

Carmelite Institute Symposium, July 2017
Witnessing to an Integral Ecology in Carmel
Part 2

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5.

We don't think of Teresa as a poet, and perhaps rightly so. Her verse, much of which has probably not survived, was for the most part occasional, important to her life in the monastery, but not to her work as a spiritual writer. She did write a couple of poems that are true spiritual lyrics. One of them pops up in two of her letters; she sent it to her brother Lorenzo and describes for him the moment of prayer that gave birth to it. She is even rather proud of it, although she commands her brother not to share it with anyone.

The poem celebrates an experience of the beauty of God—that is, that quality of God's presence that draws us out of ourselves and into its mystery and wonder. It overwhelms us, so to speak, bestowing love beyond measure, and so transforms us from the nothingness of the individual, isolated self into the eternal being of the soul in union with its Creator.

Here is the poem:

Before the Beauty of God

O Beauty exceeding
All other beauties, always!
Though hurting, You wound not,
And painlessly You undo
The love of creatures.

O Knot that binds
Two things so unequal—
Why do You unbind Yourself
Since, bound, You give strength,
Turning evils to good?

Unite her without being
To You without end;
Finish, without finishing,
And, without having to, love—
Make great this nothingness.

The poem reminds me of a petition found in the prayer, "A Prayer for the Earth," which Pope Francis composed for the conclusion of *Laudato Si*. The petition reads:

Bring healing to our lives, that we may protect the world and not prey upon it, that we may sow beauty, not pollution and destruction.

The grace of contemplation bestows wonder; it stirs up an interior gratitude simply for being alive and for being able to share life with others; it brings to our awareness, with a certain immediate, unquestioning power, a sense of that connectedness with creation that we experience as bestowing upon us divine blessing, healing, as empowering us to love. To speak of it, of contemplation, as a moment of being “Before the Beauty of God” is as good a way as any.

From our contemplative experience, we Carmelites, then, can feel a rapport with certain passages or expressions in *Laudato Si*. They seem to speak to us in an almost personal way. One such passage for me was the following:

By learning to see and appreciate beauty, we learn to reject self-interested pragmatism. If someone has not learned to stop and admire something beautiful, we should not be surprised if he or she treats everything as an object to be used and abused without scruple. [VI., III., n.215]

While the concern here is not immediately ecological, it obviously pertains to that all-too-pervasive modern mentality, with its stuntedness of spirit, that lies at the root of our continued abuse of creation in both its human and non-human varieties.

Here, in such a context, detachment can be understood as a capacity to cherish, to admire, to see another in itself. Detachment leads us away from that almost universal narcissism that projects onto everything its need for self-gratification and self-glorification.

That's one of the reasons why I personally found the election of Trump as President so distressing. He seems to me a supremely narcissistic individual, someone whose world is small, cramped, petty, and ultimately empty. And I don't want to think of our collective national psyche as somehow finding for itself a leader and eminence in such a man.

6.

Turning to the poetry of St. John of the Cross, Pope Francis makes it easy for me. He references those famous stanzas from “The Spiritual Canticle” where the Bride celebrates the Bridegroom upon their first finding of each other. You know the passage. It reads:

13.
O my beloved, the mountains
And hidden wooded valleys,
Fabled islands,
And roaring rivers,
The whistling of love-laden breezes,

14.
The night's utter stillness
At the first streaks of dawn,
Hushed music,
Far-echoing emptiness,
The supper that refreshes and delight:

15.
Our bed as gentle as flowers
Enlacing lions' dens,
Draped in purple
And set upon peace,
Canopied with countless gold shields . . .

Pope Francis alludes to this passage when he imagines the poet as mystic standing enraptured before a mountain. "Standing awestruck before a mountain," Francis writes, "[the mystic] cannot separate this experience from God, and perceives that the interior awe being lived has to be entrusted to the Lord." [VI., n.234]

That simple statement is, for me, one of the finest, most succinct statements of what a true nature mysticism is all about. It's not that we divinize nature in some strange way. Nor that we somehow perceive the divine as radiating out of, but distinct from the natural world, like a ghost in a dead body. Rather, experiencing the beauty and sublimity, grandeur and mystery, of nature as present in itself, we then spontaneously entrust our interior response to God in His transcendence.

Not infrequently there can be in spirituality a tendency to interpret our experience by boxing it in, by defining limits for it and forcing it to conform to them. Often this entails setting up a dualism of two opposing categories. From my experience teaching spirituality to seminarians, for example, the most common dualism is that of matter and spirit. Thus, our experience of the divine partakes of a supernatural, spiritual plane of existence, which lifts us up above the concrete material world of our ordinary lives. Accordingly, our spiritual life remains mostly a kind of devotional abstraction. Such a spirituality is not capable, I would say, of helping us as Christians and as Carmelites take up the challenge of an integral ecology as is so needed today.

