



Loss of Creation and its Recovery Through Aquinas and Bonaventure

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Introduction

Environmental questions have an unprecedented topicality in the Catholic Church today. With the release of Pope Francis' new encyclical, *Laudato Si'* the first encyclical in the history of the Church on environmental issues, the global community was made aware of the priority of the environment in the mind of the Church.¹ And Pope Francis is following in the line of the Popes before him, especially Saint John Paul II and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI (sometimes called the "Green Pope"), who commented extensively on environmental concerns and placed the protection of creation at the heart of the Church's work in the modern world.

Why has the leadership of the Catholic Church taken such an interest in these issues, and what is at stake? Certainly the Church is concerned about the impacts of environmental degradation on the poor and most vulnerable in society. Indeed, Pope Francis expresses this concern throughout *Laudato Si'* as he connects "the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor."² There is also the pressing demand to live into the Christian call and responsibility to be stewards of creation.³ This demand is perhaps intensified by the need to articulate a response to certain secular critiques, such as that famously put forth by Lynn White in his 1967 *Science* article, which hold Christians responsible for the ecological crisis because of the Biblical mandate in Genesis to "subdue and dominate" the earth.⁴ Yet underlying all of this is a deeper philosophical-theological question or crisis in relation to the metaphysical notion of creation itself, of which the current eco-

¹ Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si': On Care for our Common Home* (May 24, 2015).

² *Ibid.*, §49.

³ *Laudato Si'* §20-61.

⁴ Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 10 (1967), pp. 1203-07.

logical situation is but a symptom. In the spirit of Pope Francis, this article seeks to get to the “human roots of the ecological crisis”⁵ by tracing it back to its roots in the Enlightenment. The article then proposes “antidotes” to the crisis from the Catholic intellectual tradition, drawing upon the complementary wisdom of Saints Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure of Bagnoregio. We argue that the true nature of creation has been progressively obscured since the Enlightenment, and that the two medieval masters provide the metaphysical foundations needed to recover creation today. Rediscovering this deeper understanding of creation is necessary to effectively diagnose and counter the attitudes and causes underlying the contemporary environmental crisis.

I. The Concealment of Creation

In his book, *‘In the Beginning:’ A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall*, a collection of Lenten homilies given while he was a bishop in Germany, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger spoke about what he called the contemporary “concealment” of creation.⁶ What is behind these forms of concealment, he proposed, is the Gnostic model of approaching the world which became prevalent among certain Enlightenment thinkers such as Bruno. The Gnostic model is grounded in a lack of trust and strives for control of the world through knowledge and power. Love is rejected because it is an insecure foundation and implies dependence. In the name of human freedom the doctrine of creation must be set aside as the model of mastery of nature takes its place, and this involves a reduction of nature to that which is quantifiable and can be controlled.⁷

Francis Bacon also contributed to this concealment of creation. For Bacon, knowledge is power, i.e., knowledge depends upon power, namely deliberate experiments and the capacity to break nature down into component parts, as well as knowing the efficient causes of things which allows that effect to be produced at will. It was Bacon who first suggested the need to test and constrain nature in order to derive secrets to help mankind. This notion was celebrated by Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason* as a definitive triumph over the ancient philosophy of nature.⁸ The ancient philosophy needed to be expunged

⁵ *Laudato Si’* §101-136, 2, 9, 15, 144.

⁶ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *‘In the Beginning:’ A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 92-95.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 96-99. See also Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* (South Bend: Gateway, 1968), pp. 13-50.

⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Norman Kemp Smith, trans. (New York: Macmillan Press, 1990), pp. xiii.

because it was not useful; according to Bacon, it was “barren of works, full of questions.” Thus Bacon hoped to devise “helps to man, and a line and race of inventions that may in some degree subdue and overcome the necessities and miseries of humanity.” But to wrest the secrets of nature one must view nature “when by art and the hand of man she is forced out of her natural state, and squeezed and molded . . . The nature of things betrays itself more readily under the (vexations of art) than in its natural freedom.”⁹

After Bacon, who invested himself in the development of the empirical method, Galileo established a new mathematical science of nature. But it was left to Descartes to bring together the science of nature with the practical science of technology. He announced the great ambition and goal of this work: “It is possible to attain knowledge which is very useful in life, and instead of the Speculative knowledge of the Schools, we may find a practical philosophy . . . , and thus render ourselves like the masters and possessors of nature . . . to have the fruits of life without pain . . . principally, health.”¹⁰

The practical goal combines with a demand for mathematical certitude that conceals creation in two ways. The practical attitude as opposed to the theoretical or speculative attitude looks upon the world with a new eye. The scientists now look upon the world as a field of activity for harnessing the potential of nature to help humans, and not for the appreciation of the beauty, intelligibility, or truth of things. To achieve this goal of mastery the scientist must reduce nature to those components which can be readily manipulated and controlled through experiment. This represents a second form of concealment, for while Aristotle viewed nature as occurring for the most part without strict necessity – i.e., creation in its fullness involves the mysteries of existence and the irregularities due to matter, chance and contingency – the moderns on the other hand seek to control the irregularities of nature through an infallible method; they will derive with certitude what conforms to mathematical formula.

