THEOLOGY FOR A SMALL PLANET

A collection of essays
by

Clyde Christofferson

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Part 1: Lemaitre's Legacy

The morning was sunny and a pleasant breeze rustled leaves in the tall oak trees at the rear entrance to our building. It could not have been a nicer day. I had parked my car in the lot and was walking toward the door, and someone ahead of me saw me coming and held the door. I did the same for the person behind me.

This is an ordinary occurrence. I suppose the reason I remember it was that the person who held the door for me stood there, waiting. I felt I should move more quickly the last ten or fifteen feet, to accommodate this gracious behavior. And, as it turned out, the person behind me made a similar accommodation as I also held the door.

On a different occasion I was at home, somewhat out of sorts. I would have to return to the office after dinner. My wife, Judy, had made dinner and my job was to clear the table and clean up the kitchen. She helped with both, not saying a word. Not in the best mood, I took this kindness as dissatisfaction with my slow pace, and told her so. Upon reflection, though, I understood that she simply sensed the burdens I had brought to the dinner table and was being helpful.

Another example of everyday kindness became clear to me many years after my brother was killed at Chu Lai in Vietnam. He was a combat reporter with the 101st Airborne Division, and had been in the point platoon of the company whose mission he had been assigned to cover. He was among nearly two dozen men who lost their lives in an ambush. He was not yet twenty years old.

More than thirty years later my brother's combat photographer during these last days found one of my sisters via the Virtual Wall and wrote to her. It was a very touching account of mentoring by my brother. Even in the cauldron of war we do not cease to be human beings, and my brother's kindnesses were appreciated. I had often wondered about my brother's future, considering the violent circumstances of his death. This unexpected letter so many years later was itself a kindness.

They are examples, and not mere anecdotes. With modest reflection each of us could assemble our own examples. I rely upon the willing reader's own examples as much as those I have given.

What follows is a heuristic argument rather than a proof. It may be persuasive or suggestive to some, and leave others cold. I make no pretense for greater consideration.

These examples of kindnesses pass by us everyday without notice. And yet when we do take the time to reflect upon them they resonate. I am reminded of a saying attributed to St. Francis: "Preach the Good News always; when necessary use words." A story goes with this saying. St. Francis walked through Assisi to preach and took a young friar with him. They greeted the townspeople and listened to their stories, generally being neighborly. When they finished the young friar asked, "Francis, I thought you were going to preach?" Francis replied, "We did."

Why do we do these things? Why do these stories resonate with us?

I would like to share with you a metaphor that I find helpful in responding to these questions. We've all heard of the Big Bang, but we may not have seen or may not remember the news accounts from 1965 of the evidence that confirmed that the cosmos had a beginning. Researchers at Bell Labs in New Jersey were finding a low level of annoying noise in their new horn antenna. They thought it might have been the pigeons who were nesting in the horn and leaving their droppings. But after they cleaned out the pigeons the noise was still there. In frustration they called the head of another research team at nearby Princeton.

As it happened, the research team at Princeton was in the process of developing an experiment to determine whether there was a cosmic background radiation. If the cosmos had begun with a lot of heat and light we should still be able to see some residual radiation. The evidence accumulated by the Bell Labs researches -- who later received the Nobel Prize for their work -- was just what the Princeton team had theorized.

For those not acquainted with physics, this may seen strange. The researchers at Bell Labs thought they were seeing noise, and wanted to know how to get rid of it. The Princeton research team had a theory about the beginning of the universe, but not the evidence. What the Bell Labs researchers were missing was a theory that would explain their noise. But it was their evidence, and they received the Nobel Prize for the discovery of

the cosmic background radiation. In the end, it is evidence that proves theories. But theories are important, because without a theory evidence may be mere noise.

So I repeat the questions raised a few paragraphs ago about the kindnesses we observe in everyday life. Why do we do these things? Why do these stories resonate with us? Are these kindnesses we observe merely noise? Or are they like the cosmic background radiation, evidence of an unseen reality? The difference between noise and evidence is a theory. We need a theory.

Is God a theory? I don't think so. God as creator might account for the Big Bang, but we are concerned not with creation but with the kindnesses of everyday life. A mere creator won't due. Let's be more venturesome with our theory. At worst, if the theory doesn't work, another theory can be tried.

Let me borrow and slightly embellish a proposition from one of my favorite homilists: a loving God created the cosmos in order to share existence with independent beings able to image God by loving one another.

So how do we get from this theory to the observed kindnesses of everyday life, viewing these kindnesses as a sort of "background radiation"? There is a certain charm to this notion, because these kindnesses do indeed resonate with us. And it is the evidence –that our hearts leap when we see or contemplate good things being done for other folks -- that counts.

One might argue, of course, that a loving God would not leave us with mere background kindnesses. Why aren't we all imaging God in a more wholehearted fashion? Is God simply ineffective as a creator, or merely slow? How can we explain both the "background" kindnesses and the up-front pain and suffering of so many?

Return for a moment to the metaphor of the Big Bang. How does theory work?

The beginning of modern cosmology can be traced to a very simple set of suppositions. The laws of physics -- as we observe them on Earth -- are the same regardless of where we are and how we are moving. Albert Einstein developed these assumptions into the General Theory of Relativity in 1916, a theory which integrated space and time in ways that are not intuitive but which accounted for certain gravitational effects not explained by Isaac Newton's physics. Einstein's theory was expressed in terms of equations which are "covariant" – that is, they retain the same form under transformation from one frame of reference to another – but very difficult to solve. It was soon evident that solutions to these equations could be used to show that the cosmos was either expanding or contracting. Most physicists, including Einstein, did not think either of these alternatives made sense, so Einstein added a "cosmological constant" to his equations which gave a solution -- which for many years Einstein thought was the only sensible solution -- that the universe was neither expanding nor contracting. The universe was simply a neverending presence. Philosophically, Aristotle's cosmos was not much different.

A young Belgian mathematician, Georges Lemaitre, cut his teeth on Einstein's field equations and developed a solution showing that the universe was expanding, and predicting that the expansion was progressive, that is, the farther away matter was the faster it should be moving. He tried to persuade Einstein of this interpretation at a meeting both attended in 1927, but to no avail. Einstein listened to what Lemaitre had to say, but then told the young mathematical physicist that his physics wasn't very good.

In the next year or two Hubble developed observational data using Mount Wilson's one-hundred inch telescope showing that those galaxies furthest away were receding fastest, as Lemaitre had predicted. At a second meeting with Einstein in 1931, with Hubble present, Lemaitre again made his case, and this time Einstein was persuaded.

By this time Lemaitre had also concluded that the equations of General Relativity required a beginning to the cosmos. A basic understanding of quantum physics had been developed, and Lemaitre developed a theory holding that all the matter in the universe had begun as a single quantum -- a primeval atom. This cold quantum was ultimately replaced by a hot Big Bang, but Lemaitre is credited with seeing a cosmic beginning in Einstein's equations. Lemaitre himself, good physicist that he was, was cautious because supporting evidence was still missing. Hubble's evidence for an expanding universe was clear, but there was no supporting evidence for a cosmic beginning.

So how does God fit into this picture? According to Lemaitre, who was also a priest and later a member of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, God is more likely to be found in psychology than in cosmology. He was sensitive to unwarranted conclusions being drawn from his theories about physics. He was well estab-

lished in the physics community, so his "primeval atom" was not ascribed to his own religious bias. On the other hand, his physics was not well understood within his religious community, and in particular by Pope Pius XII. At a meeting of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences the Pope said that the “primeval atom” theory had proved the Genesis story of creation,

Lemaitre was not happy. He felt the incident would simply confirm the suspicions of scientists opposed to Lemaitre’s theory that the theory was suspect because traceable to Lemaitre's role as a priest. Lemaitre understood that the theory was not yet supported by evidence. The discovery of the cosmic background radiation – just before Lemaitre’s death – provided the evidence.

Thereafter Stephen Hawking showed that Einstein's General Relativity equations could be “run backwards” to the Big Bang, a cosmic moment of creation. For this work Hawking was honored by Pope Paul VI in 1975. Six years later, however, Hawking returned to Rome for a conference on cosmology and was cautioned by John Paul II that there was no need to inquire behind the creation, for this was God's handiwork. This led Hawking to conclude that "even if science and religion were one on the moment of creation they still did not see eye to eye."

In the last twenty or thirty years there has been a further interplay between theory and evidence about the cosmos, so much so that the genesis of the atoms in our bodies is fairly well understood. Every proton, neutron and electron in our bodies (and the rest of the cosmos, for that matter) was created in the first fraction of a second of creation. The higher elements required for life were created in stars that exploded. This space debris coalesced as planets orbiting around second and third generation stars. Our sun is one such star.

Does this history suggest anything useful for our theory of a loving God? No, at least not in terms of the Big Bang and a cosmic moment of creation. Life and love come much later in cosmic history.

But this history does suggest the vitality of theory. With an eye toward that vitality what questions are raised by our theory of a loving God, and what evidence might be responsive to these questions? Would not the Garden of Eden have been much simpler and more straightforward than a cosmic journey of some fourteen billion years beginning with the Big Bang?

Perhaps simpler for us to conceive (and we obviously did conceive it) but not adequate to the task. How does one God -- not just any God, but a loving God -- create a being that is independent of God and yet able to love as God loves? Occam's razor suggests that if the marriage of our independence and our ability to image God by loving one another could have been achieved more simply, it would have been. The road of evolution is long and problematic. Is this the price of independence?

And why so many independent beings? It's not just the six billion human beings currently on planet earth (to say nothing of an even greater number who are no longer living here but may be among the Communion of Saints). If, indeed, independent beings such as ourselves -- with hearts that resonate when we hear of works of love -- are the very reason for creation of the cosmos, it stands to reason that the same love responsible for life on Earth is at work in every other galaxy in the cosmos. These are not cold galaxies -- and there are a hundred billion of them -- where the prospects for life are different than in our own. And look at life on our own planet. Life flourishes in astounding variety and with dogged persistence. Even if there is only one such living planet per galaxy, that would mean tens of billions of other civilizations made up of other independent beings able to image God by loving one another. The “People of God” are in a much larger tent than we might have supposed. What does that say about our own flock on planet Earth?

TO BE CONTINUED.

"Preach the Good News always; when necessary use words."
~ St. Francis

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Part 2: From Kindness to Social Justice

A. Mostly Physics

Some time ago I picked up a book entitled *The Faith Instinct* by Nicholas Wade. I was looking for something that more closely connected "this world" with "the next world" – in the end it all has to be one existence, or so I've been thinking. Stephen Jay Gould attempts to deal with conflict between science and religion in *Rocks of Ages* by dividing these areas of knowledge into "non-overlapping magisterial areas" (NOMA), but as much as I like Gould's writing I didn't find this approach satisfying. Reality should somehow be an integrated whole.

The Faith Instinct attempts an integration, but I did not find it satisfying. Wade's position is that faith is genetic and goes back to the earliest humans, but my marginal notes (-- wouldn't trust myself with a library book that I had to return --) object to his Darwinian concept that faith survives because it promotes social cohesion. My own "instinct" is that faith is present in both winners and losers in the Darwinian struggle, and therefore survives in any event. Genetic differences don't have much to do with it, apart from providing some measure of neural complexity.

We can become too enamored of Darwin. Evolution on a cosmic time scale has a breadth (-- and, I would argue, a future --) that is not captured by Darwin's natural selection mechanism. There is something mind clearing about stepping back from this small planet called Earth and seeing creation from a larger scale. That larger scale can be described in three stages. Each stage blends into the next, and yet each succeeding stage has a novelty that suggests the progression is not finished.

I recall listening to a Teaching Company lecture series on *Big History*, which begins with the "big bang" and ends by projecting several thousand years into the future. The professor begins by asking the listener to imagine the difference in perspective between looking at an elephant in the distance and being a flea on the elephant's back. Our brief time on Earth is like the journey of a flea on the elephant's back.

But at least our time here provides a bookend to the Big Bang. As we journey through life we experience small kindnesses, and these resonate in our hearts. In Part 1 of this series of essays I drew an analogy between these kindnesses and the cosmic background radiation. The cosmic background radiation, first discovered in 1965, was the evidence used to prove the existence of the Big Bang. The small kindnesses of everyday life, in a similar way, show that we are not alone in a vast and dark cosmos: a loving God is sharing existence with independent beings able to image God by loving one another.

It does seem like a lot of trouble. Why not simply do what Genesis thought God did: create the Earth and place us in it, complete with plants and animals and all sorts of crawly things? And, by the way, leave calm waters and don't bother with earthquakes and volcanoes. The authors of Genesis may have conceived that the Garden of Eden was a better idea for human society than what they were observing in the Hebraic communities around them.

But the evidence – all developed in the last hundred years – is of a much more interesting creation. It is a long – and by now fairly well understood – series of adaptations. And it's not all physics. Oh, the early adaptations are dominated by physics, but there appears to be a progression.

First Stage

The story can be told through the gold wedding band on my finger. Amazingly, physicists think they know when every proton and electron in each of these gold atoms was created – in the first second of the big bang. The gold atoms themselves were not created until much later. It sounds like the tale of a creative alchemist making clever use of heat. The initial Big Bang was very hot and the universe was very small, and the universe – at least on very large scales – has been getting bigger and cooler ever since. Even so, it was not until about 380 thousand years after the Big Bang that the initial plasma cooled enough to allow the hydrogen and helium nuclei to capture electrons and allow the photons in this cosmic soup to move without colliding with electrons.

This "clarifying" event occurred at about three thousand degrees Kelvin, and is what we "see" when we study the cosmic background radiation. We are still inside this "clarified" universe, whose space has continued to expand these last thirteen billion years. Because of this expansion of space itself, the photons we now see have "stretched" and become much cooler, by a factor of a thousand, to about three degrees Kelvin.

It turns out that temperature plays a prominent role in this alchemist's story. Heat is necessary to mold protons and neutrons into the nuclei of higher elements like gold, and the Big Bang cooled down too quickly to get much

beyond hydrogen and helium. The task of creating the remaining elements in the periodic table was left to the stars, which were formed by the force of gravity from clouds of mostly hydrogen. The universe as a whole was cooling, but gravity operated to compress hydrogen atoms into ever hotter concentrations of matter, which turned to plasma above three thousand degrees, allowing nuclei stripped of their electrons to collide. As the temperature increased under the inexorable pull of gravity, every so often the right sequence of collisions would produce a helium nucleus. Since the mass of the helium nucleus is slightly less than the mass of the protons and neutrons needed to construct it, the missing mass becomes energy ($E=mc^2$) and the star begins to light up.

Eventually, the hydrogen fuel burns up. For our sun, this will take another five billion years. But in general, including stars that existed before our sun, gravity continues to work its alchemist's magic on the star's plasma, generating further elements up to iron in the periodic table. But this process can't go beyond iron. Up to iron, each step – each new element produced by further gravitational collapse after the fuel from the prior stage burns out – is like rolling a ball down a hill into a valley. Iron is at the bottom of the valley.

The alchemist requires a different strategy at this point, otherwise we can't get to gold – the gold in my wedding band. Stars with a small mass burn more slowly, and may last much longer than our sun. Much bigger stars burn their hydrogen fuel much more rapidly and reach the iron valley floor more quickly. But with these very large and apparently dead iron hulks of stars gravity continues to work, eventually producing one of the universe's most spectacular events, a supernova. It is in this supernova explosion that the elements above iron – including the gold in my wedding band – are created. There is enough heat and concentration of nuclei, for a long enough time, so that nucleic collisions form the higher elements, which are included along with iron in the supernova.

The Big Bang cooled so rapidly that only hydrogen and helium nuclei (and trace amounts of lithium) had time to form. A supernova cools more slowly, and begins with more complex nuclei. But the processes are similar. In both the Big Bang and supernova, creation of more complex nuclei occurs because of heat that makes the necessary collisions more probable, followed by enough cooling so that the newly created nuclei are not broken apart by further collisions of higher energy. More complex nuclei formed within stars by nuclear fusion depend upon energy – or mass converted into energy ($e=mc^2$) – triggered by gravitational collapse. In all these cases there is a window of time during which more complex structures form, all the while overall entropy (-- which is the opposite of increased complexity --) is increasing. The overall increase in entropy is what allows the more complex structures to remain stable.

This pattern – more complex structures generated thermally but which remain stable because of increasing entropy – will repeat itself in a different form as what we call life evolves out of the cosmic soup. I will give a name to this pattern: "thermo entropic window of time." Our own civilization is developing within one of these "windows of time". This window is longer than the period for increased complexity in a supernova, which in turn is orders of magnitude longer than the Big Bang's period of increased complexity. Our window of time will not last forever – indeed, is likely to be rather short by cosmic standards – but more on that later.

The debris from a supernova are disbursed into the galactic cloud and the process of star formation continues under the inexorable force of gravity. For second and third generation stars, gravitational dynamics produces not only a star of mostly hydrogen. Around the star there will rotate clumps of matter, including the debris from supernovae. This will be mostly iron, but also higher elements – including the gold in my wedding band. Over time, gravity pulls these clumps in similar orbits together, generating heat from collisions. This heat, together with heat from decay of radioactive isotopes of higher elements, was enough produce a young planet Earth fuming at the nostrils, as it were, and not very hospitable, but retaining a source of energy for continued change and adaptation in a molten iron core. Some of Earth's gold – a product of some supernova explosion before the formation of the solar system – eventually made its way to the Earth's crust, where it was mined and perhaps molded and reused any number of times before being used to make a set of wedding bands some forty odd years ago for Judy and me.

It is worth noting – and these are conclusions drawn from further and more precise measurements of the cosmic background radiation – that on large scales of more than two hundred million light years the universe is what is called "isotropic", that is, the same. The physics of galaxy and star formation, the observed distribution of stars of various sizes, and supernova that continue to occur with predictable regularity, lead to the conclusion that the proportion of elements – including gold – is the same throughout the universe, on large scales.

It is evident that even the physics of creation has a certain adaptive rhythm to it, proceeding from the simple to more complex atoms. That appears to be a common theme: over time, as the universe expands and cools on very large scales, there is a thermodynamic rhythm to the formation of more complex structures.

We now know the long cosmic history of the gold atoms in my wedding band, from proton formation in the Big Bang itself to gold atoms in a supernova perhaps five to seven billion years ago, lodging in the Earth some four

and a half billion years ago as part of formation of the solar system. Protons and neutrons were formed from quarks – almost as a thermal precipitate – as the immense temperatures early in the Big Bang dropped. These protons and neutrons are very stable because never again would temperatures in the universe be high enough to break these particles down into their constituent quarks. Gold atoms have a similar stability because they were created during a "window of precipitation" as declining temperatures from a supernova were for a time high enough for their creation but after a time fell below a temperature which could break them apart, a temperature far higher than anything these gold atoms would have to endure on Earth.

In a sense, more complex forms of matter – first, protons and then, for example, gold nuclei – have "evolved" in a dance of declining temperatures brought on by cataclysmic events: the Big Bang, star formation and eventual gravitational collapse, and supernovae. Much has been said in physics about the destiny of the universe: it will eventually run down, because its "entropy" is inexorably increasing towards zero. But this entropy rule for the whole does not prevent greater complexity (decreasing entropy) in pockets within the universe, which is what we observe as the cosmos evolves – successive "thermo entropic windows of time".

I use the term "observe" advisedly. We have been here only a short time. How can we "observe" a cosmic history that is some fourteen billion years old? We are all familiar with "telescopes" and "microscopes". These instruments have expanded our collective vision far beyond what was available to the ancients. Remarkably, we have also come to understand another instrument, what might be termed a "timescope". Because the speed of light is finite, when we look at great distances we are looking back in time. The cosmic background radiation provides our farthest look back in time, and we continue to learn more about cosmic history by ever more precise measurements of the cosmic background radiation.

Stage Two

This "timescope" perspective – which we owe to Maxwell and Einstein – allows us to see that creation is evolving toward greater complexity, even at the level of inanimate physics. It is not obvious – from the vantage point of physics – where this leads. In retrospect it leads to life forms and adaptation to a changing environment by natural selection as described by Charles Darwin. In Darwin's theory the basis for natural selection is variation in the attributes and characteristics of what would later be understood as an organism's genetic makeup.

But as I said at the beginning of this part, evolution on a cosmic time scale has a breadth (-- and, I would argue, a future --) that is not captured by Darwin's natural selection mechanism. There is something mind clearing about stepping back from this small planet called Earth and seeing creation from a larger scale. From that perspective, the beginnings of life look like an extension of Stage One. More on that next time, with

B. Life and Society

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Part 2: From Kindness to Social Justice

B. Life and Society

The most difficult subjects can be explained to the most slow-witted man if he has not formed any idea of them already; but the simplest thing cannot be made clear to the most intelligent man if he is firmly persuaded that he knows already, without a shadow of a doubt, what is laid before him. – Leo Tolstoy, from Chapter III "Christianity Misunderstood by Believers" in **The Kingdom of God is Within You** (originally published 1893)

We are a stiff necked people, as the good book says many times (Exodus 32:9; 33:3-5; 34:8; Deuteronomy 9:6; 9:13; 10:16; 31:37; 2 Kings 17:14; 2 Chronicles 30:8; 36:13; Nehemiah 9:16-17, 29; Proverbs 29:1; Acts 7:51). These biblical references all concern failure to listen to God, but the problem is far more general. All too often we become set in our ways.

