



Elements of Apophatic Theology in the Writings of Elizabeth of the Trinity

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Abstract: The article is a theological and spiritual reflection on the spiritual doctrine of the French mystic St. Elizabeth of the Trinity OCD (Élisabeth Catez), who lived from 1880 to 1906. The present study seeks to explain the reason why apart from cataphatic (positive) expressions, characteristic of nuptial Carmelite mysticism, which Elizabeth represents, her writings sometimes contain apophatic (negative) expressions, emphasizing the unknowability of God. The historical and literary, hermeneutical, philological and comparative analyses of her work lead to the following conclusions; as a Carmelite she consciously referred to the teaching of the Areopagite (Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite) and to the later continuator of his thought, Bl. John Ruusbroec (Ruysbroeck); however, to apophatic expressions – e.g. infinite, unchanging, inaccessible, indescribable, immovable, inexhaustible, unknown, invisible, incomprehensible, incomparable, elusive – she gave a nuptial tone, for the sake of emphasizing the beauty and poetic nature of the bridal love of God and man. For this reason, Elizabeth does not represent the apophatic trend, but uses its language to emphasize the beauty of God and the poetic character of his relationship with man.

Keywords: negative theology, apophatic theology, mysticism, Elizabeth, Trinity, Carmelite spirituality

The theological and spiritual writings of Elizabeth of the Trinity OCD (Élisabeth Catez), who lived in France from 1880 to 1906, grew up in Dijon, and was canonized in 2016 by Pope Francis, primarily emphasize the nuptial dimension of man's relationship with God. The author belongs to the Carmelite school of spirituality, and thus she seeks to describe man's spiritual life as a dynamic journey from a spiritual engagement to Jesus Christ to the wedding ceremony in the bosom of the Holy Trinity, which begins – thanks to the grace of faith – already here on earth. At the focal point of her doctrine is a description of the spiritual beauty of the Divine Bridegroom. These descriptions are contrasted with some phrases that seem to be a manifestation of respectful refraining from making statements about God and fear of “locking” him only in strictly defined concepts.

This raises the following question: Was Elizabeth's mysticism influenced in any way by the tradition of apophatic theology (negation – Gr. *apophasis*; *aphairesis*) dating back to the thought of Philo of Alexandria (died after 40 CE) referring to Neoplatonism?¹ If so, one can further ask: Was Elizabeth consciously inclined

¹ De Andia, “Negativa (teologia),” 911; cf. Czupryn, “Neoplatonizm,” 916. In the present study on Elizabeth's writings, the author adopts the interchangeable use of the terms “negative theology” and

towards negative theology? To what extent did she remain independent and original in her spiritual experience?

Despite several theological commentaries on her thought, this topic has not been analyzed in great detail.² For this reason, it seems worth making it the focus of the present article.

The basic source material for learning about Elizabeth's thought are her writings published in the original language – French:³

- *Œuvres complètes* (critical edition of her writings);
- “P 72 ter: Union de l'âme à Notre Seigneur,” 43–44;
- “P 72 bis: Souvenir du 23 novembre 1899,” 41–43.

The extent to which apophatic theology is present in Elizabeth's writings and what function it possibly plays in the mystical descriptions she creates is worth examining in the following three stages, which will correspond to the three paragraphs of this study:

- an attempt to find in the environment shaping Elizabeth's thought those figures who are included in the current of negative theology;
- a hermeneutic analysis of the expressions used by Elizabeth, which have the character of apophatic theology;

“apophaticism” following dictionary interpretations of these expressions (cf. e.g. Zambruno, “Teologia negativa,” 2059–2060; Spiteris, “Apoatismo,” 66). It should be noted, however, that analysts of the thought of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite favor the distinction between these expressions, understanding “negative theology” as making negative statements about God, and “apophaticism” as abstaining from any statements (see Stepień, “Teologia negatywna,” 249–251; on recent studies of the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, see Edwards, “How Negative Is the Theology of Dionysius the Areopagite?,” 601–621; Ramelli, “Apophaticism,” 564–579). It seems that, with this distinction, both “negative theology” and “apophaticism” can be observed in Elizabeth's writings. Since the Carmelite did not rely solely on Areopagite and combined “negative theology” and “apophaticism” in her writings, it seems reasonable in this study not to make the aforementioned distinction.

² The most important theological studies of the life and doctrine of Elizabeth of the Trinity include publications by theologians such as: Hans Urs von Balthasar, Roberto Moretti, Antonio Sicari, Conrad De Meester (included in the Bibliography of this article). Balthasar comes closest to the topic of apophaticism in Elizabeth's doctrine, devoting one chapter to the issue of “Infinity” in his work *Elisabetta della Trinità*. This text, however, is not a systematic analysis of all the expressions belonging to negative theology present in the thought of the Carmelite from Dijon, but focuses mainly on the titular “infinity,” which is understood by Elizabeth as a transcendent reality and an indescribable place, a destination a man seeks to reach; a depth that characterizes the human soul and attracts the depth of God. Balthasar also notices that for the Carmelite, the “infinite liberation” of man means “dying with Christ,” which allows a created person to experience infinite love. The aforementioned text by Balthasar seems to contribute the most to the discussion of the role of apophaticism in Elizabeth's writings.

³ On the other hand, the primary source for learning about Elizabeth's life and the words spoken by her are the documents of the canonization process, as well as the testimonies written down and compiled in a separate collection: Sacra Congregatio pro causis Sanctorum, *Divionen*; Postulazione della Causa, *Elisabetta parla ancora*; *La Servante de Dieu*; Fornara, *Testimoni dai processi di beatificazione*.

- an attempt to resolve whether Elizabeth is a conscious continuator of apophatic thought, and a proposal for a value-based interpretation.

Elements of a general theological method will be helpful in the research, such as: making a hypothesis on the presence of apophatic theology in Elizabeth's writings; historical description; philological analysis taking into account the context; explanatory theological description; creating a general mental sketch of Elizabeth's theology, while emphasizing the meaning of apophatic expressions; presenting a final thesis regarding the issue of the place of apophaticism in the theology of Elizabeth of the Trinity.

1. Elizabeth's Apophatic Inspirations

When analyzing the theological and spiritual thought of Elizabeth of the Trinity, one must be aware that she had no theological education, did not create systematic descriptions and did not use strictly defined methods. Her notes are general sketches, inspired by prayerful study of the Bible, reading the works of mystics and theologians,⁴ careful listening to homilies and conferences, as well as the direct action of God's grace. Sometimes she herself clearly indicated the sources of the quotes, and sometimes the similarity of thoughts was noticed only by careful researchers of her writings. Based on the French edition of her works,⁵ which contains a rich critical apparatus, it is possible to prepare an indicative list of authors cited by Elizabeth.

In order to find possible influences of negative theology on Elizabeth's thought, it is worth arranging this list chronologically⁶ and then finding representatives of apophaticism in it. Then, it will be necessary to focus on the distinctive terms they use for God. It seems that it will also be valuable to present these expressions in a broader context – against the background of the history of apophatic theology. It will then be possible to look for these expressions in Elizabeth's works – which will be done in the next paragraph of this study – and answer the question of how much they are present in her spiritual theology and what function they serve there.

Let us now proceed to make a list of the main writers⁷ quoted by Elizabeth, and select those who emphasized the unknowability of God. Of course, the primary

4 De Meester notes that the Carmelite read the Bible and the works of theologians often in editions other than those we know today; De Meester, "Introduction générale," 80.

5 *Élisabeth de la Trinité, Œuvres*.

6 Taking the authors' death date as the criterion.

7 In the aforementioned critical edition, indexes have been compiled of the more important authors cited by Elizabeth, as well as the names of those mentioned by her; see *Élisabeth de la Trinité, Œuvres*, 1083–1103. De Meester and Balthasar comment on Elizabeth's spiritual inspirations, listing similar individuals (see De Meester, "Introduction générale," 20–21; Balthasar, *Elisabetta della Trinità*, 24).

source for Elizabeth was the Bible, and it was primarily in this realm that she may have first encountered apophaticism.⁸ The Carmelite also drew inspiration outside the *strictly* biblical world; she valued the teaching of figures such as:

- St. Augustine (354–430);
- Areopagite (Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite; lived in the 5th–6th centuries);
- St. Angela of Foligno (1248–1309);
- St. Catherine of Siena (1347–1380);
- Bl. John Ruysbroeck (1293–1381);
- St. Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582);
- St. John of the Cross (1542–1591);
- St. Francis de Sales (1567–1622);
- Henri-Dominique Lacordaire OP (1802–1861);
- Charles-Louis Gay (French bishop and author of books on spirituality; 1815–1892);
- St. Thérèse of Lisieux (1873–1897);
- Irénée Vallée OP (religious name Gonzalve, retreat giver; 1841–1927).

