

“O Sweet Cautery”: John of the Cross and the Healing of the Natural World

MARY FROHLICH, RSCJ
Catholic Theological Union at Chicago

Contrary to what may appear in a superficial understanding of his spirituality, John of the Cross strongly affirms the goodness of creation and its capacity to mediate the presence of God. He specifically identifies the web of mutual interactions among creatures as a primary manifestation of divine love, and he affirms that the more a person participates in God, the more he or she participates fully and joyfully in this community of creatures. Activation of creation's full capacity to mediate divinity, however, depends on the full fruition of the human person in God. Experientially, this involves a lengthy process of a back-and-forth rhythm between the glimpse of God in creation and the complete renunciation of dependence on creaturely knowledge in favor of faith. John's writings invite us to participate in the healing of the natural world by pursuing this contemplative rhythm all the way to its fruitional climax.

Keywords: John of the Cross, ecospirituality, contemplative transformation, theology of creation, deep incarnation, healing

THE context of this article is a desire to clarify for myself and others how our Christian contemplative traditions—specifically, in this case, the writings of John of the Cross—can contribute to the healing of our deeply threatened planetary natural systems.¹ Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'* devotes a paragraph to John of the Cross, presenting him as an eminent example of the mystical awareness of God's intimate presence within each created being.² A close study of John of the Cross will reveal that he goes

¹ I am deeply grateful to the three anonymous reviewers of this article, whose comments have helped to improve it greatly.

² Pope Francis, *On Care for Our Common Home: Laudato Si'* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2015), §234.

Mary Frohlich, RSCJ, is Associate Professor of Spirituality at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. She has published articles on Carmelite spirituality, ecospirituality, and method for the study of spirituality in such venues as Spiritus, Theological Studies, Spirituality, The Way, and New Theology Review, as well as in various books and compendiums.

even further, asserting that this mystical transformation is not simply an interior experience but also radiates forth as a healing of earthly creation and even the whole cosmos.

In Romans 8:19 we read that “creation awaits with eager longing the revelation of the sons [and daughters] of God.” Paul proposes that all creation will be freed from its “futility” when humans enter into the “glory” that is meant to be ours as children of God.³ Brendan Byrne notes that in this text, “Paul presupposes a Jewish tradition which saw the non-human created world as intimately bound up with the fate of human beings.”⁴ This article examines a similar idea that emerges within John of the Cross’ presentation of spiritual development. John describes the whole creation as the “bride” of Christ,⁵ and says that when the human soul is touched by God in its most intimate center, “seemingly there flow seas of loving fire within it, reaching to the heights and depths of the earthly and heavenly spheres, imbuing all with love.”⁶ While it is self-evident that neither the author of Romans nor John of the Cross was thinking about topics such as ecology, evolution, or environmental devastation as we understand these today, I will argue that in our time it is crucial for us to reclaim and develop this intuitive insight into how the spiritual transformation of human beings redounds concretely to the healing of the natural world.

Interpreting John of the Cross

Juan de Yepes y Alvarez (1542–91) grew up in great poverty after his father—who had been rejected by his wealthy family because he married a poor woman for love—died while John and his two older brothers were still young. At age twenty-one John entered the Carmelites in Medina, Spain, and was sent to the University of Salamanca for studies. Shortly after being ordained to the priesthood in 1567, he met Teresa de Jesús (a.k.a. Saint

³ The Bible edition I have used is Donald Senior, John J. Collins, and Mary Ann Getty, eds., *The Catholic Study Bible: The New American Bible*, 2nd ed. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). It is noteworthy that the first biblical quote in *Laudato Si’* is Romans 8:22. In paragraph 2 the pope writes: “The earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she ‘groans in travail.’” (The NAB translation says, “groaning in labor pains.”)

⁴ Brendan Byrne, *Romans*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 256.

⁵ John of the Cross, *Romances*, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991), 63.

⁶ John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, trans., *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, 2.10.

Teresa of Avila) and joined her project of reforming the Carmelite Order. Ten years later, he was imprisoned for nine months in harsh conditions by Carmelites opposing the reform. Extant writings include thirty-three letters, fifteen poems, extensive prose commentaries on some of the poems (*The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, *The Dark Night*, *The Spiritual Canticle*, and *The Living Flame of Love*), and the minor works *Sayings of Light and Love* and *Special Counsels*.⁷

To those who know John of the Cross' life and writings only superficially, he may seem an incongruous choice for a project focusing on care for the natural world. John is far better known for statements such as "A person's attachments to creatures are pure darkness in God's sight. . . . Darkness, an attachment to creatures, and light, which is God, are contraries and bear no likeness toward each other."⁸ "Nada, nada!"⁹ and "dark night"¹⁰ are the two phrases that are most often identified with John of the Cross, and they are generally understood as teaching that the only path to union with God is radical renunciation of concern with the created world. On one level it seems as if the strength of his insistence on the radical difference between relationship with God and relationship with anything created would preclude interpretation of his thought in terms of ecological theology.

The way to a new perspective begins with taking seriously the fact that poetry was the first and most foundational expression of John's spirituality. His prose commentaries interpret the poems using the exegetical methods and Scholastic theological concepts of his time. John himself explicitly acknowledged that his interpretation in the commentaries does not encompass the total meaning of the poetry. Beginning his commentary on the "Spiritual Canticle" poem, he wrote: "It would be foolish to think that expressions of love arising from mystical understanding, like these stanzas, are fully explainable. . . . Since these stanzas, then, were composed in a love flowing from abundant mystical understanding, I cannot explain them adequately, nor is

⁷ The Spanish edition that I have consulted in the course of this writing is Juan de la Cruz, *San Juan de La Cruz: Obras Completas*, ed. José Vicente Rodríguez and Federico Ruiz Salvador, 5th ed. (Madrid: Editorial de Espiritualidad, 1993).

⁸ John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, in Kavanaugh and Rodríguez, trans., *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, 1.4.2.

⁹ This phrase comes from John's "Sketch of Mount Carmel," in which he depicts the most perfect path to the mount as "nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing and even on the Mount nothing." John of the Cross, "Sketch of Mount Carmel," in Kavanaugh and Rodríguez, trans., *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, 110–11.