Thus it is that "social justice is the Church's best kept secret". Our faith is so encrusted with barnacles that it needs a thorough cleaning to venture with enthusiasm into the waters of institutional reform, although the reform of social structures and institutions is precisely the focus of social justice as it has come to be defined since the 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. The insight of *Rerum Novarum* is that unjust social structures and institutions have been created by us and therefore can be reformed by us.

We begin with the small kindnesses of everyday life. The community's program of social action extends these kindnesses to a host of services that resonate with our sense of what is right and good. We also support organized efforts like SALT that lobby for state legislation and funding on behalf of those in need, and groups like Network and Bread for the World that do such lobbying at the federal level. Our friends at the Center for Concern are perhaps most directly focused on the institutional dimensions of social justice. And although our voice within the institutional Church is small, our long standing concern about the status of women as ministers within the Church is also a matter of social justice.

But institutional reform may seem a stretch, especially when no particular agenda for reform resonates broadly among those served by the institution. Is that the reason "social justice is the Church's best kept secret"?

That may be one reason, but there is another and more fundamental reason. The insight of *Rerum Novarum* is not seen as cut from the same cloth as concrete works of justice for the poor. To many Catholics, institutional reform often appears an unwelcome addition to what they have been taught. What I argue in this paper is that social justice flows quite naturally from the same wellspring that connects us to the small kindnesses of everyday life. Thus the subtitle "From Kindness to Social Justice". To see that connection it is helpful to step back and take a wide angle view of where we have come from. Part "A" of that view was "Mostly Physics", going back to the Big Bang. For reasons which will become apparent, it was important to go back that far. I tried to make the journey palatable by using it to describe the origins of the gold wedding bands Judy and I exchanged some forty years ago.

We know much more today about the cosmos than we knew when Pope Leo XIII penned *Rerum Novarum*. In retrospect, the wisdom of that document seems both overdue and prescient. Why had the Church not seen this before, instead preferring to support the divine right of kings? But more than a hundred years later we are still searching for a rationale that is persuasive to those who think our focus should be "good works," and who think "institutional reform" goes too far. What we now know about the cosmos provides a perspective that sees the reform of social structures and institutions as simply one more creative phase in the continuing unfolding of an awesome creation.

"What we now know about the cosmos" is, of course, mostly science. Or at least it begins with science. Yet there is some evidence, useful for seeing cosmic evolution as good and gracious, that few would call scientific. Everyday kindnesses are that kind of evidence. Why do such kindnesses resonate in the human heart? This resonance is consistent with creation being the handiwork of a loving God sharing existence with the likes of us, independent beings able to love one another – beginning with such kindnesses – and thereby image this awesome and loving God.

Hold that thought for a while longer. It's a different kind of understanding about the connection between this life and a transcendent existence. A traditional view, out of the Old Testament, finds a commanding God expecting obedience and rewarding obedience with eternal life. Awe of God translates into a sense of reverence for the sacred writings that have been handed down and the stories recounted in these writings. Jesus had a different view, of course. The small kindnesses that we take for granted are signs of the reign of God, here and now. We are invited to

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share in an awesome mystery, and we begin with everyday kindness. We share that recognition in the Eucharist, which every Sunday reminds us that the reign of God is present in our midst and among us. We are not an enclave in a foreign land, a lonely outpost in a hostile world. Quite the contrary. These kernels of human kindness are rooted in a cosmic evolution the scope of which evokes awe and reverence.

But we remain a stiff necked people. Jesus was frustrated that many contemporary Jews didn't seem to appreciate the simple but evident signs of the times. They wanted signs and wonders, but ignored what was in front of them.

Why are we so stiff necked? Instead of seeing ordinary kindness as a sign of the kingdom, we seek what seems grand and extraordinary. It is as if only the extraordinary adequately praises God. Look at our history. One path we have taken is to vision the extraordinary out of sacred scripture. The Church has been quick to find support in "nature" for biblical understandings, and then slow to change these understandings. This has become a part of how our faith tradition tells its story. Who is this God of ours, and how did he bring us into the picture?

We knew nothing, and presumed the Bible could tell us something. We saw an understanding of nature in Genesis, but in retrospect it makes more sense to reverse the logic. The understanding which we seek can be informed by the natural world, which is God's "book" as well. But we are impatient as well as stiff necked. We knew we were loved by God, and that this love was personal. We were central to creation. Should not nature confirm this truth? Aristotle's Earth centered view of the universe not only confirmed our centrality, but it was also authoritative, and reigned for more than a thousand years as part of the Christian story. And so entrenched was this concept that evidence to the contrary was not well received. Galileo suffered under house arrest at the end of his life for advocating the Copernican heliocentric view. It was not until John Paul II that the incident received a formal apology from the Vatican.

How are we to avoid such embarrassments? If Tolstoy is correct, an obvious suggestion is that our faith would be better served if we refrained from forming an opinion, so that when the time is right the heart will be open. This is perhaps unrealistic, since faith is always seeking understanding and for that purpose uses whatever tools are available at the time. In the early Church the teachings of Aristotle on nature seemed reliable, in particular his conclusion that the Earth stood at the center of the universe. It is only later that we have discovered otherwise, but as the Church in Galileo's time found, stories tied to faith are difficult to change. When the stories were developed we didn't have the clarity we now have about science. St. Augustine understood the problem, and advised caution about reading truths about "nature" into faith stories, but once these stories are "received" by the community what can be done? Galileo bore the brunt of that resistance to new ideas.

Is there any realistic alternative for dealing with science in our faith stories? Or are we condemned to being a "stiff necked people" who misunderstand their Christianity, as Tolstoy complained? Just as surely as we are here not to escape from this world but to act lovingly in it, so too our understanding of this world should inform our faith. We probably have to live with the difficulties, and be willing to eat crow from time to time when yet something more about "this world" tells us that we have misunderstood our Christianity. Tolstoy's lament will always be with us.

With this as preface, I now venture into what "this world" is telling us about the evolution of life and society, and how social justice is an integral part of that unfolding.

TO BE CONTINUED

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Part 2: From Kindness to Social Justice

Easter Interlude: Good News, Bad News

According to St. Augustine there is only one miracle, that of creation, with its corollary of re-creation through the Resurrection of Christ. Creation continues to unfold and inspire awe within us. As of late, the size and scope of God's creation is very far beyond what Augustine might have imagined.

If we were searching for reasons to be humble, modern cosmology has satisfied our search. What place do we have in the universe? The full scope of our smallness, our insignificance in light of the physics of the cosmos, is astounding. It suggests we look at our place in a different way.

The "different way" is provided by Jesus Christ. Christ is our comfort. It is not a cold and lifeless cosmos that we are small within. The reality is much more interesting. We simply have not had the conceptual tools to see how interesting it is.

The bedrock of our comfort is what we see of Christ in others. There is a symmetry here. The small kindnesses of everyday life are the waters of a bath whose warmth engulfs what might otherwise be a cold and lifeless cosmos. As small as we are, we are connected by these small kindnesses.

Do we know who we are? We are children of a loving God. Why do we exist? To love one another. But what is our reason for being? Why does anything exist? Love is sharing itself with independent beings who image that Love by loving one another. The scope of that Love is in some sense incidental, because knowing who we are means loving one another concretely, notwithstanding our limitations and the limitations of our vision. There is no magic, just love.

We care beyond ourselves, and grieve that the world is not a better place. Some small ache within us calls us to do more but gently accepts what little we do and just as gently persists in calling for more.

The small kindnesses given and received keep this ache alive. Somehow we fathom that we are one.

We often speak of the Christ event as God breaking into the world. But is not Christ also Jesus the human being breaking out of this world? There is a symmetry here. Christ's Rising is real. It is palpable, and we experience it again at every Eucharist. It demonstrates that reality in its fullness is one. We are waking to that reality. Death is but a transitional phase as we continue to share in Love's existence. God is not a being having attributes of power and might. These are attributes of human construction, reflecting our understanding of how life in our less than perfect society works. More simply put, Love is. The "I" in the "I am" is Love. Love need not be adorned with the baubles and bangles of our understanding. It is good that we retain a sense of mystery about God and about Christ.

Then, to the bad news. The Earth has but a few billion years left. Our sun will burn out and consume us in its final collapse. The cosmos will continue, apparently for at least another hundred billion years. And there are a hundred billion other galaxies in this vast cosmos. There is nothing special about the physics in our small corner of the cosmos. Life is aborning in every corner of God's creation. If the reason for the cosmos is that a loving God is sharing existence, then there are other sentient civilizations elsewhere in the cosmos – probably numbering in the tens or hundreds of billions -- and these will come and go in similar fashion over the next hundred billion years. Some will probably go before they see the meaning and the possibility of social justice. Some -- perhaps us -- will go before they are able to accomplish social justice.

Change -- sometimes violent change -- is the engine of evolution toward independent beings able to love one another. The asteroid impact of sixty-five million years ago appears to have been definitional for our own existence, for it created a void in the ecosystem where the dinosaurs had ruled, allowing mammals to flourish and primates to develop.

And then there was some accident, some defective muscle gene that had the fortunate side effect of allowing our primate brains to expand.

This discovery was made by a researcher looking for a genetic understanding of muscular dystrophy. He found that other primates did not have this defective gene, which affected muscles operating the jaw. But these muscles in apes are very strong and tie to the back of the head. Apparently, these muscles develop quickly in apes after birth, preventing further expansion of the skull.

So, could our vaunted intelligence be some sort of accident? Our ancestors acquired a defective gene controlling jaw muscles, which had the practical effect of allowing the cranial bones to continue growing after birth, thereby accommodating additional evolutionary changes that gave us bigger and more complex brains. And with bigger and more complex brains we found ourselves able to learn from generation to generation, to build from one generation to the next upon what had been learned before.

We take this collective learning for granted today, but this is the mechanism that has placed our own evolution on a new path, branching off from the biological track. The biological track made adaptation a very slow process. With collective learning we find ourselves able to adapt more rapidly, and the pace of our adaptation is accelerating.

But will we be able to adapt to the next cataclysmic event? It is not the several billion years left to earth that sets our time frame, although that window will indeed close eventually? Nor do we have the luxury of a time window measured by the next asteroid impact, which could be tens of millions of years off.

Shorter term cataclysms are predictable. Two are of particular interest, one from the Earth itself and another from the cosmos. The Earth is its own heat engine. We have a molten iron core whose currents are ultimately responsible for earthquakes and volcanoes. We experience earthquakes and volcanoes with some regularity. They are unpleasant realities, Haiti being one of the most recent.

The good news within the bad news of Haiti ought not to be overlooked. We see ourselves rising to meet this tragedy. This is not surprising, if we assume that the reason for creation in the first place is that a loving God is sharing existence with beings who are independent and able to image God by loving one another. Cosmic evolution has proceeded through a succession of adaptations, first those of physics, then those of biology, and now those of collective learning. The good that we are doing in Haiti may be viewed as an extension to our larger collective lives, of the small kindnesses that grace our individual lives. It is not a perfect adaptation, by any means, but our collective helping of others – an aspect of social justice – seems to fit within a larger creation story.

But the earthquake in Haiti is only the most recent example of a changing Earth that may sorely test our capacity to adapt. The geophysics of this cauldron upon whose relatively cool surface we live has more to tell us. We are familiar with volcanoes, which are fissures in the Earth's crust through which molten rock from the interior escapes. But the picture is more complex. There are a dozen or so places around the globe where the fissures do not come to the surface but instead build up a large pool of molten material relatively near the surface, like an aneurism. Periodically, the aneurism breaks. This break is called a supervolcano. The last supervolcano occurred about seventy-five thousand years ago. The crater from this event is now Lake Toba in Indonesia. This lake is a hundred kilometers long and forty kilometers wide. It dwarfs the crater of Krakatoa or any other ordinary volcano.

The volcanic ash from this explosion covered a quarter of the planet. A blanket of sulfuric acid entered the Earth's atmosphere, blocking out the sun and suddenly cooling the atmosphere, causing mass extinctions of plants and animals. There were dramatic consequences in Africa, where our human ancestors suffered a defining survival event that narrowed the human gene pool and reduced the number of *homo sapiens* to about ten thousand of breeding age, concentrated in coastal areas supported by fishing. Within about ten thousand years after this adaptive survival, our ancestors left Africa and expanded around the world.

Of the dozen or so known supervolcano sites, several are in the United States. One sits under Yellowstone Park and is the source of the geysers and bubbling mud pots that contribute to the sights and sounds of the park. This supervolcano erupted 2.1 million years ago, 1.3 million years ago, and most recently 600 thousand years ago. The caldera from these eruptions covered the western two thirds of what is now the United States.

Not to worry, however. Geologists tell us that we are likely to receive warnings of hundreds if not thousands of years before the next supervolcanic explosion of Yellowstone. But it will be a catastrophe the likes of which human society as we

know it has not witnessed. Will we be ready? Will our adaptive capabilities rise to meet this challenge? Will our society become sufficiently aware of this challenge that the impending future will serve to prompt us to an adequate adaptation? Will an adequate adaptation depend upon an improved capacity for public discourse, a capacity not evident in the recent debate over health care reform?

But a supervolcano is not the only possible cataclysm in our future. About thirteen thousand years ago a large comet struck the earth. The cosmos is a violent place. The comet was large enough to have a severe impact upon the ecology of the Earth, causing a sudden and dramatic drop in temperature that killed much plant life and, as a consequence, wiped out many very large animals (the wooly mammoth, the saber tooth tiger, the giant sloth) who were then at the top of the food chain.

By that time *homo sapiens* was the sole survivor of the genus *homo*. But the further extinction of larger animals caused by the comet left a hole in the ecosystem into which humans could expand. Perhaps we would have expanded anyway, super predators that we were capable of being, but the struggle may have taken much longer and left a harsher mark upon our soul. As it was, with other large competitors eliminated, within a few thousand years humankind had begun on a course of domestication of plants and animals leading to agriculture, cities, and eventually civilization as we know it.

How likely is another comet? Is it more or less likely than an asteroid? Neither is as predictable as a supervolcano, but any of these cataclysms will test our capacity to adapt to change.

These prospects place in perspective the more obvious challenges of human existence. As individuals, we die. Earthquakes and volcanoes periodically wreck havoc not only upon the landscape but upon entire cities. Pompeii was entombed in volcanic debris in 79 AD. The Lisbon Earthquake of 1755 killed tens of thousands of people and prompted Voltaire to write *Candide*.

Why such destruction? Why was death visited upon these particular people? Will you and I face some similar accident of nature? Where is God in all this? Rousseau argued that Lisbon was simply reaping the fruits of the vice of city life, providing a lesson in favor of a simpler existence closer to nature. Voltaire's faith in God was forever shaken.

The solace of the Risen Christ is not in God's attention to the arrows that fly by day. The early Church found it necessary to explain the Crucifixion in grand terms, as an atonement. Perhaps a simpler understanding of our salvation is that Jesus, our brother and example, is Risen notwithstanding the arrows that fly by day. There is hope for us regardless of what arrows come our way. For life eternal we need only be concerned about living as Christ lived, pouring ourselves out for one another.

Our spiritual life is subject to adaptive pressures similar to -- though on a much shorter time scale than -- the forces of change that crafted our biological evolution. Christ said "love one another." In this, he repeated what we know from the small kindnesses of everyday life. We have a larger life than is encompassed by our span on Earth, as Christ's Resurrection reminds us.

It is not whether Pompeii happens to us. It is how our kindness flowers when Pompeii happens. Our time here may be short, but the joyful prospect of continuing kindness is given to us by the Resurrection. Truly, we are saved from our own spiritual sloth by the continuing unfolding of the mystery that is the Resurrection.

We often fight change. Yet the unfolding story of the cosmos suggests that we are here because of change. If God's creation is an example to us, perhaps we are better advised to embrace the rhythm of this unfolding. And there is a rhythm to it. It is not simply "change," but a pattern of adaptation coupled to periods of stability, followed by change that is novel and unexpected.

The Resurrection is itself a novelty of this kind, and the rituals of the Easter season are a stable comfort for souls made weary by the stresses of a none too stable existence. Across the country and across the world we are not of the same mind about the mixed blessings of change.

But the rhythm of the cosmos is both inexorable and pregnant with the joy of the Resurrection.

Are we ready for our next novelty?

TO BE CONTINUED

Theology for a Small Planet

A collection of essays by Clyde Christofferson © 2009-2010

Part 2: From Kindness to Social Justice

B. Life and Society

Physicists tell us that the cosmos is winding down, inevitably getting colder and colder. This is the meaning of the Second Law of Thermodynamics, as expressed in the phrase "entropy is increasing."

Is this the cosmic equivalent of what we recognize on Ash Wednesday: "dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return"? Is the cosmos a cold and dusty place, or at least headed in that direction?

Were that the case, one might suppose that God's creation is going in the wrong direction. Or, perhaps as logically, one might doubt the wisdom of ascribing such a wrong headed creation to a loving God. If we cannot make sense of cosmic entropy, what sense is there in the notion of God the Creator?

The reality is much more interesting than that. Even at the level of pure physics it now appears that the total mass-energy of the universe (a number of kilograms with fifty-six zeroes behind it) is exactly balanced by a negative quantity of the same scale. The sum is zero, as if God had taken nothing and split it in two to create the universe.

Something strange is going on, and we are just recently (in the last fifty years) getting our arms around it. It is becoming clear that "evolution" is not the exclusive province of biology. The cosmos is evolving, and the progress of that evolution is evident in physics as well as biology. The physics evolution began first, and the biological evolution could not begin until the physics evolution had reached a certain point.

Furthermore, this evolution appears to have an integral connection to entropy. Yes, the universe may be winding down on average, but there appear to be windows of time and pockets of space where the stuff of the universe – in its then current evolutionary form – heats up to create new things and then cools down so as to preserve the new things that were created. This has a sort of "ratchet" effect, with each new creative stage having a period of stability because of cooling. Because of the interaction in these stages between heating up and cooling down the term "thermoentropic" seems appropriate. It also seems appropriate to describe the new creation at each stage as a "thermoentropic novelty." And each of these stages is circumscribed by a "thermoentropic window" of time and takes place within a "thermoentropic pocket" in space. These terms fit most easily with physics, but can be applied metaphorically to the stages of biological evolution.

Looking at cosmic evolution in this way leads to an obvious question: what is next after biology? And then what? There is creativity and novelty all along the way. Perhaps we are deceived by the physics, which points to a dead end. Stay tuned.

Clearly, it's not all physics, by any means. And yet even the physics shows an evolutionary progression, from energy to quarks to basic particles like protons and electrons to a series of more complex chemical elements. This greater complexity has developed within limited windows of space and time, consistent with increasing entropy of the universe as a whole.

When we hear the term "evolution," we often think of Charles Darwin and the development of biological organisms. Darwin's study of the biological evidence available to him from his long journey aboard H.M.S. Beagle in the 1830s led him to conclude that changes in the environment, coupled with scarce resources, led to a struggle in which those species best adapted to the changes survived and produced more offspring. And over long periods of time, an accumulation of these adaptations resulted in different species. Darwin's name for this process was "natural selection," a term which the audience for his 1859 book *On the Origin of Species* understood as something akin to the breeding of cattle and horses, which might be called "artificial selection."

The mechanism by which living things change to become different was not understood by Darwin. Gregor Mendel had written a letter to Darwin describing his experiments with peas, and the letter was found in Darwin's papers but without any indication that Darwin had taken notice. Not until Mendel's work was rediscovered some fifty years later did the science of biology find a theory of genes to explain Darwin's process of natural selection. Then, another fifty years later, Crick and Watson discovered the double helix structure of the DNA carrying our genes and, after another fifty years, the entire human genome had been mapped.

DNA has a history of its own, a very long history as it turns out. DNA is so old that all multi-celled living things are related. We joke about having 98 percent of our genes in common with Chimpanzees. But we have 50 percent of our genes in common with trees, and bananas. When you eat a banana, you are eating a distant relative.

Actually, there is a curious reason why members of the animal kingdom must consume their biological relatives in order to survive, whereas plants can survive with water and sunlight. The villain of this story – oddly enough – is the oxygen we need to breathe. The basic chemicals needed by all living things – amino acids to make proteins, nucleic acids to make DNA, lipids to make fats and hormones – formed naturally near volcanic vents in the oceans of the early Earth soon after these oceans formed some 3.8 billion years ago. This process was confirmed in 1952 by experiments conducted by Stanley Miller, a graduate student of Nobel Prize winning chemist Harold Urey. Miller added heat and electrical sparks to a combination of methane, ammonia, hydrogen and water.

The key to the experiment was avoiding oxygen, which is highly reactive and quickly destroys amino acids and the other building blocks of life.

The plot thickens. The early Earth had no free oxygen, so amino acids and the other basic chemicals of life formed spontaneously. Through a process that might be called "chemical evolution" more complex organic molecules formed in this oxygen-free environment – somewhat analogous to the way that discrete chemical elements were created in stars. Although all the details are not yet understood, chemical "evolution" builds upon itself through a succession of stable building blocks, eventually combining into more complex molecules. Some of these molecules curled up to form cell-like spheres with semipermeable membranes. Chains of nucleotides developed, perhaps through RNA, into the pair of linked chains we know as DNA, within primitive single cell structures called prokaryotes.

Energy is critical to this story, in several ways. First, energy is a resource. Initial cellular structures got their energy from the Earth's molten core, through volcanic vents. Then some prokaryotic cells migrated to the surface of the ocean, and at some point develop the ability to use another energy resource -- the sun – via photosynthesis. Photosynthesis requires the chlorophyll molecule, which manages a conversion process that combines carbon dioxide and water with sunlight to produce free oxygen and energy storing sugar molecules.

