



Saint John  
of the Cross  
2026

# St. John of the Cross and Creation

## Reading the Writings of John of the Cross

### Text 7: Creation as a gift rather than possession

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

The following text deals with the famous *Sanjuanist* theme of “*Nothing – Everything*” (*Nada – Todo*): the one who becomes “*attached*” to “*nothing*” receives “*everything*” in Christ. This theme stands in continuity with the texts that precede it, and they help us to approach it more deeply.

We may also recall the famous path of “*Mount Carmel*” that St John of the Cross sketched after his escape from the prison in Toledo. To reach union with God, three paths are possible: on the right side of the mountain, the “*way of the earth*”; on the left, the “*way of heaven*”; and finally, at the centre, the “*path of nothingness*”. Only the “*path of nothingness*” leads to union with God.

This means, in fact, not becoming attached to what is “*created*”, which may be, on the one hand, the affective and sensible experience within us of God’s presence (the *way of heaven*), and, on the other, the affective and sensible impressions we receive from our relationship with the world (the *way of the earth*). We should not reject these experiences, but—as mentioned above—we must use these created gifts as a springboard orienting us towards the Giver. These gifts will then be perceived more clearly, for by not clinging to them, we allow them to pour into us more abundantly. Not becoming attached to “*anything*” (*nada*) enables us to enjoy “*everything*” (*todo*). Indeed, closing one’s hand (or heart) around a gift from heaven or earth prevents one from receiving the fullness of what God wishes to give—namely, the whole of creation and God Himself.

In the text from John of the Cross that follows, we focus exclusively on his doctrine and advice concerning the gifts of the earth, the theme of our reflection. In this passage he first emphasises that detachment enables us to enjoy God’s gifts more fully. Attachment or idolatry towards a particular created reality assigns to it a weight in our lives that it does not possess in reality. Our relationship with this reality then prevents us from enjoying it as it truly desires to be given to us—in the truth of its being. This is what John of the Cross, later in the text, calls “*judging according*

to accidents” (that is, according to appearances distorted by our projections) and not according to “substance” (that is, the true reality that each gift of God actually possesses). As the text underlines, “attachment” enslaves me to creation, whereas detachment sets me free to love.

Thus, contrary to certain depictions of John of the Cross as an enemy of created things, we see him rather as a promoter of a true enjoyment of creation.

## **THE ASCENT OF MOUNT CARMEL (Book three 20, 1-4):**

1. Spiritual persons must exercise care that in their heart and joy they do not become attached to temporal goods. They must fear lest, through a gradual increase, their small attachments become great. Great things can come from little things, and what is small in the beginning can be immense in the end, just as a spark is enough to set a mountain on fire, and even the whole world [Jas. 3:5]. And they should never assure themselves that, since their attachment is small, they will break away from it in the future even if they do not do so immediately. If they do not have the courage to uproot it when it is small and in its first stages, how do they think and presume they will have the ability to do so when it becomes greater and more deeply rooted? Especially since our Lord affirms in the Gospel that the one who is unfaithful in little things will also be unfaithful in great things [Lk. 16:10]. Those who avoid small attachments will not fall into greater ones. But there is serious harm in little matters since through them the harm has already passed beyond the enclosure wall of the heart. And as the saying goes: Once begun, half done. Accordingly, David warns us that even though riches abound we must not set our heart on them [Ps. 62:10].

2. Even if human beings do not free their heart of joy in temporal goods for the sake of God and the demands of Christian perfection, they ought to do so because of the resulting temporal advantages, prescinding from the spiritual ones. By liberating themselves from joy in temporal goods, they not only free themselves from the pestiferous kinds of harm we mentioned in the preceding chapters, but in addition acquire the virtue of liberality. Liberality is one of God’s principal attributes and can in no way coexist with covetousness.

Moreover, they acquire liberty of spirit, clarity of reason, rest, tranquility, peaceful confidence in God, and, in their will, the true cult and homage of God. They obtain more joy and recreation in creatures through the dispossession of them. They cannot rejoice in them if they behold them with possessiveness, for this is a care that, like a trap, holds the spirit to earth and does not allow wideness of heart [2 Cor. 6:11].

