

The Patristic and Medieval Background to a Theology of the Environment

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The Christian theology of creation directly contributes to the solution of the ecological crisis, affirming the fundamental truth that visible creation is itself a divine gift, the «original gift», which creates a «space» for personal communion. Effectively, a correct Christian ecological theology is found in the application of theology to creation. The term «ecology» combines the two Greek words, *oikos* (house) and *logos* (word): the physical environment of human existence could be seen as a sort of «habitation» for human life. Considering that the interior life of the Holy Trinity is a life of communion, the divine act of creation is the totally free production of partners who can share in that communion. In this way, it can be said that the divine communion has now found its «habitation» in the created cosmos. For this reason, it is possible to speak of the cosmos as a place of personal communion¹. As Pope Francis stated:

The Father is the ultimate source of everything, the loving and self-communicating foundation of all that exists. The Son, his reflection, through whom all things were created, united himself to this earth when he was formed in the womb of Mary. The Spirit, infinite bond of love, is intimately present at the very heart of the universe, inspiring and bringing new pathways².

At the same time, it is clear that theology will not be able to provide a technical solution to the environmental crisis; nonetheless, theo-

logy can help us see our natural environment as God sees it, as the place of personal communion in which human beings, created in the image of God, must seek reciprocal communion and the final perfection of the visible universe³.

The Christian view of creation is of fundamental importance for the Christian foundation of a new responsibility toward the environment. Philosophical realism also has its place in considering the theology of the environment. Realism is an instrument of dialogue between science and faith⁴. Realism and theological language are necessary for us to develop a correct understanding of the environment. It is important to consider the cosmos from the scientific, philosophical and theological points of view, seeing its relationship with anthropology and thus avoiding the error of cosmocentrism. The realist perspective is also necessary to establish the basis for moral action with respect to the environment.

1. The Patristic era

Theological interest in creation, unlike secular concern, did not just begin in the 1960s! In Christian antiquity, the fourth Pope, Clement of Rome (37-101) is the author of the *Epistle to the Corinthians* which was considered part of the canon of Scripture in Egypt and Syria for several centuries. His emphasis regarding creation is that there is no separation in the law of God: the law which governs the heavens is the same law which governs the



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oceans and winds and all parts of creation. He provides artistic descriptions of a world in harmony with itself and the Creator. The legacy of Clement is that he demonstrates that teachings about creation have been part of Christianity from its beginning in the first century.

Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter succeed one another peaceably; the winds fulfil their punctual duties, each from its own quarter, and give no offence; the ever-flowing streams... and even the minutest of living creatures mingle together in peaceful accord. Upon all of these the Great Architect and Lord of the universe has enjoined peace and harmony, for the good of all alike, and pre-eminently for the good of ourselves who have sought refuge in His mercies through our Lord Jesus Christ⁵.

An early theologian, St. Irenaeus of Lyons (129-203) links creation, the dignity of the human person and the Holy Eucharist in a Christological key:

For the glory of God is a living man; and the life of man consists in beholding God. For if the manifestation of God, which is made by means of the creation, affords life to all living in the earth, much more does that revelation of the Father which comes through the Word, give life to those who seek God... And as we are His members, we are also nourished by means of the creation (and He Himself grants the creation to us, for He causes His sun to rise, and sends rain when He wills). He has acknowledged the cup (which is part of the creation) as His own Blood, from which He bedews our blood; and the bread (also a part of the creation) He has established as His own Body, from which He gives increase to our bodies⁶.

One of the most learned scholars of his age, Tertullian (160?-230?) was born in Carthage of North Africa of pagan parents. Eventually he journeyed to Rome where he became a legal expert. After disgust at the corrup-

tion in the practice of law, and through admiration of the integrity which he witnessed among the Christians, he converted to Christianity and was soon ordained a priest. He was a prolific and original writer who turned his legal and mental skills to the defence of the Church. His contribution to a theology of creation lies in his emphasis upon how every aspect of creation is renewed and sustained by the power of God, who teaches through His creation:

Nature is school-mistress, the soul the pupil; and whatever one has taught or the other has learned has come from God *the Teacher of the teacher*⁷.

On particular way in which creation instructs concerns the Resurrection:

Gaze now on these examples of divine power. Day dies into night, and is everywhere entombed in shadows. All things grow dull, voiceless, dumb. Everywhere there is quiet and rest. And so we mourn for the lost light. And yet once more, with all its own beauty, its power, its sun, the same and unharmed, it revives for the universal world, slaying night, which is its death, rending asunder its own sepulchre of darkness⁸.

