# Creaturely Perception and the Greening of Being

*Hildegard of Bingen, Edith Stein, and the Ecology of the Cross*

Sam Harrelson, PhD Student (Ecology, Spirituality, and Religion)
California Institute of Integral Studies
sharrelson@mymail.ciis.edu

# I. Introduction: Ecology, Creatureliness, and the Crisis of Perception

The contemporary ecological crisis is most often framed as a problem of ethics, governance, or technological restraint. Climate change, biodiversity loss, soil depletion, and water scarcity are addressed through policy proposals, sustainability initiatives, and appeals to moral responsibility. Within Christian theology, this has given rise to a rich body of ecological ethics emphasizing stewardship, care for creation, and intergenerational justice. These developments are indispensable. Yet their persistent insufficiency suggests that the crisis operates at a deeper level than action alone. Beneath ecological devastation lies a more fundamental disturbance in how the world is perceived, interpreted, and inhabited. The crisis is not only about what human beings do to the earth, but about how the earth is given to human consciousness in the first place.

This deeper register of the crisis has been named in various ways: as a loss of sacramentality, a collapse of cosmological meaning, or a severing of humanity from its creaturely context. What unites these diagnoses is the recognition that ecological harm is rooted in a distorted understanding of reality itself. When the natural world is encountered primarily as neutral matter, raw material, or standing reserve, ethical concern arrives too late. Moral exhortation struggles to gain traction when the world no longer appears as intrinsically meaningful. The ecological crisis thus exposes not only a failure of responsibility but a failure of theological and phenomenological imagination.[1]

[1] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 539–593.

Christian ecological theology has increasingly attended to this depth, particularly through renewed interest in cosmology, participation, and relational ontology. Thinkers such as Thomas Berry, Elizabeth Johnson, and Leonardo Boff have insisted that ecological healing requires a reconfiguration of how the world is understood, not merely how it is managed.[2] Yet even within this work, questions of ontology and epistemology are often treated implicitly rather than directly. The theological claim that creation is meaningful is frequently asserted without sustained attention to how such meaning is encountered by finite creatures, or how modern habits of perception may inhibit that encounter. Without a careful account of creaturely knowing, ecological theology risks oscillating between ethical urgency and metaphysical vagueness.

This paper begins from the conviction that ecological theology must be grounded in a retrieval of creatureliness itself. Creatureliness names both an ontological condition and an epistemic posture. Ontologically, to be a creature is to exist through participation rather than self-sufficiency. Epistemically, to be a creature is to know within limits, through reception rather than mastery. The ecological crisis reveals what happens when these dimensions are obscured. The world becomes available for domination precisely because it is no longer encountered as gift. Recovering a sense of creation as gift therefore requires not only ethical conversion but a conversion of perception.

To pursue this recovery, I turn to two figures rarely placed in sustained dialogue within ecological theology: Hildegard of Bingen and Edith Stein. Hildegard, writing in the twelfth century, offers a theological cosmology centered on *viriditas*, the greening vitality of God that

[2] Thomas Berry, *The Great Work* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 7–18; Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 1–12; Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 1–6.

animates and sustains all creation. Her vision resists the separation of spirit and matter, insisting instead on a living, sacramental cosmos permeated by divine life.[3] Stein, writing in the twentieth century at the intersection of phenomenology and metaphysics, provides a rigorous account of finite and eternal being that clarifies the structure of creaturely dependence and the limits of creaturely knowing. Her work offers conceptual precision where ecological theology often relies on metaphor alone.[4]

Read together, Hildegard and Stein make possible a theological account of what I call *ecological intentionality*. By this term, I mean a mode of perception appropriate to finite creatures who know themselves as participants in a world sustained by divine life. Ecological intentionality is not an ethical stance added onto an otherwise neutral apprehension of the world. It is the epistemological correlate of participatory ontology. If creation exists through relation and gift, then it can only be known through receptivity, attentiveness, and restraint. Such knowing neither reduces the world to an object of control nor dissolves it into sentimental projection. It honors alterity without severing relation.

