

Fire in the depths of the earth - Meditation for Pentecost



Pentecost reminds us that the Holy Spirit is a power at work in a continually renewed universe, and is present in the innermost mystery of all things. Grace and science come together to offer a fuller picture of what is true: that God's love is embodied in all humanity, and in the evolving world itself

Breakthrough into new vistas is an essential dimension of Pentecost. This Sunday's Collect implores God to "fill now once more the hearts of believers", encouraging us to expand our horizons. Pentecost, for theologian Karl Rahner, is a vital "hour of courageous vision" in the history of the Church, when the Holy Spirit weaves new patterns out of the "interrelatedness of Creation and Incarnation".

A central path, for him, towards that expansion of the restless heart's horizon, concerns the currently popular question about the divine intention for the Incarnation – did Jesus come to atone for the sin of Adam and Eve, or would he have come anyway?

Beyond doctrinal debate, this is a crucial question with implications for every aspect of our lives, personal and universal. Is there a theology, people ask, other than one based on a fall/redemption supposition, that tells a different story – a story of original grace and beauty rather than of original sin?

By way of reply, theologians point to two schools of theology that are central to our present reflection. One is the familiar sin/ redemption model with its basic themes of reparation and sacrifice. The other is

called a theology of nature and grace. Creation, our earth, our bodies, our death, all we mean by the “natural”, “the secular”, are not the unfortunate results of what Blessed John Henry Newman called “some terrible aboriginal calamity”. On the contrary, they are all already graced, and carefully fashioned in the divine image.

But if there was no Fall, people ask, why then are we so sinful, so destructive, so evil? Theologians reply that the act of Creation in the very first place – involving time, space and free will – carries with it the need for redemption. Salvation is implicit in Creation itself.

To be human is to be wounded from the start, to be in need of completion. Love is what completes us. “We were already saved”, writes Richard Rohr OFM, “by the gaze from the manger.” The terrible death on the Cross is not about an atonement demanded by a punitive Father for one early original sin of disobedience; it reveals, rather, the astonishing love of God for a broken humanity, healing it and charting its course towards its blessed destiny.

An orthodox theology of Creation holds that God, right from the beginning, desired to become human simply because, as St Thomas Aquinas put it, his infinite love needed to express itself outside itself (*bonum est diffusivum sui*) – first in Creation, then finally and fully revealed in Incarnation. And by virtue of solidarity and derivation, this love is embodied to a greater or lesser degree, in all of us and in the evolving world itself.



Being human does not mean being banished, fallen, cursed – a *massa damnata* as St Augustine put it – as if God’s original dream for us was, at some stage, radically destroyed. Terrible things happen when

mythical truth is confused with historical truth. Paradise was not lost in the past; Adam and Eve never existed on this planet; the Creator's original blueprint was never destroyed by an actual "fall".

If all of this is true – that the essential face of Creation, as we have it, has always carried the tender look of love rather than the sinister shape of sin – then other intrinsically connected issues to do with the vibrancy of faith will need careful revision and development.

Here is one topical example. People sense that we're at a very significant threshold in history where two pivotal stories meet – the love story revealed in the orthodox theology of nature and grace, and the amazing story revealed in the scientific explorations of a painfully evolving and utterly wonderful world.

These stories do not have to collide with each other: rather do they embrace each other, offering a fuller picture of what is beautiful and true. They both speak of a fundamental connectedness in our origins, evolution and destiny. The emerging cosmology, often called the New Universe Story, can be seen as validating the rich theological (but mostly neglected) vision which has always been at the heart of true Christianity.

A new consciousness of the bigger picture is called for, a clearer insight into the intrinsic connection between Creation and Incarnation, into the deepening conversation between the mystic and the physicist. A fundamental concept is that we all flow from one source; some will call it the process of evolution, others the work of the Holy Spirit.

In *Field of Compassion*, Judy Cannato writes, "There is a single Creator of the entire cosmos, a Creator who remains present to every part of the cosmos, sustaining and empowering its ongoing life and development. This same Creator will bring the whole movement of evolutionary Creation to completion." The original divine design in our evolving world is revealed in Incarnation, to be fulfilled in the Omega of Revelation.

Evolution, you could say, is intrinsic to Incarnation. It is how Creation, already containing the divine seed, has prepared the necessary ground – the human era – for the birthing of God. There is a sense in which Creation is the beginning of Incarnation, "the first Bible", as Aquinas put it.

Pentecost reminds us that God's fire already burns in the darkest depths of the living earth. Ultimately, for the Christian, the Holy Spirit is present as the innermost mystery of all things, and may be understood as the invisible power at work in a continually evolving universe, until God be "all in all". There is now no longer a destructive dualism between the things of God and the things of earth. "When we want both the God of infinity and the spirit within the familiar (evolving) universe, as it is, and as it shall become, there is one path to both," writes Rahner.

The recovery of a theology of nature and grace, now enriched by the emerging insights of the new cosmology, will have profound implications for many Christian teachings, for our understanding of sacrament, for pastoral ministry, for the religion/science debate and for a new evangelising of young and old. It will help, above all, to shift our self-image as fallen failures, complicit somehow in the death of Jesus, to an awareness of our role as vital co-creators with God of a steadily developing, ever-evolving universe. We are not guilty exiles on a fallen earth – we are the beloved bearers of her divine dream.

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