In order to investigate whether Elizabeth may have drawn apophatic content from any of the aforementioned non-Biblical figures, it is worth recalling in very general terms the history of negative theology itself – while looking for connections to the teaching of the Carmelite.

At the origin of systematic reflection on the unknowability of the Divine Essence (*ousia*) stands Philo of Alexandria (born between 30–13 BC, died between AD 42–54), a Jewish philosopher and theologian writing in Greek and popularizing allegorical interpretation of the Bible. Like him, many early Christian writers⁹ were convinced that knowledge of the Divine Essence was beyond the natural cognitive capabilities of man, and that the Divine Essence remained virtually unknown to man. A negative theology based on expressions from the New Testament began to emerge, including the following phrases emphasizing God's transcendence (in Greek with the prefix *a-*):¹⁰

- the invisible one (Gr. *aoratos*; Rom 1:20; Col 1:15; 1 Tim 1:17; Heb 11:27);
- the ineffable one (Gr. *arretos*; 2 Cor 12:4);

⁸ Cf. Spiteris, “Apopatismo,” 65–66. Elizabeth encountered the following apophatic expressions in the Bible: Col 1:15 (“Invisible” – see P 96: “l’Invisible”); 1 Tim 6:16 (“Inaccessible light” – see DR 29: “inaccessible [lumière]”; “Inaccessible” – see P 96: “l’Inaccessible”); 1 John 4:12 (“No one has ever seen [God]” – see DR 2: “Nul n’a vu le [Père]”); Heb 11:27 (“Invisible” – see CF 20; DR 10: “l’Invisible”).

⁹ Such as: St. Justin (c. 100 – c. 165), St. Irenaeus of Lyon (bishop; between 130 and 140 – c. 202), St. Clement of Alexandria (c. 150 – before 215), Origen (c. 185 – 253 or 254), St. John Chrysostom (c. 350–407), St. Maximus the Confessor (c. 580–662), and the Cappadocian Fathers, especially St. Basil of Caesarea (Basil the Great, bishop, 329–379) and St. Gregory of Nyssa (bishop, c. 335–394). See De Andia, “Negativa (teologia),” 911–912.

¹⁰ This theology also found expression in the Eastern liturgy; De Andia, “Negativa (teologia),” 912.

- the unspeakable one (Gr. *anekdiegetos*: 2 Cor 9:15);
- the unfathomable one (Gr. *aneksieraunetos*; Rom 11:33);
- the inaccessible, inscrutable one (Gr. *aprositos*; 1 Tim 6:16);
- the incomprehensible one (Gr. *aperinoetos*; not found in the NT);
- the indescribable one (Gr. *aperigraphos*; not found in the NT);
- the unimaginable one (Gr. *aschematistos*; not found in the NT);
- the imperceptible one (Gr. *atheatos*; not found in the NT);
- the unspeakable, unknown one (Gr. *aphatos*; not found in the NT, a typical Neoplatonic term).

The person who first systematized the relationship between cataphatic and apophatic theology, and thus contributed to the development of mystical theology, was Areopagite (Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite). It is significant that Elizabeth mentions Areopagite by calling him “St. Dionysius” (Fr. *saint Denys*), and quotes his statement that God is “the great solitary” (Fr. *le grande solitaire*).¹¹ It is worth noting that in the collection of the Carmelite library in Dijon, which the Carmelite used, there were probably two publications containing the writings of the Areopagite.¹² Today, however, it is difficult to clearly determine, as Conrad De Meester points out, whether Elizabeth read these works or whether she only knew the Areopagite’s thought from hearsay.¹³ However, it can be assumed that Elizabeth also became familiar with other apophatic terms used by the Areopagite.

And although for Pseudo-Dionysius himself, pure apophaticism actually consisted of refraining from making statements about God, since he is transcendent and superior to any human affirmative or apophatic expressions, the Areopagite taught that such an approach should not imply the destruction of theology and its language. In his opinion, negative theology is still theology, and its function is to defend

¹¹ DR 26. Incidentally, this expression, referring to Neoplatonic thought and emphasizing the transcendence of God and his “solitude” in the ontic dimension, was not incorrect at that time, although we know that God is the Communion of Three Persons and – in the light of contemporary personalistic thought – he is not lonely. It is worth adding that Elizabeth uses the term “The lonely God” (Fr. *le Dieu solitaire*) in P 72 bis, 11.

¹² Namely: *Œuvres de Saint Denys l’Aréopagite* (trans. J. Dulac; Paris: Martin-Baupré 1865, Pp. 672); and *Théologie mystique* (trans. B. Darboy; 1845), a brief treatise quoted in: Chardon, *La Croix de Jésus*, 425–437. Thinking about why these particular books were in the Carmelite library in Dijon, one can assume that the reason was that Madame Acarie (Barbe Avrillot, 1566–1618), who was the wife of Pierre Acarie and gathered the French intelligentsia at the *Hotel Acarie* for salon gatherings, had a major contribution to the creation of the French Carmelite foundation. It was at salon gatherings that the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius were very popular. It was also in that Parisian environment that her cousin, the young Pierre de Bérulle, later a cardinal and promoter of the Carmelite foundation in France, formed his spirituality. It is worth adding that when Madame Acarie became a widow, she joined the Carmelites and took the name Mary of the Incarnation (Pius VI declared her Blessed in 1791); Bruno de Jésus-Marie, *Madame Acarie*, 10; cf. Secondin, *Storia*, 32.

¹³ See Élisabeth de la Trinité, *Œuvres*, 173.

against any conceptual reduction of God and presenting him in an idolatrous manner.¹⁴ It was for this reason that Pseudo-Dionysius did not abandon making statements about God, but sought to use terms that would emphasize his mystery. Hence, the Areopagite was close to terms such as: “silence” (Gr. *sigē*), “rest” (Gr. *hēsychia*), or “darkness” – as a metaphor for the inaccessible light of God. To emphasize God’s transcendence, he often used expressions containing “exaltation” (with the prefix *above-*; Gr. *hyper-*) and apophatic “denial.”¹⁵

Pseudo-Dionysius’ negative theology, which contained traces of Augustinian Neoplatonism, was in a way corrected by St. Thomas Aquinas who stated that God is not *beyond being* but that he *is subsistent Being* (Lat. *ipsum esse subsistens*) that is *unnameable*. Thomas – like the Areopagite – was of the opinion that man actually unites with the Unknown.¹⁶ Perhaps Elizabeth drew apophatic inspiration directly from Aquinas. This is what Conrad De Meester believes¹⁷ but it is rather no more than his intuition, as he does not provide convincing evidence. What is certain is that Elizabeth was familiar with some of the ideas of St. Catherine of Siena,¹⁸ who in turn drew inspiration from the teachings of St. Augustine and St. Thomas, among others. It is worth adding here that Elizabeth herself also directly referred to the thoughts of the Bishop of Hippo on several occasions, but she probably knew them not from personal reading, but from conferences she had heard.¹⁹

References to Thomas Aquinas – continuing negative theology – can be found in, among others, the writings of Meister Eckhart OP (c. 1260 – c. 1328).²⁰ Together with

¹⁴ De Andia, “Negativa (teologia),” 912–913; cf. Hryniewicz, “Apofatyčna teologia,” 745.

¹⁵ The terms thus created served to emphasize the truth that God is above all knowledge and remains completely unknowable: he is above Being, above all essence (Gr. *hyperousios*), above all Good (Gr. *hyperagathos*); above all Divinity (Gr. *hypertheos*); hyper-radiant (Gr. *hyperphaēs*); the unknowable one (Gr. *hyperagnōstos*); the elusive one (Gr. *anaphēs*); the ineffable one (Gr. *aphthēgtos*); De Andia, “Negativa (teologia),” 913.

¹⁶ De Andia, “Negativa (teologia),” 913.

¹⁷ De Meester, “Introduction générale,” 49.

¹⁸ Elizabeth refers to St. Catherine in: GV 7; DR 4. She quotes her words emphasizing the transcendence of God and the contingency of human existence in L 50: “He is «He who is,» and we are «they who are not»” (“Il est «Celui qui est» et nous «celle qui n’est pas»”). See L 62; 73; 115; 129; 131; 160; 171; 199; 231; 239; P 106; NI 12; 15. Elizabeth may have been familiar with Catherine of Siena’s thought from reading the work of Raymond of Capua OP (1330–1399): *Vie de Sainte Catherine de Sienne*, or from the teaching of Irénée Vallée OP, a preacher at the Carmel in Dijon (see Élisabeth de la Trinité, *Œuvres*, 362, 417, 420, 615, 904). She must have heard about Catherine’s well-known work *The Dialogues* – which she mentions in L 199 – but this does not mean that she studied it in its entirety (see Élisabeth de la Trinité, *Œuvres*, 544, 599, 909).

