THE INCARNATION MYSTERY IN THE WRITINGS OF JOHN OF THE CROSS AS A REVERBERATION OF JOHANNINE CHRISTOLOGY*

MARIE HLAVÁČOVÁ

ABSTRACT

The article focuses on the influence of bible tradition and especially of Johannine Christology in the writings of John of the Cross, a Spanish Carmelite from the 16th century known for his mystical doctrine. It will be focused on the role of the mystery of the Incarnation during the process of uniting the soul with God. After explaining the method of analysis, the author presents conclusions on Johannine influence in *Romances based on the Gospel 'In principio erat verbum'* – a poetic paraphrase of the *Gospel of John* revealing John of the Cross's conception of the Incarnation mystery. Findings concerning his presentation of the Incarnation mystery in his prosaic commentaries follow next. Finally, the article offers a brief overview of the impact of John 14–17 on the saint's teaching about the anticipation of celestial glory.

Keywords

Mysticism; John of the Cross; Johannine Christology; Incarnation

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Martin Heidegger claims that '[tradition] blocks our access to those primordial "sources" from which the categories and concepts handed down to us have been in part quite genuinely drawn. Indeed, it makes us forget that they have had such an origin.'[1]

In a religious context, those who cannot be made to forget that origin because they are awakened to its existence and gradually drawn nearer

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1 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell publishers, 2001), 43.

and nearer in its presence, thus gaining access to those primordial 'sources', are called mystics. Their mission is to accept the awareness of the origin and bring it forward for the rest of us to see more clearly the non-self-evident character of existence (being).

Throughout the 20th century, mysticism – a special way of experiencing God's presence and action in one's life – gradually gained acceptance as a privileged source of newly established spiritual theology, a theological discipline which examines the Holy Spirit's sanctifying action in a Christian's life. The importance of Christian mystics, not only as shining examples of what it really means to live as a Christian (i.e. God's grateful and faithful child) but also as genuine teachers capable of introducing others to the mysteries of faith, was emphasised by such prominent theologians as K. Rahner, H. U. von Balthasar and others.[2] After all, most of the contemporary teaching of spiritual theology about the soul's union with God draws from the writings of medieval and early modern mystics, especially Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross and their disciples, such as Teresa of Lisieux, Elisabeth of Trinity, Edith Stein (Teresa Benedicta of the Cross) and others.

This acknowledgement of mystical writings as a relevant source of academic research brought about an expansion of specialised studies dedicated to different aspects of their doctrine in the second half of the last century. In the case of John of the Cross, 'Master of Faith'[3], generally appreciated for his insight into the process of mystical transformation of the soul on her way towards the union with God, the depth of his experience and thoughts seems to be nearly as inexhaustible as the mysteries of faith themselves: despite the immense multitude of articles and treatises inspired by his literal heritage, some of its facets always remain open to further investigation or different evaluation.

Why John of the Cross? While previous centuries tended to accentuate the negative dimension of his doctrine, associating him mostly with the terms 'darkness', 'purification', 'self-denial', and 'void', at least implicitly casting doubts about his acceptance of Incarnation and the role of Christ in the soul's ascension towards an unreachable God, in the last decades we are on our way to rediscover him as an outstanding

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[2] Cf. Vojtěch Kohut, 'Zkušenost křesťanská,' in *Slovník spirituality*, ed. Stefano De Fiores (Kostelní Vydří: Karmelitánské nakladatelství, 1999), 1223–1229.

[3] Cf. John Paul II. *Lettera apostolica Maestro della Fede*. December 14, 1990. https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/apost_letters/1990/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19901214_juan-de-la-cruz.html.

poet, a great admirer of God's beauty and indulgence, and an avid reader of the Sacred Scripture whose literary production rests upon a very sound and profound Christology.[4] In this line of research, this article traces the underlying influence of Johannine Christology in the mystic's passionate admiration of the Incarnation mystery.

1. Why Incarnation

At the beginning of this section it is necessary to quote the following text, which we find at the end of *Spiritual Canticle* (SC):

> One of the main reasons for the desire to be dissolved and to be with Christ [Phil. 1:23] is to see him face to face and thoroughly understand the *profound and eternal mysteries of his Incarnation*, which is by no means the lesser part of beatitude. As Christ himself says to the Father in St. John's Gospel: This is eternal life, that they know you, the one true God, and your Son Jesus Christ whom you have sent [Jn. 17:3]. The first thing a person desires to do after having come a long distance is to see and converse with a deeply loved one; similarly, the first thing the soul desires on coming to the vision of God is to know and enjoy the *deep secrets and mysteries of the Incarnation* and the ancient ways of God dependent on it.[5]