The micro-fossil evidence of algae that use photosynthesis goes back 3.5 billion years, not long after the beginnings of life and the formation of DNA and single celled prokaryotes. The villain of the story – oxygen – starts building up in the atmosphere about 2.5 billion years ago. Over the next billion years or so, as more oxygen becomes available through photosynthesis, the prokaryote population is poisoned – or perhaps starved is a better term – because the amino acids at the base of their food chain were being destroyed by oxygen.

This environmental pressure led to the evolution of a more robust form of cell, the eukaryote, more than a billion years ago. Eukaryotes tend to be much larger than prokaryotes and contain "organelles" for metabolizing oxygen. It appears that that eukaryotes evolved from symbiotic relationships among prokaryote cells hard pressed to survive in the face of oxygen poisoning.

Second, energy – kinetic energy – is also destructive. In prokaryote cells DNA chains live a hard life. They are constantly pummeled, and sometimes broken, by other molecular objects flying around within the cell. Yet DNA has a structure which is able to rebuild itself. The two chains are connected by successive pairs of nucleotide "bases" A, T, C and G (Adenine, Thymine, Cytosine and Guanine). "A" links only with "T" and "C" links only with "G". So when links in the chain are broken off the remaining link looks for a matching "base" within the cell to replace the missing link. The same rebuilding process operates more systematically during reproduction when the DNA chains unzip.

This reconstruction depends upon the presence of the "base" nucleotides and the other "food" for DNA. A cell can be viewed as a container where a solution of these "nutrients" can more efficiently feed the DNA reconstruction process.

In the prokaryotic cell, DNA is unprotected. The reconstruction process continues to repair DNA chains that have been damaged. However, the reconstruction is frequent (because the cell is full of moving objects that collide with the DNA and cause damage) and not always accurate. The result is variation, from daughter cell to daughter cell cloned from the same parent, and – in conventional Darwinian fashion – development of new species of prokaryotic cells.

Something new happens with eukaryote cells. DNA is protected within a nucleus, a new structure

within the cell. This is a much quieter life than the DNA had to endure in prokaryote cells. In a sense, the nucleus provided a relatively "cool" – and therefore more stable – environment for the DNA. This is the positive side of "entropy", which allows development of more complex DNA structures (e.g. DNA chains coiled into long "slinky"-like chromosomes) and more adaptable forms of reproduction. Prokaryote cells simply cloned themselves by splitting. There was some variation (and consequent evolution of new species of prokaryotic cells) because of the constant damage and reconstruction of DNA floating loose within the cell.

Eukaryote cells evolved a much more efficient mechanism for obtaining variation. Instead of simply having a single cell clone itself by splitting, two different cells contribute half their DNA to form a new cell. The resulting cell, like each of the two parent cells, has two sets of chromosomes, one from each parent. But the contribution from each parent is a mix from the grandparents. Each new cell will have a different mix, which is the mechanism for variation from generation to generation.

This method of variation is called "sexual reproduction" and enables more rapid adaptation to the environment. Consequently, eukaryote species proliferated. Eventually – about six hundred million years ago – there developed a further adaptive mechanism, namely, cooperation among cells having the same DNA.

Once discovered, this mechanism quickly radiated in what is known as the Cambrian Explosion of multi-celled organisms. Various genetic lines developed. Of most interest to us as human beings, organisms with backbones developed about 500 million years ago, and some of these migrated from the sea to land about 400 million years ago. Reptiles came 350 million years ago, and the first dinosaurs and mammals about 250 million years ago.

Most large animals, including the dinosaurs, became extinct following an asteroid impact some 65 million years ago. This extinction allowed smaller animals to expand into the environment vacated by the larger animals, and it was during this period that the first primates evolved. For good or ill, it appears that fairly dramatic changes in the environment have been a major factor in driving evolution.

At some point in this evolution we part from chimpanzees. Chimps -- like other animals -- have brains that enable them to adapt over the period of their lives. But chimps appear to have limited ability to transmit what they learn to succeeding generations. In any community of chimps, the learning does not further accumulate after one or two generations. New chimp communities learn their full set of skills in a generation or two, and learn nothing new thereafter. Young chimps learn from their elders, but their elders know no more then their elders before them.

By contrast, each generation of humans benefits from collective learning in the form of adaptations not available to their parents. We take that for granted today, although we tend to focus on technology and are not sure whether such a principle applies to our politics. Alas, we may have to wait for another "thermoentropic novelty" to advance our politics.

Darwin's "natural selection" provided a high level explanation of a mechanism for biological evolution. Organisms that evolved brains were thereby better able to adapt to changes in their environment. By way of analogy, a society with collective learning is better able to adapt: it is able to improve its adaptive tool set over time. Chimpanzees can't do that.

But how does "collective learning" enable this improved adaptive capability? It is perhaps easiest to see this in the advances of science and technology, where the edifice of knowledge is systematically recorded and transmitted, using the language of mathematics and the methods of science. Individual consumers of new technology benefit from this process.

It is said that "history is a great teacher." Over time, our analysis of history has enabled us to understand that which had earlier been ascribed to "gods". For example, the "divine right of kings" gave way to a more candid recognition that we were making our own beds, whether or not we put kings in them.

It is this kind of insight that led Pope Leo XIII to speak about our responsibility for the structures of society in *Rerum Novarum*. In the century since that encyclical Catholic social teaching has fleshed out many of the details of this responsibility. The obligation to critically examine the structures and institutions of society and reform them is termed "social justice."

But viewed from the perspective of cosmic evolution, what is the meaning of "social justice"? Is it not "kindness" writ large on the social fabric?

More on that theme next time.

Theology for a Small Planet

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Part 2: From Kindness to Social Justice

C. Kindness Writ Upon the Social Fabric

Spring is a time of new life, and old habits. One of our old habits is the annual ritual of putting the umbrella in its place in the round table on the deck. The ritual includes connecting a cable that runs under the deck. A blue jay flew out from an eave under the deck, alighted on a tree branch nearby and chirped wildly as if to say "come after me!"

And then I saw why. There was a nest under the eave. The distressed mother thought I might have an interest in her eggs, and sought to distract me. I was delighted to observe nature at work, and fancied that I might have protected this bird's nest had the opportunity presented itself. We are kindred spirits, I thought, as the blue jay chirped away.

Life is full of kindred spirits. There is a story – I think taken from the book *When Elephants Weep* by Jeffrey Masson – about a rhinoceros mother in distress because her calf was caught in mud at a river bank. Adding to her distress, a herd of elephants approached. The lead female elephant came to the river bank and reached out her trunk to pull the calf out of the mud. The mother rhino did not react well, fearing the worst. But the other elephants blocked the rhino from charging while the rescue continued.

Nature, of course, is not all sweetness and light. Far from it. The blue jay and the rhino each had responses for protecting their young against predators, responses which, over the course of evolution, had acquired the status of habit. After the successful rescue of her calf, perhaps the rhino had a sense of kindred spirit with the elephant.

The mixed blessings of nature are evident in the details of our human condition as well, although we tend to see human failings rather than the unfolding of nature in the workings of society. I watched a Ken Burns' film about Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, and the long struggle leading to the 19th Amendment giving women the right to vote. In the early days of the struggle advocates looked to the "equal protection" clause of the 14th Amendment, and challenged the law in order to bring a case to the Supreme Court. Anthony actually voted in Rochester NY, because the local registrars allowed her to do so, but then she was tried and convicted of casting a vote unlawfully. But she never paid the $100 fine imposed, and the authorities did not push the matter against such a notable figure as Susan B. Anthony.

But in Missouri, a woman was denied registration, and brought suit on that account under the 14th Amendment. Hopes within the suffrage movement were high. But the Supreme Court ruled against the would-be Missouri voter on the ground that registration to vote was not established by the Constitution but rather was a matter for the states. Whereupon southern states proceeded to use registration restrictions to disenfranchise black males, the very group whose right to vote was explicitly protected by the 15th Amendment. There was a painful irony in this sad outcome, because gender had been deliberately excluded from the language of the15th Amendment in order to assure that black males would be able to vote.

Change comes slowly. What is right and kind and just – hope for "kindred spirits" – does not always prevail, at least not at first. Women did not obtain the right to vote until fifty years after the 15th Amendment. When we use the term "Darwinian" to describe evolution, the reference is to biological change. But the history of change in the cosmos is much larger than biology. Viewed from that larger perspective, biological change is a relative latecomer to a progression that begins with physics. And why would we suppose that biology is the end of this progression? There are kindred spirits all around us, ready and willing to help make this world a better place. As the habits of the blue jay and the rhino imply, of course, the hope for kindred spirits – that the lion may lie down with the lamb – is a cosmic work in progress. It is an aspiration that is "present" sometimes, but more often "not yet."

These are the signs of the times. Something more than biology is afoot in the land, but the scope of change viewed from the cosmic perspective suggests that "kindred spirits" – brought together by kindness – are part of a cosmic drama still unfolding. Kindness is all around us, although the lion often has its way with the lamb. The lion may have its way but, ever so slowly, hope for "kindred spirits" becomes an expectation that fills the air, seeking to crowd out the harshness and unkindness to which some of our lions have become habituated.

Kindness is the cousin of the cosmic background radiation that came to the stage much earlier. The cosmic background radiation has told us much, and continues to tell us more, about the origin and composition of the universe. It is a very big universe, with tens of billions of galaxies each with trillions of stars. And the cosmos is what scientists call "isotropic" – no matter where you look, no matter how distant, you will find essentially the same stuff. The cosmic background we see here on planet Earth provides a window on the Big Bang, and that window is the same everywhere. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the progression to sentient life – and more – is simply a part of the unfolding of the cosmos. This unfolding is "isotropic" throughout an expanse that is so vast as to beggar the imagination.

If that is what the cosmic background radiation tells us, what do "kindred spirits" tell us? They also tell us that we are not alone, but in a more immediate and palpable sense. Furthermore, these kindred spirits provide examples and models. What we see *resonates* deep in our heart. Amid the storm, something good makes its presence felt.

Not that we can wish away the storm. Not all spirits are kindred. The lamb and the lion are wary bedfellows. Where is goodness – this something that makes its presence felt – going? Wouldn't it have been easier just to get there – to have been put there – rather than suffer through this cosmic journey? That is an inquiry – about pain and suffering – for another day.

For now, we have kindred spirits and we have change. Change has a history, and we can call this history "cosmic evolution." There is a physics perspective on this history, going back to the Big Bang. There is a chemistry perspective on this history, which overlaps with the physics perspective that began earlier, and serves as a preface for a biological perspective that began later. All these perspectives are continuing, and further perspectives await our experience.

Indeed, without our inquisitive minds we would have none of these perspectives. From a strictly chronological point of view, since the sciences of physics, chemistry and biology were some time in coming, human history itself was probably first to benefit from human inquiry and a sensible arrangement of the evidence. Stories of the tribe were passed on orally at first, using the metrics of poetry as memory aids. Written language made possible not simply transmission of accumulated knowledge and wisdom but a more efficient and reliable accumulation of what prior generations had learned. Learning and understanding became collective activities, enabling succeeding generations to build upon what had gone before. This attribute of human society has been called "collective learning."

We take for granted that the individual human being is able to reflect upon the self, examine past behavior and resolve to do better. It is less obvious how this works with respect to social structures and institutions that have developed over time. Where is collective learning? Our institutions seem to learn more slowly than we do as individuals, at least about how to be "kindred spirits."

Machiavelli thought he was simply describing current political realities in *The Prince*, but he was roundly criticized by his contemporaries for accepting statecraft as it is and failing to hold a torch for what it ought to be. There is something in the human spirit that calls for what is right even though politics does not deliver. A few hundred years later Frederick II of Prussia wrote an idealistic paper opposing the guidance provided by Machiavelli, yet his behavior as King of Prussia seemed to fit the Machiavellian model, as noted by Voltaire.

There is something Darwinian about how our social and political institutions behave. In nature we understand why the lamb does not lie down with the lion. The lion is hungry and the lamb is food. It is nature, after all. We do not really expect nature to be otherwise. But does not Machiavelli's *Prince* reflect the same expectation? Our institutions appear to evolve as animals evolve, with the prize of survival going to the most powerful and the fleetest of foot, as Darwin taught.

But is that forever? Is our individual sense of "kindred spirits" in vain? Or is it just a matter of patience – agonizingly frustrating patience. A cosmic perspective is all well and good, but does not the cosmos unfold too slowly to provide much hope for the present?

Actually, no. There is reason to hope that the pace is picking up. Look more carefully at the implications of "collective learning." Clearly, the pace of science and technological change has been rapidly accelerating. But the relative success of science should not blind us to the considerable growth in our understanding of our social and political institutions.

One emblematic example will suffice. There was a time in the not too distant past when kings were believed to rule by divine right. Rule by a monarch seemed a fixture of nature, whether justified by the practical reason of Hobbes or the concern of the Church for stability. In any case, it was the accepted wisdom. Several revolutions – our own included – served as a test of more democratic forms. There was enough hope kindled by these tests, whether or not the tests always proved successful, that today popular determination of governmental forms is the preferred norm.

The lesson here is not that universal democracy is a proper objective, but rather that our institutions have been evolving. Machiavelli was simply being descriptive, and "collective learning" had not in his time made enough progress to offer "kindred spirits" much relief.

It is at this point that the scope of cosmic evolution is, at least, suggestive. It is fair to see raw power as the driving rationale for statecraft at the time of *The Prince*. Although everyday kindnesses undoubtedly played a role in the society that existed below the level of statecraft, kind princes did not often survive. We needn't mimic Pollyanna to go to the next step. The next step is not sweetness and light. The next step is simply a general recognition that our current institutions have a mixed heritage, and that we are becoming more capable of evaluating and reforming these institutions. These institutions often have a pedigree that traces their practices and functions to the service of power, or whatever else was conducive to survival when these practices and functions evolved. We are becoming better able to reflect upon the now accepted structures of these institutions and ask how they can be changed to serve the ends of justice rather than of power. We can ask these questions because these structures are not untouchable – as if they were the work of God or nature – but are human constructions that can be evaluated and reformed.

And this is precisely what Pope Leo XIII did in encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 with respect to societal institutions affecting labor. Challenging institutions that generally operated to provide a more stable society was something of a novelty for the institutional Church, but the line of teaching begun with *Rerum Novarum* and affirmed several times since (most recently in John Paul II's *Centessimus Annus* in 1991) has persisted. This is the Catholic social teaching we call "Social Justice."

It is a worthy and challenging project. Pollyanna need not apply. This is not the errant idea of crackpot "do-gooders" tilting at *realpolitic* windmills. It is more fundamental, reflecting kindness being writ upon the social fabric.

We are only beginning along this road, and have much to learn about how evaluation and reform works. In the terms of cosmic evolution, we are looking for mechanisms or processes which are reliable and stable. We have not yet found them. It is no accident that social justice is the Church's "best kept secret."

There are some interesting experiments that can be construed as searching for such mechanisms or processes. David Mog told us about America*Speaks*, which has for several years been promoting a methodology for sustained citizen engagement and public deliberation. Click **here** for further information. David recently participated as a table captain in Philadelphia, one of 19 cities across the country where citizens discussed what to do about the federal budget.

Several NOVA and PAX members are participating in "listening sessions" leading up to a conference scheduled for June 2011 in Detroit under the auspices of the American Catholic Council. The conference will have keynote addresses by a number of figures including Hans Kung and Joan Chittister. Click **here** for further information.

In the broad context of cosmic evolution, the notion that our institutions may have a history and baggage from times when practices and structures evolved more in response to power than to justice provides not only an understanding of the way we were but insight into how we can be better, more accommodating to "kindred spirits." Church social teaching is a marker in the historical sand.

And this marker inevitably leads to evaluation and reform of this Church of ours, which is – after all – an institution. Vatican II may be understood as part of that reform. But there is more to come, surely, as we develop stable and reliable mechanisms for evaluation and reform of institutions generally.

How might such developments affect the structure and practices of a 2000 year old institution?

More on that next time.

Theology for a Small Planet

A collection of essays by Clyde Christofferson © 2009-2010

Part 2: From Kindness to Social Justice

D. Social Justice and the Institutional Church

Catholic social teaching is often referred to as "the Church's best kept secret." A Google of this phrase coupled with the words "Catholic," "social" and "justice" produces over seven hundred hits. When Pope Leo XIII called for reform of the traditional social structures of labor in *Rerum Novarum* in 1891, he was fulfilling not only a promise but also breaking new ground.

The promise of justice is ancient, but theologians rely on a slightly more recent formulation by Thomas Aquinas. Ken Himes, in a series of talks on Catholic Social Teaching at St. Mary's Church in Fairfax in 1999, showed how changes in understanding have affected our views of social justice. He first described *Rerum Novarum* as an effort to address two excesses and to walk a path between them. On the one hand, *laissez faire* capitalism carried freedom to excess. On the other socialism in its pursuit of equality was Godless and denied a right moral order, leading to class warfare. The preeminent value is human dignity, not freedom (as envisioned by capitalism) or equality (as envisioned by socialism). Leo XIII emphasized the importance of social charity as a response to the excesses of capitalism and socialism.

Ken then returned to Thomas Aquinas for a framework for understanding the term "social justice." Aquinas defined three aspects of justice. First, justice should be blind as between individuals. That is to say, relationships (primarily in the nature of contracts) should be *commutative*. Second, principles of justice must be applied to the relationship between the individual and the group: the individual should obey just laws, and had a duty to contribute to the group through work. Ken called this *legal* justice. Third, there is the concept of *distributive* justice, which refers to the duties of the group toward the individual: a fair sharing of both the benefits and burdens of life in community. This requires an assessment of the needs that each individual has a right to have met, and imposes upon the state the duty to satisfy a certain set of basic needs before allowing the marketplace to operate to satisfy needs beyond this basic set. This produces a "relative equality" but demonstrates that justice trumps market freedom at and below some level of basic needs.

But something was missing in the latter half of the 19th century. Justice in practice did not measure up to the Thomistic framework. This is why Leo XIII had to break new ground. By 1891 the social sciences had demonstrated that much of what we had heretofore accepted as being beyond our control was indeed subject to deliberate efforts to change, so that injustices could be corrected. The institutions of society are not the work of God or of nature, but are the work of human beings, and can be changed by human beings.

Thus the concept of "social justice" is an addition to the three forms of justice articulated by Thomas Aquinas. We need to create new institutions of society so that *commutative*, *legal* and *distributive* justice in fact come to pass. The state has a positive role in this formulation, to regulate society toward the common good.

But is not the Church an institution of society, and should not Catholics examine and reform this institution? This is not what Leo XIII had in mind in *Rerum Novarum*. John XXIII talked about opening the Church to fresh winds, and Vatican II took steps in that direction. In recent decades a more conservative view has become ascendant in the Vatican, and it is not clear how this struggle will turn out.

But what, then, of Catholic social teaching? Is the institutional Church an exception? There are some who would argue, yes, the Church is an exception because it is guided by the Holy Spirit. Surely, the Body of Christ is preserved from error. On the other hand, is not the laity included in the Body of Christ? Are not we all the People of God? The documents of Vatican II (*Lumen Gentium* in particular) talk about the People of God first, as the inclusive communion. The Magisterium is discussed thereafter, as a part of that broader communion.

The problem the institutional Church faces is that it is only slowly coming to grips with its own evolution in history. The idea that God's creation is through evolution on a cosmic scale is still a fairly new idea, even in scientific circles. The implications of the idea have not yet taken hold in the public imagination. And the Church is still in thrall to an understanding of reality that places revelation and science in separate categories. Pope Paul VI was

happy to recognize Stephen Hawking for showing that the universe had a beginning in the Big Bang, but this was taken as a confirmation of Genesis, not as a challenge to the traditional understanding of divine intervention in the world.

As it turns out the same evidence that confirmed the Big Bang has provided a story of an evolving cosmos. This story is not at all like Genesis. Furthermore, the narrative of cosmic evolution is so comprehensive that it suggests a view of God's presence in the world that is at the same time more subtle and more awesome than the traditional view.

It will take the institutional Church some time to adapt. St. Augustine advised that interpretation of scripture should take care to avoid the embarrassment of conflict with what was understood about the natural world, but those were simpler times when relatively little was known about the natural world. The challenge of following Augustine's advice would become more difficult, as the Galileo episode showed. The Church supported a picture of the universe favored by Aristotle, where the earth was at the center and movement of celestial bodies was in perfect circles, a sign of God's perfection. The mathematical gyrations of Ptolemy preserved that picture as data accumulated about the motion of the planets. Ptolemy constructed an elaborate system of circles upon circles in order to preserve the appearance of perfection of planetary orbits.

When the Roman Empire in the West disintegrated, the Church filled the vacuum. When Roman civil institutions collapsed, the Church provided the glue that held society together. The Christian view of how individuals and society were to behave became not only the standard but the essential line of defense between order and disorder. Challenges to the Church's world view were viewed as a threat to the stability of society. And, as Machiavelli observed, stability is the first responsibility of those who would govern.

In this context, even Copernicus and Galileo were influenced by the reigning world view of God's celestial perfection. Although Copernicus placed the sun at the center, he held to circular orbits. By the time of Galileo the data were difficult to reconcile with circular orbits, and Galileo knew this. He nonetheless maintained that the orbits must be circular: heavenly perfection required it.