Pope Francis recognizes this problem as well. He writes, for example:

Admittedly, Christians have not always appropriated and developed the spiritual treasures bestowed by God upon the Church, where the life of the Spirit is not dissociated from the body or from nature or from worldly realities, but lived in and with them, in communion with all that surrounds us. [VI., n.216]

The Spirit of Carmel has fallen prey to such dualisms. When I hear some of the older friars of my Province reminisce about their days in formation, back in the 50s, it reminds me of that observation by Michel Foucault, the French philosopher, that in the post-Tridentine church the model for life in the monastery and for seminary formation was either a military boot camp or a prison. The recalcitrant will—which is to say, the natural will—had to be driven out and replaced by a docile, that is, supernatural, will.

But the way of the true contemplative, and certainly John of the Cross is a prime example, is not ultimately a withdrawal from creation, but an immersion into it as a vital, intimate presence, there to find the divine Spirit healing us, loving us, blessing us, accompanying us. *Laudato Si* insists that Carmel be true to its Holy Father by remaining clear about our groundedness in the created world, there where grace abounds.

I can't leave St. John of the Cross behind without quoting once against from "The Spiritual Canticle." Here are stanzas 33 and 34, from Redaction B, which in my view are the

climatic stanzas of the poem. The Bridegroom speaks of the union now achieved between himself and the Bride. The imagery is lush and very much of this world. Yet, as an expression of love for God, providing us an enduring communion and groundedness in his loving presence, it seems to me unexcelled.

33.

Now the little white dove
Has borne her green branch to the ark,
And, look, the turtledove
Has found his heart's mate
Down near the grassy riverbank.

34.

All alone she dwelt
And alone has now built her nest;
Alone he leads her,
He, her dearest one,
Who alone, like her, bears a wound of love.

7.

There's a certain paradoxical aspect to this life of the Spirit. The Spirit is in the world, of course, and He is with the world. But He is not of the world, at least not exactly; He is of the transcendent, the eternal, the yet-to-be, the All. But that is the nature of detachment and humility, ultimately the nature of love. When we love someone, we are certainly not indifferent towards them. We are not detached, in the sense of disengaged, uncaring, uncommitted, adopting a live-and-let-live attitude. Yet, at the same time, we are not controlling, possessive, fearful, insistent, demanding guarantees and rewards in exchange for our love. We all know this distinction well.

An integral ecology, then, is a way of thinking about this love, only now writ large. We see ourselves as part of something larger than ourselves, whether it be our families, our communities, our societies, the human community as a whole—and here is perhaps where *Laudato Si* represents something new, pushing the vision of our human vocation to build up a loving solidarity in ever wider and wider, more inclusive circles—ultimately, our circle of loving care and concern is to embrace that community of life which is our planet. “Everything is interconnected,” Pope Francis writes in *Laudato Si*, “and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity.” [VI.,VII., n.240]

Do we see ourselves, then, as bringing love to our ever-expanding circle of belonging? Can we be part of the whole in a way that is deliberate, free, willing, and given over to love? A couple of quotes from Pope Francis will reinforce this truth:

[The needed spiritual conversion underlying an integral ecology] entails a loving awareness that we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures, but joined in a splendid universal communion. As believers, we do not look at the world from with-

out but from within, conscious of the bonds with which the Father has linked us to all beings. [VI. I., n.W220]

Fraternal love can only be gratuitous; it can never be a means of repaying others for what they have done or will do for us. That is why it is possible to love our enemies. This same gratuitousness inspires us to love and accept the wind, the sun, and the clouds, even though we cannot control them. In this sense, we can speak of a “universal fraternity.” [VI. V., n.228]

Now to a poem by Jessica Powers. I'll assume you know who she is. The poem is one of her finest. It reads;

To Live with the Spirit

To live with the Spirit of God is to be a listener.
It is to keep the vigil of memory,
earthless and still.
One leans to catch the stirring of the Spirit,
strange as the wind's will.

The soul that walks where the wind of the Spirit blows
turns like a wandering weather-vane toward love.
It may lament like Job or Jeremiah,
echo the wounded hart, the mateless dove.
It may rejoice in spaciousness of meadow
that emulates the freedom of the sky.
Always it walks in waylessness, unknowing;
it has cast down forever from its hand
the compass of the whither and the why.

To live with the Spirit of God is to be a lover.
It is becoming love, and like to Him
toward Whom we strain with metaphors of creatures:
fire-sweep and water-rush and the wind's whim.
The soul is all activity, all silence;
and though it surges Godward to its goal,
it holds, as moving earth holds sleeping noonday,
the peace that is the listening of the soul.

(1949; 1984)

I prefer to leave these reflections there, in the quiet resonance and aftershock of this extraordinary poem, so much of the spirit of Carmel. None of us can solve the ecological crisis we face as a species. Some of us may have a larger role to play in our Carmelite response to it. All of us, as Carmelites, can live as fully as we can with the Spirit. And that may be all

we need. At least the Lord will find faith, hope, and love alive in this world, if and when everything falls apart.