como por fe seca (perdóname esa palabra, no tengo otra), como fría, como mediana, en fin, como no experimental (otra que no sé si será atrevida)."



expressive value, because they do not cover the semantic nuances she wants to convey. She compares life to that moment to a face obscured by a semi-transparent veil that someone took off from her in full light, which can be interpreted as meaning that even though she received the gift of knowing God, she had not yet penetrated the secrets of the Eucharist. However, this has changed with the experience with the carpenter's workbench:

So, I did a spiritual communion, and I can't say more. Stunned, I did not perceive anything that was going on around me, I felt an insurmountable pain with a touch of special love, as if the Holy Eucharist was passing through my soul, tears flooding me without me perceiving it. In addition, it seemed to me that I kind of understood how Jesus was present in the Host and how God's Word was present in Jesus<sup>17</sup> (loc. 1404–1407).

The explicit "I can't say more" again points to the powerlessness of talking about lived events in common language. At the same time, it forces one to interpret the mystical statement with intuitive narration. "Artists usually say: I don't even know how, it just happened to me. Creative activity usually consists of a different share of balance and a sudden, unexpected idea" (Plesník et al. 2011, 93). Even Laura cannot describe her experience with words and tends to an intuitive statement, more precisely the mental statement, when she talks about the experience as she felt it. When talking about the intuitive statement, there is often an overlap of different styles, a certain translucency of one over the other, and such a mutual transgression has a metaphorical character (94).

This is confirmed by using the metaphor of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ by Laura, which she envelops in a feeling of "insurmountable pain mixed with special love". The fact that she has just survived something that transcended her both cognitively and emotionally is expressed by the antithesis: "In short, I am not trying to say more, because I will twist an idea that is not even an idea"<sup>18</sup> (*Autobiography* 2017, loc. 1408–1409).

17 "Hice la comunión espiritual y no sé decir más. Como electrizada, como si no sintiera lo que alrededor pasaba, como si tuviera un dolor soberano, con una mezcla de amor extraordinario, como si la santa eucaristía pasara mi alma de parte a parte me bañé en lágrimas sin sentirlo. Me parecía, además, como que comprendía cómo Jesús está en la hostia y cómo el Verbo Divino está en Jesús."

It is possible to identify a connotation with St. Bernard, whose work *Cantica cantorum*, sermon LXXIV, quotes Underhill in connection with the encounter of the soul with the Absolute. As the saint himself pointed out, the Word visited him very often, and although he never knew how it had ever entered his soul, he felt its presence. "This is exactly what contemplatives call passive or donated contemplation" (2004, 283).

18 "En fin, no ensayo decir más porque acabo de desfigurar la idea que tampoco es idea."



## The image of the crucified Christ

Another experience of St. Laura, lived by looking at the image of Christ crucified in front of the eyes of the Jerusalemites, has the character of an active figurative vision.<sup>19</sup> Despite the inconveniences that accompanied her missionary work, Laura retained a growing love in her soul and metaphorically perceived suffering as the “fuel of this love” [“combustible para este amor”] (loc. 17079). One day, she was supposed to attend a performance of the Tunebs – one of Colombia’s indigenous tribes – at a local parish. When she looked at the painting, even though she had seen the painting for the first time in her life, she felt a “strong loving ray” [“rayo amoroso tan fuerte”] (loc. 17081). It physically injured her chest and part of her left hip:

It was the first and only time I felt such a phenomenon. At the same time, with the inner ardour of love, I felt the heat on my chest and hip, it was as if they were igniting and the glow of fire penetrated my body, not only superficially, but all over it. While the inner ardour or revival of love lasted, without a flood of tears, as it happened the other times, I felt the phenomenon, but I did not perceive it. A little later, when the inner flame began to recede, I woke up, put my hand on my chest, and my clothes were as hot as if I were standing by a fire. It only lasted a short time. If it had been longer, I would probably have died<sup>20</sup> (loc. 17082–17086).

The experience of St. Laura can be compared to the transverberation experienced by St. Teresa of Jesus.<sup>21</sup> Under a strong and loving ray, it is possible to identify a lance that pierced Christ on the cross: “But one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, and forthwith came there out blood and water” (Jn 19:34), a symbol of Christ’s love, which he sacrificed for people (and which in it itself gradually increased): “Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end” (Jn 13:1).

## The image of scar

Through her work, Laura returns several times to the “image of a scar” – she associates it with two attributes, light and blackness [“rayón de luz” / “rayón negro”]. Her interpretation of the relationship she has with herself and with God, as it emerged

19 We use the same term as Evelyn Underhill, according to her imaginative vision can be divided into passive and active (see Underhill 2004, 325).