Politics is the art of accommodating the reigning world view. Copernicus had the benefit of a judicious publisher who found a theologian (Osiander) who wrote a substitute preface to *De Revolutionibus* that suggested that it was for the convenience of simplifying the calculations only, and not making a statement about reality, that the planetary orbits were described using the sun as their center.

Galileo was not nearly so politic. In his *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief Systems of the World*, he put the astronomical views of his former friend, now Pope Urban VIII, into the mouth of a simple-minded character with the name Simplicio. This indiscretion – characteristic of Galileo – led to his trial by inquisition and house arrest.

Yet, apart from this impolitic behavior, the position of Church officials (notably Cardinal Bellarmine, who had dealt with Galileo on the Copernican issue fifteen years earlier) was that further research had to be done to confirm or condemn heliocentrism. Thus, the practical implementation of Augustine's advice placed the burden of proof upon those who would challenge the Church's worldview. This makes some logical sense because no one's interest would be served if the Church abandoned its long held position only to find that the new view had not been adequately vetted.

This cautionary experience with Galileo provides a realistic model for how the Church's position is likely to evolve in response to the still developing story of cosmic evolution. It is important to emphasize how recent is our understanding of cosmic evolution. A hundred years ago the general consensus among scientists – even Albert Einstein – was that the universe was in a steady state condition, as it had always been and always would be. Indeed, this was the view of Aristotle.

So ingrained was this preconception that when it appeared that solutions to Einstein's field equations of General Relativity could include both expanding and collapsing universes, Einstein nipped that interpretation in the bud by adding a "cosmological constant" to the equations. Only after Hubble's discovery in the late 1920s that distant galaxies were receding at a speed proportional to their distance did Einstein recognize that the cosmological constant was "the biggest mistake of my life."

And other scientists persisted in believing in a steady-state universe until discovery of the cosmic background radiation in the mid-1960s. If the scientific community is cautious about such matters,

who can expect the institutional Church to be otherwise?

On the other hand, change in response to an evolutionary view of creation will not be without precedent. The Galileo episode is one form of precedent. The history of Catholic social teaching itself moves the Church toward recognition of the human role in evolution. Leaders of the Church (beginning with St. Paul) accommodated Church teaching to the reality of slavery, but the Church has come to see the error of this accommodation. The position of the Church on the "divine right of kings" went through a similar evolution. Pope John Paul II, to his credit, acknowledged similar mistakes with regard to Galileo and with regard to the Jews.

If *Rerum Novarum* was a milestone in 1891, what the Church needs, more than a hundred years later, is another milestone of the same kind – a recognition that the institutional structures of the Church are made by human beings, not by God. *Rerum Novarum* did not come out of the blue, but had been prepared by a growing consensus in the social science community. What is currently missing is a framework for developing such a consensus with regard to the institutional structures of the Church.

For the most part, the Church has tried to place itself above the fray, taking the high road of principle and leaving practical implementation of changes in institutional structure to the political process. The Church has weighed in politically on traditional moral behavior issues, as with abortion and stem cell research, but these issues are more about institutional positions rather than about changes in the structure of institutions.

Ironically, if the Church applies Catholic Social Teaching to itself as an institution it will be in a better position to advocate social justice in secular institutions. This is not because "setting an example" improves credibility, but rather because change is hard and practical experience helps, especially first hand experience from the point of view of the institution being changed. We are still in the early stages of making social justice a reality. The problem addressed by *Rerum Novarum* was that justice was not happening; the structures and institutions of society were standing in the way. In order for justice to happen, it would be necessary to change these structures and institutions. Catholic Social Teaching provides objectives, but doesn't tell particular institutional realities how to get from here to there. What is needed are reasonably stable and reliable mechanisms for getting from here to there.

What better way for the Church to start down this path than to use its own institutional structure as a guinea pig. Needless to say, the notion of institutional Church as guinea pig is a hard sell. It doesn't have to be put exactly that way, of course. But it's a hard sell nonetheless. The gathering next June in Detroit sponsored by the American Catholic Conference may serve as a sounding board for the kinds of injustices that call for changes in Church structure. But that doesn't change the underlying dynamic: the institutional Church as guinea pig is a hard sell.

That said, allow me to go out on a limb and say where I think the Church is going to end up, and why this place will be not only dramatically different but also much better adapted to the unity for which Christ prayed.

Recently I watched Ken Burns' film "Mark Twain." *Huckleberry Finn* began as a sequel to *Tom Sawyer*, but Twain put it aside while he took a trip down the Mississippi. There he saw what had happened to the Civil War legacy of freedom for slaves. When he returned he recast *Huckleberry Finn* as a commentary on American life that has become a classic. At one point in the book Huck considers writing a letter to Jim's owner telling her where she can find her runaway slave. Huck wrestles with his impulse to write the letter, because everything he has been taught tells him that he is doing wrong by helping Jim run away. He will surely go to hell if he doesn't right this wrong, so that Jim gets back to his proper place. But in his wrestling Huck comes back to this person Jim, whom he has come to know, and he throws the letter away. "Well, then, I'll just go to hell."

Huck's struggle serves as a metaphor for current times with the Church. The Church is divided as Huck is divided. Justice issues – for silenced theologians, for women, for a lay role in governance – are adrift on a raft. What will we do? The authority of the Church's past weighs heavily. But that burden can be lightened if the Church's view of itself is transformed to reflect an evolutionary view of God's handiwork.

TO BE CONTINUED

Theology for a Small Planet

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The Down Side of Hope

These are trying times. For those whose hearts burn for justice and human dignity, the direction of events seems wrong. The elation of recent years at a politics of hope has more recently been deflated. The entire world is in a funk. Painfully, this funk echoes the longer running retrenchment of the institutional Church from the promise of Vatican II.

What is going on?

The standard progressive accommodation to these events might be "two steps forward, one step back." Maintain a stiff upper lip and keep pushing. Those of less optimistic persuasion suspect the trajectory might be "three steps back." The myth of Sisyphus presents a depressing image.

There may be a cosmic method to these trials. As these essays have tried to show, there is an unfolding that we are a part of. The universe blows hot and blows cold, not in some aimless sense but toward whatever it is that is embodied by our hopes. The hopes are real; they are a sign. Creation is of a piece, remarkably. And the ups and downs – blowing hot and blowing cold – are the engine of cosmic evolution. In the last fifty years, since confirmation of the Big Bang, we have become witness to a succession of examples of this wayward engine at work.

The wayward engine of ups and downs is most familiar to us in Darwin's process of natural selection, which is different in kind from the physical processes of the Big Bang and star formation. DNA replication produces variation in organisms, and the vicissitudes of nature weed out organisms that are less well adapted. Over time, this process has produced ever more complex creatures, but sometimes changes in the environment have been so large and swift that even the dominant organisms have been unable to adapt. The dinosaurs did not survive a nuclear winter produced by an asteroid sixty-five million years ago, leaving an ecological vacuum filled by mammals and then primates. A comet some thirteen thousand years ago similarly drove many large animals to extinction, making it easier for *homo sapiens* to then become dominant.

But the wayward engine of ups and downs is nothing if not creative. Or, perhaps more accurately, the more complex structures that have developed over time – now including the structures of human civilization – have found new processes of adaptation that build upon, but are different in kind from, Darwin's natural selection.

These processes have the human character written all over them, which is why they are different in kind from natural selection. They have something to do with the small kindnesses of everyday life, which resonate in our hearts. The same resonance accompanies the good that we attempt to do as a community, from the meat loaves and scalloped potatoes at Christ house to our support for the orphanage in Bolivia and dozens of other projects, to the new micro-financing project in Nicaragua.

But how can work like this prevail against Darwinian self interest? Remarkably, kindness is not relegated to the volunteer efforts of church groups – it has made its presence felt in the lion's den, as it were, where competition is fierce. But not without ups and downs. I would describe how this works in terms comparable to Darwinian evolution. In Darwinian evolution

changes in the environment operate to "naturally select" better adapted specimens and species. Applied to our civilization, this process seems to foster the success of behavior described by Machiavelli in *The Prince*. Yet over time there has been improvement, an ever so subtle moderation of the severity of self-interest.

The engine of this improvement is the same thirst for justice and kindness that drives our social action projects. It is a longing that resonates within the human heart, and rejects the boundary of "private charity." It is simply not true that self-interest – the Darwinian premise – trumps all. What happens is that, in its better moments, the community develops structures and practices which not only restrain self-interest but do good for the sake of good. But then circumstances change and the "better moments" pass away. Retrenchment sets in, driving both individuals and the community as a whole to fall back. Justice and kindness seem more distant. The more primitive Darwinian self interest is ascendant, which tends to tear down or obviate structures and practices that had been able to develop and flourish in more accommodating environments.

When more accommodating environments return, *resonance* will generate new or modified structures and practices for justice and kindness, which will be tested by later changes in the environment that again drive both individuals and the community to retrench. The length and depth of the retrenchment will test the resilience of the structures and practices that strive for justice and kindness. And over time this cycle between *resonance* and retrenchment will tend to make justice and kindness structures more resilient, and better able to weather the storms of retrenchment.

For example, the democratic forms of our republic reflect an evolution of this kind over a succession of changes in civilization that cycle between hope and retrenchment. Athenian democracy is an example of a less resilient structure and our current republic embodies more resilient democratic structures. Machiavelli's *The Prince* is often interpreted as a justification for retrenchment, but that misreads the author. Machiavelli was intent upon establishing within Italy the benefits of a republic, and saw a successful prince as a practical step toward that eventual end. Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy* recount the period during the Roman republic when structures more resilient to the purposes of democracy were developed. These structures tried to establish a balance, including elements of all three classical forms of government: democracy, monarchy and aristocracy. The idea of a republic was to use this balance to overcome the tendency of a democracy to degenerate into mob rule, the tendency of a monarchy to degenerate into tyranny, and the tendency of aristocracy to degenerate from rule by the best to rule by the rich.

The American experiment is a balanced republic of this kind. Democratic structures are not in themselves just or kind, although they do respond to the *resonance* of freedom. Freedom does indeed resonate, and for the same reason that justice and kindness resonate: a loving God is sharing existence with <u>independent</u> beings able to comprehend this existence and love one another thereby imaging God. Furthermore, over the long term, democratic structures provide a more resilient and robust foundation for mechanisms, structures and practices that do justice and express kindness.

But structures and practices that do justice and express kindness must

themselves be annealed by changes in the political environmental that cycle from hope to retrenchment. Private charity persists from age to age, but is not adequate to the need. Structures and practices of the general community for justice and kindness, relying upon the powers of the modern state, have been and are being developed. Social programs (typically, first in Europe and then in America) have elements that reflect the *resonance* of justice and kindness in the human heart. The current financial stress is testing these structures and practices, and retrenchment may well occur. More hopeful times will return, and more resilient social programs will develop.

The direction of all this is evident. We are in the palm of God's hands. And yet we are limited creatures, among many such civilizations in the cosmos, and our continued survival is not etched in stone. Our capacity to develop ever more resilient structures and practices for justice and kindness, at the level of the general community as well as individually, will be tested. And our time is limited. Will we reach the parousia of a unity of God's kingdom in heaven and on earth? We can hope, and we can act on that hope. The downside of hope need not discourage us.

What is the role of the institutional Church in this struggle for justice and kindness? In the preceding essay in this series I suggested that Huckleberry Finn's struggle with himself over the slave status of Jim, his companion on a raft down the Mississippi, serves as a metaphor for current times with the Church. The Church is divided as Huck is divided. Justice issues – for silenced theologians, for women, for a lay role in governance – are adrift on a raft.

In recent weeks I have come upon yet another reason for seeing Church governance as off the rails. One of my favorite pastimes is listening to Teaching Company courses, and a short series of twelve lectures on *Understanding Complexity* has provided food for thought concerning the promise of Vatican II. Yes, we are in a period of retrenchment. And yes, this retrenchment will test the resilience of the structures and practices initiated by the Church fathers at Vatican II. We seem to be going nowhere with *Lumen Gentium's* shift toward an emphasis upon the Church as the People of God. Parish and diocesan councils languish in obscurity. Regional synods began with promise but the Vatican pulled them back. *Ut Unum Sint* suggested a reflection on the Petrine ministry, but that inquiry has languished as well.

What those who study complex systems say is that robust and resilient systems emerge from the bottom up, without a script or a plan. And these systems survive by balancing in a middle ground: the individuals within the system are interdependent (but not too much), connected to one another (but not too much), diverse (but not to excess), and learn and adapt (without knowing it all).

There is a history, of course, to the highly centralized structure of the Roman Catholic Church. But the People of God appear to be responding like a complex system, on their own – thank you very much – seeking a *via media* from the bottom up.

The institutional Church could be a more helpful part of this development. Our American heritage of a constitutional form of government – one that understands the excesses of democracy, monarchy and aristocracy – provides a pertinent perspective. The institutional Church need not bury its talents.

But hope has its down side.

TO BE CONTINUED

Theology for a Small Planet

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The Up Side of Evil

Some years ago a nature program – I think it was National Geographic – described the survival struggle between lions and herds of wildebeest on the plains of Africa. The best face upon the process is that the fittest survive, and the lions weed out the weak and the less fit. I vividly recall one scene in the film. A pregnant mare was giving birth in a clump of trees near the herd. A lioness crouching nearby seized the moment and dispatched the vulnerable mare and her half-born calf.

Was the mare among the weak and less fit? It did not make any difference. She was vulnerable. Nature took its course. But I recall feeling great sympathy for the mare, because of her vulnerability. Bad things can happen to good mares; and surely her calf was innocent.

How different is this natural act of brutality from a flood or a fire that also cuts life short? If an earthquake levels a city and kills tens of thousands of people – as did the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 – the scale of the tragedy is large enough to raise questions about the beneficence of a loving God. Voltaire was deeply shaken by the destruction wrought by the Lisbon earthquake, and the occasion focused his acerbic pen on a then popular argument by Leibniz: since God created the world this surely must be "the best of all possible worlds." Voltaire first wrote a poem about the Lisbon earthquake, and then *Candide*, putting Leibniz's theodicy in the mouth of Doctor Pangloss.

The Lisbon earthquake was a catastrophe of the first order. The city was devoutly Roman Catholic and some theologians argued that the appearance must have been deceiving because God was obviously angry. Rousseau argued that the cause of this disaster was the vain mistake of crowding people into cities. A young Immanuel Kant wrote a short book attempting to systematically explain the earthquake in terms of natural causes.

Why do questions about the real presence – or lack of presence – of a loving God occupy the human mind in such circumstances? Another story may shed some light on this question. It begins as a question that might be asked by a small child: why is the sky blue? We look up on a clear day and see a blue canopy. It appears that this blue canopy is indeed "out there," just as the Lisbon earthquake was "out there."

But is the sky blue? I recall two courses during one semester in college that provided an answer to this question. One of these courses included a thin book about the behavior of bees. Bees who found a source of pollen would come back to the hive and do a dance that told other bees how to get to the source of pollen. Researchers found that the bees used the sun as a reference point for these directions. Amazingly, the bees were able to find their way on cloudy days. How could they see the sun?

The second course was a physics course on electromagnetism. Light, of course, is an electromagnetic phenomenon. The professor explained that the sun's rays are filtered in a peculiar way by the ionosphere, a blanket of charged particles that surrounds the earth. Electromagnetic radiation from the sun causes these charged particles to vibrate. And when a charged particle vibrates it gives off electromagnetic radiation of its own. One of our class exercises was to figure out the pattern of this re-radiated light. It turned out that the amount of light re-radiated by a charged particle was proportional to the fourth power of the frequency.

Our eyes have three color cones: blue, green, and yellow-red. Blue is the highest of these frequencies. The eyes of bees are different: bees have cones that detect ultraviolet, which is a higher frequency than blue and – as anyone who gets sunburned on a cloudy day at the beach knows – goes right through clouds. For light re-radiated by the

ionosphere, it's the high frequency cone that matters. The sky looks blue to us because blue is the highest frequency cone we have. And bees can see the sun on a cloudy day because they have an ultraviolet cone – they don't see the clouds.

So the sky is not really blue, it just looks blue to us. It looks ultraviolet to bees. What we thought was "out there" was not really "out there." The ionosphere is "out there" but the blue that we see says more about us than about the color of the sky.

So what about the Lisbon earthquake? Like the ionosphere, the Lisbon earthquake was "out there." But what color was it? It killed a lot of people, and these deaths were also "out there." Voltaire and Rousseau colored the event in their own distinct hues, but color it they did. The wildebeest mare and her calf, as a meal for the hungry lioness, were also "out there." But why did I react the way I did, seeing something wrong and out of order – not for the good of creation – in what happened?

When bad things happen we hope for better things, and these better things resonate in the human heart. It is the same *resonance* that we have for the small kindnesses of everyday life. Only we see what is missing rather than what is present. As Saint Augustine said, evil is the absence of good. As Martin Luther King, Jr., advised, we cannot fight evil directly but must crowd it out by doing good.

We yearn to make this world a better place, and that yearning is no accident. It is a fundamental reflection of who we are, as children of a loving God. Objective events contrary to this yearning – thousands killed by the Lisbon earthquake, the wildebeest mare and her calf being eaten by the hungry lioness – touch us because of who we are.

Arguably, the Lisbon earthquake is merely an act of nature – nothing genuinely evil about it, and not much that human ingenuity could do about it, notwithstanding Rousseau's protest that we get back to nature. Arguably also, the fate of the wildebeest mare and her calf is merely nature taking its course.

There is the old question about whether a tree falling in the forest makes a noise if there is no one there to hear it. We could ask a similar question in reverse: if we did not anguish when bad things happen to good people, would there be a God?

Perhaps the fact that bad things happen to good people says more about how we color the world, from the inside, than about the world "out there." We see evil afoot in the land, and respond by yearning to make this world a better place. And we act on this yearning. This is a sign of life in the human heart. It is a life deeply connected to all of creation, a marvel to behold. We see what can be made better, and we act to make it better. This active living is testimony to the presence of a loving God who is sharing existence with independent beings able to love one another, thereby imaging God.

Just as hope has its down side, evil has its up side.

TO BE CONTINUED

Theology for a Small Planet

A collection of essays by Clyde Christofferson © 2009-2011

Implications of Being a Small Planet – Part 1

Paul (1 Corinthians 13:8-12) *"Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part. When I was a child I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known."*

Einstein was asked, *"When will your theories of physics be accepted?"* He replied, *"When all those who have taught me physics have died."*

If you Google "small planet" a typical entry discusses one of two topics. First, the planet is becoming smaller – we are closer to even our distant neighbors – as transportation and communication technology shrink the separators of distance and time. Second, human beings on the planet are becoming more conscious of the limited resources available, and the need to husband these resources, so that we can all live together in an equitable fashion.

Some entries in this second category discuss the relevance of theology in husbanding our limited resources in an equitable manner. And there are a few entries (perhaps one in five hundred) that place our small planet in relation to a much larger cosmos. There are even some entries that talk about theology in the context of a vast cosmos.

It is this last area that I want to explore in this essay. My starting point is a simple premise: the reason for being of this vast cosmos is that a loving God is sharing existence – and the comprehension of this existence – with independent beings able to love one another and thereby image God. Some have reasoned in the other direction – from evidence in the "book of nature" to the existence (or non-existence) of God, but I have an interest in seeing how the premise plays out in light of our ever growing understanding of how the cosmos came to be and how it is evolving.

The cosmos is huge. The raw mass of the universe in kilograms is on the order of ten raised to the fifty-sixth power. There are perhaps a hundred billion galaxies. Space itself is expanding. We think we have a pretty good idea of what has happened to the universe going back to a very small fraction of the first second after the Big Bang.

Quite remarkably, this vast cosmos is fairly uniform. This uniformity was first observed when the cosmic background radiation was discovered in 1964 – it appeared to be the same in all directions. Subsequent – and more precise – measurements of the cosmic background put a number on this "sameness": no matter where in the cosmos you look, it is the same to within a very small degree. How small? As small as an ant compared to the height of the Empire State Building. The technical term for this is that the cosmos is "isotropic."

This means that in any sufficiently large space (about two hundred million light years across) there will be exactly the same amounts and proportions of all the basic chemical elements and (as evolution goes forward) the building blocks of life (amino acids and the like).

What about life on other planets? Science is looking for evidence in the conventional manner. But a faith oriented premise -- that the cosmos is here in the first place because a loving God is sharing existence – already suggests an answer. If there is life on Earth there is life in abundance throughout the cosmos: wherever life can evolve, it will evolve.

It is of some interest that scientists (under a grant from NASA) recently discovered what they believe to be strange life forms in California's Mono Lake. These life forms appear to have substituted arsenic for phosphorous in their DNA (i.e. their genetic code) and in their ATP (i.e. their energy processing molecule). Apparently, Mono Lake has high levels of arsenic but low levels of phosphorous.

If life is robust and adaptable – as it should be if God is sharing existence – it should not be surprising that evolution would find a substitute for

phosphorous in an environment like Mono Lake. Nor should it be surprising that sentient civilizations like our own are evolving throughout the cosmos. If there were but one such civilization per galaxy that would mean a hundred billion such civilizations, in round numbers.

This God, this Abba that we call our own is – to understate the matter – prolific.

What does this mean for religious explanations for why we are here and where we are going?

