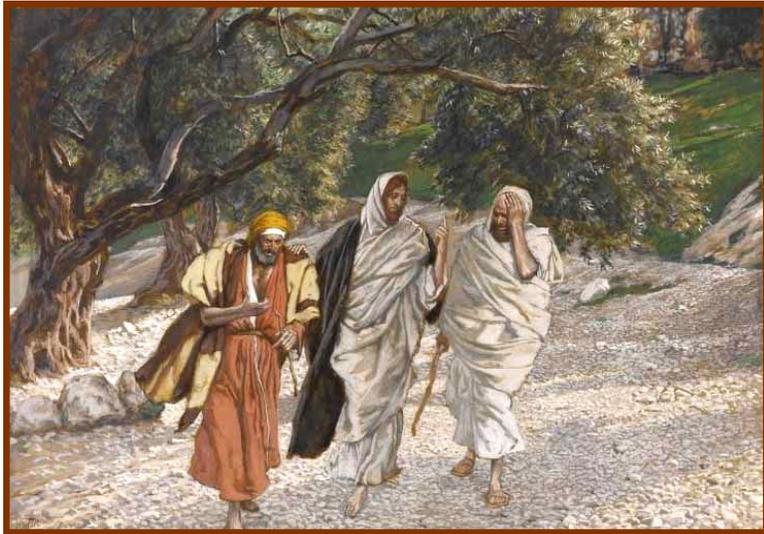


This association of fire and Spirit is proposed in a very special way, as a symbol of God the Father's revelation of Himself and in the renewal of the faithful. Two episodes bring out this association in a special way: John the Baptist's announcement (cf. Mt 3: 11) and the event of Pentecost (cf. Acts 2: 1-13). The first at the beginning of Christ's public ministry and the last at the beginning of the Church's his public ministry.

According to the Acts of the Apostle (2: 1-13) the extraordinary experience of the gift of the Holy Spirit, that is the definitive "baptism" of the people of God, took place on the day of Pentecost. Here there is a wonderful association between the gift of the Spirit and fire (v. 3) in the revelation of the power the restores the world.

The account of Pentecost (cf. Acts 2: 1-13) helps us perceive the triple dimension of the Spirit understood as the "fire of love:" a) The Spirit – love that enlightens the Church and makes it conscious of the plan of salvation and of its identity as the community of saved (cf. Acts 11: 16); b) The Spirit – love that consumes by fire all doubts and fears, and purifies as if in a regenerating baptism the whole community, hidden in the secret of the cenacle and liberates the disciples to preach the Gospel (cf. Acts 1: 5-8); and c) The Spirit – love that animates the hearts and lives of all the believers, oriented now to the attainment of the fullness of life and ecclesial maturity (cf. Acts 2: 42-28).

With the image of fire one understands better the paschal experience of the disciples of Emmaus. It is found again in our daily encounter with God who becomes "a companion" in our pilgrimage and who "animates with fervor" the hearts of every believer to a renewed hope in life and to the attainment to the promise of beatitude.



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FIRE

The "Words" of God in Scripture



**All praise be yours, my Lord,
through brother fire,
through whom you brighten up the night.
How beautiful is he, how cheerful!
Full of power and strength.
St. Francis of Assisi**

FIRE—The “Words” of God in Scripture

by Don Giuseppe De Virgilio

Brother Fire (Frate Focu), as St. Francis of Assisi called this element in his Canticle of the Creatures, has special characteristics: it gives light as well as brings warmth, it gives life and also destroys it, it gives visibility to forms although it has no form itself, it is of the earth but aspires to the heavens, it enkindles hope and inspires fear, it is both beautiful and terrifying.

Fire is considered a primary element at the origins (arche) of the universe as well as in the final destruction of everything (Ekpyrosis). In Hellenistic Judaism reference is made to the three functions of fire: it gives light, burns and warms.

In the Talmud one reads: "Three created elements preceded the formation of the Universe: water, wind and fire. The water conceived and gave birth to darkness; the fire conceived and gave birth to light; the wind conceived and gave birth to wisdom" (Talmud 65).

In biblical tradition fire is assigned a symbolical and spiritual (cultic) value with the offering of sacrifices (burnt offerings) (cf. Lev 1: 9-13) and in the purification of persons, places and objects (Lev 13: 52). The symbol of fire with differing meanings depending on the context is a manifestation of God's divinity. Lightning, thunder and hail in storms as well as droughts are perceived as the "fire of God" (Job 1: 16; Ps 29: 7; 78: 4-8; 105: 32; 104: 4; Amos 7: 4). The Angels, the Cherubim and the Seraphim (Seraphim literally means "burning ones" cf. Gen 3: 24; Ex 25: 18), are part of this manifestation.