20 “Es la primera y única vez que he sentido tal fenómeno. A la vez que el ardor interior amoroso sentía que se agolpaba el calor sobre el pecho y el costado, como encendiéndose, y con ardor de fuego aplicado a la carne, no superficialmente solo, sino en toda ella. Mientras duró el ardor interior o crecimiento de amor, sin efusión de lágrimas como otras veces, sentía el fenómeno, pero no lo advertía. Un poco después, cuando comenzó a calmar el ardor interior, advertí, y entonces puse la mano sobre el pecho y estaba la ropa caliente cual si hubiera estado al pie de una hoguera. Esto duró poco y si hubiera durado más, quizás hubiera muerto.”

21 More about St. Teresa’s mystical experiences is written by M. Kučerková and M. Režná in their publication *Poetics of the Ineffable* [Poetika nevyjadřitelného] (2016). In this context, they analyse as St. Teresa saw a cherub in his physical form, who pierced her heart several times with a long spear.

from the transcendent experience, evokes Jung's archetype of shadow. She put it in opposition with the light of God's love.

When I immerse myself inside me and see what I call my being, I see in time clearly two scars, one black, the other as light. The first is the one I call myself and has its origin at the time when it began to exist according to your will. The second is what is yours and what never started, because it is eternal. This is what you showed when you said: I loved you with everlasting love!<sup>22</sup> That one is black because it is a denial of one's own existence, because it is a vicious circle, a little of a little, because it is ignorance and sin. This one is light because it is yours, because it is real, because it is love, because it is life, because it is an eternal presence, because it is what it is<sup>23</sup> (*Autobiography* 2017, loc. 506–510).

It is important to pay attention to the choice of other attributes related to the opposition black-light. While the scar of light is characterized by terms such as “real”, “love”, “life”, “eternal presence”, the black one is defined by the terms “denial of existence”, “vicious circle”, “little of a little”, “ignorance”, “sin.” When Laura assigns the attribute of blackness to this one scar, she describes herself through lyrical images as a set of negative qualities, frustration, fear, or cycle (in the sense of a vicious circle) – on the contrary, she understands the attribute of light – God or God's love – as infinity. St. Laura goes on to say that after death the two scars will merge and the only thing that will remain will be the light of God's being [“la luz de tu Ser”], indicating the insignificance of its existence compared to the nowhere beginning and nowhere ending presence of God. “The scar of light is simply eternal” (loc. 513). Thus, in Laura (as in most Christian mystics) we find the ancient Christian symbol of God as light, inspired by the Bible: “And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not” (Jn 1:5).<sup>24</sup>

In addition, St. Laura uses the metaphor of God as the Sun: “God, the divine Sun of my life” [“Dios, divino Sol de mi vida”], similar to what we see in St. Teresa of Ávila (he is the Sun that shines in the midst – cf. 1 *Interior Castle* 2, 3)<sup>25</sup>, to which several

22 Reference to a quote from the Bible (Jer 31:3).

23 “Cuando entro dentro de mí y veo esto que llamo mi ser se me ocurre ver bien deslindados, dos rayones en un espacio de tiempo, el uno negro; de luz, el otro. El primero es el que llamo yo y comenzó en el tiempo, cuando fue tu voluntad que existiera. El otro es lo que es tuyo y que jamás ha comenzado porque es eterno. Es aquello que mostraste cuando dijiste: ¡Con caridad perpetua te amé! Aquel es negro, porque es una negación de existencia propia, porque es un girón de nada, un poquito de poquedad, porque es ignorancia y pecado. Este es luz, porque es tuyo, porque es real, porque es amor, porque es vida, porque es un eterno presente, porque es lo que es.”

24 It is important to add the fact, that the symbol of light as a result of mystical enlightenment is repeated in works of several mystics, e.g. at Jacopone da Todi, Mechtilda of Magdeburg, St. Hildegard or St. Teresa of Ávila. Although each of them has a different kind of experience in connection with enlightenment, the symbol of light has similar characteristics. In Jacopone da Todi it is a blinding light without measure, which shines in the heart, in St. Teresa a light that does not set and is eternal, Mechtilda of Magdeburg describes it as the flowing light of the Deity, for St. Laura is love, life and eternal presence. For Laura, this is what Underhill calls the “joyful perception of the Absolute,” but it must not be confused with the consciousness of union with God, as I realize myself as being separate from God (2004, 278).

25 “sol resplandeciente que está en el centro” (1 *Castillo interior* 2, 3; Santa Teresa de Jesús 2006).

times in her text St. Laura refers: “Like a butterfly, I was looking for what I should stick my heart to in the world, and since I couldn’t find it, I clung to the light and burned myself, painlessly, as St. Teresa says”<sup>26</sup> (*Autobiography* 2017, loc. 1323–1324).