Over the past century, faith in creation has been primarily reduced to the affirmation that everything which exists is due to divine causality. There has been a tendency to see the content of the Christian faith as a response to the word of revelation pronounced throughout salvation history. There has always been, however, a conviction that not only salvation history, but also creation itself constitutes a context of word and event in which God expresses Himself and turns toward man. Since early times, beginning with Tertullian and Saint Augustine, the great theologians have spoken of a «double» book of Divine Revelation: creation and Holy Scriptures. The Scholastics developed the doctrine of the world of things as *imagines et vestigia Dei*, and used concepts such as sacrament of natu-

re or of creation⁹. The metaphysical traces or imprints, such as unity, beauty, truth and contingency, are found inscribed in creation just as labels are found on the «creations» of «designers». But the full meaning of creation is only intuited through supernatural revelation. As a theoretical foundation for a Christian response to the ecological challenge, therefore, we must turn to a renewed creation theology.

One of the most eloquent of the Western Fathers, Marcus Minucius Felix (167?-249), was born in Certa of North Africa and travelled to Rome where he became a lawyer. Not much is known about his early life; he apparently converted to Christianity rather late, in middle age. His discourses on the Christian life follow the Ciceronian style of conversations between friends, and he uses this approach to address a number of theological issues. He explained how knowledge of the cosmos aids in self-knowledge:

Man ought to know himself, but this knowledge cannot be attained by him unless first he is willing to acknowledge the entire scope of things, including God Himself. And then, from the constitution and furniture of the world itself, every one endowed with reason holds that it was established by God, and is governed and administered by Him¹⁰.

Through this knowledge we can see how God cares for every part of creation:

God does not care only for the universe, He also cares for all of its parts... If on entering a house, you should behold everything refined, well arranged and adorned, you would believe that a master presided over it, and that he was much better and above all those excellent things. So in this house of the world, when you look upon the heaven and the earth, its providence, its ordering, its law, believe that there is a Lord and Parent of the universe far more glorious than the stars themselves, and the parts of the whole world¹¹.

Eminent theologian of the early Church, Origen was born in Alexandria, and became a brilliant philosopher and biblical exegete by the age of eighteen. Like most early Christians, much of his writing is based upon inspired knowledge and experience of Christ. He often uses creation as a fertile field for insight into the divine nature, and says that everything in creation represents some aspect of the nature of God.

The world in all its diversity and varying conditions is composed not only of rational and diviner natures, but of dumb animals, wild and tame beasts, of birds and of all the things which live in the waters... Seeing there is so great a variety in the world, and so great a diversity among rational beings themselves, what cause ought to be assigned for the existence of the world? But God, by ineffable skill of His wisdom, transforming and restoring all things, recalls those very creatures which differed so much from each other in mental conformation to one agreement of labor and purpose, so that although they are under the influence of different motives, they nevertheless complete the fullness and perfection of one world, and the very variety of minds tends to one end of perfection¹².

Bishop of Alexandria and defender of orthodoxy, St. Athanasius (297-373) entered into many dialogues to articulate and preserve an authentic Christian understanding of Church doctrine. He frequently used lessons from nature to exemplify his instruction and his writings are filled with a sense of creation as a primary instructor of Christian life.

By the greatness and the beauty of the creatures proportionately the Maker of them is seen. For just as by looking up to the heaven and seeing its order and the light of the stars, it is possible to infer the Word Who ordered these things, so by beholding the Word of God, one needs must behold also God His Father, proceeding from Whom He is rightly called His Father's Interpreter and Messenger. And this one may see from

our own experience; for if when a word proceeds from men we infer that the mind is its source, and by thinking about the word, see with our reason the mind which it reveals, by far greater evidence and incomparably more, seeing the power of the Word, we receive knowledge also of His good Father, as the Saviour Himself says, "He that has seen Me, has seen the Father"¹³.

As a young man, St. Ephraim the Syrian (306-373) appeared dull and uninspired. After his conversion and baptism, a profound change took place in his attitude and numerous mental and spiritual gifts flowered which allowed him to unravel difficult philosophical and metaphysical complexities. When Ephraem was confronted by theological adversaries, he appealed to their hearts rather than to their minds: he expresses himself in visionary, apocalyptic, symbolic and especially poetical forms. His writings convey a unique blend of mystical experience with perceptions about the natural world.

