

A PENTECOST HOMILY

[*The following was preached by Fr. Terrence Ehrman, C.S.C., as the homily at the conference Mass of the fifth annual conference of the Society of Catholic Scientists on June 5, 2022, which was the Feast of Pentecost. The theme of the conference was “Earth and Environmental Stewardship.”*]

Are you in love with God’s creation? Do you love creation with the same love with which God loves it? I teach theology courses on science and theology at the University of Notre Dame and also have the opportunity to teach an aquatic ecology course in the biology department. I delight in walking around campus trying to identify different organisms — trees, herbaceous plants, birds, and insects. I am having a tough go with the flowering grasses right now. I enjoy looking in places not frequented by many and thus often overlooked — such as puddles. About ten days ago, I found a pot-hole sized puddle on the outskirts of campus and saw a beetle swimming on its surface. I carry an orange plastic pill bottle with me, and I was able to scoop it up. I placed some plants in the vial and watched this 5 mm beetle swim around. I uttered my standard expression of praise to God for such a wonder: “Praise Him with great praise.” The most striking aspect of this beetle — a water scavenging beetle — family Hydrophilidae — was a silvery sheen on its abdomen. It undulated and shimmered; it reminded me of watching the Northern Lights from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. I knew what this silvery sheen was — insect SCUBA. Hydrophilids poke their non-wettable antennae through the water into the air and a bubble of air forms over their abdomen which they can dive with as their own SCUBA tank. I watched with amazement as it would hold on to the vegetation with its hind legs, let go, and then tumble over and float upwards because of the buoyancy of the bubble.

I also reflected on the reality that given all of my undergraduate and protracted doctoral training in aquatic entomology, this was one of the first times I had actually observed a living aquatic insect do what it does. So often in biology, we are not so much biologists as necrologists. We kill the living organisms. We sweep vegetation for adult insects and immediately put them in a cyanide kill jar or use a kick net in a stream and place the caught insects in alcohol. The minute anatomical structures of an insect are much easier to see on a dead, motionless specimen.

When we see a beetle or anything that is, do we think of God? Do we praise God for a water scavenging beetle? Do we think of Jesus Christ when we see a beetle? Do we encounter the Trinity? As men and women anointed with the Holy Spirit, how do we see reality? How do we see nature?

We know from our Catholic faith that the Trinity — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — creates as one principle. We have heard talks on Pope Francis’s *Laudato si’* at this conference. Significantly, and not unintentionally, Pope Francis promulgated *Laudato si’* on 24 May 2015 — on the Feast of Pentecost. I think a keystone passage to understand the entire encyclical comes near the end of the document. Pope Francis draws upon the Franciscan saint Bonaventure, whom Sr. Damien Marie, F.S.E., discussed in her keynote talk at this conference. Pope Francis writes the following:

The Franciscan saint teaches us that *each creature bears in itself a specifically Trinitarian structure*, so real that it could be readily contemplated if only the human gaze were not so partial, dark and fragile. In this way, he points out to us the challenge of trying to read reality in a Trinitarian key (LS §239).

This mixed metaphor of reading and listening points to creation as the book of nature or, as St. Bonaventure would describe creation, as the *carmen Dei* — the song or poem of God. Are we able to read or listen to this *carmen Dei* that is being orchestrated all around us at every moment?

St. Basil the Great, in the fourth century, identified the Trinitarian causal nature of reality with the Father as the original cause, the Son as the creative cause, and the Holy Spirit as the perfecting cause (Basil, *On the Holy Spirit*, §38). The medieval theologians, such as Aquinas and Bonaventure, would refine this using the Aristotelian causes. The Father is the efficient cause of creation, giving being to everything; the Son or Word is the exemplary or formal cause of creation; and the Holy Spirit is the final cause of creation. The Father is associated with power bestowing being where there was once nonbeing. The Son or Word is wisdom ordering all things well (Wis 8:1). The Holy Spirit is goodness drawing all things into the goodness of God as their final end. Thus, whenever we encounter anything that exists — like a water scavenging beetle — we can encounter the power, wisdom, and goodness of the Trinity creating that creature.

When God gazes upon what He has created, He acclaims it “good.” The ancient Septuagint translation of the Hebrew of Genesis into Greek describes what God sees as *kalon* — beautiful with direct connections with goodness. Thus, God sees that it was beautiful. In the Book of Wisdom, the author identifies those researchers into nature who overlook its divine beauty as “foolish” (Wis 13:1-9). For many — Christians or not — creation is only ‘nature’; and as we heard in our talks, Lynn White, Jr. critiqued Christianity for commanding the exploitation of this nature. I disagree with White. Many Christians have wrought ecological destruction, but it is not because of something intrinsic to Christianity per se, but because of being fallen Christians. Even for many Christians, nature has become “dis-encharmed” or more accurately opaque to the divine presence immanent within it. Instead of a sacramental vision, we are mostly beholden to a Cartesian materiality that sees nature as inert stuff that can be manipulated by a Promethean humanism.