¹⁰ "The Dark Night" is the title of one of John's most famous poems, as well as of an extensive commentary on the poem. See John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*, in Kavanaugh and Rodríguez, trans., *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*.

it my intention to do so. I only wish to shed some general light on them.”¹¹ John’s commentaries are indispensable for understanding his conceptual world, and they can by no means be lightly dismissed. Nonetheless, the priority of the poetry opens up opportunities to reinterpret his spirituality within very different conceptual worlds.

Another way of putting this is to affirm that while John of the Cross does indeed work with a premodern conceptual framework of the human person’s relationship with God and creation, his central focus is not on this but rather on what we could call “mimetic truth,” particularly as expressed in his poetry. The primary goal of a presentation aimed at mimetic truth is that the reader become transformatively engaged with the phenomenon. Paul Ricoeur has outlined three stages of mimesis, which have elsewhere been summed up as the world behind the text, the world within the text, and the world in front of the text.¹² The world behind the text (mimesis₁) includes everything that has shaped the experience, skill, and mental framework of the author. The world within the text (mimesis₂) is the author’s creative employment of an experience of meaning. The world in front of the text (mimesis₃) is the reader’s creative reception of this story into her or his framework of experiences, concepts, existential drama, and so on. John’s poetry, which resides at the level of mimesis₂, can be received into our very different mental framework (mimesis₃), and, in receiving it, we may discover in it new resonances that John himself would not have been able to articulate explicitly, but which nonetheless are faithful to his account and to his fundamental intention of calling forth new instances of spiritual transformation.

If we read John with our eye focused first on the story-world into which he seduces us, with the abstract conceptual structure of his thought as an adjunct to interpretation rather than as the dominant focus, John’s writings can open up vistas that are remarkably in tune with many aspects of ecological theology. It is also helpful to know that during his lifetime John was well known as a man who paid close attention to the natural world, expounded often upon its beauties, and preferred to pray out of doors (especially at night).¹³ His lived

¹¹ John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Cantic*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, trans., *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, Prologue 1–2.

¹² For a thorough study of the “Spiritual Cantic” poem in terms of this three-pronged mimesis, see David Brian Perrin, *Canciones entre el alma y el esposo of Juan de La Cruz: A Hermeneutical Interpretation* (San Francisco, CA: Catholic Scholars Press, 1996). See also Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Sandra M Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

¹³ See, for example, Crisógono de Jesús Sacramentado, *The Life of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kathleen Pond (London: Longmans, 1958), 67, 130, 161, 166, 196; Federico

approach to asceticism did not reject the natural world, but rather delighted in it and learned from it. Thus when the symbolic nodes of “nada” and “night” are placed back into the totality of John’s imaginative, intellectual, and spiritual world, a profoundly affirmative picture of creation and the natural world emerges.¹⁴

Overview of John’s Imaginative and Conceptual World

In the poetic world of John’s mysticism, in fact, creation is a love story. This bears repeating: for John, God’s cosmic act of creating all things, and God’s ongoing act of creating each individual existing thing, are nothing more and nothing less than a vast romance of Lover and Beloved. The implications of the story can be seen most clearly expressed in one of John’s lesser-known works, a set of poems called “Romances” in which he meditates on John 1:1, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God.” Here is an excerpt:¹⁵

“My Son, I wish to give you
a bride who will love you.”
.....
“Let it be done then,” said the Father,
for your love has deserved it.
And by these words
the world was created,
a palace for the bride
made with great wisdom
and divided into rooms,
one above, the other below.
.....

Ruiz, ed., *God Speaks in the Night: The Life, Times, and Teaching of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 2000), 259, 326–27.

¹⁴ On this topic, see Gilbert Azam, “Le monde sensible et son expression dans Saint Jean de La Croix,” *Bulletin de Littérature Ecclésiastique* 90, no. 1 (1989): 23–32; Florentino Bocos, “Las criaturas en el proceso espiritual de San Juan de La Cruz,” in *Jean de La Cruz, espíritu de llama: Estudios con ocasión del cuarto centenario de su muerte (1591–1991)*, ed. Otger Streggink, Studies in Spirituality Supplements 1 (Rome: Institutum Carmelitanum, 1991), 581–96; Francis K Nemeck, *Receptivity* (New York: Vantage, 1985), 17–31; David Brian Perrin, *For Love of the World: The Old and New Self of John of the Cross* (San Francisco, CA: Catholic Scholars Press, 1997).

¹⁵ *Romances*, 62–63.

And though beings and places
 were divided in this way,
 yet all form one,
 who is called the bride;
 for love of the same Bridegroom
 made one bride of them.

In the overflowing love of the divine Persons for one another, the Father creates the world for the Son as a beloved bride who dwells in a gloriously beautiful palace. In the same image, though, John gives context to his statements about the renunciation of creatures when he images the bride’s palace as divided into upper and lower rooms. The lower room is the physical world that we can access through our bodily senses, while the upper room is the angelic realm. Human beings are placed primarily in the lower realm, where God is possessed only in faith and hope. Only those in the upper realm possess God in “gladness.” Still, the intention of God is to raise up all of creation—lower and upper rooms alike—in bridal union “where God’s very joy/ would be her joy. . . taken wholly into God,/ she will live the life of God.”¹⁶

John’s intellectual framework,¹⁷ derived from the type of Scholastic theology that permeated his theological education, included such a two-level universe of the “natural” and the “supernatural.” While for him the human soul is fundamentally a single suppositum,¹⁸ it is created with a similar bilevel structure made up of the “inferior” or sensory faculties (the sense organs and the phantasy) and the “superior” or spiritual faculties (intellect, memory, and will). Normal human knowledge begins with the senses, enters the phantasy as concrete images, is abstracted by the intellect into concepts, and finally attracts or repels the will, which guides the person’s active response. In John’s view, however, authentic knowledge of God requires that this ordinary process be stilled and emptied so that awareness of God can be impressed directly upon the central substance of the soul.

When John’s perspective on the human relationship to creation and the natural world is schematized, what is commonly emphasized is the

¹⁶ Ibid., 64.

¹⁷ The following very brief review of some of John’s explanatory concepts does not, of course, do full justice to all the nuances of his thought. For a fuller account, see Steven Payne, *John of the Cross and the Cognitive Value of Mysticism*, Synthese Historical Library (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishing, 1990), chap. 2.

