



Saint John
of the Cross
2026

St. John of the Cross and Creation

Reading the Writings of John of the Cross

Text 6: Creation drawn from nothingness

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

Having considered the preceding texts of mystical character, we may now approach the ascetical teaching of St John of the Cross. Indeed, it was fitting to begin with the goal pursued by our author—namely, the knowledge of creation that flows from the search for God and then union with Him—before considering the means of attaining this end: *detachment*, a central term in the doctrine of St John of the Cross, but one that must be properly understood, together with the notion of *nothingness*, lest we fall into regrettable misinterpretations.

In the following text, St John of the Cross sets in parallel the infinity of the Creator and the finitude of creation, drawn from nothingness. From this he draws an uncompromising metaphysical and existential conclusion: to unite oneself (through *knowledge* and above all *love*) to creation apart from any relationship with the Creator is to diminish our being, which is made to unite with the Infinite, and thus to deprive it of creation itself—creation being the finite message and image of the divine Infinite.

The argumentative framework of the mystical Doctor is based on the philosophy and theology of the “analogy of being”. This expression means that the resemblance between created being and the Being of the Creator is finite and limited, like the creature itself; but the difference, on the other hand, is infinite, like God Himself.

Let us take an example: an apple is “beautiful” and “good”, and, as the Franciscan theologians especially teach, the whole of creation is in the image of God. Therefore, the “beauty” and “goodness” of the apple (which is a being limited in time and space) tell me something of the “Beauty” and “Goodness” of God. But, since God is limited neither by time (He is eternal) nor by space (He is infinite), the distance between the apple’s “beauty–goodness” and the “Beauty–Goodness” of God is infinite.

From these considerations it is easy to understand that only the apple (to continue the same example, though the point applies to all creation) is suited (“proportioned”, as John of the Cross would say) to my capacity to “know” and “love”, since I myself am limited in time and space (that is, this concerns natural knowledge and love). It is equally easy to understand that I am not suited (“not proportioned”) to “know” and “love” the infinite and eternal divine. This is why only the welcoming within me, through faith, of God’s self-communication in Jesus Christ can allow me this supernatural “loving knowledge” (cf. *Ascent of Mount Carmel* II, 9).

Thus, to make absolute any creature to the point of directing towards it my desire for the infinite (a desire inherent in every human person) is to prevent myself from receiving the divine Infinite. This is what our mystical Doctor calls “attachments”.

There is more. Since creation is not eternal (for it had a beginning), it follows that it is created from no pre-existing “something”. Therefore, to cling to a creature is to tend towards nothingness. For the desire for the infinite and eternal that is within us can only be lost, annihilated, in the created order, which by its nature does not possess it.

Here we arrive at a proper understanding of St John’s doctrine concerning “attachment” to creation and its “nothingness”. To be detached from creation means, for our mystical Doctor, to receive it as a gift from God, who, through the gift itself, invites us to turn towards Him—just as a fiancé who offers a ring to his fiancée. In this metaphor of the engaged couple, attachment would mean appropriating the ring while turning away from the fiancé. But since in this case the fiancé is the Creator (and therefore not drawn from nothingness), to do so is to leave the Absolute for nothingness itself.

Within this perspective, creation, as a gift, takes on a remarkable value—one far exceeding even the most legitimate ecological considerations—namely, that a simple finite creature can be for us a bearer of the infinite divine presence. Everything depends on our attitude, which John of the Cross seeks to educate and God to purify.

The right attitude, which John of the Cross teaches throughout his work, is to make use of creation as a “springboard” towards the Creator. At least in the beginning; for, as we saw in the preceding texts, although at first one goes *to* God through creation, little by little this creation will be seen *in* God, until it ultimately becomes an experience *of* God and *of* creation inseparably, in virtue of the Incarnation and its sacramental extension, but without any pantheistic confusion.

To conclude this introduction, let us emphasise that with all these reasonings—and with the text that follows—we stand fully within the biblical theme of *idolatry*: forsaking the Creator for the creature. Finally, it is important to note that turning away from the creature in order to go directly to the Creator *without it* (throwing away the fiancé’s ring) represents the pride of a human nature that wishes to behave like an angel—and a fallen one at that—for such an attitude turns us away from the mystery of the Incarnation, which depends upon that of creation. Such an approach would stand in complete opposition to the doctrine of St John of the Cross.