The painless burning in connection with the light to which Laura “clung” refers to the Old Testament story of Moses and the baptism, which burned and did not burn out (again, there is a biblical motif presented). Laura understands God as the presence of light and ardour, which does not hurt, while the metaphor of the butterfly encounters the fragility of the human soul, but also its gradual transformation (a parallel of its spiritual maturation, or spiritual path to union with God).<sup>27</sup>

## The image of ray

Another image that Laura works with in connotation with light is the “image of a ray” [“rayo”].<sup>28</sup> Laura uses it several times, e.g., in the above-mentioned experience with the anthill: “I was as if struck by a ray”, or in view of the experience of looking at a painting of the crucified Christ when she was wounded by a “strong loving ray”. This expression is also a metaphor for knowing God and his living presence, and gives God, following a cataphatic approach, the attributes such as “deep”, “majestic” or “loving”.

Elsewhere, she speaks of how the black scar was gradually smoothed out by the “brightness of the beloved ray of light” [“las refulgencias del querido rayo de luz”] (loc. 11354–11355).

The black scar has completely lost its ability to resist. However, my life has been and still is far from perfection; I do not see: the light has blinded me, and I am not even trying to improve, because the need for eternal glory of God has filled my soul. Poor black scar! Her outline dulled! Love and my own knowledge took all her power!<sup>29</sup> (loc. 4040–4043)

26 “Como mariposa busqué a qué pegar el corazón en el mundo y no hallando sitio, me pegué a la luz y me quemé, sin dolor, como dice Santa Teresa.”

This is a reference to a quote from Teresa’s poem *Oh, exceeding beauty!* [¡Oh hermosura que excedéis!] (1577):

“Oh, beauty exceeding / All other beauties! / You cause pain without wounding / And you destroy painlessly / The love of creatures.”

“¡Oh hermosura que excedéis / a todas las hermosuras! / Sin herir dolor hacéis, / y sin dolor deshacéis, / el amor de las criaturas” (Santa Teresa de Jesús 2019).

27 The awakens of the mystic into the stage of release, the transition from darkness to light can also be perceived through Plato’s allegory of the cave – bound beings in darkness can only see shadows and their knowledge, more precisely vision changes with the arrival of light.

28 Although there are several meanings for the term “rayo” in Spanish (lightning, ray, radiation, etc.), we have decided to translate it as “ray” in order to preserve the aesthetic quality of the original text.

29 “El rayón negro perdió su facultad de pintar casi por completo. Sin embargo, mi vida distaba mucho y dista todavía de ser perfecta; pero no veo: la luz me ofuscó y ni me empeño en perfeccionarme, porque la necesidad de la gloria de Dios llenó mi alma. ¡Pobre rayón negro! ¡Se le embotó la punta! ¡El amor y mi propio conocimiento le quitaron todo su poder!”

In this part we can see how Laura gradually stopped concentrating on worldly things and let only the act of infinite love of God come to the fore. When Laura says that love has taken the power of the black scar, she invokes God because he is synonym of love.<sup>30</sup> Laura gives love (God) the attributes of “fragility” and “bitterness”, calling it “strange”, “very deep that cannot be felt” suggesting that it is not possible to capture the nature of God with human language or to describe union with him. Unification has its conditions, which, however, cannot be met if one does not take an active part in them. Fear, hope, and love were considered in patristic literature as a parallel with three paths: the path of perfection, the path of enlightenment and the path of unification. In union, God puts man in a new relationship with what surrounds him – the goal is to find God in all things (Dinzelbacher 2000, 75–77).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we can claim that the simplicity of the statement, but also the topicality, brings Laura's autobiography closer to the contemporary man, perhaps even more than the often complicated and metaphorically overshadowed works of mystics belonging to older literature. However, it should be pointed out that Laura also shows signs of universal mystical poetics, which is reflected in particular in the spontaneous nature of narration (denial of one's expressive abilities), the use of biblical motifs (God as love) or archetypal symbols (light-shadow opposition). The authenticity of her statement is also confirmed by the distinctive inner images with which she tries to convey her experience with the transcendent as concisely as possible to the reader (scar of light vs. black scar, experience with an anthill, experience with a carpenter's workbench, the image of the crucified Christ or the image of a ray). The written text of St. Laura can also be viewed through the aesthetic expressive qualities of a statement, for example through melancholy, tragedy, contemplativity, authenticity, etc., which help us to understand what her statement is about, what she tries to express and how she does so.<sup>31</sup>

30 In this context, we would like to pay attention to M. Vašek's study “The Experience of Love and its Discourse: Marion's Phenomenology and Mysticism” [Skúsenosť lásky a jej diskurz: Marionova fenomenológia a mystika], where the author points out the relationship between mystical experience and the experience of love. According to him, in philosophical thinking, God was not understood as Love, but as Good, One, Being, Infinity, etc. “Not only philosophy, but also religious thinking in its key texts (e.g., the Torah, the prophets, Islam, or modern Judaism) did not privileged love as the primary determination of the divinity of God. The New Testament, especially the First Letter of St. John, explicitly states this – ‘God is love’ (1 Jn 4:16). God's transcendence is experienced, understood, and named in a specific way. In this case, it is love that seals the unity of God's names, is above all his names. We are never able to fully follow or understand transcendence par excellence” (2020, 111).

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