In detachment from things they acquire a clearer knowledge of them and a better understanding of both natural and supernatural truths concerning them. Their joy, consequently, in these temporal goods is far different from the joy of one who is attached to them, and they receive great benefits and advantages from their joy. They delight in these goods according to the truth of them, but those who are attached delight according to what is false in them; they delight in the best, the attached delight in the worst; they delight in the substance of them, those sensibly attached delight in the accidents. The senses cannot grasp or attain to more than the accidents, whereas the spirit, purged of the clouds and appearances of the accidents, penetrates the truth and value of things, which is the object of the spirit. Joy, then, clouds the judgment like a mist. For there can be no voluntary joy over creatures without voluntary possessiveness, just as there can be no joy, insofar as it is a passion, unaccompanied by habitual possessiveness of heart. The denial and purgation of such joy leaves the judgment as clear as the air when vapors vanish.

3. Those, then, whose joy is unpossessive of things rejoice in them all as though they possessed them all; those others, beholding them with a possessive mind, lose all the delight of them all in general. The former, as St. Paul states, though they have nothing in their heart, possess everything with greater liberty [2 Cor. 6:10]; the others, insofar as they possess things with attachment, neither have nor possess anything. Rather, their heart is held by things and they suffer as a captive. As many as are the joys they long to uncover in creatures, so many will necessarily be the straits and afflictions of their attached and possessed heart.

Cares do not molest the detached, neither in prayer nor outside it, and thus, losing no time, such people easily store up an abundance of spiritual good. Yet those who are attached spend all their time going to and fro about the snare to which their heart is tied, and even with effort they can hardly free themselves for a short while from this snare of thinking about and finding joy in the object to which their heart is attached.

At the first movement of joy toward things, the spiritual person ought to curb it, remembering the principle we are here following: There is nothing worthy of a person's joy save the service of God and the procurement of his honor and glory in all things. One should seek this alone in the use of things, turning away from vanity and concern for one's own delight and consolation.

4. There is another exceptional and principal benefit of detachment from joy in creatures: freedom of the heart for God. With this the soul is disposed for all the favors God will grant it. Without it, he does not bestow them. The favors are such that for each joy the soul renounces out of love of God and evangelical perfection, it will receive a hundredfold in this life, as promised in the Gospel [Mt. 19:29; Mk. 10:30].

Even if such gains were not to be had, the spiritual person would have to quell these joys because of the displeasure given to God through them. In the Gospel we see that merely because the rich man rejoiced in having stored up goods for many years God was so angered he told him he must give an account of his soul that very night [Lk. 12:20].

We should believe, therefore, that as often as we rejoice vainly, God is watching and planning some chastisement and bitter drink according to our merits; for at times the sadness redounding from the joy is a hundred times greater than the joy. What St. John says of Babylon in the Apocalypse is true, that she would receive torment in the measure in which she rejoiced and lived in delights [Rv. 18:7]. Yet the text does not mean that the sadness will not be greater than the joy. It shall be greater, since eternal torments are inflicted for brief pleasures. But it indicates that no fault will escape a particular punishment. For he who will punish the idle word will not pardon vain joy [Mt. 12:36].

## **LAUDATO SI':**

**LS 2.** This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she “groans in travail” (*Rom 8:22*). We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. *Gen 2:7*); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters.

**LS 5.** Saint John Paul II became increasingly concerned about this issue. In his first Encyclical he warned that human beings frequently seem “to see no other meaning in their natural environment than what serves for immediate use and consumption”. Subsequently, he would call for a global ecological *conversion*. At the same time, he noted that little effort had been made to “safeguard the moral conditions for an authentic *human ecology*”. The destruction of the human environment is extremely serious, not only because God has entrusted the world to us men and women, but because human life is itself a gift which must be defended from various forms of debasement. Every effort to protect and improve our world entails profound changes in “lifestyles, models of production and consumption, and the established structures of power which today govern societies”. Authentic human development has a moral character. It presumes full respect for the human person, but it must also be concerned for the world around us and “take into account the nature of each being and of its mutual connection in an ordered system”. Accordingly, our human ability to transform reality must proceed in line with God's original gift of all that is.

