Introduction: Fire and the Cross in a Time of Unraveling

We are living in a time of planetary unraveling. Climate disruption, species extinction, and spiritual disintegration are no longer distant projections but daily conditions. The overlapping crises of the Anthropocene, or what some now call the Capitalocene or Plantationocene, cannot be solved by technological fixes or reformist solutions alone. These crises are not merely ecological or political. They are also primarily metaphysical. They signal a breakdown in understanding relation, being, and becoming. If theology and ecology are to meet this moment, they must do more than critique; those who seek understanding from both areas, as well as practitioners, must reimagine the world from the ground up.

This paper proposes what I call a Process Ecology of the Cross, or a theological and philosophical framework grounded in process-relational cosmology, shaped by kenotic theology, and animated by the ecological practices and political commitments of Indigenous fire stewardship, feminist science studies, and posthuman spiritual ethics. Rather than reading the cross as a symbol of substitutionary violence, I propose we read it as a cosmopolitical threshold: a sacrament of descent, vulnerability, and regenerative participation in the more-than-human world.

Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy provides the ontological scaffolding for this reimagining. In his metaphysical system, all reality is composed of "actual occasions" (events that feel, relate, and become in and through their relationships with others). "The many become one, and are increased by one," he writes, capturing the dynamic nature of concrescence and creative advance (Whitehead, 21). Nothing is static; all is becoming. In this worldview, God

is not omnipotent and controlling, but relational and persuasive, working within the processes of the world to bring about beauty and intensity (Whitehead, 343).

This relational vision reframes not only theology but ecology. It echoes Thomas Berry's cosmology, which insists that “the universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects” (Berry, 17). It also draws from Catherine Keller’s apophatic theology, which rejects totalizing explanations in favor of “entangled difference” and a willingness to dwell in what she calls the “cloud of the impossible” as a space of relational unknowing and ethical openness (Keller, 48).

To deepen this vision, I draw on Mihnea Tănăsescu’s *Ecocene Politics*, which critiques the modern myth of a single, objective Nature and proposes a pluriversal political ecology grounded in entanglement and co-constitution. “We are already implicated,” he writes. “We are already entangled” (Tănăsescu, 78). The cross, reimagined through this lens, becomes not a symbol of divine distance but a gesture of divine participation in the tangled, suffering processes of the Earth. It is a call to relinquish mastery and enter into the slow, painful, and sacred work of relational becoming.

This cruciform descent also echoes Donna Haraway’s call to “stay with the trouble.” In contrast to techno-utopianism and apocalyptic despair, Haraway invites us into response-ability, the capacity to remain in relationship, “make kin,” and compost failed cosmologies into more just and relational worlds (Haraway, 14). The cross, then, becomes not a clean escape from suffering but a sign of faithfulness within it, and a commitment to stay with the wounded, the uncertain, and the unresolved.

Fire is one of the elemental signs of this transformation. Often framed as destructive in Western imaginations, fire in many Indigenous cosmologies is a being of reciprocity, purification, and renewal. Margo Robbins, a Yurok cultural fire practitioner, says, “When we light a fire, we are in ceremony. The fire is not just a tool, but it is a being we pray with” (Kimmerer, “Serviceberry”). As I will argue later, fire is not merely a metaphor but a sacrament of process. It enacts what Whitehead calls creative advance and embodies the kenotic rhythm of release, transformation, and return (Whitehead, 31).

Throughout this paper, I develop a theology of the cross rooted in process metaphysics, ecological kenosis, and sacramental perception. I aim to explore how communion functions ontologically in process-relational thought and how it grounds ecological interdependence. I reinterpret kenosis as a cosmopolitical practice of descent and humility and then develop the idea of ecological intentionality, rooted in phenomenology and polyphasic perception. Further, I examine fire as a sacrament of regeneration as a practical and process-oriented case study of applying this perception. The cross is re-read in this lens as a crucible of shared becoming. Finally, I offer a vision of composted peace: a cruciform ethic of staying with the Earth, performing peace beyond the human, and participating in the liturgy of planetary renewal.