¹⁹ See GV 4; L 206. In L 214, Elizabeth quotes words attributed to St. Augustine, although they are actually the words of Bishop Severus of Milève, who died before 397, a friend of St. Augustine, that were quoted during a retreat conference by Martin Fages OP, a retreat giver whose religious name was Pierre-Henri-Dominique: “[...] love, forgetting its own dignity, yearns to lift and enlarge the beloved being: the measure of love is to love without measure” (see Élisabeth de la Trinité, *Œuvres*, 571). For references to St. Augustine, see also L 224; 236; 264; cf. Élisabeth de la Trinité, *Œuvres*, 135, 417, 485.

²⁰ De Andia, “Negativa (teologia),” 913.

his disciples – John Tauler OP (c. 1300–1361) and Bl. Henry Suzo OP (1295–1366) – he gave rise to Rhineland mysticism (Rhine-Flemish school), developing the apophatic current following the school of Pseudo-Dionysius. The Rhineland mystics, in turn, had a strong influence on the apophatic thought of Bl. John Ruysbroeck (1293–1381), a Dutch theologian and mystic, to whom, in turn, Elizabeth of the Holy Trinity repeatedly referred in her notes.²¹

She explored Ruysbroeck's theology, according to which God's Essence is the fullness of ontic "to be" – of transcendent, absolute, infinite, and dynamic nature. A manifestation of this dynamism is the life of the three Persons of God, and a person can experience this life through faith in Jesus Christ, through knowing his humanity and abiding in the Church, which is his Mystical Body. The "Divinity" itself, however, remains immeasurable, incomprehensible, and inaccessible to man. Therefore, the highest level of knowledge of God is "ignorance" which comprehends nothing but opens to knowledge that surpasses all natural means of attaining it.²²

The apophatic current, with its roots in the thought of the Areopagite (Pseudo-Dionysius), was enriched by the Carmelite experience of the "dark night"²³ developed until the 17th century thanks to the works of Cardinal Pierre de Bérulle (1575–1629), an oratorian and mystic, founder of the French school of spirituality, a great promoter of the establishment of Carmelite Monasteries in France according to the Teresian reform, fascinated by the works of, among others, Pseudo-Dionysius, St. Augustine and Bl. John Ruysbroeck. Negative theology seems to have faded into the background over time, and the interest in it – in the 20th century, thanks to works written by Anselm Stoltz OSB (1900–1942) and Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky (1945–1953).²⁴

When summing up all that has been said about the possible sources of Elizabeth's apophatic inspiration, the following conclusions can be drawn:

²¹ Elizabeth was familiar with an anthology of Ruysbroeck's writings from their French translation: *Rusbrock l'admirable*. She makes a mention – not a direct one – of reading this book in L 300. The translator, Ernest Hello, relied on a Latin edition edited by Surius (†1578), who, in turn, did not always rely on Ruysbroeck's original texts but sometimes also on those of one of his disciples, i.e. Godfried van Wevel (1320–1396). See Élisabeth de la Trinité, *Œuvres*, 81, 93–94, 96–97, 707. References to Ruysbroeck's thought can be found in Elizabeth's works, for example, in: CF 1; 4; 7–8; 10–14; 17–18; 21–24; 32; 35–37; 40; 43; GV 2; 5; 8; DR 1; 3–5; 7; 10–11; 21; 25; 28; L 288; 307; NI 17.

²² Misiurek, "Jan Ruysbroeck," 820–821.

²³ One can see a clear influence of Pseudo-Dionysius on Carmelite mysticism, especially on St. John of the Cross, who called the path to full union of man with God "night" (see, for example, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, I,2,1); see Zambruno, "Teologia negativa," 2065–2066. Far fewer traces of apophaticism can be found in St. Teresa of Avila, and they are less discernible, for example, in her poetic works, as well as in her work, *The Interior Castle* (especially the so-called *sixth mansions*). Of significance is that it is these very Carmelite mystics that Elizabeth was reading; see the tables of citations for each of their works in Élisabeth de la Trinité, *Œuvres*, 1083–1087.

²⁴ The publications that are referred to are: Stolz, *Théologie de la mystique*; Lossky, *Théologie mystique de l'Église d'Orient*; see De Andia, "Negativa (teologia)," 914; Hryniewicz, "Apofatyczna teologia," 746; Secondin, *Storia*, 32; Deville, *L'École*, 32; cf. Misiurek, "Francuska duchowość," 292.

- the primary source that spoke of God’s transcendence for her was the Bible (with the writings of Paul that were of particular importance in this regard);²⁵
- authors who identified themselves with negative theology and had a strong influence on the Carmelite in this aspect are Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, Ruysbroeck, and John of the Cross (especially the last two);
- she also came across negative theology in the Carmelite school of spirituality;
- she made her apophatic thought more profound with the French school of spirituality;²⁶
- In the two previous areas, an important role, albeit a “hidden” one, was played by Cardinal Pierre de Bérulle²⁷ who “brought” Teresian Carmel to France, contributed to the revival of the intellectual and religious life of the French Church, through the interest of the faithful in mysticism – including apophatic mysticism.

Having given some consideration to historical and formal aspects, it seems appropriate at this point to move on to a philological and theological-critical study of Elizabeth’s writings. What will be needed now is to find, categorize, and semantically analyze apophatic expressions. The purpose here will be to read the motives behind Elizabeth’s use of certain phrases, therefore both the text and the context of her writings will be taken into account. All this with the intention of trying to answer the question about the place of negative theology in the mysticism of the Carmelite nun of Dijon, the originality of her thought, its great significance, and timeliness in the next part of this study.

2. Apophatic Expressions in Elizabeth’s Thought

A close reading of Elizabeth’s writings mentioned in the introduction to this paper gives grounds to conclude that, indeed, they included terms related to apophaticism, and that they can be divided into the following two groups:

- strictly apophatic formulations – emphasizing the transcendence of God and encouraging to suspend judgments about him; these are: invisible (Fr. *invisible*); inaccessible (Fr. *inaccessible*), incomprehensible (Fr. *incompréhensible*), unimaginable (Fr. *insondable*), indescribable (Fr. *ineffable*), ineffable (Fr. *inénnarrable* – about the mystery of Christ); elusive (Fr. *insaisissable* – though not directly about God, but about his mysteries); unknown (Fr. *inconnu* – about the mysteries

²⁵ See “Table des références bibliques,” *Œuvres*, 1074–1082.

²⁶ Reflected in the collection of books in the Carmel of Dijon, as well as in the teaching of retreat givers and preachers.

²⁷ Elizabeth does not mention him even once in her writings.

- of God); incomparable (Fr. *incomparable* – in relation to the relationship with God);
- expressions related to apophatic thought – comparisons, and metaphors that emphasize the mystery of God; these include: nothingness (Fr. *néant* – in reference to man); nothing (Lat. *nescivi*); night (Fr. *nuit*); darkness (Fr. *ténèbre*); shadow (Fr. *ombre*); hidden (Fr. *caché*); hide oneself (Fr. *se cacher*); helpless (Fr. *impuisant* – about human capabilities).²⁸

At the beginning of the hermeneutical analysis, the first group – formulations closely related to apophaticism – shall be discussed. Following the tradition, Elizabeth uses the word “invisible” (Fr. *invisible*), both in the adjectival form and as a noun. The adjectival form refers in her writings to God, the supernatural world, and to the mystery of the communion of saints. Thus, “invisible” to mortal people is: God, the “bosom of the Father,” the Divine Essence, God’s mysteries;²⁹ the eternal world and imperishable things;³⁰ people who – like angels – from heaven help those on earth.³¹ Elizabeth’s use of the noun form emphasizes that “the Invisible One” is God’s own name, and that God revealing himself to Moses in the Old Testament crosses the line of “being invisible” in the mystery of the Incarnation.³²

The next apophatic term is “inaccessible” (Fr. *inaccessible*). It is noticeable that the Carmelite uses it in a similar way. She uses it to refer to God’s Essence,³³ to the light in which God hides himself,³⁴ and also uses it as God’s own name.³⁵ What needs to be noted here is that Elizabeth does not mean that God is distant, but that man cannot grasp him with intellect.³⁶

The same pattern – the use of the word as an adjective and as a noun – can also be seen in the case of the word “incomprehensible” (Fr. *incompréhensible*).

²⁸ Other words could also be included in this group, such as “mystery” (Fr. *mystère*; see e.g., NI 15, where the word serves as God’s Name).

²⁹ See CF 1 (“c’est le sein du Père, ou l’Essence divine, invisible à tout regard mortel”); P 32, 3 (“Aux pieds des saints autels/ Du Dieu invisible aux mortels”); P 103, 2 (“Du mystère invisible/ Tout sera dévoilé”).

