



Saint John
of the Cross
2026

St. John of the Cross and Creation

Reading the Writings of John of the Cross

Text 3 : Creation as a 'Messenger'

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 this new passage, John of the Cross presents creation as a divine word speaking to us of him, the divine Beloved.

Let us recall that in the *Spiritual Canticle B* (the commentary), John of the Cross aims to map out the whole spiritual journey through its three principal stages: beginners, proficient, and perfect (as he himself indicates; cf. SCB 22,3). Up to stanza 5, he is addressing those who are at the stage of “meditation”. This stage, essential in itself, begins with the “consideration” of creation.

All creation (including angels and saints) is seen as a “messenger” questioned by the bride and entrusted with bringing news of the Beloved—especially the place where he is “hidden” (1,1). This attitude is linked to what we have previously observed: namely that creation, as “palace” and “icon”, is already a self-communication of God. For John of the Cross, the four natural elements—earth, water, air, and fire (the traditional framework for scientific reflection since antiquity)—together with their countless combinations in the natural world around us (nature, culture, science and technology, etc.) are, each in their own way, divine words.

If we apply these *Sanjuanist* insights to our contemporary situation, they open up a fruitful field for ethical reflection on scientific research. Should science confine itself solely to profit or performance? Should it not also safeguard the gratuitousness of wonder-filled contemplation, open to the search for God? Philosophers since antiquity have reflected on

these two dimensions of our relationship with creation. Already Aristotle (4th century BC) distinguished two aspects of our engagement with the world: *theoria*, which belongs to the realm of “making”, of what humanity “manufactures”; and *poiesis*, which is more closely linked to the spontaneous emergence of the natural world around us, belonging to the realm of “being” and “contemplation”.

A twentieth-century philosopher, Heidegger, meditated at length on this dimension of our attitude to the world, denouncing the dominance of “making”, “fabricating”, and “producing–consuming”, in which the West—and gradually the whole planet—has become trapped. The extract from John of the Cross’s poem that follows, together with its commentary, emphasises the primacy of a contemplative gaze upon creation—not to turn us away from scientific or technical activity, but to purify it.

This theme of necessary purification is recurrent throughout the work of John of the Cross. Faith purifies our vision of the world, transforming it from something owed to us and meant for consumption (what John of the Cross calls the “active”) into a reality freely given, to be received and respected as such (what he calls the “passive”). This is the profound meaning of the celebrated “passage” (Pasch) from meditation to contemplation (2 DN 12–15). Then our vision of created things becomes a “loving attentiveness”, shaped by faith, love, and hope.

THE SPIRITUAL CANTICLE B 4,1-7:

*O woods and thickets,
Planted by the hand of my Beloved!
O green meadow,
Coated, bright, with flowers,
Tell me, has he passed by you?*

COMMENTARY

1. The soul has made known the manner of preparing oneself to begin this journey: to pursue delights and satisfactions no longer, and to overcome temptations and difficulties through fortitude. This is the practice of self-knowledge, the first requirement of advancing to the knowledge of God. Now, in this stanza, she begins to walk along the way of the knowledge and consideration of creatures that leads to the knowledge of her Beloved, the Creator.

On this spiritual road the consideration of creatures is first in order after the exercise of self-knowledge. The soul thereby advances in the knowledge of God by considering his greatness and excellence manifested in creatures, as is brought out in that passage of St. Paul: *Invisibilia enim ipsius a creatura mundi, per ea quae facta sunt intellecta conspiciuntur* (The invisible things of God are known by the soul through creatures, both visible and invisible) [Rom. 1 : 20].

She addresses creatures, then, in this stanza, asking them about her Beloved. And it is noteworthy, as St. Augustine says, that the soul’s interrogation of creatures is the reflection about the Creator that it makes through them. This stanza contains a meditation on the elements and other inferior creatures, on the heavens together with the other material things in them that God created, and also on the heavenly spirits.

O woods and thickets,

2. She calls the elements (earth, water, air, and fire) “woods,” because like pleasant woods they are thickly populated with creatures. She labels these creatures “thickets” because of their vast number and the notable difference among them in each of the elements. On the earth there are countless varieties of animals and plants; in the water, numberless kinds of fish; and in the air, a remarkable diversity of birds; and the element fire concurs with the others for the animation and preservation of these creatures. Each kind of animal lives in its element and is placed and planted in it as in the woods and region where it is born and nurtured. Indeed, God commanded this when he created the elements. He ordered the earth to produce the plants and the animals; and the sea and water, the fish; and he made the air a habitation for birds [Gn. 1 : 1 1-12, 20-2 1 , 24] . Seeing that as he commanded it was done, the soul says in the following verse:

Planted by the hand of my Beloved!

