

Topic 6: Creation

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of the truth about creation comes from its being the “foundation of God's saving plans . . . the beginning of the history of

salvation, which culminates in Christ" (*Compendium*, 51). Both the Bible (*Gen* 1: 1) and the Creed begin with a confession 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 [the] fundamental questions regarding our very origin and destiny" (*Compendium*, 51), which the human spirit itself raises and also answers in part, as philosophical reflection demonstrates. Despite the accounts of the origin of the world contained in the religious culture of so many peoples (cf. CCC, 285), the specific notion of creation has only been grasped by Judeo-Christian revelation.

Thus creation is a mystery of faith, and at the same time it is a truth that is accessible to natural reason (cf.

CCC, 286). This special positioning between faith and reason makes creation a good starting-point for the task of evangelization and for the dialogue that Christians are always (especially in our days) called to carry out, [1] as St. Paul did at the Areopagus in Athens (cf. *Acts* 17: 16-34).

It is usual to distinguish between creation as the creative action of God (active), and creation as the created reality that is the effect of God's action (passive). [2] The explanation given below of the main dogmatic aspects of creation is set out accordingly.

1. THE ACT OF CREATION

1.1. “Creation is the common work of the Holy Trinity” (CCC, 292)

Revelation presents God's creative action as the fruit of his omnipotence, wisdom and love.

Creation is usually attributed especially to the Father (cf. *Compendium*, 52) just as redemption is attributed to the Son and sanctification to the Holy Spirit. At the same time the works of the Holy Trinity *ad extra* (external to God), the first of them being creation, are common to all the Persons, and therefore we can consider the specific role of each Person in creation, since “each divine Person performs the common work according to his unique personal property” (CCC, 258). This is the meaning of the equally traditional appropriation of the essential attributes (omnipotence, wisdom and love) to the creative work of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit respectively.

In the Nicene Creed we confess our faith in “one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth”, “in one Lord, Jesus Christ . . .

through him all things were made”; and in the Holy Spirit “the Lord and giver of life” (DS 150). Christian faith speaks therefore, not only of creation *ex nihilo* , from nothing, which points to the omnipotence of God the Father, but also of creation done with intelligence, with the wisdom of God —the *Logos* through which all things were made (*Jn 1: 3*); and also of creation *ex amore* , done out of love (GS 19), the fruit of the freedom and love that is God himself, the Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son. In other words, the eternal processions of the three divine Persons are the foundation of their creative work. [3]

Just as there is no contradiction between the oneness of God and his being three Persons, so too there is no contradiction between the one creative principle and the different ways in which each of the Persons works.

“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.” (CCC, 290).

Strictly speaking only God can create, [4] which implies making things from nothing (*ex nihilo*) and not from something that pre-exists. For creation, an infinite active potency is required, which belongs to God alone (cf. CCC, 296-298). The appropriation of creative omnipotence to God the Father is therefore fitting, since in the Trinity (according to a classical expression) he is *fons et origo* , the

source and origin: that is, the Person from whom the other two proceed, the beginning without beginning.

Christian faith holds that the fundamental distinction in all that exists is the distinction between God and his creatures. This was a novelty in the early centuries, in which the polarity between matter and spirit gave rise to mutually irreconcilable views (materialism and spiritualism, dualism and monism). Christianity broke these molds, particularly with its affirmation that material things too (like spirit) are the creation of the one transcendent God. Later on, St. Thomas developed a metaphysics of creation that describes God as Subsistent Being (*Ipsum Esse Subsistens*). As the first cause, God is absolutely transcendent to the world. At the same time, by virtue of the participation in his being by creatures, he is intimately present in them, and they depend for

everything on him as the source of their being. God is *superior summo meo* and at the same time *intimior intimo meo* (higher than my highest and more inward than my innermost self) (St. Augustine, *Confessions* 3, 6, 11; cf. CCC, 300).

“Through him all things were made”

The Wisdom literature of 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” (CCC, 295), but it has an intelligibility that human reason, by participating in the divine Understanding, can grasp, though not without great effort, and only in a spirit of humility and respect towards the Creator and his work (cf. *Job* 42: 3; cf. CCC, 299). This development reaches its full expression in the New Testament. By

identifying the Son, Jesus Christ, with the Logos (cf. *Jn* 1: 1 ff.) it affirms that God's wisdom is a Person, the Incarnate Word, by whom all things were made (*Jn* 1: 3). St. Paul formulates this relationship of created things with Christ, by clarifying that all things were created in him, through him and for him (*Col* 1: 16-17).