With reference to man, fire describes metaphorically emotions and the state of affairs of the "heart:" love (cf. Ct 8: 6-7; Sir 9: 8), adultery (cf. Prov 6: 27), fervor for the truth (cf. Jer 20: 9), sin (cf. Sir 8: 10), tale bearing and strife (cf. Prov 26: 20), being persecuted (cf. Ps 118: 12), salvation from danger (cf. Ps 68: 3), anger and wrangling (cf. Sir 28: 10), viciousness (cf. Is 9: 17), and even murder (cf. Sir 11: 32; 22: 24).

The symbol of fire is used in the mission of the prophet Elijah (cf. 2 Kings 1: 10-14; Sir 48: 13), John the Baptist (cf. Mt 3: 11-12) and Jesus (cf. Lk 12: 49-50). In its symbolic usage is attached also the meaning of renewal, making new, because it has the function of the enlightening, purifying and confirming in the faith. For example in the sacrifice of Abraham (cf. Gen 15: 17-20), in Moses' encounter with God (cf. Ex 34: 29-35), in Isaiah's preparation of his mission as prophet (cf. Is 6: 6-7), and in the visions of the other prophets (cf. Ez 10: 2-7; Dn 7: 9-14).

In the New Testament fire is associated above all with three important phases of God's revelation of Himself: In the Transfiguration (cf. Mt 17: 1-8), the Resurrection (cf. Mt. 17: 1-8) and Pentecost (cf. Acts 2: 1-13).

The best-known example of the use of this symbol in the religious memory of Israel, is found in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah by fire and brimstone (cf. Gen 19: 24).

This image of consuming fire represents symbolically God's judgment of sin and of the proud and arrogant. We see this with the seventh plague of Egypt (cf. Ex 9: 13 ff.), the destruction of idols (the Golden calf, cf. Ex 32:20), and various other episodes (cf. Lv 10: 2; Num 11: 1-3; 16: 35; 26: 10). Images of fire of tremendous power are used in the description of God's final intervention in the last times (cf. Is 30: 27-33). Fire is the warning sign of that great day and terrible "Day of the Lord" (cf. Joel 3: 3; Mal 3: 19). This is a time of destruction, hope and enlightenment. With the symbol of fire God confirms the triumph of the just and the final end of sinners. Jesus' affirmations must be understood from this viewpoint on John the Baptist's ministry (cf. Mt 3: 10, 12; Lk 3: 16), on Gehenna (hell) (cf. Mt 5: 22), on the tree that does not bear good fruit (cf. Mt 7: 9), in the parable of the evil doers (cf. Mt 13: 40 ff.), on the scandal of those who cause little ones to sin (cf. Mt 18: 7-9; Mk 9: 43), on the branch of the vine that withers (cf. Jn 15: 6), on the chaff (cf. Mt 3: 12; Lk 3: 17), and in the events of Sodom and Gomorrah (cf. Lk 17: 29). This judgment Jesus began fulfilling during His mission in the world.

In the writings of St. Paul, the symbol of fire is used in the context of judgment (understood by the Church Fathers as purgatory cf. 1 Cor 3: 13-15); in the context of the good works of each Christian (cf. Rm 12: 20) and in the context of Christ's second coming at the end of times (the Parousia).

This is considered in particular and with extraordinary imagery in the book of the Apocalypse: with burning sulfur to represent eternal damnation (Rev 14: 10); a fiery pool burning with sulfur to indicate hell (Rev 19: 20; 20: 10, 14, 15; 21: 8); a censer filled with burning coals to indicate destruction (Rev 8: 5); breastplates of fire to indicate the protection of the conquering horsemen (Rev 9: 17); the beast who is thrown into the fiery pool to indicate the victory over the evil one (Rev 18: 8; 19: 20).

In the biblical narratives fire is related symbolically to Yahweh as a sign that manifests His glory (kabod), His presence (shekinah), of His renewed covenant (berit), and His Holiness (kadosh).

God's power, expressed with the symbol of fire, refers in particular to the "person" of the Spirit of God, who is the giver of life and restorer of the cosmos.

The spirit is the protagonist of the action and revelation of Yahweh in the world, in three lines of direction: messianic salvation, prophecy (the announcement of the Word and bearing witness), and religious worship and service.