



St. John of the Cross and Creation

Reading the Writings of John of the Cross

Text 1 : Creation as 'a palace'

Suggestions for community gathering:

1. Read the text together.
2. A member of the group who has prepared something in advance presents their reflections on the text, drawing on the commentary and other resources as needed.
3. Share together as a community in response to the text.

It would be helpful if each person had read and reflected on John's text individually before the group meeting.

Introduction to the text

It is fitting to begin this series of texts with an excerpt from the *Nine Romances*: “In the beginning was” composed by St. John of the Cross in 1577 while he was imprisoned in Toledo. Indeed, this poem, written a few days before Christmas, offers us an entire theology that shapes the thought of Saint John of the Cross on the mystery of creation, in connection with the mystery of the redeeming Incarnation, and therefore of the Nativity.

The deliberately childlike character of this text (meant to celebrate the childhood of God at Christmas) should not hide from us its incomparable depth. After describing the life and interior counsel of the three divine persons, John of the Cross emphasizes especially the dialogue between the Father and the Son—a dialogue in the Holy Spirit in which the communal decision is made to create the world (the visible and invisible world, that is, the angels and human beings as well as the whole cosmos). Let us note that in Greek *kosmos* can carry the meaning of “ornament” (Romances 1, 2, and 3). In Romance 4, John of the Cross therefore presents this creation as “a palace for the Bride” (v.5). This Bride is the Church (angels, saints, and the cosmos), but more particularly Mary, in whom the “espousals” take place (Romances 8 and 9). God, in his Son, having assumed (wedded...) our own “flesh,” this flesh itself belongs to the mystery of material creation (Romance 7).

This theological vision is rooted in the Church Fathers, who read the Genesis account allegorically: “A man will leave his father and mother, and cling to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh” (Gen 2:24). In this allegorical vision, Christ is understood as the new Adam who becomes one flesh with his mother Mary, who thus becomes (mystical-

ly) the New Eve who makes all creation into a Bride. Material creation itself is therefore seen as a splendid “palace,” the Marian “place” of the espousals (Romance 4:21). Mary and the cosmos together are this “palace,” whose beauty and goodness become the sign of God’s beauty and goodness.

These espousals are celebrated in the Incarnation, which is seen as prior to the gift of the Eucharist. Indeed, for our author, before the Incarnation, the Son is the spiritual nourishment of the Father, his “bread” (Romance 3). But after the Incarnation, the Bride Mary “lays” in the “manger” (Romance 9) this same bread—now material, having become flesh for the nuptial feast in “the palace,” that is, for the Eucharistic celebration in the Church. This patristic and *Sanjuanist* theology highlights the mad love of God who lowers himself to the point of entering materiality itself, which forms part of human nature and the material cosmos.

It is moreover within this dynamic of the sublimation of matter that John of the Cross expresses himself most readily through poetry. Poetry, like art in general, is the “incarnation” in matter (through sounds, images, etc.) of a thought or an intention—modelled on God’s own creative and redemptive act:

ROMANCES 3:

In the beginning the Word
was; he lived in God
and possessed in him
his infinite happiness.
That same Word was God,
who is the Beginning;
he was in the beginning
and had no beginning.

He was himself the Beginning
and therefore had no beginning.
The Word is called Son;
he was born of the Beginning
who had always conceived him,
giving of his substance always,
yet always possessing it.
And thus the glory of the Son
was the Father’s glory,
and the Father possessed
all his glory in the Son.

As the lover in the beloved
each lived in the other,

and the Love that unites them
is one with them ,
their equal, excellent as
the One and the Other:
Three Persons, and one Beloved
among all three.
One love in them all
makes of them one Lover,
and the Lover is the Beloved
in whom each one lives.
For the being that the three possess
each of them possesses,
and each of them loves
him who bears this being.

Each one is this being,
which alone unites them,
binding them deeply,
one beyond words.
Thus it is a boundless Love that
unites them,
for the three have one love
which is their essence;
and the more love is one
the more it is love.

ROMANCES 4 (1-38):

“Let it be done, then,” said the Father,
for your love has deserved it.
And by these words
the world was created,
a palace for the bride
made with great wisdom
and divided into rooms,
one above, the other below.

The lower was furnished
with infinite variety,
while the higher was made beautiful
with marvelous jewels,
that the bride might know
the Bridegroom she had.
The orders of angels
were placed in the higher,
but humanity was given
the lower place,
for it was, in its being,
a lesser thing.

And though beings and places
were divided in this way,
yet all form one,
who is called the bride;
for love of the same Bridegroom
made one bride of them.
Those higher ones possessed
the Bridegroom in gladness;
the lower in hope, founded
on the faith that he infused in them,
telling them that one day
he would exalt them,
and that he would lift them
up from their lowness
so that no one
could mock it any more;
for he would make himself
wholly like them,
and he would come to them (...)

LAUDATO SI’:

LS 13. The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change. The Creator does not abandon us; he never forsakes his loving plan or repents of having created us. Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home. Here I want to recognize, encourage and thank all those striving in countless ways to guarantee the protection of the home which we share. (...)

LS 61. On many concrete questions, the Church has no reason to offer a definitive opinion; she knows that honest debate must be encouraged among experts, while respecting divergent views. But we need only take a frank look at the facts to see that our common home is falling into serious disrepair. (...) There are regions now at high risk and, aside from all doomsday predictions, the present world system is certainly

unsustainable from a number of points of view, for we have stopped thinking about the goals of human activity. “If we scan the regions of our planet, we immediately see that humanity has disappointed God’s expectations”.

LS 69. Together with our obligation to use the earth’s goods responsibly, we are called to recognize that other living beings have a value of their own in God’s eyes: “by their mere existence they bless him and give him glory”, and indeed, “the Lord rejoices in all his works” (Ps 104:31). By virtue of our unique dignity and our gift of intelligence, we are called to respect creation and its inherent laws, for “the Lord by wisdom founded the earth” (Prov 3:19).

Questions

1. Why does John of the Cross use the image of a palace to speak about creation? What is he trying to express through this metaphor?
2. What does the idea of a “common home” mean for Pope Francis? What is he inviting us to do when he speaks of the Earth in this way?
3. What differences are there between the spiritual vision of John of the Cross and the ecological vision of *Laudato Si*’?
4. Can we say that both the “palace” and the “common home” speak of the beauty of nature? In what way do these two images inspire us to take care of it?
5. How do these two ways of speaking about creation help us to change our way of seeing creation?



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