Thus creative reason is at the origin of the cosmos (cf. CCC, 284). [5] Christianity from its very beginning has had great confidence in the capacity of human reason to know, and great certainty that reason (scientific, philosophical, etc.) can never reach conclusions that are contrary to the faith, since both proceed from the same origin.

It is not unusual to come across people who raise false antitheses, as for example between creation and evolution. In reality, a sound

epistemology not only distinguishes between the spheres proper to the natural sciences and faith respectively, but also acknowledges within philosophy a certain principle of mediation, since the sciences, with their own methods and objectives, do not cover the whole sphere of human reason; and faith, which refers to the same world as science, needs philosophical categories in order to formulate its meaning and enter into dialogue with human rationality. [6]

So it is natural that, from the beginning, the Church should have sought to dialogue with reason. Reason is aware of its created character, since it did not give existence to itself, nor does it govern its own future entirely. Reason is open to what transcends it, and in short, to the Reason that originated it. Paradoxically, reason that is closed in on itself, which thinks it can find within itself the answer to the

deepest questions, ends up in nihilism, irrationalism, etc., affirming the absurdity of existence, and failing to recognize the intelligibility of what is real.

“The Lord and giver of life”

“We believe that [the world] proceeds from God’s free will; he wanted to make 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 154: 9*).” (CCC, 295). As a consequence, “Because creation comes forth from God’s goodness, it shares in that goodness—‘and God saw that it was good . . . very good’ (*Gen 1: 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 31*)—for God willed creation as a gift” (CCC, 299).

These characteristics, goodness and free gift, enable us to discover in creation the action of the Holy Spirit,

“who hovered over the waters” (*Gen 1: 2*), the Person-Gift in the Trinity, subsistent Love between the Father and the Son. The Church confesses her faith in the creative work of the Holy Spirit, the giver of life and the source of all good. [7]

The Christian affirmation of God’s creative freedom enables us to overcome the limitations of other points of view that, placing a necessity upon God, end up maintaining fatalism or determinism. There is nothing “in” God or “outside” of God that obliges him to create. What then is the end that moves him? What is his purpose in creating us?

1.2 “The world was created for God’s glory” (First Vatican Council)

God created all things “not to increase his glory, but to show it forth and to communicate it” (St.

Bonaventure, *In II Sent.* I, 2, 2, 1). The first Vatican Council (1870) teaches that “This one, true God, of his own goodness and ‘almighty power,’ not for increasing his own beatitude, nor for attaining his perfection, but in order to manifest this perfection through the benefits which he bestows on creatures, with absolute freedom of counsel ‘and from the beginning of time, made out of nothing both orders of creatures, the spiritual and the corporeal’” (DS 3002; cf. CCC, 293).

“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’ (St

Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 4, 20, 7)" (CCC, 294).

Far from being the dialectic of contradictory principles (as occurs in Manichean dualism, and also in Hegel's monist idealism), affirming that God's glory is the purpose of creation does not imply any negation of man, but is, rather, an essential premise for his fulfillment. The roots of Christian optimism are to be found in the joint exaltation of God and of man; "man is great only if God is great." [8] Christian optimism and reason affirm the absolute priority of good, but without being blind to the presence of evil in the world and in history.

1.3 Conservation and Providence. Evil

Creation is not limited just to the beginning. "With creation, God does not abandon his creatures to themselves. He not only gives them

being and existence, but also, and at every moment, upholds and sustains them in being, enables them to act and brings them to their final end" (CCC, 301). Sacred Scripture compares God's action in history to the act of creation (cf. *Is 44: 24; 45: 8; 51: 13*). Wisdom literature further explains God's action which maintains his creatures in existence. "How would anything have endured if you had not willed it? Or how would anything not called forth by you have been preserved?" (*Wis 11: 25*). St. Paul goes further and attributes this conserving action to Christ: "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (*Col 1: 17*).

