

DIALOGUING WITH THE DANCE OF CREATION

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WHAT A MAGNIFICENT SIGHT THE PANORAMA OF THE HEAVENS makes on a clear night—the myriads of planets, stars and galaxies, as they move across the heavens before us! Psalmists, troubadours, poets, have all expressed amazement at the sight. Scientist and theologians, in spite of their differences, are united by wonder and awe, and by the desire to know and understand the heavens. We read in Psalm 8:

When I look at the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are humans that you are mindful of them, mortals that you should care for them? (Psalm 8:3-4)

And Psalm 139 suggests that God is in a dance with creation: ‘Even there your hand shall lead me, and your right shall hold me fast’ (Psalm 139:10).

Scientists have made it possible for us to view the heavens in new and fascinating ways. Telescopes and space stations show us the circling of planets and gases in the universe, leading to the creation of new stars and planets. They tell us that the universe is constantly expanding, in an activity like a choral dance.

What scientists say finds an echo in theologians speaking of a dance in the Trinity:

... the love which is God emerged more clearly as the trinity of Father, Son and Spirit engaged in *perichoresis*, a permanent dance of love into which human beings are invited and empowered to join.

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The love which is God has been made available to all willing to join the dance, willing to draw others into the dance, willing to make place for others in the dance.¹

John O'Donnell, drawing on the work of Eberhard Jüngel, develops the image of *perichoresis* in a book on the Trinity:

The concept of the trinitarian God who is love implies the eternal newness according to which the eternal Lord is always his own future. God and love never grow old. Their being is and remains one that is coming.²

We can imagine the dynamic activity within the Trinity, its dance or *perichoresis*, overflowing into the dance of the heavens. We are caught up in this marvel of motion, sound and light which is the movement of the stars, the variations of light and of sound coming from beyond our earth. We are part of the Trinity's dance.

¹ Enda McDonagh, 'Love', in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins and Dermot A. Lane (Collegeville, Mn: Liturgical Press, 1987), 615.

² John J. O'Donnell, *The Mystery of the Triune God* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1988), 170, quoting Eberhard Jüngel.

What, then, does it mean to be a creature? 'Humanity is created' is more than a simple statement of fact. To be created is to be taking part in the divine dance, to be in relationship with all other creatures, human and non-human, to be in communion with the three persons of the Trinity.

Even scientists recognise that there is more to reality than molecules, atoms and minute quanta. Rupert Sheldrake, an eminent biologist, understands the existence and phenomenon of being a creature in terms of the *interaction* of living beings. The mechanistic view of things does not explain memory in cells (morphogenesis), or instinctive behaviour and learning. It cannot define life. Nor does it account for the sacredness of times and places. He has come to a view of the universe which is both scientific and spiritual. He has made it his goal in life to demonstrate the vital principle in the universe, and to speculate about forms of consciousness in the creation other than the human:

My interest is in a new view of science, where we see the universe as alive, and in an exploration of what it could mean to see that there are forms of consciousness above the human consciousness. If one thinks of a divine consciousness embracing all things, and then this human consciousness here, the traditional view is that there are many, many other levels and kinds of consciousness in between.³

Then of course there is our spiritual sense of being a creature. As we become aware of the temporality and tenuousness of life, as we begin to seek the meaning of life, we come to recognise ourselves as creatures of a creator. As we question further we might ask, 'Is this creator a person?' Then we might reason: 'If we are persons then there is a personal creator'. Or we might turn to the wisdom of our ancestors and their inspired sacred writings that proclaim the presence of a personal creator. If we acknowledge that the creator is a person and has a personal relationship to us, our experience of being a creature takes on a deeper quality, even

³ Hal Blacker, "Maybe Angels: A Confluence of Imagination and Rational Enquiry": An Interview with Rupert Sheldrake, in *What is Enlightenment?* 6/1 (Spring/Summer 1997), reproduced at <http://www.wie.org/j11/sheldrake.asp>.

if our image of a personal creator may need much refinement theologically and spiritually.

The experience of being a personal creature is a spiritual experience. We sense that we have been brought into existence by a personal creator, and that even now our relationship with that creator is what is sustaining us in being. The experience is interpersonal: we know that our being is dependent on the benevolent love of a transcendent person, or rather of the community of persons that is the Trinity. Even Jesus, in his humanity, had a sense of creaturehood. The Gospels record his praying to the Father, and both Paul and the author of Hebrews stress his vulnerability.