In light of modern philosophy therefore, one can say that creation was concealed when Enlightenment philosophers of science rejected Aristotle’s philosophy of nature with its conception of form as an intrinsic principle of change and teleology. And also from this very beginning one sees the inner tension or inconsistency in their account because of the question of the human being. The first inconsistency has to do with the goal of the use of the new power over nature. How

⁹ Francis Bacon, *The New Organon and Related Writings*, Fulton H. Anderson, ed. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1960), pp. 8, 15, 95, 273.

¹⁰ Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, Part 6, in *Philosophical Works* (Cambridge: Haldane and Ross, 1972) Vol. 1, pp. 119-20. See also Kennington, “Descartes and Mastery of Nature,” *On Modern Origins: Essays in Early Modern Philosophy* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004), pp. 123-44.

does one derive the purpose for which the powers shall be used? In his book, *The Abolition of Man*, C.S. Lewis writes that there is a flaw at the heart of the mindset which emphasizes mastery of nature, because the mastery of nature, he says, means the mastery of some men by others.¹¹ The second contradiction or problem derives from the question of the treatment of human beings themselves: Shall they be treated as the rest of nature? That is, should human beings be reduced to a material that can be vexed and constrained to yield its secrets so as to be controlled for some other purpose? Isn't this an obscuring of the true nature of humans as created beings with freedom and dignity?

These lingering and pressing questions concerning modern science and technology which were born in the Enlightenment continued to unfold in subsequent centuries. Guardini says that with modernity the world gradually lost its character of "creation" and became "nature." In effect, creation was "taken out of God's hands,"¹² no longer ultimately dependent upon God. Without "creation" what need is there for a Creator? The true nature of creation is reduced to an independent, self-sufficient reality determined completely by its material nature and divorced from anything beyond the physical.

Not only is the created order obscured as nature is reduced to the measurable and quantifiable, but the very notion of the activity of creation is equated with change. Baldner and Carroll rightly point out that this misunderstanding of the act of creation as change is the core error at the heart of the contemporary debate about creation;¹³ it represents a fundamental confusion between "the order of biological explanation and the order of philosophical explanation."¹⁴ Change is a process that requires matter upon which to operate, while creation refers to the conferral of existence itself, *ex nihilo*, as will be discussed further later.

And so the concealment of creation which began in the Enlightenment with certain Gnostic, Baconian, and Cartesian elements leads to another level of concealment – the gradual sundering of creation from the Creator. The Church Fathers refer to this in the documents of Vatican II, particularly "On the Church in the Modern World." In section 36 concerning the autonomy of temporal affairs, the Council Fathers lament the illegitimate autonomy in the contemporary scientific culture which "proclaim[s] the independence of created things

¹¹ C.S. Lewis, *Abolition of Man* (New York: MacMillan, 1965).

¹² Romano Guardini, *The World and the Person* (Chicago: H. Regnery Co, 1965), p. 11.

¹³ William E. Carroll, "Aquinas and the Big Bang," *First Things* (November 1999), p. 19.

¹⁴ William E. Carroll, "Creation, Evolution, and Thomas Aquinas," *Revue des Questions Scientifiques* 171:4 (2000): pp. 319-47.

from God the Creator” and asserts that humans “can use them without any reference to their Creator.”¹⁵ With two memorable statements they warn: “Without the Creator the creature would disappear;” and: “When God is forgotten, the creature itself grows unintelligible.”¹⁶

Once God is eliminated, humans are tempted to take His place. Humans act as if they were God, and their works come to be viewed as “creation.” They now “grasp existence in order to shape it . . . not in obedience to God but as their own work.”¹⁷ Humans concentrate on making the world according to their design, since “nature has been delivered over to them totally;”¹⁸ they are no longer dependent upon anyone but themselves. And for what purpose should nature be used? The mentality of power and activity has no space or time for contemplation, for worship, for Sabbath, because the drive to build the world is overriding. The development of technology and productivity becomes the ultimate norm of value and culture, rather than questions of ultimate purpose and meaning.