I am currently listening to a series of lectures on *Comparative Religion* produced by The Teaching Company. At one point the professor gave an anecdote from his own experience. He was part of a delegation of Christians hosted by a Saudi sheik. The sheik was a devout Muslim and was determined to raise the question whether Christians believed there was only one God, and if so how Jesus Christ could be the Son of God. The discussion was resolved by observing the different ways that Muslims and Christians describe how God provides revelation: for Muslims, God's revelation is the Holy Qur'an; for Christians God's revelation is through Jesus Christ.

What is the truth of the matter?

Or is "truth" even the right question to ask?

How is God active in the world, and how do we know God? As long as the focus was on this small planet Earth it seemed plausible to imagine that God could act – and did act – at will. "Revelation" reflected such an act, whether the Ten Commandments given to Moses or the Qur'an recited to Muhammad. Communities would then form around such revelations and spread the word.

But what if God's manner of sharing existence is more subtle than this? We are a stiff-necked people unresponsive to direct commands and untutored in subtlety. Nor do we react well to change. Evolution on a cosmic scale has only recently entered the "book of nature" recognized as being God's work.

We may be stick-necked and a slow learner of subtle ways, but cosmic evolution suggests a rather simple explanation for the varieties of religious experience and understanding: these understandings are themselves the product of an evolution, a work still in progress.

And the specifics of this evolution are particular to the various communities of faith. Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Jews each have their own story. Buddhists and Hindus have a cyclic notion of cosmic change, whereas the three monotheistic religions have a linear view. But all of them developed their understandings of the sacred long before evolution – either biological (c. 1859 with Darwin) or cosmic (c.1964 with the Big Bang) – became part of the "book of nature."

Does "truth" evolve? Even asking the question raises the specter of civilization coming unglued. Theologians have developed a suite of terms to counter challenges to truth: "syncretism" or "false irenicism" subordinates the truth to a spirit of conciliation; "relativism" values different opinions comparably regardless of the truth; "indifferentism" treats the differences between opinions as of little importance, subordinating the truth.

None of these concerns fits the fresh reality that is unfolding before our eyes. Something marvelous is afoot. A loving God is sharing existence, not by planting life – and then us – within an otherwise inert cosmos but by the subtlety of an ever pregnant cosmos whose cup runneth over with love.

This small and pregnant planet is not alone.

What does this mean for Jesus Christ?

What does this mean for the "universal Church"?

What does this mean for change in how a stiff-necked people love one another?

TO BE CONTINUED.

Theology for a Small Planet

A collection of essays by Clyde Christofferson © 2009-2011

Implications of being a Small Planet – Part 2

Paul (1 Corinthians 13:8-12) *"Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part. When I was a child I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known."*

Einstein was asked, *"When will your theories of physics be accepted?"* He replied, *"When all those who have taught me physics have died."*

At a time when fifty percent of the American public remain highly skeptical of the evolution of species, as first described by Darwin in 1859, it may be presumptuous to rely upon an equally revolutionary concept developed a hundred years after Darwin.

The concept is the evolution of the entire cosmos. There are some physicists (including Stephen Hawking) who contend that this particular cosmos may be one of many, but that doesn't affect what I am about to say. There is something marvelously pregnant about this cosmos, and it places "revelation" in a different light.

Note Einstein's quote above. *Homo sapiens* as a species is averse to change. Never mind that a host of particular individuals have ventured out into the unknown. Both Darwin and Einstein ran up against entrenched and comfortable ways of thinking about the world. Change is hard.

Perhaps change is hard for quite understandable reasons. The human animal seeks understanding. We each come at this from different life experiences. I remember two distinct events when I was fifteen, both in the same place – my room at the family home in St. Louis. On one occasion I asked myself "What if nothing?" It was not about whether I might not have been born, or whether my parents had not married, or whether the United States had never gotten off the ground. It was a more comprehensive question that gradually grows as you follow a line of thought. What if the Earth had never been, or the solar system, or the Milky Way – or anything at all?

At about that same age I remember finishing some sit-ups beside my bed, pausing for a moment, and praying to God for understanding. I wanted to know why things were. I had just recently become a Catholic – that's another story – and I felt comfortable asking God for help.

I guess there is a lesson there – be careful what you ask for. At this point in time I no longer think of God in that same way. That's just not the way God works. This is a God of warmth and tenderness, comforting me as I fall to my death. I don't mean that as a joke. It's just another version of the story of Job.

My understanding of how and why things are has grown over the years, yet I can see common threads. I'm still myself. And if anything has changed in how I consider this ineffable reality that has no name, it is the awe. When I was young I was comforted by Love; now my jaw drops as I marvel – almost to the point of stupor – at existence.

I've become attached to my own understanding, a view of the world that seems to make sense, a view that provides a coherent framework for how and why things are. And it is reasonable to suppose that others with different understandings also find that these understandings provide coherent frameworks for living. These different coherent frameworks serve us as we look in the mirror in the morning and contemplate what is to be done in the day ahead, even after the previous day when things didn't work out as we had hoped. It's that down side of hope, again.

As disappointing as a coherent framework can be, it is nonetheless part of me. And change is hard, because I'm not going to give up my sense of coherence. And a reasonable attention to objectivity leads to the reasonable presumption that others who may have quite different understandings have a similar attachment to their own coherence.

There, I've said it. It's not truth, it's coherence. We are different, and stubbornly so. Scientists are no different. The evidence that scientists work with may be the same – that is, replicable by others – but how you select and interpret the evidence makes a lot of difference. There is a famous story about a speech that Lord Kelvin – the dean of British science – gave at the end of the nineteenth century. He concluded that the major theories required to understand the world had been developed and that the science of the future would be about fleshing out the details.

A few years later Lord Kelvin's words became an embarrassment to him. He had not anticipated quantum theory and relativity. Yet how could Lord Kelvin – and a great many other scientists of the time – part with their coherent understandings? They couldn't, not without an alternative that was also coherent. Developing such alternatives takes time. And perhaps death, so that a newer generation without the same attachments may take hold. This is what Einstein meant by "when all those who have taught me physics have died."

Is religion any different? Until discovery of the cosmic background radiation less than fifty years ago, a good case could be made that the supernatural occupied a different space than the natural. Even scientists like Stephen Jay Gould argued that science and religion each had their own areas of competence. He coined a term for this separation: NOMA – Non-Overlapping Magisterial Areas.

Gould has since died. But will his thoughts about NOMA be an embarrassment to him? Will he follow the pattern of Lord Kelvin?

Or will it be the Church that follows the pattern of Lord Kelvin?

Pardon the abruptness of that transition. That was what I was intending to get to all along. What is it that we call "revelation"? In ancient times it was reasonable to suppose that the universe had always existed. There may have been disputes about whether a God or gods existed, but if God existed and was active in the world it seemed obvious that the mode of activity would be straightforward and direct: giving tablets to Moses, or the Qu'ran to Muhammad.

Or sending His only Son, Jesus the Christ.

Where am I going with this? I'm a practicing Catholic, and this God of ours is truly awesome. And the disciples and followers, and then also Paul, experienced the Risen Christ after the Crucifixion.

Where I am going with this is very straightforward: we – through our religion and our Church – are idolaters, taking human constructions and calling them divine. That goes for us, that goes for Muslims and that goes for Jews.

Wait! Not so fast! Is that any way to treat a friend? Have you no consideration for the sensibilities of your fellow human beings?

Not to worry. No one will pay any attention to me anyway. Why? Because people give priority to maintaining the coherence of their outlook upon the world. Look at Lord Kelvin, and consider the difficulty which even scientists faced in their attempt to deal with relativity theory and the quantum hypothesis. There was confusion, there was doubt, and it took years to change. A generation of prior teachers passed away. And our current understandings about science may face comparably wrenching changes in the future.

Why should religion be immune from this process? Did not God bring one reality into being?

It's not about truth; it's about coherence. The challenge I am proposing is not a challenge to truth; it's a challenge because of the importance of coherence.

So let me back up, and run through that last part once again, this time more slowly.

TO BE CONTINUED.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Theology for a Small Planet

A collection of essays by Clyde Christofferson © 2009-2011

Implications of being a Small Planet – Part 3: 1, 2, 3, …

Paul (1 Corinthians 13:8-12) *"Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part. When I was a child I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known."*

Einstein was asked, *"When will your theories of physics be accepted?"* He replied, *"When all those who have taught me physics have died."*

We are slow to change. In the last essay in this series I suggested that this was because we struggle to maintain a coherent outlook. The young are more willing to examine new outlooks because they are still searching, but age takes a toll. If I have found a framework that works for me, why should I toss it over for a new idea?

So it should not surprise anyone that the Church – which has labored these past two thousand years to refine a way of looking at the world – is not inclined to change its view. Yet the book of nature – as made evident to us in the last fifty years – makes a compelling case for reexamination.

Why? Because – as the Church believes – the cosmos is God's creation. And, if we both look closely and pray humbly, this creation may tell us something about who we are and why we are here. It is from within this framework of at least openness to a connection between the cosmos and the mystery of God's creation that there emerges a compelling case for change in the way the Church looks at the world.

But the compelling case may well reach the institutional Church last, after it first reaches the faithful. Ken Himes once used a train metaphor to describe Vatican II: the train has left the station, and there are some shoveling coal into the boilers to make the train go faster, some are in the caboose applying the brakes, some are looking out the window at the scenery, and some are still on the station platform, shaking their fists at the departing train. Rome has a tendency to join with those in the caboose. Most charitably, the Church wants to slow change down so that those most resistant to change will not be left behind. In any event, change will not come to the Church until it comes to the people served by the Church. Until the way you and I look at God adapts to the new teachings of the book of nature, the Church will be reluctant to rethink its current frame of reference.

Since before the time of Christ, at least as far back as Aristotle, serious minds looked to the stars for evidence of change, and found none. The evidence was there, but they couldn't see it. Aristotle himself made a rather sophisticated judgment, based on lack of change in the relative position of stars from one season to another, that the Earth must be at the center of the universe. He was wrong, of course, but only because he had no idea how far away the stars were. As it turns out, the distances are enormous and, at the galactic level, increasing.

Change in the position of distant stars proceeds so slowly that it could not be seen by Aristotle – and can not be seen by us with the naked eye – in a lifetime or even a thousand lifetimes. The Hindu account of cyclical creation comes close to cosmic time scales by using metaphors that imaginatively extend time. For example, how long would it take to wear down a mountain if an eagle brushed its wing against the mountain once a year? But Western cosmology until the 1920s was content to suppose that the universe beyond our shining blue planet had always been and would always be essentially as it is.

Einstein inadvertently changed this outlook, as recounted in the first essay in this series. Einstein himself did not appreciate this implication of his General Theory of Relativity until he was

confronted with Hubble's evidence that distant galaxies were speeding away at a rate proportional to their distance. If this evidence is taken backward in time we come to the Big Bang, which was finally proven – again, inadvertently – by observation in 1964 of a low level of very cold (2.7 degrees above absolute zero, as measured on the Celsius scale) radiation coming from all directions. If you tune in to a blank television channel about ten percent of the white snow that you see is the cosmic background radiation. This is the evidence that Aristotle couldn't see.

A lot has happened – albeit very slowly – since the Big Bang. Is that change going anywhere? And does that change in the cosmos have any connection to what we hope for in a life to come?

Yes.

Many years ago I took a review course to prepare for an examination to practice law. One of the teachers advised us how to spend our preparation time economically. He said there are three levels of understanding of any area of law. First, there is glib understanding. Second, as you ponder the subject matter further, questions will arise and confusion will set in. Third, after further study you come to sublime understanding.

His advice? When you get to glib understanding, stop! This will be sufficient for the bar exam. It's time to husband your limited resources and move on to the next area of study.

This recollection came to mind as I reread passages from a book I first read more than forty years ago, *Insight* by Bernard Lonergan, S.J. Don't ask me now why I read this tome. I guess I was young, and looking for challenges. After all these years I recall very little, but I did remember a point Lonergan made that is relevant to understanding cosmic evolution. He said that understanding leads to insights that become a basis for another level of understanding, a new level of understanding that – because of the intervening insights – is essentially different from the earlier level.

I still have the book, and began to reread it, looking for these parts I remember. Lonergan resorts to a simple example – the transition from arithmetic to algebra – to make his point. In terms of his point (which is about scientific reductionism, which I will get to shortly) this example represents a "glib understanding" that is quite adequate for my purposes. Lonergan constructed a simple table in order to define the positive integers:

1 + 1 = 2
2 + 1 = 3
3 + 1 = 4
etc., etc., etc. …

And then he said the following: *"What, then, does the 'etc., etc., etc.' mean? It means that an insight should have occurred. If one has had the relevant insight, if one has caught on, if one sees how the defining can go on indefinitely, no more need be said. … For in defining the positive integers there is no alternative to insight."*[1]

After a few more insights, algebra emerges. It is not necessary to go there. The above example is sufficient: there are insights between arithmetic and algebra. And you can't get to algebra from arithmetic without those insights; although you can understand the arithmetic embedded in algebra, you can't reduce algebra to arithmetic, because insights stand between them.

Stop! Hold that thought.

What do we see in the Big Bang? In the beginning all we see is physics. Chemistry – the interactions of atoms and the formation of molecules – doesn't enter reality until after stars form, burn out and collapse. Biology doesn't come into play until even later, after second and third generation star systems form under the force of gravity from the debris of supernova.

Think of physics, chemistry, and biology as something like the progression of 1, 2, 3 from Lonergan's table. Reductionist thinkers say that it's all physics: biology can be reduced to chemistry, and chemistry can be reduced to physics.

And what about consciousness? Reductionist thinkers argue that the mind is no more than the biological brain, and therefore in the end can also be reduced to physics. Lonergan explains this as follows: *"The force of this reductionism, however, is proportionate to the tendency to conceive the real as a subdivision of the 'already out there now'. When that tendency is rejected, reductionism vanishes."*[2]

Lonergan wrote before discovery of the Big Bang, yet his rejection of the notion that the "real" is merely a subdivision of the "already out there now" bears some resemblance to science's rejection of the common sense notion that the universe is expanding out into an empty space that is "already

out there now." And yet this is what the physics of the Big Bang tells us: space itself is expanding – the cosmic background radiation has "cooled" from about three thousand degrees shortly after the Big Bang to about three degrees now, because space itself is expanding.

I will stick with the "glib understanding": reductionists would say that the cosmos is "1, 2, 3" and nothing more – there is no "etc., etc., etc." There is no further insight. But if a loving God is sharing existence with the likes of us, independent beings able to comprehend existence and love one another, then the progression "1, 2, 3" is pregnant with "etc., etc., etc." The small kindnesses of everyday life are not incidental pleasantries but speak profoundly – like the cosmic background radiation – about who we are and why we are here.

There is a longer story about the philosophical struggle between reductionism and the notion of "emergence" (e.g. the emergence of algebra from arithmetic via a series of insights leading to what Lonergan calls a "higher viewpoint"[3]). In the 1920s there was a group of "British emergentist" philosophers who flowered for a time, and then went into eclipse until recent decades, when the idea reemerged. But that story, as well, is for another time.

The point here is that reductionists in science see the future as Lord Kelvin saw it – 1,2,3 is where we are and the future is 3,3,3, etc. all the way out. Essentially, it all comes down to physics. Even Stephen Hawking appears to be in this camp, judging from his latest book *The Grand Design*[4]. But this view of physics pushes God into a different reality. Historically, believers have joined in this dualistic view of reality.

But what if reality is one?

We now have a reason to think so. Before, the contrast between this world of pain and suffering and a just God demanded a separate heaven. If there were a God and a heaven, that is. In the tradition of Abraham this logic generated an explanatory story: Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden ate the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge, and were banished to the hardships of earth.

We can wonder what stories are being created by sentient beings elsewhere in the cosmos. They, too, were pregnant in the Big Bang. They, too, are of the same physics and chemistry. Their DNA may take a different path, but it may well be DNA. They will have their own experience of the kindnesses of everyday life. And when they discover the Big Bang – and the evidence for the Big Bang is everywhere and "everywhen," coursing through your body as you read this – they will have reason to know we are here, though they may never know who we are.

This gracious God of ours is awesome.

We have some taste of these other stories, because we have other stories right here on planet Earth. Other religious traditions have their own stories, and the stories are quite different.

So what about Jesus Christ? For those who follow the reductionists – it's 3,3,3 all the way out – Christ is just another story. But if the cosmos is pregnant with further insights, then not only may Jesus be Christ but the truth may be more remarkable than the story we have received and are handing down to our children.

What does cosmic evolution – the handiwork of God – suggest to us (and to the other sentient civilizations throughout the cosmos)? Stories evolve, too. Because our understanding evolves, too. Because arithmetic evolves into algebra. Evolution is not about "mechanist determinism"[5] (Lonergan's expression for the assumption that the real is "already out there now"); it is about *insight*.

So, we need some better understanding of what we have come to call "revelation." This is God's cosmos, after all – if, indeed, that is what we believe. And if we believe this is God's cosmos, we can look and see what the book of nature is telling us. The story is not "already out there now" – we have a pregnant cosmos.

Who is this Jesus Christ?

All right, slow down. I know this is a touchy subject. But bear with me. We come out in a good place.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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[1] Bernard J.F. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (Longmans: London, 1958), p. 14.

[2] *Ibid.,* p. 257.

[3] *Ibid.,* pp. 13-19, 233-234, 257.

[4] Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design* (Bantam Books: New York, 2010), loc. 323 of the Kindle edition.

[5] Lonergan, *op. cit.*, p. 254.

Theology for a Small Planet

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Implications of being a Small Planet – Part 3: … 4, 5, 6

Paul (1 Corinthians 13:8-12) *"Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part. When I was a child I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known."*

Einstein was asked, *"When will your theories of physics be accepted?"* He replied, *"When all those who have taught me physics have died."*

We are limited human beings. I become ever more painfully aware of these limitations as I get older. Years ago I loved to run, and now – because of a torn meniscus – I cannot. My eyesight is still good – if I wear glasses; but the prescriptions are getting stronger, and now I have a separate set of glasses for reading and for using the computer.

These limitations come with age. Wistfully, I wish I had the body of my youth and the better sense that comes with age. But the reality is that even such an optimal combination would be saddled with more fundamental limitations. *Homo sapiens* is a step – albeit the most recent and the most promising – in a longer evolutionary journey of life on planet Earth. And Earth is a small planet in a vast cosmos. There are tens of billions of other galaxies with essentially the same "stuff": stars that serve as gravitational furnaces for forging hydrogen and helium into the other chemical elements, which are then incorporated into planets around next generation stars. And the progression over time from physics to chemistry to biology does not suggest that this progression is at an end. It is a pregnant cosmos, still unfolding.

It defies basic principles of symmetry to suppose that our living Earth is alone. There is no need to violate the known laws of physics: the cosmos is expanding and cooling, trading heat for complexity. In retrospect, life in ever more complex forms seems an inexorable development. If the reason for being of this universe is that a loving God is sharing existence with the likes of us, then the fruits of this sharing are throughout the starry heavens. And among the many other sentient civilizations elsewhere in the cosmos it is reasonable to suppose that at least some others are more capable than *homo sapiens* on planet Earth. This is an implication of being a small planet.

But so what? One would think by now that we would have gotten the point. Our ancestors thought they were the chosen people and – fittingly – that the Earth was the center of the universe. Then we found out that the Earth revolved around the Sun, and the Sun is a nobody in the Milky Way galaxy, which in turn is a nobody among tens of billions of galaxies, most of which are racing away from us so rapidly that we shall never know the sentient life that is within them. It is humbling being on a planet that spins about a nobody star in a nobody galaxy.

Voltaire had a point: it is enough that we tend to our own garden. The Earth is a vibrant exemplar in a still pregnant cosmos. We would do well to take another look at where we have been to see this ongoing pregnancy at work. It should not be surprising that we told many stories in our youth before there was any notion of an unfolding cosmos, and these stories – in particular the stories that knit us together in religious communities – reflect the biases of youth.

How do we make a transition? Paul's letter to the Corinthians puts this kind of transition in familiar terms – from childhood to adulthood – and then suggests that it is love but not knowledge that will help us: "*Love never fails. But …where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part …. When I was a child I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but through a glass, darkly; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.*"

What story did Paul (and the other followers of Jesus) tell about Christ? The reason this is a concern is that they didn't know what they didn't know. They knew God's love – "love never fails" – and they did their best to understand who Jesus of Nazareth was. They lived with Jesus, and lived through the tumultuous last days in Jerusalem and the Crucifixion. They experienced the Resurrection, some in the Upper Room, some on the Road to Emmaus, some on the sea of Tiberius, and in Galilee as the Gospels recount. And later, on the road to Damascus, even Paul had an experience of a similar kind. Paul had been persecuting the followers of Jesus, so his experience of the Risen

Christ is perhaps the most remarkable testimony we have.

We share this experience at liturgy, and have just recently celebrated and relived the Last Supper, Good Friday and Easter Sunday. The story is central to our community life.

But what did Paul and the others do with this experience? We know what this experience is, because we share it and celebrate it at Eucharist. But what did Paul and the others do? They tried to make sense of what had happened, as best they could. And their story has been handed down to us, and we have made it our own. But they didn't know what they didn't know.

Does that mean the story – the one we have come to know and love – needs to be changed? Perhaps, but perhaps not. Is it loving to reflect upon the story in light of what we are coming to know about the cosmos? Or better, how can we lovingly reflect upon the story handed down to us?

