



Saint John
of the Cross
2026

St. John of the Cross and Creation

Reading the Writings of John of the Cross

Text 4: Creation as a Quasi-Sacrament

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

After the stage of meditation (beginners), in which the praying person seeks the Beloved through the mediation of created things, comes the stage of infused contemplation. This means that there is something like a reversal in the contemplative process: at the beginning (meditation), it is we who actively turn towards God; but in the stage of infused contemplation, it is God's action within us that becomes predominant, and we must therefore behave no longer actively but passively. The term *passivity* used by our author means "to receive" the God who is given or "infused". This stage culminates in the spiritual betrothal (CSB 13 – proficient) and then the spiritual marriage (CSB 22 – perfect).

At this stage of infused contemplation, the person's relationship with creation becomes entirely different. He or she experiences that "God is all things" (CSB 14–15,5). What is very important to understand here is that, at this stage, through their supernatural union with the creating Word, the person is also united, in Christ, to creation itself. No longer only by moving from the attributes of the creature to those of the Creator (for example, from the beauty of a landscape to the Beauty of God), which is characteristic of meditation, but by making the contemplative experience of the intimate connection, or direct union, between the attributes of the creature and the Attributes of God (for instance, the direct union—experienced contemplatively as such—between the majesty of a mountain and the majesty of God).

Here the novelty lies in no longer needing meditation in order to make the connection between created attributes and uncreated Attributes. More than this: in meditation one can only approach the attributes of the creature and those of the Creator by means of ideas (con-

cepts) or mental images. By contrast, in infused contemplation these same created and uncreated attributes, and their union, are experienced through contact (“touch”, as John of the Cross says – 2 MC 26), without concepts or mental images, without the active effort of meditation. The created, the uncreated, and the contemplative person are all three united.

It should also be noted that the text by John of the Cross which follows speaks in a very significant way of the “Last Supper” (CSB 15,5). Our mystical doctor wishes to bear witness to his experience, namely that in the celebration of the Mass (the Supper) and the *Transubstantiation*, creation is already transfigured: it becomes something like a sacrament of God’s presence. As a sign and means of union with God (which is the definition of a sacrament), the world around us is therefore, for John of the Cross, a quasi-sacrament for the contemplative nourished by the Eucharist. Here one naturally thinks of Teilhard de Chardin’s *The Mass on the World*. Here, then, is the text by John of the Cross:

THE SPIRITUAL CANTICLE B 14-15,1-5.9.28-29:

1. Since this little dove was flying in the breeze of love above the flood waters of her loving fatigues and yearnings, which she has shown until now, and could find nowhere to alight, the compassionate father Noah, stretching out his merciful hand, caught her on her last flight and placed her in the ark of his charity [Gn. 8:9]. This occurred when in the stanza we just explained the Bridegroom said, “Return, dove.”

Finding in this recollection all she desired and more than is expressible, the soul begins to sing the praises of her Beloved in the following stanzas. They apply to his grandeurs, which she experiences and enjoys in this union.

Bride

*My Beloved, the mountains,
and lonely wooded valleys,
strange islands,
and resounding rivers,
the whistling of love-stirring breezes,*

*the tranquil night
at the time of the rising dawn,
silent music,
sounding solitude,
the supper that refreshes, and deepens love.*

2. Before commenting on these stanzas, we should call to mind for the sake of a clearer understanding of them and those following that this spiritual flight denotes a high state and union of love in which, after much spiritual exercise, the soul is placed by God. This state is called spiritual betrothal with the Word, the Son of God.

And at the beginning, when this flight is experienced the first time, God communicates to the soul great things about himself, beautifies her with grandeur and majesty, adorns her with gifts and virtues, and clothes her with the knowledge and honor of God, as the betrothed is

clothed on the day of her betrothal. Not only do her vehement yearnings and complaints of love cease but, in being graced with the blessings mentioned, a state of peace and delight and gentleness of love begins in her. This state is indicated in these stanzas, in which she does no more than tell in song her Beloved's grandeurs, which she knows and enjoys in him through this union of betrothal. In the remaining stanzas she no longer speaks of sufferings and longings as she did before, but of the communion and exchange of sweet and peaceful love with her Beloved, because now in this state all those sufferings have ceased.

