Are We at Home in the Cosmos?

A Franciscan Perspective

Ilia Delio, O.S.F.

The author combines Franciscan spirituality and theological acumen in drawing us into a Christian ecological vision of creation as revelatory of the presence of God. Such a vision can lead to an examination of our relationship with the world in which we live, and move us from an “I-it” to an “I-Thou” relationship with the creation entrusted to our care.

There is an age-old saying that captures the sacredness of place where lies our deepest sense of peace and comfort, of all that we are and strive to be, where memories are drawn and dreams unfold. “Home is where the heart is,” not only speaks to every weary traveler who arrives safely home after a long trip but to anyone who searches for that place in the world where one can truly be oneself. The Franciscan theologian, Bonaventure, captured this idea in his own way when he wrote: “You truly exist where you love not merely where you live.” In other words, you truly are yourself and the fullness of all you can be where you love, and where you love is truly where you live. If loving and living are so united, we may question whether or not we truly love where we live. For we live in creation, in the natural world of created things. Scientists today tell us that creation is our “home,” that we are biologically related to other living forms of life and that, on a broader level, we are joined to the cosmos “at the hip.” But do we love our “home”?

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The diagnosis today on environmental disturbances reveals a critical situation. Scientists indicate that changes in global climactic systems and collapsing global biological diversity pose fundamental threats to the very future of human society. We are on the brink of humanitarian and ecological catastrophes, and the risks they pose are not arrayed equitably. The life of the poor is imperiled disproportionately. In a world where forty percent of the people live on two dollars per day and social development is stalling or backsliding, environmental disruption looms ominously (Warner, 55). In 1990, a group of distinguished scientists, including the late Carl Sagan and physicist Freeman Dyson, wrote a letter appealing to the world's spiritual leaders to join the scientific community in protecting and conserving an endangered global ecosystem. “We are close,” they wrote, “to committing what in religious language is sometimes called crimes against creation” (Toolan, 9–10). That the scientists appealed to the religious community is not surprising. Lynn White, in his controversial article, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” claimed that the source of environmental problems is religious in nature. Christianity, he indicated, with its emphasis on human salvation and dominion over nature, “made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects” (White, 1205). Although White’s argument has raised questions among scholars, his thesis highlights the need for religion to heal the wounds of Mother Earth. “Since the roots of our trouble are largely religious,” he claimed, “the remedy must also be essentially religious. We must rethink and re-feel our nature and our destiny” (White, 1207).

It is in light of the need for religion to bind up the wounds of the earth that the Franciscan tradition has a prominent role to play. As a tradition rooted in the Incarnation, it takes seriously the whole of creation, including the natural world, in the search for God. The basis for a Franciscan ecology is found in the life of Francis and expounded in the theology of Bonaventure. To understand Bonaventure’s contribution to a Franciscan theology of creation, therefore, we must first look to the life of Francis, especially as Bonaventure reflected on that life. The insights of both Francis and Bonaventure can help us in our desire to restore health to the earth and join with it on the journey to God.

Francis of Assisi and the Family of Creation

Religion by definition means to “bind back” [re-ligare] to the ultimate source, to be “reconnected” so as to be made whole. Francis of Assisi was a religious person in the truest sense of the word. His search for meaning and identity led him to the God of compassionate love whom he encountered in the person of Jesus Christ. Bonaventure wrote that while at prayer one day, Christ Jesus appeared to Francis “as fastened to a cross. His soul melted at the sight, and the memory of Christ’s passion was impressed on the innermost recesses of his
heart. From that hour, whenever Christ’s crucifixion came to his mind, he could scarcely contain his tears and sighs” (Bonaventure 2000, 534). This feeling of compassion for the Crucified led Francis to share his clothes with the poor and to serve among the lepers whom he formally despised. Bonaventure captured what became central to Francis, namely, the power of love. Love opened up for Francis the mystery at the heart of everything and allowed his heart to touch the pulse of life. As Francis grew in love in and through Christ, his eyes opened up to the truth of God in creation. He came to realize that the Incarnation sanctifies all of creation; thus he came to feel for the things of creation.

Francis’s feeling for creation was at the same time a growth in connectedness to creation. In his Major Legend of Saint Francis, Bonaventure described Francis’s relationship with Christ as one of deepening piety. The word piety (pietas) means “blood-related” or “family-related.” It can be defined as an attitude of respect toward those to whom one is bound by ties of religion, consanguinity; of relationships between human beings. Bonaventure highlights the idea that through his relationship with Christ, Francis came to realize his “family” relatedness to everything, including the tiny creatures of creation. Francis’s piety was the fruit of his ongoing conversion. Growing in union with Christ through the Spirit gave Francis a new relationship to a new nature, one in which grace and innocence prevailed, not sin and conflict. His piety was the source of his reverence for animals and he recognized them as fellow creatures and signs of Christ. As Thomas of Celano wrote: “He calls all animals by a fraternal name, although, among all kinds of beasts, he especially loves the meek” (354).