Sanjuanist scholars currently recognize as authentic four major prose works concerned with principles of spiritual (mystic) life – two of them existing in two genuine editions – about ten poems, approximately thirty letters, a collection of sayings and two short writings known as *Precautions and Counsels*. While the four major writings – originally intended as commentaries on his verses – explain John of the Cross's doctrine on the spiritual journey towards the union with God, the rest of them (poems, letters, sayings, *Counsels and Precautions*) have more private character and offer glimpses into his personality, mystical experience, and style of spiritual direction. Thus, the latter has hardly anything to add to the doctrinal content of the major works about the Incarnation, so they were not used in the research, with one

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[4] Cf. A thorough analysis of John of the Cross's Christology presents Florencio García Muñoz, *'Una Palabra habló el Padre que fue su Hijo.' Jesucristo en San Juan de la Cruz* (Burgos: Monte Carmelo, 2014).

[5] Canticle 37,1. St. John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross* [Revised Edition]. ICS Publications. Kindle Edition.

exception: there are several reasons to include a poem called *Romances on the Gospel 'In principio erat verbum'*[6] and even to open the analysis with it. A poetic narrative vision of intra-trinitarian relations and their manifestation through the creation and Incarnation, based on the text of the Fourth Gospel, opens a unique insight into the author's notion of Trinity and Incarnation – the two fundamental mysteries in the core of Christian faith. It has therefore essential importance for an assessment of his opinion on those mysteries: it is therefore the first reason why to start the analysis with this work. Besides, the fact that it clearly announces a close relationship to the Johannine Gospel in its title is calling for an evaluation of the extent and nature of Johannine's influence. Third, it counts among the saint's oldest literary creations; therefore, the mystical-theological vision described in the poem might be seen as a kind of 'introduction' to his later writings,[7] especially to his doctrinal commentaries.

The choice of an appropriate method of analysis was a challenging task as the methods normally used to analyse poetry do not reveal the theological message easily (if at all). There are no special methods designed to extract a theological/doctrinal meaning from a poetic text, except hermeneutics and exegesis employed in biblical research. The problem of their application, in this case, lies primarily in the fact that they are methods developed to examine one particular text, not to compare two texts with each other or to identify passages in which the influence of an earlier author on the work of a later author is evident. For the analysis of *Romances*, the methodology settled on a comparison based on linguistic as well as semantic analysis, i.e. it focused on the occurrence of the same terms in *Romances* and the *Gospel of John* and the comparison of their meaning in both works.

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[6] The experts are divided in the approach if this is a single 'romance' (a poetic composition written in the rhythmic scheme typical of Spanish folk poetry, whose rhythmic scheme is characterised by the repetition of the same rhyme at the end of all the even verses and the absence of any rhyme in the odd verses) and the view that it is a cycle of nine 'romances'. Here, I am inclined to the second view. The composition, with a total of 310 verses, with eight-syllable continuous rhymes, is divided into nine scenes in which the poet recounts in five steps the history of salvation from the Trinitarian life before the creation of the world to the birth of Christ. The poem was written during the saint's nine-month stay in Toledo prison. – cf. *Obras de San Juan de la Cruz, Doctor de la Iglesia. Tomo I. Preliminares*. ed. Silverio de Santa Teresa (Burgos: Editorial Monte Carmelo, 1929), 132.

[7] Srov. Federico Ruiz Salvador, *Introducción a San Juan de la Cruz* (Madrid: BAC, 1968), 162.

The choice of an approach to the analysis of the prose writings faced another difficulty: How to identify passages in the text of the individual writings relating to the Incarnation, possibly inspired by the Fourth gospel? The risks of interpreting the saint's attitude towards the mystery of the Incarnation solely based on passages where he quotes or refers to the Gospel text have been amply revealed in the article by J. Boulet, who draws completely inadequate conclusions from the absence of certain Gospel verses in the saint's treatises. Since John of the Cross gives neither a systematic exposition of the Gospel nor of the dogma of the Incarnation but deals with the spiritual growth of a human person (in the terminology of the sixteenth century, 'the soul') and with the goal towards which he or she is directed, it is to be expected that both the Gospel kerygma and the mystery of the Incarnation would be present in his exposition implicitly rather than explicitly. This is also why most of his references to the Gospel (or its Prologue) illustrate a doctrine of spiritual realities and phenomena that are only loosely or not at all related to the mystery of the Incarnation, and thus do not provide a complete picture of his view of this mystery.