The keys of doctrine which unlock all of Scripture's books,
have opened up before my eyes the book of creation.
The treasure house of the Ark, the crown of the Law,
this is a book which above its companions has in its narrative
made the Creator perceptible and transmitted his actions;
It has envisioned all His craftsmanship,
made manifest His works of art¹⁴.

St. Hilary of Poitiers (315-367) is the most important Father of Roman Gaul, sometimes called the Athanasius of the West, for his defence of the true faith against the Arians. The heart of his theology is the uniqueness of Christianity among all the religions of the world because it manifests the highest intuitions of God into the physical world and because it teaches us how to know God by following the example and path of Jesus Christ:

Therefore, .. by the greatness of His works and the beauty of the things that He has made the Creator of worlds is rightly discerned. The Creator of great things is supreme in greatness, of beautiful things in beauty. Since the work transcends our thoughts, all thought must be transcended by the Maker. Thus heaven and air and earth and seas are fair: fair also the whole universe, as the Greeks agree, who from its beautiful ordering call it *kosmos*, that is, order.

But if our thought can estimate this beauty of the universe by a natural instinct -an instinct such as we see in certain birds and beasts whose voice, though it fall below the level of our understanding, yet has a sense clear to them though they cannot utter it, and in which, since all speech is the expression of some thought, there lies a meaning patent to themselves- must not the Lord of this universal beauty be recognized as Himself most beautiful amid all the beauty that surrounds Him? For though the splendour of His eternal glory overtax our mind's best powers, it cannot fail to see that He is beautiful¹⁵.

One of the Eastern Fathers, St. Cyril of Jerusalem (315-386) and author of a series of lectures on the Christian sacraments and instructions for catechumens, he was once persecuted by the Arians for selling church property to feed the poor. He attended the Council of Constantinople and helped develop the Nicene Creed and the concept of «homoousios» which identifies the unity inherent in Christ's spiritual-physical nature. His writings about creation are characterized by their emphasis upon physical nature as a window into the Divine Nature.

For what fault have they (the heretics and pagans) to find with the vast harmony of God? They who ought to have been struck with amazement on beholding the vaultings of the heavens: they, who ought to have worshipped Him Who reared the sky as a dome, Who formed the stable substance of heaven... Is there not cause to wonder when

one looks at the constitution of the sun? ... See also how the days alternately respond each to the other in due order in summer increasing and in winter decreasing... For the heretics who have no ears, they all but cry aloud, and by their good order say, that there is none other God save the Creator who has set them their bounds, and laid out the order of the Universe¹⁶.

A founder of Eastern communal monastic life, and the first of the Cappadocian Fathers, St. Basil the Great (329-379) describes the handiwork of the Creator as «everywhere in creation» and probes deeply into the reasons for creation's structure. He lays out a Christian cosmology that goes beyond spatial limitations, that remains orderly and intentional, and that is filled with an intelligible hierarchy beyond human comprehension. This marvellous creation he calls the «supreme icon» of Christian faith which leads to knowledge of the «Supreme Artisan». His lessons from the bees are a beautiful example of his theology of creation:

Listen, Christians, you to whom it is forbidden to “recompense evil for evil” and who are commanded “to overcome evil with good.” Take the bee for your model, which constructs its cells without injuring anyone and without interfering with the goods of others. It gathers openly pollen from the flowers, drawing in the basis for the honey scattered over them like dew, and injects it into the hollow of its cells. At first this honey is liquid; time thickens it and gives it its sweetness. The Book of Proverbs has given the bee the most honourable and the best praise by calling her wise and industrious. How much activity she exerts in gathering this precious nourishment, by which both kings and men of low degree are brought to health! How great is the art and cunning she displays in the construction of the storehouses which are destined to receive the honey? After having spread the pollen like a thin membrane, she distributes it in contiguous compartments which, weak though they are, by their number and by their mass,

sustain the whole edifice. Each cell in fact holds to the one next to it, and is separated by one upon another. The bee takes care not to make one vast cavity, for fear it might break under the weight of the liquid, and allow it to escape. See how the discoveries of geometry are mere by-works to the wise bee!¹⁷

Importantly, St. Basil makes an observation concerning the earth as a common inheritance:

God has poured the rains on a land tilled by avaricious hands; He has given the sun to keep the seeds warm, and to multiply the fruit through His productivity. Things of this kind are from God: the fertile land, moderate winds, abundance of seeds, the work of the oxen, and other things by which a farm is brought into productivity and abundance... But the avaricious one has not remembered our common nature and has not thought of distribution¹⁸.

