

John of the Cross

Spiritual Canticle 4-7



John of the Cross : *'The Spiritual Canticle'*.

Stanza 4

O woods and thickets
planted by the hand of my Beloved!
O green meadow,
coated, bright, with flowers,
Tell me, has he passed by you?

- The soul is 'walking along the path of consideration of creatures which leads to the knowledge of the Beloved, their Creator'(4.1).
- 'Ever since the creation of the world God's eternal power and divine nature, though invisible, have been understood and seen through the things God had made'(Romans 1:20, referred to in 4.1).
- 'God did not create, nor does he carry on the work of creation, by any other hand than his own'(4.3).

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Tell me, has he passed by you?

- 'My Son, I wish to give you a bride who will love you ...
"I will hold her in my arms and she will burn with your love
and with eternal delight she will exalt your goodness"(Romance 3, On Creation).
- 'What impedes spiritual progress is not immersion in the world,
but being engrossed with creatures ... The person who would
encounter God must pass-all-the-way-through creation,
not circumvent it'(Nemeck-Coombs 'O Blessed Night' page 52-53).

Everything around us is created and sustained in existence by God. God is the 'heart' of all that exists, for creation is a participation in the very being of God. The closer we are in touch with anything that exists, the closer we are in touch with God. We grow in union with God not by escaping from the world, but by penetrating to the heart, for God is at the centre of all that God has made.

'In him we live and move and have our being'(Acts 17:28).

'In him all things hold together'(Colossians 1:17).

At the same time, God is the 'beyond' of everything, for God is not identified with creation, but transcends it. The closer we come to the heart, the more we are taken beyond creation into the mystery which we call 'God'. We are to let God attract us through matter both when we experience it as promoting growth and when we experience it as causing diminishment. God works through everything to bring about transforming union.

Creation is a 'word' of God, that is to say, it is God's self-expression and self-communication. In the prologue to his Gospel John writes:

'All things came into being through the word of God.
Without this word not one thing came into being' (John 1:3).

Augustine *Confessions* X.6

‘What is my God? I put my question to the earth.

It answered, “I am not God”, and all things on earth declared the same.

I asked the sea and the chasms of the deep

and the living things that creep in them, but they answered,

“We are not your God. Seek what is above us”.

I spoke to the winds that blow, and the air

and all that lives in it replied, “I am not God”.

I asked the sky, the sun, the moon, and the stars, and they told me,

“Neither are we the God whom you seek”.

I spoke to all the things that are about me,

all that come through the door of the senses, and I said,

“Since you are not my God tell me something of my God”.

Loud and clear they answered, “It is God who made us!”

I asked these questions simply by gazing at these things.

Their only answer was their beauty.’

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin SJ

‘The true union that you ought to seek with creatures that attract you is to be found not by going directly to them, but by converging with them on God, sought in and through them. It is not by making themselves more material, relying solely on physical contacts, but by making themselves more spiritual in the embrace of God, that things draw closer to one another’ (Writings in time of war page 143).

‘By means of all created things the divine assails us, penetrates us and moulds us. We imagined it as distant and inaccessible, whereas we live steeped in its burning layers. “In him we live”. As Jacob said, awakening from his dream, the world, this palpable world which we were wont to treat with the boredom and disrespect with which we habitually regard places with no sacred association for us, is in truth a holy place and we did not know it’ (The Divine Milieu page 89).

Paul VI Evangelii Nuntiandi 1975, n.53

‘The Church respects and esteems these non-Christian religions because they are the living expression of the soul of vast groups of people. They carry within them the echo of thousands of years of searching for God, a quest which is incomplete but often made with great sincerity and righteousness of heart. They possess an impressive patrimony of deeply religious texts. They have taught generations of people how to pray. They are all impregnated with innumerable seeds of the Word and can constitute a true preparation for the Gospel.

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Stanza 5

Pouring out a thousand graces,
He passed these groves in haste;
And having looked at them,
with his image alone
He clothed them in beauty.

- 'In this stanza the creatures answer the soul'(5.1).
- 'All this God did through His own Wisdom, the Word, His only-begotten Son by whom He created them'(5.1).
- 'With the image of His Son, God clothed creatures in beauty by imparting to them supernatural being. This He did when God's Word became man and "lifted everything up to Himself"(John 12:32)'(5.4).

‘Have a habitual desire to imitate Christ in all your deeds by bringing your life into conformity with His. You must then study His life in order to imitate Him and behave in all events as He would’(Ascent I.13.3).

‘We make progress only through imitation of Christ, who is the way, the truth and the life. No one goes to the Father except through Him [John 14:6]. Elsewhere He says: ‘I am the door. If you come through me you will be saved.’