In time, however, says Benedict XVI, the “arrogance of activity” turns against humans. Then “there is devised a new and no less ruinous view – an attitude that looks upon the human being as a disturber of the peace, as the one who wrecks everything, as the real parasite and disease of nature. Human beings no longer have any use for themselves; they would prefer to put themselves out of the way so that nature might be well again.”¹⁹ One can recognize this strange turn in the stance of certain environmental groups who argue that the solution to environmental problems is to significantly reduce human populations.

All this began with Enlightenment notions of power, activity, and the drive to master nature, which led to an exaggerated sense of the autonomy of created things and to distorted views of creation as change, and finally to the loss of the true notion of creation because it removed the created world from under the Creator’s protection. When this happens, humans lose their bearings, and the result is the degradation of their relationships with others and with the created world. As John Paul II states so clearly: “When man uses things without reference to the Creator, he does incalculable harm to himself.”²⁰ The creature in effect becomes obscured and unintelligible even to himself.

¹⁵ John Paul II, *God: Father and Creator*, Vol. 1 (Boston, MA: Daughters of St. Paul, 1996), p. 218.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

¹⁷ Guardini, *The World and the Person*, p. 11.

¹⁸ Ratzinger, ‘*In the Beginning*,’ p. 37.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

²⁰ John Paul II, *God: Father and Creator*, p. 219.

II. The Recovery of Creation through a Return to the Sources

So how do we recover or rediscover the creature? The most important step is to properly understand and recover the true meaning of creation. What does it mean to say that the world is created and that things have the status of creatures? In his book, *'In the Beginning' . . .*, then-Cardinal Ratzinger emphasized the need to rediscover the doctrine of creation by a return to the sources, particularly St. Thomas Aquinas.²¹ We are reminded by Pope Francis that the theme of creation has also been central in the Franciscan tradition, which traces its roots to St. Francis of Assisi, author of the beautiful *Canticle of the Creatures* and patron saint of ecologists, and its “second founder,” St. Bonaventure of Bagnoregio. Therefore, we turn next to the wisdom of the two great medieval doctors, Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure, on the theme of creation. The focal point for the discussion is the commentaries of each on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard. For both Thomas and Bonaventure, their commentaries on this text, although written early in their careers, contain the major themes of their life’s work and are valuable for studying their respective views of creation, especially where they comment on questions of creation and the nature of God’s relationship with creation in Books 1 and 2.²²

III. St. Thomas Aquinas on Creation

For Aquinas, creation is the continual complete causing of the very being of all that is. Apart from God’s original and ongoing creative causality, creatures are nothing, non-being. There is a first principle, which is one, that gives being to all things and toward which all things are oriented as their end. Thomas thinks that it is important to first establish the unity of the Creator God. Any other alternative sets up a dualism of God and another principle set alongside him or even against him. For example, the Platonists envision the duality of God as demi-urge who acts on pre-existent matter according to eternal forms. The Manichees allow a principle of darkness and evil to act as a co-rival with God. Some Islamic thinkers envision that angels actually create within the ambit of God’s first creation. Aquinas argues that all being derives from God, the giver of being, who is responsible for all that is and who is the only creator in the true sense of the word. The first truth to be known concerning creation is that there is one creator who is universally responsible

²¹ Ratzinger, *'In the Beginning,'* p. 79.

²² Steven E. Baldner and William E. Carroll, trans., *Aquinas on Creation* (Toronto, Canada: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1997), p. 32.

for all that is. The emphasis upon the unity of the creator is clear from his first treatment of creation in Book 2, d.1, q.1, a.1 of his commentary on the *Sentences*. Following the texts of Lombard, he seeks to prove not that there is a creator (such proofs for God are treated in another section) but rather to prove that “the first principle absolutely, however, can only be one.” He demonstrates the unity of the creator God in three ways, and in so doing he does much to clarify the very meaning of creation.²³ It is precisely in clarifying the meaning of creation that Thomas explains why there can be but one creator. And we might also add, a good creator who acts out of goodness.

Gilby states that although there are many terms and phrases used for creation from the scriptural terms in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, Thomas’s own proper use favors the phrase “*productio totius esse a causa universali omnium entium*.”²⁴ (God “produces the entirety of being as a universal cause of all beings.”) This notion of being (*ens, entia, esse*) can be seen as the foundation of Aquinas’ doctrine of creation. God is the “First Being,” and creation is the “emanation of all being from the universal cause, which is God.” Therefore, to properly understand the true nature of creation, we must understand the meaning of being, or *esse*, in Aquinas’ thought. Thomas refers to *esse* as the “act of all acts and the perfection of all perfections.” If we can come to terms with being as *esse* we would then see why creation is a special type of causality different from that required by a regular change or motion. But most of all, focusing on being can help us recover the contemplative attitude from which we can affirm the goodness of the being of things and appreciate God as the giver of being or existence.

