

Light and Fire

O Lord my God, thou art very great! Thou art clothed with honor and majesty, who coverest thyself with light as with a garment. ~ Psalm 104:1-2

THROUGHOUT HUMAN EXISTENCE, light has symbolized knowledge, truth, and goodness. Sacred Scripture is full of the symbolism of light and its opposite, darkness, from the very first verses when “darkness was upon the face of the deep” (Gn 1:2) and “God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light” (Gn 1:3). Fire is viewed as a source of warmth, a sign of love and passion and zeal, and as something dangerous that can purify or consume completely what it burns.

In Scripture light and fire are, first and foremost, signs of God himself. Even before circumcision became the sign of God’s covenant with Abraham, God sealed it with “a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch” (Gn 15:17). To Moses, God appeared in a burning bush that, miraculously, was not consumed (see Ex 3:2-5), and God led the Israelites out of Egypt with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (see Ex 13:21). When Moses ascended Mount Sinai, “the Lord descended upon it in fire” (Ex 19:18), and the sacred text reads: “Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel” (Ex 24:17).

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God directed the Israelites to keep a lamp continually burning outside the veil that screened the Ark of the Covenant, the sign of God’s presence in their midst (see Lv 24:1-4). Moses tells the Israelites not to make forbidden images (that is, worship idols), because “the Lord your God is a devouring fire, a jealous God” (Dt 4:24). Three times during the time of the kings of Israel, it is recorded that God himself consumed the sacrificial offerings with “fire from Heaven” (1 Chr 21:26; see also 1 Kgs 18:38; 2 Chr 7:1). And

God’s words themselves are as fire (see Jer 23:29).

As much as God is fire, he is light. Over and over, the Psalms identify God as light and truth (see Ps 43:3), light and the ability to understand (see Ps 36:9), light and salvation (see Ps 27:1). The knowledge of God is itself light: “[T]hou art my lamp, O Lord, and my God lightens my darkness” (2 Sm 22:29), and God’s Word gives understanding (see Ps 119:32) and is a guide through life: “Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps 119:105). God’s justice is light for all nations (see Is 51:4). Darkness meant sin, light forgiveness and freedom: “[W]hen I sit in darkness, the Lord will be a light to me. I will bear the indignation of the Lord because I have sinned against him, until he pleads my cause and executes judgment for me. He will bring me forth to the light; I shall behold his deliverance” (Mi 7:8-9).

The sign of God’s presence in the Temple sanctuary, the

lit lamp, was so important that the Feast of Rededication (see 1 Mc 4:52-59) that we know as Hanukkah celebrates also a miracle of light. Although the story is not recounted in the Bible, Jewish tradition tells of a single cruse of oil, sufficient to keep the lamp lit for only one day, miraculously lasting for eight days.

Prophecies of Jesus' coming compared him to light: *"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined"* (Is 9:2). His Chosen One was to be light to all: *"I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and*

kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations" (Is 42:6; see also Is 60:1-5). Upon the birth of Jesus' cousin John, his father Zechariah prophesied John's role as Jesus' herald *"when the day shall dawn upon us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death"* (Lk 1:78-79).

And when Jesus came, the Evangelist John wrote of him and his cousin John: *"In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light. The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world"* (Jn 1:4-9). Even as an infant, Jesus was recognized as the light of Revelation to all (see Lk 2:30-32). At the very beginning of his public life, he is identified as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy (see Mt 4:16). And his cousin John the Baptist said to the crowds: *"I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire"* (Mt 3:11).

Jesus often called himself the light of the world: *"I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life"* (Jn 8:12; see also Jn 9:5). His mission was to dispel the darkness: *"I have come as light into the world, that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness"* (Jn 12:46; see also Jn



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12:35-36). On another occasion, he exclaimed: *"I came to cast fire upon the earth; and would that it were already kindled!"* (Lk 12:49).

