

Topic 4: God, the Creator

Creation is at once a mystery of faith and a truth accessible to reason. God has created everything "not to increase his glory but to manifest and communicate it." The knowledge and admiration of divine power, wisdom and love leads man to an attitude of reverence, adoration and humility, living in the presence of God and knowing himself to be God's child.

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Introduction

The importance of creation lies in the fact that it is “the foundation of all God’s saving plans . . . it is the beginning of the history of salvation, which culminates in Christ” (*Compendium*, 51). The Bible and the Creed begin with the profession of faith in God the Creator.

Unlike the other great mysteries of our faith (the Trinity and the Incarnation), creation is “the first answer to our fundamental questions regarding our very origin and destiny” (*Compendium*, 51). The human spirit asks, and in part also find answers for these questions, as we see in the history of philosophy and in the accounts of the religious beliefs of so many peoples (cf.

Catechism, 285). But the specific notion of creation was only truly grasped in the Judaeo-Christian revelation.

Creation is thus both a mystery of faith and a truth accessible to reason (cf. *Catechism*, 286). This fact makes it a good starting point for the evangelisation and dialogue that Christians are called to carry out in our day and age,^[1] like Saint Paul did the Areopagus in Athens (cf. Acts 17:16-34).

A distinction is often made between God's creative act (creation *active sumpta*) and the created reality, which is the effect of this divine action (creation *passive sumpta*).^[2]

1. “Creation is the common work of the Holy Trinity” (Catechism, 292)

Revelation presents God’s creative action as the fruit of his omnipotence, wisdom and love. Creation is usually attributed to the Father (cf. *Compendium*, 52), redemption to the Son and sanctification to the Holy Spirit. At the same time, the works *ad extra* of the Trinity (the first of these, creation) are common to the Persons, and so the question arises as to their specific role in creation, for “each divine Person carries out the common work according to his unique personal property” (*Catechism*, 258). This is the meaning of the traditional appropriation of the essential attributes (omnipotence, wisdom, love) respectively to the creative work of

the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

a) “Creator of heaven and earth”

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.’ Three things are affirmed in these first words of Scripture. The eternal God gave a beginning to all that exists outside of himself. He alone is Creator (the verb ‘create’ – Hebrew *bara* – always has God for its subject). The totality of what exists (expressed by the formula ‘the heavens and the earth’) depends on the One who gives it being” (*Catechism*, 290).

Only God can create in the proper sense,^[3] which implies bringing things into being from nothing (*ex nihilo*) and not from something pre-existent. This requires an infinite active power, which is God’s alone (cf. *Catechism*, 296-298). Thus it is

fitting to appropriate creative omnipotence to the Father, since (according to a classic expression) in the Trinity he is *fons et origo*, that is, the Person from whom the other two proceed, the beginning without beginning.

The Christian faith affirms that the fundamental distinction in reality is that between God and his creatures. This was a novelty in the early centuries, when the polarity between matter and spirit gave rise to irreconcilable views (materialism and spiritualism, dualism and monism). Christianity broke these moulds with its insistence that matter (as well as spirit) is also the creation of the one transcendent God. Later, Thomas Aquinas developed a metaphysics of creation that describes God as Subsistent Being (*Ipsum Esse Subsistens*). As the first cause, he is absolutely transcendent to the world; and, at the

same time, by virtue of the participation in his being by creatures, he is intimately present in them, which depend in everything on the One who is the source of being. As Saint Augustine said, God is *superior summo meo* and at the same time *intimior intimo meo*: “higher than my highest and more inward than my innermost self.”^[4] —

b) “By whom all things were made”

The wisdom literature in the Old Testament presents the world as the fruit of God’s wisdom (cf. Wis 9:9). “It is not the product of any necessity whatever, nor of blind fate or chance” (*Catechism*, 295). God’s creation has an intelligibility which human reason, sharing in the light of the divine Intellect, can grasp, although not without effort and always in a spirit of humility and respect before the Creator and his

work (cf. Job 42:3; *Catechism*, 299). This development reaches its full expression in the New Testament. By identifying the Son, Jesus Christ, with the Logos (cf. Jn 1:1), it declares that the wisdom of God is a Person, the incarnate Word, through whom all things were made (cf. Jn 1:3). Saint Paul highlights the close tie between creation and Christ, stressing that all things were created in Him, through Him and for Him (cf. Col 1:16-17).

The entire universe therefore originates from a creative Reason (cf. *Catechism*, 284).^[5] Christianity right from the beginning has had great confidence in the ability of human reason to know what exists; and also a strong certainty that reason (scientific or philosophical) can never arrive at conclusions contrary to faith, since both come from the same Source.