¹⁸ John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*, 1.4.2; 2.1.1; 2.3.1. The Spanish term John uses is *uno supuesto*. We might also note that the term “soul” as used by John very often could be translated as “whole person” in today’s terminology.

movement of withdrawal. Indeed, John's most important contribution to Christian spirituality may well be the rationale he provides for a radical silencing of the ordinary chatter of the faculties, in order to be open to the transforming touch of God in the center of our being. For John, reliance on the analogy of being—that is, the ways in which our ordinary sensory paths of knowing provide us with some degree of knowledge of God—would be like trying to find our way by the light of a match when instead we can step out into the bright light of the sun. This is why he makes statements like the one quoted at the beginning of this article: "A person's attachments to creatures are pure darkness in God's sight. . . . Darkness, an attachment to creatures, and light, which is God, are contraries and bear no likeness toward each other."¹⁹

Yet as we will discover, fundamentally John does not so much counsel withdrawal from creatures as invite the seeker to rediscover the true reality of all created things in God. Just as in Scholastic thought the intellect participates in the form of what it knows, so in John's view the soul that is touched by God in its very center becomes "God by participation."²⁰ When the soul-bride receives this grace of participation in God, she "sees what God is in himself and what he is in his creatures in only one view, just as one opening the door of a palace beholds in one act the eminence of the person who dwells inside together with what that sovereign is doing."²¹ To the soul in this state, it will seem that "the entire universe is a sea of love in which it is engulfed."²²

The problem, as John sees it, is not that creatures do not bear the image of God; rather, it is that when we approach them on their own level, we are only able to catch this image in winks and hints. The only way to see creatures in their full God-permeated reality is first to come into the fullness of our own God-permeated reality, within which we will discover all things blazing with divine love.²³ When our own souls have been put in order, he asserts, our experience of creatures will be like a return to the Edenic state of innocence, where "all that our first parents saw, spoke of, and ate in the garden of paradise served them for more abundant delight in contemplation."²⁴ The person who is united with God does not feel distaste for creatures, but

¹⁹ John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 1.4.2.

²⁰ John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, 22.3; 39.6.

²¹ John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love*, 4.7.

²² *Ibid.*, 2.10.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 3.26.5.

rather experiences a hundred times more delight in them than is possible for the person who approaches them only on the level of the senses.

Incarnational Theology

Crucially, the hinge of this spirituality of seeing God in creatures is the theology of the Incarnation. John is convinced that it is because the second person of the Trinity entered completely into earthly human life that all created beings, from least to greatest, are infused with divine light. He writes: “Not only by looking at them did [God] communicate natural being and graces, but also, with this image of his Son alone, he clothed them in beauty by imparting to them supernatural being. This he did when he took on our human nature and elevated it in the beauty of God, and consequently all creatures, since in human nature he was united with them all.”²⁵

We can discover some links here to one of the key themes of ecotheology, “deep incarnation.” The term was proposed by Lutheran theologian Niels Gregersen to express the idea that incarnation is not simply an event entering time and space two thousand years ago, but rather is an action of God built into creation from the beginning and penetrating all its aspects.²⁶ Moreover, the flesh of the human Jesus (or for that matter, the flesh of any human being) is not a packet separable from the whole physicality of the Earth and its living systems, but is interconnected with every bit of it. A correlative idea is that of “deep resurrection.”²⁷ If the flesh of Jesus is implicated in every nook and cranny of the Earth—and, ultimately, of the whole cosmos—then the whole creation also bears the promise of being included in the bodily resurrection of Christ.²⁸

While avoiding an anachronistic claim that John of the Cross taught “the same” ideas, we can nonetheless note that John too understands the Incarnation as imbuing the entire created cosmos with a real element of divinity. As we saw above, John’s love story of God and creation climaxes with the bride (all creation) “taken wholly into God, [where] she will live the life of God.”²⁹ A chief difference between John’s thought and that of today’s ecotheology, though, is that John did not have a concept of creation

²⁵ John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, 5.4.

²⁶ Niels Henrik Gregersen, “The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World,” *Dialog* 40, no. 3 (September 2001): 192–207.

²⁷ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 207–10.

²⁸ Strong resonances of this perspective also appear in Pope Francis, *On Care for Our Common Home*, §§100, 243.

²⁹ John of the Cross, *Romances*, 64.

as evolving. Whereas “deep incarnation” highlights a gradual, progressive divine presencing that includes working in and through contingent processes of natural selection and evolution, such a “bottom-up” view would be alien to John’s world. For him, the deifying impact of the Incarnation on creation is eternal rather than progressive. As he wrote in one of his “Sayings of Light and Love”: “The Father spoke one Word, which was his Son, and this Word he speaks always in eternal silence, and in silence must it be heard by the soul.”³⁰

As this saying suggests, the “progressive” element for John is in the human person’s gradual opening to full awareness of, and participation in, divine presence. Ultimately the path is “silence”—the complete silencing of the faculties so as to be available to the eternal touch of God in the substance of the soul. Yet as John’s entire corpus attests, the actual journey to that dazzling consummation is a long and winding process as the soul and all creatures participate in, and are gradually transformed by, their interaction with God and one another. In this process, which clearly involves the contingent aspects of creation, perhaps we can find some links to another key theme of ecological theology, “emergent creation.”

Elizabeth A. Johnson and Denis Edwards³¹ both develop the idea of emergence by drawing on Karl Rahner’s assertion that God created matter with a capacity for self-transcendence—in Johnson’s words, “with an inner tendency, a quiet, powerfully pulsing drive, to become something more.”³² The *creatio continua* of God is the accompaniment of God’s Spirit in the deepest interior of every bit of creation, urging it forward to manifest more fully its character as the dwelling place of God. All created beings, in this view, are empowered to participate with the Spirit in this ongoing emergence of God’s creation.³³ As we go deeper into the exploration of John’s presentation of the progressive process of human spiritual transformation, we can detect similar ideas of “emergence” expressed through his poetic imagery.

The Dance of Transcendence and Immanence in “Spiritual Canticle B”

The “Spiritual Canticle” poem is John’s most fully developed poetic expression of the experience and process of spiritual transformation. There we

³⁰ John of the Cross, *Sayings of Light and Love*, in Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, trans., *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, no. 100.