Fire was not only the symbol for zeal and purification, but also for punishment, the "cold fire" of desolate separation from God: *"His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire"* (Lk 3:17). Darkness — evil — opposes the light: *"And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.*

For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God" (Jn 3:19-21). When Jesus faces the officials who have come to arrest him, he tells them: *"[T]his is your hour, and the power of darkness"* (Lk 22:53). As he hung dying on the cross, *"there was darkness over the whole land"* (Mk 15:33). Although there were no witnesses to Jesus' Resurrection, when we celebrate his Resurrection in the great Easter Vigil Mass, we begin in darkness until the Paschal Candle, symbolizing the Risen Christ, is lit with new fire and processed down the aisle to the proclamation, "Light of Christ!"

The Church was born of fire from Heaven: *"When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from Heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance"* (Acts 2:1-4).

In explaining the meaning of the faith to Gentiles, St. Paul repeatedly uses the metaphors of darkness for sin and death: *"For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed; the night is far gone, the day is at hand. Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light"* (Rom 13:11-12). Light is knowledge and sin is spiritual darkness (see 2 Cor 4:4-6; Eph 4:17-19). The power of darkness is the pow-

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er of Satan: *“For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the Heavenly places”* (Eph 6:12). Light represents new life as Christians: *“[F]or once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is a shame even to speak of the things that they do in secret; but when anything is exposed by the light it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it is said, ‘Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light’”* (Eph 5:8-14; see also 1 Thes 5:5).

The other apostles taught the same. James called God *“the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change”* (Jas 1:17). Peter described salvation as coming from *“him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light”* (1 Pt 2:9). And John wrote that *“God is light and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not live according to the truth; but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin”* (1 Jn 1:5-7).

God’s fire will end the world (see 2 Pt 3:7-12), and his angels *“will gather out of his Kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth”* (Mt 13:41-42). Yet that same fire tests and purifies those who die in God’s friendship. We are told in the book of Revelation that *“nothing unclean shall enter”* the Heavenly city (Rv 21:27). St. Paul tells us that *“each man’s work will become manifest; for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work which any man has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire”* (1 Cor 3:13-15), for, as the author of the Letter to the Hebrews says, *“our God is a consuming fire”* (Heb 12:29).

We know little of what

“The Church was born of fire from Heaven.”

Heaven will be like. But we expect to be in God’s glorious light: *“The sun shall be no more your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you by night; but the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory”* (Is 60:19). The book of Revelation calls God himself the light of the Heavenly Jerusalem and Jesus its lamp: *“And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light shall the nations walk; and the kings of the earth shall bring their glory into it, and its gates shall never be shut by day — and there shall be no night”* (Rv 21:23-25; see also Rv 22:5). St. Paul says that Jesus is *“the King of kings and Lord of lords, who ... dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has ever seen or can see”* (1 Tm 6:15-16).

The apostles Peter, James, and John were given a bare glimpse of Jesus in his glory even before he died: *“And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain apart. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him”* (Mt 17:1-3). This was Moses, the great giver of the Law, whose face had shone so brilliantly after talking with God on Mount Sinai that the Israelites feared to approach him, and who had from that time on to veil his face (see Ex 34:29-35), and Elijah, who did not die but was taken by God in *“a chariot of fire and horses of fire ... up by a whirlwind into Heaven”* (2 Kgs 2:11).

We, too, will become glorious. Isaiah prophesied that the *“dead shall live, their bodies shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For thy dew is a dew of light, and on the land of the shades thou wilt let it fall”* (Is 26:19),

and Jesus tells us that, at the end of the world, *“the righteous will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father”* (Mt 13:43). And his Mother, already glorified in Heaven, is the *“woman clothed with the sun ... and on her head a crown of twelve stars”* (Rv 12:1). Our future glory is, literally, a dazzling promise of light — the purest light of love.

(CCC 214, 242, 257, 529, 696-697, 736, 748, 1030-1031, 1034-1035, 1147, 1216, 1243, 1785, 2466)