This account of perception does not arise abstractly. As this requires formation, I also engage with ascetic and mystical traditions that function as schools of perception within Christian history. The Desert Fathers and Mothers, as interpreted by Douglas Burton-Christie, reveal how exposure, deprivation, and attentiveness retrain desire and perception.[5] The Carmelite tradition, especially in John of the Cross and Teresa of Ávila, shows how receptive knowing is

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[3] Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 35–49.
[4] Edith Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, trans. Kurt F. Reinhardt (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2002), xxi–xxv.
[5] Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 21–28.

tested and sustained through unknowing, loss, and dwelling. These traditions do not offer ecological programs, yet they enact the phenomenological conditions necessary for encountering creation as gift rather than possession.

Finally, this retrieval finds contemporary ecclesial expression in *Laudato Si'* and in the liberationist ecological theology of Leonardo Boff. Pope Francis's critique of the technocratic paradigm and his insistence on creation as gift presuppose a participatory ontology and a receptive epistemology, even where these are not named explicitly.[6] Boff's claim that the earth itself cries out depends upon a world that is alive, expressive, and capable of being addressed rather than merely used.[7]

First, I develop Hildegard of Bingen's theology of *viriditas* as a participatory ontology of living creation. Second, I turn to Edith Stein's account of finite and eternal being, with particular attention to empathy and the structure of creaturely knowing. Third, I articulate ecological intentionality as the convergence of participatory ontology and receptive epistemology. Fourth, I examine ascetic and mystical traditions as cruciform formations of perception. Finally, I draw these threads together in an extended conclusion that articulates an *Ecology of the Cross*, in which vulnerability, dependence, and exposure become the conditions for ecological faithfulness.

What follows is not an attempt to resolve the ecological crisis through theology alone. It is an effort to name the theological and phenomenological conditions under which any genuine

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[6] Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (Vatican City, 2015), §§67–69, 101–114.
[7] Boff, *Cry of the Earth*, 23–30.

response might take root. If the crisis is rooted in a failure of perception, then healing must begin with learning how to see again.

## II. Hildegard of Bingen and the Ontology of Viriditas

Hildegard of Bingen's theological vision offers one of the most comprehensive and integrated cosmologies in the Christian tradition. Writing in the twelfth century within a monastic context shaped by Benedictine spirituality, Augustinian theology, and Neoplatonic metaphysics, Hildegard develops an account of creation that resists the emerging dualisms of late medieval thought. At the center of her cosmology stands the concept of *viriditas*, a term that names greenness, vitality, fecundity, and generative power. While often treated as a poetic or symbolic motif, *viriditas* functions in Hildegard's work as a genuinely ontological category. It expresses her conviction that creation is alive with divine energy and sustained through continuous participation in God's life.[8]

For Hildegard, creation is not a static artifact produced in the distant past. It is a living, dynamic reality sustained by God's ongoing creative presence. In *Scivias*, she describes God as the "living fountain" from whom all life flows and to whom all life returns.[9] This image is devotional but expands beyond that dimension. It names a metaphysical claim about the structure of reality itself. Creation exists only insofar as it participates in divine vitality. Being is not autonomous. It is received. The world is alive because it is continually addressed and sustained by God.

[8] Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine*, 35-40
[9] Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. Columba Hart and Jane Bishop (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), II.1.

This participatory ontology places Hildegard firmly within the Christian tradition of participation while giving it distinctive expression. Drawing on Augustinian and Neoplatonic sources and traditions, she affirms that created being exists through relation to its source rather than through self-sufficiency. Yet Hildegard resists any account that would render creation merely illusory or subordinate in value. Created life matters precisely because it participates in divine life. *Viriditas* names the real presence of God's generative power within the material world.[10]

One of the most striking features of Hildegard's theology is her refusal to separate spirit and matter. Unlike later theological trajectories that would increasingly spiritualize salvation and instrumentalize nature, Hildegard insists on the integrity of embodied life. The same divine vitality that animates the human soul animates the elements, the plants, the animals, and the cosmos itself. Creation is not divided into sacred and profane realms. It is a single, living order permeated by divine presence.[11]

This unity is expressed through Hildegard's frequent use of cosmological imagery in which human beings function as microcosms of the larger creation. Human health is inseparable from the health of the surrounding environment. In *Causae et Curae*, Hildegard describes illness as a disturbance in the balance between the human body and the elements, suggesting that bodily, spiritual, and ecological health are intertwined.[12] Although it's tempting to define this as

[10] Denys Turner, "Hildegard of Bingen and the Theology of the Body," in *The Darkness of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 220–235.
[11] Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 44–49.
[12] Hildegard of Bingen, *Causae et Curae*, trans. Priscilla Throop (Rochester, VT: Healing Arts Press, 1998), 3–10.

an early form of environmental science or awareness, it is more a theological claim about relationality. Human flourishing cannot be isolated from the flourishing of the earth.