THE ASCENT OF MOUNT CARMEL (Book One 4, 1-4):

1. The necessity to pass through this dark night (the mortification of the appetites and denial of pleasure in all things) to attain divine union with God arises from the fact that all of a person’s attachments to creatures are pure darkness in God’s sight. Clothed in these affections, people are incapable of the enlightenment and dominating fullness of God’s pure and simple light; first they must reject them. There can be no concordance between light and darkness; as St. John says: *Tenebrae eam no comprehenderunt* (The darkness could not receive the light) [Jn. 1:5].

2. The reason, as we learn in philosophy, is that two contraries cannot coexist in the same subject. Darkness, an attachment to creatures, and light, which is God, are contraries and bear no likeness toward each other, as St. Paul teaches in his letter to the Corinthians: *Quae convention lucis ad tenebras?* (What con-

formity is there between light and darkness?) [2 Cor. 6: 1 4] Consequently, the light of divine union cannot be established in the soul until these affections are eradicated.

3. For a better proof of this, it ought to be kept in mind that an attachment to a creature makes a person equal to that creature; the stronger the attachment, the closer is the likeness to the creature and the greater the equality, for love effects a likeness between the lover and the loved. As a result David said of those who set their hearts on their idols: *Similes illis jiant qui Jaciunt ea, et omnes qui conjidunt in eis* (Let all who set their hearts on them become like them) [Ps. 1 15:8]. Anyone who loves a creature, then, is as low as that creature and in some way even lower because love not only equates but even subjects the lover to the loved creature.

By the mere fact that a soul loves something, it becomes incapable of pure union and transformation in God; for the lowness of the creature is far less capable of the height of the Creator than is darkness of light.

All creatures of heaven and earth are nothing when compared to God, As Jeremiah points out: *Aspexi terram, et ecce vacua erat et nihil; et caelos, et non erat lux in eis* (I looked at the earth, and it was empty and nothing; and at the heavens, and I saw they had no light) [Jer. 4:23]. By saying that he saw an empty earth, he meant that all its creatures were nothing and that the earth too was nothing. In stating that he looked up to the heavens and beheld no light, he meant that all the heavenly luminaries were pure darkness in comparison to God. All creatures considered in this way are nothing, and a person's attachments to them are less than nothing since these attachments are an impediment to and deprive the soul of transformation in God—just as darkness is nothing and less than nothing since it is a privation of light. One who is in darkness does not comprehend the light, so neither will a person attached to creatures be able to comprehend God. Until a soul is purged of its attachments it will be unable to possess God, neither here below through the pure transformation of love nor in heaven through the beatific vision. For the sake of greater clarity we will be more specific.

4. We just asserted that all the being of creatures compared to the infinite being of God is nothing and that, therefore, anyone attached to creatures is nothing in the sight of God, and even less than nothing because love causes equality and likeness and even brings the lover lower than the loved object. In no way, then, is such a person capable of union with the infinite being of God. There is no likeness between what is not and what is. To be particular, here are some examples.

All the beauty of creatures compared to the infinite beauty of God is the height of ugliness. As Solomon says in Proverbs: *Fallax gratia, et vana est pulchritudo* (Comeliness is deceiving and beauty vain) [Prv. 31:30]. So a person attached to the beauty of any creature is extremely ugly in God's sight. A soul so unsightly is incapable of transformation into the beauty that is God because ugliness does not attain to beauty.

All the grace and elegance of creatures compared to God's grace is utter coarseness and crudity. That is why a person captivated by this grace and elegance of creatures becomes highly coarse and crude in God's sight. Someone like this is incapable of the infinite grace and beauty of God because of the extreme difference between the coarse and the infinitely elegant.

Compared to the infinite goodness of God, all the goodness of the creatures of the world can be called wickedness. Nothing is good save God only [Lk. 18:19]. Those who set their hearts on the good things of the world become extremely wicked in the sight of God. Since wickedness does not comprehend goodness, such persons will be incapable of union with God, who is supreme goodness.

