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A Love That Embraces the World

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

10/30/2018

Many people find it beautiful and inspiring that love should occupy a central place in reality. But often this can seem like a nostalgic belief – although certainly the world would be a better place if we were all guided by this principle. The experience of evil, of injustice, of the imperfections in this world, seem to

make love more of an *ideal* we need to strive for rather than the very *foundation* of reality. “Indeed, most people nowadays would not think about love as related in any way to truth. Love is seen as an experience associated with the world of fleeting emotions, no longer with truth.”[1]

The Christian faith, in contrast, sees in the origin of the universe a Love that is both personal and infinitely creative – a Love that has even gone to the extent of entering into creation as one more person there, to save it. *I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you (Jer 31:3)*. Many people who dream of improving the world recognise the greatness of this vision, but are incapable of leaving aside the notion that a personal and eternal being – a being preceding the world – stems from a way of thinking that is “mythical and opposed to the way things really are.”[2] They see it

as foreign to a rational framework we can share based on our common experience of the world. Having reflected in a previous article on the creation narratives in the book of *Genesis*, we can once more ask the question: in what sense is it rational today to speak about creation?

Where is God?

Even among people with faith, one often hears the claim that, while science bases its affirmations on sound proofs, the idea of God is based on traditions and unverifiable suppositions. At first glance, it may seem hard to object to this view. But if one takes into account that “sound proofs” equates here to “empirical evidence,” one can understand that the scope of this certainty is limited by science itself, which deliberately focuses on the empirical and measurable aspects of reality. This strategic decision has allowed

science to grow exponentially. But it also implies that empirical science cannot address the entire spectrum of reality, or at least it cannot rule out that this spectrum may be wider than its reach. On the other hand, experimental science, like all scientific disciplines (including theology), has presuppositions that it cannot itself demonstrate. One of them is the *existence* of the very reality that it studies, which necessarily requires a different kind of rational reflection. Therefore Christian revelation does not attempt to question the method of science or its evident successes; rather it precedes it and opens wider horizons for it.

Certainly, the way in which God is present in the world can make it hard to recognise him. Saint Augustine wrote: “There is nothing more hidden and nothing more present than He; it is difficult to find

where He is and even harder to find where He is not.”[3] This paradox, this intermixing of yes and no, which can seem at times like a short-circuit, points instead to the need to open rationality to another level.[4] God is not a reality like others in this world, nor does He necessarily intervene in natural processes in empirically verifiable ways. God acts on a much deeper level, sustaining the very being of creatures, making things *be*. When we speak about Him, even to deny his existence, our language always goes beyond the boundary of the rigour proper to experimental science, and avails itself of a different language that science itself presupposes, and that has its own rigour: philosophical or metaphysical language. Therefore a “god” who is obliged to reveal himself through instruments of scientific observation would not be the true God, but his caricature. And the true God does not interfere with the working of science,

because He is situated on a level of reality prior to science itself. God does not fit into the laws of physics; rather it is the laws of physics that “fit” in Him.[5]

The contribution of science has been decisive in making us aware of the immensity of the universe and its laws and its evolutionary trajectory, which forms a kind of biological prehistory of the appearance of *homo sapiens* on earth. Nevertheless, science cannot fully explain the origin of the universe because this event does not simply link two “states” of the same reality. To explain the “law” underlying the leap from *nothing* to the first embryonic form of the universe goes beyond the possibilities of science because what is *nothing* escapes any scientific representation. Every cosmological theory assumes a space-time structure as a starting point, and nothingness in a radical sense, that

is, *non-being*, always falls outside this structure: the threshold that separates being and nothingness is metaphysical.[6] Thus one can understand why dialogue between science and theology is not only desirable but necessary, and why it requires the mediation of philosophy, not so much as a referee to keep peace between warring parties, but rather as an interlocutor capable of understanding the scope and possibilities of both disciplines.

At the heart of reality

Even when approaching the very origin of the universe, science always remains on *this side of reality*, within being. There are many scientists who, in identifying this threshold, realise the need to undertake philosophical reflection on the need for a Creator to explain the origin of the universe. “The very beauty of creation is, without doubt, a great

book. Contemplate, look, read its higher and lower parts. God did not write with letters of ink, through which you could know Him. He placed before your eyes the very things that He made. Why do you seek a more powerful voice? Heaven and earth both cry out to you: ‘God made me.’”[7]

Nevertheless, philosophy itself also comes up against limiting questions: Why is there being rather than nothing? Why do I exist? In this regard, the Christian faith contributes “a new image of God, higher than that which philosophical reason could ever forge and think. But faith does not contradict the philosophical doctrine of God ... Christian faith in God accepts the philosophical teaching about God and completes it.”[8] Faced with the question of the purpose and ultimate meaning of existence (a question that at some point in life becomes

decisive for everyone), philosophy is silent. The Christian faith then rises up and responds: God was there before the world; He conceived of it and created it out of love.