This is not a theology of triumph or substitute sacrifice. It is a theology of remaining, of descending, burning, composting, and becoming-with. It is a call to see the cross not as a vertical ladder to transcendence, but as a horizontal opening to relational fidelity in a world that is dying and yet still becoming. The cross, like fire, burns not to destroy but to clear space for memory, renewal, and a pluriverse where many worlds can still emerge.

Becoming in Communion: Whitehead, Keller, and the Ontology of Relation

At the heart of a process ecology of the cross lies a radical ontological claim: to be is to be in relation. This foundational insight, central to Alfred North Whitehead's process-relational philosophy, reframes existence not as a collection of self-contained substances but as a dynamic field of interdependent becoming. All entities and presupposed objects in traditional Western understandings, whether atoms, organisms, ecosystems, or divine realities, are not fixed objects but "actual occasions" of experience and concrescence, each constituted by its relations to others. As Whitehead writes, "The many become one, and are increased by one" (Whitehead, 21). Reality is composed of events that prehend, feel, and respond to other events. Becoming is not an isolated achievement; it is always a shared act.

This metaphysical vision resonates profoundly with ecological and theological traditions that affirm communion as the fundamental pattern of life. In this context, Communion is not merely an ethical injunction to care for the Earth. It is a cosmological truth, and a recognition that everything arises through encounter, resonance, and mutual transformation. Thomas Berry, deeply influenced by process thought, names this the "communion of subjects" rather than a "collection of objects" (Berry, 17). Subjectivity is not exclusive to humans; it pervades the cosmos. All beings participate in these ontological fields of feeling and relation much like the electromagnetic or gravitational fields that pervade the study of physics since the 20th century.

The theological implications of this are immense. If God is the source and sustainer of becoming, then the divine is not static, omnipotent will, but relational creativity, or what Whitehead calls the "poet of the world" (Whitehead, 88). In this view, God is the ultimate instance or concrescence of communion: not coercive but persuasive, not remote but immanent

in the process of world-making. Catherine Keller draws on this Whiteheadian legacy and pushes it into apophatic terrain. In *Cloud of the Impossible*, she articulates a relational theology of entanglement, where God is neither absent nor fully knowable, but intimately present in the clouded, trembling space of shared becoming. "We are entangled," she writes, "not because we choose to be, but because we are" (Keller, 7). In this entanglement, communion is not tidy. It is messy, ambiguous, and sacred.

This metaphysical account of communion also carries political and ecological force. In the context of ecological collapse, it calls us to recognize that we are not observers of a broken system but participants in its becoming. The land, the waters, the atmosphere, and the soil microbes all participate in a web of agency and effect. Communion is not a metaphor; it is a condition. The question is whether we will live into this condition with responsibility, humility, and reverence.

Importantly, communion in process thought or theology is not consensus in this context. It is not a flattening of difference or a denial of pain. Rather, it is a differential unity, a harmony of contrasts. Whitehead insists that the intensity of experience arises from the tension and integration of difference (Whitehead, 26). Keller echoes this in her insistence that "true relation demands irreducibility" (Keller, 83). Communion, then, is not a utopia of sameness, but a practice of remaining-with-of sustaining relation across rupture, uncertainty, and otherness. In this sense, communion is always cruciform: it bears the weight of suffering, the ache of difference, and the possibility of transformation not in a personal substitutive sense but in a cosmogenesis of being.

Such a vision challenges the modern Western metaphysical and theological (and ecological) inheritance that privileges separation, autonomy, and control. It rejects the Cartesian

cogito, the liberal subject, and the colonial ontology of nature-as-object. Instead, it aligns with Indigenous and decolonial traditions that understand beings as co-constituted through relational epistemologies. Communion is a political act in this sense. To affirm it is to resist extractivism, market-driven ethics, selfish anthropocentrism, and theologies of dominion. It begins from shared vulnerability and commits to shared becoming (Escobar, 10–13; Tănăsescu, 63).

This is where the symbol of the cross begins to shift. In many Christian traditions, the cross has been interpreted as a juridical solution to sin, a site of substitutionary atonement, or a marker of divine wrath that begets deliverance from suffering in human lives. But through the lens of process-relational communion, the cross becomes something else: a sacrament of *entangled* vulnerability. It marks not the triumph of divine violence but the descent of divine presence into the world's suffering. In this reading, the cross is not a transaction but an invitation to remain in communion even in the face of pain, uncertainty, and death as Haraway would admonish.