The God of Christianity is not a watchmaker or an architect, who once he has done his work, takes no more notice of it. Such images are those of a deist outlook, according to which God does not intervene in this

world. Thus they distort the notion of the true creator God, since they drastically separate creation from God's conservation and governance of the world. [9]

The notion of conservation acts as a bridge between the act of creation and God's governance of the world (providence). God not only creates the world and keeps it in existence, but he also "leads his creatures towards their ultimate end, to which he himself has called them" (*Compendium*, 55). Sacred Scripture shows us the absolute sovereignty of God, and constantly witnesses to his fatherly care, in the smallest things as well as in the great events of history (cf. CCC, 303). In this context, Jesus reveals himself as the "incarnate" providence of God, who as the Good Shepherd cares for the material and spiritual needs of mankind (*Jn* 10: 11, 14-15; *Mt* 14: 13-14, etc.), and he teaches us to

abandon ourselves to his care (*Mt* 6: 31-33).

If God creates, sustains and directs everything with goodness, where does evil come from? “To this question, as pressing as it is unavoidable and as painful as it is mysterious, no quick answer will suffice. Only Christian faith as a whole constitutes the answer to this question . . . There is not a single aspect of the Christian message that is not in part an answer to the question of evil” (CCC, 309).

Creation was not completed right from the beginning, but God created it “in a state of journeying” (*in statu viae*), that is, he directed it towards an ultimate goal which has yet to be attained. For the fulfillment of his designs, God makes use of the concurrence of his creatures, and he grants human beings a share in his providence, respecting their freedom

even when they do wrong (cf. CCC, 302, 307, 311). What is truly surprising is that God “in his almighty providence can bring a good from the consequences of an evil” (CCC, 312). It is a great and mysterious truth that “in everything God works for good with those who love him” (*Rom* 8: 28). [10]

The experience of evil seems to show a tension between God’s omnipotence and his goodness, in their action in history. The answer (mysterious in itself) to this apparent conflict, is the event of Christ’s Cross, which reveals God’s “way of being,” and is therefore a source of wisdom for mankind (the *sapientia crucis* , the wisdom of the Cross).

1.4 Creation and salvation

Creation is “the first step towards the Covenant of the one God with his people” (*Compendium*, 51). In the Bible creation is open to the saving

action of God in history, which reaches its fullness in the paschal mystery of Christ, and which will reach its final perfection at the end of time. Creation came about with a view to the Sabbath, the seventh day on which the Lord rested, a day which completes the first creation and opens up to the eighth day when a still more marvelous work begins: the Redemption, the new creation in Christ (cf. *2 Cor* 5: 7; CCC, 345-349).

Thus we are shown the continuity and unity of God's plan for creation and redemption. There is no hiatus, but rather a link, between them, since man's sin did not totally corrupt God's work. The relationship between the two—creation and salvation—can be expressed by saying that, on one hand, creation is the first event of salvation; and on the other hand, redemptive salvation has the characteristics of a new creation. This relationship throws

light on certain important aspects of the Christian faith, such as the ordering of nature to grace or the existence of a single supernatural end of man.

2. CREATED REALITY

The effect of God's creative action is the whole created world, the "heavens and earth" (*Gen 1: 1*). God is "the Creator of all things, visible and invisible, spiritual and corporeal; who by his omnipotent power at the beginning of time created from nothing each and every creature, spiritual and corporeal, that is to say the angelic and material world; and afterwards human beings, composed of spirit and of body." [11]

Christianity overcomes both monism (which holds that matter and spirit are one, that the reality of God and the world are identical), and dualism (according to which matter and spirit

are primordially equal opposing principles).

The act of creation pertains to God's eternity, but the effect of this action is marked by temporality. Revelation states that the world was created with a temporal beginning, [12] that is to say, the world was created together with time, which fully accords with God's intention to reveal himself in the history of salvation.

2.1 The spiritual world: angels

“The existence of spiritual, non-corporeal beings that Sacred Scripture usually calls ‘angels’ is a truth of faith. The witness of Scripture is as clear as the unanimity of Tradition” (CCC, 328). Both show them in their double function of giving praise to God and being messengers of his saving plan. The New Testament presents the angels in relation to Christ: created through

him and for him (cf. *Col 1: 16*), they surround Christ's life from his birth to his Ascension, being the announcers of his second glorious coming (cf. CCC, 333).

In the same way they are present from the beginning of the life of the Church, which benefits from their powerful help, and in her liturgy she unites herself to them in adoring God. From birth each human being is accompanied by an angel, who protects us and leads us to Life (cf. CCC, 334-336).