Some people today often pose false disjunctions, for example, between creation and evolution. In reality, an adequate epistemology not only distinguishes between the spheres proper to the natural sciences and to faith, but also recognises in philosophy a necessary role of mediating between the two spheres. The sciences, with their own method and object, do not exhaust the entire range of human reason; and faith, which refers to the same world that the sciences speak of, needs philosophical concepts to formulate its truths and enter into dialogue with human reason.^[6]

It is only natural, then, that the Church from the beginning has sought to dialogue with reason: a reason aware of its created character, since it has not given itself existence, nor does it completely control its future; a reason open to what transcends it, to the Reason that

is at the origin of all creation.

Paradoxically, a closed reason, which believes it can find within itself the answer to its deepest questions, ends up affirming the meaninglessness of existence and fails to recognise the intelligibility of reality (nihilism, irrationalism).

c) “Lord and giver of life”.

“We believe that [the world] proceeds from God’s free will; he wanted to make his creatures share in his being, wisdom and goodness: ‘For you created all things; and by your will they existed and were created’ (Rev 4:11) . . . ‘The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made’ (Ps 145:9)” (*Catechism*, 295). Hence, since “creation comes forth from God’s goodness, it shares in that goodness. ‘And God saw that it was good. . . very good’ – for God willed creation as a gift” (*Catechism*, 299).

This goodness and free gift of creation allows us to discover there the action of the Spirit who “hovered over the waters” (Gen 1:2) at the moment of creation. The Spirit is the Person-Gift in the Trinity, the subsistent Love between the Father and the Son. The Church professes her faith in the creative work of the Holy Spirit, giver of life and source of all good.^[7]

The Christian affirmation of God’s freedom in creating allows us to overcome the narrowness of other visions which, by placing necessity in God, end up sustaining a fatalism or determinism. There is nothing, either “inside” or “outside” God, that obliges Him to create. What then is the end that moves Him? What has he set out to do in creating us?

2. “The world was created for the glory of God” (First Vatican Council)

God created everything “not to increase his glory but to manifest and communicate it.”^[8] Insisting on this teaching of Saint Bonaventure, the First Vatican Council (1870) declared that “in his own goodness and through his almighty power, not to increase his own beatitude or to attain his perfection, but in order to manifest this perfection through the gifts he bestows on creatures, the one true God, with absolute freedom of counsel and from the beginning of time, made out of nothing both orders of creatures, the spiritual and the corporeal” (DZ 3002; cf. *Catechism*, 293). When it is stated, therefore, that the goal of the creature is the glory of God, this is not meant to defend a kind of divine “egocentrism.” On the contrary, God,

so to speak, goes out of himself to communicate himself to creatures. “The glory of God consists in the realization of this manifestation and communication of his goodness, for which the world was created. God made us ‘to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, *to the praise of his glorious grace*’ (Eph 1:5-6). For ‘the glory of God is man fully alive; moreover man’s life is the vision of God’” (*Catechism*, 294).^[9]

Far from a dialectic of opposing principles (like Manichaeism or Hegelian idealism), stressing the glory of God as the goal of creation is not a negation of man, but rather an indispensable presupposition for human fulfilment. Christian optimism is rooted in the joint exaltation of God and man: “Only if God is great is humankind also great.”^[10] It is an optimism that stresses the absolute priority of the

good, but that is not blind to the presence of evil in the world and in history, as will be seen in the next topic. This is the central affirmation of Christianity: God has created everything for Christ, who is both God and man, and in his glorious exaltation humanity is elevated while the splendour of divinity is manifested.

3. The temporal character of creation and evolution

The effect of God's creative action is the totality of the created world, both "heaven and earth" (Gen 1:1). The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) teaches that God is "Creator of all things, visible and invisible, spiritual and corporeal, who from the beginning of time and by His omnipotent power made from nothing creatures both spiritual and corporeal, that is, the angelic and the earthly, and then the human

creature, who as it were shares in both orders, being composed of spirit and body” (DZ 800).

Hence, as we have seen, Christianity overcomes both monism (which leads to matter and spirit being confused, and in which the reality of God and the world are identified) and dualism (according to which matter and spirit are opposing original principles).

This teaching also makes clear that while the creative action belongs to the eternity of God, the effect of such action is marked by temporality. Revelation states that the world has been created with a temporal beginning, i.e. that it has been created together with time, which is congruent with the divine plan to manifest Himself in the history of salvation. This is a revealed truth, which reason cannot demonstrate, as Thomas Aquinas taught in the

famous medieval dispute about the eternity of the world.^[11] God guides history through his providence.