Bonaventure claims that everything in creation “spoke” to Francis of God. He came to “see” God’s goodness in every aspect of creation, so that everything ultimately led him to Christ, the Word of God. In Bonaventure’s view, Francis came to “see” God in creation because he contemplated God in the things of creation. Contemplation is a penetrating gaze that gets to the truth of reality. Bonaventure describes the contemplative vision of Francis as “contuition,” that is, seeing things for what they truly are in God. In Major Legend of Francis he wrote: “In beautiful things he contuited Beauty itself and through the footprints impressed in things he followed his Beloved everywhere, out of them making for himself a ladder through which he could climb up and lay hold of him who is utterly desirable” (596–97). These footprints of God impressed on the things of creation enabled Francis to find God wherever he went in the world, and finding God in the things of creation led him to embrace Jesus Christ, for Christ is the Word of God made visible in the world.

Are We at Home in the Cosmos?

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Bonaventure described Francis’s world as one imbued by the goodness of God so that he was “aroused by everything to divine love.” Duns Scotus later formulated a doctrine of individuation known as *haecceitas* which captured Francis’s attentiveness to the details of nature. The notion of *haecceitas* points to individuality at the core of each thing—it’s very being (Delio, 37). It refers to that positive dimension of every concrete and contingent being which identifies it and makes it worthy of attention. *Haecceitas* makes a singular what it is and sets it off from other things like it to which it might be compared. It can only be known by direct acquaintance, not from any consideration of common nature. What Scotus indicated, in light of Francis, is that things are God-like in their specificity. Thus, regular, daily attention to the wider world of creatures/nature is fundamental to realizing that the world is charged with the grandeur of God.

Francis’s life shows us that feeling connected to creation is brought about through a fundamental change in values. Only when we come to realize that the center of our lives, the divine mystery of love, is the center of creation can we begin to relate to the things of nature as brother and sister, joining with them on the journey into God.

*Bonaventure and the Book of Creation*

While Francis lived in creation as brother, Bonaventure reflected on the life of Francis and highlighted the role of the human person in creation. Bonaventure’s theology of creation takes as its starting point the Trinity of love. He described creation like a river that flows from a spring, spreading throughout the land, and eventually flowing back to its point of origin. Thus he indicated the deep, intimate relationship between creation and the Trinity. He described created reality as sharing in the mystery of the generation of the Word from the Father. Creation is a limited expression of the infinite and dynamic love between the Father and the Son. To say that creation flows out of the infinite fountain of divine love is to say that God is creative and loving. As a work of art, creation is intended to manifest the glory of the Artist-Creator. In order for divine glory to be consciously expressed, God creates human beings who are capable of participating in and manifesting that glory. Thus, God freely creates a glorious universe and calls forth within this universe human persons who are endowed with the freedom to participate in this divine artistic splendor.

Bonaventure used two images to describe creation in its natural beauty: mirror and book. As a mirror, creation reflects the power, wisdom, and goodness of God. We can compare the manifold beauty of creation to the stain-glassed windows of a great cathedral. Just as light strikes the various panes of glass and diffracts into an array of colors, so too the divine light emanates through the Word and diffracts in the universe, producing a myriad of colors in a myriad of
things, all reflecting the divine light in some way. Bonaventure also described the created world as a book in which its Maker, the Trinity, shines forth and is represented at three levels of expression: a vestige, an image, and a likeness (Delio, 29). The difference in these levels of expression reflects the degree of similarity between the creature and Creator, the copy and the model. The vestige is the most distant reflection of God and is found in all creatures. That is, every grain of sand, every star, every earthworm, reflects the Trinity as its origin (efficient cause), its reason of existence (formal cause) and the end to which it is destined (final cause). The image, however, is only found in intellectual (human) beings, indicating that the human person is an apt receptacle for the divine. Those humans conformed to God by grace, according to Bonaventure, are similitudes, since, through grace, they bear a likeness to God. The universe, therefore, appears as a book representing and describing its Maker. Every creature is an aspect of God's self-expression in the world, and since every creature has its foundation in the Word, each is equally close to God (although the mode of relationship differs). Since the Word of God is expressed in the manifold variety of creation, Bonaventure views the world as sacramental. It is a symbolic world, full of signs of God's presence. The world is created as a means of God's self-revelation so that, like a mirror or footprint, it might lead us to love and praise the Creator. It is meant to lead humans to what it signifies, namely, the infinite Trinity of dynamic, eternal, and self-diffusive love.