Science has contributed to this blindness as well. Science, notes theologian Bruce Foltz, often studies nature in its “lifeless and mechanized” dimension.¹ It separates the subject from the object. We lose the relational dimension of reality. Several years ago, in my *Science, Theology, and Creation* course, a biology student who worked in a genetics lab asked me about his killing fruit flies. In class, we had discussed the intrinsic and instrumental goodness of creatures. I appreciated his sensitivity to the relational dimension of creation and suggested he offer a prayer to God giving thanks for the intrinsic goodness of those fruit flies and for the instrumental goodness of helping him and the lab uncover the truths (and beauty) of God’s creation and how it works. His relational sensibilities mirror that of Robin Wall Kimmerer, who highlights how scientific methodology “separates the observer and the observed”.² Kimmerer is a member of the Potawatomi Nation and a professor at the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry. She entered college wanting to major in botany to answer her question of why goldenrods and asters looked so beautiful together. Her advisor remonstrated her naivete by exclaiming that her question was not a scientific one and that botany is not about beauty. The botany she subsequently learned was not about relationships between people and plants, as she had learned in her native community growing up, but a “reductionistic, mechanic, and strictly objective” way of knowing in which plants were not subjects but mere objects.³

On this feast of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit calls Christians to an ecological conversion, a term coined by Pope St. John Paul II to point out that our care for creation is not something incidental but rather intrinsic to being a follower of Jesus Christ. The Garden of Eden is marked by harmonious relationships with God, one's own self, with neighbor, and creation. Our sin, however, alienates us from God, self, the other, and creation. Jesus Christ has come to restore those broken relationships by pouring out upon us the gift of His Spirit. The Holy Spirit heals and elevates our vision to see truly with the eyes of love. God the Father creates through his Wisdom — the Son/Word — and through His Love, the Holy Spirit.

Through John's Gospel, we learn that God creates everything in and through His divine *Logos*. Kallistos Ware, an Orthodox bishop and theologian, writes that "Christ the Creator-Logos has implanted in each created thing a characteristic *logos*, a 'thought' or 'word,' which is the divine presence in that thing, God's intention for it, the inner essence of that thing, which makes it to be distinctively itself and at the same time draws it toward God. By virtue of these indwelling *logoi*, each created thing is not just an object but a personal word addressed to us by the Creator."⁴ The *logoi* are the basis for reading the Book of Nature. The Christian practice of contemplating nature (*theoria physike*) is not anything New Age but a traditional means to encounter God, Christ, the Trinity in and through creation. The Holy Spirit enables this reading. Bruce Foltz, drawing upon the work of Maximus the Confessor, writes that "for the spiritually prepared: Every entity, every shrub and stone" — and every water scavenging beetle! — "offers . . . its own glimpse of the 'mysterious and deifying presence of Christ the *Logos* in the world.'"⁵ He goes on to compare this *theoria physike*—contemplation of nature — to the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Just as their hearts burned within them as the risen Jesus opened the Word of God to them from Scripture, so our Christian hearts should burn within us as we contemplate the *logoi* of creation.⁶

Do our hearts burn with love for creation? God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5). Do we see and love creation with the same love with which God has created and sustains creation? The Holy Spirit is Love and Gift. As Catholic theologian Gilles Emery puts it, "the Father and the Son love us by the *same Love* by which they love each other eternally."⁷ The Holy Spirit is "the Love who perfects creatures in their being and action" . . . "the Love who gives life and who leads creatures to their fulfillment."⁸

Jürgen Moltmann holds that the Holy Spirit brings the activity of the Father and the Son to its goal and completeness. The Holy Spirit is immanent in all of creation as the Lord and giver of life. What we celebrate today in Pentecost is more than this immanence already present in creation. Jesus's resurrection ushers in the new creation. Moltmann says that Easter coincides with spring — "which represents the eternal spring of the new creation of all things" and that Pentecost coincides with early summer — "for early summer's greening and blossoming represents the eternal enlivening of all creation in the breath of the Spirit."⁹ Through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, we are drawn to enter into the Trinitarian communion of love and to love with the same love that unifies the Trinity. We are to love God, self, other, and creation with this divine Love.

St. Hildegard of Bingen develops this idea of the greening power of the Holy Spirit, calling it *viriditas*. A decade ago, I learned from a Ukrainian priest that in the Eastern tradition the color of the Holy Spirit is not red but green because of the Spirit's being the Lord and Giver

of Life. Through sin and vice, we become dessicated. The Holy Spirit is that life-giving water that refreshes and renews and re-vivifies. Filled with *viriditas*, we can see nature truly as creation — as good and beautiful and as reflecting the immanent presence of the transcendent Triune creator.

The Elder Zosima in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* expresses this true vision and true heart: "Look at the divine gifts around us: the clear sky, the fresh air, the tender grass, the birds, nature is beautiful and sinless, and we alone, are godless and foolish and do not understand that life is paradise, for we need only to wish to understand, and it will come at once in all its beauty."

Filled with the Holy Spirit, we celebrate the Eucharist which is "the fulfillment of the practice of integral ecology."¹⁰ The goods of creation become transformed through the Holy Spirit into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. What we celebrate here should connect us directly to the realm of creation. As a friend and colleague of mine says, "Indoor Christians" should also be "Outdoor Christians."¹¹ The same Creator-Logos through whom creation comes to be is the same Incarnate Logos born of the Virgin Mary who redeems us by his death and resurrection and who has sent his Holy Spirit to make us new creations through baptism and the Sacraments. The Holy Spirit makes us into the Body of Christ that we received in the Eucharist. As members of Christ's Body, we are to see and love creation with the same love with which God loves it.

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