



Saint John  
of the Cross  
2026

# St. John of the Cross and Creation

## Reading the Writings of John of the Cross

### Text 5 : The 'Awakening' of Creation

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 passage is something of a synthesis of the previous texts, yet raised to an admirable theological, spiritual, and poetic height. It is taken from *The Living Flame of Love*. Here the person at prayer, like Moses before the “burning bush”, experiences that both he himself and all creation are set ablaze by the fire of the Holy Spirit without being destroyed. On the contrary, both are caught up into the “awakening” (the Resurrection) of Christ the Bridegroom, who breathes out the Holy Spirit as a man breathes upon waking.

To understand this sublime text properly, we must remember that John of the Cross bases his songs and the doctrine that flows from them on his own reading of the Fathers of the Church—particularly their allegorical interpretation of Moses and the burning bush. Their interpretation is as follows: Moses, once the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter and therefore a prince, is forced to flee into the desert, where he becomes the shepherd-servant of a wealthy landowner. Moses has fallen down the whole social ladder. As we learn from the story of Joseph, who was sold by his brothers, the Egyptians despised the occupation of shepherd.

Thus, it is in a situation of extreme poverty (the status of shepherd, the bareness of the desert, and the insignificance of a mere bush) that God reveals himself to Moses. This poverty is not destroyed by the divine presence; it is taken up and loved, for the burning bush is not consumed. In this theophany within the poverty of a bush, the Fathers saw in turn: Mary, whose virginity is not destroyed by the fire of the Holy Spirit but embraced by him in the mystery of the Incarnation; the Eucharist, whose appearances of bread and wine are not destroyed by the fire of the Holy Spirit but transubstantiated by him; and of course Christ himself, not destroyed but raised up by the Holy Spirit. They also saw in the burning bush our own soul (the person at prayer), which is not destroyed by the presence of the Spirit's fire of love but transformed into that very same fire of love.

It is this final interpretation that John of the Cross uses in his poem and commentary on *The Living Flame of Love*, from which the following quotations are taken. In this poem of only four stanzas, John of the Cross first emphasises that the “flame of love wounds me in the deepest centre of the soul” (LF 1,1.2.3), and that this flame “is no longer painful now” (LF 1,4). This absence of bitterness signifies that spiritual purification is complete: the soul, now a new bush, is not “destroyed” but transformed in the fire of the Holy Spirit, who now meets within it no resistance (“bitterness”) to this love, for he can now act in the “deepest centre of the soul” (LF 1,3).

The verses and commentaries that follow for our meditation are taken from stanza 4. This final stanza sings of the fact that, since the Holy Spirit can now act freely within the soul, the soul—within the fire of the Spirit—experiences the presence of the risen Christ, a new bush “awakened” (raised) by this same Spirit. But because this spiritual awakening of Christ in the soul is the awakening of the Creator Word, John of the Cross notes beautifully in his commentary that it is at the same time the awakening of all creation. In giving himself to the “soul” (the person in the intimacy of prayer), the Incarnate Word gives, at the same time, the whole of creation.

## **THE LIVING FLAME OF LOVE B 4,1-5.14-15**

*How gently and lovingly  
you wake in my heart,  
where in secret you dwell alone;  
and in your sweet breathing,  
filled with good and glory,  
how tenderly you swell my heart with love.*

### COMMENTARY

1. The soul here addresses its Bridegroom with deep love, esteeming him and thanking him for two admirable effects sometimes produced by him through this union, noting also the manner in which each is wrought, as well as another effect that overflows in it from this union.
2. The first effect is an awakening of God in the soul, brought about in gentleness and love. The second is the breathing of God within it, and this is brought about through the good and glory communicated to it in this breathing. And what overflows in it is its being tenderly and delicately inspired with love.
3. And thus it is as though the soul were to say: How gentle and loving (that is, extremely loving and gentle) is your awakening, O Bridegroom Word, in the center and depth of my soul, which is its pure and intimate substance, in which secretly and silently, as its only lord, you dwell alone, not only as in your house, nor only as in your bed, but also as in my own heart, intimately and closely united to it. And how delicately you captivate me and arouse my affections toward you in the sweet breathing you produce in this awakening, a breathing delightful to me and full of good and glory. The soul uses this comparison because its experience here is similar to that of one who on awakening breathes deeply. The verses follow:

