

*Las palabras del silencio de Santa Rosa de Lima o la poesía visual del Inefable.* By Emilio Ricardo Báez Rivera. (Madrid: Universidad de Navarra-Iberoamericana; Frankfurt-am-Main: Vervuert. 2012. Pp. 196. €24,00 paperback. ISBN 978-84-8489-650-0 [Iberoamericana]; 978-3-86527-703-9 [Vervuert].)

When Isabel Flores de Oliva (1586–1617) was beatified in 1667 and canonized in 1671, she became America's first saint, preceding even the archbishop who confirmed her: Toribio de Mogrovejo (1538–1606), who was canonized in 1726. This distinction awarded to a reclusive woman who wore the habit of the Third Dominican Order created a wave of fervor and regional pride that reinforced the grip of Catholicism in the New World. Biographies in several languages began circulating in Europe in the last quarter of the seventeenth century, initiating a long list of books dedicated to eulogize and analyze this penitent figure that grew up and died so distant from the European Catholic Reformation. The popularity of her image never waned, and she still attracts countless religious and academic admirers.

St. Rosa de Lima did not write much apart from some now-forgotten verses. The essential femininity of Rosa defined the means to express her religious beliefs. She followed the most ascetic practices of the day, largely practiced by cloistered women: maceration of her body, prayers, fasting, and acts of charity. What was her most unusual expression of belief and the subject studied in this book was a collage she created: the symbolic statement of her faith expressed in paper and cloth. The themes were the fifteen mercies received from God, also stated as wounds of the soul ascending via a spiritual ladder. Two sheets of paper illustrated with the symbolic hearts and her personal calligraphic message were discovered in 1926 and, after thorough authentication, have become the object of study by several authors.

Emilio Ricardo Báez Rivera's work offers an intensive interpretation of the meaning of the emblematic hearts and their message. It is preceded by a thorough review of Rosa's life, the apostolic processes opened after her death, and the spiritual climate of the times in Lima and Spain. Rosa escaped the fate of many who were declared false mystics, possibly owing to her connections with ecclesiastical figures. She had visionary traits, like dozens of women in her time, and the author explains her mystic vein within the boundaries of her visionary experiences. Utilizing semiotic tools to interpret each one of the details in the collage-holograph, he gives us a meticulous study of each one of the figures. The morphology of the heart as the receptacle containing all emotions and venue for receiving and giving the love of God was central to female mysticism since the late-medieval period. Báez carefully examines the figures that, in his opinion, condensed the teachings of the Church and the feelings of a strong believer. Since the unique arrangement of each of the hearts visually explains the religious message, the author's task was to expand the symbolic meaning and context of the tiny figures. This he has done with a great deal of verve and imaginative prose that often calls on the Song of Songs to explain the meaning of wounds, lightning, arrow, flames, nails, and wings in the construction of the collage and the written message of the saint. By also explaining the use and meaning of emblematic messages in the late-medieval and early-modern periods, the author helps the reader understand the spiritual inheritance behind Rosa's emblems. He also makes a strong case for considering the plastic expression of intense faith a legitimate and innovative venue for the study of faith in periods of intense religious fervor. This is a well-balanced, appealing, and commendable book that will interest those studying female spirituality in the early-modern period.