3. This verse contains the following reflection: Only the hand of God, her Beloved, was able to create this diversity and grandeur. It is noteworthy that she deliberately says “by the hand of my Beloved.” Although God often acts through the hand of another-as through those of angels and humans-he never created, nor does he carry on this work of creation by any other hand than his own. This reflection on creatures, this observing that they are things made by the very hand of God, her Beloved, strongly awakens the soul to love him. She then continues:

O green meadow,

4. This verse refers to her reflection on the heavens. She calls them a “green meadow” because the created things in them are as green growing plants that neither die nor fade with time, and in them, as in cool green meadows, the just find their recreation and delight. The diversity of the beautiful stars and other heavenly planets is also included in this meditation.

5. The Church likewise uses the word “green” to express heavenly things. In praying to God for the souls of the faithful departed, she says, speaking to them: *Constituatur vos Dominus inter amoena virentia*, which means: May God set you in delightful green places. And she says that this green meadow is also

Coated, bright, with flowers,

6. By these “flowers” she understands the angels and saintly souls that adorn and beautify that place like a costly enamel on a vase of fine gold.

Tell me, has he passed by you?

7. This question is the reflection mentioned above; it is similar to saying: Tell me of the excellent qualities he has created in you.

LAUDATO SI’:

LS 85. God has written a precious book, “whose letters are the multitude of created things present in the universe”. The Canadian bishops rightly pointed out that no creature is excluded from this manifestation of God: “From panoramic vistas to the tiniest living form, nature is a constant source of wonder and awe. It is also a continuing revelation of the divine”. The bishops of Japan, for their part, made a thought-provoking observation: “To sense each creature singing the hymn of its existence is to live joyfully in God’s love and hope”. This contemplation of creation allows us to discover in each thing a teaching which God wishes to hand on to us, since “for

the believer, to contemplate creation is to hear a message, to listen to a paradoxical and silent voice". We can say that "alongside revelation properly so-called, contained in sacred Scripture, there is a divine manifestation in the blaze of the sun and the fall of night". Paying attention to this manifestation, we learn to see ourselves in relation to all other creatures: "I express myself in expressing the world; in my effort to decipher the sacredness of the world, I explore my own".

LS 87. When we can see God reflected in all that exists, our hearts are moved to praise the Lord for all his creatures and to worship him in union with them. This sentiment finds magnificent expression in the hymn of Saint Francis of Assisi:

Praised be you, my Lord, with all your creatures,
especially Sir Brother Sun,
who is the day and through whom you give us light.
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendour;
and bears a likeness of you, Most High.
Praised be you, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,
in heaven you formed them clear and precious and beautiful.
Praised be you, my Lord, through Brother Wind,
and through the air, cloudy and serene, and every kind of weather
through whom you give sustenance to your creatures.
Praised be you, my Lord, through Sister Water,
who is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.
Praised be you, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
through whom you light the night,
and he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.

LS 97. The Lord was able to invite others to be attentive to the beauty that there is in the world because he himself was in constant touch with nature, lending it an attention full of fondness and wonder. As he made his way throughout the land, he often stopped to contemplate the beauty sown by his Father, and invited his disciples to perceive a divine message in things: "Lift up your eyes, and see how the fields are already white for harvest" (Jn 4:35). "The kingdom of God is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all seeds, but once it has grown, it is the greatest of plants" (Mt 13:31-32).

Questions

- . How does John of the Cross describe nature as a messenger in stanza 4 of the *Spiritual Canticle B*? What spiritual role does this messenger fulfil according to him?
- . How does *Laudato Si'* (no. 87) develop this idea of nature as a place of encounter with God? For you personally, is creation more like a “book” (*LS 87*) or a “messenger” (John of the Cross)? Why?
- . Again in *Laudato Si'*, at number 87, we clearly see that creation speaks to us of God, and that this constant dialogue between nature and humanity is a place of encounter with God. In what way does this idea echo that of John of the Cross, for whom nature carries a divine message addressed directly to the human soul?
- . If creation is a “messenger” of God, how does this change our way of seeing all living things (animals, landscapes, resources)? And how can we reconcile a spirituality of creation (as in John of the Cross) with the ecological urgencies highlighted in *Laudato Si'*?



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