**Incarnation and Creation**

While Bonaventure's theology of creation reflects harmony and order, it is a harmony that finds its center in the person of Jesus Christ. For Bonaventure, as for Scotus, creation is intended for Christ because Christ is the beloved Word of the Father. Whether or not sin ever existed, Scotus claimed, Christ would have come. Both Bonaventure and Scotus held that Christ is first in God's intention to love; the whole creation is made for Christ. Everything is patterned on the Word of God and, we might say, is a “little word” of God. Creation, therefore, is not mere physical matter; rather, it expresses God's infinite love. God “speaks” the depths of his heart in the rich diversity of creation. Because creation reveals the glory of God, in the same way that Jesus Christ reveals the Father, creation is sacred. It is a holy earth that speaks to us of the holy love of God. But how do we come to know the sacredness or holiness of this creation? How do we come to feel this God-filled center of creation? Bonaventure’s insight to the mystery of Christ as the center of the human soul and center of creation can help us here. Essentially, he claimed, the more deeply we come to know Christ at the center of our personal lives, the more deeply we come to know Christ at the heart of creation. Prayer helps us realize that Christ is the one
through whom we and all creation are made and in whom we will find our completion. In Christ we realize the fullest possible life in God, which includes all of creation.

In view of Francis's life, Bonaventure claimed that humans are not created to stand in a position of superiority or domination over nature but in a central position of mediation, joining together the physical/material world of creation and the spiritual love of God. The whole material world cries out for perfection, he wrote, but is unable to attain it on its own. The human person, therefore, stands in the center as one who is capax Dei (i.e., has a capacity for God) and who can lead non-human creation toward its God-intended fulfillment through relationships of harmony and goodness. To stand in creation in openness to God requires an ability to relate to others outside ourselves as essential to ourselves. We must see beyond the mere surface of things. Prayer is that life-giving relationship with God that opens our eyes to the truth of the world around us. Contemplation enables us to see into the depths of things or rather to see things as they are in relationship to God. To see things in their individual creation is to realize that each aspect of creation is uniquely loved into being by a God of infinite love. Only in this way do we recognize that each aspect of creation is where we encounter God and the truth of ourselves in God.

While relationship, according to Bonaventure, is the key to life in God, we can resist or desist from relations by choice and thus diminish the fruitfulness of creation by stripping it of its goodness. Sin is the refusal to participate in creation's web of life. It describes the personal history of one who was created for communion and refuses it (Kopas 1994, 178). It is the rejection of our identity as part of an interdependent world in which God's power as creative source expresses itself through shared power with other creatures. To sin is to reject responsibility for those to whom we are connected by refusing to accept the “other” (the “Thou”) as the one who addresses us, discloses our responsibility and calls us into question. Sin, therefore, bears its consequences in a broken human community and in abandonment of the natural world. The desire to overcome sin is the desire to overcome all obstacles that stand in the way of the accomplishment of God's creative aim, which is the fullest possible sharing of life and love between God and creation. There can be no real healing of the earth unless we humans are on the way toward healing and wholeness. Personal re-creation is the basis of cosmic re-creation. A spirituality that includes mercy, forgiveness, reconciliation and peace is one that can nurture a new creation both on the

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human and cosmic level. Only life-giving relationships that reflect a God of generous love can heal the earth of its wounds.

Challenges Today

While the emphasis of Francis and Bonaventure on the holiness of creation is inspiring, the sacramental world of the medievals has yielded to drastic Baconian measures of modernity giving rise to a radical desacralizing of nature. This desacralization has, in turn, permitted us to treat the earth as an instrument of good rather than a value in itself. We have lost vision of the inherent goodness of creation and its sacramental character. This loss, I would argue, results from estrangement in two principal areas: a crisis of feeling and a loss of connectedness. It is not that we no longer think of the sacredness of creation, but rather that we no longer feel its sacredness. Contemporary culture thrives on apathy and indifference. What happens to the earth affects us neither one way nor the other, unless it affects us personally. This estrangement of feeling may correspond to the larger cultural spiritual crisis of alienation. A sense of loneliness, isolation and disconnectedness mark contemporary western culture with its penchant for materialism and technological devices. The crisis of feeling and (dis)connectedness that underlie the environmental crisis today may indeed be religious in nature because it is a loss of a fundamental “I-Thou” relationship that affects the heart of creation.