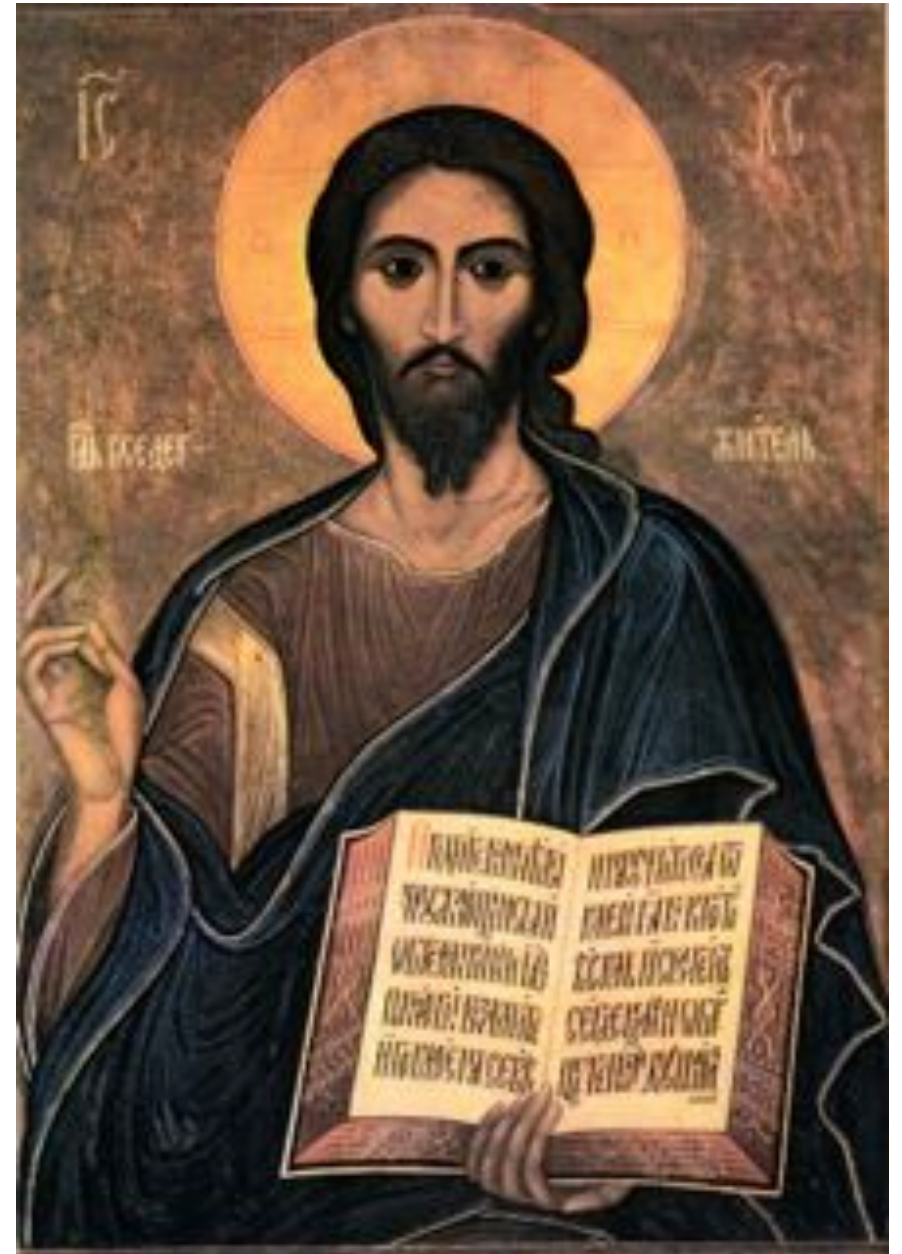
(John 10:9) (Ascent II.7.8).

‘In Christ the whole fullness of God dwells bodily’(Colossians 2:9).

‘Christ is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, who sustains all things by his powerful word’(Hebrews 1:3).

John-Paul II *Mission of the Redeemer* n.5

‘In this definitive Word of his revelation, God has made himself known in the fullest possible way. God has revealed to humankind who he is.’



Commentary on the Spiritual Canticle 5,4

‘St. Paul says: The Son of God is the splendour of his glory and the image of his substance (Hebrews 1:3).

It should be known that only with this figure, his Son, did God look at all things, that is, he communicated to them their natural being and many natural graces and gifts, and made them complete and perfect, as it is said in Genesis: God looked at all things that he made, and they were very good (Genesis 1:31).

Commentary on the Spiritual Canticle 5,4 continued

‘To look and behold that they were very good was to make them very good in the Word, his Son. Not only by looking at them did he communicate natural being and graces, as we said, 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 became man and elevated human nature in the beauty of God, and consequently all creatures, since in human nature he was united with them all.

