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"God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good"

First of a two-part article on creation, in the series "The Light of Faith."

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When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have established; what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? (Ps 8:4-5). Men and women

of all times have been struck with amazement when contemplating the marvels of the world around them. Even though we now have a good grasp of the physical causes of the colors of a sunset, an eclipse, or the light display of an aurora borealis, we are still fascinated to behold them. And the more science advances, the clearer we grasp the complexity and immensity of what surrounds us: from microscopic life and the atomic structure of matter, right up to the unimaginably vast distances and magnitudes of the galaxies.

We can also be overcome with deep amazement on considering the reality of our own selves, when we become aware of our existence, despite being unable to fathom the origin of our life, and we acquire self-awareness. From where do I come? Although the fast pace of life in many parts of the world today

makes it easy to avoid such questions, it is not only those who are more prone to introspection who raise them. These questions stem from a deep need to find our bearings in life, a concern that may at times become dormant, but that, sooner or later, reawakens in everyone's life.

Seeking a Face beyond the universe

Experiencing the abyss of our own consciousness or the vastness of the world around us can at times lead to a kind of dizziness. Nevertheless mankind's natural religious instinct has led in every age to the effort to delve more deeply into these realms, seeking in the most varied ways a Face to adore. The Psalmist, when confronted with the wonders of nature, declares: *The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork* (Ps 19:2). Likewise, when faced with

the mystery of the human being and life, he cries out: *I give you thanks, for I am fearfully, wonderfully made* (Ps 139:14). For centuries, the ascent from the visible world to God took place very naturally. But in this day and age believers find themselves faced with questions that can cause perplexity. Isn't the search for a Face beyond the known universe simply a human projection, more suited to a now superseded stage of mankind's development? Doesn't scientific progress, even when unable to provide an answer to every question and problem, reduce the concept of creation to a "veil" covering over our ignorance? And in any case, isn't it only a matter of time before science will be able to answer all these questions for us?

It would be a mistake to dismiss this view too quickly as merely impertinent, or as symptoms of a baseless skepticism. Rather it serves

to highlight how “the Faith has to be re-lived and re-encountered in every generation.”^[1] This is especially relevant in our day and age, when science and technology have shown how much we can know and do by our own strength, so much so that the very idea of an order prior to our own human initiative has at times become remote and difficult to imagine. These are questions that require some quiet pondering, in order to confirm our own faith and better understand its meaning and its relationship to science and reason, so as to be able to enlighten others as well. Naturally, in these two articles it is only possible to mark out a few pathways, without exhausting a topic that bears on so many aspects of the Christian faith.

Revelation of creation

We can begin by citing a passage from the Bible on the origin of all

that exists, and in particular of each person throughout history. It is very specific and easily expressed in words: we are God's creation, the fruit of his freedom, wisdom and love: *Whatever the Lord pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth (Ps 135:6). O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom have you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures (Ps 104:24).*

Nevertheless, the simplest statements can mask the most complex realities. If human reason nowadays has at times a blurred perception of this view of the world, neither did it reach this notion in a simple way. Historically, the notion of creation, in the sense expressed by the Church in the Creed, arose only in the course of God's revelation to the people of Israel. The support of the divine Word aided the discovery of the limits of the various mythical views about the origin of the universe and

of man. Thus human reason was helped to go beyond the speculations of the brilliant Greek philosophers and to recognize the God of Israel as the one and only God, who created everything out of nothing.

A distinctive feature of the biblical account is the fact that God creates without starting from a pre-existing reality, with only the force of his Word: *And God said, 'Let there be light; and there was light . . . Let us make man in our own image' . . . So God created man in his own image (Gen 1:3.26.27)*. Another key feature of this account is that at the beginning there is no trace of evil: *And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good (Gen 1:31)*. *Genesis* itself is not sparing in details concerning the ways in which evil and suffering entered the world from very early on in history. All the same, and in open contrast to this universal experience,

the Bible repeatedly insists that the world is essentially good and that creation is not a degraded reality, but an immense gift from God. “The universe did not emerge as the result of arbitrary omnipotence, a show of force or a desire for self-assertion. Creation is of the order of love . . . *For you love all things that exist, and detest none of the things that you have made; for you would not have made anything if you had hated it* (Wis 11:24). Every creature is thus the object of the Father’s tenderness, who gives it its place in the world. Even the fleeting life of the least of beings is the object of his love, and in its few seconds of existence, God enfolds it with his affection.” [2]

The beginning of Saint John’s Gospel also sheds decisive light on this account: *In the beginning was the Word* (Jn 1:1), writes the fourth Evangelist, taking up the opening words of *Genesis* (cf. *Gen* 1:1). At the

origin of the world is the *logos* of God, imbuing it with rationality and meaning: *With you is wisdom, who knows your works, and was present when you did make the world, and who understands what is pleasing in your sight and what is right according to your commandments (Wis 9:9)*. In reference to the Greek term *logos* used by Saint John for the Word of God, Benedict XVI said: “*Logos* means both reason and word—a reason which is creative and capable of self-communication, precisely as reason. John thus spoke the final word on the biblical concept of God, and in this word all the often toilsome and tortuous threads of biblical faith find their culmination and synthesis. In the beginning was the *logos*, and the *logos* is God, says the Evangelist. The encounter between the Biblical message and Greek thought did not happen by chance.”[3]