A profound writer, St. Gregory Nazianzen (329-389) has been uniquely honoured as the only Greek father with the special title, «the theologian.» He is known as one of the three Cappadocian Fathers, one of the four Eastern doctors of the Church, and one of those especially responsible for the defeat of the Arian heresy. He loved solitude and was easily dismayed by the strife and conflict of the world. Even though he sought a quiet, simple life, circumstances combined with his brilliant oratorical skills continually called him out of seclusion into positions of leadership. He sees all of creation as recapitulated within the microcosm of the human person, not just because both are creatures of God, but because of the manner in which the individual carries the image of God:

This man God set upon the earth as a kind of second world, a microcosm; ... He was king of all upon the earth, but a subject of heaven; earthly and heavenly, transient yet immortal; belonging both to the visible and to the intelligible order...; combining in the

same being spirit and flesh.... Thus he is a living creature under God's Providence here, while in transition to another state and ... in process of deification by reason of his natural tendency toward God¹⁹.

St. Gregory Nazianzen also had a profound awareness of the place of the animals within God's creation and how they reflected their Maker in some ways:

Who among men knows all the names of the wild beasts? Or who can accurately discern the physiology of each? But if of the wild beasts we know not even their names, how shall we comprehend the Maker of them? God's command was but one which said, "Let the earth bring forth wild beasts, and cattle, and creeping things, after their kinds" (Gen 1:24), and from one earth and from one command have sprung diverse natures, the gentle sheep and the carnivorous lion, and the various instincts of irrational animals, bearing resemblance to the various characters within men; the fox to manifest the craft that is in men, and the snake the venomous treachery of friends, and the neighing horse the wantonness of young men, and the laborious ant to arouse the sluggish and the dull: for when a man passes his youth in idleness, then he is instructed by the irrational animals, being reprov'd by the divine Scripture saying, "Go to the ant, you sluggard, see and emulate her ways, and become wiser than she" (Pro 6:6). For when you see her treasuring up her food, imitate her and treasure up for yourself fruits of good works for the world to come... Is not the Artificer worthy the rather to be glorified? For what? If you know not the nature of all things, do the things which have been made then become useless? Can you know the efficacy of all herbs? Or can you learn the benefits which derive from every animal? Even from venomous adders have come antidotes for the preservation of men. But you will say to me, "the poisonous snake is terrible". Fear you the Lord and it will not be able to hurt you. "A scorpion stings". Fear the Lord and it shall not sting you. "A

lion is blood-thirsty". Fear the Lord, and he shall lie down beside you, as by Daniel. But truly wonderful also is the action of the animals: how some, as the scorpion, have the sharpness of a sting; and others have power in their teeth; and others do battle with their claws; while the basilisk's power is his gaze. So then from this varied workmanship, understand the Creator's power²⁰.

A brother of St. Basil, a monk and eventually a bishop, St. Gregory of Nyssa (330-395) served in the remote and obscure diocese of Nyssa near the Armenian border. There he composed inspired works on the ascetical life and the true Church of Christ. He describes human purpose as one of consecrating, even as transfiguring, creation into its full cosmological potential. Gregory, an ardent student of Origen, is the first person to use the term, «the eternal now», to describe our experience of God creating the cosmos with the human at the centre. He ardently affirms the spiritual value of nature and all things of this earth even though they reside in a subordinate position to the kingdom of God:

Man was brought into the world last after the creation, not being rejected to the last as worthless, but as one whom is called to be king over his subjects at his very birth.... The Maker of All gives him as foundations the instincts of a two-fold organization, blending the Divine with the earthly, that by means of both he may be naturally and properly (to enjoy both) God by means of his more divine nature, and the good things of earth by the sense that is akin to them.... He has a rank assigned to him before his genesis and possesses rule over the things that are before his coming into being²¹.

St. Ambrose (340-397) is one of the four great fathers of the West and the teacher of Augustine. He took the Gospel literally and one of his first acts was to divest himself and the entire diocese of Milan of all extraneous possessions and to give them to the poor. He emphasized that creation and its resources were for all people:

Although you may lack money, you are not therefore devoid of grace. Although your house is not large, your possessions are not limited. For the sky is open and the expanse of the world is free. The elements have been granted to all for their common use. Rich and poor alike enjoy the splendid ornaments of the universe²².