³¹ Denis Edwards, “Evolution, Emergence and the Creator Spirit: A Conversation with Stuart Kauffman,” *Colloquium* 42, no. 2 (November 1, 2010): 208–30.

³² Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 175.

³³ These perspectives are endorsed, albeit somewhat obliquely, in Pope Francis, *On Care for Our Common Home*, §§79–80.

can discover the core of this process expressed as a kind of dance between the knowledge of the wondrous trace of God in creation and the knowledge that the fullness of God transcends creation. Creation *is* and *is not* divine: the two statements must continually be experienced in dynamic tension, because to hold only one of them without the other is to step out of the dance that can lead to consummation of the love story of creation and God.

John is believed to have written thirty-one verses of the “Spiritual Canticle” in Toledo in 1578, during his nine months of imprisonment by his own Carmelite brothers. As he later shared the poem with others, especially communities of Carmelite sisters, he began to develop a commentary in response to their comments and questions. At various times over the subsequent years John added verses to the poem, rearranged the order of some verses, and formalized his extended commentary. There are three major extant versions of the poem, commonly identified as O (1578); A (including additions between 1578 and 1584); and B (with final additions and rearrangements; exact date uncertain). John’s commentary also exists in two versions, A (on the A version) and B (on the B version, with added material).³⁴ Here I am focusing on his final version of the poem, known as “Spiritual Canticle B.”

The most important literary source of John’s “Spiritual Canticle” is the biblical Song of Songs. John participates in the long tradition of Jewish and Christian interpretation of the erotic imagery of the Song of Songs as telling the story of God’s love for human beings. While Scholastic commentators on the Song of Songs tended to focus on the doctrinal meanings of God’s relationship with the church, John’s approach is more like that of monastic commentators who seek to awaken and inspire spiritual seekers.³⁵ As Colin P. Thompson has shown,³⁶ John was extraordinarily creative in his use of the Song’s imagery and themes, thus demonstrating artistic genius while at the same time modeling a very free spirit in his approach to interpretation.

True to its poetic genre and John’s mimetic purpose, the “Spiritual Canticle” is more evocative and celebratory than precise and explanatory.

³⁴ See Perrin, *Canciones*, 109–21. In the early twentieth century there was some debate on whether the B version was authentic, but that has since been resolved; see Perrin’s note on p. 120. Perrin argues that each of the three versions of the poem deserves to be regarded as a work of art in its own right.

³⁵ Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, 3rd ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 107–8.

³⁶ Colin P. Thompson, *The Poet and the Mystic: A Study of the “Cántico espiritual” of San Juan de La Cruz*, Oxford Modern Languages and Literature Monographs (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 60f.

Although “dance” is not John’s own image,³⁷ I find it to be an appropriate metaphor for the poem’s interior rhythm of moving back and forth between emphasis on the necessity of transcending attention to creation in order to know God, and emphasis on the discovery and embrace of divine presence in every aspect of creation. The “swing” of contrast between these movements is much stronger in the earlier stanzas of the poem, mellowing to a gentle rocking movement by its conclusion. The following outline schematizes this rhythm of the dance of immanence and transcendence, with indented lines emphasizing the transcendence of God and left-justified lines emphasizing God’s participation in creation.

- 1–3 Longing: “Where have you hidden, Beloved, and left me moaning?”
- 4–5 The trace of God in creation: “With his image alone, [he] clothed them in beauty.”
- 6–12 The wound of deeper longing: “All [things] wound me more . . .”
- 13–16 Creation is God for me: “My Beloved, the mountains, and lonely wooded valleys”
- 17–21 The ambiguity of creation: “Be still, deadening north wind . . . watching fears of night . . . cease your anger!”
- 22–25 Restoration of damaged relationship: “I restored you, where your mother was corrupted.”
- 26–29 Transcending knowledge: “I drank of my Beloved, and . . . I no longer knew anything.”
- 30–33 The mutual gaze of love: “One of my eyes wounded you . . . your eyes imprinted your grace in me.”
- 34–35 The wound of solitude: “He also bears in solitude the wound of love.”
- 36–39 Mutual transformation in divine beauty: “Let us go forth to behold ourselves in your beauty.”
- 40 Peace: “The siege was still . . .”

In his prose commentary on the “Spiritual Canticle B” poem, John sections it according to the schema of spiritual development that was his mental frame. Stanzas 1–12, he says, describe the purgative way or spiritual longing; stanzas 13–21, the illuminative way or spiritual espousal; stanzas 22–35, the unitive way or spiritual marriage; and stanzas 36–40, the foreshadowing of the beatific state or complete transformation in God. The poem itself does not, however, use this kind of language, nor is there any internal allusion

³⁷ When John does use the Spanish word *bailando*, it has the negative connotation of people celebrating idols; see John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 3.38.3. For a thorough discussion of John’s appreciation of the spiritual role of the arts despite his highly cautionary comments, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, “St. John of the Cross: The Perfect Adventure,” in *Studies in Theological Style: Lay Styles*, vol. 3, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 105–71.

to this schema; it is simply faithful to the poetic genre of evocative image, sound, and rhythm.

In the portion that John's commentary identifies as dealing with the purgative way (stanzas 1–12), the poem begins with the pain of longing for the lost Beloved: "Where have you hidden, Beloved, and left me moaning?" The emphasis is on the absence and hiddenness of God. But with stanzas 4 and 5 the opposite movement emerges strongly: "O woods and thickets, planted by the hand of my Beloved! . . . With his image alone, [he] clothed them in beauty." In its painful longing the soul discovers with joy that the mark of God—indeed, the very image of God—is truly present in every created thing. After the initial joy, though, stanza 6 begins a rebound of the intense awareness of absence. Like a long-hungry person who tastes a crumb of food, the soul is more tormented than ever by its inability to access the fullness of God. She cries out, "Do not send me any more messengers . . . All [things] wound me more!"