Before doing that, take a fresh look at this pregnant cosmos, this "book of nature." In the first essay in this collection I spoke about the small kindnesses of everyday life. These are part of our experience, and we know them. Our ancestors knew them as well, or so we may reasonably presume. But did our ancestors pay any attention? They would not have thought to see these small kindnesses as a reflection of a cosmos pregnant by a loving God and unfolding in our presence. Had they known what we are now coming to know, they might more readily have said "eureka!" when Jesus said, "the reign of God is at hand."

This is an insight of the kind that Bernard Lonergan talks about as the unfolding of that which is emergent[1]. For the followers of Jesus our participation in the reign of God was through a bodily resurrection, as stated in the Creed. But what does that mean? They had no way of understanding it, except as mystery. Our ancestors acquired the notion that we have an immortal soul, provided we safeguard that soul during the life of the body. Mystics had a more integral conception of a continuing and bodily reality, but the faithful could be forgiven for seeing the soul as somehow separate from the body. The notion that God implants a soul into us seems clumsy by comparison to a human consciousness that unfolds out of a pregnant cosmos. You may recall Dan Madigan's homily last November[2] in which he gently critiqued an unfortunate consequence of the "ensoulment" concept, namely, that the soul is viewed as if it were something to be placed on a shelf instead of lived out now.

The novelty that is Jesus Christ is all quite real. The followers of Jesus experienced the reality, but understood it through a glass, darkly. The faithful believe it, but understand it through a glass, darkly. Perhaps the reality will always be a mystery. Yet Paul's metaphor – the understanding of the child matures to the understanding of the adult – suggests our understanding can be viewed as a work in progress, and not simply as a set of doctrines to be believed.

And the unfolding cosmos is confirming the "work in progress" approach to understanding the experienced reality of the Risen Christ. The subtitle for this essay is ": … 4, 5, 6", following the prior essay's subtitle "1, 2, 3 …". The "1, 2, 3 …" refers explicitly to the Lonergan example of the creative insight required to get from "1, 2, 3, etc." to the set of positive integers. Lonergan's example can be generalized, as Lonergan himself contemplated. The sequence "physics, chemistry, biology, …" can be viewed as successive descriptions of an increasingly complex reality, unfolding over time since the Big Bang. Each of these descriptions is separated from its predecessor by a set of "insights" that make the successor description "essentially different" from its predecessor.

Lonergan makes the key point that a new reality is unfolding. The "real" is not simply a subdivision of the "already out there now."[3] If reality were "already out there now" then all that is real could be reduced to physics. If that were the case, then physics presents a dreary picture of a universe that is running down under the inexorable law of entropy. But if reality is not "already out there now" then the cooling since the Big Bang leads to life in its fullness, not death.

History in the fourteen billion years since the Big Bang tells a story of life, not death. And it is a life that continues to unfold. Thermodynamic cooling can be viewed as a creative incubator, rather than as a slow death. In an earlier essay I told the story of the gold atoms in my wedding band: every proton, neutron and electron in each of these gold atoms was created in the first fraction of a second after the Big Bang, but it was not until billions of years later – in a supernova explosion – that heat fused lower elements into gold and then cooling set in so that the fused protons and neutrons would not fly apart again.

Since the Big Bang there have been a succession of such heatings and coolings, separated by relatively stable incubators that I have called thermoentropic pockets of space and windows of time. The terminology overemphasizes the role of physics. And I apologize for that, because I do not believe that "what is real" is "already out there now" and therefore reducible to physics. I compensate by using another term – "thermoentropic novelty" – to refer to the new realities that unfold. Our understanding of these new realities

take the form of *insights* (Lonergan's term) that are our "eureka!" moments.

Back to "… 4, 5, 6." These are merely placeholders, just as "1, 2, and 3" may be understood as placeholders for "physics, chemistry and biology" as descriptions of reality separated by insights. Similarly, consciousness – that very personal self that is taking the time to read these words – is not reducible to biology. Those who think about such topics have not yet formulated an understanding of the *insights* that separate biology ("3") from consciousness ("4"), but my guess is that an appreciation of the small kindnesses of everyday life figures prominently in this understanding. That which is good and beautiful *resonates* in our hearts, and this also is a part of what separates consciousness from biology. That consciousness is itself a thermoentropic novelty, a further unfolding of the cosmos, another new part of a still unfolding reality.

Jesus the Christ is a further unfolding. The experience of the Risen Christ – in the Upper Room, on the road to Emmaus, on the road to Damascus, and at the breaking of the bread that we share every Sunday – testifies to the newness of this reality. Call this unfolding "5". Those who think about such topics have said much about Jesus, and over the centuries this understanding has been formulated into a story and set of beliefs that characterize Christianity. Jesus proclaimed that "the reign of God is at hand" and Christians now have upstaged the proclamation by proclaiming the proclaimer.

The Church strives to be universal. That is what "Catholic" means. But in the context of being a small planet, what does that mean? Does the Church understand itself as being universal in the sense of a worldwide Catholic Church? It is certainly that. "Catholic" could also refer to *homo sapiens* across the globe, including all of humanity. But even that ambitious perspective is dwarfed by a cosmos having billions upon billions of sentient civilizations, none of whom know the name of Jesus or the history of the Crucifixion. And so how are we to understand the Christ? Those outside the Christian tradition – even here on planet Earth, and certainly elsewhere in the cosmos – are not likely to make a connection between experience of the reign of God and the Crucified One known to Paul and the Apostles.

There are those who have a simple answer to this conundrum: God chose us. History has been unkind to that answer, beginning with Jesus himself in the telling of the Good Samaritan Story to Jews who believed they knew that the Samaritans were not chosen. The idea that the Earth was the center of creation did not survive Galileo and Newton. According to Einstein, there is no such thing as a center to the universe, any more than there could be a central point on the surface of a sphere.

The handwriting would appear to be on the wall: experience of the reign of God is as universal as God. That would be the humble adult judgment, notwithstanding recollection by that same adult of a child who had been at the center of a mother's love and affection.

To return to Paul's metaphor, the transition from childhood to adulthood can be generalized. There are old adults and even older adults. Wisdom comes with age; we become wiser as we get older. Is there an end to it? We die an unfinished creation. So it should be no disrespect to suggest that the Church faces a major *metanoia* in coming to grips with the implications of being on a small planet. Vatican II may be viewed as part of that *metanoia*, because it moved the Church out into the world.

For those who think Vatican II is not the end, the understanding we now have of the cosmos suggests that an evolution of surprises is God's idea, not ours. We still need *metanoia*. In particular, we need some better understanding of what we have come to call "revelation." It is one thing to believe that the truth is fixed and absolute, and that the human task is to conform to the laws of an unchanging God. It is another thing to cope with a dynamic cosmos, and contemplate the likelihood that this remarkable and awesome God can work miracles without miracles, all so that the likes of us can enjoy freedom and love and – yes – even comprehension.

What is next? Vatican II opened up windows and let fresh air in, as John XXIII hoped. Is there a sleeping giant in the *sensus fidelium* that *Lumen Gentium* recognized[4]? Are the People of God waking to their own consciousness, and to their own role in the genesis of the very structures that are now being reexamined? Might this be another "thermoentropic novelty", requiring new *insights* to understand it?

Surely such surprises from a living God are in the offing, though we may not know the time or the place.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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[1] Bernard J.F. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (Longmans: London, 1958), p. 262.

[2] Dan Madigan homily at NOVA, November 7, 2010, 32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time. Audio of homily: audio-link.

[3] Lonergan, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

[4] Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* #12.

Theology for a Small Planet

A collection of essays by Clyde Christofferson © 2009-2011

Implications of being a Small Planet – Part 4: Paul and the Church

At the end of the last essay I wrote:

"What is next? Vatican II opened up windows and let fresh air in, as John XXIII hoped. There is a sleeping giant in the *sensus fidelium*[1] that *Lumen Gentium* recognized. The People of God are waking to their own consciousness, and to their own role in the genesis of the very structures that now need to be reexamined."

This essay will expand upon these suggestions, and conclude with a connection between Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus and the need for a comparable conversion within the institutional Church.

At about the same time as *Lumen Gentium* was being approved at Vatican II a couple of Bell Labs researchers in New Jersey were taking measurements of what they thought was an unwelcome noise interfering with the satellite antenna they were testing. The noise turned out not to be noise at all but the cosmic background radiation, which proved the existence of the Big Bang.[2]

The institutional Church has not yet absorbed the significance of the Big Bang, but it will. Indeed, humanity in general has not yet absorbed the significance of the Big Bang, and in some important ways is farther behind than the institutional Church. However, the institutional Church cannot absorb the significance of the Big Bang without a conversion experience like Paul had on the road to Damascus.

Thus this essay.

Lumen Gentium is a starting point. This Vatican II document reoriented the Church's understanding of what "Church" means. It is common to associate "Church" with the institutional hierarchy headquartered at the Vatican, but *Lumen* Gentium takes a different approach. It begins with a discussion of the People of God[3] in terms that can only be described as all inclusive. That is, "all inclusive" in the sense that that term would have been understood to those in attendance at Vatican II. "People of God" was methodically defined to encompass an ever broadening definition of seekers after truth, beginning with the Catholic faithful[4] and Christians more generally[5], and then extending to Jews and Muslims and to those seeking God, and then to those "who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and with His grace strive to live a good life"[6]. All humanity is covered. All belong to a kingdom that is not of this world and are in communion with each other through the Holy Spirit.[7] It was to gather all these together as one that God sent the Word, Jesus the Christ.[8]

Universality is a specific commitment for the scope of the People of God.[9] Since God created the entire cosmos (and in Trinitarian style the Son and the Spirit have this scope as well), it seems reasonable to suppose that the People of God must also include all sentient beings, wherever situated throughout the cosmos.

The Big Bang has a particular significance for the Church. The eyes of faith provide an understanding of why we are here. Science does not purport to answer that question and, therefore, must be more cautious. But if the reason for being of the cosmos is that a loving God is sharing existence with beings able to love one another and thereby image God, then the lesson of the Big Bang is that there are countless other such civilizations of sentient beings throughout the cosmos. We are not alone.

A theology for a small planet must take that into account.

How?

It is not that difficult, with a certain change of perspective, a *metanoia* if you will. The institutional Church may find that change difficult, but *Lumen Gentium* provides a path.

As the prior essays have tried to show, God's presence in creation is both more subtle and more awesome than the stories of our tradition (or any religious tradition) allow. With insight provided by modern cosmology it is not necessary to suppose a separate heaven and a separate earth, where God "sent his only Son" by miraculous intervention. Instead, it appears that reality is simply unfolding. This is happening not in the manner of a watchmaker God but rather with unpredictable novelties. Jesus Christ is such a novelty, but that novelty could not be appreciated without a predicate novelty: our own consciousness.

A subtitle to a prior essay was "… 4, 5, 6." The (thermoentropic) novelty of the Risen Christ is "5", and human consciousness is "4". There will be time in another essay for the novelty that is "6".

It all fits together if the basis for "revelation" is not God's words – whether given to Abraham, Moses, the Prophet, or through Jesus Christ – but rather the "eyes of faith" provided by human consciousness. "Conscience" is a commonly used term. In prior essays in this series I have used the term *resonance* to convey the same meaning, and it is that term that I prefer to use here.

Resonance has a certain dynamic. Faith is a journey, and it is important to have language that can describe that journey. There are steps along the journey, and places of rest. Each journey takes its own course, yet each journey has its own integrity. The language of the journey must preserve the integrity of journeys that can be quite different.

The dynamic of *resonance* provides this language. Any journey faces forks in the road, where choices are made. One on journey takes the *more resonant* fork, adopts the *more resonant* position, or subscribes to the *more resonant* expression. Or, if the *less resonant* fork is taken, or the *less resonant* position is adopted, or the *less resonant* expression is subscribed to, conscience takes its toll.

And yet the journey continues. A *more resonant* fork may be followed by another fork and another choice. A *more resonant* position may later be understood as *less resonant* in comparison to another position that is *more resonant*. An expression that *resonates more* at one time may *resonate less* at another time in comparison to another expression.

We are each responsible for our own journeys, and know or come to know our own heart. Take the Apostle Paul as an example. Analogies are never perfect, but consider a parallel between Paul on the road to Damascus and the Church on the road to preserve its patrimony, the revelation of Jesus Christ. Paul was not merely a devout Jew. He experienced the living God, as a Jew, and saw the Jesus movement as an idolatry that should be stamped out. The Church also experiences the living God, and takes issue with theologians who might lead the faithful astray.

Paul persecuted the followers of Jesus, but had a revelation on the road to Damascus. In a blinding moment he recognized something new. He had come to a fork in the road, and confronted a choice. Using the language of *resonance*, Paul concluded that his persecution of the followers of Jesus *resonated less* and recognizing Jesus as the Risen Christ *resonated more*. If the analogy holds, the institutional Church will also experience a recognition that something new is happening. But why should anyone hope for a change in the Church as dramatic as what happened to Paul on the road to Damascus?

Paul's experience on the road to Damascus is my favorite account of the Risen Christ, although the story on the road to Emmaus is also a favorite. On the road to Emmaus the disciples who had known Jesus came to recognize him in the breaking of the bread. In some sense this is a mundane encounter: we do the same at Eucharist. But Paul is different. He did not know Jesus, except by a reputation that Paul understood as undermining faith in the God of Moses. The man Jesus had "hung on a tree", which under Mosaic law meant condemnation by God.[10]

The language of *resonance* allows us to maintain the integrity of Paul's own journey. Paul was faithful to the Torah and its teachings. It was that faith that Paul was pursuing, and it was because of that faith that Paul was persecuting the followers of Jesus.

What happened to Paul on the road to Damascus? The traditional account has Jesus speak to Paul: "why are you persecuting me?" The workings of the Spirit are more subtle, I think. The traditional account places Paul's conversion entirely at the hand of a direct intervention by the Christ, not giving adequate credit to Paul's faith of long standing. Paul knew the living God, as the Church knows the living God. But Paul believed that Jesus and his followers were undermining faith in that living God, just as the Church is concerned that its theologians may undermine faith in that same living God.

Perhaps something about the followers of Jesus, something contrary to his presuppositions, had nonetheless rested upon his consciousness. Did Paul observe small acts of kindness among them? Did these *resonate* with him, despite his hostility to this idolatrous sect? Perhaps it dawned upon him, on the road to Damascus, that these followers of Jesus were living the same faith in the living God that Paul himself professed. That faith was, indeed, living and Jesus the Crucified One expressed that life. Paul's faith was renewed. He had come to a fork in the road, and had taken the *more resonant* path.

Understood in this fashion Paul's journey maintains its integrity. Perhaps the Church can undergo the same kind of renewal.

It would be a subtle yet dramatic renewal, as was Paul's. To see the analogy it is important to emphasize the genuineness of Paul's faith, and genuineness of the Church's faith. What had been missing from Paul's mindset – before his *metanoia* on the road to Damascus – were two important points. One was the genuineness of the faith of the followers of Jesus, and I think that is what turned Paul around. This is what he saw, through the eyes of his faith, on the road to Damascus.

The second point is equally important. Indeed, it is perhaps more important for the purposes of the analogy I am drawing between Paul and the Church. The second point is that Jesus was bringing something new. Yes, he was fulfilling the law of Moses, but the fulfillment meant change. The Jews – and Paul was a Jew – did no work on the Sabbath, ate kosher, and separated themselves from Samaritans. For Jesus, saving work took precedence over the Sabbath, cleanliness was about what came out of the mouth not what went into it, and the

Samaritan on the road to Jericho was neighbor to the beaten traveler. Love was more important than ritual and tradition. These were hard teachings for those who had become comfortable in their own ways of responding to the living God.

Is the Church too comfortable with what it has built up over two thousand years? Vatican II opened some windows and blew some fresh air into a fortress Catholicism, but as Paul's experience reminds us, a strong faith can be blind. The fortress is not so easily opened to renewal. It is not enough to open some windows and allow new breezes to refresh the inside. Vatican II provided some initial momentum, but that momentum has encountered resistance. For some the fortress seems well built, after all.

Lumen Gentium's understanding of the People of God hints of something new, something that the institutional Church may find challenging. The Church has in the past accepted the sense of the faith that has emerged from the people under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This is called the *sensus fidelium*. It is carefully circumscribed by *Lumen Gentium* so as to require unanimity within the People of God and guidance from the teaching authority of the Church.

However, the notion that God's presence in creation is still unfolding places a different twist on the *sensus fidelium*. "Revelation" does not come from on high but more subtly, through a journey – that we are all on, and that we share in community – toward that which *resonates more*. The current structures of the Church are what currently *resonate more* as the People of God journey together. That is, the authority of the institutional Church is itself validated by the *sensus fidelium*.

Let me restate that using the parallel between Paul and the Church. Did Jesus speak to Paul on the road to Damascus, out of the blue? Or did Paul recognize the Risen Christ from his encounters with the followers of Jesus, after those encounters struck a *resonant* chord within him? If Jesus spoke to Paul out of the blue, it was a miraculous intervention. This kind of expression for God's presence in the world is understandable, because it would have *resonated* with first century Jews. But if Paul's faith in the living God was true, and his faith journey has integrity, what he found on the road to Damascus was a new insight into Jesus and his followers. This new insight does not require a miraculous intervention, and is consistent with a cosmos that continues to unfold. In light of a God of subtlety and awe, this view *resonates more* than a miraculous intervention.

Similarly, is the current structure and authority of the Church derived from God's words in scripture, or is it the product of a community journey whose particulars have been determined by *resonance*? If current structure and authority is derived from God's words as interpreted by the Church's teaching authority, then there is no role for the *sensus fidelium* beyond the role allocated by the Church's teaching authority. But if the cosmos is continuing to unfold, the current structure and authority of the Church can be understood in terms of *resonance*. The structures of the early Church would have *resonated* with first century Jews, and the authority structures of the Roman Catholic Church would have *resonated* with Christians of the Roman Empire. The Reformation was a fork in the road, and *resonance* called some to continue in the Roman tradition and called others to undertake Protestant views of how to be the one true Church.[11] Within the Roman Catholic tradition the *sensus fidelium* is the collective *resonance* of the community, but God's people have a wider base and this wider base continues to grow in self-awareness and independence. The structure and authority that *resonated* at an earlier stage of growth may later be found wanting.

In this context, *Lumen Gentium's* understanding of the People of God acknowledges the integrity of a variety of faith journeys, and remains a hopeful sign for a still unfolding cosmos.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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[1] *Lumen Gentium,* #12.

[2] See *Lemaitre's Legacy*, the first essay in this series.

[3] *Lumen Gentium*, Chapter II, "On the People of God," ¶¶9-17.

[4] *Lumen Gentium*, #14.

[5] *Lumen Gentium*, #15.

[6] *Lumen Gentium*, #16.

[7] *Lumen Gentium*, #13.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Deuteronomy 21:23.

[11] During the Reformation, both Catholics and reformers believed there was only one true Church.

Theology for a Small Planet

A collection of essays by Clyde Christofferson © 2009-2011

Implications of being a Small Planet – Part 5: Aristotle and the Church

Who is the Church? And what is it becoming?

Since Vatican II, following the words of *Lumen Gentium*[1], we are fond of saying that the Church is the people of God. But in the popular consciousness the term "Church" still calls to mind the institutional arm of the Church – the Pope and the bishops, the Vatican and the curia. These are concrete, whereas the "people of God" is a more mysterious notion.

In the last essay I spoke of Paul and the Church. Paul is important because he came from the other side. He did not know Jesus, except by reputation. Jesus had "hung on a tree" and was therefore condemned by God.[2] Paul loved the God of Abraham and Moses, and these followers of Jesus, Jews who were following someone who was condemned by that God, were undermining the Jewish faith. Paul's zeal for the faith led him to persecute the followers of Jesus, so his experience of the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus is quite remarkable.

Remarkable, yes. A fundamental change in who Paul was, probably not. In describing what happened on the road to Damascus I take the view that Paul's journey of faith maintains its integrity, before and after the encounter that knocked him off his horse. As will become clear later in this essay, the integrity of the faith journey is a touchstone of identity – not only for Paul, but for each of us and, indeed, for the institutional Church itself. Paul's journey has integrity if his change of heart came out of his own experience, an experience that connected his own love of God with something leading him to conclude that these followers of Jesus shared that same love of God. It says very little for the integrity of Paul's journey if all that happened on the road to Damascus was a *deus ex machina* encounter, with God intervening to tap Paul on the shoulder and tell him he was on the wrong track.

The institutional Church is also on a journey, and – I will suggest – should be expected to maintain its integrity just as Paul maintained his integrity. The Church is going through a particular period of angst, and this may compound the difficulty of discerning the signs of the times. The Church has taken a number of actions that illustrate this difficulty, and I will talk about three of them: two of these actions involve theologians (Roger Haight and Elizabeth Johnson), and the third is the new missal scheduled to take effect next Advent.

But the context for these illustrations is like a deep ocean tremor that produces a tsunami. I am referring to what science – modern physics in particular – has taught us in the last fifty years. Fifty years is a short time in the history of the Church. Change takes time. Furthermore, while the Church has come to an understanding of its guiding role in challenging overreaching uses of technology in contemporary society, the Church is supportive of scientific inquiry – how could it be otherwise with God's "book of nature", as St. Augustine well understood.

As these essays have emphasized, we have learned a great deal from what is called the cosmic background radiation, which was discovered almost accidentally in 1964. Its very existence confirms the creation of the universe in what is now understood to be a hot, and then expanding, Big Bang. Evolution of the cosmos from a point in time was one possible implication of Einstein's Theory of General Relativity, but this implication was expressly rejected by Einstein himself until Hubble's discovery that the universe was expanding. And it took another thirty or forty years before discovery of the cosmic background radiation put alternative explanations (mainly, that the universe had always existed) to rest.