One of the great Latin Fathers, St. Augustine (354-430) was a convert from Manicheism who became Bishop of North Africa. His writings depict the cosmos afire with a radiant beauty which everywhere portrays the fecund qualities of God:

Every creature has a special beauty proper to its nature, and when a man ponders the matter well, these creatures are a cause of intense admiration and enthusiastic praise of their all-powerful Maker. For He has wrought them all in His wisdom ... He creates them tiny in body, keen in sense, and full of life, so that we may feel a deeper wonder at the agility of the mosquito on the wing than at the size of a beast of burden on the hoof, and may admire more intensely the works of the smallest ants than the burdens of the camels²³.

St. Nilus of Ankyra (365?-430) was a desert-dwelling monastic abbot and saint who was born near Constantinople and who wrote lucidly on the ascetical life. His contribution to modern ecological understanding lies in his ability to articulate the intricacies of the spiritual-mental struggle which brings the soul to know the fullness of creation as an interior spiritual experience as well as an exterior intellectual understanding. This knowledge is important today as it forms the basis for addressing over-consumption and the consumer mentality:

We should remain within the limits imposed by our basic needs and strive with all our power not to exceed them. For once we are carried a little beyond these limits in our desire for the pleasures of life, there is then no criterion by which to check our onward

movement, since no bounds can be set to that which exceeds the necessary... Once a man has passed beyond the limits of his natural needs, as he grows more materialistic, he wants to put jam on his bread; and to water he adds a modicum of wine required for his health, and then the most expensive vintages. He does not rest content with essential clothing²⁴.

One of the four great Western Fathers, Saint Jerome is especially known for translating the Bible into Latin, which we know today as the Vulgate translation. Jerome chronicled the stories of the monks of the Egyptian desert and graphically related the amazing levels of spiritual development to which they attained. His ecological importance is primarily as a chronicler of fourth and early fifth century Christian experience and suppositions about wilderness and the animals.

We admire the Creator, not only as the framer of heaven and earth, of sun and ocean, of elephants, camels, horses, oxen, leopards, bears, and lions, but also as the maker of tiny creatures. Ants, gnats, flies, worms and the like – things whose shapes we know better than their names. And as in all creation we reverence His skill, so the mind that is given to Christ is equally earnest in small things as in great, knowing that an account must be given even for an idle word²⁵.

Pope St. Gregory the Great (540-604) was born in Rome of noble and wealthy parents. He is known first for his holiness and insight, and then for his masterful rebuilding of the Western Church from the rubble of barbarian invasions which completed the fall of the Roman Empire in the West. His writings portray creation as everywhere filled with the glorious presence of Christ Who made all things translucent and transparent to the illumined mind:

God is within all, over all, under all, is both above with His power and beneath with His support, exterior in respect to magnitude and interior in respect to subtlety,

extending from the heights to the depths, encompassing the outside and penetrating the inside; but He is not in one part above, in another beneath, nor in one part exterior and in another interior. Rather, one and the same wholly and everywhere, He supports in presiding and presides in supporting, penetrates in encompassing and encompasses in penetrating²⁶.

One of the greatest fathers of the Church, St. Maximus the Confessor (580-662) represents the summit and synthesis of early Christianity thought on creation. Every created thing, from stone to seagull to the stars of heaven is an expression of the creative thought and will of the Triune God. Creation is at once, a word, or many words in a «book» of God, a gift of God, a symbol of God, and a song of God. Thus for St. Maximus the universe is a vast «cosmic liturgy», composed of word, gift, song and symbol in which heaven and earth are joined in a sacrifice of praise, thanksgiving and worship. Human nature, created in the image and likeness of God, is intended by God to be both microcosm and mediator of, in and through this cosmic liturgy. This means, according to Maximus, that human salvation and the transfiguration of the cosmos are inextricably linked. Just as all things are recapitulated in human nature as microcosmos, so too the human being is meant to bear the responsibility of mediator of creation, that is, to be the one in whom all things created are lifted up to God.

The Church is one and the same in and throughout each section. The wise thus glimpse the universe of things brought into existence by God's creation, divided between the spiritual world, containing incorporeal intelligent substances, and the corporeal world, the object of sense (so marvellously woven together from many natures and kinds of things) as if they were all another church, not built by hands, but suggested by the ones we build; its sanctuary in the world above, allotted to the powers above, its nave the world below, assigned to those whose lot it is to live in the senses...

The holy Church of God is an image of the sensible world by itself; the sanctuary reminds one of the sky, the dignity of the nave reflects the earth. Likewise the world can be thought of as a church: the sky seems like a sanctuary, and the cultivation of the land can make it resemble a temple²⁷.