Hildegard's emphasis on relational vitality carries significant ecological implications. If creation is alive with *viriditas*, then the natural world cannot be reduced to neutral matter or treated as a mere resource. The earth is not simply raw material awaiting human transformation, but is a living participant in divine life. To exploit creation without regard for its integrity is to disrupt a network of relations sustained by God. Hildegard frequently associates ecological disorder with moral and spiritual failure, suggesting that human sin reverberates through the fabric of creation itself.[13]

At the same time, Hildegard does not idealize the natural world. She is acutely aware of decay, corruption, and disorder. *Viriditas* can be diminished or obstructed through sin, imbalance, and neglect. Hildegard's theological strands avoid romanticizing nature as pure or harmonious. Creation is wounded. Yet, it is not abandoned. Because its source lies beyond itself, creation remains capable of renewal. The greening power of God persists even where life appears diminished.[14]

This tension between vitality and vulnerability is crucial for ecological theology. Hildegard's world is neither static nor self-healing. It depends upon divine generosity and human participation. Human beings occupy a distinctive place within this order, not as masters but as responsible participants. They are capable of cooperating with *viriditas* or resisting it. The ethical

[13] Hildegard, *Causae et Curae*, 42–45.
[14] Michael Marder, *Green Mass: The Ecological Theology of St. Hildegard of Bingen* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021), 12–20.

implications of this claim are clear, but they rest upon a prior ontological vision. Creation matters because it participates in God's life, not because it serves human needs.

Hildegard's theology also resists any sharp separation between revelation and creation. The natural world is not merely the stage upon which salvation unfolds. It is itself revelatory. Creation speaks of God, not abstractly but concretely, through its vitality, rhythms, and fragility. Hildegard's visions and chants give voice to this conviction, rendering the cosmos as a kind of liturgical space in which divine praise and creaturely life are intertwined.[15]

For contemporary ecological theology, Hildegard's significance lies not in offering a ready-made environmental ethic but in articulating a participatory ontology that renders such an ethic intelligible. If creation is alive with divine vitality, then ecological concern is not optional or secondary. It is demanded by the nature of reality itself. Yet this ontological vision also raises a further question. How can finite creatures know and inhabit such a world without collapsing participation into possession? How can creation be encountered as alive without being romanticized or instrumentalized?

Hildegard gestures toward an answer through her emphasis on humility, balance, and attentiveness. Yet she does not provide a systematic account of creaturely knowing. For that, I point to Edith Stein. Stein's phenomenological and metaphysical work offers the conceptual precision needed to articulate how participatory ontology gives rise to receptive epistemology. If Hildegard names what creation *is*, Stein helps us understand how finite creatures can come to know creation faithfully.

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[15] Hildegard of Bingen, *Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum*, trans. Barbara Newman (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 1–7.

## III. Edith Stein: Finite Being, Empathy, and Receptive Knowing

If Hildegard of Bingen offers a theological ontology in which creation is alive with divine vitality, Edith Stein provides the metaphysical and phenomenological resources needed to articulate how finite creatures can know such a world. Writing in the early twentieth century at the intersection of phenomenology, Thomistic metaphysics, and Christian theology, Stein confronts a set of problems that remain pressing for ecological theology. How can finite beings know reality without collapsing it into projection or control? How can difference be acknowledged without severing relation? And how can creaturely dependence be affirmed without diminishing the integrity of created life?

Stein's *Finite and Eternal Being* is a sustained attempt to answer these questions. At its core lies a rigorous articulation of creaturely finitude grounded in participation rather than autonomy. Finite beings, Stein insists, do not possess being in themselves. They receive it. Eternal being alone exists in fullness, while finite beings exist only through continual dependence on a source beyond themselves.[16] This dependence is not accidental or secondary. It is constitutive. To be finite is to exist as given.