This experience is not simply intellectual, but also affective. It involves not just an acknowledgment that we are dependent, but also a response of gratitude. Again, we might listen to Rupert Sheldrake:

It is hard to feel a sense of gratitude for an inanimate, mechanical world proceeding inexorably in accordance with eternal laws of nature and blind chance. And this is a great spiritual loss, for it is through gratitude that we acknowledge the living powers on which our own lives depend; through gratitude we enter into a conscious relationship to them; through gratitude we can find ourselves in a state of grace.⁴

A sense of limitedness and dependency, of fragility and contingency, can—depending on the quality of a person's faith and sensitivity—lead to a relationship of gratitude. A person can grow in deep awareness of the giftedness of our lives and respond to the Creator in wonder, gratitude, humility and love.

As I recognise the transcendent, I am carried beyond my everyday sensory life to the creator of all. I am taken out of myself. When this happens I have entered into the realm of mystery, the mystery of my relationship with the person of the Godhead, with the persons of the Trinity. This entry into God's mystery is the basis of every other spiritual experience, even as these seem to centre on other realities such as Jesus Christ or the communion of saints.

⁴ Rupert Sheldrake, *The Rebirth of Nature: Science and God* (Rochester, Vt: Park Street Press, 1994), 221. For more background, see Jean Mouroux, *The Christian Experience*, translated by George Lamb (London: Sheed and Ward, 1955 [1952]).

When our sense of creaturehood carries us into the love of God, we are being given an experience of spiritual consolation as Ignatius describes it:

I use the word 'consolation' when any interior movement is produced in the soul that leads her to become inflamed with the love of her Creator and Lord ... when one sheds tears that lead to love of one's Lord, and to every increase of hope, faith, and charity, to all interior happiness that calls and attracts a person towards heavenly things and to the soul's salvation, leaving the soul quiet and at peace in the Creator and Lord.⁵

Creaturehood in the Spiritual Exercises

Ignatius observed the heavens as a way of appreciating the handiwork of the Creator. He tells us that shortly after his conversion,

... the greatest consolation he used to receive was to look at the sky and the stars, which he did often and for a long time, because with this he used to feel in himself a great impetus towards serving Our Lord. (Autobiography 11)

In the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius first approaches the theme of creation in the Principle and Foundation (Exx 23). In the first sentence of this statement he writes:

The human person is created to praise, reverence and serve God Our Lord, and by so doing to save his or her soul.

Ignatius saw life as the continual creative personal presence of the Trinity, of the Trinity coming to us. Indeed he refers to Christ not only as our Lord but also as our Creator in many places in the *Spiritual Exercises*, echoing the teaching of the Johannine prologue, and of the hymn we find at the opening of the letter to the Colossians.⁶

Here is a modern rendition of Ignatius' Principle and Foundation:

⁵ Exx 316. Ignatian sources in this article are taken from Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Personal Writings*, edited and translated by Joseph A. Munitiz and Philip Endean (London: Penguin, 1996).

⁶ Exx 5, 15, 16, 50, 52, 229, 317, 351.

As a response to the overflowing love of the Trinity, we humans, in kinship with all other things of the universe, are created to praise, reverence and serve the Trinity in all our life endeavours, and so to discover the fullness of our lives on earth (and in heaven). In our praising, reverencing and serving the Trinity, we establish a new awareness of connectedness and relationship with all the rest of nature and the need to develop a free loving attitude, even as we use them for our livelihood in all that is left to our free will and is not prohibited. This requires true spiritual freedom on our part. This is the basic attitude toward all of the community of life and is necessary for true love. Such freedom extends to our relationship to everything. So we need to find this freedom in order to develop a right relationship with creation: human, animal, plants, matter. This gives us the freedom necessary to live with honour or disgrace, in poverty or riches, with a long or short life, in sickness or in health and so of all other matters. Our one desire is to choose what will better help us praise reverence and serve the Three Divine Persons.⁷

It is important to note how Ignatius here links humans to other creatures in their personal salvation. 'The other things on the face of the earth are created for human beings' to help them attain salvation. Today, we would say that all creatures of the universe gain salvation collectively, a position which we find expressed in Paul's letter to the Romans:

We know that the whole of creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for the adoption, the redemption of our bodies. (Romans 8:22-23)