To live as an “I” in relation to a “Thou” is to dwell in mystery and it is no secret that the depth of the Christian vocation depends on mystery. It depends on our relationship to God in and through Christ and our ability to dwell in the mystery of Christ, as we encounter that mystery in our lives and in our world. This “I-Thou” relationship was key to Francis’s fraternal life which included his sense of creation as family. The problem today, however, is that we no longer know how to dwell in mystery. Modern technology, Richard Gaillardetz writes, has reshaped our daily existence in ways that can make it difficult to experience the grace of God in our lives (11). The loss of “feeling” at the heart of creation is a loss of mystery at the heart of creation. Because we are no longer grasped by mystery we no longer relate to anything outside ourselves as essential to our selves.

Christian responsibility for the natural world demands that we think of the earth, and the entire cosmos for that matter, as our home. We must shift from technological “I-it” thinking to ecological “I-Thou” thinking, from device and control mechanisms to constructing nature as an active partner in the pursuit of God. If Francis learned to feel solidarity with creation through a deep, prayerful relationship with Christ, what do we need to feel part of the whole? How can we regain a sense of mystery in our lives where we can recognize creation as a manifestation of God’s gracious goodness, where the inherent dignity of each living
being is recognized and valued as expressing the infinite love of God? We need, as Gaillardetz points out, a new asceticism to accompany an ecological spirituality that incorporates the web of life in religious expression. On a practical note, we need to make choices that include the environment, when choices are presented to us.

A Christian ecological vision requires a feeling of belonging to nature here and now. Only if we spend time with nature will we be impelled to act on behalf of nature. We must learn to contemplate God in creation and not apart from it, which means seeing things in their individual creation, each uniquely loved into being by a God of infinite love. But this type of penetrating vision requires time to deepen. A technological mindset cannot comprehend that “dead time” of which modern technology tries to rid us is often the arena of grace. In her Madeleva Lecture, Kathleen Norris observed that “it always seems that just when daily life seems most unbearable . . . that what had seemed ‘dead time’ was actually a period of gestation” (Norris 1998, 10). In our feverish obsession to fill our lives with more things that give us what we want, instantly, without effort or engagement, do we cut ourselves off from the graced dimension of ordinary life?

The pursuit of the mystical involves attentiveness to ordinary things as mediations of grace and occasions of divine blessings. We need focal practices and communal gatherings and celebrations that disengage us from the artificial environments we immerse ourselves in and direct us to the goodness and beauty of creation. A disengagement from the world of artificial devices and engagement with the embodied world of God’s presence demands a conscious decision to waste time among the ordinary and mundane. Francis’s biographers indicate that he spent time in solitary places, in mountains and caves, and wandered amidst the flowers and the fields. The modern day promise of immediacy, expediency and enjoyment lures us away from attentiveness, fidelity, perseverance and the ability to spend time in the simplicity of nature. We may no longer feel the world as God’s good creation because we have lost the ability to love the simple and the ordinary.

Bonaventure indicates that love is the reason for creation and the bond of unity in creation. The one who, like Francis, lives “in Christ” learns to love like Christ and, thus, becomes an indispensable member of a living Body which includes the simplest creatures of creation as brothers and sisters. Only when we choose to live in God through love do we begin to feel the things of this earth as God’s embodied love, and thus do we realize our responsibility for creation—bringing it with us on our journey into God. Bonaventure emphasized that fulfillment of the universe lies in the mystery of the human person through the power of love, and he calls us to contemplate the goodness of God in creation. To see and to love must lead to solidarity with all creation; to recognize the primordial mystery of love as the source of all life. Only in this way can we realize that the justice and peace we long for must be a justice and peace of the earth which in turn means right, loving relations with the natural world of God’s good creation.

ILIA DELIO, O.S.F.
Francis became a brother in creation through the love of the crucified and glorified Christ. Through his relationship with Christ he came to realize that the earth will not be annihilated or destroyed but together with humanity will be transformed in the love of God. This indeed is the hope of the journey into God as it embraces the whole of creation. But lest we fail to perceive our vocation, we bear the revolt that awaits us. I conclude with the words of Bonaventure:

Therefore any person who is not illumined by such great splendor in created things is blind. Anyone who is not awakened by such great outcries is deaf. Anyone who is not led by such effects to give praise to God is mute. Anyone who does not turn to the First Principle as a result of such signs is a fool. Therefore open your eyes; alert your spiritual ears; unlock your lips, and apply your heart so that in all creatures you may see, hear, praise, love, and adore, magnify, and honor your God lest the entire world rise up against you (Bonaventure 2002, 61).

References