Creation, then, has a beginning, but it is not reduced to the initial moment. Rather it is a continuous creation, since the divine creative influence never disappears. Creation is revealed in the Bible as a divine action that continues in history until its final culmination in the new creation. It is understandable, then, that nothing could be further from the Christian vision than an immobile mentality, according to which everything is already perfectly determined from the beginning. Hence some aspects of the theory of evolution fit without difficulty in this dynamic vision of the world, always being careful to distinguish the two levels of causality, respecting the sphere of divine action and causality as distinct from the sphere of the action and causality of created

beings. The exaltation of the former to the detriment of the latter would lead to an unacceptable “supra-naturalism” (as though God did everything and creatures were merely “puppets” in the hands of the sole divine agent). While the overvaluation of the latter former leads to an equally deficient vision: naturalistic deism, which holds that God cannot act in the world since it possesses its own self-sufficiency.

4. Creation and salvation

Creation is “the first step toward the covenant of the one God with his people” (*Compendium*, 51). In the Bible, creation is open to God’s saving action in history, which attains its fullness in the paschal mystery of Christ, and which will reach its final perfection at the end of time. Creation is made with a view to the Sabbath, the seventh day on which the Lord rested, the day on

which the first creation culminates and which opens onto the eighth day when an even more marvellous work begins: the Redemption, the new creation in Christ (cf. 2 Cor 5:7; cf. *Catechism*, 345-349).

This shows the continuity and unity of the divine plan of creation and redemption. The relationship between the two can be expressed by saying that, on the one hand, creation is the first salvific event; on the other hand, redemptive salvation has the characteristics of a new creation. This relationship sheds light on important aspects of the Christian faith, such as the ordering of nature to grace and the existence of a single supernatural end for man.

5. The truth about creation in the Christian's life

The radical nature of God's creative and saving action requires a

response that has the same character of totality: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength” (Dt 6:5; cf. Mt 22:37; Mk 12:30; Lk 10:27). At the same time, the universality of the divine action entails that God creates and saves the whole man and all men. Our response to his call to love Him with our whole being is intrinsically linked to bringing his love to the whole world. Thus the statement that the apostolate is the overflow of the interior life^[12] is manifested by an analogous dynamic of the divine action, that is to say, of the intensity of the Trinitarian love that overflows towards all creatures.

The knowledge and admiration of God’s power, wisdom and love should lead us to an attitude of reverence, adoration and humility, to live in the presence of God, knowing that we are his children. Aware that everything has been created for

God's glory, Christians seek to order all their actions to the true end that fills our life with happiness: the glory of God, not our own vainglory. They strive to continually rectify the intention for their actions, so that it can truly be said that the only end of their life is: *Deo omnis gloria!*^[13]

The grandeur and beauty of creatures awakens people's admiration; it provokes questions about the origin and destiny of the world and of mankind and provides a glimpse of the reality of the Creator. In their dialogue with non-believers, Christians can raise these questions to help minds and hearts to open to the Creator's light. Likewise, in their dialogue with believers of different religions, Christians find in creation an excellent starting point, since it is a truth that is partly shared, and that grounds the fundamental moral values of the human person.

Basic bibliography

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Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, 51-54.

Saint John Paul II, *I Believe in God the Father. Catechesis on the Creed (I)*, 1996, pp. 181-218.

Saint Josemaría, *Passionately loving the world*, in *Conversations with Saint Josemaría Escrivá*, 113-123.

^[1] Cf. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (2015), 62-100; at the end of the encyclical, the Pope suggests two prayers. “The first we can share with all who believe in a God who is the all-powerful Creator, while in the other

we Christians ask for inspiration to take up the commitment to creation set before us by the Gospel of Jesus” (246); also see Pope Francis’ *Fratelli tutti* (2020), 287.

[2] Cf. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *De potentia*, q.3, a.3, c.; the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* follows the same guideline.

[3] This is why it is said that God does not need instruments to create, since no instrument possesses the infinite power needed to create. Hence also, when speaking of the human being as a creator or as capable of participating in God’s creative power, the word “creator” is used in a broad sense.

[4] Saint Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, 3, 6, 11. Cf. *Catechism*, 300.

[5] Cf. Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, 23 April 2011.

^[6] Both pseudo-scientific rationalism and unscientific fideism need to be corrected by philosophy. One also needs to avoid the false apologetics of those who seek empirical verification or a demonstration of the truths of faith in the data provided by science. In reality, as said above, we are dealing with data belonging to different methods and disciplines.

^[7] Cf. Saint John Paul II, *Dominum et vivificantem* (1986), 10.

^[8] Saint Bonaventure, *Super Sent.*, Bk. 2, d.1, q.2, a.2, ad 1.

^[9] The internal quotation is from Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus haereses*, 4, 20, 7.

^[10] Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, 15 August 2005.

^[11] Cf. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *De aeternitate mundi; Contra Gentiles*, II, ch. 31-38.

^[12] Cf. Saint Josemaría Escrivá, *The Way*, 961.

^[13] Cf. Saint Josemaría Escrivá, *The Way*, 780; *Furrow*, 647; *The Forge*, 611, 639, 1051.

Santiago Sanz

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