We need to ponder deeply our connectedness with all the other creatures of the universe and our dependence on them. How often do we realise the significance of the sun and other celestial beings for our

⁷ Compare Ignatius' own text: 'The human person is created to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord, and by doing so save his or her soul. The other things on the face of the earth are created for human beings in order to help them pursue the end for which they are created. It follows from this that one must use other created things in so far as they help towards one's end, and free oneself from them in so far as they are obstacles to one's end. To do this we need to make ourselves indifferent to all created things, provided the matter is subject to our free choice and there is no prohibition. Thus as far as we are concerned, we should not want health more than illness, wealth more than poverty, fame more than disgrace, a long life more than a short one, and similarly for all the rest, but we should desire and choose only what helps us more towards the end for which we are created.'

existence and ongoing life? Do we, like the aboriginal hunter, thank the deer for giving up its life to feed us? When we acknowledge that other creatures too are created, we recognise that they are more than mindless matter. We should approach them as companions on our spiritual journey to God. This helps us understand anew Ignatius' entreaty to us to become free in our relationships with them, free in the sense of giving them growth and meaning. We are not saved alone but in union with other humans and indeed with the rest of the universe.

At the end of his *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius once again places our relationship with God against the background of other creatures. He suggests that we are to consider how the Holy Spirit dwells in creatures: the elements, the plants, the animals and humanity (Exx 235). This text as it stands does not necessarily foster the full sense of spiritual creaturehood which is the concern of this article. For it is possible to consider oneself as a creature before God, the Creator from a detached, 'head' position. From there one can certainly accept that our existence is a mystery, and indeed that the whole universe is rooted in mystery. But such understanding has not yet reached the 'heart'; it has not fully gripped our subjectivity. A heart awareness requires a surrender of self, a sense of wonder at one's existence. The mystery of oneself before the Creator then leads one to prayer. We come to enter deeply into the personal activity of the Trinity, into the interpersonal relationship which is the Trinity—the activity and relationship which call us into being and sustain us in our personhood.⁸ Some readers may find helpful the exercises on creaturehood placed at the end of this article.

The Principle and Foundation expresses our purpose and goal in life. It tells us that we are creatures of a benevolent Creator, and then insists on the need for freedom (in Ignatius' language 'indifference') in our relationships with other creatures. Ignatian spiritual freedom involves a correct relationship with all the creatures of the earth; conversely it is undermined by the abuse of our companions on the

⁸ An intimate sense of creaturehood can be attained by using the experiences of creaturehood as the subject of prayer with one's life as part of the 'Story of One's Life as an Experience of Graced History'. See my *Choosing Life: The Significance of Personal History in Decision-Making* (New York: Paulist, 1978); and *Spiritual Freedom*, second edition (Chicago: Loyola UP, 1995 [1973]), 261-273.

way to union with God. We must seek an awareness of our connectedness with other creatures in order to praise, reverence and serve the Trinity in all things.

**All around us,
creation is
groaning** For Ignatius, God is present at all times and in all things. We are to be loving companions as we relate to other creatures and use them for their salvation as well as our own. In Romans, Paul speaks of our groanings as we wait for resurrection, while all around us creation is groaning too. We are to be brought to a sense of connectedness with all the other creatures of the universe. If, as Sheldrake and others believe,⁹ the stars and galaxies are like angels and have a consciousness, then we can acknowledge our connectedness with them and our dependence on them as we might with pet animals.

Early Christian doctrine saw a closer relationship between creation and salvation than was later envisioned. Created reality never exists without its actual ordering to grace and salvation. The creative act of Christ extends to all humanity and even reaches the cosmic realm. Other created things are to be valued in themselves and not just their use.¹⁰ Ignatius' text itself goes beyond the strictly utilitarian.

The Principle and Foundation has often been presented as referring to the individual. But Ignatius was speaking of 'humanity' as a whole, and was linking human beings with the whole range of creation. We might say, 'we are saved as a people', or even 'we are saved as a planet'. We are to approach other creatures as our companions on our journey to the Trinity.

A Prayer Exercise on Creaturehood

Now I give some ways to enter into my experiences of creaturehood. Before beginning this exercise, I should recall that my whole life story is an experience of grace. It expresses the continuous activity of the Trinity through other creatures who sustain me and who constantly

⁹ See the interview with Sheldrake referred to above in n. 3.