³⁰ See L 142, 1 (“tout ce monde invisible, aux lumières de la foi, se rapproche tant de nous”); L 238, 1 (“ceux qui [...] «n’ont pas recherché le choses visible, car elles sont passagères, mais les invisibles qui sont éternelles»”); L 268, 1 (“ils m’ont encore rapprochée de Dieu, du monde invisibles”); L 278, 2 (“les âmes qui [...] n’ont pas recherché les choses visibles parce qu’elles sont passagères, mais les invisibles parce qu’elle demeurent éternellement”); cf. L 331, 1.

³¹ Cf. L 293, 1 (“être votre Ange invisible”); L 340, 2 (“près de Lui, elle doit être l’Ange invisible”).

³² See DR 10 (“Il est dit de Moïse qu’il était «inébranlable dans la foi comme s’il avait vu l’Invisible» [...] «inébranlable dans la foi comme s’il avait vu l’Invisible”); P 96, 3 (“Sous les traits d’un petit enfant/ On peut contempler l’Invisible”); CF 20 (“Il était inébranlable dans la foi comme s’il avait vu l’Invisible”).

³³ See CF 1 (“c’est le sein du Père, ou Essence divine [...] inaccessible à toute intelligence humaine”).

³⁴ See DR 29 (“Il restait caché en son inaccessible [lumière]”).

³⁵ See P 96, 3 (“Le Dieu caché, l’Inaccessible/ Pour nous se fait petit enfant”).

³⁶ Cf. CF 1.

The Carmelite expresses the truth that the Essence of God,³⁷ the life of the Trinity,³⁸ the life in heaven is “incomprehensible” to man,³⁹ and the “incomprehensible” God transcends human cognition in the mystery of the coming of the Son of God into the world.⁴⁰

And again, similarly for the word “unfathomable” (Fr. *insondable*). The mystery of the supernatural life of man in relationship with the Divine Essence is “unfathomable,”⁴¹ and the “Unfathomable One” comes into the world,⁴² and becomes present in man, making his dwelling in man.⁴³ In this way, man can repose in God, in the “Unfathomable Abyss,” which is the beginning of heavenly life – already here on earth.⁴⁴

The way in which these four words are used – “invisible” (Fr. *invisible*), “inaccessible” (Fr. *inaccessible*), “incomprehensible” (*incompréhensible*) i “unfathomable” (Fr. *insondable*) – are used, indicates a fairly precise intention. These terms are for Elizabeth:

- an emphasis on the mystery of the supernatural world;
- God’s own names;
- a demonstration of the uniqueness of the penetration of transcendence into the created world, which was accomplished through the mystery of the Incarnation.

It is clear here that in the Carmelite’s work, the “invisibility” and “inaccessibility” of God are juxtaposed with the coming of the Divine Bridegroom to the earthly world. Elizabeth, therefore, does not reject apophatic notions, but “incorporates” them into the Mystery of God’s Incarnation. A distant analogy can be recognized here: just as the transcendent God enters everyday life, in the same way, the words indicating his transcendence also describe his unique coming into the world in Bethlehem and his constant coming into the world in the Church.

Continuing the analysis of the first group of words – directly related to apophaticism – one also encounters terms that Elizabeth uses only in the adjective form. She uses them to express the uniqueness of God’s mysteries, as well as to describe the depth of her own feelings: admiration, respect, and adoration. For Elizabeth,

³⁷ See L 274, 3 (“vous faire pénétrer les profondeurs insondables de l’Etre Divin”).

³⁸ See DR 44 (“l’insondable Trinité”); L 332 (“le simple regard sur Lui nous sépare de tout et nous fixe en l’insondable profondeur du mystère des Trois”).

³⁹ See P 96, 3 (“O mystère incompréhensible”).

⁴⁰ See P 103, 2 (“Et l’Incompréhensible/ Nous sera révélé”).

⁴¹ See P 80, 1 (“Etre Infini, Profondeur insondable/ Nous communions à ta Divinité”).

⁴² See P 91, 3 (“O profondeur, insondable mystère”); P 91, 5 (“O profondeur, insondable mystère”); P 91, 7 (“O profondeur, insondable mystère”); P 91, 9 (“O profondeur, insondable mystère”).

⁴³ See P 88, 4 (“Tu pénétras l’Etre Insondable,/ Portant en toi «le don de Dieu»”); P 109, 1 (“Cet abîme insondable et ce profond mystère”).

⁴⁴ See DR 7 (“ce repos en Dieu, Abîme insondable, prélude et écho de ce sabat éternel”).

the mystery of human death,⁴⁵ life, and happiness⁴⁶ is something elusive (Fr. *insaisissable*). She writes about the “unknown” (Fr. *inconnu*) joys⁴⁷ and realms⁴⁸ towards which the Bridegroom – Jesus Christ – leads. She draws attention to the ineffable (Fr. *inénnarrable*) mysteries of God’s work that Mary made the subject of her reflections,⁴⁹ which led her to the fulfillment of God’s indescribable (Fr. *ineffable*) plan in her life.⁵⁰ Elizabeth uses the word “indescribable” (Fr. *ineffable*) to describe the beauty of the Bridegroom,⁵¹ his love,⁵² God’s “kisses,”⁵³ God’s mystery,⁵⁴ as well as ecstasy,⁵⁵ graces received,⁵⁶ happiness,⁵⁷ joy,⁵⁸ tenderness,⁵⁹ desires,⁶⁰ plans,⁶¹ and peace⁶² – with which God bestows and fills the man’s heart. Elizabeth calls the happiness towards which man moves incomparable (Fr. *incomparable*).⁶³

The second group of terms associated with apophaticism are expressions involving images, comparisons and metaphors. They do not belong to negative theology in a strict sense but are its *sui generis* echoes. In order to emphasize the transcendence of God, Elizabeth chooses to refer to man by the word “nothingness” (Fr. *néant*).⁶⁴

⁴⁵ See L 238, 1 (“Quel mystère insaisissable que la mort”).

⁴⁶ See J 25 (“c’est un ombre, une chose insaisissable [...] l’espoir d’un bonheur toujours attendu et insaisissable”).

⁴⁷ See LA 7 (“C’est «moi» qui viens, et je t’apporte la joie inconnue”); L 323, 1 (“sur ma croix où je goûte de joies inconnues”); L 324, 1 (“j’expérimente des joies inconnues”); L 328bis, 1 (“sur ma croix où je goûte de joies inconnues”); L 340, 1 (“des mois de bénédictions, de joie profonde, inconnue du monde”).

⁴⁸ See P 66, 19 (“De me transporter en des régions inconnues”).

⁴⁹ See DR 2 (“Elle, c’est l’inénarrable, [c’est] le «secret qu’elle gardait et repassait en son cœur”); cf. Luke 2:19).

⁵⁰ See CF 40 (“Jamais la vision ineffable qu’elle contemplait en elle-même ne diminua sa charité estérieure”).

⁵¹ See L 271, 1 (“aller voir Celui que j’aime en son ineffable beauté”); P 104, v.6 (“[...] je quitterai la terre/ Pour aller contempler l’ineffable Beauté”).

⁵² See P 90, 4 (“Jésus, le Prince de la Paix,/ Lui dont l’amour est ineffable”).

⁵³ See P 85, 3 (“Il vient Lui-même au-devant de ses vierges/ Pour leur donner l’ineffable baiser”).

⁵⁴ See P 121, 3 (“Un secret tout amour, un secret ineffable”).

⁵⁵ See L 194, 1 (“L’Amour fait sortir de soi celui qui aime pour le transporter par une ineffable extase dans le sein de l’Objet aimé”). It should be noted that Elizabeth does not talk about mystical phenomena related to ecstasy, but about the very essence of mystical ecstasy; see Gogola, “Trójca Święta,” 138.

⁵⁶ See L 284, 3 (“l’enrichir de grâces ineffables”).

⁵⁷ See L 187, 1 (“je Lui dis avec un ineffable bonheur: «Vous êtes mon Tout»); L 324, 2 (“quel bonheur ineffable goûte mon âme en pensant que le Père m’a prédestinée pour être conforme à son Fils crucifié”); P 105, v.19 (“Et là je pus surprendre, ô bonheur ineffable,/ Les projets d’union formés par le Seigneur”); P 55, v.25 (“Et je suis incapable de dire/ Le divin, l’ineffable bonheur/ Dont Jésus inonde mon cœur”).

⁵⁸ See L 270, 1 (“cela m’est une joie ineffable”).

⁵⁹ See P 93, 1 (“Je viens le révéler l’ineffable tendresse/ Qui plane sur ton âme et la nuit et le jour”).

⁶⁰ See P 107, t (“L’ineffable désir d’un cœur reconnaissant”).

⁶¹ See P 100, 2 (“Je formais avec toi des projets ineffable”); P 115, 3 (“Voici que seon cœur forme un projet ineffable”).