With stanza 13 (which John's commentary indicates is the transition to the illuminative way), the soul's cry is answered as the longed-for one is glimpsed. Suddenly she discovers God's presence in creation at an entirely new level. "My Beloved, the mountains, and lonely wooded valleys, strange islands, and resounding rivers!" she sings in stanza 14.³⁸ In his commentary on this stanza John writes, "Inasmuch as the soul in this case is united with God, she feels that all things are God. . . . It should not be thought that what the soul is said to feel here is comparable to seeing things by means of the light, or creatures by means of God; rather in this possession the soul feels that God is all things for her."³⁹ Yet the delight of embrace soon gives way to a deep sense of uneasiness and turbulence expressed in stanzas 17–21: "Be still, deadening north wind . . . You girls of Judea, stay away . . . you watching fears of night . . . I conjure you to cease your anger!" It is as if the ambiguity of creation, which can give delight but can also deceive, frighten, and disappoint, has emerged again with a vengeance, fueling the desire for a yet more radical level of peace.

This time the response comes in the form of the explicit and complete embrace by the Beloved, which the commentary calls the spiritual marriage. The image of the Garden of Eden, the original perfect harmony of humanity in creation, is evoked in stanzas 22–25 as the bride enters "the sweet garden of her desire."⁴⁰ In the arms of the Beloved, the earthly paradise is restored: "I

³⁸ This is the section referenced by Pope Francis, *On Care for Our Common Home*, §234.

³⁹ John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Cantic*, 14/15.5.

⁴⁰ See also the earlier reference to *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* 3.26.5, in which John describes union with God as a return to the delights of Eden.

restored you, where your mother was corrupted.” But once more, the affirming movement is quickly followed in stanzas 26–29 by a yet deeper urgency to transcend: “In the inner wine cellar, I drank of my Beloved, and . . . I no longer knew anything, and lost the herd that I was following.” Divine love is so inebriating that all ordinary, sense-based knowledge and activity fades into insignificance. Then in stanzas 30–33, the human, embodied level of experience reemerges at the deepest level of intimacy, with the exquisite tenderness of a mutual exchange of gazes between lover and beloved: “One of my eyes wounded you . . . your eyes imprinted your grace in me . . . and thus my eyes deserved to adore what they beheld in you . . . you have looked, and left in me grace and beauty.”

As the poem moves toward its conclusion, the back-and-forth rhythm of embrace and transcendence grows gentler, and each side of the dance more clearly includes the other. Stanza 35 alludes to the movement of transcendence with the affirmation that the dove has built her nest in solitude, guided by the one “who also bears in solitude the wound of love.” The final verses, identified in the commentary as foreshadowing beatific transformation, celebrate the mutual transformation of God and creature in divine beauty: “Let us go forth to behold ourselves in your beauty, to the mountain and to the hill, to where the pure water flows . . .” John’s commentary affirms that the soul now begs for “the grace, wisdom, and beauty which every earthly and heavenly creature not only has from God but also manifests in its wise, well-ordered, gracious and harmonious relationship with other creatures.”⁴¹ Thus in beatitude the soul not only drinks of peace and communion with God, but also communes in the gifts of every created thing. The poem ends, finally, with the encompassing of the turmoil of creation within the overflowing peace of beatitude: “The siege was still; and the cavalry, at the sight of the waters, descended.”

The dance of “is/is not” in John’s poem exemplifies what scholar of mysticism Michael Sells calls performative apophasis: a paradox that cannot be fully resolved verbally or intellectually and yet, as verbal event, awakens the reader to mystery beyond words.⁴² It also offers a view of “emergent creation” within the human soul. As was the case with “deep incarnation,” this concept would be an uncomfortable fit with John’s conceptual framework. Yet on the level of the poetry—the more foundational way in which he conveys his mystical insight—he portrays just such a process of mutual, progressive, developmental participation among God, humans, and creatures.

⁴¹ John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, 39.11.

⁴² Michael Anthony Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

Creatures and the “Wound of Love”

For John, the dance—the lived relationship of love with the immanent and transcendent God—is what matters. In his poetry he *sings* that relationship. In his prose, he strives for precision of language not simply for the sake of philosophical or even theological clarity, but in order to resolve core issues of spiritual guidance. As this reading of the “Spiritual Canticle B” poem has shown, the path is not a straight one. The seeker must engage in the “dance” of both embracing creatures and letting them go in order to reach fruition in God. At different stages the appropriate character of both the embrace and the renunciation shifts.

A core image that John uses over and over again for the way this process is experienced is the “wound.”⁴³ In a wound, the body’s integrity is painfully breached and lifeblood flows outward. John develops this as a paradoxically positive image for how the mutuality of shared life between God and creation reaches its fullness. It is noteworthy that in the text from Romans 8:18–22 that was quoted at the beginning of this article, Paul identifies a similar dynamic: “I consider that the sufferings of the present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us. . . . We know that all creation is groaning together in labor pains even until now.” The created human person feels God’s impingement as a wound, but the deeper the wound grows, the more it becomes a space for the birthing of God’s glory.⁴⁴

In his writings John describes several kinds of wounds, each of which involves a person in a different way of experiencing God in the created world: the wound of absence, the wound of intimacy, and the wound of transforming love.⁴⁵ In the “Spiritual Canticle” poem we see the first of these wounds in the ache of the Beloved’s absence: “You fled like the stag after wounding me . . . I am sick, I suffer and I die” (stanza 1). Like the Bride in the Song of Songs, John’s bride too is “sick with love.”⁴⁶ The hint of God’s presence glimpsed

⁴³ John’s work as a teenager as an aide in a hospital for the poor, and the special care he gave to the sick and wounded in his communities throughout his life, provide a biographical context for this image. See Crisógono de Jesús Sacramentado, *The Life of St. John of the Cross*, 13–14, 148–51, 198–200; Ruiz, *God Speaks in the Night*, 40–47.

⁴⁴ The same dynamic of “the pains of childbirth” is referenced by Pope Francis, *On Care for Our Common Home*, §80.

⁴⁵ Imagery of “wounds” appears frequently in John’s writings. The clearest statement of the three types of wounds is in John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, 7. In this chapter John calls the three increasingly painful wounds (1) the “wound” (*herida*) of knowledge of creatures, (2) the “sore wound” (*llaga*) of knowledge of the mysteries of faith, and (3) the “festered wound” (*llaga afistolada*) of “the touch of supreme knowledge of the divinity.” See also *The Living Flame of Love*, 1.6–26.