After having studied the various references to the Fourth Gospel in the saint's work in detail, I concluded that it would be very difficult to deduce anything from them concerning his view of the mystery of the Incarnation, so I did not deal with them further and decided to identify the relevant places for analysis in another way. For this purpose, it proved most appropriate to pay attention first to the passages in which the concept of the Incarnation occurs directly and, by exegesis (linguistic and semantic analysis), to get a basic idea of what they say about the author's view of this mystery, and then to focus on the passages where Christ is spoken of as 'the Word' since this title is used exclusively for Christ in the Fourth Gospel and can therefore be understood as an explicit reference to its Christology. This procedure has made it possible to outline a relatively coherent conception of the mystery of the Incarnation in the prose works *The Canticle* (= *The Spiritual Canticle*) and *The Flame* (= *The Living Flame of Love*) and to show the different perspective of *The Ascent* (= *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*). The chosen form of analysis has proved quite inapplicable to *The Night* (= *The Dark Night*), where the concepts of 'Incarnation' and 'Word' do not appear. As an examination of the view of the Incarnation in this work using any other method would be beyond the scope of the article, I have not included it in the analysis. A study of the passages selected according to

these criteria has pointed to the Johannine inspiration of the final chapters of *The Canticle* and the whole of *The Flame*, in whose description of the culminating stages of life in union with God can be observed the influence of the Farewell Discourse (Jn 14–16) and the High Priestly Prayer (Jn 17). In the conclusion of my analytical examination of the saint's prose writings, I have therefore compared his accounts of this phase of the mystical life with the Christology of the Fourth Gospel contained in chapters 14–17.

2. The John-Sanjuanist Vision of the Incarnation in *Romances*

What strikes one at first glance about *Romances* (R) is the remarkable balance between fidelity to the Gospel text and the creative freedom with which the poet processes the Gospel material (and the other sources whose influence is evident in the composition) into an original work of art that reflects an intimate knowledge of the biblical text, a deep mystical insight into the nature of the mystery of the Incarnation, fidelity to the deposit of faith of the Church, and the ability to process the richness of thought of the previous tradition in a new way. For example, in the very first couplet of the poem (R 1,1–2), the poet replaces 'to be' of the Gospel with the full-meaning verbs 'to live' and 'to dwell' ('abide'), terms that carry special significance in the Fourth Gospel because they describe the relationship between the Father and the Son, which serves as the 'matrix' for the relationship between Jesus and the disciple. Other examples include the synthesis of the Gospel statements about the glory of the Son in the Father and the glory of the Father in the Son in the fifth stanza of the first scene: '*Y así toda la gloria del Hijo / es la que en el Padre había / y toda su gloria el Padre / en el Hijo poseía*' (R 1,17–20) or the projection of Jesus' earthly obedience to the Father's will into the Son's assent to a plan of salvation involving Incarnation: '*Mi voluntad es la tuya, / el Hijo le respondía / y la gloria que yo tengo / es tu voluntad ser mía*' (R 7,24–28). However, from the point of view of the mystery of the Incarnation and its role in the process of the soul's union with God, the most important is the Father's declaration of love for the Son (R 2,11–14), which again resonates with Johannine Christology,[8] but above all in which we find the germ of the doctrine developed later in *The Ascent* (A): The Father can

[8] Cf. Jn 3,35; Jn 5,20a; Jn 10,17.

only love the one who resembles the Son; following Christ is thus the basis of the path to the union[9] as Jesus states in the Gospel in his Farewell Discourse.[10]

The list of other parallels could be longer, but I believe that the examples given have sufficiently shown how the poem is imbued with the thought of the Johannine school and how it copies the Gospel view of the mystery of the Incarnation. It presents a *de facto* artistic-theological synthesis of the message of the Fourth Gospel and adopts an original approach to it: it seems to 'project' what Jesus says in the Gospel about himself and his relationship to the Father onto the timeless existence of God 'prior' to the creation and the Incarnation that the Evangelist has in mind when he opens his work with the term 'in the beginning'. In the poem, John of the Cross glimpses precisely this 'moment': the timeless eternity – the eternal lingering of the Word with God in an intimate relationship (conversation) to which (before the Incarnation) no outsider has access. In this remarkable access to the mystery of the incarnate Word, he opens a 'porthole' into eternity, where the Word permanently 'rests in the bosom of the Father' (Jn 1,18). The unusual perspective from which the Gospel message is viewed is gained from contemplating the Evangelist's idea of the Incarnation: that Jesus – the eternal Word – came into the world to 'reveal the name of the Father' to people (Jn 17,6) and 'give eternal life' (Jn 17,2), which consists in their knowing the Father and Jesus Christ sent by him (cf. Jn 17,3). As the incarnate God, then, he is the 'meeting point' of eternity with human history – by the unity with the Father, whom he reveals by his dialogical existence, he is himself the 'window' through which one can glimpse the relations that prevailed between the Father and the Son 'before the foundation of the world' (Jn 17,24), he is 'the way' (Jn 14,6) leading to the Father with whom he has been and to whom he returns after the completion of his mission (Jn 14,28; 16,10; 17,11–13). In the form imprinted by the Evangelist, the mystery of the Incarnation becomes for John of the Cross a kind of 'telescope' that allows him to look beyond time and space to where he can see the glory that the Son had with the Father.

