



# Catholic Ecological Integrity: Sacramental, Evangelical, Eucharistic

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## SACRAMENTAL

Beginning the new year, we pause to reflect on the nexus between two significant teachings from our Holy Father Francis — his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (November 24, 2013) and his Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si' — On Care for Our Common Home* (May 24, 2015). In both documents, he exposes the Catholic tenets of “Sacrament” and life in a “sacramental universe.” Just as a classic work of art bears the mark of the artist, so too, the entire cosmos is revelatory of God. All of God’s creation — including but also beyond humankind — opens material reality as a kind of conduit of Divine Grace, a source of deep joy of Christians in Christ Jesus (Rom. 1:19-20). I suggest that it is through the taste of God’s grandeur in creation that we begin to appreciate the “Real Presence” of Christ in the Eucharist, “the source and summit of the Christian life” (*Lumen Gentium*, § 11), and that joy motivates us to live and share the “Good News.”

Indeed, as St. Bonaventure held, the entire world was transformed at the moment of the Incarnation. When the Divine became part of the material world: “All things are said to be transformed in the transfiguration of Christ. For as a human being, Christ has something in common with all creatures. With the stone he shares existence; with plants he shares life; with animals he shares sensation; and with the angels he shares intelligence. Therefore, all things are said to be transformed in Christ since — in his human nature — he embraces something of every creature.”<sup>1</sup>

## EVANGELICAL

The early Christological creation hymn in Col. 1:15-20, states that Christ is God's preeminent and supreme agent in creation. This hymn reflects Gen. 1 and Prov. 8, and it challenges us to see Christ's joy in creating and longing to become human and to express tangibly God's unconditional love for all humans and other-kinds in creation. <sup>2</sup> Australian theologian Denis Edwards explains:

“Here the cosmic Christ is celebrated as both the source of creation and its goal: all things have been created in Christ and all things are reconciled in him. The words ‘all things’ are repeated like a refrain. All things are created in Christ, who is the image (icon) of the invisible God. As in the wisdom literature Sophia is with God in creation and continually sustains all things, so in Colossians the risen Christ is the one in whom all things are created and in whom all things hold together. The Colossians hymn goes further, asserting that in Christ and Christ's cross, God has reconciled all things to God's self. Everything in creation is created in Christ, sustained in him, and reconciled in him.” <sup>3</sup>

In *Colossians*, Christ's death and resurrection are understood as the beginning of the transformation of the whole of creation. This is possible because of “the primacy of Christ” — the belief or faith claim that insists on the absolute priority of God's will and grace and the secondary role of human sin.

In the *Prologue of the Gospel of John*, 1:1-14, St. Bonaventure saw not only the central belief of Christianity, but also the unity of the doctrines of creation and redemption. Notably, St. John uses the Greek *sarx*, (“flesh”) to indicate that in the Incarnation, Christ became one with us and the material universe that God created and sustains in love. Here we also see the similarity in language to the text of *Genesis 1*, affirming God's eternal love and life-affirming presence.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis builds on the profound reality and power born forth by God's manifestations of love and earthly presence. Citing St. John XXIII, Pope Francis challenges the People of God to both reject prophets of doom and distinguish between the substance of the faith and the form in which it is spread (EG §§ 84,41). The whole People of God is formed through pastoral sensitivity and meditation on Christians becoming a people (EG §§ 268-74). To that end, Pope Francis challenges the People of God to overcome our divisions concerning *how* to pursue the common good and peace in society, by following four axioms (EG §§ 217-237): Time (walking together in hope) is greater than space; Unity (solidarity) prevails over conflict; Realities (especially the principle of incarnation) are more important than ideas; and The Whole (community) is greater than the parts.

Gospel proclamation is not solely anthropocentric; indeed, it requires bringing “Good News” to all of creation (Is. 49:13; Mk. 16:15; Rom. 8:19; and EG §4, 181, 215, 257, 274)! Citing St. Paul VI, *Populorum Progresio*, §14, Francis asserts that the Gospel requires care for all people and the whole person. The universal destination of the goods of the earth is egregiously violated when the very capacity for people burdened by poverty to have access

to those goods that constitute the very necessities of life is nonexistent. Frequently, it is those same economic systems that disenfranchise people who are poor that also wreak utter ruin of the earth's clean air and potable water, fertile soil, robbing plants and animals of their restorative vitality (EG § 215). It is primarily the poorest of the poor whose very life is grievously threatened by unfettered global warming and our current climate emergency.

## **EUCCHARISTIC**

As Catholics participate in a eucharistic revival amid a climate emergency, the Sacraments elicit our awareness of our dependence on “our Sister, Mother Earth” and awe at God’s offer of unfailing love of us and all creatures. Pope Francis recalls how: “The universe unfolds in God who fills it completely. Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person’s face. The ideal is not only to pass from the exterior to the interior to discover the action of God in the soul, but also to discover God in all things” (LS §233). The awe of Eucharistic devotion needs to move us to participate in Jesus’ self-sacrificing love (*Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy*, §19 and LS §236).

The Eucharist is God’s act of “cosmic love” that joins heaven and earth. It embraces all of creation (LS §236). That interchange requires our movement from contemplation to action in our role as caretakers of God’s creation (Gen. 1:26-28). Yet, the raw material of the Earth is also an occasion for sin when we reduce Earth’s elements to profit-making commodities, depleting them, denying them to people who are poor, engaging in conflicts or creating unjust systems. Creation has been compromised, impaired by human selfishness and killing. Evidence of our personal Eucharistic revival needs to shine forth in the ways we make Christ’s presence concrete in care for our Sister, Mother Earth, and all sisters and brothers — human and other kinds.

<sup>1</sup> Bonaventure, Sermon I, Dom II, in Quad. IX, 215–19, in Zachary Hayes, “Christ, Word of God and Exemplar of Humanity,” *The Cord* 46 (1996): 13.

<sup>2</sup> Robert J. Karris, “Colossians 1:15-20—Jesus Christ as Cosmic Lord and Peacemaker,” in *Franciscan Theology of the Environment*, in Dawn M. Nothwehr, OSF (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 2002), 86.

<sup>3</sup> Denis Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 56.