The Process Ecology of the Cross, then, begins not with guilt or salvation, but with relation. It insists that all theological and ecological reflection must begin from recognizing that we belong to each other, whether humans, animals, rivers, fungi, clouds, or the divine. To live this communion is to practice what Haraway calls response-ability, or the ability to respond, be affected, and remain with (Haraway, 14). It is to embrace what Keller names the cloud of the impossible, where knowing is never total, but always felt, partial, and shared.

Exploring kenosis will expand on this communion language. Kenosis is the spiritual (and political in the direct sense of that term) practice of self-emptying, as a mode of communion. Likewise, phenomenology of ecological intentionality, grounded in embodied perception and sacred attention, aids in this understanding. Together, these threads will lead us to fire, and

finally, to the cross not as a place of redemptive domination, but as a cosmic altar of shared becoming.

Kenosis as Cosmopolitical Descent: From Philippians to the Ecocene

The paradox of power made perfect in weakness lies at the heart of Christian theologies. In one of the earliest hymns preserved and appropriated in the New Testament, the apostle Paul presents Christ not as a triumphant conqueror but as one:

> who, though he was in the form of God,
>
> did not regard equality with God
>
> as something to be exploited, but emptied himself,
>
> taking the form of a slave,
>
> being born in human likeness.
>
> And being found in human form,
>
> he humbled himself
>
> and became obedient to the point of death—
>
> even death on a cross. (Phil. 2:6–8, NRSV)

This is the mystery of kenosis, or divine self-emptying, not as loss but as love. Kenosis has often been interpreted theologically as Christ's relinquishing of divine privilege in order to share in human vulnerability. Yet in our planetary moment of now in a concrescent context, this hymn of descent must be reread as a cosmopolitical gesture, and as an invitation to descend not

only into the human condition but into the more-than-human web of planetary suffering and shared becoming.

In a time of ecological devastation and spiritual fragmentation, kenosis emerges not as pious sentiment but as a metaphysical ethic. It is a call to let go of perceived mastery, to renounce fantasies of control with our actions and theologies, and to open ourselves (ontologically, spiritually, and politically) to entanglement with all that suffers in the pluriverses of existence. Mihnea Tănăsescu, in *Ecocene Politics*, argues that our ecological crisis is rooted in a metaphysical hubris and the belief in a single, unified, controllable concept of "nature." Instead of this mononaturalism, he calls for a planetary politics grounded in plurality, fragility, and relational humility (Tănăsescu, 63–79). "To imagine politics in the Ecocene," he writes, "is to begin from the understanding that we are already entangled, already implicated, already co-constituted by forces we do not control" (Tănăsescu, 78).

Kenosis, read or experienced through this lens, becomes an ecological-political posture of descent. It invites us to recognize that we are not above the Earth, nor outside of its suffering. We are participants in the fire, the flood, and the grief of extinction. And we are called, not to heroically solve these crises from on high with technocratic or removed legislation, but to descend into them and to be *with*. In this way, kenosis becomes not a loss of agency but a redistribution of agency as a refusal to dominate, and a willingness to participate. It is the unlearning of human exceptionalism based on rejections of metaphysical concepts and the modern embrace of reductionist and "scientist" tendencies in the West.

This vision echoes Leonardo Boff's articulation of kenosis as the foundation of an ecological ethic. In *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, Boff writes, "The Earth is not an object to be dominated but a subject to be communed with. It is wounded and cries out in pain. The proper

response is not control, but compassion" (Boff, 34). This compassion is not a sentimental posture, but a form of planetary solidarity grounded in vulnerability. It is the cross as ecology and embracing the complexities of the Earth pierced, and the divine descending to dwell there.

Alfred North Whitehead's process theology further supports this reading. In contrast to classical theism's omnipotent God, Whitehead offers a God who persuades, not compels. This divine presence co-suffers with the world and draws all things toward creative transformation. This kenotic God is not above process, but immersed in it. As John Cobb writes, "God is the fellow sufferer who understands" (Cobb, 149). In this view, God's power is relational and persuasive, not dominating. Kenosis becomes the very shape of divine becoming, inviting creation into novelty through love rather than force.