Also, the very image of the Father 'speaking' to the Son in eternity follows the Evangelist's way of expressing himself: Jesus reveals what

[9] Cf. 1A 13,3–4 a 2V 7,8–9.
[10] Cf. Jn 14,15a; Jn 14,21; Jn 15,9–10.

he 'heard' (Jn 15,15) from the Father, even the very words of the Father (Jn 14,10). As in his Farewell Discourse Jesus makes it clear that by 'words' he means 'commandments',[11] or his love for his disciples, [12] which mirrors the Father's love for himself (cf. Jn 15,9) and is manifested not only in words but above all in deeds,[13] the term 'word' in the context of the Gospel means much more than a mere utterance; it includes all the manifestations (speech and action) by which Jesus enters into a relationship with his disciples and reveals (gives) himself to them as the Father reveals (gives) himself to him. Just as the Evangelist chose the image of 'speaking' to express a relationship of love that manifests itself in a unity of will and a willingness to give himself unconditionally, so does John of the Cross in the second scene of *Romances*, where he styles the expression of the Father's love for the Son as 'speaking' – an eternal declaration of love.

3. The Term *Incarnation* in the Prose Works

In the saint's prose, the term Incarnation appears a total of eleven times,[14] and only in *The Canticle*. It usually occurs as part of the phrase 'mystery of the incarnation' (whether singular or plural), which is usually repeated multiple times in a single passage. In sum, there are four occurrences, but their strategic placement within the work is worth noting.

Let us recall that *The Canticle* in its second redaction[15] becomes a thoughtful treatise on the soul's journey toward the union with God, from its beginnings, when the soul's desire for God is awakened and she begins to follow it, to the culminating stage of union, when she experiences the indwelling of the persons of the Trinity and the Trinitarian

[11] Cf. Jn 14,15.21.23–24 and 15,10.
[12] Cf. Jn 15,9–13.
[13] Cf. Jn 13,1–17 and J 15,13.
[14] Cf. Juan Luis Astigarraga, Agustí Borrell, and Javier Martín de Lucas, eds., *Concordancias de los escritos de San Juan de la Cruz* (Roma: Teresianum, 1990), 689–690. Quotations from identical or similar passages in the first and second editions of *The Spiritual Canticle* are counted only once.
[15] The commentaries on the 'Song of the Soul and the Bridegroom' and on the poem 'Oh, Living Flame of Love' have survived in two versions (redactions). Critics now consider both to be authentic. While in the 'Song' the author made a rather extensive revision consisting of adding a new stanza to the poem (hence a new chapter) and rearranging the original order of the stanzas, in the 'Flame' he mostly limited himself to reworking, adding, or, on the contrary, omitting some parts of the text.

breathing (the exhalation of the Spirit between the Father and the Son, in which she shares through her union with Christ). From this point of view, it is interesting that the mention of the Incarnation appears for the first time in the commentary in the fifth stanza of the poem (SC 5,3), which describes the initial stages of the spiritual journey. The longing for God as 'beloved' impels the soul to seek him, which is accomplished at this stage by discovering the reflection of his beauty in creation. At the same time, the soul grows in the awareness that creation is not an end, for God 'made creatures by the way',[16] since he was working towards a much grander goal – the Incarnation of the Word. In comparison, the significance of the other signs of God's presence in creation pales, though the whole of creation reflects his attributes in some way and so bears witness to him. The moment of comparison is of the utmost importance for a correct understanding of the author's position. The author certainly does not underestimate the majesty and value of creation as a magnificent work of God but only emphasises the far more perfect possibility of an encounter that God offered to man when he stooped from the heights of his transcendence, embraced human existence, and thus infinitely transcended the horizon in which the mutual relationship between man and God unfolds.[17] In the next point of the commentary on the fifth stanza of *The Canticle* (SC 5,4), the emphasis on the Incarnation as the key moment in salvation history is even more explicit: by the very Incarnation, the Son of God raises humanity and with it all creation to a supernatural, divine dignity.

The mention of the Incarnation two stanzas later (SC 7,3) already catches the soul at the stage when she moves from seeking the Beloved through the beauty of creation to a deeper knowledge of Him alone,

[16] SC 5,3. The idea outlined in SC 5:3–4 can be better understood thanks to *The Romances*. According to them, God's creative intention is directed from the beginning to the 'marriage' of the Son with the Spouse – the Incarnation; for this reason the Father creates the world as the Spouse's dwelling (a palace divided into two 'dwellings') and the Spouse 'in the likeness of the Son' (Rom 7,10). All that precedes the Incarnation, however magnificent in itself, only prepares for this climactic moment of human history, in which the Son is conformed to his betrothed by taking on flesh, i.e., human destiny. The created world, in all its splendour, cannot bear comparison with the splendour of Trinitarian love, whose overflowing fullness gives it rise as a 'palace for the betrothed' (R 4,5), whom the Father and the Son intend to receive into their communion.