At the close of the patristic era, St. John Damascene (675-749) lived among the early Islamic people of Damascus in what is modern Syria. He is distinguished particularly by his voluminous work, *The Exposition of the True Orthodox Faith*, which lays out the parameters for a comprehensive Christian theology. He stressed the importance of a non-pantheistic approach to creation:

I do not worship matter. I worship the Creator of matter who became matter for my sake, who willed to take His abode in matter, who worked out my salvation through matter. Never will I cease honouring the matter which wrought my salvation! I honour it, but not as God.... Because of this I salute all remaining matter with reverence, because God has filled it with his grace and power. Through it my salvation has come to me²⁸.

He indicated how the human person is a microcosm of the community of life:

Man, it is to be noted, has community with things inanimate and participates in the life of the unreasoning creatures, and shares in the mental processes of those endowed with reason. For the bond of union between man and inanimate things is the body and its composition out of the four elements: and the bond between man and plants consists, in addition to these things, of their powers of nourishment and growth and seeding, that is, generation: and finally, over and above these links, man is connected with unreasoning animals by appetite, that is anger and desire, and sense and impulsive movement... plus the five physical senses... Lastly, man's reason unites him to incorporeal and intelligent natures,

for he applies his reason and mind and judgement to everything and pursues after virtues and eagerly follows after piety, which is the crown of the virtues. And so man is a microcosm²⁹.

2. *The Middle Ages*

Especially in the monastic tradition there is to be found an expression of the Church's care towards creation. Two particular examples of the Christian attitude toward nature can be seen in Saint Benedict and Saint Francis. The basis for a truly constructive ecological spirit has thus been present for centuries in the Christian tradition.

Saint Benedict represents the more active and practical aspect. The monks at Monte Cassino followed the *ora et labora* rule, and learned to cultivate the land for intensive production without degrading the environment. In a community context, the good ideas of conservation and preservation were put into effect. Saint Benedict's approach was an example of an application of the Gospel passage: «Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides» (Mt 6:33).

Saint Francis, on the other hand, represents the aspect of praise and contemplation, exemplified by his *Canticle of the Creatures*: «All praise be yours, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth, who sustains us and governs us, and produces various fruits with colored flowers and herbs». Saint Francis felt a natural «not pantheistic or intellectualistic» brotherhood with every creature and every environmental event (for example: wolves, fire, water and even death). This type of perception does not seem to contrast the work of the Benedictines at all. Saint Francis, in fact, recommends not cutting down entire trees, but rather some of the branches in order to allow the tree to live and man to use its wood. As stated earlier, in 1979 Saint Francis was declared the patron saint of the environment by Pope John Paul II³⁰.

A Syrian monk who writes primarily for other monks. St. Peter of Damaskos (1027?-1107?)

lived in a small skete (a monastic village) in the Syrian desert. His writings depict a cosmos infused with the presence of God and he finds everywhere the love of God dwelling in all things. St. Peter of Damascus is important for ecological awareness because he reflects a cosmological vision in which God's providence embraces the whole of creation. This becomes accessible to us, he writes, as we are moulded into the likeness of God through the acquisition of the virtues and contemplation. From St. Peter of Damascus we learn that the world is a manifestation of divinity; that through creation we can discern the Word which sustains every creature; that through examination of both the little things and the large, we find the continuing work of our Lord Jesus Christ while still in this world. In accordance with the monastic style of his time, his writing is deliberately a systematic which requires the reader to restore the original internal harmony to arrive at his or her own view of their place in spiritual formation:

God's providence embraces the whole universe.... By contemplating the beauty and use of each thing, (one who has acquired the habit of detachment) is filled with love for the Creator. He surveys all visible things: the sky, the sun, moon, stars and clouds, rain, snow and hail... thunder, lightning, the winds and breezes and the way they change, the seasons, the years...; the four-legged animals, the wild beasts and animals and reptiles, all the birds, the springs and rivers, the many varieties of plants and herbs, both wild and cultivated. He sees in all things the order, the equilibrium, the proportion, the beauty, the rhythm, the union, the harmony, the usefulness, the variety, the motion, the colours, the shapes, the reversion of things to their source, permanence in the midst of corruption. Contemplating thus all created realities, he is filled with wonder³¹.