Accordingly the Son of God proclaimed: If I be lifted up from the earth, I will elevate all things to myself (John 12:32). And in this elevation of all things through the Incarnation of his Son and through the glory of his resurrection according to the flesh not only did the Father beautify creatures partially, but, we can say, he clothed them entirely in beauty and dignity.’

Colossians 1:15-20

[Stanza 1 - God's Beloved Son and Creation]

God's Beloved Son is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn of all creation;
for in him were created all things ...
all things have been created through him and for him.
He himself is before all things,
and in him all things hold together.

[Stanza 2 - God's Beloved Son and Redemption]

He is the head of the body, the church;
he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead,
so that he might come to have first place in everything.
For God was pleased for all the fullness to dwell in him,
and through him to reconcile to himself all things ...
by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Hebrews 1:2-3 (referred to in Spiritual Canticle 5.4)

‘God has spoken to us by a Son,
whom he appointed heir of all things,
through whom he also created the ages.

He is the brilliance of God’s glory
and the exact imprint of God’s very being,

and he continues to carry all things to their goal
by his powerful word.’

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Stanza 6

Ah, who has the power to heal me?
Now wholly surrender yourself!
Do not send me
any more messengers,
They cannot tell me what I must hear.

- 'The soul is wounded with love through a trace of the beauty of her Beloved which she has known through creatures, and is anxious to see that invisible beauty which is the cause of the beauty which she can see'(6.1).
- The more creatures awaken love, the more the soul sorrows at the felt absence of the Beloved. 'She asks, if it be His will, that He truly surrender Himself to her in full and perfect love'(6.2).
- 'If up to this time I could be content with mediated knowing because I did not have much knowledge or love of You, this is no longer true. Now the intensity of my love cannot be satisfied with these messengers'(6.6).

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Stanza 7

All who are free
Tell me a thousand graceful things of you
They all wound me more
And leave me dying
Of, ah, I-don't-know-what behind their stammering.

- We are still speaking of creatures, but now the focus turns to people whose love has shown and continues to show God to the soul. 'They teach me choice things about Your grace and mercy manifested in Your Incarnation and in the truths of faith ... The more they desire to tell, the more of Your graces they are able to reveal'(7.7).

‘God’s greatest favour is to gather us into the intimacy of his love, where we are one with him, and transformed into him, in love’(26.2).

‘Like the bee that sucks honey from all the wild-flowers, the soul extracts the sweetness of love from everything that happens to her. That is to say, she loves God in them. Thus everything leads her to love’(27.8).

‘A little of this pure love is more precious to God and to the soul and more beneficial to the Church, even though it seems we are doing nothing, that everything else we might do put together’(29.2).

‘If in any way we can comprehend God and be united with him, it is through love, and not through the gratification of desire. And since the delight, sweetness and satisfaction that we can experience is not love, none of the delightful feelings can be an adequate means for our union with God. It is the operation of the will which is the proportionate means for this union. The will’s operation is quite distinct from feeling. By its operation, which is love, the will is united with God and terminates in Him, and not by the feeling and gratification of our desires which remain in the soul and go no further. Feelings only serve as stimulants to love’(Letter 14th April 1589).

‘God’s favours and visits are generally in accord with the intensity of the yearnings and ardours of love which precede them’(13.2).

‘God does not give grace and love except according to the soul’s desire and love. The more the soul desires and loves, the more God gives’(13.12).

‘Although a person suffering purification knows that she loves God ... she finds no relief. On the contrary this knowledge causes her deeper affliction. For in loving God so intensely that nothing else causes her concern, and aware of her own misery, she is unable to believe that God loves her. She believes that she neither has nor ever will have within herself anything deserving of God’s love, but rather every reason for being abhorred not only by God but by every creature forever. She grieves to see within herself reasons for meriting rejection by God whom she so loves and longs for’(Dark Night II.7.7).

‘Only the love of God which is being united to the soul imparts the heat, strength, temper and passion of love, or ‘fire’ as it is called’(Dark Night II.11.2).

‘If you are seeking God, your Beloved, much more is your Beloved seeking you’(Living Flame 3.28).

‘Since God is inaccessible, be careful not to concern yourself with all that you are able to comprehend and feel, so that you do not become satisfied with less and lose the lightness of soul suitable for going to Him’(Sayings of Light and Love 52).

‘The waters of inward delights do not spring from the earth. One must open toward heaven the mouth of desire, empty of all else that might fill it: ‘Open wide your mouth that I might fill it’[Psalm 81:10]’(Letter, 18th November 1586).

‘The more God wants to give, the more He makes us desire ... Since the immense blessings of God can enter and fit only in an empty and solitary heart, the Lord wants you to be alone’(Letter 8th July 1589).

‘They will neither have nor feel any more needs than that to which they desire to submit their heart’(Letter, 18th July 1589).

‘If you desire nothing else than God you are not walking in darkness, however poor and dark you may think you are’(Letter, 12th October 1589).