[17] This total disproportion between Creator and creature is only briefly outlined by the saint here and is dealt with in more detail in the Exodus, where he firmly denies the capacity of creatures and created values to become a means of union with God (cf. 1A 4,4ff.).

which is revealed to her in the works of the 'Incarnation of the Word'. From the context, it may be inferred with a good deal of certainty that the phrase 'the works of the incarnation of the Word' means the whole earthly life of Jesus from conception to death and resurrection, as recorded in the Gospels and other books of Scripture since the whole of Scripture bears witness to Christ. This broad view of the mystery of the Incarnation is offered above all by *Romances*, in which humanity's hope of salvation lies in the expectation that the Word-Begotten will become like men, dwell with them, converse with them, eat and drink with them, and remain with them 'until the end of the age' (R 4,37–48). The detailed enumeration of activities – referring partly to the opening of John's first letter (1Jn 1,1) and partly to the Gospel's 'dwelling' of the Word among men (Jn 1,14) – underlines the complete likeness: the betrothed will remain no stranger to the betrothed's lot, identifying with her in everything and accompanying her in everything. This humility, generosity, and love of God is contemplated by John of the Cross in the Gospel text and is always in his mind when he speaks of the richness, splendour and grandeur of the mystery of the Incarnation.

In this spirit, then, it is to be understood that a deeper knowledge of the Beloved is made available to the soul 'in the works of the incarnation of the Word' which 'wounds' it with love, i.e., disposes it to the union. It is also worth noting that this is not a knowledge that the soul acquires by her activity, but it is – as wounding – granted or rather (since it is a grace of God) 'bestowed' upon her through the theological virtues. In his commentary on the second verse of the stanza (SC 7,7), the author describes how the soul, like all lovers, is eager to learn as much as possible about the Beloved so that she greedily absorbs everything that is told about him, because the more she learns about him, the more she will be able to enjoy the 'charms' of his Incarnation.[18]

[18] The disposition just described, which the soul has adopted (or which has prevailed in it as a result of the 'wounding of love' – the initial infused outburst of mystical love), is strikingly reminiscent of the advice John of the Cross gives at the close of the first book of *The Ascent* to him, who by his efforts would hasten the onset of the next stage, the night of sense (1A 13,3), so a little note about this work, which deals with the initial stage of the mystical life in greater detail than *The Canticle*, is need. For this stage of the spiritual journey, the Mystical Teacher recommends that the disciple abides by Christ with all the strength of his will, making him (meaning: his earthly life, as we learn about him from the Gospel) the model of all his actions, and, following his example, renounce, out of love, his pleasure in all things unless they are for the greater honour and glory of God (cf. 1A 13,4).

In proportion as the soul grows more in love, she desires to conform to the Beloved and to be like Him in everything, so that she unconsciously seeks the Beloved in everything and behind everything, listens attentively to everything she can learn about Him, and longs to be even closer to Him and to be fully united with Him. At each stage of the journey to the union, the betrothed's 'belonging' to the incarnate Christ (i.e., the way she understands and experiences the mystery of the Incarnation) takes different forms, as evidenced by the references to the Incarnation in the fifth and seventh chapters of *The Canticle*. Whereas during the purificatory (meditative)[19] stage the soul purposely seeks to focus her attention on the mystery of the Incarnation and learns to follow Christ – the incarnate Word – by recalling through contemplation how much the Incarnation transcends the beauty and majesty of creation, in the illuminative (contemplative) stage a deeper knowledge of God's works – especially the Incarnation – is communicated to her through contemplation without her own doing.

Another change of perspective occurs in the unifying stage, which begins with a spiritual betrothal (chapter thirteen of *The Canticle*) and culminates in a spiritual marriage (chapter twenty-two). The mysteries of the Incarnation, which were previously made available to the soul primarily as 'knowledge' about the Betrothed, now become a commonwealth of both: the soul experiences them directly, no longer as intellectual knowledge, but as an 'experience' that the Betrothed 'shares' with her – making her experience and feel how they are realised in her and what she shares in them. The interpretation of the twenty-third chapter, in the introduction to which the author notes that the union reveals to the soul 'the sweet mysteries of the Incarnation and the ways and forms of human redemption' (SC 23,1) and then focuses on their most proper core – the redemption of the corrupted human nature by the cross of Christ – reaffirms that the saint calls the whole of Jesus' earthly life the Incarnation by which God's saving action – the 'betrothal' of the Son to human nature (the betrothed) – is accomplished.