⁴⁶ John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, 7.2.

through the creatures only intensifies this wound of absence: “All wound me more, and leave me dying of ah, I-don’t-know-what behind their stammering” (stanza 7). With this image John articulates a profound experience of the physical world as wounding and unsatisfying. Yet the focus is not on this as a fault or lack in creation, but just the opposite: it is because creation really does bear the mark of God that it wounds the seeker by awakening an intensely painful desire to know the fullness of God. In a certain sense, it is not the too-littleness of creation that wounds, but the too-muchness, for it awakens what it cannot satisfy.

Rather than being fundamentally destructive, the first wound is a “sickness of love.” Ultimately the soul will arrive at a point where the light of God can shine forth unobstructed from every aspect of creation, but at this first moment the soul is like someone who has just been thunderstruck by love and can see nothing of value except the “one and only.” Pierced by that overwhelming glimpse of the Beloved, she is driven to close her eyes to everything else so as to reach him.

The next appearance of the wound in the poem is a startling shift: suddenly in stanza 13 it is the “stag,” the one sought-after, who is wounded. The wound of absence so painfully felt turns out to be mutual. The longed-for one also longs for me! Thus begins the story of the second wound, the wound of intimacy. Creation, which in the first moment appeared so lacking, suddenly takes on the features of the Beloved. “My Beloved, the mountains, and lonely wooded valleys . . . the supper that refreshes and deepens love.” John’s commentary is insistent: “She feels that all things are God!”⁴⁷ The soul has discovered the truth of creation: it is a divine love story. Intimate love is a constant dance between fearful withdrawal and fervent embrace, between moments of hurt and moments of reconciliation, between unquenchable longing and delightful fulfillment. It can be painful, profoundly costly, even terrifying; yet it is also the highest joy of human life. In this dimension, according to John’s portrayal, we know the goodness of creation—its genuine capacity to mediate the presence of God—but we also know the pain, sorrow, turbulence, and violence that are inherent in created life and love. Complete and lasting joy will require a yet more profound wound.

It is in describing the third wound, the wound of transforming love, that the uniqueness of John’s perspective comes to the fore. His best exposition of it comes in the poem “The Living Flame” and his commentary on it.⁴⁸ Here are the key lines from that poem:

⁴⁷ Ibid., 14/15.5.

⁴⁸ John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love*.

O living flame of love
that tenderly wounds my soul
in its deepest center!
.....
O sweet cautery.
O delightful wound!
O gentle hand! O delicate touch
that tastes of eternal life
and pays every debt!
In killing you changed death to life.

In this poem John is describing the touch of God in the very substance, the "deepest center," of the soul. Of this divine touch he writes: "Since you detach and withdraw the soul from all other touches of created things by the might of your delicacy, and reserve it for and unite it to yourself alone, so mild an effect do you leave in the soul, that every other touch of things both high and low seems coarse and spurious."⁴⁹ Here we see the central teaching of John, for which he is justly lauded: the touch of actual union with God is *sui generis*, and requires being completely emptied of attachment to the touch of any other thing. Thus this divine touch is a "delightful wound." John writes: "O then, delightful wound, so much more sublimely delightful the more the cautery touched the intimate center of the substance of the soul, burning all that was burnable in order to give delight to all that could be delighted!"⁵⁰

The key to interpreting how this "third wound" of transforming love relates to the created world is to remember that the soul is, in fact, a creature. It is not that God removes the soul from creation; rather, God unveils God's union with creation in the soul, which is a creature created with the unique capacity to receive this revelation in full fruition. Commenting on the verse "How gently and lovingly you wake in my heart," John writes:⁵¹

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 commingled, 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

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.18.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.8.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 4.5.

every created thing glow and make the same movement all at once. . . . 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 effect of this “delightful wound,” then, is that, in a relation of connaturality⁵² with God, the soul is now able to experience all of creation as God does—as a “sea of love.”⁵³ As Constance FitzGerald put it in her study of John and Wisdom,⁵⁴

Then absolutely everyone and everything in the universe is experienced as indissolubly and harmoniously connected and part of an energizing Mystery that binds everything together. In the lover of Divine Sophia we see a remarkable instance of the earth, the cosmos, becoming truly conscious of itself as it really is, seeing itself for the first time, as it were, in the eyes of the person transformed by Sophia.

What we have discovered so far, then, is that, contrary to what may appear in a superficial understanding of his spirituality, John of the Cross strongly affirms the goodness of creation and its capacity to mediate the presence of God. He specifically identifies the web of mutual interactions among creatures as a primary manifestation of divine love,⁵⁵ and he affirms that the more a person participates in God, the more he or she participates fully and joyfully in this community of creatures.⁵⁶ Activation of creation’s full capacity to mediate divinity, however, depends on the full fruition of the human person in God. In John’s view, the core of this transformation is the touch of God in the substance or “deepest center” of the soul. Experientially, this involves a lengthy process of a back-and-forth rhythm between the glimpse of God in creation and the complete renunciation of dependence on creaturely knowledge in favor of faith. John’s particular contribution to ecospirituality, therefore, will be the invitation to pursue this contemplative rhythm all the way to its fruitional climax.

⁵² For a detailed study of John and connaturality, see N. Grace Aaron, *Thought and Poetic Structure in San Juan de la Cruz’s Symbol of Night*, Studies in the Humanities 66 (New York: Peter Lang, 2005).

⁵³ John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love*, 2.10.

⁵⁴ Constance FitzGerald, “Transformation in Wisdom: The Subversive Character and Educative Power of Sophia in Contemplation,” in Kevin Culligan, OCD, and Regis Jordan, OCD, eds., *Carmel and Contemplation* (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 2000), 333.

⁵⁵ See John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, 5.1-4; 14/15.25-27; 39.11.

⁵⁶ John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love*, 2.10.

"Wounds" and Today's Eco-Crisis

While "night" is John's best-known image for the radical difference between ordinary sense-based knowledge and faith-based knowledge of God, his development of the image of the "wound" to express how knowledge of God affects the human person may offer a path to a fresh interpretation of his spirituality in ecologically sensitive terms. One of the key elements of our present reality is the destructive wounding of ecological communities on all levels, from microbiological to global. John does not explicitly write about anything comparable to this. In fact, he unfailingly emphasizes the orderliness, harmony, and beauty of the natural world, referring to creatures as being for the soul "a harmonious symphony of sublime music surpassing all concerts and melodies of the world."⁵⁷ I think, though, that by reflecting on the stages John describes in the "wounding" of the human person on the way to God, we can discover elements that contribute to a spirituality of planetary healing.