Stein's metaphysical account is careful to preserve the distinction between Creator and creation. An eternal being does not stand alongside finite beings as one being among others. It grounds them without becoming identical to them.[17] This participatory structure avoids both dualism and collapse. Creation is neither autonomous nor illusory. It is real precisely because it is sustained. Stein offers a modern articulation of a participatory metaphysics long present in

[16] Edith Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, trans. Kurt F. Reinhardt (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2002), 318–321.
[17] Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, 336–340.

Christian theology, one that resonates deeply with Hildegard's vision of *viriditas* while providing conceptual clarity absent from Hildegard's symbolic idiom.

The ecological implications of this metaphysics are significant. If finite beings exist only through participation, then no creature can be understood as self-sufficient or merely instrumental. Each being has its own integrity, grounded in its essence and sustained by divine generosity. Stein resists reducing beings to interchangeable instances within a functional system.[18] Essence matters because it names the particular way in which a being participates in eternal being. Applied ecologically, this means that trees, animals, landscapes, and ecosystems are not simply resources but finite beings with their own modes of existence and value.

Yet Stein's contribution to ecological theology does not lie in metaphysics alone. Her phenomenological work, particularly *On the Problem of Empathy*, addresses the epistemological question that by ontology itself leaves unresolved. How do finite beings encounter one another as other without collapsing difference or asserting mastery? Empathy, for Stein, is the act by which one subject apprehends another subject as a center of experience distinct from oneself.[19] It is neither emotional contagion nor imaginative projection. Rather, it is a structured mode of intentionality in which alterity is preserved within relation.

Stein's account of empathy is often read narrowly as a theory of intersubjectivity. However, its implications extend beyond human relations. Empathy, understood structurally and phenomenologically rather than sentimentally (as is the modern convention), names a way of encountering another without claiming access to the other's interiority. The other is given as

[18] *Ibid*., 357–360.
[19] Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, trans. Waltraut Stein (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1989), 10–17.

expressive but inexhaustible.[20] This structure is crucial for ecological theology. Non-human creatures don't need to be anthropomorphized to be encountered as meaningful. They can be apprehended as finite beings whose modes of participation differ from our own yet remain real and significant.

When Stein's phenomenology is read alongside her metaphysics, empathy emerges as the epistemological correlate of participation. Because finite beings exist through relation, they can only be known through modes of knowing that respect relation without possession. Knowing is always partial, mediated, and dependent. Epistemic humility is therefore not a moral virtue added onto an otherwise autonomous subject. It flows from the structure of finite being itself.[21]

This insight has far-reaching implications for ecological intentionality. If knowing is always receptive and limited, then attempts to master or exhaust the meaning of the natural world are not merely ethically problematic. They are epistemologically misguided. The desire to render the world fully transparent to human reason reflects a misunderstanding of creaturely knowing. Stein's work exposes this misunderstanding by insisting that finitude is not an obstacle to knowledge but its proper condition.

Stein's emphasis on receptivity also complicates modern assumptions about agency and control. In a technological culture oriented toward manipulation and efficiency, receptivity is often construed as passivity or weakness. Stein rejects this dichotomy. Receptive knowing is not inert. It is an active openness to being addressed by what is other.[22] Such openness requires

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[20] Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 67–72.
[21] Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, 401–405.
[22] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), 67–74.

discipline, attentiveness, and restraint. It is precisely this discipline that ecological theology must recover if it is to resist both domination and romanticization.

Stein's phenomenology converges with the ascetic traditions of Christianity, even though she does not engage directly with them. Her account of finite knowing anticipates the practices of exposure, deprivation, and attentiveness that shape ascetic life. The recognition that knowledge arises through dependence rather than control prepares the ground for a theology in which perception itself becomes a site of conversion.

Stein's work thus provides a crucial bridge between Hildegard's participatory ontology and the formation of ecological intentionality. If Hildegard names the vitality of creation, Stein clarifies the conditions under which such vitality can be known without being appropriated. Together, they allow ecological theology to move beyond metaphor toward a disciplined account of how finite creatures encounter a living world.