It should be noted that these two stanzas describe the most God communicates to the soul at this time. Yet it must not be thought that he communicates to all those who reach this state everything declared in these two stanzas, or that he does so in the same manner and measure of knowledge and feeling. To some souls he gives more and to others less, to some in one way and to others in another, although all alike may be in this same state of spiritual betrothal. But the greatest possible communication is recorded here because it includes everything else. The commentary follows.

Commentary on the Two Stanzas

3. In Noah's ark, as the divine Scripture says, there were many rooms for different kinds of animals, and all the food that could be eaten [Gn. 6: 14, 19-21]. It should be noted that, similarly, the soul in her flight to the divine ark, the bosom of God, not only sees there the many mansions that His Majesty through St. John declared were in his Father's house [Jn. 14:2], but sees and knows there all the foods (all the grandeurs the soul can enjoy), that is, all the things included in these two stanzas and signified by these common terms. In substance, these are:

4. The soul sees and tastes abundance and inestimable riches in this divine union. She finds all the rest and recreation she desires, and understands secrets and strange knowledge of God, which is another of the foods that taste best to her. She experiences in God an awesome power and a strength that sweep away every other power and strength. She tastes there a splendid spiritual sweetness and gratification, discovers true quiet and divine light, and tastes sublimely the wisdom of God reflected in the harmony of his creatures and works. She has the feeling of being filled with blessings and being empty of evils and far removed from them. And, above all, she understands and enjoys inestimable refreshment of love, which confirms her in love. These in substance are the affirmations of the two stanzas.

5. The bride says in these stanzas that the Beloved is all these things in himself, and he is so also for her, because in such superabundant communications from God the soul experiences and knows the truth of St. Francis' prayer: My God and all things. Since God is all things to the soul and the good that is in all things, the communication of this superabundance is explained through the likeness that the goodness of the things mentioned in these stanzas has to it, which we shall explain in our commentary on each of the verses. It should be known that what is explained here is present in God eminently and infinitely, or better, each of these sublime attributes is God, and all of them together are God.

[...]

and resounding rivers,

9. Rivers have three properties: first, they besiege and inundate everything they encounter; second, they fill up all the low and empty spots found along their path; third, they are so loud that they muffle and suppress every other sound. Since in this communication in God the soul has a delightful experience of these three properties, she says that her Beloved is the resounding rivers.

As for the first property, it should be known that the soul is conscious at this time that the torrent of God's spirit is besieging and taking possession of her so forcibly that all the rivers of the world seem to have flooded in upon her and to be assailing her. She feels that all the actions and passions in which she was formerly occupied are drowned therein. Although it is a thing of tremendous force, this is not a torment to her because these rivers are rivers of peace, as God declared of this onslaught through Isaiah: *Ecce ego declinabo super eam quasi fluvium pacis, et quasi torrentem inundantem gloriam* (See that I will descend and besiege her – the soul – like a river of peace and like a torrent overflowing with glory) [Is. 66: 12]. Hence this divine onslaught caused by God in the soul, like resounding rivers, fills everything with peace and glory.

The second property the soul experiences at this time is the divine water filling the low places of her humility and the voids of her appetites, as St. Luke says: *Exaltavit humiles; esurientes implevit bonis* (he exalted the humble and filled the hungry with good things) [Lk. 1 :52-53] .

The third property she experiences in these resounding rivers of her Beloved is a spiritual clamor and outcry louder than any other sound or call. This cry prevails against all other cries and its sound exceeds all the sounds of the world.

[...]

The supper that refreshes, and deepens love.

28. Supper affords lovers refreshment, satisfaction, and love. Since in this gentle communication the Beloved produces these three benefits in the soul, she calls it “the supper that refreshes, and deepens love.”

It should be known that in divine Scripture this term “supper” refers to the divine vision [Rv. 3:20-21]. Just as supper comes at the end of a day's work and the beginning of evening rest, this tranquil knowledge causes the soul to experience a certain end of her evils and the possession of good things in which her love of God is deepened more than before. As a result, he is the supper that refreshes by being the end of evils for her, and deepens love by being to her the possession of all goods.