This process-relational account also reframes notions of salvation in both theology and practice. No longer is it a matter of escaping Earthly suffering or securing individual redemption. Instead, salvation becomes participation in the divine pattern of shared vulnerability and creative transformation. The cross ceases to be a legal or transactional mechanism and becomes a cosmopolitical sacrament in which the altar is where domination is relinquished and communion is enacted. As Catherine Keller insists, theology must learn to dwell in "the cloud of the impossible," where kenosis becomes a methodology of unknowing, openness, and entangled presence (Keller, 49).

This cruciform vision of kenosis also aligns with Indigenous cosmologies emphasizing humility, reciprocity, and mutual presence. In her teachings on the *Honorable Harvest*, Robin Wall Kimmerer writes: "Take only what you need. Use everything you take. Give a gift in reciprocity for what you have taken. Sustain the ones who sustain you" (Kimmerer, 183). Such practices model a kenotic relation, a continual emptying and offering that resists control in favor

of sacred circulation. They are theological without being doctrinal; spiritual without being disembodied.

To embrace kenosis as cosmopolitical descent is to align with these rhythms of letting go, listening, and being-with. It is to allow the self to be decentered, the future to remain uncertain, and the Earth to be encountered not as object of salvation but as co-suffering subject of love. It is to grieve well, to dwell in the ashes without despair, and to trust in the sacrament of compost: that from death, something new may yet emerge (Haraway, 55).

Yet this form of self-emptying must not collapse into quietism or solipsism. Kenosis is not passivity but an offering. It is not withdrawal but transformation. As seen in Christ's descent and resurrection, kenosis is paradoxically a path to fullness, not through assertion, but through relational fidelity. When reframed ecologically, kenosis becomes the spiritual disposition required for true communion and the willingness to relinquish superiority in favor of interdependence, to unlearn mastery in favor of mutual becoming.

This kenotic orientation takes shape in perception and attention through what I call ecological intentionality. Drawing on phenomenology and polyphasic consciousness, I will argue that our way of seeing must also become kenotic if we are to perceive the world not as object to be saved, but as relation to be shared.

Ecological Intentionality and Polyphasic Perception

If kenosis is the spiritual and political descent into relational vulnerability, then ecological intentionality is its perceptual counterpart. Participating in a process ecology of the cross is about acting differently and seeing differently. It is to cultivate a form of attention that honors the

subjectivity of the more-than-human world, resists reductionism, and makes space for the presence of beings beyond human linguistic categories. Ecological intentionality names this transformed posture of perception. It is a way of seeing shaped by humility, interdependence, and reverence. This form of attention lets the world be in its own difference.

In the phenomenological tradition, intentionality refers to the aboutness of consciousness and its inescapable orientation toward something beyond itself. As Edmund Husserl famously stated, “All consciousness is consciousness of something” (Husserl, 84). However, in Husserl's framework, intentionality remained largely a matter of internal mental acts. Maurice Merleau-Ponty expanded this notion by emphasizing the embodied nature of perception: we do not perceive as disembodied minds, but as sensing bodies situated in the world. “The body is our general medium for having a world,” he writes (Merleau-Ponty, 203). The world is not constructed abstractly but experienced through movement, rhythm, gesture, and vulnerability.

This embodied orientation lays the groundwork for ecological intentionality, which moves beyond objective knowledge to an ethic of relational perception. It asks whether we perceive the tree as lumber or as kin (even the lumber used to make the cross)? Do we listen to the river as a data source or a presence? This question is not merely poetic. It is metaphysical and lived. Thomas Berry and Robin Wall Kimmerer insist that how we see shapes how we relate. “In a culture of gratitude,” Kimmerer writes, “everyone knows that gifts will follow the circle of reciprocity and flow back to you again” (Kimmerer, 115). Gratitude is a mode of intentionality, and a crucial mode of seeing the world as subject, not object.