Yet Stein also raises a further question. If receptive knowing is structurally possible, how is it formed and sustained within concrete practices of life? Metaphysical clarity alone does not transform perception. The habits of mastery that characterize modern ecological relations are deeply ingrained. To address this, we must turn to traditions that function as schools of perception.

## IV. Ascetic Formation and the Desert: Cruciform Schools of Ecological Perception

If Hildegard of Bingen provides a participatory ontology of creation and Edith Stein articulates the metaphysical and phenomenological conditions of finite knowing, the ascetic traditions of early Christianity offer an account of how such knowing is formed within lived practice.

Ontology and epistemology alone do not reconfigure perception. The habits of mastery that shape modern relationships to the natural world are cultivated over time and reinforced through social, economic, and technological systems. Any theological account of ecological intentionality must attend to practices that interrupt these habits and retrain attention. The Desert Mothers and Fathers provide precisely such an interruption.

As Douglas Burton-Christie has shown, the desert tradition should not be understood primarily as an escape from the world or a rejection of material reality. Rather, the desert functions as an active environment that shapes perception through exposure, deprivation, and attentiveness.[23] The desert resists human control. It refuses productivity, abundance, and comfort. In doing so, it confronts the ascetic with finitude in a concrete and unavoidable way. Hunger, thirst, silence, and vulnerability are not incidental features of desert life. They are formative conditions that disclose the truth of creaturely dependence.

This disclosure aligns closely with Stein's account of finite being. In the desert, the illusion of self-sufficiency collapses. Life is revealed as something received moment by moment rather than secured through possession or control. Ascetic practice thus enacts in lived form what Stein articulates metaphysically. Finitude is not an abstract concept but a bodily and environmental reality. The ascetic learns dependence not through reflection alone but through sustained exposure to conditions that resist mastery.[24]

The desert also functions phenomenologically. It reshapes the structure of attention. Removed from the distractions and protections of settled life, the ascetic becomes acutely aware

[23] Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 21–28.
[24] Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, 318–325.

of the surrounding environment. Wind, heat, cold, and silence are no longer background conditions. They press upon the body and demand response. Burton-Christie emphasizes that the desert is not a neutral stage upon which spiritual struggle unfolds. It is an agent that addresses, resists, and forms the ascetic.[25] This relational dynamic anticipates the kind of ecological intentionality described earlier. The world is not merely perceived. It is encountered as other, as something that cannot be fully anticipated or controlled.

Importantly, the desert tradition does not romanticize nature. The desert is not gentle or harmonious. It is harsh, unpredictable, and often deadly. This refusal of romanticization is critical for ecological theology. It resists the temptation to idealize the natural world as pure or benign. Instead, the desert reveals creation as vulnerable, demanding, and resistant. The ascetic does not master the land. The land unmasks the ascetic.[26]

This unmasking is deeply cruciform. The desert exposes the limits of human power and confronts the ascetic with dependence and mortality. Yet it is precisely through this exposure that attentiveness deepens. The ascetic learns to listen, to wait, and to receive. Desire is reordered away from possession and toward participation. In this sense, the desert functions as a school of cruciform perception. It teaches that life emerges not through domination but through vulnerability.

The theological significance of this formation becomes clearer when read alongside Hildegard's vision of *viriditas*. While Hildegard celebrates vitality and greenness, the desert appears at first glance to stand in tension with her imagery. Yet this tension is instructive.

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[25] Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert*, 109–120.
[26] *Ibid*., 131–145.