To create, Aquinas says, is “to produce a thing into being according to its entire substance.”²⁵ It is creation out of nothing, *ex nihilo*, because nothing pre-existed God’s act of creation. Creation is not change, emphasizes Aquinas, because change requires a pre-existing material reality. Rather, creation is a conferral of being by the first cause.²⁶ “Creation accounts for the existence of things, not for changes in things.”²⁷ In creation, creatures receive “a certain relation to the Creator as to the principle of their being.”²⁸ Change,

²³ Ibid., p. 66. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Trinity and God the Creator* (Ex Fontibus Co., 2012), pp. 368-69.

²⁴ Thomas Gilby, ed., Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: Volume 8, Creation, Variety and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 148-49.

²⁵ Baldner and Carroll, *Aquinas on Creation*, p. 74.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 76. See also pp. 44-45.

²⁷ Carroll, “Aquinas and the Big Bang,” p. 19.

²⁸ Aquinas, *I Sent.*, d.1,q.8, a.4.1 and *II Sent.*, d.1,q.1,a.2. See also: *ST I*, q.45, a.3; and Stephen J. Pope, “Neither Enemy Nor Friend: Nature as Creation in the Theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas,” *Zygon* 32: 2 (1997), pp. 222-23.

properly speaking, entails the bringing into being of a new substance from pre-existing matter, as in generation or corruption, or through the modification of another being in terms of its quantity, quality, or place. Thomas accepts the distinction therefore between substantial and accidental change. But creation is neither a change in the accidents or modification of a pre-existing being, nor is it the transformation of one being into another through generation and corruption. It is the bestowal of being in its entirety or totality. John Paul II similarly clarified the difference between divine creativity, as creator, and artistic creativity by the craftsman: “The one who creates bestows being itself, he brings something out of nothing—*ex nihilo sui et subiecti*, as the Latin puts it—and this, in the strict sense, is a mode of operation which belongs to the Almighty alone. The craftsman, by contrast, uses something that already exists, to which he gives form and meaning.”²⁹

In his treatment of creation, Thomas makes a fundamental distinction between essence and existence. He explains in many places that one can understand the essence of a thing in its material and formal principles (matter and form), through its genus and species, its material parts, as well as the limits of its potential change and growth. But this understanding of essence or what a thing is or may become in no way brings to light the reality or existence of the thing. How do we come to acknowledge and to affirm the existence of the thing? It is one thing to know what a Phoenix is, but another to know *that* it is.³⁰

Thomas correlates acts of the mind with these two discoveries. It is through simple apprehension that one comes to know what a thing is; one exercises a process of definition to discover what kind of thing it is. But it is through judgment that one says a thing is, that it exists. Further, Thomas will say that whatever is not included in the essential features must be accounted for by an external cause. For example, since heat is not an essential feature of a rod of iron, if a rod of iron is hot I know that its heat is derived from the heat source. I am able to make and understand the distinction between the essence of the thing and the existence of the thing and understand that the existence of a thing does not follow from what it is. I must come to see that its existence is derived from another source, and that cause of existence is God.

From these philosophical assertions concerning essence and existence Thomas explains that there must be only one being in whom essence and existence are identical. And because such a being is being essentially and preeminently, all other beings derive their

²⁹ John Paul II, *Letter to Artists* (1999), §1.

³⁰ Josef Pieper, *Guide to Thomas Aquinas* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), pp. 133-46.

existence from it. God is “a nature which is itself being” and this being gives being to all. “Everything and whatever is in the thing shares in being in some way, and since everything has imperfection mixed in, everything must in its entirety arise from the first and perfect being. This we call to create; to produce a thing into being according to its entire substance.”³¹

Thomas also says that “nonbeing” is prior to “being,” not necessarily in time but in the nature or *ratio* (meaning). Created things simply would not exist without the creator. The terminology could be misleading, “from nothing” suggesting it is from a pre-existing source. In change we say that the hot water comes from the cold water, presupposing a pre-existent material. But not so in creation.³² Thomas explains that the divine agent is better called “a giver of being” and the creature a “receiving of being,” with the understanding that all things and possibilities fall under “being.”³³

To summarize the main points: Creation is the act of the first being, a cause that accounts for an effect known through experience and reason, namely the very being or existence of things. The distinction between essence and existence plays a key role in pointing to the need for a cause of existence, as well as explaining why there can be but one first principle or giver of being, a first principle whose very nature is to be. Further, we understand that the act of creation as a giving of being presupposes no pre-existent material or being, and is properly said to be “creation *ex nihilo*.” Creation is therefore radically different from change and generation, as was mentioned previously – a misunderstanding which has clouded the contemporary debate.

