



# St. John of the Cross and Creation

## Reading the Writings of John of the Cross

### Text 2 : Creation as 'an icon'

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

In the following passage, taken from the *Spiritual Canticle* (B), we are no longer dealing with an overall vision, as in the *Romances*, but with the poetic translation of St John of the Cross' personal experience. Here we enter the theological commentaries that the mystical doctor himself composed on the basis of his poems (or songs). We once again encounter the theme of creation as a "palace" and the entry of the Son of God into it, though presented with entirely different images. Creation and the redeeming Incarnation are described as a twofold divine action. In the first action—or first movement—God creates, in his Son, the natural world, which is thus fashioned in the image of his goodness, beauty, and other perfections, creation becoming a "trace" of God's passing. John of the Cross here refers to the traditional theology that teaches that all the beauty of the created and finite world are an image of the infinite beauty of God.

Then, in the second action—or second movement—the redeeming Incarnation is described as a seal that is "engraved" (SCB 5,4) upon human and cosmic reality to communicate directly to them this divine goodness and beauty—these excellences—as well as God's other perfections, along with the human perfections of Christ and of Mary. In a single phrase, yet one of immense scope and significance: for John of the Cross, creation reaches perfection only in welcoming the Incarnation, in Mary. Through this welcome, creation is no longer simply the natural and created image of God, as in the first action, but by supernaturally sharing in the divine and human perfections of Christ, men and women become mediators of the fulfilment of the cosmos, thus espoused and divinised. Human and cosmic reality is divinised to the extent that it is humanised—this becoming the foundation of all the good-

ness, beauty, and dignity of creation, as well as the foundation of humanity's responsibility towards it. Man and woman are, in Christ and in Mary, the mediators of this transfiguration of creation, since by nature they share in its materiality.

Thus, in the *Spiritual Canticle*, the “palace” spoken of in the Romances becomes the “Bride” and an icon. This Bride, or icon, is entrusted to humanity, for its harmony is “inviolable” (SCB 5,1), as the saint warns us. It is in this sense that in stanza 5 John of the Cross speaks of the face of Christ which, like a seal, has been engraved, or imprinted, upon creation through the mystery of the redeeming Incarnation. This understanding forms the basis of an entire theology of the image or icon. John of the Cross here draws on Franciscan theology. For Saint Francis, just as we are made in the image of the divinity, so too, through the Incarnation, the divinity is made in our image. Hence all the dignity and responsibility of humanity lie in giving back to creation its full “beauty” (SCB 5,5)—a beauty that is Christic, Marian, and iconic. The “beauty” of creation and re-creation thus becomes, for John of the Cross, the foundation of its morality. “Beauty will save the world,” as Dostoevsky would later write.

In the brief commentaries that follow stanza 5 of the *Canticle*, which we are about to read, John of the Cross emphasises how all human activity finds its origin and fulfilment in the beautiful mystery of the redeeming Incarnation, from which radiates—according to the measure of humanity’s response—the “form” (SCB 5,3) or “face” of Christ, and also the face of Mary, for she is that very response. Through the redeeming Incarnation, Christ first “engraved” himself in her, the true “icon”. The response of the creature therefore lies in its relationship with creation, of which Adam and Eve, and then the New Adam and the New Eve, are the “guardians” (Genesis 2:15).

Here, then, is the beautiful stanza 5 of the *Spiritual Canticle*, together with several decisive commentaries by John of the Cross himself. Brief as the stanza is, its depth is inexhaustible:

## THE SPIRITUAL CANTICLE B 5,1-4

*Pouring out a thousand graces,  
he passed these groves in haste;  
and having looked at them,  
with his image alone,  
clothed them in beauty.*

### COMMENTARY

1. In this stanza the creatures answer the soul. Their answer, as St. Augustine also declares in that same place, is the testimony they in themselves give the soul of God’s grandeur and excellence. It is for this testimony that she asked in her reflections. The substance of this stanza is: God created all things with remarkable ease and brevity, and in them he left some trace of who he is, not only in giving all things being from nothing, but even by endowing them with innumerable graces and qualities, making them beautiful in a wonderful order and unfailing dependence on one another. All of this he did through his own Wisdom, the Word, his only begotten Son by whom he created them.