¹⁰ See Zachary Hayes, 'Creation', in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, edited by Michael A. Downey (Collegeville, Mn: Liturgical Press, 1993), 239-240. Scriptural corroboration can be found in Colossians 1:15-20, Romans 8:18-28, Job 38-39, Psalm 104. See also Joann Wolski Conn, 'Toward Spiritual Maturity', in *Freeing Theology*, edited by Catherine Mowry LaCugna (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 235-258; and 'Self', in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, 865-866.

give me new life. These other things are an expression of the Creator's loving presence to me and to the whole universe.

I read the following Scripture text as a way of entering into the mystery of creaturehood:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God ... in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for the adoption, the redemption of our bodies. (Romans 8:19-25)

The Desire of My Heart

I ask for the grace to discover and appreciate my sense of creaturehood as an intimate act of the Trinity's loving, evolving presence with me throughout my life within the universal community that is the universe.

Point 1

I look over my life story, searching out experiences of creaturehood, of my dependence on the other creatures of the earth, and of my connection with them:

- how my physical body is made up of the chemical components of the earth
- how water and air are essential for my life
- how the plants, fish, birds and animals give me my sustenance, etc.

I consider how the other creatures of the earth sacrifice themselves for my existence.

Point 2

I reflect on the various things of beauty in the world as an expression of the Beautiful:

- the beauty of form in other humans, plants, fish, birds and animals, etc.

- the beauty of colour in the sky, mountains, lakes, flowers, etc.

I consider how all these beauties nurture and uplift my soul.

Point 3

I reflect on the sounds that are present on the earth calling to me. I put my ear to the earth and hear its heartbeats:

- sounds of the wind on the earth
- sounds of the ocean
- the silence of plants growing
- sounds of human voices, of singing by humans, birds and animals, etc.

I consider that these sounds are a means of communication between myself and the Trinity.

Point 4

I look over my life story searching out those experiences of identity with the other creatures of the community of life in the universe:

- the elements of my body as variations of the elements in many other creatures
- the ways in which our instincts work
- the ways in which we adjust and meet new situations in life, etc.

I consider how the other creatures of the earth give identity to me.

Point 5

I reflect on the ways in which various creatures show affection towards me and call me to express myself in a compassionate and heartfelt way:

- the ways in which I see other creatures achieving things that I would like to do, such as flying, swimming, etc.
- the sense of real connection through colour, odour and graceful movement, etc.

I consider how all these experiences give me compassion for other creatures.

Point 6

I reflect on the ways that other creatures enhance my being by affectionate communication, work and protection, etc.

I consider that these experiences are expressions of the Trinity to me.

Point 7

I look over my life story, searching out those experiences with other creatures that highlight my awareness that I am the beloved of the Trinity:

- I recall the experiences of the grandeur of the mountains, valleys and streams as if they were created only for me
- I recall trees and plants that have called me to a sense of awe before the Trinity
- I recall various house pets which have protected me and shown great affection to me, etc.

I consider how the other creatures of the earth reflect the love of the Trinity for me.

Point 8

I look over my life story with the other creatures of the universe, searching out those experiences of light that have consoled me and lifted me up.

I consider how the other creatures of the universe have been a source of enlightenment and truth to me.

Point 9

I look over my life story in terms of the other creatures of the universe, searching out those experiences of chaos, suffering, disorder, dysfunction and shadow that give me an appreciation of the marvellous compliance of other creatures with the mysterious actions of the Trinity, as well as the ways in which newness and hope arise in the universe and in me.

I reflect on my own need for this kind of attitude and I think of Christ's acceptance of the weather, the land and other creatures.

I consider how all these shadow experiences have been a grace to me.

Point 10

I look over my life story with the other creatures of the universe, searching out those experiences of light that have consoled me and lifted me up:

- I consider how the other creatures of the universe have been a source of enlightenment and truth to me
- I ponder on the joyous, new elements as well as on painful and chaotic ones

My life is an experience of being loved (graced) by the Trinity whether in light, shadow, suffering or hope-filled experience with the community of life in the universe.

Dialogues

I let my sense of dependence, and of connectedness with the rest of creation, emerge into conversation with the Creator of all. I express whatever surfaces: amazement, insight, awe, appreciation, gratitude, humility, etc. I pray to offer myself to the Creator in ways that will enhance their beautiful expression of love to me in this evolving universe.

I close with the prayer Jesus taught us.

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