The affirmation of creation does not encroach upon modern science as such because it does not entail a hypothesis about motion, change, or a big bang; rather it is about the very being of things. And yet this basis for understanding creation as a giving of being is obscured in contemporary thought. First, philosophy of nature is neglected in favor of exclusively scientific descriptions of phenomena. Paradoxically we are unaware of the very being of things because of the pressure of a reductionist mentality which stems from a positivist philosophy of science and a demand for the technological fruit of scientific knowing. As Joseph Pieper explains in *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*, we need to have an attitude that goes beyond the utilitarian or the demand for what is convenient in order to see things for what

³¹ Baldner and Carroll, *Aquinas on Creation*, 74.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 76-77.

they are and to see things whole.³⁴ The transcendental properties of being, namely the true, the good, the one and the beautiful, are apprehended in the light of their created nature; they do not refer, says Pieper, to a neutral being that simply exists nor to “an indeterminate world of objects” (scientific positivism), but formally to being as *creatura*.³⁵ As beings derived from a first cause who is being itself, all creatures are true or intelligible, and they are good as reflections of the bounty of God. In light of the profound mystery of creation we are led to affirm both the intelligibility and goodness of all being, but also the limited possession of perfection in all creatures, who thereby give mute testimony to the infinite splendor of the creator before whom all is nothing and silent in adoration. It would seem to be that “Creator” and “Creation” are mutually supporting terms. But by the same token, it appears that the reverse is true. This is the tragedy of our day – the denial of the creature and the denial of the creator are also mutually supporting attitudes. How are we to break this impasse?

The approach to creation through the distinction between essence and existence provides the adequate intellectual foundation for a resolution of the issues of our day. For it provides the tools to refute the confused notions of creation as change and temporal beginning; and it shines a light on the feature of the contingency of the world that we need for the philosophical proof that leads to an affirmation of a creator God. We fail to see the creature any longer because we fail to respect the creator; but we fail to see the creator because we have lost our awareness of the being of things, particularly in their beauty and intelligibility. Thomas can help us to see again and appreciate the very “being” of things.

IV. St. Bonaventure on Creation

Next we will consider the complementary contributions of the Franciscan tradition to understanding creation. As Chesterton said eloquently: “The whole philosophy of Saint Francis revolved around the idea of a new supernatural light on natural things, which meant the ultimate recovery, not the ultimate refusal, of natural things.”³⁶ Following in the footsteps of St. Francis, St. Bonaventure developed a systematic theology that put into words what Francis lived. As with Aquinas, it is in Bonaventure’s Commentary on the *Sentences*

³⁴ Joseph Pieper, *Leisure, the Basis of Culture* (South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 1998).

³⁵ Joseph Pieper, *The Silence of St. Thomas* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1957), p. 48.

³⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas and St Francis of Assisi* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2002), p. 232.

of Peter Lombard that we find the defining aspect of his teaching on creation. For Bonaventure, it is his metaphysics of exemplarism.³⁷

While philosophical wisdom for Aquinas is grounded in apprehending the intelligibility of created being in itself,³⁸ philosophical wisdom for Bonaventure is “God’s self-expressive presence in things.”³⁹ Bonaventure’s Trinitarian theology is based in the Dionysian principle of *bonum diffusivum sui*: It “belongs to most high Goodness to communicate itself”.⁴⁰ “Let us believe, therefore, that there is no cause of created things . . . except the Goodness of the Creator, . . . whose Goodness is so great that . . . He wills that others be sharers in His own Goodness.”⁴¹ Creatures are created by the Trinitarian God out of His overflowing goodness and with the purpose of serving that Goodness. And creation, Bonaventure asserts, “means a relation . . . , since the creature itself depends essentially and totally on the Creator.”⁴²

If creation is formed by the self-diffusion of the Father (whom Bonaventure calls the “fountain fullness, *fontalis plenitudo*”⁴³), the Son is the image or exemplar of the Father, and the consummation of their love is the Spirit.⁴⁴ The Son is the Word, expressing and impressing Himself on creation. Creation is impressed with the Word and becomes like a “little word” expressing God. Creation is a book in which the Creator may be read through the words of created things, which have received their “structure of expression” from the Divine expression.⁴⁵ Created realities in their diversity of forms “shout out” what they have received of God’s loving expression of Goodness and Truth in varying degrees.⁴⁶ According to Bonaventure, God creates in this way, even though He could have “perfected matter immediately, yet He preferred to make it under a certain formlessness and imperfection, so that out of its imperfection matter might as if shout to God, to perfect it.”⁴⁷

³⁷ Christopher Cullen, “The Semiotic Metaphysics of St. Bonaventure,” PhD diss. (The Catholic University of America, 2000), p. 104. Also Cullen, *Bonaventure*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 71.