This simple statement leads, in reality, to the opposite of what the notion of creation is sometimes accused of producing: it demystifies the universe. The understanding of the world as God's creation is "the decisive 'enlightenment' of history ... the break-through out of the fears that had oppressed humankind. It placed the world in the context of reason and recognized the world's reasonableness and freedom."[9]

Although science is able to read an important part of the internal logic of nature, a science without God would not liberate the world from myths, because there would always remain gaps that needed to be filled with other explanations.[10] It is impossible for science, because of its

self-limitation to the empirical, to fill in all these gaps. Nor will people stop asking these questions, since the very fact of doing so shows (just as the efforts of science do) that the human being transcends the order of the empirical. The human spirit is manifested among other things by the fact that each of us perceives our personal identity in the face of the world, and that we ask ourselves about these gaps, and even that someone may consider it stupid to ask about them... All this makes it clear that even from a purely philosophical standpoint, and despite being a microcosm sharing the same elements as the universe, we are more than simply a part of the material world.

Personal freedom and self-awareness, by which we perceive ourselves as distinct from the world, are therefore also great “gaps” through which we can glimpse

transcendence; they speak to us of a personal God who is even more radically distinct from the world, and who creates it freely. And vice versa, recognising that reality has its origin in this creative Freedom grounds the recognition of human freedom, and therefore of the dignity of each person.^[11] This is one of the fundamental senses in which *Genesis* says that *God created man in his image* (*Gen 1:27*): we ourselves are a mirror in which God can be glimpsed. Hence Blessed John Henry Newman pointed to conscience as “our great interior teacher of religion,”^[12] a “connecting principle between the creature and his Creator,”^[13]

Faith in creation, therefore, does not seek to impose the “world of the spirit” on the material world from the outside. Rather it decisively affirms that God embraces the entire material universe. As Dante’s poetic

intuition expressed in immortal words: “God is the love that moves the sun and the other stars.”[14] At the heart of reality God is present, and He loves the world and each person: “Creatures came into existence when the key of love opened his hand.”[15] A recurring idea in the writings of Saint Josemaria provides great theological depth here. He used to say that, when deciding to carry out an action, “the most supernatural reason is: because we want to.”[16] Freedom and love, like the rationality of the world, speak to us of God. Therefore, if Saint Augustine recognized God in the book of nature, he also found him in the intimacy of his soul: “behold, Thou wert within and I was without. I was looking for Thee out there ... Thou didst call and cry out and burst in upon my deafness; Thou didst shine forth and glow and drive away my blindness.”[17]

The miracle of the world

The reality of miracles reflects this same priority of God's freedom, love and wisdom with respect to the world. With his inimitable paradoxical style, Chesterton said: "If a man believes in the inalterability of the laws of nature, he cannot believe in any miracle in any age. If a man believes in a will behind law, he can believe in any miracle in any age."^[18] The three synoptic Gospels recount a leper who approaches Jesus, asking to be healed. Jesus answers: *I want it, be clean (Mt 8:3)*. God heals that man because he wants to, in the same way that he created the world, and he has created each person, because he wants to, out of love. Commenting on another miracle, the healing of a blind man, Benedict XVI observed: "It is not by chance that the people's last remark after the miracle has been performed is reminiscent of the evaluation of

Creation at the beginning of the Book of *Genesis: He has done all things well* (Mk 7:37). Prayer clearly entered the healing action of Jesus as he looked up to heaven. The power that healed the deaf mute was certainly elicited by compassion for him but it proceeded from the fact that he had recourse to the Father. These two relationships interact: the human relationship of compassion towards a man enters into the relationship with God, and thus becomes healing.”[19]

Miracles, therefore, are not exceptions that call into question the solidity and rationality of the world; rather they point to the very root of that solidity. They reveal the true miracle, which is the very existence of the universe and of life. This true miracle (*miraculum*, something before which only admiration is fitting) is God’s creation. The opening of reason to this “beginning of the beginnings” not only makes miracles

reasonable, but above all it makes the world itself reasonable. “The uniformity and generality of natural laws ... lead us to think that nature is self-sufficient. And yet, there is no break in continuity between creation and the most everyday and banal event. A miracle intervenes to convince us of it.”[20]

It is sometimes said that “we live by a miracle,” to refer to the surprising ways in which certain problems or dangers are solved. In reality, the expression contains a radical truth: every moment of our ordinary life unfolds in the midst of the miracle of a world that exists out of love. “Each one of us, each man and each woman, is a miracle of God, is wanted by him and is personally known by him.”[21] As Saint Paul said to those listening to him in Athens on the Areopagus: *in him we live and move and have our being* (Acts 17:28). Therefore, “in the

Judaeo-Christian tradition, the word ‘creation’ has a broader meaning than ‘nature,’ for it has to do with God’s loving plan in which every creature has its own value and significance.”[22]