⁶² See L 171, 3 (“dans l’âme règne une ineffable paix”); P 79, 1 (“Dans un profond silence, une ineffable paix”); P 88, 4 (“Ensevelie en l’adoration/ En une paix tout ineffable”).

⁶³ See P 39, 1 (“A peine déjà je vous possède/ Qu’à cet incomparable bonheur/ La pour de vous perdre succède”).

⁶⁴ See CF 4 (“que l’abîme de notre néant, de notre misère”); CF 12 (“je vois mon néant, ma misère, mon impuissance”); CF 22 (“au commencement était le néant [...] Le type de toutes les créatures, qui n’étaient

It should be noted here from the outset that in pure negative theology the term “nothing” defines the possibility of describing God, that is, it practically denies the possibility of describing him by any term. Elizabeth – perhaps inspired by the thought of the Areopagite or Catherine of Siena – uses the term “nothingness” as a metaphor and symbol – the existential fragility of man, the contingency of being, and man’s moral weakness – to emphasize the greatness and transcendence of God. The Carmelite seeks to emphasize that the “nothingness” represented by man can be infused by God with God’s Being, his merciful love. According to Elizabeth, without the help of God, human words, language, and even prayer are helpless (Fr. *impuissant*),⁶⁵ and man knows nothing (Lat. *nescivi*).⁶⁶ This is because God is concealed (Fr. *caché*)⁶⁷ – he can hide himself (Fr. *se cacher*),⁶⁸ but from this concealment in transcendence, by becoming a Child, he takes the initiative to encounter man.⁶⁹ God approaches and meets man, but this encounter takes place here on earth – according to Elizabeth, who is a true disciple of the school of John of the Cross in this respect – still in the midst of the mysterious night (Fr. *nuit*),⁷⁰ darkness (Fr. *ténèbre*)⁷¹ and shadow

pas encore sorties du néant”); GV 5 (“l’abîme de l’immensité de Dieu se trouve en tête à tête avec l’abîme du néant de la créature, et Dieu étroit ce néant”); DR 21 (“se plonger dans l’abîme de son néant”); L 252, 1 (“par nous-mêmes nous ne sommes que néant et péché”); L 273, 3 (“que la terre et les choses d’ici-bas sont néant au regard de l’éternité”); L 340, 2 (“le néant de ce qui passe sans être fait pour Dieu”); J 97 (“reconnaître sa faiblesse et son néant”); P 118, 7 (“Oh, précipitons-nous au fond du «double abîme»: «L’immensité de Dieu, notre propre néant»”).

65 See L 154, 1 (“le langage de la terre est impuissant”); L 163, 1 (“Devant de telles épreuves le langage humain se sent bien banal et bien impuissant”); L 201, 1 (“La parole humaine se sent bien impuissante”); L 241, 1 (“ma prière est bien impuissante”).

66 See DR 1 (“«Nescivi.» Je n’ai plus rien su [...] «Nescivi!» Je ne sais plus rien”); DR 4 (“encore ce petit mot: «Nescivi» [...] On pouvait faire du bruit, s’agiter autour d’elle: «Nescivi!» On pouvait l’accuser: «Nescivi!»); DR 5 (“on peut atteindre son point d’honneur: «Nescivi!» Dieu peut se cacher, lui retirer sa grâce sensible: «Nescivi!»).

67 See DR 29 (“Il restait caché”); P 96, 3 (“Le Dieu caché”).

68 See DR 5 (“Dieu peut se cacher, lui retirer sa grâce sensible: «Nescivi!»”).

69 See P 96, 3 (“Le Dieu caché, l’Inaccessible/ Pour nous se fait petit enfant”).

70 See NI 15 (“Puis, à travers toutes les nuits, tous les vides, toutes les impuissances, je veux vous fixer toujours et demeurer sous votre grande lumière”); P 95 (“Lorsque tu ne vois plus briller sa douce flamme/ Et que la nuit profonde environne ton âme”); L 239 (“[...] puisque nous le [Christ] possédons en nous, qu’importent les nuits qui peuvent obscurcir notre ciel: si Jésus semble dormir, oh reposons-nous aussi près de Lui; soyons bien calmes et silencieuses; ne le réveillons pas mais attendons dans la foi”); L 273 (“Pense que ton âme est le temple de Dieu [...] à tout instant du jour et de la nuit les trois Personnes divines demeurent en toi”); L 329 (“[...] chaque nuit, tandis que vous reposez, nous [Dieu en lequel Élisabeth se sait assumée] irons vous visiter avec la Plénitude d’amour!”); L 332 (“Déjà dans la nuit de la foi, les unions sont si profondes, les étreintes si divines!”); DR 10 (“la ténèbre sacrée» en faisant la nuit et le vide dans toutes mes puissances”); cf. Elisabeth’s words: “J’ai tellement souffert cette nuit que j’étais tentée de me jeter par la fenêtre; mais je me suis dit: ce n’est pas ainsi qu’une Carmélite doit souffrir” (Postulazione della Causa, *Elisabetta parla ancora*, 157).

71 See DR 10, 1 (“Il se «cache dans les ténèbres» puis semble d’autre part se contredire en disant que «la lumière l’environne comme d’un vêtement». [...] c’est que je dois me plonger dans la «ténèbre sacrée»”); cf. Ps 18 (17):12; Ps 104 (103):2); L 165 and L 193: (“La foi, c’est le face à face dans les ténèbres”; cf. 1 Cor 13:12–13); J 29 („[...] cette parole divine [...] est la lumière qui doit nous éclairer dans les ténèbres d’ici-bas”).

(Fr. *ombre*).⁷² “Nights” and “darkness” are symbols of purification, test, and mysterious immersion into the depths of God’s mysteries. “Shadow,” on the other hand – in the natural world arising because the source of light is obscured – serves Elizabeth as a symbol of the acts of the Holy Spirit, shielding man and empowering him to receive the creative act of God, full of divine light, which for man living here on earth may appear as still too strong, but in reality is a manifestation of God’s love – conforming him to Jesus Christ and empowering man so that, without ceasing to be human, he can participate in the Mystery of the Communion of the Divine Persons.

Having outlined the distinctive features of the two groups of terms used by Elizabeth, either directly or indirectly related to apophaticism, it is also worth noting formulations that constitute a certain link between her apophatic and cataphatic theology.

In terms of vocabulary, they contain negations but they cannot be considered apophatic. This is because they are not a refusal to make statements about God, but, on the contrary, they represent his attributes. It seems pertinent to mention them here, as they provide further background to Elizabeth’s apophatic formulations, and thus serve in understanding how the Carmelite used negative theology. These are the following terms: inexhaustible (Fr. *intarissable*, *inépuisable*); infinite (Fr. *infini*); unchangeable (Fr. *immuable*); unchangeability (Fr. *immutabilité*); uncreated (Fr. *incrée*); independent (Fr. *indépendant*). Elizabeth referred these terms both to God and to the entire supernatural world, as well as to the gifts the Creator gives to humans.

Drawing on philosophical terminology, she refers to God as “uncreated Being” (Fr. *l’Être incréé*)⁷³ and also uses the word “infinite” (Fr. *infini*). The proper name of

⁷² See NI 15 (“[...] ô Père, penchez-vous vers votre pauvre petite créature, «couvrez-la de votre ombre», ne voyez en elle que le «Bien-Aimé en lequel vous avez mis toutes vos complaisances»”); DR 1 (“Nul n’a pénétré le mystère du Christ en sa profondeur, si ce n’est la Vierge. [...] tous les saints restent dans l’ombre quand on regarde aux clartés de la Vierge!...”); L 246 (“[...] je m’unirai à l’âme de la Vierge alors que le Père la couvrirait de son ombre, tandis que le Verbe s’incarnait en elle, et que l’Esprit Saint survenait pour opérer le grand mystère. C’est toute la Trinité qui est en action, qui se livre, qui se donne [...]”); L 269 (“Vis au-dedans avec Eux dans le ciel de ton âme; le Père te couvrira de son ombre, mettant comme une nuée entre toi et les choses de la terre pour te garder toute sienne”; cf. Matt 17:5 and Luke 1:35); L 278 (“[...] je ne parle pas de la vie religieuse, qui est la grande séparations avec le monde, mais de la dégagement, de cette pureté qui met comme un voile sur tout ce qui n’est pas Dieu et qui nous permet d’adhérer sans cesse à Lui par la foi. Que le Père vous couvre de son ombre et que cette ombre soit comme une nuée qui vous enveloppe et vous sépare; que le Verbe imprime en vous sa beauté, pour se contempler en votre âme comme en un autre Lui-même; que l’Esprit Saint qui est l’Amour fasse de votre cœur un petit foyer qui réjouisse les Trois Personnes divines par l’ardeur de ses flammes [...]”); P 79 (“Elle [Marie, Vierge fidèle] attire le Ciel, et voici que le Père/ va lui livrer son Verbe, pour en être la Mère!/ Alors l’Esprit d’amour de son ombre la couvre”; cf. Luke 1:35); P 85 (“Il plane ici, son ombre nous protège/ Regardons-Le pour nous virginiser”).