³⁸ Gregory F. LaNave, “God, Creation, and the Possibility of Philosophical Wisdom: The Perspectives of Bonaventure and Aquinas,” *Theological Studies* 69 (2008), pp. 828-30.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 830.

⁴⁰ Bonaventure, *I Sent.*, d.2, q.2, note 2.

⁴¹ Bonaventure, *II Sent.*, d.1, pt. 1, ch. 3.

⁴² Bonaventure, *II Sent.*, d.1, pt.1, a.3, q.2, concl.

⁴³ Bonaventure, *I Sent.* d.31, pt.2, dubium 6, tome1.

⁴⁴ Leonard J. Bowman, “The Cosmic Exemplarism of Bonaventure,” *The Journal of Religion* 55: 2 (1975), pp. 182-83.

⁴⁵ Cullen, “Semiotic Metaphysics of Bonaventure,” p. 153. Cf. *I Sent.* d.35, a.1, q.1, ad 3.

⁴⁶ Bonaventure, *II Sent.*, d.12, a.1, q.2, concl.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Bonaventure describes three levels or degrees of exemplarity in creation, which he calls vestige, image, and similitude. A vestige reflects or speaks of God remotely, like a footprint. All created beings are vestiges. The image resembles God more distinctly than the vestige, like a photograph. Humans as rational beings are images of God; their rational nature is unlike that of any other creature and is immediately ordered to God.⁴⁸ For Bonaventure one essential distinction between vestige and image is that the vestige has God as its cause, but the image, being a higher level and more complete degree of expression and relation, has God as both its cause and its object.⁴⁹ Bonaventure also distinguishes a third level of exemplarity which he calls similitude. As humans conform themselves to Christ and imitate Him more closely, they grow in similitude or likeness with God. This level of exemplarity is found in holy persons and saints. In Bonaventure's thought there is a link between similitude and vestige in that the more humans grow in similitude with Christ, the more they are able to "read" the book of creation and see God in His vestiges. One thinks of St. Francis of Assisi in this regard, as he came to know and love creation as Brother and Sister and expressed it so beautifully in his *Canticle of Creatures*.

Bonaventure's exemplarism is grounded in a metaphysical vision in which the order of the universe is intelligible only in light of its ordination in God. For Bonaventure (as for Aquinas), creation is radically contingent and cannot be fully understood, nor can it achieve its fulfillment, apart from God. Like Aquinas' metaphysics of being, Bonaventure's metaphysics of exemplarism provides a more than adequate response to the contemporary concealment of creation in a number of ways. First, in light of his metaphysics one can see how utilitarian approaches to creation obscure the inherent expressiveness, intelligibility and beauty of creation because they view the world as raw material to be used for practical purposes. Secondly, Bonaventure's exemplarism encourages a fundamental posture of listening and receptivity, of learning to recognize the language of God in his vestiges in creation, in contrast to the contemporary anthropocentric model of mastery of nature, which sets up humans as dominators acting in the place of God. For Bonaventure, since the world is created out of the overflowing love between Father, Son, and Spirit in the Trinity, God is continually expressing his love in his creation; He continually communicates his goodness and truth through his creatures. Creation is fundamentally relational and crying out for engagement (not domination), for a loving response to God's expressiveness.

⁴⁸ Etienne Gilson, *The Philosophy of Bonaventure* (Paterson, NJ: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1965), p. 200.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 191-93. Cf. *I Sent.*, d.3, a.1, q.1,2, fund.4, t.I, and *I Sent.*, d.3, a.1, un. ad 4, t.1.

Bonaventure's exemplarism is also important to contemporary discussions of creation because of his articulation of the special nature of humans in creation. Contrary to contemporary trends in which humans have come to be viewed as the "disease" of creation (and their true nature as created beings thus obscured), in Bonaventure's metaphysics humans occupy a unique role in creation as what might be called mediators,⁵⁰ with their mediation flowing from Christ as Prime Mediator. As the divine exemplar, Christ is the medium, the bridge between God and humans.⁵¹ Christ, the Prime Mediator, impressed with the image, expresses it in creation and leads humans back to the Father, inasmuch as they are impressed and conformed to Him, i.e., inasmuch as they grow into similitude or likeness with Christ. Human persons are the only creatures capable of coming to know creation as an expression of God, and this is part of their unique mediating role in the created world. Indeed, the purpose of creation is to lead humans to what it signifies through a kind of perception Bonaventure calls "contuition." Bowman defines contuition as "the act by which man is capable of seeing things in God and God through things... the possibility of seeing things in their ultimate significance."⁵²