All dialogue requires the presence of a rational counterpart, possessing *logos*. Thus the dialogue with the world initiated by the Greek philosophers was possible precisely because created reality is imbued with rationality, with a logic that is at once very simple and quite complex. This dialogue, enlightened by revelation, led to the emphatic affirmation that the world “is not the product of any necessity whatever, nor of blind fate or chance,”^[4] but rather of a loving Intelligence, a personal Being who transcends the very order of the universe because he precedes it.

Core of the creation accounts

Not infrequently today, the creation accounts in *Genesis* are seen as beautiful poetic texts, imbued with great wisdom, but perhaps, when all is said and done, not at the level of the sophistication and

methodological rigor that science and literary and historical criticism require. Still, it would be a mistake to treat our predecessors disdainfully for not having had microscopes, particle accelerators, or specialized journals. It would be all too easy to forget that perhaps they saw and understood things on a more essential level—one we may have lost sight of along the way.

To understand what a person or text means to express, we need to pay attention to the way of speaking used, above all if it is different from ours. Hence we should keep in mind that in the creation accounts “the image of the world is delineated by the inspired author in accord with the cosmogonies of the times he lived in;” and it is within this framework that God inserts the specific novelty of his revelation to Israel and to the people of all times: “the truth concerning the creation of

everything by the working of the one and only God.”[5]

Even so, it is often objected that in a bygone era the notion of creation played its role, but now it is simplistic to propose it anew.

Modern physics and the discoveries about the evolution of species have rendered obsolete the idea of a Creator who intervenes to bring the world into being and give shape to it. The rationality of the universe would at best be an intrinsic property of the material world; and any appeal to other agents would pose a challenge to the seriousness of scientific discourse.

Nevertheless, these objections to the notion of creation can often stem, even without realizing it, from an overly literal reading of the Bible, which the Bible itself discards. If, for example, we compare the two accounts of creation placed one after

the other in the first two chapters of *Genesis*, we can observe very clear differences which cannot be put down to editorial carelessness. The sacred authors were well aware that they were not required to provide a detailed and literal description of the origin of the world and human beings. They tried to express certain fundamental truths through the language and concepts available to them.[6]

When we begin to understand the particular language of these accounts, a primitive language but nonetheless filled with wisdom and deep insight, we can focus on its true core. They speak to us of “a personal intervention”[7] that transcends the created universe. Prior to the world, there existed the personal freedom and infinite wisdom of a Creator God. By means of a symbolic and apparently simplistic language, a deep truth is expressed that can be

summed up in the following way: God made all this, because he wanted to.[8]The Bible does not venture to make pronouncements concerning the stages of the evolution of the universe and the origin of life, but rather affirms the freedom of God's omnipotence,[9] the rationality of the world he creates and his love for his creation. Thus unfolds an image of the world, and of each of the beings that make it up, as "a gift from the outstretched hand of the Father of all."[10] The world, in the light of faith in creation, is marked at its very heart by the sign of welcome. Even in the midst of imperfection, evil and suffering, a Christian sees each being as a gift stemming from Love and calling us to love: to enjoy, respect, take care of and hand on to others.

[1] Joseph Ratzinger, *Dios y el mundo*, Random House, Mondadori, Barcelona 2002, 49.

[2] Pope Francis, Enc. *Laudato si'*, 24 May 2015, no. 77.

[3] Pope Benedict XVI, *Discourse in the University of Regensburg*, 12 September 2006.

[4] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 295.

[5] Saint John Paul II, *General Audience*, 29 January 1986.

[6] Alongside these reasons internal to the Bible itself, a body of knowledge on the correct way of interpreting the sacred text has also been growing through a dialogue between theology and science—a dialogue subject to not a few tensions, but nonetheless quite fruitful. In these lengthy exchanges, excesses on both sides have been

frequent, along with mutual aggravations. A fundamentalist reading of the Bible, with the attempt to get it to express more than it actually means to, has led to disrespect for the sacred text. And as a result, science has often seen itself authorized to say more than it is really capable of saying concerning the origin and meaning of the world.

[7] Joseph Ratzinger, *La fiesta de la fe*, Desclée, Bilbao, 1999, 25.

[8] This conviction was deeply imbedded in the faith of Israel, as these words of a mother to her son, just prior to his martyrdom, show clearly: “I beseech you, my child, to look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them, and recognize that God did not make them out of things that existed. Thus also mankind comes into being” (2 *Mac* 7:28).

[9] Cf. Romano Guardini, *La fine dell'epoca moderna. Il portere*, Morcelliana, Brescia 1993, 17.

[10] Pope Francis, Enc. *Laudato si'*, no. 76.

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