Edith Stein's phenomenology of empathy offers a further deepening of this perspective. In *On the Problem of Empathy*, Stein argues that empathy (*Einfühlung*) is the act of receiving the irreducible presence of the other, not by projecting ourselves into them, but by allowing their subjectivity to impress upon us (Stein, 11). Empathy, then, is not imagination but recognition. Applied ecologically, this insight becomes radical, and it means attending to the tree not as a symbol or utility, but as an other in its own right. To "let the tree be the tree," in Merleau-Ponty's sense, is a kenotic perceptual act (Merleau-Ponty, 353).

Yet even these sophisticated modes of perception remain constrained if we confine awareness to rational consciousness. Tara Lumpkin's work on polyphasic consciousness challenges the hegemony of the waking, rational state and invites us to recover non-ordinary and often marginalized forms of perception, including dreaming, trance, vision, psychedelic states, and ritual consciousness. "Perceptual diversity," she writes, "is a key to adaptive ecological behavior" (Lumpkin, 129). The monoculture of perception produced by modern Western epistemologies has severed us not only from other beings but from other ways of knowing.

Ecological intentionality thus becomes a polyphasic practice as an openness to multiple registers of perception, including symbolic, intuitive, affective, and spiritual. In this sense, Matthew Segall's reading of Whitehead as a kind of "psychedelic realist" is especially helpful. "To perceive is to participate," Segall writes, emphasizing that perception itself is ontologically creative (Segall, 188). Whitehead's "prehension" theory, where even seemingly non-sentient entities feel and relate, grounds this idea metaphysically. All reality is relationally constituted, and therefore, attention becomes a cosmic act.

This participatory metaphysics aligns precisely with a process ecology of the cross, where attention is not passive observation but a form of sacramental relation. Like fire and

kenosis, perception in this model is not about control but about letting-go, being-touched, and staying-with. This is also the heart of Donna Haraway's ethics of response-ability. "It matters what stories make worlds," she insists, and it matters what perceptions shape those stories (Haraway, 12). To respond to the Earth is to be attentive to its agencies, languages, and signs, even when they are outside our usual frames of reference.

This shift in perception is not abstract for me. It has become a daily practice of sorts in my own theological journey. As part of a long-term ecological tracking project, I have spent months attending to a black walnut tree near our home in South Carolina. Initially, I approached it scientifically by observing leaf cycles, fungal growth, and weather effects starting in early 2025. But gradually, the practice shifted from data collection to presence. The tree became a teacher (that word does not do the experience justice), not of information, but of time, patience, and silence. There were mornings when I sat and simply breathed. I did not study the tree, but I companioned it. This pattern became a morning ritual for me and perseveres today. This, too, is ecological intentionality.

Such perception leads inevitably to ethics, ritual, and liturgy. If we see fire as kin, we will burn differently. If we perceive the river as sacred, we will not pave its banks. If we feel the ash of a burned landscape as prayer, we will no longer speak of "waste." Ecological intentionality, then, becomes the kenosis of the soft gaze toward the horizon of being, letting go of human centrality, and turning toward shared life.

For example, fire in the context is both a literal and symbolic participant in ecological regeneration and theological imagination. Fire teaches us to perceive creatively, to surrender control, and to enact transformation through release. As a sacrament of process, fire enacts the cruciform rhythm of destruction and renewal. In its flicker, we glimpse the world's becoming—

and our place within it.

Fire as Sacrament: Toward a Processual Liturgy of Regeneration

In process-relational cosmology, few material forces so clearly embody the metaphysical principle of becoming as fire. Often cast as a symbol of danger or judgment in Western theology, fire is also a central agent of sacramental transformation in ecological and spiritual traditions. When interpreted through Whiteheadian metaphysics and ecological kenosis, fire becomes not a force of negation, but also a teacher of creative concrescence. It burns, but in that burning, it reveals how life emerges from letting go. In a process ecology of the cross, fire is not merely metaphorical, instead it is a liturgical participant in the sacrament of shared planetary becoming.

In Whitehead's metaphysics, reality is not composed of static substances but of "actual occasions" of experience, such as events that feel, relate, and become in response to other events (Whitehead, 28–29). Each act of becoming is an act of creative advance into novelty instead of blank creations *ex nihilo*, but the transformation of inherited data into something new. Fire enacts this principle. As it burns, it prehends the past through dead wood, dry grass, fallen leaves, and integrates them into new events of flame, smoke, ash, and fertile ground. In fire, we see the metaphysical grammar of process made visible.

