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An Astonishing Secret

THE LOVE STORY OF CREATION AND THE WONDER OF YOU



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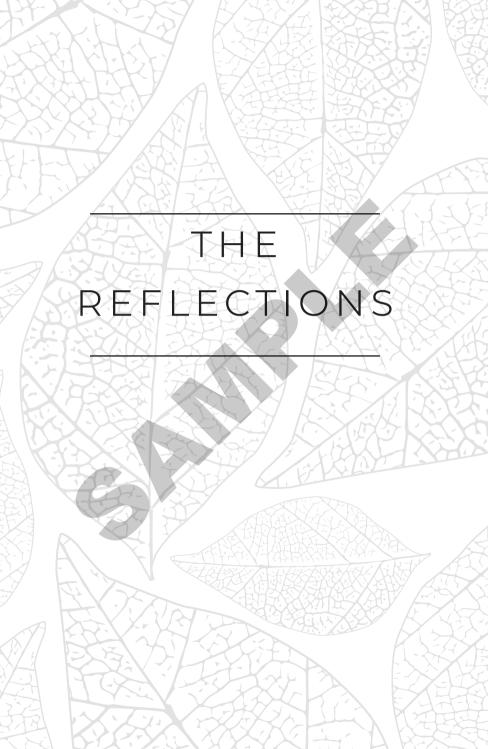
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LOVING THE EARTH – GOD'S LIVING BODY

St Francis reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us. [LS 1]

This is a long way from the fearsome teaching of the past regarding 'the world, the flesh and the devil', a negative story that frightened us when we were children, a story about the fall-out from the Adam and Eve myth that many Catholics still believe. Pope Francis knows that the world is good, as God pronounces it in Genesis; it is not a punishment for an 'original sin' that never happened! (To be discussed more fully later.) Even at this time of serious darkness for Christian churches there are stirrings of a new light from deep within. Because we are born with God's own longing safely incarnate within us, we will forever seek that harmony and hope for which we were born. As the river flows and the bird flies, the human heart will always long for completion in love. Pope Francis knows this. It is why he acts, speaks and writes as he does. It is, for instance, why he sees creation as 'a beautiful mother'.

He knows that something invariably stirs in us when we stop to look around us with eyes of wonder, with what he often calls 'the contemplative gaze'. We begin to see more deeply into the beauty of 'ordinary' things – the speeding train through the sleeping fields, the flash of a wing from a hidden

nest, the whistle of the wind through November trees, the way a cat looks at you. We see daily happenings and events – mornings, tears, hills, water, seasons, births, bodies, babies, death, growing – with a new light around them, a forgotten vision now being recovered, some kind of promise of heaven restored. How utterly liberating it is for us to have a leader who encourages us to see this wonderful world as we would a lover, full of grace and blessing! Somewhere in our hearts we have always known and delighted in this vision in a natural, instinctual kind of way. And now we know, that hunch, that stirring, that lifting of the human spirit is another name for God's presence, for the deepest reason for our reaching, for the joy we never tire of seeking. The heaven we live for is not a place waiting in the future; it lies at our feet, at our fingertips, in what our eyes see and our tongue tastes.

At last we are learning how to love the land we live on, how to walk beautifully on the fields and streets around us. This is a much more evolutionary step for humanity than walking on the moon. Our Celtic forebears did not disrespect their environment; they saw it as a precious aspect of their lives. So did the native peoples of many lands. Too often, a mistaken religious emphasis has sundered the close bonds between God's love and Creation itself. Our world is not just a useful resource, a place to live on, to supply us with food, to be exploited for our benefit, 'to be plundered at will' – and then to be left behind as we head for heaven. She is a living, breathing, precious entity to be cherished daily.

Only when we begin behaving as though the Earth is our true home does it begin to really feel like one. We may each have a different religion, language, culture or skin colour, but under the one sky we all belong to one human race, one planet in one universe of immense beauty. And, as Pope

Francis has taught, all are *equally* the people of God. Until we expand the horizons of our hearts and minds we will never feel the consolation of being at home, but of feeling lost and cautious on a foreign shore. There are levels of living that we have still not experienced. There are depths of belonging to our environment that are as yet unknown to us. Yet it was to experience this depth that we were born. Until we see the world we live in, beautiful and broken though it may be, with a tender care, and love it as we would our own family, we will never experience the abundant life promised to all God's beloved creatures – that is everyone and everything. And every morning we are born again to that possibility.