Theologians (especially St. Thomas Aquinas, the “Angelic Doctor”) and the magisterium of the Church have delved deeply into the nature of these purely spiritual beings, endowed with intellect and will, and have affirmed that they are personal, immortal creatures, who surpass in perfection all visible creatures (cf. CCC, 330).

The angels were created in a state of trial. Some rebelled irrevocably against God. Having fallen into sin, Satan and the other devils—who had been created good, but became evil by their own doing—tempted our first parents to sin (cf. CCC, 391-395).

2.2 The material world

God “created the visible world in all its richness, diversity and order. Scripture presents the work of the Creator symbolically as a succession of six days of ‘divine work,’ concluded by the ‘rest’ on the seventh day (*Gen 1: 1-2, 4*)” (CCC, 337). “On many occasions the Church has had to defend the goodness of creation, including that of the physical world (cf. DS 286; 455-463; 800; 1333; 3002)” (CCC, 299).

“By the very nature of creation, material being is endowed with its own stability, truth and excellence, its own order and laws” (GS 36, 2).

The truth and goodness of created beings proceed from the one Creator God who is at the same time Three. Thus, the created world is a true reflection of the activity of the divine Persons: “In all creatures there is a representation of the Trinity by way of vestige”. [13]

The cosmos has beauty and dignity insofar as it the work of God. There is a solidarity and hierarchy between beings, which should lead us to a contemplative attitude of respect towards creatures and the natural laws that govern them (cf. CCC 339, 340, 342, 354). The cosmos was created for man, who received from God the command to have dominion over the earth (cf. *Gen 1: 28*). This command is not an invitation to a despotic exploitation of nature, but to participation in God’s creative power: by their work, human beings collaborate in the perfecting of creation.

Christians share the just demands raised by ecological sensitivity in the past decades, without falling into a vague divinization of the world, and affirm the superiority of man over all other creatures as the “summit of the Creator’s work” (CCC, 343).

2.3 Man

Human beings enjoy a particular position in the creative work of God, since we participate at the same time in material and spiritual reality. Scripture says that God created mankind alone “in our image and likeness” (*Gen 1: 26*). Human beings were placed by God at the head of visible creation, and we enjoy a special dignity, since “of all visible creatures only man is ‘able to know and love his creator.’ ‘He is the only creature on earth that God has willed for its own sake’ and he alone is called to share, by knowledge and love, in God’s own life. It was for this

end that he was created, and this is the fundamental reason for his dignity" (CCC, 356; cf. 1701-1703).

Men and women, in their diversity and their complementarity, both willed by God, possess equal dignity as persons (cf. CCC, 357, 369, 372). In both there is a substantial unity of body and soul, which is the form of the body. Since it is spiritual, the human soul is created immediately by God (it is not produced by the parents, nor does it pre-exist), and it is immortal (cf. CCC, 366). Both points (spirituality and immortality) can be demonstrated philosophically.

Therefore it is reductionism to affirm that human beings proceed exclusively from biological evolution (absolute evolutionism). In reality there are ontological gaps that cannot be explained by evolution.

The moral awareness and freedom of human beings, for example, show forth their superiority over the

material world, and are a sign of their special dignity.

The truth of creation helps us to overcome both the negation of freedom (determinism) and the contrary extreme of an undue exaltation of freedom. Human freedom is created, not absolute, and it exists in mutual dependence on truth and goodness. The dream of freedom as pure power and arbitrariness proceeds from a deformed image not only of man but also of God.

By their activity and work, human beings participate in the creative power of God. [14] Moreover, their intellect and will are a participation, a spark, of God's wisdom and love. While the rest of the visible world is a simple vestige of the Trinity, human beings are a true *imago Trinitatis*, image of the Trinity .

3. SOME PRACTICAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE TRUTH ABOUT CREATION

The radicalness of God's creative and saving action demands from man a response that has the same characteristic of totality: "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might" (*Deut* 6: 5; *Mt* 22: 37; *Mk* 12: 30; *Lk* 10: 27). It is in our response to God that we find true happiness; that is the only thing that makes our freedom complete.

God creates and saves the whole man and all men. Responding to God's call and loving him with our whole being is intrinsically united to bringing his love to the whole world. [15]

Our knowledge and wonder at God's power, wisdom and love lead us to an attitude of reverence, adoration and humility, and to live in God's presence, knowing that we are each

a child of God. At the same time, faith in providence leads Christians to an attitude of filial trust in God in all circumstances: with gratitude for the benefits we have received, and with simplicity and abandonment to God in circumstances that may appear bad, since God brings greater good out of evil.