Indigenous fire stewardship practices across Turtle Island embody this grammar with profound ecological and spiritual precision. For millennia, Native communities have practiced cultural burning, not as conquest over nature, but as collaboration with the biosphere. These burns increase biodiversity, foster food webs, reduce wildfire risk, and honor the seasonal regeneration cycles. In these traditions, fire is not a threat but a relative. "When we light a fire,

we are in ceremony," says Yurok fire practitioner Margo Robbins. "The fire is not just a tool—it is a being we pray with" (Kimmerer, "Serviceberry"). Such fire is not an enemy to suppress, but a co-creator to honor. It is a being of intentional relation.

Disrupting these practices through colonial suppression, extractive land policies, and fire exclusion regimes was not just ecological or political. These disruptions were cosmological violence. The attempt to render fire inert, mechanized, or threatening severed the relational logic that once underpinned entire ecosystems. Today's megafires and wildfires in places such as the Carolinas and California are made worse by climate change and inadequate suppression. They are not evidence of fire's danger, but of our failure to listen to fire. The re-emergence of Indigenous fire stewardship is thus not merely an ecological intervention. It is a cosmopolitical reparation (Whyte, 7).

In Christian theology, fire also occupies a central symbolic place. It appears in the burning bush that confronts Moses with the holiness of becoming (Exod. 3:2); in the tongues of flame that descend at Pentecost, igniting speech, relation, and transfiguration (Acts 2:3); and in the Easter Vigil, where the Paschal fire breaks the tomb's darkness with light. Sergius Bulgakov, writing from the Eastern Orthodox mystical tradition, interprets fire not as wrath but as the purifying flame of divine love: "The fire of the Spirit burns… with the fire of love, which sanctifies and illumines" (Bulgakov, 93). In this light, fire is theophany—divine presence made radiant in matter.

When read through Whitehead and Keller, this sacramental vision of fire becomes not a symbol but a mode of divine becoming. Fire is not imposed from above but emerges from within. It is the world's way of transfiguring itself. In Keller's apophatic theology, fire can also be read as revealing, concealing, burning, and blessing. In the smoke and ash, we enter the cloud

of the impossible, not to find finality, but to dwell in sacred indeterminacy (Keller, 150). Fire is relational mystery incarnate.

For me, this insight is not merely theoretical. As part of my engagement with ecological spirituality in the Carolina Piedmont, I have observed prescribed burns conducted in collaboration with Indigenous ecologists and land managers. These burns are planned with care, prayer, and humility to restore the health of oak and longleaf pine systems. The fire burns away choking underbrush, awakens long-dormant seeds, and clears space for animals and fungi to thrive. In these moments, fire does not feel destructive. Fire and human interaction feel liturgical. The land breathes. The air hums. The smoke lifts like incense. The act becomes an offering and kenosis is made visible in action.

Donna Haraway's language of composting helps give this experience form. Fire, like compost, is not a negation but a transformation. It breaks down so that life can break open. "Compost is not posthuman," she writes. "It's the humus of becoming-with" (Haraway, 55). The fire does not erase, it entangles. It does not end, it opens. It is the cruciform logic of regeneration, carried not in abstract symbol but in carbon, heat, and breath.

But fire is not inherently *good*. In this age of ecological crisis, we must distinguish between relational fire and extractive fire. One burns to renew; the other burns to destroy. One is ceremonial and the other is industrial. A process ecology of the cross insists that we discern the flame. As Tănăsescu reminds us, we live amid entanglement whether we choose it or not. The question is not whether to relate to fire, but how (Tănăsescu, 63–64).

In this light, fire becomes a participant in the cruciform cosmology. It consumes, but it also consecrates. It invites us into the rhythms of death and rebirth, not as metaphysical

abstractions, but as sacred practice. It teaches us to burn well—to relinquish with intention, to attend to what remains, and to trust in what will come. In fire, as in the cross, we are called not to mastery but to communion within transformation.