*Viriditas* is not reducible to abundance or fertility. It names the sustaining presence of God even where life appears diminished. The desert reveals that divine vitality is not identical with human notions of flourishing. Life persists under conditions of scarcity, and that dependence becomes visible.[27]

The desert tradition also resonates with Stein's account of receptive knowing. In the desert, perception is stripped of its habitual frameworks. There is little to consume, little to control, and little to distract. Attention becomes sharpened through necessity. The ascetic learns to perceive the environment not as a resource but as a condition of life. This perception does not arise from sentiment or theory. It is cultivated through bodily vulnerability and sustained practice.[28]

This ascetic reordering of perception prepares the ground for later mystical theology, particularly in the Carmelite tradition. John of the Cross and Teresa of Ávila refine the desert's lessons by articulating how receptive knowing is tested and sustained over time. Their work does not abandon the world but deepens the desert's insight into the structure of desire and knowledge. The dark night described by John of the Cross intensifies the desert's exposure by withdrawing not only material supports but also conceptual and spiritual ones. Creation can no longer function as consolation or instrument. Knowledge itself becomes cruciform.[29]

Teresa of Ávila complements this emphasis by offering a theology of dwelling that resists both domination and withdrawal. In *The Interior Castle*, the soul is portrayed as a space of

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[27] Michael Marder, *Green Mass: The Ecological Theology of St. Hildegard of Bingen* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021), 87–95.
[28] Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert*, 156–162.
[29] John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991), II.5–7.

encounter shaped by hospitality rather than force. This interiority does not replace the world but reconfigures how the world is inhabited. Teresa's theology affirms that receptive knowing does not end in emptiness but in relational depth.[30]

The desert tradition and the Carmelite mystics demonstrate that ecological intentionality is not simply a way of thinking but a way of living. It requires formation through practices that expose finitude, retrain desire, and cultivate attentiveness. These traditions do not offer ecological programs, yet they enact the phenomenological conditions necessary for encountering creation as gift rather than possession.

This formation culminates in what may be called an Ecology of the Cross. The cross gathers together the desert's exposure, Stein's finitude, and Hildegard's vitality into a single theological figure. The cross reveals that life is sustained not through mastery but through vulnerability. It discloses the truth that participation precedes control and that receptivity is the condition of communion. Ecological faithfulness, on this account, begins not with management but with learning how to dwell within limits.

## V. Conclusion: Toward an Ecology of the Cross and the Conversion of Perception

The ecological crisis confronts Christian theology with a question that cannot be answered through either ethics or policy alone. At stake is not simply how human beings should act toward the natural world, but how the world itself is encountered as meaningful, vulnerable, and worthy of care. This paper has argued that ecological devastation is inseparable from a deeper crisis of

[30] Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1980), V.1–2.

creaturely perception, one rooted in the loss of participatory ontology and receptive epistemology. The recovery of ecological faithfulness, therefore, depends upon a retrieval of creatureliness itself, understood both as a mode of being and a mode of knowing.[31]

Hildegard of Bingen and Edith Stein offer complementary resources for this retrieval. Hildegard's theology of *viriditas* articulates a vision of creation as alive with divine vitality, sustained by God's ongoing presence rather than by autonomous self-sufficiency. Creation, in her account, is not inert matter awaiting human use, but a living, sacramental order in which divine life is expressed through material forms. Stein's metaphysics of finite and eternal being clarifies the structure that makes such a world intelligible. Finite beings exist only through participation, and finite knowing is therefore marked by dependence, limitation, and receptivity. Together, Hildegard and Stein resist both domination and romanticism. They affirm the vitality of creation without collapsing difference, and they ground humility not in sentiment but in ontology.

This ontological and epistemological recovery comes into sharper focus through Stein's phenomenology of empathy. Empathy, as Stein understands it, is not an emotional projection but a disciplined mode of intentionality in which the other is encountered as other. This structure preserves distance while sustaining relation. When extended beyond strictly human intersubjectivity, empathy offers a way of describing how finite creatures can encounter the more-than-human world as expressive without claiming mastery over it. Trees, animals, landscapes, and ecosystems are not grasped exhaustively or reduced to function. They appear as

[31] Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, 318–325.

finite beings whose interiority, while not transparent, is real and meaningful. Such perception is neither sentimental nor instrumental but rather receptive.[32]

The concept of ecological intentionality emerges from this convergence of participatory ontology and receptive phenomenology. Ecological intentionality denotes a mode of perception grounded in creaturely finitude, one that acknowledges that the world exceeds human grasp and cannot be rendered fully available for use. This is not a withdrawal from engagement, but a reorientation of engagement itself. Action flows from perception, and perception is shaped by what one believes the world to be. A world understood as *gift* invites care. A world understood as *resource* invites extraction.