The Church has not yet come to grips with the implications of the difference between a cosmos with a beginning and a cosmos that always existed. The notion that the cosmos had a beginning was welcomed by Pope Pius XII as a confirmation of God's creative act as recounted in Genesis, and Pope Paul VI gave an award to Stephen Hawking for his work in further understanding the physics of the Big Bang. The Big Bang is more than a beginning, however. In the 13.7 billion years since the Big Bang a remarkable unfolding has taken place. It is, indeed, a genesis, but it is different in kind from the prosaic Biblical account. It is evolutionary rather than creative in the Biblical sense. We live in a pregnant rather than a created cosmos. Thus far, this distinction has been lost upon the Church.

To understand how the institutional Church may absorb the significance of cosmic evolution it is necessary to see where the Church is coming from. The

institutional Church regards itself as a fiduciary, as a caretaker on behalf of the people of God for the revelation[3] that culminates in Jesus Christ. In the created order – as opposed to the pregnant order – what was revealed is then handed down. For the Church, revelation has a cosmic dimension, appropriate to a universal God, but this cosmic dimension is provided not by the Big Bang but by Aristotle.

The transition from Aristotle's cosmos to the cosmos of the Big Bang is not as straightforward as seeing that the earth revolves around the sun. The Church had trouble enough with Galileo on that point, and only recently acknowledged that its treatment of Galileo left something to be desired. But Galileo was a gentle wave compared to the tsunami of cosmic evolution. The institutional Church is still following Aristotle, for the simple reason that its understanding of the revelation that is Jesus Christ was developed in the shadow of Aristotle's cosmos. It is not an easy matter to pull that understanding out from under Aristotle's shadow into the different light provided by cosmic evolution.

It is a much deeper problem than Aristotle's physics of the heavens, but that physics is a starting point. It is a sufficient summary to say that Aristotle's cosmos saw the Earth as fixed and eternal, with life placed upon it. The Sun and the Moon and the starry skies above were of a different order from the Earth, but were similarly eternal. The Genesis account grafts onto this view a beginning – through a series of deliberate acts by God – but is otherwise consistent with Aristotle's notion that the heavens are fixed and eternal.

The coherent identity of the Church was largely constructed during the reign of Aristotle's model of the cosmos. There is a certain comfort and confidence that comes with this model. That which is revealed by God can be regarded as eternal, like the starry skies above. Within this model, Jesus Christ was understood as an intervention by God in the affairs of his chosen people, completing the revelation begun by Moses and the prophets, as recounted in holy writ and further understood and enriched under the guidance of the Holy Spirit through tradition and the teaching authority of the Church.

The coherent identity of the Church under that model moved inexorably to a hierarchical structure[4] within which the truth could be determined. It would never do to have contrary views of the eternal truth, and so a single authority was necessary. It did not occur to them to consider whether they were asking the right question or, to use a modern metaphor, whether they were leaning their ladder up against the wrong wall. Cosmic evolution is going to place the fiduciaries of the Church atop the ladder, where the question can no longer be avoided.

Let me digress for a moment, before returning to how the Church may change when it grasps what God's book of nature is telling us through cosmic evolution.

At our community led liturgy at the Michelotti's over the Fourth of July weekend, the theme was the indwelling Spirit. At the dialogue John Mooney spoke about an Ignatian Spirituality mission that he and Tom Clarkson and Rich Rosenberg were undertaking with folks who had lost their homes, their families, virtually everything in their lives, and who were often alcoholics on top of all that. He began his comments by saying that he didn't like the word "ministry" – as in "minister to" – because he felt a strong sense of brotherhood with these men as they struggled, with some successes and some relapses, to become whole again.

This notion of brotherhood has worked its way into my thinking about relationships more broadly, including how individuals relate to institutional realities associated with government and Church. It's not exactly intuitive to consider a personal relationship with an institution. The current politics of partisanship in Washington makes sport out of distance from the institutions of government. For some, the government is distant and unworthy of trust. On the other side are those who defend the work that is being done through the institutions of government.

Would it help to apply the notion of brotherhood? Bishops and priests, Vatican and Curia, are certainly our brothers within the people of God. But brotherhood in that sense is at least in part a rough formalism. There is a wall of officialdom that separates us from the kind of brotherhood that John Mooney was talking about. But doesn't a similar wall arise from a "ministry to" attitude toward those as down and out as the Ignatian Spirituality folks?

John's distinction between "ministry" and "brotherhood" is a good one, and can perhaps be applied to the various "walls" that separate us. If there is a wall between me and the institutional Church, perhaps thinking in terms of brotherhood will help. May I not feel a sense of shared journey with our Church, as it also struggles, with some successes and some relapses?

Each of us has our own journey, from childhood to a maturity that we never quite reach. There is perspective in that journey, because while we are the same person we grow and change. It is hard to get our arms around the entire journey. Our consciousness and sense of self is in the present. On the other hand we can remember -- at least in snippets – who we once were. It is the same being. We know that. But the experience

of the journey's perspective is no more present than our memory of what is past.

Suppose the institutional Church is like the Ignatian Spirituality folks that John, Tom and Rich work with, and with whom they have a sense of brotherhood. These folks have lost much. In reflecting on our individual journeys, most of us see a progression that is generally upward and onward. The present improves upon the past, generally speaking. This is certainly consistent with the Western notion of progress. And the new and improved marvels that regularly demonstrate the power of technology sometimes give us a sense of material progress even when there is no progress.

Is that picture of life more than a one dimensional segment of a much broader and richer -- if sadder and more painful -- journey? The Ignatian Spirituality folks have put John, Tom and Rich in touch with life journeys that are in a much worse place as measured over time. Yet the sense of this touch with reality has been brotherhood rather than ministry. From the outside it may seem like service to the poor and downtrodden, a good thing surely. But there can be a wall of separation: there is the donor and the donee, the one who provides and the one who receives. Indeed, this is the model or lens through which society views this work. This is noble work, yes. But it is charity.

John's point is that from the viewpoint of Ignatian Spirituality it is the work of brotherhood, not charity. We may wonder why "charity" and "love" are different words. Was that so in Biblical times? Do we not remember the phrase about the three virtues, "faith, hope and charity, and the greatest of these is charity"? Surely – from the vantage point of modern culture – the better translation is "the greatest of these is love." The term "charity" has become burdened with the relationship of donor and donee. Perhaps there was a time, a cultural experience, perhaps with the early Christian communities, when this was not so. Like a child who has not experienced sin, perhaps our life in community did not then know the difference between charity and love.

John told us – in his experience of brotherhood with the Ignatian Spirituality folks – that those times are still with us. The Spirit is present, a presence that is somehow lost or diminished when we think in terms of donor and donee, in terms of a minister and those who are the objects of a ministry.

The brotherhood with the Ignatian Spirituality folks makes me think about our relationship to the institutional Church. The Church, too, has fallen on hard times and – judging from history – not for the first time. Over the last half century many have left the Church – former Catholics are so numerous that they would form the second largest religion in the United States. Over an even longer period the Church has suffered a loss of a different kind, eating at it from the inside, a loss that has come into a bright light only in recent years. I am referring, of course, to the sexual abuse of children in the care of the Church's ministers.

Should we think of the Church in terms of ministry or brotherhood? There would be some irony in ministering to the ministers. Brotherhood avoids that difficulty, and is better suited to Vatican II's understanding of the people of God. And the Ignatian Spirituality folks are a reminder that the journey of life is not always a forward progression, as the Church's current circumstances confirm.

There is a lesson for us and for the institutional Church in this digression. If the Ignatian Spirituality folks can take a wrong turn and hope to recover in the presence of brothers and sisters, so can the Church. Like Paul, the Church can have its own vision on the road to Damascus, a vision that is not imposed, *deus ex machina* style, from the outside, but that it discovers, in a manner than preserves its integrity, in the presence of brothers and sisters. The Church is still on journey, struggling with the demons of Aristotle's cosmos, of which the Church has drunk deeply.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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[1] *Lumen Gentium*, Chapter II, "On the People of God," ¶¶9-17.

[2] Deuteronomy 21:22-23. "(22) If a man guilty of a capital offense is put to death and his body is hung on a tree, (23) you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, **because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse**. You must not desecrate the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance." (New International Version, emphasis added.)

[3] In Catholic theology, "revelation" is the historical and personal self-communication of God culminating in Jesus Christ; "scripture" is normative witness to revelation; "tradition" is the reception and renewal of revelation, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, down through the ages.

[4] See, for example, the discussion of hierarchy in the Vatican II document *Die Verbum* (compare ¶6 with ¶¶9,10) and in the encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* by Pope Paul VI (see ¶¶9,22,27-28,37,46-48 and especially the logic of ¶110, bracketing an often eloquent discussion in ¶¶58-87 regarding the importance of dialogue in bringing the Mystical Body of Christ to fruition).

Theology for a Small Planet

A collection of essays by Clyde Christofferson © 2009-2011

Implications of being a Small Planet – Part 5: Aristotle and the Church -- continued

The Church is still on journey, struggling with the demons of Aristotle's cosmos. The institutional arm of the Church – its teaching authority – is still beholden to this ancient cosmos, for an Earth centric view (and its cousin, a Rome centric view) continues to prevail, notwithstanding the Church's acknowledgment that the Earth itself is not the physical center of the universe.

There have been signs that should have provided warning. Aristotle's cosmos provides a perspective that builds reliance upon what is fixed. It is no accident that Ptolemy constructed a system that preserved the fixities of the cosmos as understood by Aristotle, with Earth at the center and celestial bodies moving in appropriately perfect circular orbits. This was in accordance with the sense of the times, and the Church was quite comfortable with this view.

Another sign was the order of precedence for evidence in disputations at European universities. In a formal debate, the most persuasive evidence was accepted authority. A citation to Aristotle or another classical master was entitled to the greatest weight. Second in authority was argument based upon such authorities. And last, if the matter had not already been settled, other evidence could be presented. The inertia of this Aristotelian demon was enormous. Even after Francis Bacon, Galileo and others had demonstrated the power of turning the Medieval order of precedence on its head – so that the most persuasive argument was based upon evidence rather than authority – the old order of precedence persisted in European universities for another hundred years. Change is slow.

We are witnessing in our own times a similar persistence of Aristotle's hydra-headed cosmic demons. A particular obstacle to renewal is the sanctity of revelation as the buttress of continuity. Continuity is important, of course. The followers of Jesus argued that the Mosaic law was being fulfilled – not overturned – by the reign of God which Jesus preached. But the Jews – Paul in particular – saw in this Jesus movement challenge rather than fulfillment.

Similarly, the Church sees challenge rather than fulfillment in the work of theologians like Roger Haight and Elizabeth Johnson. These theologians are pursuing a more expansive understanding of Christ in light of the varieties of religious experience evident in today's world, a world whose fluid pluralism makes the boundaries of a fortress look archaic. Are these theologians a sign of the times, a sign of where the Spirit is leading us? Or do they lead the faithful astray?

If some of Aristotle's cosmic demons are still with us, where is the Church's *metanoia* going to come from? It may be a difficult *metanoia*, because Aristotle's world view is deeply embedded in the Church's collective psyche. On the other hand, Paul's *metanoia* on the road to Damascus was also difficult. He was blinded and could not ride his horse. It is difficult to extend that metaphor – Paul was simply a man riding a horse – to a two thousand year old institution headquartered at the Vatican. But the Spirit works in mysterious ways. Perhaps Vatican II can be viewed as a *metanoia* of the Church in response to the call of Pope John XXIII for a "bringing up to date" or *aggiornamento.*

The sanctity of what has been revealed through Jesus Christ has led the institutional Church to a particular perspective from which new ideas are evaluated. For example, the Notification about Roger Haight's *Jesus Symbol of God* demanded that these ideas "convey the immutable meaning of the dogmas as understood by the faith of the Church" or, at least, "clarify their meaning, enhancing understanding."

But Haight is on a different mission. He is bringing something new to the discussion. He helpfully lays out the question of salvation in broad terms, which would be meaningful to anyone, not just those who profess the Christian faith: *"Salvation today has to address the foundational experience of bewilderment at the ultimate meaning of existence, of the evil that characterizes human existence, of the moral failure of one's own personal existence, and of the finitude that is never secure, but is only diminished through suffering and with*

time, and culminates in the apparent annihilation that is death"[1]

He has a clear grasp of the unity of reality: *"Salvation cannot be understood as merely a promise or as an exclusively future reality. Salvation must be something that can also be experienced now. ... Salvation must be integral; it cannot touch a so-called spiritual dimension of a person's life and not include his or her activity in this world."*[2] And he understands the significance of Augustine's caution that religion must avoid conflict with an understanding of nature: *"Religious conceptions are not more immune from a deepening understanding of our physical universe than are the understandings of the human phenomenon itself. Biblical and classical conceptions of salvation, we have seen, run in close parallel with the conceptions of the world that were in place when they were formulated. One cannot expect less in our own time. We need a conception of salvation that is sensitive to the negative impact human development is having on our life-support system, and that takes account of scientific data concerning the human species within the larger picture of the reality of God's created cosmos" (emphasis supplied).*[3]

Although Haight frames his analysis in terms of other faith traditions among *homo sapiens* on planet Earth, it would be equally applicable to an unknown civilization of sentient beings elsewhere in the cosmos. If the Church were to pursue "catholicity" in light of the Big Bang, the inquiries of Roger Haight in *Jesus Symbol of God* would be helpful and constructive.

But the Notification was not thinking in these terms, any more than Paul was open to the followers of Jesus before his journey to Damascus. The institutional Church is facing a "road to Damascus" awakening in its self understanding of role with regard to what Christ revealed. Despite historical development in this self understanding over the last two thousand years, absorption of the reality of cosmic evolution and the prospect of other sentient civilizations elsewhere in the cosmos will be difficult for the institutional Church.

That difficulty is evident in another conflict between the teaching authority of the institutional Church and a theologian. This further conflict is more recent than the 2004 Vatican action against Roger Haight. Just this year the US bishops' Committee on Doctrine has acted against Elizabeth Johnson's *Quest for the Living God*. The book has been in circulation since 2007 and has been widely acclaimed and used.

Johnson takes the Christian worldview of the Trinity – a mystery that somehow grasps an incomprehensible God – and shows in a series of examples how the continuing quest for the living God is being played out. Her analysis and description serves as yet another confirmation of God's immanence through cosmic evolution.

But the Committee of Doctrine takes an approach that misses the forest for the trees. They pick up on Johnson's emphasis on the otherness of God. She waxes eloquent on the incomprehensibility of this mystery we call God[4]. I confess to having a reaction similar to that of the Committee. My marginal notes mildly disagree with her emphasis. My own sense was that "comprehension is not about God, but about God's sharing an existence that is comprehensible." There is something important about our increasingly evident capacity to comprehend the cosmos, as Einstein's famous comment suggests[5].

The bishops' Committee took what Johnson said as an opportunity to reiterate – by way of contrast – Catholic teaching about "knowing God." We all remember the Baltimore catechism's answer to the fundamental question of our reason for being: "to know God, to love God, and to serve God." While we cannot know God fully, the bishops pointed out, that does not mean that God is wholly other and incomprehensible as Johnson says.

But, of course, that's not what Johnson said. The whole point of the examples she describes in *Quest* is to demonstrate the vitality of our continuing journey toward comprehension. Johnson says: "We will never reach the end of exploring, having figured it all out."[6] But this is not to say that our knowledge is not increasing, as if we were simply meandering in a vast wilderness, getting nowhere.

So why did the Committee take this tack? Perhaps they viewed *Quest* as an appropriate opportunity to fulfill their obligation to teach.

The Committee also took issue with Johnson's view of evolution. Johnson says: "*Modern forms of theism assume that God intervenes in the world at will to accomplish divine purpose apart from natural processes. But the scientific picture of the universe indicates that this is not necessary. Nature*

is actively organizing itself into new forms at all levels." [7]

What Johnson is describing here is the creativity of a pregnant cosmos. This is not a clockwork, as the determinism of Newtonian mechanics might conceive it. We are being graced with a succession of what I have called "thermoentropic novelties," including our own consciousness, and also Jesus Christ.

But the Committee misses entirely what Johnson is saying. Johnson is speaking about an integrated reality, and the best the Committee can do is say, "*The physical cannot account for the non-physical, and the self-organization of created realities does not explain itself. … It is the spiritual nature of the human soul that allows human beings, through their bodily senses, intellectually to know the truth and freely to will the good and so act upon it."* [8]

The distinction between body and soul is what *resonates* when all you have to work with is an Aristotelian (or even Newtonian) view of the cosmos. There is nothing unusual or amiss about this. Our conscious connection to the Spirit and to the living God is *real*. But if we are set in the ways of Aristotle's cosmos, and see that cosmos as "physical reality", then a distinct "spirituality" is necessary to account for reality in its fullness.

But the evolving cosmos that has come to light in the last fifty years makes possible a different conception of reality, one that integrates "physical reality" and "spirituality" in one unfolding reality. Johnson grasps this; the Committee does not. The Committee (and, indeed, the institutional Church more broadly) is still working with Aristotle's cosmos.

Let me add a third example. Roger Haight and *Symbol* is the first example. Elizabeth Johnson and *Quest* is the second example. The third example is the new Roman Missal. All three examples demonstrate a teaching authority that is burying the talents of the Church.

The Roman Missal project began so well. The International Commission on English and the Liturgy (ICEL) was charged with updating the order of the mass that had been put together right after Vatican II. It was understood that the initial post Vatican II changes were necessary but rough hewn. It was time to refine that initial effort, and it was appropriate that this be done by those closest to the language being spoken – a good use of the principle of subsidiarity: decisions should be made at lower levels, if possible.

So ICEL worked diligently and in 1998 produced a revised order of the mass. But the Vatican was not happy with it, and sent the draft back with instructions that – in the end – could be translated as "kindly undertake to render more accurately the beautiful Latin text of St. Jerome." St. Jerome? Latin? What is the point of going backward when God's handiwork – as evident in cosmic evolution – is going in the opposite direction? It is the demon of Aristotle's cosmos, all over again.

Are we living through another time where convenient preconceptions blind the institutional Church to what God is telling us – what a loving God is opening up to our comprehension – through our observations of God's handiwork in the cosmos? Did we not go through this once before, with Ptolemy and an Earth-centric view of the cosmos? Do we not remember Copernicus and Galileo? Is what we see with Roger Haight, with Elizabeth Johnson, and with the Roman Missal: a reprise on the Church's affection for Ptolemy?

There are differences, of course. It's not about the physics of the cosmos. We are well beyond claiming that the Earth is the center of the universe in a physical sense. But what is the cosmos? Is it all physics, or reducible to physics? Cosmic evolution cannot be reduced to physics. As Bernard Lonergan points out, creation is ongoing. Reductionism evaporates as soon as reality ceases to be a subdivision of the "already out there now."[9] It now appears that God has graced us not with a "created order" but rather with a pregnant cosmos that is unfolding into the fullness of reality. There is a more integral connection between Heaven and Earth. It is time to re-think – or, perhaps better, re-imagine – the central realities of existence, and our corresponding "deposit of faith."

A loving God, the Holy Spirit, and the real presence of Christ call our hearts to a different possibility. Is it possible that God did not simply create the cosmos, and then place us in it? Is it possible that God grew us out of the cosmos, as if to emphasize the point – the teaching lesson from the Big Bang – that the cosmos itself is alive and pregnant?

And this teaching raises the suggestion that this fertile cosmos is still pregnant. What is next? The ability to ask this question and to understand that

not even the cosmos knows the answer is the difference between life and clockwork.

So why is the institutional Church, the teaching authority of the Church, taking a Ptolemaic view of God's self-revelation through Jesus Christ?

The teachings of the Church, as presently formulated, are workmanlike but not awesome. God is awesome, and the teachings of the Church should be expected to keep up. Is God changing? Or is that question even appropriate for a God of love? In any event our comprehension is getting better. The lesson of the Big Bang is that our very existence is evolving, and this evolution has direction. There is a progression from stars to galaxies to life … and then what? If we take off our scientific blinders and allow the spiritual side of our consciousness to speak there begins to *resonate* a different, at least for me.

Look at God's handiwork! Faith lets me look at the cosmos and ask what this loving God is up to. I don't have to play scientist and wait for the next piece of evidence. I see "1, 2, 3 …" – and that is enough. It was enough for Lonergan, and it is enough for me. The cosmos is unfolding. And if the cosmos is unfolding – if a pregnant cosmos is the way God is working – then why not an unfolding of revelation? Why not an unfolding Church?

This makes more sense to me than a "deposit of faith" maintained by the Church, a Church kept free from error by a gracious Spirit. What a curse it must be to be kept free from error! Being alive is making things better, not being perfect. The unfolding cosmos – the pregnant and unfolding cosmos – is about making things better, not being free from error. We should banish "free from error" from our lexicon, from the questions we ask about ourselves and about our Church. It is sufficient to make things better.

How would we treat our children, our sons and daughters, who are seeking what a loving God is sharing, a fullness of existence? How do we respond to their explorations? Is our first concern about change from the "deposit of faith" that has been handed down? I suppose so, if we see God as changeless. Do we not encourage the small improvements in the everyday life of our children?