Aware that everything has been created for the glory of God, Christians try in all our actions to seek the true end that fills our lives with happiness: the glory of God, and not our own vainglory. We struggle to rectify our intention in our actions, so that we can say that the only purpose of our lives is this: *Deo omnis gloria* , all the glory to God!

[16]

God has chosen to place human beings at the forefront of his creation, conferring on them dominion over the world, so that we

may perfect it with our work. Human activity, therefore, can be considered as a participation in God's work of creation.

The greatness and beauty of creatures stirs up in us a sense of wonder and awakens questions about the origin and destiny of the world and of mankind, helping us glimpse the reality of our Creator. Christians' dialogue with non-believers can evoke such questions, helping people to open their minds and hearts to the light of the Creator. Moreover, in conversations with believers of other faiths, an excellent starting-point is the truth of creation, since it is a truth that can be partly shared and underlies some fundamental moral values regarding the dignity of the human person.

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Recommended Reading

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Footnotes:

[1] Cf., among others, Benedict XVI, Speech to the members of the Roman Curia, 22 December 2005; “Faith, Reason and University” (Speech at Regensburg), 12 November 2006; Angelus, 28 January 2007.

[2] Cf. St. Thomas, *De Potentia*, q.3, a. 3, co.: the *Catechism* follows the same division.

[3] Cf. St. Thomas, *Super Sent.*, lib. 1, d. 14, q. 1, a. 1, co.: “they are the cause and the reason for the procession of creatures.”

[4] This why we say God does not need instruments in order to create, since no instrument has the infinite potency needed in order to create. Hence when we speak, for example, of a human being as creative, and even as capable of sharing in God’s creative power, the use of the adjective ‘creative’ is not analogous, but metaphorical.

[5] This point appears frequently in the teaching of Benedict XVI, e.g. Homily in Regensburg, 12 November, 2006; Speech in Verona, 19 October, 2006; Meeting with the clergy of the diocese of Rome, 22 February, 2007, etc.

[6] Both scientific rationalism and anti-scientific fideism need to be corrected by philosophy. At the same

time it is also necessary to avoid the false apologetics of those who seek forced agreements, seeing in the facts presented by science an empirical verification or demonstration of the truths of faith, when in reality, as we have said, they are facts that belong to different methods and disciplines.

[7] Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 18 May, 1986, no. 10

[8] Benedict XVI, Homily , 15 August, 2005.

[9] Deism implies an error in the metaphysical notion of creation, since creation as the giving of being involves an ontological dependence on the part of the creature, which is inseparable from its continuation in time. Both constitute a single act, even though we can distinguish between them conceptually. “The conservation of things by God does

not occur by a new act, but by the continuation of the act that gives being, which is certainly an action without any motion and without time" (St. Thomas, I, q. 104, a. 1, ad 3).

[10] Continuing the experience of many saints in the history of the Church, this expression of St Paul's was often on the lips of St. Josemaria Escriva, who lived and encouraged others to live in joyful acceptance of God's will (cf. Josemaria Escriva, *Furrow*, 127; *The Way of the Cross*, IX, 4; *Friends of God*, 119). The last book by John Paul II, *Memory and Identity*, contains a deep reflection on the action of God's providence in the history of mankind, in accordance with St. Paul's assertion: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (*Rom* 12: 21).

[11] Lateran Council IV (1215), DS 800.

[12] This is taught by the Fourth Lateran Council and, referring to the earlier council, by Vatican Council I (cf. respectively DS 800 and 3002). This is a revealed truth that cannot be demonstrated by reason, as St. Thomas taught in the famous medieval dispute about the eternity of the world: cf. *Contra Gentiles*, lib. 2, ch. 31-38; and his philosophical work *De aeternitate mundi*. [13] St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1, q. 45, a. 7, co.; cf. CCC, 237.

[14] Cf. Josemaria Escriva, *Friends of God*, 57.

[15] The fact that apostolate is the overflow of the interior life (cf. Josemaria Escriva, *The Way*, 961), is the correlation of the dynamic of God's action within his own being and on other beings, that is to say, of the intensity of the Trinitarian being, wisdom and love which overflows into creatures.

[16] Cf. Josemaria Escriva, *The Way*, 780; *Furrow*, 647; *The Forge*, 611, 639, 1051.

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