Yet perception does not change through conceptual clarity alone. The habits of mastery that characterize modern ecological relations are deeply embedded in bodies, practices, and institutions. The ascetic and mystical traditions of Christianity play a decisive role in this argument. The Desert Mothers and Fathers, as interpreted by Douglas Burton-Christie, demonstrate how environments of exposure and deprivation function as schools of perception. The desert disrupts the illusion of self-sufficiency and confronts the ascetic with finitude in bodily and environmental registers. Hunger, silence, and vulnerability are not incidental hardships. They are formative conditions that retrain attention and reorder desire.[33]

This ascetic formation is unmistakably cruciform. The desert reveals that life is sustained not through control but through dependence. It unmasks the fantasy of autonomy and exposes the creaturely condition as one of continual reception. The desert enacts in lived form what Stein

[32] Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 10–17.
[33] Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert*, 156–162.

articulates metaphysically. Finitude is not an abstract concept but a concrete reality encountered through vulnerability. Perception is reshaped through loss.

The Carmelite tradition intensifies this insight. John of the Cross's doctrine of the dark night extends the desert's exposure into the interior life, withdrawing not only material supports but also conceptual and spiritual ones. Knowledge itself becomes cruciform. Creation can no longer function as consolation or instrument, and the desire to grasp is gradually undone. Teresa of Ávila complements this unknowing with a theology of dwelling, in which receptivity gives rise not to emptiness but to relational depth. Together, they show that receptive knowing is sustained through patience, trust, and fidelity rather than mastery.[34] [35]

These theological and phenomenological insights find contemporary retrieval within the life of the Church, particularly in *Laudato Si'*. Pope Francis's insistence that the earth is given rather than owned presupposes a participatory ontology and a receptive epistemology, even where these are not named explicitly. His critique of the technocratic paradigm is not merely political or economic. It is epistemological. It challenges a way of knowing that assumes the world is fully available for manipulation and optimization. *Laudato Si'* calls instead for an ecological conversion rooted in humility, attentiveness, and gratitude.[36]

Leonardo Boff's integral ecology intensifies this call by naming the suffering of the earth and the suffering of the poor as inseparable. The claim that the earth itself cries out depends upon a world that is alive, expressive, and capable of being addressed. Ecological harm is not merely damage to resources but injury to a living community of beings sustained by God. Redemption,

[34] John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*, II.5–7.
[35] Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, V.1–2.
[36] Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §§67–69, 101–114.

on this account, cannot consist in technological management alone. It requires participation, solidarity, and justice.[37]

It is at this point that the Ecology of the Cross emerges as a constructive theological proposal. The cross gathers together the insights of Hildegard, Stein, the ascetic tradition, and contemporary ecological theology into a single figure. The cross reveals that divine power is exercised not through domination but through vulnerable presence. It reveals that life is received, not secured. In ecological terms, the cross names the point at which mastery is relinquished, and participation becomes possible, as Moltmann points us to as well.[38]

An Ecology of the Cross does not romanticize suffering, nor does it sanctify ecological devastation. Rather, it insists that healing begins with truth, and that truth includes the acknowledgment of finitude, dependence, and vulnerability. The cross discloses the structure of creaturely life itself. To exist as a creature is to exist within limits, sustained by gift, exposed to loss, and called into relation. Ecological faithfulness, then, is not first a matter of control or efficiency. It is a matter of learning how to dwell within those limits with reverence.

The ecological crisis thus calls the Church not only to act differently but to see differently. It demands a conversion of perception as much as a change in behavior. Hildegard reminds us that creation still greens with divine vitality, even where it is wounded. Stein teaches us how such a world can be known without possession, through empathy and receptive intentionality. The ascetic and mystical traditions show how this way of knowing is formed

[37] Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 23–30.
[38] Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 88–95.

through practices of exposure and dwelling. Together, they invite theology to become once again a discipline of attention.

To learn how to receive the world is to relearn what it means to be a creature. This task is slow, demanding, and often uncomfortable. Yet it remains the most hopeful response to a wounded world that is still held. An Ecology of the Cross does not promise mastery or resolution. It promises fidelity to the truth of creaturely life, and in that fidelity, the possibility of healing.

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