It will take time, for many of us, really to grasp the intimacy between God and the world, between grace and nature, between the holy and the human. Divine love is at the core of creation, from the panorama of oceans and milky ways, to the length of an ant's leg. And that love is urging everything to risk, to move forward, to trust. 'Beside every blade of grass,' the Talmud tells us, 'there is an angel that bends over and whispers "Grow, Grow".' We know all about this because of the unexplored mystery of the Incarnation, the very core and hinge of our faith. The presence of the incarnate Word fills everything with God's very being. It graces nature, it consecrates time, it divinises humanity, it blesses every effort for good. As Pope Francis keeps reminding us, through Christ, God is present in the entire cosmos, from the tiniest particle of matter to the infinity of space. The whole world is incarnational. 'Through him, with him, in him' everything, every person, all that happens, is created, sustained and sanctified.

A FURTHER WORD

To understand Pope Francis's opening sentence more clearly we need to expand our understanding and viewpoints, to see them against a wider, cosmic horizon. We then revise, recalculate and reshape our opinions, theories and theologies. And then we begin to love as never before. In spatial terms, to give us a clearer perspective, to deepen our sense of wonder, how big is 'the bigger picture'?

'Today the Christian is aware of living on a tiny planet that is part of a system of a particular sun which itself belongs to a galaxy with 300 million stars and is hundreds and thousands of light-years broad, a galaxy estimated to be but one among billions in the universe. It is not easy for an individual to see Earth as the reality for which the universe exists. In this cosmos of gigantic dimensions, a size not even able to be imagined, human beings can feel themselves to be little more than an accidental marginal phenomenon ... the eternal Logos of God who drives forward these billions of galaxies has become a human being on this small planet which is but a speck of dust in the universe.'15 Since Karl Rahner wrote this, the cosmic estimations he offers have expanded even more astonishingly. He is referring here to the many new challenges that face the Christian story on planet Earth in light of the seemingly infinite cosmic milieu in which we find ourselves.

In *Vast Univers*e Professor Thomas O'Meara OP says, 'If there are billions of galaxies, each with billions of stars, the chances are that hundreds of thousands of planets have civilisations. They are not all existing now: some have come and gone, fading away into God's providence hundreds of

millions of years ago. Others will begin to exist far into the future. Still, thousands of civilisations might live in our own space and time. $^{\prime16}$



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WE ARE BLIND – TO THE SICKNESS OF OUR MOTHER-EARTH

The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life ... We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (Gen 2: 7); our very bodies are made up of her elements; we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters. [LS 2]

Pope Francis laments, 'The violence in our hearts, wounded by sin ... against our Mother Earth by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods which God has endowed her'. Lord Deben, Chair of the UK's Independent Committee on Climate Change writes, 'We are diminishing, damaging and ultimately destroying ourselves.' It is here that the encyclical Laudato Si' is so telling. It reminds us of our sinful assertion that we are the masters now, embracing the values of a throwaway society. 'This attitude,' the Pope warns us, 'then extends to fragile humanity itself. The old, the disabled, the unborn are too often seen as inconvenient, and their intrinsic worth is ignored.' (LS 43) The 'poor' are always the first victims of human abuse of the earth. This terrible destruction stems from our loss of intimacy with, our loss of care or concern for our Mother Earth. An inhuman, reckless greed has wreaked havoc on innocent creatures, human and non-human.

The Pope reminds us that we are created from the Earth, our bodies sustained by nature's elements, our very lives kept in being by breathing her air, our energies and health preserved by her healing water. There is a Celtic awareness of the remedies for human ailment in nature itself – potassium, magnesium, selenium, iron, zinc, calcium, vitamin D and various other minerals and vitamins. A sacred healing fills the natural environment we live in (above). There is a mutual dependence that we too often, at our peril, ignore. *Laudato Si'* is an urgent wake-up call. Are we protecting the Earth as we would our mother, our sister? Are we deeply concerned about its future? Do we fully appreciate, even believe, the Pope asks, her role of living praise? He keeps emphasising the worship offered by the universe to God, a theme beloved of St Francis himself.