She then says:

*Pouring out a thousand graces,*

2. These “thousand graces” she says he was pouring out refer to the numberless multitude of creatures. She records the high number, a thousand, to indicate their multitude. She calls them graces because of the many graces he has endowed creatures with. Pouring these out, that is, stocking the whole world with them,

*he passed these groves in haste;*

3. To “pass the groves” is to create the elements, which are here termed “groves.” She declares that he passed by them pouring out a thousand graces because he adorned them with all the creatures, for these groves are favored with graces. And, in addition, he poured out on them a thousand graces by giving them the power to concur in generation and conservation.

And she says “he passed” because creatures are like a trace of God’s passing. Through them one can track down his grandeur, might, wisdom, and other divine attributes.

She declares that this passing was “in haste.” Creatures are the lesser works of God because he made them as though in passing. The greater works, in which he manifested himself more and to which he gave greater attention, were those of the Incarnation of the Word and the mysteries of the Christian faith. Compared to these, all the others were done as though in passing and with haste.

*and having looked at them,  
with his image alone,  
clothed them in beauty.*

4. St. Paul says: *the Son of God is the splendor of his glory and the image of his substance* [Heb. 1: 3]. It should be known that only with this figure, his Son, did God look at all things, that is, he communicated to them their natural being and many natural graces and gifts, and made them complete and perfect, as is said in Genesis: *God looked at all things that he made, and they were very good* [Gn. 1: 31]. To look and behold that they were very good was to make them very good in the Word, his Son.

Not only by looking at them did he communicate natural being and graces, as we said, but also, with this image of his Son alone, he clothed them in beauty by imparting to them supernatural being. This he did when he took on our human nature and elevated it in the beauty of God, and consequently all creatures, since in human nature he was united with them all. Accordingly, the Son of God proclaimed: *Si ego exaltatus a terra fuero omnia traham ad me ipsum* (If I be lifted up from the earth, I will elevate all things to myself) [Jn. 12: 32]. And in this elevation of all things through the Incarnation of his Son and through the glory of his resurrection according to the flesh not only did the Father beautify creatures partially, but, we can say, he clothed them entirely in beauty and dignity.

## **LAUDATO SI':**

**LS 12.** What is more, Saint Francis, faithful to Scripture, invites us to see nature as a magnificent book in which God speaks to us and grants us a glimpse of his infinite beauty and goodness. « Through the greatness and the beauty of creatures one comes to know by analogy their maker” (Wis 13:5); indeed, “his eternal power and divinity have been made known through his works since the creation of the world” (Rom 1:20). For this reason, Francis asked

that part of the friary garden always be left untouched, so that wild flowers and herbs could grow there, and those who saw them could raise their minds to God, the Creator of such beauty. Rather than a problem to be solved, the world is a joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and praise.

**LS 84.** Our insistence that each human being is an image of God should not make us overlook the fact that each creature has its own purpose. None is superfluous. The entire material universe speaks of God's love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God.

**LS 92.** We can hardly consider ourselves to be fully loving if we disregard any aspect of reality: "Peace, justice and the preservation of creation are three absolutely interconnected themes, which cannot be separated and treated individually without once again falling into reductionism". Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of his creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth.

**LS 100.** The New Testament does not only tell us of the earthly Jesus and his tangible and loving relationship with the world. It also shows him risen and glorious, present throughout creation by his universal Lordship: "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross" (Col 1:19-20). This leads us to direct our gaze to the end of time, when the Son will deliver all things to the Father, so that "God may be everything to every one" (1 Cor 15:28). Thus, the creatures of this world no longer appear to us under merely natural guise because the risen One is mysteriously holding them to himself and directing them towards fullness as their end. The very flowers of the field and the birds which his human eyes contemplated and admired are now imbued with his radiant presence.

### Questions

1. What does it mean, for John of the Cross, that nature "leaves in the soul a form clothed in its beauty"? Does creation become a visible trace of God's passage? Can we say that, for John of the Cross and for Pope Francis, creation is an *icon*—that is, an image that makes the invisible visible?
2. Can we say that nature is a "word of God" for these two authors? What forms of language do they use (poetic, theological, symbolic) to speak about it?
3. In what way is the contemplation of nature, in John of the Cross and in *Laudato Si'*, a path towards God? How does the gaze directed at creation transform the soul in John of the Cross, and the way of living in Pope Francis?
4. If nature is an icon or a sacred mystery, what attitude does this imply towards it? How does one move from contemplation to action?



General Curia of the Teresian Carmel  
[www.discalcedcarmelite.com](http://www.discalcedcarmelite.com)