⁷³ See P 91, 3 (“l’Être incréé s’oriente sur moi”).

God, of the whole Trinity, is “Infinite,”⁷⁴ for it is he himself who is “infinite”: Being,⁷⁵ Holiness,⁷⁶ Love,⁷⁷ Mercy,⁷⁸ Solitude.⁷⁹ With that said – as previously mentioned – referring to God as “Solitude” in Elizabeth’s time was not a fallacy, it referred to Neoplatonic thought, and analyzing her texts one can come to the conclusion that she understood this concept not so much in metaphysical terms, emphasizing the nature of the Divine, but in a nuptial and moral perspective – as the Bridegroom who wishes to invite his bride to meet him in seclusion.

Elizabeth sees the uniqueness of the dynamics of love between God and people. There is an “infinite” desire hidden in the human heart, which becomes a thirst for the “infinite,” equivalent to the hunger to meet God,⁸⁰ to draw from the “inexhaustible” (Fr. *intarissable*,⁸¹ *inépuisable*⁸²) source, namely the Heart of Jesus.

According to Elizabeth, “infinite” (Fr. *infini*) is God’s: holiness,⁸³ sweetness,⁸⁴ peace,⁸⁵ riches,⁸⁶ Majesty,⁸⁷ Mystery,⁸⁸ tenderness of the fatherly hand that allows the participation in the sufferings that are the guarantee of his love.⁸⁹ “Infinite” are also the depths of God⁹⁰ and the realms of encounter with him.⁹¹ “Infinite” is God’s love,⁹² and human love can also be such – evolving to the point of identifying in one

74 Elizabeth uses the word “infinite” as God’s own name: DR 40 (“sans doute à la distance qu’il y a de l’Infini au fini”); cf. L 158, 1 (“n’est-Il pas cet infini dont nos âmes ont si soif”); L 185, 1 (“cette Trinité qui dès ici-bas est notre cloître. Notre demeure, l’Infini”); L 109, 2 (“C’est l’Infini”); por. L 87, 2; L 90, 1; L 115, 2; L 117, 1; L 121, 1; L 124, 1; L 129, 3; L 156, 2; L 182, 2; L 197bis, 1; L 202, 1; L 203; P 79, 2; P 85, 6.

75 See P 80, 1 (“Etre Infini. Profondeur insondable”); P 91, 7 (“L’Etre infini s’ensevelit en moi”); cf. L 133, 1.

76 See NI 16, 3 (“autant de louanges, d’adorations et d’hommages envers sa Sainteté infinie”).

77 See CF 20 (“pour aller se reposer au sein de l’Amour infini”); CF 44 (“là nous charterons au sein de l’Amour infini”); cf. L 172, 1; L 184, 1; L 212, 1; L 268, 1; L 298, 1; NI 17; P 90, 4.

78 See J 33 (“la Miséricorde infinie”).

79 See NI 15, 4 (“O mes Trois, mon Tout, Ma Béatitude, Solitude infinie”); DR 27 (“Il [Le Créateur] la fait passer en cette solitude immense, infinie, en ce «lieu spacieux» chanté par le prophète qui n’est autre que Lui-même”).

80 See L 49, 1 (“cet soif infinie de Lui”); cf. L 169, 1 (“Il a mis en mon cœur une soif d’infini”); L 139, 1; L 107, 1.

81 See P 57, 1 (“Ce Cœur fontaine intarissable”).

82 See P 57, 1 (“Ce Cœur source inépuisable”).

83 See L 224, 1 (“quelle assurance cela nous donnerait pour paraître un lour devant sa sainteté infinie”).

84 See CF 17 (“Les délices qu’il apporte sont infinies, puisqu’elles sont Lui-même”).

85 See P 109, 4 (“Je puisse à travers tout demeurer comme au Ciel «En ta dilection» et ta paix infinie”).

86 See L 284, 5 (“afin de la combler de ses richesses infinies”).

87 See DR 43 (“en face de cet Amour tout-puissant, de cette Majesté infinie”).

88 See L 313, 1 (“une main d’une tendresse infinie”).

89 See L 332 (“je vais m’écouler dans l’infini du Mystère”).

90 See L 132 (“la Beauté radieuse qui [...] dès ici-bas veut nous emporter toujours plus loin dans les profondeurs infinies”).

91 See L 49, 1 (“[...] dans le régions infinies où il n’y a plus que Lui”); L 54, 1 (“dans les régions infinies où l’«Un» avec Lui se consomme”); cf. L 61, 2; L 278, 2.

92 See L 149, 1; L 150, 1; L 191, 2.

ecstasy with God's love.⁹³ God opens "infinite" horizons⁹⁴ for man and bestows "infinite" happiness⁹⁵ and sweetness.⁹⁶ He deposits in man's inner self an ever-increasing capacity to receive him, in a sense as "infinite" as he himself.⁹⁷

Elizabeth, using words that could appear artificial and overly high-flown in descriptions of the bridal relationship between God and man, "warms them up" by adding a new context. She calls the Trinity, God himself "Unchangeable" (Fr. *Immuable*),⁹⁸ but at the same time calls him Unchangeable: Beauty,⁹⁹ Love,¹⁰⁰ and Goodness.¹⁰¹ She writes that "unchanging" are his plans,¹⁰² will, and desires with regard to human souls,¹⁰³ as well as his love.¹⁰⁴ He is the one who gives "unchangeable" peace,¹⁰⁵ and tenderness,¹⁰⁶ and is himself an "unchangeable" abode¹⁰⁷ for man. Quoting Ruysbroeck, the Carmelite also adds that in eternal life, beyond reason, people will find deep peace in the divine "unchangeability" (Fr. *immutabilité*).¹⁰⁸

Elizabeth perceives the merging of the invisible world, whose mystery one can attempt to convey in apophatic language, with the visible world, which in turn can be described in cataphatic terms. This union was achieved as the unrepeatable event of the Incarnation but it also extends over time. Elizabeth notes – based on Ruysbroeck's theology – that Jesus Christ continually comes to the world and does so always as if it were his first coming, as if he had not come before, since as God he exists in the "eternal now" and thus remains "independent" (Fr. *indépendant*)¹⁰⁹ of time.

⁹³ See L 192, 1 ("l'amour, cela est quelque chose d'infini et en l'infini on peut toujours aller plus loin"); cf. L 192, 3; L 192, 1; NI 13, 9 ("la même extase d'infini amour").

⁹⁴ See L 209, 1 ("elle voit se dérouler des horizons infinis").

⁹⁵ See L 236, 1 ("mon bonheur grandit toujours, il prend des proportions infinies").

⁹⁶ See J 105 ("dans mes larmes je sens un calme, une douceur infinis"); J 111 ("elle sent une douceur infinie dans ce sacrifice").

⁹⁷ See L 249, 1 ("Il creuse en votre âme des capacités plus grandes pour le recevoir, c'est-à-dire en quelque sorte infinies come Lui-même"); cf. L 305, 4 ("le souhaits de mon cœur sont infinis comme Lui-même").

⁹⁸ See DR 5 ("l'âme ainsi simplifiée, unifiée, devient le trône de l'Immuable"); cf. DR 28; L 70, 2; L 73, 1; L 109, 1; L 132; L 249, 3; L 298, 1; NI 15, 1; P 74, 10 ("Et contemplerons des clartés/ De l'immuable Trinité"); P 80, 1 ("O Trinité, ô Dieu, notre Immuable"); P 82, 2; P 90, 4; P 115, 3; cf. DR 44 ("C'est encore sans sortir de là qu'elle vivra, à l'image de la Trinité immuable").

⁹⁹ See L 121, 1 ("toujours sous le regard de l'Immuable Beauté"); cf. P 84, 1; P 85, 2.

¹⁰⁰ See L 212, 1 ("elle a vu l'Immuable Beuté").

¹⁰¹ See L 210, 1 ("deux petit sœurs qu habitent l'Amour Immuable").

¹⁰² See DR 6 ("Si je rapproche ces deux exposés du plan divin et éternellement immuable").

¹⁰³ See CF 41 ("Comment réaliser ce grand rêve du Cœur de notre Dieu, ce vouloir immuable sur nos âmes"); cf. L 234, 1.

¹⁰⁴ See LA 5 ("aimée d'un amour immuable et créateur").

¹⁰⁵ See DR 21 ("la paix véritable, immuable et parfaite que rien ne trouble").

¹⁰⁶ See P 106, v.3 ("Je viens te révéler l'immuable tendresse").

¹⁰⁷ See L 208, 2 ("C'est là, en cette demeure immuable, que j'aime vous retrouver"); L 261, 1 ("que le Dieu teut Amour soit votre demeure immuable"); cf. L 274, 3.