**LS 6.** My predecessor Benedict XVI likewise proposed “eliminating the structural causes of the dysfunctions of the world economy and correcting models of growth which have proved incapable of ensuring respect for the environment”. He observed that the world cannot be analyzed by isolating only one of its aspects, since “the book of nature is one and indivisible”, and includes the environment, life, sexuality, the family, social relations, and so forth. It follows that “the deterioration of nature is closely connected to the culture which shapes human coexistence”. Pope Benedict asked us to recognize that the natural environment has been gravely damaged by our irresponsible behaviour.

**LS 67.** We are not God. The earth was here before us and it has been given to us. This allows us to respond to the charge that Judaeo-Christian thinking, on the basis of the Genesis account which grants man “dominion” over the earth (cf. *Gen* 1:28), has encouraged the unbridled exploitation of nature by painting him as domineering and destructive by nature. This is not a correct interpretation of the Bible as understood by the Church. Although it is true that we Christians have at times incorrectly interpreted the Scriptures, nowadays we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God’s image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures. The biblical texts are to be read in their context, with an appropriate hermeneutic, recognizing that they tell us to “till and keep” the garden of the world (cf. *Gen* 2:15). “Tilling” refers to cultivating, ploughing or working, while “keeping” means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving. This implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature. Each community can take from the bounty of the earth whatever it needs for subsistence, but it also has the duty to protect the earth and to ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations. “The earth is the Lord’s” (*Ps* 24:1); to him belongs “the earth with all that is within it” (*Dt* 10:14). Thus God rejects every claim to absolute ownership: “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me” (*Lev* 25:23).

**LS 115.** Modern anthropocentrism has paradoxically ended up prizing technical thought over reality, since “the technological mind sees nature as an insensate order, as a cold body of facts, as a mere ‘given’, as an object of utility, as raw material to be hammered into useful shape; it views the cosmos similarly as a mere ‘space’ into which objects can be thrown with complete indifference”. The intrinsic dignity of the world is thus compromised. When human beings fail to find their true place in this world, they misunderstand themselves and end up acting against themselves: “Not only has God given the earth to man, who must use it with respect for the original good purpose for which it was given, but, man too is God’s gift to man. He must therefore respect the natural and moral structure with which he has been endowed”.

**LS 116.** Modernity has been marked by an excessive anthropocentrism which today, under another guise, continues to stand in the way of shared understanding and of any effort to strengthen social bonds. The time has come to pay renewed attention to reality and the limits it imposes; this in turn is the condition for a more sound and fruitful development of individuals and society. An inadequate presentation of Christian anthropology gave rise to a wrong understanding of the relationship between human beings and the world. Often, what was handed on was a Promethean vision of mastery over the world, which gave the impression that the protection of nature was something that only the faint-hearted cared about. Instead, our “dominion” over the universe should be understood more properly in the sense of responsible stewardship.

## Questions

- . John of the Cross warns against seeking satisfaction or enlightenment in created things rather than in God Himself. How might this spiritual attitude help us to view creation not as a resource to be exploited, but as a gratuitous gift to be received in faith?
- . In what ways could the ascetic path proposed by John of the Cross become a spiritual foundation for supporting an authentic integral ecology, as presented in *Laudato Si'*?
- . What does it truly mean to “receive creation as a gift”? How does this change the way we look at it, use it, or even speak about it within our communities?
- . In the third book of the *Ascent*, chapter 20, John of the Cross states that the disordered possession of things darkens the soul. *Laudato Si'* (n. 115) critiques a mentality of domination over nature. In what way does material possession become a form of interior domination? And how can one be freed from it? John of the Cross calls us to “appropriate nothing”, not even spiritual gifts. How might this logic of non-attachment be applied concretely to our relationship with creation today?
- . How can a religious community live a lifestyle that is at once simple, contemplative, and committed? What guidance do these two texts offer for reflecting on our way of consuming, praying, engaging, and dwelling in the world?



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