For John the first phase of the experience of the wound arises with the aching sense of the absence of God in creation. He writes, "This wound arises from the knowledge the soul receives from creatures, the lowest of God's works."⁵⁸ For him, this was not so much a response to any ugliness or damage in the natural world, but simply a poignant awareness that all its beauty and wonder can provide only a tantalizing hint of that for which the human heart most deeply longs. In the twenty-first century, however, the first level of wound that occurs in our encounter with the natural world may be the horror and sorrow of ecological devastation, to which our natural reaction is likely to be diversion, numbness, and/or denial. But instead, this wound must function for us like the *penthos* of the desert tradition—the sorrow for sin that rends the heart and opens it to God.⁵⁹ Rather than turn away from the devastation that breaks our heart, John invites us to discover in that very place the urgent fire that will fuel our search for the fullness of God's merciful love.

John's second phase of the experience of the wound emphasizes both the joys and the afflictions of deepening in intimacy with God. He writes, "This sore wound is produced in the soul by knowledge of the Incarnation of the Word and the mysteries of the faith."⁶⁰ John explicitly states that this intimacy is played out not only interiorly, but in one's experience of the created world.

⁵⁷ John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, 14/15.25.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.2.

⁵⁹ Douglas E Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), chap. 3.

⁶⁰ John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, 7.3.

In union, he says, the soul tastes “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.”⁶¹ As the “Spiritual Canticle” sings of discovering the trace and image of God in each individual creature and in the web of their interconnections, we can discover a kind of prefiguring of today’s theology of “deep incarnation.” We can catch glimpses of “deep resurrection” as well, especially in the “Romances” poem, where, in stanza 4, John writes that all “beings and places” in creation form one “bride” which will be ‘taken wholly into God’ and will “live the life of God.” For John, the wound of this second phase is more costly than the first because it is the price of deepening intimacy. Just as a love commitment to another human being sometimes gives tender delight but may at other times seem to make almost impossible demands that evoke painful turmoil, so it is at an even deeper level with the love of God.

Perhaps we can build some links here to the work of Bill Jordan and others on the spirituality of ecological restoration projects, which involve committing oneself to a relationship of community with a grievously wounded landscape.⁶² The labor of attempting to foster and collaborate with an ecosystem’s efforts to heal itself is a profound form of intimacy. Real community, Jordan emphasizes, is always hard and tenuous work, punctuated by ambiguity and losses as well as by moments of great joy. A spirituality that can find in wounds the occasion to attend more deeply and realistically to one’s partners in community, rather than to turn away in bitterness, is an essential part of such work. John of the Cross offers this, but something more as well: the conviction that, whatever the cost in struggle and setbacks, this work truly is a part of the “great work”⁶³ of contemplative liberation of the cosmos that humans are created to do.

Finally, in the third phase of the experience of the wound the work of transforming love becomes completely God’s. John writes: “It is equivalent to having a festered wound. . . . She lives by dying until love, in killing her, makes her live the life of love, transforming her in love.”⁶⁴ The human person is paradoxically divested of all in order to be filled with all; and in this, the universe is liberated to be a “sea of love.” One of John’s best-known sentences is, “For a little of this pure love is more precious to God and the soul and more beneficial to the Church, even though it seems one

⁶¹ Ibid., 14/15.4.

⁶² William Jordan, *The Sunflower Forest: Ecological Restoration and the New Communion with Nature* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2003).

⁶³ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Crown, 2000).

⁶⁴ John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, 7.4.

is doing nothing, than all other works put together."⁶⁵ Although here John names only the church as the beneficiary of an individual's spiritual transformation, today we could justifiably extend his insight to include the whole created world.

An interpretation of John of the Cross in terms of ecological spirituality, then, begins from the experience of the absence of God in the wounds of the earth, its creatures, and its ecosystems. They are wounds aggravated by human sin, and in *penthos* they turn us toward God. With a theology of "deep incarnation" we recognize in them the wounds of Christ. In contemplation as well as in action we do not turn away from them, but go forth to receive and assuage them in intimacy. At this stage they are "sore wounds" because of the terrible sorrow of intimately accompanying Christ's suffering in all things. But the third stage is that the more radically we assent to God, the more these wounds are discovered as a sacred space where the fount of God's healing, transforming love wells up and flows out to us, to our neighbors, and even to the whole cosmos.

In developing such a theology of wounds that lead to healing, we have to tread carefully. John is talking about a very deep contemplative transformation, in which God's life opens up in the person at a new and astonishing level. He is not saying simplistically that wounds, pain, or suffering in the ordinary physical sense of those terms are "good for us." Nor is he saying that we should seek wounds and pain as a spiritual technique.⁶⁶ These are two of the misinterpretations that have sometimes given John a bad name. What he is talking about, rather, is the living experience of God. He goes on at great length about how for the created human person it is not only the absence of God that is painful; the inflow of the living God may be experienced as an even deeper "wound." Just as too much light or too much sound can cause pain and damage to our physical senses, so with encountering God in the intimacy of our being. The "too-muchness" of God overwhelms us, assaults us, sweeps us away, and may be experienced paradoxically as intensely painful and intensely delightful at the same time.

The difference between this deep interior "wound" and a physical one, however, is that its ultimate effect is not damage but healing. In "The Living Flame," John began to use the image of "cautery" to express the paradox of one act that both grievously wounds and radically heals. In his time, cauterization—the application of a heated iron to a part of the body—was commonly used by physicians as a means of cleaning and sterilizing wounds. We may recall that as a teenager John worked as an aide in a hospital

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.2.