There is no bird on the wind, There is no star in the sky, There is nothing beneath the sun But proclaims his goodness.¹⁷

And do we know that we humans have evolved, in a precious moment of creation, into the locus and focus of the Earth's consciousness and awareness? Without us she is blind and vulnerable, unfinished and 'groaning' (St Paul). We can tell the Earth that she is our nourishment and inspiration – holding us, mothering us. 'The new awareness that is sweeping our planet reminds us that we are so interconnected with the air we breathe, the trees of the forest, the flowers of the field, the mountains and rivers, that their diminishment is our diminishment, their destruction our destruction. Not only the beauty and majesty but also the

chaos and power of the natural world inspire our poetry, our art, and our spiritual lives with a sense of wonder. When we fan this flame of wonder in our heart there is a new meaning in our lives.'18

Pope Francis is practical – and in a hurry. He knows that until we believe the Earth to be a precious, long-suffering family member, the damaged body of God, we will persevere in our carelessness towards it. He is well aware of the unfortunate consequences of a deeply flawed teaching about God's banishment of all of us as exiles to 'this vale of tears' where death happens. And in this particular passage he issues a warning. The Earth and ourselves are inseparably and intrinsically connected. The pain of one is the pain of the other. In his Message for the World Day of Peace, 2014, he said, 'Nature is at our disposition and we are called to exercise a responsible stewardship over it. Yet so often we are driven by greed and by the arrogance of dominion, possession, manipulation and exploitation; we do not preserve nature; nor do we respect it or consider it as a gracious gift which we must care for and set at the service of our brothers and sisters. including future generations.'

In the meantime a first step may well be to soften our own hearts to the tender power of nature, to experience in our deepest selves that profound bonding and intimacy that can flood our senses when we surrender to the incarnate beauty of God. It is this kind of unforgettable experience that transforms our attitudes, values and goals. There is a neglected mystic in all of us, waiting to be nourished by this beauty. 'I walked out alone in the evening,' wrote Bede Griffiths OSB. 'A lark rose suddenly from the ground beside the tree by which I was standing, and poured out its song above my head, and then sank – still singing – to rest ... I felt inclined to kneel to the

ground as though I had been standing in the presence of an angel \dots' . ¹⁹

A FURTHER WORD

'Why', the Pope asks, 'have we forgotten that we are of the earth ... ?' And why are we so resistant to the openness he is pleading for? Many of us know we must knuckle down to some serious reading, have lively conversations with our friends, indulge in imaginative thinking and ask a hundred questions. One question that quickly appears is the one about 'original sin'. How does it 'fit in' with the Universe Story of original love and joy?

'The new emerging Christian consciousness, or, I might say, the new emerging catholic consciousness, cannot and must not be supressed. Information technology is enhancing the speed of its evolution, and it is taking root at the most basic level of individual lives. As with evolutionary emergence on the whole, the new emerging catholic consciousness is encountering resistance to change on various levels: the institutional Church, academic theology and ecclesial life ... On every level, whether it is resistance to the new theology or the refusal of pluralism, the inability to let go of medieval theology and engage the world as science informs us. Hence, there is resistance to relate to God in a new way, in a new world, to see the God of Jesus Christ as the God who does new things, the God of hope and promise ... It is difficult to say for certain, but is seems the Church is slowly collapsing from within. Instead of evolving it is devolving - its very presence is thinning out to the extent that in some areas of the world, such as parts of Western Europe, it is dissolving into history ... [But] death is part of new life. Are we experiencing a necessary death today in the Body of Christ, the Church? Is the Church experiencing a weakness of heart from within because there is no longer sufficient spirit of life to sustain itself? Are we on the brink of resurrection or revolution?'²⁰

Theologians suggest, especially today, that what is meant by 'original sin' is the given human condition into which each of us is born, a potential to damage humanity, to diminish altruism and destroy love - a condition we all share and by which we are all affected. The 'sin of the world', in which we are all connected, is the biblical term for it. It is more about the darkness and evil that awaits the innocent child after birth and baptism, rather than about any contamination she is bringing into the world with her, and that needs to be exorcised out of her (cf. the baptismal ceremony exorcism). Sharing in the human condition does not mean that the sin of Adam and Eve, who never existed in the first place, has already shadowed the heart of the already-graced child. Karl Rahner writes, ' ... original sin in no way means that the moral quality of the actions of the first person or persons is transmitted to us, whether this be through a juridical imputation by God, or through some kind of biological heredity, however conceived.'21

'In other words,' writes teacher Judy Cannato, 'we are not personally accountable for the human condition. An original sin is not imputed to us and we are not required to make amends for a "fall". Nor does original sin mean that we have been born depraved (fallen, excluded, stripped of divine love) ... An evolutionary point of view does not deny or contradict the reality of personal and collective sin. What it does reject is

literal thinking that there was an Eden – a place on Earth in which human life was completely in conscious relationship with the Holy, and to which we will return if we regain right relationship with God. In this context there is no paradise to recapture.'²²