[19] John of the Cross puts his interpretation of the spiritual journey in the Canticle in the context of the traditional division of the process of union into purifying, illuminating and unifying stages before he begins his commentary on the poem (SC Theme), and then in his commentary on the twenty-second stanza (SC 22,3), he specifies which stanzas correspond to each stage. The purifying stage is described in the first five stanzas, the illuminating stage is dealt with in stanzas 6–12, and from stanza 13 onwards it is the unifying stage.

The fact that God became incarnate is the basic point from which the whole doctrine of the Mystical Teacher is derived: the history of salvation, the existence of the world and the possibility of knowing God as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the inseparable communion of mutual indwelling in love. While the depth of his reverence for this mystery is most clearly evidenced in *Romances*, in which he recounts the Incarnation of the Son and the consequent elevation of his betrothed – the humanity and by extension the entire created world to the Son's level as the sole reason for God's creative activity, his fascination with this mystery is also evident in the final passages of *The Canticle*. In the commentary on the thirty-seventh stanza, this mystery is the source of the hope with which the soul anticipates the transition from earthly life to the blissful belonging to God, the moment of the fulfilment of her desire to understand and appropriate it (i.e., the mystery of the Incarnation) in all its splendour and fullness, to delight in it and enjoy it as God himself delights in it and enjoys it.[20] He even suggests that it is this full 'understanding' and appreciation of the Incarnation that constitutes the essence of her bliss in the hereafter.[21]

From what has been said, we can conclude that this mystery represents, in the conception of John of the Cross, the centre of gravity of the spiritual life – the core from which all the spiritual life of the Christian derives, and the source of all progress on the spiritual path. It encompasses the whole of God's redemptive work accomplished during Jesus' earthly life; it is the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. The presence of this mystery at the very foundation of his teaching is also evidenced by the emphasis he places on the uniqueness of Christ's mediatorial role from the very beginning of the spiritual journey.

4. Christ as the Word

In the context of examining the saint's relationship to the mystery of the Incarnation, it is worth noting that he quite often refers to Jesus as 'the Word', which cannot be understood as anything other than a direct reference to the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel (Jn 1,1–18) since only in that Gospel does the Word have a uniquely personal character and

[20] Cf. SC 36,5.
[21] Cf. SC 37,1–2.

is identical with the person of Jesus Christ. The term 'Verbo' (Word)[22] is used as a proper name for Christ twenty-one times in *The Canticle*, eleven times in *The Flame*, and once towards the end of *The Night*. In *The Ascent*, which differs markedly from the remaining writings in its scholastic method of interpretation, the appellation does not occur; however, an exposition devoted to the completeness and exclusiveness of revelation in Christ designates it by the term 'Palabra' (Statement, Word, Speech).

The first 6 occurrences in *The Canticle* (nearly a third of the total) are in the first chapter, the next 7 in the chapters at the end of the book (chapters 35 to 38), and 3 in chapter 5, which also contains the first explicit mention of the Incarnation. In *The Flame*, most occurrences are in the second chapter (paragraphs 17–20, where 'the Word' appears 7 times, including 4 times in the series of exclamations in paragraph 17), with three others in the final chapter 4 and one mention of 'the Word' in chapter 3.[23] Rarely does the saint speak of Christ as merely the Word, without further names and attributions. In *The Canticle*, he oscillates between the combination 'the Word, the Son of God' and 'the Word, (her) Spouse', and in two places he even uses all three designations simultaneously. Twice he abandons this scheme in favour of the phrase 'the divine Word'. In the remaining four instances, 'the Word' forms part of the phrase 'the incarnation of the Word' or 'the union of the Word'. In *The Flame*, the combination 'Word, Son of God' occurs only twice, and 'Word – Betrothed' is referred to once, in all other cases there is only 'the Word' without further specification. *The Night* uses the atypical combination 'Verbo Cristo' (Christ – the Word).

The first passage referring to Christ as 'the Word' is found at the beginning of the commentary (SC 1,2). By the simultaneous use of the expressions 'Word' – 'Son of God' – 'Betrothed', the author refers to the different dimensions of Christ's being: 'Word', due to the link with the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel, recalls the Incarnation, i.e., the hypostatic union of the divine and human natures in Jesus Christ, by which God enters into dialogue with man and overcomes the distance between the divine and the human. 'Son of God' refers to his being as a second divine person defined by his relationship to the Father and

[22] This term always appears in the saint's writings with a capital letter as the proper name of the second divine person (the Son-Soul's Spouse).

[23] We count the parallel locations of the two editions of the same work only once.

hence to the mystery of the Trinity. 'Betrothed' characterises who he is to the soul of the disciple with whom he wants to unite in love. All three together capture and characterise the person of the Beloved to whom the soul turns in the poem. The soul becomes aware and present to each aspect of his being in contemplation, and in the course of the spiritual journey, she also experiences it more and more deeply and intensely in proportion as she gradually conforms to the Beloved, so that he can increasingly share with her the 'mystery' of his being.