The cross becomes the site, or concrescence, where all these threads converge. If fire is a sacrament of becoming, the cross is its altar as a crucible of planetary relation, divine vulnerability, and regenerative peace.

A Process Ecology of the Cross: Composting Salvation, Performing Peace

If fire is the sacrament of processual regeneration, then the cross is its altar and a site where transformation, vulnerability, and communion converge. Within dominant strands of Western Christian theology, the cross has often been framed through the lens of substitutionary atonement, reducing its cosmic potential to a juridical transaction between God and humanity. However, the cross takes on a different valence when read through the lenses of process philosophy, Indigenous cosmology, and ecological theology. It becomes a cosmopolitical threshold. This is where kenosis becomes liturgy, divine becoming is made manifest, and planetary peace begins not through power but shared descent.

In Whitehead's process thought, every act of becoming is marked by tension, novelty, and the integration of contrast. The universe is not static, but an unfolding of concrescent events shaped by the feelings and relations of other events (Whitehead, 36). The divine is caught up in this process, not as an omnipotent manipulator or dominant controller, but as the "fellow sufferer who understands," a God who lures the world into deeper communion through relational persuasion (Cobb, 149). The cross, seen through this lens, is not a metaphysical anomaly but a

cosmic pattern where kenosis is enacted at the heart of becoming. It is where the world's pain is neither denied nor explained, but held and transfigured.

This processual re-reading reframes salvation not as escape but as entanglement. Salvation becomes the slow work of relational transformation, composting violence, grief, and fragmentation into shared life. It is the labor of staying with wounds until they become soil. Catherine Keller captures this cruciform movement when she writes, “The cross is not a doctrine to believe, but a way of being-with in the tangle of the world’s becoming” (Keller, 201). This “being-with” demands theological humility. It urges us to stop asking how God fixes the world and to begin asking how God remains with the world in its undoing.

In this undoing, the political vision of Mihnea Tănăsescu becomes essential. Again, in *Ecocene Politics*, he argues that metaphysical assumptions about mastery and separability are directly responsible for the ecological devastation we now face. In contrast, the Ecocene demands a politics of entanglement where cosmopolitics is grounded in recognizing that “we are already co-constituted by forces we do not control” (Tănăsescu, 78). In this vision, the cross becomes the political icon of shared fragility. It does not mark a triumph but a turning, a descent into the real conditions of life on Earth.

This cruciform descent aligns with Donna Haraway’s call to “stay with the trouble.” She resists escapist optimism and apocalyptic despair, advocating for response-ability and the capacity to remain in a relationship, even when resolution is impossible. “We become with each other or not at all,” she writes (Haraway, 4). A process ecology of the cross takes this seriously. It teaches that peace is not the cessation of struggle but the performance of fidelity in the midst of it. It is the act of remaining at the foot of the cross, at the edge of the burn scar, in this cloud of unknowing or grief or uncertainty in an authentic and intentional manner.

This cruciform peace is not abstract. It has material, political, and spiritual dimensions. It is practiced in prescribed burns, communal grief rituals, indigenous-informed stewardship, and sacramental attention. It is performed in lament, repentance, and relationship with people, soil, fungi, rivers, and forgotten or even extinct species. It calls faith communities to reorient their theologies away from conquest and toward compost and rituals that honor death, transfigure grief, and plant, animal, microbial, atmospheric, or oceanic hopes.

This vision reframes not only peace but theological education itself. In a process ecology of the cross, to learn theology is not to master content but to develop perceptual disciplines. To become a theologian is to become attentive to becoming-to toward fire, to grief, to planetary time. It means learning to read landscapes as scripture, to see sacraments in soil, and to hear liturgy in birdsong and silence. It means approaching God not as a solution but as an engaged companion in the ongoing work of relation and creation and existence (even though memory).

In this cosmology, salvation becomes compost. Salvation is not clean, instant, or abstract, but slow, partial, and real. It emerges from the ashes of what we've destroyed, if we are willing to remain long enough to tend the transformation with ecological intentionality. The cross is no longer the symbol of substitution or personalized deliverance from an unfortunate afterlife. Instead, the cross is the site of shared becoming. It is where the divine takes on the pattern of process, not to escape the world, but to deepen its interrelation.