Here we might note a difference between Bonaventure and Aquinas in relation to the process of knowing. For Bonaventure, knowing is not so much the intellectual apprehension of the being of things as a formation or "impressing" of the thing on the soul. Coming to "know" created things can actually form the human soul into God's likeness, "provided that the soul has been transformed in such a way that it is capable of receiving that impress."⁵³

The process of coming to know and mediate creation in this way is for humans a fundamentally contemplative and spiritual act. Human mediation is a process of learning "the grammar of nature," to use an expression favored by Benedict XVI.⁵⁴ It is also a process of reconciliation, since Christ the Mediator is the instrument of reparation for fallen creation, the "*persona Reparatoris*."⁵⁵ And so creation will reveal itself in its true significance to the human mediator only to the extent that humans are reconciled to God; then their eyes will be opened to be able to see and read God's impressions in the natural world.

⁵⁰ Sister Damien Marie Savino, "Atheistic Science: The Only Option?" *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture*, Vol 12:4 (2009), pp. 56-73.

⁵¹ Bonaventure, "Prologue to the First Book of *Sentences*," in *Bonaventure: Mystic of God's Word*, Timothy Johnson, ed., (New York: New City Press, 1999), p. 51.

⁵² Bowman, "Cosmic Exemplarism," pp. 197-98.

⁵³ LaNave, "God, Creation, and Philosophical Wisdom," p. 828.

⁵⁴ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, §48.

⁵⁵ Bonaventure, "Prologue to the Third Book of *Sentences*," in *Bonaventure: Mystic of God's Word*, p. 65.

In his Prologue to *II Sentences*, Bonaventure introduces the image of “upright posture” as an analogy for the unique mediating role of humans in the created world. He bases his commentary on the Scriptural passage from Ecclesiastes (7:30): “Only this have I found: that God made the human person upright, and he has entangled himself in an infinity of questions.”⁵⁶

In the original state of mankind, says Bonaventure, humans were created “upright,” to be in a special “middle” position in creation:

God, therefore, made men and women upright when he turned them toward himself. In their turning toward God, they became upright not only in relation to things above them but also in relation to things beneath them. Men and women stand in the middle.⁵⁷

Men and women are called to be upright in relation to things above and things below. Thus they possess the capacity for God while at the same time being part of the created world. “Man stands in the middle, not only as *imago Dei*, but also as *imago mundi*.”⁵⁸ When persons are turned in the direction of God and subject to him, everything else is subject to them and summed up in them. Their “dominion” is not domination, but mediation. In this it becomes clear that the contemporary overreaction which perceives humans as the “disease” of nature is due to a misunderstanding of the proper status of the human being in the order of creation. The dominion of humans in the created world is not a warrant for arrogant and willful abuse of creation; rather, humans as mediators are meant to shepherd creation into its fullest fertility.

Bonaventure identifies three primary aspects of uprightness which flow from God’s primary characteristics of wisdom, goodness, and power.⁵⁹ When God created man and woman, he “subjected every created truth to their intellect for discernment, every good to their affections for use, every force to their power for governance.”⁶⁰ In relation to truth, he gives the example that Adam knew the created truth of things and so was able to give them names.⁶¹ In relation to goodness, he says that God subjected all creation to the human will, to be used for the betterment of humanity. In relation to power, he quotes Genesis 1:28, indicating that God gave governing authority over all things to human persons.

⁵⁶ Bonaventure, “Prologue to the Second Book of *Sentences*,” in *Bonaventure: Mystic of God’s Word*, p. 59.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁵⁸ Sister Paula Jean Miller, *Marriage: The Sacrament of Divine-Human Communion* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1996), p. 46.

⁵⁹ Bonaventure, *II Sent.*, d.12, a.1, q.2, concl. 4.5.6.

⁶⁰ Bonaventure, “Prologue to the Second Book of *Sentences*,” p. 61.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

The latter passage is not to be understood as giving humanity license to exploit and subdue creation in the Baconian sense of “vexing and constraining” nature. In Bonaventure’s thought, creation is only subject to humanity when humanity is subject to God. Only when persons choose to be upright in relation to Divine truth, goodness, and power (i.e., when they are honest, good, and humble), will they be able to come into an authentic “upright” relationship with creation. Only when they realize that the first cause and final end of creation is God will they be able to read the language of creation and effectively mediate the created world back to the Father. In this they participate in Christ’s restorative role as mediator.