In a follow-up interpretation of the first stanza of the poem (SC 1,3–6), the saint introduces the central idea of the writing: The Beloved, whom the soul seeks, is hidden 'in the bosom of the Father' (Jn 1,18), where the Father 'feeds' on him in eternal glory, and at the same time, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, dwells secretly in the deepest interior of the soul, into which the soul in love is to plunge in order to find him. The whole passage is distinctly underlaid by the theology of the Fourth Gospel, which is shown, among other things, by the fact that John of the Cross uses the term 'the Word' almost every time he refers to Christ in it. The statements about the Word in the first chapter of *The Canticle* can be summarised as follows: to the Word-Christ the soul's longing for union is directed, he is her 'Beloved', yet his divine nature (hidden in the 'Father's bosom') prevents her from an immediate encounter with him, so she begs the Father to let her feed on him as the Father himself 'feeds' on him.

Another aspect of John of the Cross's view of the Word-Christ is revealed in the note before the stanza in the fifth chapter of *The Canticle* (SC 5,1). It recapitulates New Testament theology concerning the role of the Son in creation:[24] God created the world 'by his Wisdom […] and that is the Word, the only begotten Son'. Further interpretation then implies that the Word is the 'form' of creation, his likeness imprinted on creation mirrors the uncreated beauty of the Word, is an imperfect reflection of it, and refers the seeking soul to it. Similarly, the conclusion of the eleventh chapter (SC 11,12) speaks of 'the Word': The soul longs for the completion of the process that is to conform her to the One whose 'sketch' she bears within herself, who is 'her Spouse, the Word, the Son of God'.

[24] Cf. J 1,3; Col 1,16–17; Heb 1,2–3.

In chapters 14–15, 'the Word' occurs as part of the definition of spiritual betrothal,[25] and in the chapter on the intimacy of spiritual marriage, 'the Word' becomes the bed 'into which (the soul) rests through […] union' (SC 24,3). The soul has already come to know her betrothed intimately at this stage of the spiritual journey and continues to do so. She can see the mystery of the Incarnation as the manifestation of her Betrothed's infinite love, with which he gives himself to her in his entirety, discovering ever new riches in him, whose beauty and depth arouse her amazement and nourish her desire for a full knowledge of all the mysteries of the Beloved and for the total union with him to be realised in the life to come. Her fascination with this mystery is depicted in the final chapters of *The Canticle* (especially 35–39) and *The Flame*.

5. The Glory of the Incarnate Word

The mystery of the Incarnation is revealed in the closing chapters of *The Canticle* as the centre around which the mystical life of the soul revolves. The mystery of Christ's being as the Incarnate Word appears to her as 'a very rich mine with many caverns full of treasures' (SC 37,3), where she continually discovers more and more treasures and never exhausts all its riches. Because she longs to penetrate the deepest roots of the mystery of the Incarnation, she longs for eternity, where she will be able to 'understand the very deep ways and eternal mysteries of his Incarnation' (SC 37,1).

We learn three things about the mystery as such from the passage:

1. Everything that is known about God begins and ends in Christ, in whom the second divine person mysteriously meets and unites with human nature.
2. The mystery of the hypostatic union is closely related to other mysteries revealed by the revelation in Christ, namely, the mysterious union of men in God and God's purposes for the salvation of humankind.
3. The immensity of the mysteries of Christ (i.e., the mystery of the Incarnation and all that pertains to it) far exceeds human ability to penetrate them, so that the soul can endlessly discover their

[25] In parallel, the saint uses the term 'the Word' as part of the definition in *The Flame* (3,25) – here he also speaks of a 'spiritual betrothal to the Word'.

inexhaustible riches in their heights and depths and rejoice in them, 'which is no small part of her blessedness' (SC 37,1).

It cannot be overlooked, however, as the saint points out further on in the sixth point, that this penetration and discovery of new dimensions of the Divine mysteries is not the activity of the soul, but rather the activity of the Spouse within her, for through it her transformation into him is manifested (cf. SC 37,6), which gives the soul the capacity to know and love the Betrothed as he knows and loves himself, which is explained both in the previous – thirty-sixth – chapter (especially point 5) and in even greater detail in the following two chapters (38–39). It must be remembered, however, as the author reiterates in the note to the thirty-eighth Canto, that the immersion in the mystery of the Incarnation described in the previous two chapters is experienced by the united soul rather than in hints since it is to be fully realised only in eternity, where 'it will be transformed in beauty by the union of the Word with humanity' (SC 38,1).