What does it mean to perform peace beyond the human? What does living as participants in a process of cruciform ecology look like, not to solve the crisis but to compost it toward a different world? How might grief, anxieties, or complications push us as humans beyond our own presuppositions about other-than-humans, whether microbes or God?

Conclusion: Staying with the Trouble, Composting Toward the Pluriverse

To live into a process ecology of the cross is to adopt a posture of presence, humility, and relation in the face of planetary unraveling. It is important to understand that the overlapping crises of ecological collapse or radical change based on human action (or inaction), climate injustice, and spiritual dislocation are not simply problems to be solved but symptoms of a deeper metaphysical disorder and a forgetting of our embeddedness in the web of life. Theology cannot afford to remain abstract, escapist, or dualistic as the world burns, drowns, and fragments. Instead, it must become relational, kenotic, and sacramental. It must learn to compost.

Throughout this work, I have proposed the cross as a cosmopolitical threshold or a site of divine kenosis, ecological participation, and metaphysical transformation. In dialogue with Whitehead's process-relational metaphysics, I argue that the cross marks not a moment of substitutionary atonement, but a cosmic act of becoming-with. The cross, like fire, is where the past is received, the present is released, and the future is risked. It is an altar of concrescence: a crucible where difference is not resolved but held (Whitehead, 36; Keller, 201).

The threads drawn through kenosis, ecological intentionality, fire as sacrament, and composted salvation weave together a vision that is both theological and cosmological, spiritual and political. Catherine Keller's apophatic method allows us to hold the mystery of suffering and transformation without reducing it to doctrinal certainty. To reiterate, her statement that theology must embrace "a cloud of unknowing—not as lack, but as presence we cannot possess" (Keller, 48) does much work. In that cloud, the cross flickers with relational fidelity instead of resolution.

Mihnea Tănăsescu's political vision of the Ecocene reminds us that we are already entangled, dependent, and bound to a world that exceeds our control. In that entanglement lies both danger and possibility (Tănăsescu, 78). Donna Haraway urges us not to escape but to stay with the trouble and to remain in messy, layered, more-than-human relationships, cultivating response-ability rather than mastery (Haraway, 14). In this cosmology, the cross is not a symbol of redemptive violence, but a practice of remaining-with, whether in pain, presence, or potential.

The sacrament of fire teaches this presence through its rhythm of destruction and renewal. As fire practitioners have long known, to burn with intention is not to erase but to prepare and to make room for seeds long buried, for life long dormant (Kimmerer, "Serviceberry"; Whyte, 7). Fire is therefore cruciform in that it clears what chokes, honors what was, and kindles what might be. To burn well is to participate in becoming and to trust that death is not the end of life but its transformation. It is a lesson we as humans should learn, observe, and enact to relieve our own crisis of being finite.

And so, salvation, reframed through process theology and ecological kenosis, is not a rescue from Earth but a deeper rooting within it. It is the slow work of composting despair into care, pain into practice, grief into soil. This salvific act is not singular but ongoing. It is performed in ecological mourning, sacramental burning, and perceptual discipline. To perceive is to participate and to be changed by what we attend to.

What emerges is a call to perform peace beyond humans and to live out a cruciform ecology that holds space for difference, co-suffers with the wounded, and affirms that the sacred is not above the world but within its aching becoming. The cross affirms Berry's communion of subjects, not through triumph, but through vulnerability. Not through escape, but through embrace.

For theologians, this means writing with ash under their fingernails. For faith communities, it means planting trees as penance, tending fires as prayers, and mourning extinct species just as we do the saints. For all of us, it means surrendering the illusion of innocence and accepting the invitation to compost with care. This is not cheap hope. It is sacramental hope. It is what remains when we have stayed long enough in the ruins to see shoots breaking through.

To walk the way of the cross in the Ecocene is to remain faithful not to doctrine, but to relation. It is to carry the world's wounds not as shame, but as an invitation. To live with the fire, not as a threat, but as a teacher. To kneel not in submission, but in communion with the Earth, the divine, and the pluriverse of becoming. And from this cruciform soil, something tender and fierce may yet take root. Something plural. Something peaceful. Something more than human.

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