An Augustinian monk who served as master of the Abbey School of Paris, Hugh of St. Victor (1096-1141) is known for restoring the mystical tradition of an earlier Christia-

nity and for inspiring concern for spiritual transformation. His spiritual discipline caused him to shine like a beacon of spiritual renewal to the twelfth century. For Hugh knowledge of the world introduces contemplation of the Creator. The most prominent themes about care of creation in Hugh of St. Victor's writings are the wisdom and rationality of the world, the ability to know God through contemplation of his works, and the importance of using the senses prayerfully so that they may apprehend the beauty of God everywhere in creation:

The whole sensible world is like a book written by the finger of God, that is, created by the divine power, and individual creatures are like certain characters invented not by human judgement, but by divine choice to manifest and to signify in some way the invisible wisdom of God. But just as when unlettered people see an open book, they see the characters, but do not know the letters, so foolish people and natural human beings, who do not perceive the things of God, see the external appearances in these visible creatures, but do not understand their inner meaning. But those who are spiritual persons can judge all things insofar as they consider the beauty of the work externally, but grasp within them how much the wisdom of the Creator is to be admired³².

A visionary and prophet, St. Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) was inspired by the audacity of the tasks given to her as she listened to the Word of God. She served as a Benedictine nun and abbess of a medieval German convent. She combined Christian theology with ethics and cosmology; produced an encyclopaedia of medicine and natural science; authored liturgical hymns; and wrote the first Christian morality play. Beginning at the age of sixty, she undertook four lengthy missionary tours of Europe. Her contemporaries called her «the Sibyl of the Rhine», and she ministered as an oracle of inspired counsel on topics from marital troubles to health problems and the ultimate destiny of souls. Today herbalists have rediscovered the

benefits of her medical prescriptions and have applied her remedies in homeopathy. She saw things which were invisible to those around her; she foretold the future; and those who knew her said there was a continual «luminosity» around her head which she called «the reflection of the living light». She wrote eloquently about God's blessings through the world and proclaimed that sin and corruption destroy the harmony of the cosmos and besmirch the grandeur of God's gift of creation. For her, nature evokes joy, wonder, praise, thanksgiving, and especially love. Hildegard's legacy to the modern world is that only a transformed heart, following Christ wherever He leads and willing to die to all idols, brings healing to the earth.

Do not denigrate anything God has created. All creation is simple, plain and good. And God is present throughout his creation. Why do you ever consider things beneath your notice? God's justice is to be found in every detail of what he has made. The human race alone is capable of injustice. Human beings alone are capable of disobeying God's laws, because they try to be wiser than God ... The rest of Creation cries out against the evil and perversity of the human species. Other creatures fulfil the commandments of God; they honour his laws. And other creatures do not grumble and complain about those laws. But human beings rebel against those laws, defying them in word and action. And in doing so they inflict terrible cruelty on the rest of God's creation³³.

There is a limited meaning in which creation carries some form of God's Self-revelation. Saint Anselm of Canterbury wrote: «*Uno eodemque Verbo dicit seipsum et quaecumque fecit*» (In the one and the same Word, God says Himself and what He has done)³⁴. Seen in this way, created things are *verba in Verbo et de Verbo*: «words in the Divine Word originated by the Divine Word». Creation is that which is found in it; it is expression, symbol and sacrament of God. Consequently, there are not merely obscure allusions to God in cre-

ation, but in it He reveals Himself, as Saint Paul affirmed in his letter to the Romans (Rm 1:19). Or in the words of Saint Bonaventure: «Everything that God does, He does in order to manifest Himself»³⁵. In a certain sense, creation is also God's gift of Himself. God is He Who, according to Sacred Scripture, gives life to all, provides food and drink, and brings rain and sunshine upon the just and the unjust to show His love, His concern and His donation to humanity.

There are various degrees of intensity in this gift. In the human realm, a handshake is less intense than the expression of spousal love, which in turn is perhaps a less intense level than sacrificing one's life for another human being. The intensity of God's manifestation is found in a certain measure in creation, and in a much different measure in salvation history, which culminates in the sacrificial offering of the Son of God upon the altar of the Cross.