All the world's wisdom and human ability compared to the infinite wisdom of God is pure and utter ignorance, as St. Paul writes to the Corinthians: *Sapientia hujus mundi stultitia est apud Deum* (The wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight) [1 Cor. 3:19].

LAUDATO SI':

LS 70. In the story of Cain and Abel, we see how envy led Cain to commit the ultimate injustice against his brother, which in turn ruptured the relationship between Cain and God, and between Cain and the earth from which he was banished. This is seen clearly in the dramatic exchange between God and Cain. God asks: "Where is Abel your brother?" Cain answers that he does not know, and God persists: "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground" (Gen 4:9-11). Disregard for the duty to cultivate and maintain a proper relationship with my neighbour, for whose care and custody I am responsible, ruins my relationship with my own self, with others, with God and with the earth.

LS 74. The experience of the Babylonian captivity provoked a spiritual crisis which led to deeper faith in God. Now his creative omnipotence was given pride of place in order to exhort the people to regain their hope in the midst of their wretched predicament. Centuries later, in another age of trial and persecution, when the Roman Empire was seeking to impose absolute dominion, the faithful would once again find consolation and hope in a growing trust in the all-powerful God: "Great and wonderful are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways!" (Rev 15:3). The God who created the universe out of nothing can also intervene in this world and overcome every form of evil. Injustice is not invincible.

LS 122. A misguided anthropocentrism leads to a misguided lifestyle. In the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, I noted that the practical relativism typical of our age is "even more dangerous than doctrinal relativism". When human beings place themselves at the centre, they give absolute priority to immediate convenience and all else becomes relative.

LS 203. Since the market tends to promote extreme consumerism in an effort to sell its products, people can easily get caught up in a whirlwind of needless buying and spending. Compulsive consumerism is one example of how the techno-economic paradigm affects individuals. Romano Guardini had already foreseen this: "The gadgets and technics forced upon him by the patterns of machine production and of abstract planning mass man accepts quite simply; they are the forms of life itself. To either a greater or lesser degree mass man is convinced that his conformity is both reasonable and just". This paradigm leads people to believe that they are free as long as they have the supposed freedom to consume. But those really free are the minority who wield economic and financial power.

LS 204. The current global situation engenders a feeling of instability and uncertainty, which in turn becomes "a seedbed for collective selfishness". When people become self-centred and self-enclosed, their greed increases. The emptier a person's heart is, the more he or she needs things to buy, own and consume. It becomes almost impossible to accept the limits imposed by reality. In this horizon, a genuine sense of the common good also disappears.

LS 223. Such sobriety, when lived freely and consciously, is liberating. It is not a lesser life or one lived with less intensity. On the contrary, it is a way of living life to the full. In reality, those who enjoy more and live better each moment are those who have given up dipping here and there, always on the look-out for what they do not have. They experience what it means to appreciate each person and each thing, learning familiarity with the simplest things and how to enjoy them. So they are able to shed unsatisfied needs, reducing their obsessiveness and weariness. Even living on little, they can live a lot, above all when they cultivate other pleasures and find satisfaction in fraternal encounters, in service, in developing their gifts, in music and art, in contact with nature, in prayer. Happiness means knowing how to limit some needs which only diminish us, and being open to the many different possibilities which life can offer.

Questions

- . John of the Cross writes that any disordered enjoyment of created things is an obstacle to union with God (1 MC 4,1-2). How does this requirement of detachment echo Pope Francis's call for a "joyful sobriety" (LS 223)?
- . *Laudato Si'* (no. 204) speaks of a sober way of life as an act of freedom and not as a form of deprivation. How does this sobriety correspond to John of the Cross's idea of inner freedom through detachment? Can living with less truly open us to more? How can the moderate and respectful use of material goods become a spiritual path towards God, in the light of these two texts?
- . *Laudato Si'* (no. 74) reminds us that the goods of the earth are destined for all. How does this principle of justice correspond, on another level, to the personal stripping-away advocated by John of the Cross? Does voluntary poverty also have a social dimension? In a world marked by consumption and accumulation, how can the two texts inspire a more prophetic religious life, embodying another way of dwelling upon the earth?



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