Already united to her Betrothed – the Word – by the grace of spiritual marriage, she experiences a foretaste of heavenly bliss and thus knows clearly and surely what she expects in the hereafter: This is the adoption as sons of God, who truly say to God what the Son himself said in St. John to the eternal Father: 'All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. (Jn 17:10)'. The distinct influence of the Christology of the Fourth Gospel in this passage can be appreciated if, in addition to the Johannine concept of the mutual indwelling of lovers in one another, we also notice in the author's description of the sharing of 'beauty' between the bride and the Bridegroom the echo of Jesus' prayer (Jn 17). The plea 'let them behold my glory' (Jn 17,24) underscores the entire passage in which the betrothed expresses her hope to 'behold' and share the 'beauty' of the Bridegroom of Christ. The believer's desire to behold the 'beauty' of the Son of God mirrors Jesus' desire to share the 'glory' of divine sonship with his disciples. The Johannine δόξα ('glory'; also 'radiance', 'splendour') becomes, in John of the Cross, the 'beauty' and 'grace' of the Incarnation, but its essence remains the loving communion of unity between the Father and the Son, which, through the mysterious plan of the Incarnation, spills over into creation. The Johannine inspiration of the last chapters of the Song is confirmed by a passage in the penultimate chapter (SC 39:5), which clarifies the ultimate goal of the Incarnation: God has offered humanity an incredible

gain through the Incarnation – 'the power/ability to become children of God', i.e., to participate in God's life by participating in the Trinitarian outbreathing of the Holy Spirit.

John of the Cross writes at least two of his prose works (*The Canticle* and *The Flame* (LF)) with the intention of showing his readers the splendour of this gift and thereby motivating them to respond appropriately so that the promises of Jesus in John's Gospel can be fulfilled in them. By reference to them, he also seeks to vindicate his doctrine of the mystically experienced presence of divine persons within the believer against sceptics who regard it as too optimistic. He considers the defence so important that he does not hesitate to repeat the reference to the Gospel again in his commentary on the first stanza of the poem (LF 1,15).

Although the number of explicit quotations of the Fourth Gospel is not high in *The Flame*, their strategic placement in the text and their interpretation show that the entire commentary is permeated by its kerygma, especially the Farewell Discourse and the Prayer for the Disciples. In particular, the opening words of the commentary on the first stanza (LF 1,1), quoting Jn 7:38 and implicitly alluding to Jn 7,39, can be seen as evidence of a strong Johannine influence, by which he makes it clear that by 'rivers of living water' he means the Holy Spirit. It is precisely this 'flowing out' of the Spirit from within the soul, i.e., his working in her, that the saint is about to speak of (cf. LF 1,3–5). Leaving aside the extensive excursus on spiritual guides in chapter 3, the whole work may be considered an ode to the fulfilment of the promises of the fourteenth and fifteenth chapters of John's Gospel. His characterisation of the Holy Spirit's action in the soul (LF 1,3–4) offers an example of how Jesus' words about the Advocate (Jn 14,15–16.26), whom the Father will send to those who love him at his request, and about the eternal life that consists in the knowledge of the Father and the Son (Jn 17,3), crystallise in the saint's mystical experience.

At this stage of mystical union, the soul becomes more and more aware that the mystery of the Incarnation – meaning the whole of Jesus' earthly existence and also His pre-existence as the second divine person – constitutes a kind of 'gateway' to all the other mysteries of God and therefore desires to penetrate it as deeply as possible, which, however, she cannot do (especially during earthly life) because of its immense breadth, depth and complexity, so that she will always have something to discover and admire in Christ. To gaze upon him and to revel in his

'beauty' (or 'glory') forever is her idea of bliss, the foretaste of which she already tastes as she is brought, through her union with the Word (the Bridegroom), into the communion of love between the Father and the Son and participates in the exhalation of the Spirit between them.

John of the Cross consciously bases his description of the life of union on the Fourth Gospel, especially (but not exclusively) on chapters 14–17, in which the evangelist presents a synthesis of Jesus' public ministry in the form of farewell discourses and prayers for the disciples. The influence of the Gospel is evident even where the saint does not explicitly quote it. The thought of the Johannine school is manifested in *The Flame* by the appreciation of the greatness of the gift given to humanity by the Incarnation and by the emphasis on the destination of man, which, according to the kerygma of the Fourth Gospel, is the invitation to eternal life in communion with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

In this article, I have briefly presented some of the findings I have reached. This is not a definitive and complete answer to the question of the role of the mystery of the Incarnation in the teaching of John of the Cross or in his mystical experience; rather, it is a first attempt to explore this aspect of his teaching more closely. The analysis has confirmed the hypothesis that the saint's view of the mystery of the incarnation is rooted in Johannine Christology and plays an important role in his doctrine, but it has left several unanswered questions (including the question of how the central role of the mystery of the incarnation in the life of the Christian is expressed in the commentary on the poem *One Dark Night*) that leave room for further research in this area.

Catholic Theological Faculty
Charles University
Thákurova 3
160 00 Prague 6
Czech Republic
E-mail: mirjam.hlavacova@outlook.cz