*How gently and lovingly  
you wake in my heart,*

4. There are many kinds of awakening that God effects in the soul, so many that we would never finish explaining them all. Yet this awakening of the Son of God that the soul wishes to refer to here is one of the most elevated and beneficial. For this awakening is a movement of the Word in the substance of the soul, containing such grandeur, dominion, glory, and intimate sweetness that it seems to the soul that all the balsams and fragrant spices and flowers of the world are commin-

gled, stirred, and shaken so as to yield their sweet odor, and all the kingdoms and dominions of the world and all the powers and virtues of heaven are moved; not only this, but it also seems that all the virtues and substances and perfections and graces of every created thing glow and make the same movement all at once.

Since, as St. John says, all things in him are life [Jn. 1:3-4], and in him they live and are and move, as the Apostle declares [Acts 17:28], it follows that when, within the soul, this great Emperor moves (whose principality, as Isaiah says, he bears on his shoulders [Is. 9:6] – which consists of the three spheres, celestial, terrestrial, and infernal [Phil. 2:10], and the things contained in them – upholding them all, as St. Paul says [Heb. 1:3], with the word of his power), all things seem to move in unison.

This happens in the same manner as when at the movement of the earth all material things in it move as though they were nothing. So it is when this Prince moves, who himself carries his court, instead of his court carrying him.

5. Even this comparison is most inadequate; for in this awakening they not only seem to move, but they all likewise disclose the beauties of their being, power, loveliness, and graces, and the root of their duration and life. For the soul is conscious of how all creatures, earthly and heavenly, have their life, duration, and strength in him, and it clearly realizes what he says in the Book of Proverbs: *By me kings reign and princes rule and the mighty exercise justice and understand it* [Prv. 8: 1 5-16]. Although it is indeed aware that these things are distinct from God, insofar as they have created being, nonetheless what it understands of God, by his being all these things with infinite eminence, is such that it knows these things better in God's being than in themselves.

And here lies the remarkable delight of this awakening: The soul knows creatures through God and not God through creatures. This amounts to knowing the effects through their cause and not the cause through its effects. The latter is knowledge *a posteriori*, and the former is essential knowledge.

[...]

*where in secret you dwell alone;*

14. The soul says he dwells in its heart in secret because this sweet embrace is wrought in the depths of its substance.

It should be known that God dwells secretly in all souls and is hidden in their substance, for otherwise they would not last. Yet there is a difference, a great difference, in his dwelling in them. In some souls he dwells alone, and in others he does not dwell alone. Abiding in some he is pleased; and in others, he is displeased. He lives in some as though in his own house, commanding and ruling everything; and in others as though a stranger in a strange house, where they do not permit him to give orders or do anything.

It is in the soul in which less of its own appetites and pleasures dwell where he dwells more alone, more pleased, and more as though in his own house, ruling and governing it. And he dwells more in secret, the more he dwells alone. Thus in this soul in which neither any appetite nor other images or forms nor any affections for created things dwell, the Beloved dwells secretly with an embrace so much closer, more intimate and interior, the purer and more alone the soul is to everything other than God. His dwelling is in secret, then, because the devil cannot reach the area of this embrace, nor can the human intellect understand how it occurs.

Yet it is not secret to the soul itself that has attained this perfection, for within itself it has the experience of this intimate embrace. It does not, however, always experience these awakenings; for when the Beloved produces them, it seems to the soul that he is awakening in its heart, where before he remained as though asleep. Although it was experiencing and enjoying him, this took place as with a loved one who is asleep, for knowledge and love are not communicated mutually while one is still asleep.