⁶⁶ As is argued, for example, by Maureen Flynn, "The Spiritual Uses of Pain in Spanish Mysticism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64, no. 2 (1996): 257–78.

for the very poor and those suffering from venereal disease, where he may well have attended people undergoing this agonizing procedure.⁶⁷ Sixteenth-century doctors presumably assured their patients that this painful assault on their body was ultimately for the sake of healing, since that was the medical belief of the time. John applies this image to the Holy Spirit, calling it a “sweet cautery”⁶⁸ and a flame of love that “assails and wounds” the soul in its deepest center.⁶⁹

For John of the Cross, the cautery effected by the Holy Spirit’s radical invasion of the human person ultimately heals not only the soul, but the whole cosmos. This is a contemplative transformation that, as such, occurs at an interior and invisible level. Its implications, however, are quite concrete. The one who has experienced this most intimate wound “in the middle of the heart of the spirit,” John says, “feels its ardor strengthen and increase and its love become so refined in this ardor that seemingly there flow seas of loving fire within it, reaching to the heights and depths of the earthly and heavenly spheres, imbuing all with love.”⁷⁰ To participate in creation from the point of view of God is to engage the entire interdependent web of creaturely relations with kinship, coresponsibility, and self-giving love. In our time, with our increasingly fine-tuned knowledge of ecology and our vastly enhanced potentials for global interaction, this clearly implies action on behalf of restoring health to the threatened ecosystems of our planet.

John of the Cross in *Laudato Si’*

After this close study of John of the Cross’ views on creation and creatures, it may not seem so surprising that Pope Francis recognizes him as an ally in his efforts to recruit Christians to “care for our common home” through the encyclical *Laudato Si’*. The pope writes:

St. 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 things, and thus feels that “all things are God.”⁷¹

⁶⁷ Crisógono de Jesús Sacramentado, *The Life of St. John of the Cross*, 13–14; Ruiz, *God Speaks in the Night*, 40–47.

⁶⁸ John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love*, 2.1–2.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.14.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.10.

⁷¹ Pope Francis, *On Care for Our Common Home*, §234. The translation of John’s text in the Vatican’s English translation of the encyclical differs slightly from that in the edition I

The most resonant phrase in the quotation is “all things are God.” Both John of the Cross and Pope Francis want to resound this phrase while also nuancing it to avoid the impression of pantheism. Pope Francis is very direct, introducing the quote with an explicit statement that the finite things of this world are not really divine, even though the mystic can experience an “intimate connection” between them and God. John of the Cross likewise emphasizes the sense that “all things are God” is an *experience* that the soul has in the context of being united to God. John’s discussion of what this means, however, not surprisingly involves more subtlety than what Pope Francis conveys. This is John’s explanation:

It should not be thought that what the soul is said to feel here is comparable to seeing things by means of the light, or creatures by means of God; rather in this possession the soul feels that God is all things for her. Neither must it be thought that, because the soul has so sublime an experience of God, we are asserting that she has essential and clear vision of him. This experience is nothing but a strong and overflowing communication and glimpse of what God is in himself, in which the soul feels the goodness of the things mentioned in these verses.⁷²

John wants to emphasize that the soul really is experiencing God *in* the creatures. This intimacy with God doesn’t just enlighten one’s relationship with creatures; it permeates and possesses one’s being in such a way that even in encountering creatures, what is perceived is the “godness” in them. Because of the limitations of life in this world, this remains a “glimpse” of God rather than “an essential and clear vision.”

Pope Francis concludes paragraph 234 with a longer quotation from John. Its centerpiece is the following: “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. . . . These valleys are what my Beloved is to me.”⁷³ This quotation gives concrete imagery to the point the encyclical’s author is making: that we truly encounter God in the natural world. Among the qualities that John of the Cross and Pope Francis identify as alerting us to God’s presence are creation’s beauty, freshness, pleasantness, and stillness.

have been using. For reference, the Spanish text reads: “Todo lo que aquí se declara está en Dios eminentemente en infinita manera o, por mejor decir, cada una de estas grandezas que se dicen es Dios, y todas ellas juntas son Dios. Que, por cuanto en este caso se une el alma con Dios, siente ser todas las cosas Dios.”

⁷² John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*, 14/15.5.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 14/15.6–7.

As Pope Francis approaches the soaring conclusion of *Laudato Si'*, it is as if adding allusion to John rings the final note that brings the mystical and contemplative depth of the encyclical to fullness.⁷⁴ In the context of the whole encyclical, however, the most important role that quoting John of the Cross plays is to confirm the pope's contention that a Christian's commitment to contemplative practice is key to the ability to recognize and take up his or her role as a caretaker of our "common home," the Earth. The more awareness of the presence of God in creation is a personal experience, the more the encyclical's core language of the Earth as "sister and mother" shifts from being simply a gauzy metaphor to being at the motivating heart of one's identity. Many kinds of spiritual and ethical practice that facilitate this shift are described in the encyclical. The quotations from John of the Cross, however, give notice that the fullness of this awareness involves a mystical transformation that, in most cases, will require a long-term commitment to the practice of interior prayer.

Conclusion

Still, some of us may wonder whether the grandeur of John's cosmic vision of transformation really applies to us—especially if we do not consider ourselves likely to approach such exalted spiritual states as "spiritual marriage" and "beatific transformation." In view of that, let us take a cue from a more mundane story told by Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, disciple and interpreter of John of the Cross. Thérèse observed a sister struggling to light a candle from a nearly extinguished lamp. Upon succeeding, the sister then used the flame to light the candles of the entire community. Thérèse commented: "It was, therefore, the half-extinguished little lamp that had produced all these beautiful flames which, in their turn, could produce an infinity of others and even light the whole universe."⁷⁵ Pope Francis, too, strongly affirms that even small actions done with heartfelt care for the Earth can "change the world." He continues: "They benefit society, often unbeknown to us, for

⁷⁴ This is not intended as a competitive statement, as if John of the Cross were "better" than Saint Francis, Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, Teilhard de Chardin, Romano Guardini, or others who appear to have had even more influence on the spiritual and theological framework that Pope Francis is developing in *Laudato Si'*. The point is that John of the Cross' particular contribution to Christian thought includes a unique depth of explanation of the character and meaning of mystical transformation. By bringing him into the picture, Pope Francis adds mystical and rhetorical punctuation that strengthens the potential theological and pastoral impact of the encyclical.

⁷⁵ Saint Thérèse de Lisieux, *Her Last Conversations* (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1977), July 15, 1897, no. 5.

they call forth a goodness which, albeit unseen, inevitably tends to spread.”⁷⁶ Thus John of the Cross, Thérèse, and Pope Francis all assure us that no matter how dim we may feel our own lamps are, they bear the spark of God—and, therefore, the capacity to participate in the healing and fruition of God’s creation.

⁷⁶ Pope Francis, *On Care for Our Common Home*, §§211–12.