29. Yet for a better understanding of what this supper is to the soul – it is, as we said, her Beloved – we should note in this appropriate place what the beloved Bridegroom says in the Apocalypse: *I stand at the door and knock; if anyone opens, I shall enter and we shall sup together* [Rv. 3:20] . In this text he indicates that he carries his supper with him, and it is nothing but his very own delights and savors that he himself enjoys. In uniting himself with the soul he imparts them, and she likewise enjoys them. For such is the meaning of the words, “we shall sup together”. Hence these words declare the effect of the divine union of the soul with God, in which God's very own goods are graciously and bounteously shared in common with his bride, the soul. He himself is for her the supper that refreshes and deepens love, for in being bounteous he refreshes her, and in being gracious he deepens love in her.

LAUDATO SI':

LS 9. As Christians, we are also called “to accept the world as a sacrament of communion, as a way of sharing with God and our neighbours on a global scale. It is our humble conviction that the divine and the human meet in the slightest detail in the seamless garment of God’s creation, in the last speck of dust of our planet”.

In VI. Sacramental signs and the celebration of rest (LS 233-237)

LS 234. Saint John of the Cross taught that all the goodness present in the realities and experiences of this world “is present in God eminently and infinitely, or more properly, in each of these sublime realities is God”. This is not because the finite things of this world are really divine, but because the mystic experiences the intimate connection between God and all beings, and thus feels that “all things are God”. Standing awestruck before a mountain, he or she cannot separate this experience from God, and perceives that the interior awe being lived has to be entrusted to the Lord: “Mountains have heights and they are plentiful, vast, beautiful, graceful, bright and fragrant. These mountains are what my Beloved is to me. Lonely valleys are quiet, pleasant, cool, shady and flowing with fresh water; in the variety of their groves and in the sweet song of the birds, they afford abundant recreation and delight to the senses, and in their solitude and silence, they refresh us and give rest. These valleys are what my Beloved is to me”.

LS 235. The Sacraments are a privileged way in which nature is taken up by God to become a means of mediating supernatural life. Through our worship of God, we are invited to embrace the world on a different plane. Water, oil, fire and colours are taken up in all their symbolic power and incorporated in our act of praise. The hand that blesses is an instrument of God’s love and a reflection of the closeness of Jesus Christ, who came to accompany us on the journey of life. Water poured over the body of a child in Baptism is a sign of new life. Encountering God does not mean fleeing from this world or turning our back on nature. (...)

LS 236. It is in the Eucharist that all that has been created finds its greatest exaltation. Grace, which tends to manifest itself tangibly, found unsurpassable expression when God himself became man and gave himself as food for his creatures. The Lord, in the culmination of the mystery of the Incarnation, chose to reach our intimate depths through a fragment of matter. He comes not from above, but from within, he comes that we might find him in this world of ours. In the Eucharist, fullness is already achieved; it is the living centre of the universe, the overflowing core of love and of inexhaustible life. Joined to the incarnate Son, present in the Eucharist, the whole cosmos gives thanks to God. Indeed the Eucharist is itself an act of cosmic love: “Yes, cosmic! Because even when it is celebrated on the humble altar of a country church, the Eucharist is always in some way celebrated on the altar of the world”. The Eucharist joins heaven and earth; it embraces and penetrates all creation. The world which came forth from God’s hands returns to him in blessed and undivided adoration: in the bread of the Eucharist, “creation is projected towards divinization, towards the holy wedding feast, towards unification with the Creator himself”. Thus, the Eucharist is also a source of light and motivation for our concerns for the environment, directing us to be stewards of all creation.

Questions

- . How does John of the Cross use natural images (mountains, rivers, forests) to reveal a sacramental presence of God, and in what way do *Laudato Si'* §§233–237 go beyond a purely utilitarian view of nature by presenting it as a “sacrament of communion”?
- . How does the Church’s liturgy (e.g. blessings of harvests, the Season of Creation) make this vision present today? Might there be new liturgies yet to be created?
- . Compare the Christian vision with other approaches according to your own country and cultural background (e.g. the sacredness of the land in Indigenous American spiritualities, but also Zen Buddhism, Hinduism, and various forms of animism).
- . In what way can a sacramental vision of creation offer a response to the current ecological crisis?



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