15. Oh, how happy is this soul, which ever experiences God resting and reposing within it! Oh, how fitting it is for it to withdraw from things, flee from business matters, and live in immense tranquility, so that it may not, even with the slightest speck of dust or noise, disturb or trouble its heart where the Beloved dwells. He is usually there, in this embrace with his bride, as though asleep in the substance of the soul. And it is very well aware of him and ordinarily enjoys him. Were he always awake within it, communicating knowledge and love, it would already be in glory. For if, when he does waken, scarcely opening his eyes, he has such an effect on the soul, what would things be like were he ordinarily in it fully awake?

## **LAUDATO SI':**

**LS 80.** Creating a world in need of development, God in some way sought to limit himself in such a way that many of the things we think of as evils, dangers or sources of suffering, are in reality part of the pains of childbirth which he uses to draw us into the act of cooperation with the Creator. God is intimately present to each being, without impinging on the autonomy of his creature, and this gives rise to the rightful autonomy of earthly affairs. His divine presence, which ensures the subsistence and growth of each being, “continues the work of creation”. The Spirit of God has filled the universe with possibilities and therefore, from the very heart of things, something new can always emerge: “Nature is nothing other than a certain kind of art, namely God’s art, impressed upon things, whereby those things are moved to a determinate end. It is as if a shipbuilder were able to give timbers the wherewithal to move themselves to take the form of a ship”.

**LS 220.** This conversion calls for a number of attitudes which together foster a spirit of generous care, full of tenderness. First, it entails gratitude and gratuitousness, a recognition that the world is God’s loving gift, and that we are called quietly to imitate his generosity in self-sacrifice and good works: “Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing ... and your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Mt 6:3-4). It also entails a loving awareness that we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures, but joined in a splendid universal communion. As believers, we do not look at the world from without but from within, conscious of the bonds with which the Father has linked us to all beings.

**LS 225.** On the other hand, no one can cultivate a sober and satisfying life without being at peace with him or herself. An adequate understanding of spirituality consists in filling out what we mean by peace, which is much more than the absence of war. Inner peace is closely related to care for ecology and for the common good because, lived out authentically, it is reflected in a balanced lifestyle together with a capacity for wonder which takes us to a deeper understanding of life. Nature is filled with words of love, but how can we listen to them amid constant noise, interminable and nerve-wracking distractions, or the cult of appearances? Many people today sense a profound imbalance which drives them to frenetic activity and makes them feel busy, in a constant hurry which in turn leads them to ride rough-shod over everything around them. This too affects how they treat the environment. An integral ecology includes taking time to recover a serene harmony with creation, reflecting on our lifestyle and our ideals, and contemplating the Creator who lives among us and surrounds us, whose presence “must not be contrived but found, uncovered”.

**LS 226.** We are speaking of an attitude of the heart, one which approaches life with serene attentiveness, which is capable of being fully present to someone without thinking of what comes next, which accepts each moment as a gift from God to be lived to the full. Jesus taught us this attitude when he invited us to contemplate the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, or when seeing the rich young man and knowing his restlessness, “he looked at him with love” (Mk 10:21). He was completely present to everyone and to everything, and in this way he showed us the way to overcome that unhealthy anxiety which makes us superficial, aggressive and compulsive consumers.

## Questions

- . Why does Pope Francis insist that the ecological crisis is also a spiritual one (nos. 80 and 220)? How does this resonate with the theology of John of the Cross?
- . In *The Living Flame*, divine love burns away selfishness: how might this inspire a more responsible love for the earth (*Laudato Si'*, no. 226)?
- . Both mystical contemplation (*The Living Flame*) and integral ecology (*Laudato Si'*) demand a docility to the Holy Spirit. How can we discern his action in order to act coherently? And how can we ensure that prayer and union with God do not become forms of escape, but are instead driving forces for protecting creation?
- . Discussion in the light of our vows (our promises for OCDS):
- . How can our religious poverty, lived under the guidance of the Spirit, become a prophetic witness in the face of destructive consumerism?
- . In what way does our consecrated chastity, as a fruit of the Spirit, enable us to live a freer and more respectful relationship with creation?
- . How can our obedience to the Spirit lead us to a deeper commitment to the demands of safeguarding our common home?



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