However, because of original sin, humanity is fallen. In this fallen state, when persons are not turned toward God, they are blinded and tempted to say: “The river is mine and I made myself.”⁶² The original relationship of uprightness is broken, says Bonaventure, and human persons become bent over and curved (*incurvatus*), miserably deviated.⁶³

In the state of curvature caused by sin, the gaze of human persons is directed downward and they cannot see the way ahead. Bonaventure describes it poignantly:

[Human] understanding, by turning away from the highest truth, becomes ignorant; it enmeshes itself in endless questions through curiosity . . . The will, by opposing the highest good, becomes destitute as concupiscence and greed entangle it in an infinite number of questions . . . Human power, by breaking away from the highest power, becomes weak . . . This is the spirit of instability, and everything is off balance because of it.⁶⁴

With these words Bonaventure’s thoughts echo across the centuries, landing at the feet of the contemporary world. Human *understanding* entangled in endless questionings and doubts, human *wills* coveting more and more, human hunger for *power* pushing past appropriate boundaries and denying any dependence on the Creator—these are the attitudes which have progressively undermined and obscured the true nature of creation and the creature since the Enlightenment. With these deformative attitudes human persons make the created world their end rather than God. This puts creation in bondage, where it is groaning, waiting to be brought out of obscurity. Perhaps this is what C. S. Lewis meant by his cryptic remark that “reconsideration, and something like repentance, may be required” to restore

⁶² Bonaventure, “Prologue to the First Book of *Sentences*,” in *Bonaventure: Mystic of God’s Word*, p. 50.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁶⁴ Bonaventure, “Prologue to the Second Book of *Sentences*,” pp. 63-64.

a balance to our approach to nature.⁶⁵ This attitude of repentance is also what Pope Francis calls for in *Laudato Si'*.

In other words, humans need to “stand up straight” in similitude with Christ in order to bring creation into its own proper standing in God. In this consists their mediating role, and creation itself will rebel if humans do not assume it:

Therefore open your eyes, alert your spiritual ears, unlock your lips, and apply your heart so that in all creation you may see, hear, praise, love and adore, magnify and honor your God lest the entire world rise up against you.⁶⁶

Though Bonaventure wrote these words almost 800 years ago, they still ring true today. If we do not open our eyes and “apply our hearts” to see and honor God in the created world, everything becomes unbalanced: Not only is God lost, but creation itself is obscured by our lack of care, goodness and wisdom. The created world then responds out of its nature in a kind of rebellion or “groaning” – a phenomenon we can recognize in contemporary situations of environmental degradation. Since creation includes humans, a further outgrowth is that we become unintelligible to ourselves, fulfilling the prophesy of the Church Fathers in *Gaudium et spes* §36: “When God is forgotten, the creature itself grows unintelligible.”

V. Conclusion

In light of this analysis, one begins to see some of the deeper reasons why the Church has taken such an interest in environmental issues and how a return to the sources can help recover creation and recapture its meaning for the contemporary world. In complementary ways, these two medieval thinkers, Aquinas and Bonaventure, have much to offer contemporary discourse. Both share a fundamental understanding of the world as “creation”—more than just “nature” reduced to change and to what is quantifiable—and of created things as radically dependent upon God for their original creation and ongoing existence. Against a contemporary backdrop in which the culture is being progressively cut off from knowing God as its origin and destiny, Aquinas and Bonaventure put the world securely in God’s hands as created, and therefore intelligible and good.

These two great philosophers demonstrate that the world is more reasonably viewed as the result of reason, freedom, and love rather

⁶⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Abolition of Man*, p. 89.

⁶⁶ Bonaventure, *Journey of the Soul to God*, Ch. 1:No. 15, Vol 2 in Philotheus Boehner & Zachary Hayes, OFM, eds., *Works of Bonaventure* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 2002).

than brute matter and blind chance. In a world driven by power and activity, they call for a contemplative gaze at creation, one that strives to apprehend the being of things and to listen to the expressions of the goodness and truth of things. Bonaventure and Aquinas show us the path to understanding better the meaning of creation by “respecting” its true nature, in the sense of “re-inspecting” or re-looking at things and learning to read the book of creation. In this sense, the contemporary scientific enterprise is not at odds with our effort here to consider the meaning of creation through a “return to the sources,” as the medieval vision developed by Aquinas and Bonaventure leaves room for the legitimate autonomy of creation and the scientific enterprise. In addition, the notion of the human person as mediator provides an alternative to contemporary anthropocentrism with its portrayal of humans as dominators and should therefore dispose of the fears of people who think of humans as the disease of nature and who accuse the Catholic Church of being the cause of the environmental crisis. It should be amenable to, and could even provide the foundation for, a true environmental ethic. Humans are not the disease of creation but the remedy, if they themselves take the remedy, which includes placing God back in the picture and exercising their particular human capacity for reflection and mediation in order to come to know and treasure created reality more deeply.

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