Creation itself, furthermore, is already a first modulation of the Word of God. In a certain analogous and limited sense, creation is a «sacrament» a sign and efficacious means, of God's Self-revelation and His gift of Himself. In creation, God manifests Himself in a mediated way. It is necessary to make these clear distinctions in order to avoid ontologism and other steps toward pantheism. A distinction must be made between natural and supernatural revelation. Theodoret, Bishop of Cyrrhus in Syria, highlighted the enormous difference between God's revelation in nature and in His Son made flesh:

The incarnation of our Savior represents the greatest fulfillment of divine solicitude toward man. In fact, neither heaven nor earth nor sea nor sky nor sun nor moon nor stars nor the entire visible and invisible universe, created by His word alone or rather brought to light by His word in accordance with His will, indicate His incommensurable goodness so much as the fact that the Only Begotten Son, He Who subsists in God's nature, reflection of His glory, imprint of His substance, Who was in the beginning, was with God and was

God, through Whom all things were made, after having taken on Himself the nature of a servant, appeared in human form, by his human form was considered man, was seen on earth, interacted with men, bore the burden of our weaknesses and took upon Himself our illnesses³⁶.

NOTE

¹ INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God* (July 23, 2004), 74.

² POPE FRANCIS, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si*, 238.

³ Cf. *Ibid.*, 78.

⁴ Cf. P. HAFFNER, *The Mystery of Reason* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2001), 12-19.

⁵ POPE CLEMENT I, *Letter to the Corinthians* 1:21.

⁶ ST. IRENAEUS, *Against Heresies*, 4:20.7 and 5:2.2.

⁷ TERTULLIAN, *De Testimonio Animae*.

⁸ TERTULLIAN, *De Resurrectione Carnis* I.

⁹ Cf. G. GRESHAKE, "La creazione come autorivelazione e dono di sé da parte di Dio" in A. Caprioli e L. Vaccaro, *Questione ecologica e coscienza cristiana*, 128.

¹⁰ MARCUS MINUCIUS FELIX, *The Octavius* XVII.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² ORIGEN, *De Principiis*, Book II:1-3.

¹³ ST. ATHANASIUS, *Against the Heathen* 45:1-2.

¹⁴ ST. EPHRAEM, *Hymns of Paradise*, Hymn VI.

¹⁵ ST. HILARY, *On the Holy Trinity*, Book I, 7.

¹⁶ ST. CYRIL OF JERUSALEM, *Catechetical Lectures*, IX:5-6.

¹⁷ ST. BASIL, *Hexaemeron* VIII, "The Creation of Fowl and Water Animals" 4.

¹⁸ ST. BASIL, *Sermon IV:1, On Ownership*.

¹⁹ ST. GREGORY NAZIANZEN, *Orations* 45:8.

²⁰ ST. GREGORY NAZIANZEN, *Catechetical Lectures*, IX:13-14.

²¹ ST. GREGORY OF NYSSA, *On the Making of Man*, II-IV.

²² ST. AMBROSE, *The Six Days of Creation*, III.

²³ ST. AUGUSTINE, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Book III, Ch. 14.

²⁴ ST. NILUS OF ANKYRA, *Ascetic Discourses*.

²⁵ ST. JEROME, *Letter 60 to Heliodorus*, 12. See also Mt 12:36.

²⁶ POPE ST. GREGORY THE GREAT, *Moral Teachings from Job* 2:12.

²⁷ ST. MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR, *The Mystagogia*.

²⁸ ST. JOHN DAMASCENE, *On the Divine Images* 1:16.

²⁹ ST. JOHN DAMASCENE, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, Book II, 12.

³⁰ See POPE ST. JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Inter sanctos* (November 29, 1979) in AAS 71 (1979), 1509-1510 [translation mine]. This declaration recognizes that he must be “rightly counted among the saints and illustrious men who had a unique veneration for nature, considered a magnificent gift from God to humanity ... In fact, he had a unique perception of all of the Creator’s works, and nearly superbly inspired he composed the beautiful Canticle of the Creatures, through which -particularly through brother sun, sister moon and the stars- he gave due praise, honor, glory and every blessing to the highest, omnipotent and good Lord”.

³¹ ST. PETER OF DAMASCUS as found in *Philokalia*, Vol. III, “The Sixth Stage of Contemplation,” trans. Philip Sherrard (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), 136-137.

³² HUGH OF ST. VICTOR, *The Three Days of Invisible Light*, translated by Roland Teske, SJ (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1996), 4.

³³ ST. HILDEGARD OF BINGEN, *Scivias* 1.2.29-30.

³⁴ ST. ANSELM OF CANTERBURY, *Monologion*, 33.

³⁵ ST. BONAVENTURE, *In II sententiarum* 16, 1, 1 [translation mine].

³⁶ THEODORET OF CYRRHUS, *Discourses on Divine Providence*, 10.