¹⁰⁸ See CF 14 ("C'est là qu'au-dessus de la raison nous attend la tranquillité profonde de la divine immutabilité").

¹⁰⁹ See CF 17 ("son arrivée, indépendante du temps, consiste dans un éternel «maintenant»").

Having completed another part of the analysis, it is worth reiterating that the apophatic tradition is present in Elizabeth's writings in three ways:

- in expressions strictly belonging to negative theology;
- in symbols illustrating human inability to know God;
- in affirmative formulations – emphasizing God's transcendence.

Therefore, it seems reasonable to pose the question – “What function does this tradition serve?” And since, as already pointed out, apophaticism in Elizabeth's writings is “enveloped” with nuptial cataphatic expressions, further questions may be added: What is the purpose of placing apophaticism at the very center of the description of the spousal relationship between God and man? And can such apophaticism still be called apophaticism?

3. The Function of Apophaticism in the Nuptial Mysticism of Elizabeth

In an effort to resolve the issue of the significance of negative theology in the Carmelite's mystical reflections, it must be stated, first of all, that apophaticism is not a focal point in her work, nor is it a dominant feature in her writings. Elizabeth's primary focus is on getting to know Jesus Christ in a spousal bond, which leads her to a broad perspective on various theological concepts, such as Christ's pre-existence; the redemptive dimension of his death on the cross; Christ's and the Entire Trinity indwelling in a man; Jesus' presence in the Eucharist; Christ as the way toward the union with the Triune God; God's election of each person in Jesus Christ; the Christian as Christ's “sacrament” and his “additional humanity” (*Fr. humanité de surcroît*).¹¹⁰ So, does apophaticism appear in Elizabeth's works only occasionally representing some kind of dissonance? The way to find the answer is the truth that love involves mystery. Therefore, let us focus on how Elizabeth understood spousal love for Christ.

As Elizabeth put it in a questionnaire completed when she entered the convent in early August 1901 – at the center of her experience of relationship with God was

¹¹⁰ See L 256 (“Quelle est sublime, la mission de la carmélite; elle doit être médiatrice avec Jésus-Christ, Lui être comme une humanité de surcroît en laquelle Il puisse perpétuer sa vie de réparations, de sacrifices, de louanges et d'adorations”); L 309 (“Il [l'Époux] veut que je sois une humanité de surcroît en laquelle Il puisse encore souffrir pour la gloire de son Père, pour aider aux besoins de son Église”; cf. Col 1:24); NI 15 (“que je Lui sois une humanité de surcroît en laquelle Il renouvelle tout son Mystère”). For more on Elizabeth's thoughts on the Christian understood as Christ's “additional humanity” see Martínez-Blat, *Doctrina*, 175–179; Miczyński, “Chrześcijanin,” 131–137. The development by the Carmelite of that idea, closely linked to the truth about God's indwelling in the justified man, is an argument for Joanne Mosley (*Elizabeth*, 474–475) to call Elizabeth a “doctor.”

getting to know the “soul of Jesus Christ.”¹¹¹ In French spirituality of the 19th century, devotion to the “soul of Christ” meant learning about the richness of the interior of his person – including the world of feelings, will, desires – but also the mystery of God. At the same time, the adoration of the Incarnate Son was – through the work of the Holy Spirit – a transformative force for the believers. Therefore, Elizabeth wrote in one of her letters: “[...] my Bridegroom [Christ] is so beautiful, by loving [Him] I am transformed into Him.”¹¹² Obviously, it must be added that the Carmelite did not mean any empirical, emotional or sensual experience,¹¹³ nor did she mean a metaphysical transformation – since a man will always remain a created person. That sentence should be understood as admiration for the spiritual beauty of the Un-created Person and becoming internally similar to him. Elizabeth, explaining how she understands “being the bride of Christ,” writes: “*Being the bride of Christ!* This is not just an expression of the sweetest of dreams: it is a divine reality; the expression of the whole mystery of similarity and union; [...] it is to enchant his Heart to such an extent that, forgetting all distance, the Word overflows into the soul, as if into the bosom of the Father, with the same ecstasy of infinite love! It is the Father, the Word and the Spirit who take possession of the soul, divinizing it into One through love [...]”¹¹⁴

That very context should be taken into account when looking for the meaning of negative theology in the mysticism of Elizabeth of the Trinity. Answering the question of who her Divine Bridegroom was, the Carmelite saw that his person of the God-man connected the transcendent world with the visible world. Transcendent God – the invisible one (Fr. *invisible*), the inaccessible one (Fr. *inaccessible*), the incomprehensible one (Fr. *incompréhensible*), the unimaginable one (Fr. *insondable*), the indescribable one (Fr. *ineffable*), the ineffable one (Fr. *inénnarrable*), the elusive one (Fr. *insaisissable*), the unknown one (Fr. *inconnu*), the incomparable one (Fr. *incomparable*) – in the reality of the Incarnation and the Eucharist becomes very close to a man. As the Son of the Eternal (Fr. *le Fils de l'Éternel*),¹¹⁵ Jesus Christ is both the hidden God (Fr. *le Dieu caché*),¹¹⁶ the inaccessible one (Fr. *l'Inaccessible*),¹¹⁷

¹¹¹ See NI 12 (“*Quel livre préférez-vous? – L'âme du Christ, elle me livre tous les secrets du Père qui est aux Cieux*”).

¹¹² L 130 (“Il est si beau, mon Fiancé, maman je l'aime passionnément et l'aimant je me transforme en Lui”).

¹¹³ Cf. Miczyński, *Rozwój duchowy*, 112.

¹¹⁴ NI 13 (“*Etre épouse du Christ!* Ce n'est pas seulement l'expression du plus doux des rêves: c'est une divine réalité; l'expression de tout un mystère de similitude et d'union; [...] c'est avoir ravi son Cœur au point qu'oubliant toute distance, le Verbe s'épanche dans l'âme comme au sein du Père avec la même extase d'infini amour! C'est le Père, le Verbe et l'Esprit envahissant l'âme, la déifiant, la consommant en l'Un par l'amour [...]”).

¹¹⁵ DR 2.

¹¹⁶ P 96.

¹¹⁷ P 96.

the invisible one (Fr. *l'Invisible*)¹¹⁸ but also Emmanuel (Fr. *Emmanuel*),¹¹⁹ God with us (Fr. *Dieu avec nous*),¹²⁰ Jesus- the Host (Fr. *Jésus-Hostie*).¹²¹

Elizabeth, following the theological tradition, uses apophaticism to emphasize God's transcendence but also to point out that the extraordinary mystery is the love linking the Bridegroom-Christ with the bride-creation. According to the Carmelite, there is a huge ontic and moral difference between the Unknowable, Infinite Bridegroom and the creation, making the bride perceive herself as nothingness and weakness only. It might seem, therefore, that Elizabeth's "apophatic" perception of God would create that distance – in her theological works – appear unbridgeable. Meanwhile, the Carmelite refers to the words of the Psalmist "deep calls unto deep at the noise of Your waterfalls" (Ps 42:8), interprets them allegorically and teaches that the immeasurable merciful love of the Bridegroom pours into the abyss of human weakness.¹²² Thus, apophaticism in Elizabeth takes on a new meaning – it strengthens the dynamics of the description of the spousal love of God and a man. The weakness of human existence becomes a space for the manifestation of the immeasurability, the infinity of God. The Carmelite emphasizes many times that a person justified by God is his dwelling place. Therefore, it can be seen that Elizabeth links all apophatic expressions related to God with the center of a man. A man carries the radiance of the Infinite God within himself, the invisible, inaccessible, incomprehensible, inconceivable, indescribable and ineffable one, who is Infinite Love (Fr. *Amour Infini*).¹²³ The horizons of the human heart are broadening,¹²⁴ a man – created in the image of God (cf. Gen 1:26)¹²⁵ – becomes more and more similar to Jesus Christ, the Divine model (Fr. *Modèle divin*).¹²⁶ Therefore, Carmelite writes that for a person living in a relationship of love with God, life on the Earth is already an anticipated heaven,¹²⁷

118 P 96.

119 P 96.

120 L 187.

121 P 24.

122 L 298 ("Lui [Jésus, Dieu], Il est l'Immuable, Celui qui ne change jamais: Il t'aime aujourd'hui comme Il t'aimait hier, comme Il t'aimera demain. Même si tu Lui as fait de la peine, rappelle-toi qu'un abîme appelle un autre abîme et que l'abîme de ta misère, petite Guite, attire l' abîme de sa miséricorde, oh! vois-tu, Il me fait tant comprendre cela").

123 L 172 ("[...] écoutez tout ce qui se chante en son Âme, en son Cœur; c'est l'Amour, cet Amour Infini qui nous enveloppe et veut associer dès ici-bas à toutes ses béatitudes").