I thank you because I am wonderfully made (Ps 139:14). Faith in creation leads to a profound attitude of gratitude. Despite the presence of suffering and evil in the world, all reality (especially our own existence and that of the people around us) appears to us as a promise of happiness: *All you who are thirsty, come to the water! You who have no money, come ... Come, without paying and without cost, drink wine and milk! (Is 55:1).* Man knows himself defenceless (because he really is) but also the recipient of an infinite generosity that calls him to live, and to live forever. Saint Irenaeus summarized it in a celebrated maxim: “The glory of God is man

fully alive; moreover man's life is the vision of God.”[23]

Seen from this perspective, life is not a mere struggle for success or survival, even in the most extreme conditions: it is a space for gratitude, for adoration, in which we find our true rest.[24] “How wonderful is the certainty that each human life is not adrift in the midst of hopeless chaos, in a world ruled by pure chance or endlessly recurring cycles! The Creator can say to each one of us: *Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you (Jer 1:5)*. We were conceived in the heart of God, and for this reason ‘each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary.’”[25]

Further readings to go deeper into the topic:

Catechism of the Catholic Church, nos. 279-324.

Francis, Enc. *Laudato Si*, ch. 2 (nos. 62-100).

Benedict XVI, Audience, 6 February 2013; Audience, 9 November 2005.

– Homily at the Easter Vigil Mass, 23 April 2011; Homily at the Easter Vigil Mass, 7 April 2012.

– Message to the Rimini Meeting, 10 August 2012.

– Address at the University of Regensburg, 12 September 2006.

John Paul II, Catechesis on creation, 8 January 1986 – 23 April 1986.

– *Memory and Identity*,

Chesterton, G.K., *Saint Thomas Aquinas*

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[1] Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, 29 June 2013, no. 27.

[2] Joseph Ratzinger, *The Feast of Faith: Approaches to a Theology of the Liturgy*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1986, p. 20

[3] Saint Augustine, *De quantitate animae*, 34, 77.

[4] This is this sense in which Benedict XVI spoke of “the courage to engage the whole breadth of reason,” Discourse in the University of Regensburg, 12 September 2006.

[5] “Albert Einstein said that in the laws of nature ‘there is revealed an intelligence of such superiority that, compared with it, all the systematic thinking and acting of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection’... Consequently a first path that leads to the discovery of God is an attentive contemplation of

creation” (Benedict XVI, Audience, 14 November 2012).

[6] Saint Thomas Aquinas explains that to bring being out of nothing, an “infinite power” is needed (cf. *Summa Theologica* I, q. 45, 5, ad 3). This is a capacity that cannot be passed on to any creature; precisely because, as we can see from our own existence, creatures are contingent; that is, they could have never existed (cf. *Summa Theologica* I, q. 104, 1).

[7] Saint Augustine, *Sermon* no. 68, 6.

[8] Joseph Ratzinger, *The God of Faith and the God of the Philosophers*.

[9] Joseph Ratzinger, *‘In the Beginning...’: A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall*, Eerdmans Publishing Company, Michigan 1995, 14.

[10] Many scientists hold this view. It is enough to mention Einstein here who, with his own particular view of God, stated that “science without religion is crippled; religion without science is blind” (*Pensieri, idee, opinione [1934-1950]*, Newton Compton, Roma 1996, 29); and Georges Lemaître, priest and physicist, who developed the foundations of what later would be called, initially with irony and later seriously, the *Big Bang* theory.

[11] Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *The Feast of Faith: Approaches to a Theology of the Liturgy*, 20: “If personality is not a possibility, i.e., not present, with the ‘ground’ of reality, it is not possible at all. Either freedom is a possibility inherent in the ground of reality, or it does not exist.”

[12] Blessed John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*,

The Catholic Publication Society, New York 1870, p. 378.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 112.

[14] “L’amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle” (Dante, *The Divine Comedy. Paradise*, XXXIII, 145).

[15] Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Sent. II*, prol. (cited in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 293).

[16] Saint Josemaria Escriva, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 184.

[17] Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, X, 27, 38.

[18] G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, Dover, New York, 2012, p. 67.

[19] Benedict XVI, Audience, 14 December 2011.

[20] J. Guitton, *Le temps et l'éternité chez Plotin et saint Augustin*, Aubier, Paris 1955, pp. 176-177.

[21] Benedict XVI, Audience, 23 May 2012.

[22] Francis, *Laudato Si*, 76.

[23] Saint Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, 4, 20, 7 (cited in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 294).

[24] Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 347. Creation, miracle, adoration, thanksgiving... It is not by chance that these motifs converge in the Eucharistic mystery: “The Eucharist joins heaven and earth; it embraces and penetrates all creation. The world which came forth from God’s hands returns to him in blessed and undivided adoration” (Francis, *Laudato Sì*, no. 236).

[25] Francis, *Laudato Sì*, no. 65. (Internal citation is from Benedict XVI, Homily for the Solemn

Inauguration of the Petrine Ministry,
24 April 2005).

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