124 L 89 ("Si vous saviez comme je suis heureuse, mon horizon grandit chaque jour"); L 203 ("[les âmes] c'est jusqu'à l'Infini de Dieu qu'elles pénètrent, et là, dans ce silence et ce calme où Il est Lui-même [...]. Le Ciel, il viendra un jour et nous verrons Dieu en sa lumière. Oh! La première rencontre! Elle fait tressaillir mon âme! Priez pour moi; l'horizon est si beau, le divin Soleil fait briller sa grande lumière").

125 Cf. CF 24; CF 31; GV 3; DR 8; DR 22.

126 P 121, 5.

127 See L 330 ("Pour vous, si vous voulez, je demanderai, et ce sera le signe de mon entrée au Ciel, une grâce d'union, d'intimité avec le Maître; c'est ce qui a fait de ma vie, je vous le confie, un Ciel anticipé: croire qu'un Être qui s'appelle Amour habite en nous à tout instant du jour et de la nuit et qu'Il nous demande de vivre en société avec Lui").

eternal happiness in the infinite. Thus, Elizabeth uses apophaticism to show eschatological reality.¹²⁸

Here, an attempt can be made to systematize the answer to the question of what function negative theology plays in the works of Elizabeth of the Trinity. For that purpose, one can reproduce her way of thinking, summarizing it as follows: the Carmelite:

- borrows the apophatic concepts from the history of theology;
- uses them as God’s name, the name of Christ;
- uses them to describe the way of God coming to a man – in the mystery of the Incarnation, the Eucharist, God’s dwelling in the human interior;
- uses them to describe the depths of a man’s inner being, the mystery of human being, which bears “God’s image”;
- uses them to express the eschatological perspective, the end of a man’s fulfillment in Jesus Christ, the Trinity.

Thus, it can be said that apophaticism, which strictly refers to God, in Elizabeth’s mysticism – in a sense – broadens its scope and begins to refer also to the mystery of the interiority of a man, to the depths of Christian experience of a man – to their thoughts, decisions and feelings (thus, Elizabeth continues the well-known theme of negative theology, which can be found in, e.g., Gregory of Nyssa). For through the union with Christ-Bridegroom, a man becomes the dwelling place of the Infinite and moves toward living in the Infinite.

There are some philosophical traits in Elizabeth’s apophaticism; however, its roots are primarily in God’s revelation contained in the Bible. It has the following dimensions:

- Christocentric – with incarnational, soteriological and ecclesial overtones; emphasizing the mystery of the Incarnation, Redemption (co-dying with Christ and moving toward glory in the Resurrection), as well as the mystery of the Church as the mystical Body of Christ;
- nuptial – relating to the mystery of spousal love with God;
- sentimental – expressing awe, the intensity of mystical feelings – awe, admiration, worship.

A doubt arises here as to whether, through such context, Elizabeth did not change the content of apophatic expressions, giving them a predicative character. Is that a continuation and development of apophatic thought, or *de facto* shift to cataphatic theology? Or perhaps it is simply a mixture of apophatic and cataphatic language – more or less deliberate? The Carmelite, although she was not a theologian,

¹²⁸ See DR 17 (“Puisque mon âme est un ciel où je vis en attendant «la Jérusalem céleste», il faut que ce ciel chante aussi la gloire de l’Eternel, rien que la gloire de l’Eternel”; cf. Hbr 12:22).

consciously used theological expressions, did not want to change them, tried to use them to describe her own experience and faithfully follow the Bible and the teaching of the Church. It seems that with such approach, Elizabeth:

- protects apophaticism from turning into extreme agnosticism that suspends any judgment about God and doubts whether anything true can be said about him at all;
- emphasizes the direct connection of apophaticism with mystical experience and intuitive knowledge;
- protects apophaticism from the error of treating mystical experience as impersonal, or extremely subjective;
- complements the sometimes *stricte* apophatic formulations, although by doing so, she happens to depart from classical negative theology;
- broadens the horizons of apophaticism – which no longer concerns only God, but also his mysteries – including human existence;
- frees it from the wrongly understood apophaticism, presenting God as the one who always remains a Mystery, living in a man.

Elizabeth harmoniously combines apophaticism with cataphatic theology, as well as with symbolic theology, mainly nuptial one, and thus the truth about God's transcendence and immanence takes on a unique existential character for her. In this context, one may ask whether the Carmelite's combination of the apophatic and nuptial dimensions does not bring her closer in thinking to Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464), to his thought structure known as the unity of opposites (Lat. *coincidentia oppositorum*), i.e. characteristic statements being in opposition to each other and serving to “express inexpressible truths.”¹²⁹ In the theological sketches written by Elizabeth, one can find the following contradictory expressions: indescribable and describable God; the Lonely God and the Trinity; distance and relationship with God; similarity or complete dissimilarity to God; infinity and finitude; the darkness of faith and the light of God; outer life and inner experience;¹³⁰ etc. In this perspective, Elizabeth seeks to show that the unchanging and ineffable God is not indifferent to creation, but infinitely involved in the fate of people.¹³¹

It should also be mentioned – as Christian-Marie Michel rightly does – that the main Guide in spiritual life and theological reflection for Elizabeth was the Holy Spirit,¹³² which is why she remained herself – essentially independent in her mystical experience from other authors, and therefore original. She stuck to the Bible and Tradition, and thanks to this – as Eduardo Sanz de Miguel points out – she managed

¹²⁹ Cf. Borriello, “Il linguaggio mistico,” 163.

¹³⁰ Louf, “Élisabeth de la Trinité et Ruusbroec,” 61.

¹³¹ Cf. Perrier, *Tu es maison*, 310.

¹³² Michel, *Le Ciel sur la terre*, 111.

to overcome any forms of reductionism of spirituality of her era (e.g. proposed by Jansenism).¹³³ Elizabeth received from God the grace of spontaneous self-transcendence, awareness of the limitations of her experience and not confusing it with God. It seems that thanks to this she was able to radically reject all subjectivity¹³⁴ and remain with a simple heart close to the Heart of God (Fr. *cœur à cœur*).¹³⁵

What is valuable is how the Carmelite from Dijon was able to combine the language of systematic theology with the mystical language – metaphorical, symbolic, emotional.¹³⁶ She “dressed” the personal, subjective and inexpressible mystical experience in apophatic expressions, which she “warmed” with nuptial language of high emotional temperature. She thus understood the theological tradition she encountered, as well as the religious culture in which she grew up, as both a heritage and a task.¹³⁷ All her theological sketches served to convey the truth that God’s eternal plan for creation is dynamic, that the Father constantly seeks to shape man in the image of his Son (cf. Rom 8:29),¹³⁸ and that this is accomplished through the work of the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth does not define the limits of this development,¹³⁹ but, following St. Paul, writes that before the creation of the world, people were chosen by the Father in Christ to be “holy and blameless in His sight,” “to the praise of his glorious grace” (see Eph 1:4–6).¹⁴⁰ The beauty of the mystery of this eternal plan of God – dating back to the time “before the creation of the world,” already realized here on earth through union with the Divine Bridegroom (Fr. *Époux*),¹⁴¹ and fulfilled in the world to come – was precisely what Elizabeth sought to express in apophatic language.

* * *

In the postmodern world, which can be described in a way as “post-intellectual,” as it is often reluctant to make clear divisions or analytical definitions,¹⁴² can *via negativa* lead to the refinement of thought, to purification.¹⁴³ The mysticism of Elizabeth of the Trinity seeks to combine philosophy and theology, as well as objective truths

¹³³ Sanz de Miguel, *Santa Isabel*, 133.

¹³⁴ Peñalba, “Teología,” 252.

¹³⁵ This expression is often used by Elizabeth: see, for example, L 138; 161; 270; P 55; J 135.

¹³⁶ See Miczyński, *La cristologia esistenziale*, 387.

¹³⁷ This understanding of culture – as a heritage and a task – was strongly emphasized by St. John Paul II in his teaching; see Kowalczyk, *...lecz aby świat zbawić*, 405–406.

¹³⁸ See, for example, CF 12; CF 27; CF 30; GV 9; DR 1; DR 14.

¹³⁹ It seems that any attempt to provide a measure of spiritual development would always be associated with the risk of entering into excessive and inadequate schematism; cf. Chmielewski, *101 pytań*, 27–28.

¹⁴⁰ See, for example, CF 22; CF 23; GV 12; DR 23.

¹⁴¹ P 73, 4.

¹⁴² Cf. Nadbrzeżny, *Filozofia zbawienia*, 17.

¹⁴³ Cf. Mortley, “The Via Negativa,” 590.

with subjective experience. It is a testimony of how one can appreciate the search of previous generations, and at the same time follow one's own path towards the Truth, towards the Mystery of Being.

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