What about Galileo? Was he not a child of the Church? Did the Church respond to his explorations appropriately? Or, perhaps, appropriately as best the Church understood its lights at the time. But if we had it to do over again, how would the Church respond? And if our children today have some of Galileo in them – and I'm thinking of Roger Haight and Elizabeth Johnson, among others – how should the Church respond?

We need a guide for responding appropriately. Have we no such guide? Interestingly, the documents of Vatican II identify such a guide. It is not fleshed out, it has not grown to adulthood, but the kernel is there.

Let me approach this kernel from a different angle. Look out at the night sky, and then look at your hand. The cosmos is large beyond our imaginings, and the evidence is not something you or I can see, but it is passing through our fingers nonetheless. It is the cosmic background radiation that has told us so much about the awesome cosmos in that night sky. We see back in time fourteen billion years; we see a universe so isotropic on large scales that our own evolution on Earth is unlikely to be unique. If there were but one Earth-like planet in every galaxy there could be a hundred billion such opportunities for sentient life.

And the eyes of faith tell us more. Does it not *resonate* through the eyes of faith that the reason for being of the cosmos has something to do with God and with us? The traditional formulation is that we are created in God's image, but cosmic evolution says something more than the Garden of Eden story. I believe a loving God is sharing existence with independent beings able not only to love one another but also to comprehend this existence, thereby imaging this loving and comprehending God. The ongoing and developmental nature of this sharing is important, and provides an alternative way of understanding a reality that the Catholic tradition sees as a "deposit of faith" preserved by the Spirit "free from error."

And one way to see this alternative is to imagine another sentient civilization, somewhere out in this vast cosmos, on its own journey toward the same sharing with the same loving and comprehending God. Jesus of Nazareth is not knowable to this other civilization, even if the Christ, the Incarnate Word, is present everywhere. Surely it would be a gratuitous arrogance for those of us on planet Earth to suppose that revelation for some distant civilization is dependent upon us. As a practical matter, communication with a distant galaxy is problematic (because the speed of light is

too slow to get there and back in any reasonable amount of time), and getting more problematic because the cosmos is expanding at an accelerating rate (more and more, distant galaxies will be receding from us at greater than the speed of light, making communication impossible).

So how can this work? This distant civilization will ultimately confront the reality that they, too, are not alone in the cosmos. The same cosmic background radiation that is passing through our fingers is passing through theirs, as well, whether they are fingers or some other form of bodily appendage. If they have the capacity for science, they, too, will recognize the problem, and will conclude – as we must conclude – that the mechanism of revelation must be symmetrical. That is, the mechanism must be such that it works both for us and for them.

A mechanism of revelation that satisfies the criterion of symmetry – which, by the way, is perhaps the most powerful and productive principle in all of science – is simple, elegant, and dynamic. It explains the different places we have come on our various journeys. It explains why we once thought that being "free from error" was something to be grasped at. Any distant civilization, with its own grasp of the living God, looking out at the starry night sky and imagining us, will at some point in their developmental progression find the same mechanism.

What is this mechanism and how does it work? The simple way to put it is this: God did not come out of the sky, see these hapless human beings, and decide to give them a soul, in the Garden of Eden or otherwise. This soul or conscience or whatever name you want to give it has been coming into being in this cosmic evolutionary process. It is an integral part of our consciousness, not something to be stored on a shelf somewhere and treated separately as the object of salvation. In the terms I have been using in this series of essays, this is why we are able to say that something *resonates*, or that one alternative *resonates more* than another. The alternatives that *resonate* are those that prick our conscience, and that respond to our yearning to love and to make this world a better place. Like any other capability, it improves with use.

Jesus of Nazareth *resonated* with his followers. If we imagine some distant sentient civilization having a consciousness that *resonates*, we can speculate that the living Word might become incarnate in whatever form may be appropriate for this distant civilization. The *resonant* consciousness comes first, and enables appreciation of the incarnate Word. Without a prior *resonant* consciousness, would there be anything for the living Word to incarnate into?

What would be the content of revelation to a sentient civilization in this distant galaxy? Presumably the teachings of the living Word would *resonate*, and followers of an incarnate Word would be able to have an Easter-like experience of a real presence of the living God. That assumes, of course, an Incarnation in this distant galaxy, with or without some event equivalent to a Crucifixion. With perhaps many billions of such sentient civilizations, all journeying toward the same God and a sharing of the same existence, one might suppose that every possible way for a loving God to share existence would come to pass. Perhaps that is the reason for such a vast cosmos.

What kind of "deposit of faith" would square with the work of a loving God in a distant civilization? As Christians we have come to take for granted that we proclaim Jesus Christ, but Jesus himself proclaimed that the reign of God was at hand. Does our "deposit of faith" overemphasize Jesus? Are we too much focused on proclaiming the proclaimer and not enough focused on the message Jesus himself proclaimed?

On the other hand, the Incarnation is significant beyond the content of the message or, perhaps, gives the message its meaning. It is too easy for us – and perhaps also for a distant sentient civilization – to assume that we are the end of God's creation. Recall the essays "…: 1, 2, 3 …" and "…: … 4, 5, 6." We have physics (1), we have chemistry (2), we have biology (3), and now we have *resonant* consciousness (4). And that is it; that's the end.

No, that is not the end. Christ, the Incarnate Word (5), is a thermoentropic novelty that goes beyond our consciousness, even if our consciousness is necessary to appreciate it. It would be prudent to remain open to yet another surprise in the unfolding of God's creation. Our own theology speaks of a "second coming" of Christ, which may not be like the first. What about the theology of sentient beings in a distant galaxy? Or, judging from the situation on planet Earth, perhaps there are a number of theologies in this distant civilization. A symmetrical mechanism for revelation accounts for these as well.

Beyond the Trinitarian elements (God, Incarnate Word, Spirit) of a "deposit of faith" it is certainly reasonable to treat the "People of God" as an expansive term inclusive of sentient beings throughout the cosmos. But an institutional teaching authority in a distant civilization would not be the same as what we know as the Church on Earth, with bishops in various places on this Earth and a Pope in the city of Rome. We may rely upon an institutional Church here to serve as fiduciary for the "deposit of faith", and it is conceivable that a distant civilization could rely upon a similar institutional reality.

Who, then, is responsible for the universal "deposit of faith", and what exactly is that "deposit"? As soon as reliance is placed upon a localized institution symmetry across the galaxies is lost. Symmetry is also lost if reliance is placed upon Jesus of Nazareth rather than the Incarnate Word. It is the same ineffable God, but that's the easy part. The particulars of Jesus of Nazareth and the keys of Peter pose the problem. How can symmetry be preserved?

It turns out to be simple. Just forget about being "free from error" and instead think "whither"[10] – where are we going? There are three steps to arriving at a symmetrical approach to the journey toward union with a loving and living God. First, from our perspective on planet Earth, we can make the same distinction between the Spirit and the institutional Church as we make between the Incarnate Word and Jesus. A distant civilization may have its own version of Jesus, but this would be the same Word even if the flesh is different. Similarly, there may be one institution here and another for a distant civilization, but the same Spirit that guides them both.

Step two. How does the Spirit work? If it works through the institution, then we have the same symmetry problem. We end up with two "deposits of faith." It's like having two Popes, even if they are too far away from each other to be able to communicate. We need a mechanism that does something more creative than choosing between or among competing Popes.

We have known about this problem for some time. This is why the Church speaks of "reception" of its teachings. Vatican II acknowledged a sense of the faithful, a *sensus fidelium*, operating over time. And while the Vatican II documents carefully constrain the *sensus fidelium* within the arms of the institutional Church, the acknowledgment of the *sensus fidelium* is a significant step forward.

"Step two" adds one further thought: this very constraint – and, indeed, each one of the various stages of a journeying Church over the course of history – is validated by the *sensus fidelium*. It is the *sensus fidelium* that holds the "deposit of faith" and validates the institutional Church. It is the *sensus fidelium* through which the Spirit works, as messy as that is. Vatican II spoke presciently when it shifted emphasis to the people of God. That shift has not yet been fully absorbed. But it is necessary for comprehending the utterly awesome character of a pregnant God able to spawn other sentient civilizations in this vast cosmos.

There is a third step. How does the *sensus fidelium* work? The people of God are many. How do we avoid cacophony and chaos? Won't there be many different interpretations of the Spirit among the people of God? Indeed, have not the people of God broken up into a multitude of different religions and denominations on this account? Yes, of course, but not to worry. What are five or ten religions on Earth compared to billions of different sentient civilizations across the cosmos, each on its own journey toward the same living God?

There is a method to the *sensus fidelium*, a method that has two attributes. First, the method acknowledges that the integrity of the journey comes first. Both the individual and the community, and the Church as a whole, are entitled to give priority to the integrity of the journey. It is not necessary to be in the same place; it is sufficient to be on journey toward the same God. Second, the mechanism of *resonant choice* moves the journey forward, step by step. Different communities may be in different places, taking different steps, and in that sense the *sensus fidelium* is of the community. This is symmetry at work, and overcomes the problems of an Earth centric bias.

Where, then, is the unity of the Church? The mechanism of the *sensus fidelium* finds unity in the same God toward which all journey. Unity pertains to the people of God, rather than to the institutional Church. This approach is broad enough to encompass sentient beings in distant civilizations.

Admittedly, the journey of the Roman Catholic Church is currently at a different place. The Church has been at this place for some time, since long before we knew of the Big Bang and long before it was plausible to consider the symmetry

requirements of sentient life in distant galaxies. Recall the Council of Nicea, and the Emperor Constantine's concern about the unity of the Roman Empire and the unity of the Empire's Church. It is in this environment that the bishops of the Church addressed the problem of "many different interpretations." I don't want to overemphasize Constantine's influence, because the Church was already moving in this direction. It seemed important to get the "deposit of faith" right. The politics of moving in this direction did not concern them. In retrospect we can observe that the victors wrote the history, and that our present generation has grown up in the shadow of the victors.

It was not simply the bishops – the fiduciaries of the institutional Church – who were concerned about the problem of "many different interpretations". It is fair to say that this difficulty was recognized by the faithful at large. The integrity and survival of the entire community was believed to be at stake, especially after the collapse of Rome in 476. Because of this the sense of the faithful, the *sensus fidelium*, ratified and validated the concept that the institutional Church should serve as a single point of reference for the "deposit of faith." The politics of the institutional Church became quite important, if not dispositive. The procedural advantage of a single decision making body would not be ignored by practical folk.

The result is one institution and one teaching. The "deposit of faith" is what the teaching authority says it is, subject to the *sensus fidelium*. That has worked well enough for a long time, but it doesn't take account of other sentient civilizations elsewhere in the cosmos.

So the Roman Catholic Church is at a crossroads. The "Rome has spoken" approach still has much support among the faithful. But the Church has a weakness that will ultimately lead to agreement that the politics of "Rome has spoken" needs to be replaced by the *sensus fidelium*. That weakness – if it is to be called a weakness – is the principle of universality. That is the meaning of the word "catholic". For many other Christian denominations the emphasis is on the community – their communities – not upon the people of God writ large. For the Roman Catholic Church, the people of God writ large is a matter of considerable importance, as demonstrated by *Lumen Gentium*[11].

We have not yet figured out how this is going to work. Vatican II, however, was prescient. It did more than give priority to the people of God. It did more than acknowledge the *sensus fidelium*. It also advocated the use of structural entities – parish and diocesan councils – that could bring the *sensus fidelium* out from the shadows. Few bishops have seen the long term potential for such encouragement of parish and diocesan councils, but such things are in the cards of cosmic evolution.

One sign of the times is the American Catholic Council, which met last June in Detroit over Pentecost weekend to pursue further development of what John XXIII opened up at Vatican II. Joan Chittister, in a speech on the last day of the weekend, captured the prevailing imagination of the assembly by recounting advice from those ancient upon the land we love: "In the Native American tradition, at the time of initiation, the elders tell the younger, 'as you go the way of life, you will see a great chasm – …". She paused, allowing the image presented to the young Indian initiates to gather in the minds of the audience. And then she repeated the one word of advice given by the elders to the younger: "'… **jump!**'" And then Sr. Joan concluded with a rousing exhortation: "For all our sakes, speak up, burn brightly, go on. For the sake of the Gospel, for the sake of the Church, for all our sakes, for the sake of the Holy Spirit and the presence of God and the power of Pentecost, for God's sake, make a leap!" After a standing ovation of several minutes, she returned to the podium and said to the assembly who knew they were listening to prophetic words, "you are my hope."

The NOVA Community is caught up in these signs of the times. In September, the annual retreat at Shrine Mont will be a prayerful and low key excursion – titled "A Cosmic Adventure" – into the fullness of reality that comes from contemplating cosmic evolution. Then, on October 2nd and again on October 23rd, the community will meet to hear about what went on at the ACC meeting in Detroit. See announcements elsewhere in this newsletter for all these events.

We are limited beings, perhaps more (or perhaps less) limited than other sentient civilizations is the cosmos, but limited nonetheless. The Spirit of a loving God understands our limitations and works with us, like a parent. Is not this what Jesus meant when he said there were things he had not said but that would be revealed by the Holy Spirit?

We are not alone. We live in families, and communities. We discuss these choices, and revisit the question of *resonance*. On many points the community is not all of one voice, nor is it always clear whether a common community voice is necessary or appropriate. One community within the people of God may be of one voice and another community may be of a different voice, and communities may split on this account, and it may still not be clear whether the point of difference merits a common community voice. Where is the *sensus fidelium* in these voices?

These matters are cause for concern, especially for those who see the institutional Church as a sign of unity of the people of God. But, as I have tried to show, there is challenge and opportunity here as well. The demons of Aristotle's cosmos may still be with us, but perhaps not for that much longer. Cosmic evolution has come into its own in the last fifty years, and its implications are entering the public consciousness.

We are not only individuals. We are part of the people of God. I am arguing that the *sensus fidelium* of the people of God has given birth to the institutional Church, and sustains it. As the people of God, do we not love the Church, just as we as individuals love our own children? Granted, individual members of the Body of Christ have a variety of views about the institutional Church (see, e.g., Joe Annunziata's assessment on page 8), but the "sense of the faithful" of the larger people of God is a different matter. Is there not room for love in our larger collective self?

The institutional Church has arrived at a chasm, and needs the admonition of wise elders to screw up its courage, and jump. But there are none that this institution recognizes as elders. The *sensus fidelium* is on the horizon, but the Church does not yet claim it as a parent. The Church believes that the revelation of Jesus Christ is complete, and that further working out of this revelation is a matter of details. Important details, to be sure, but details under the watchful eye of the Holy Spirit. Blessed Pope John XXIII and Vatican II nudged the institutional Church in a direction more open to a future both uncertain and gracious. But the chasm remains.

There is precedent in science for the Church's position about completeness and details. At the end of the nineteenth century the most noted physicist of his time, Lord Kelvin, gave a speech recounting all that physics had achieved. Newton's laws of motion described the workings of matter both here and in the heavens. Maxwell's equations described the phenomena of electricity and magnetism in a way that brought them together and explained light, as well. The basic laws of nature had been discovered, Lord Kelvin opined. Henceforth, the task of science would be a matter of working out the details of these basic laws.

Lord Kelvin's speech was poorly timed. Within a few years a clerk at the Swiss patent office, Albert Einstein, published papers that added relativity and quantum theory – more than details – to the repertoire of physics. Lord Kelvin's speech has been a lesson for students of physics ever since.

Theologians like Roger Haight and Elizabeth Johnson are continuing to nudge the institution toward a more Spirit filled approach toward a chasm that is worth jumping.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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[1] Roger Haight, S.J. *Jesus Symbol of God* (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, NY, 1999), pp. 354-355.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 355.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 357.

[4] Elizabeth Johnson, *Quest for the Living God (*Continuum: New York, NY, 2007), pp. 34-37, in the chapter "Gracious Mystery, Ever Greater, Ever Nearer".

[5] "One may say 'the eternal mystery of the world is its comprehensibility' … the world of our sense experience is comprehensible. The fact that it is comprehensible is a miracle.", from the article "Physics and Reality" by Albert Einstein, published in the March 1936 issue of the Journal of the Franklin Institute, at p. 351; reprinted in *Ideas and Opinions* (Crown Publishers: New York, NY, 1954) at p. 290, 292.

[6] Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

[7] Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

[8] Committee of Doctrine, USCCB, Statement on *Quest for the Living God* (24 March 2011), at p. 17-18.

[9] Lonergan, *Insight*, p. 257.

[10] A term used to great effect by Johnson in expounding upon the teaching approach of Karl Rahner. See *Quest*, pp. 35-38

[11] *Lumen Gentium*, Chapter II, "On the People of God," ¶¶9-17.

Theology for a Small Planet

A collection of essays by Clyde Christofferson © 2009-2011

Implications of being a Small Planet – How Can Reality be both One and Intelligible?

Albert Einstein, 1926: *"God does not play dice with the Universe."*[1]

Albert Einstein, 1936: "*The most incomprehensible thing about the world is that it is comprehensible.*"[2]

Bernard Lonergan, 1957: "*The world of our experience is an unfolding of emergent probabilities, neither deterministic nor a non-intelligible morass of merely chance events.*" [3]

NOVA's 2011 retreat at Shrine Mont was titled "A Cosmic Adventure." Courtesy of Marie Pinho's projection equipment and video materials found and explained by David Mog, the community enjoyed a mind-bending introduction to modern cosmology, and how science can nurture the religious imagination by simply reflecting upon God's creation. John Haughey, S.J., was with us the entire weekend and gave the final talk on Sunday morning before celebrating the Eucharist with us.

It would be prosaic to say that life has its surprises. In science, experimental results can be unsettling. And explanations of experimental results can be downright weird, as we found out on Saturday. We saw a short video cartoon where "Dr. Quantum" used the famous "two slit" experiment to explain how electrons (and baseballs, for that matter) could look like particles on some occasions and look like waves on other occasions, depending on what the observer was looking at.

An even weirder experimental result is called "quantum entanglement," where two subatomic particles form a single quantum system. Each particle has what is called "spin" (which is just a name, but that is the name that physicists give to this quality which can be measured). When the spin of one particle is measured, the spin of the other is determined, even if the other particle is in a different place. The problem is that the spin is not known until it is measured. There is a probability that it could be, for example, "spin up", but it could also be "spin down." You don't know until the measurement is taken. And if it turns out to be "spin up" for one particle, then the experimental results also show that the other particle in the "entangled" pair will be "spin down."

How can this be? It would be one thing if the spin probability was just a question of our ignorance: there is a real value of spin for each particle, and we just don't know what it is until it is measured. But it would be another thing entirely if the spin value didn't actually materialize until it was measured. In that case, how does the other particle in the entangled pair know what its value is? How would that value be communicated? This is what Einstein called "spooky action at a distance."

So what is the answer, and what does this say about God? Is the spin value already set, and we just don't know it until it is measured, as Einstein argued? Or is it truly a matter of probability, as Niels Bohr argued in a famous series of debates with Einstein? The debates ended inconclusively, in the 1930s, with a paper by Einstein and a clever but difficult counterargument by Bohr.

And so the argument sat for thirty years.

Saturday night at the retreat John Mooney sat down with David Mog and me to talk about how to interpret what quantum mechanics was telling us. John was concerned that Bohr's interpretation – that there was no reality to "spin" until it was measured – would mean that reality was unintelligible. He talked about a Teaching Company course which disclosed that Bohr had been influenced by the logical positivist school of philosophy. John said he didn't know much about physics, but knew something about philosophy, and logical positivism has been discredited. We agreed that the universe should be intelligible.

I would put it this way: a loving God is sharing existence with independent beings able to love one another and comprehend existence, thereby imaging God. There is so much of nature that is comprehensible, why would God merely tantalize us with understanding only to cut us off at the quantum level?

On the way home from the retreat I listened to a Teaching Company course on Quantum Mechanics, in which the professor gave a very lucid account of what happened some thirty years after the Einstein paper and Bohr's response. In 1964 a physicist named John Bell took a novel approach to the Einstein-Bohr problem. He set up a fictional universe having the characteristics described in Einstein's paper, and then developed what is now known as "Bell's inequality." He showed mathematically that in any hypothetical universe where, for example, the "spin" of an entangled particle was real before it was measured and there was no "spooky action at a distance," then "Bell's inequality" would be correct.

But when he analyzed the experimental results of quantum mechanics, Bell's inequality was not correct. Consequently, Einstein's assumptions may be correct in some universe, but not the universe we are living in. Since 1964 Bell's results have been confirmed in experiments with "entangled" particles that are very far apart, so that "spooky action at a distance" would require communication at far greater than the speed of light.

Einstein was a believer in cause and effect, and was troubled by "spooky action at a distance." And certainly, if there is cause and effect, the universe is intelligible. But since 1964 it has been necessary to either a) abandon determinism, b) accept "spooky action at a distance", or both.

Is there a middle ground? Can we have intelligibility without determinism, and what would that look like? Bernard Lonergan provides such intelligibility in his book, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*. As you will see, Lonergan – although no physicist – has the better of the argument.

I would put the question another way. Use Bell's approach, but from a different angle. Suppose there were a universe which is deterministic, where God – if there is a God for such a universe – acts upon such a universe from afar (or above, or whatever). You might call it "spooky action at a distance," but it's not "spooky" if you also assume that God is all powerful and can do anything. If God can do "action at a distance" it wouldn't matter that the universe is deterministic. In such a universe, God comes from somewhere else and intervenes in an otherwise deterministic universe. We would call these interventions "miracles" because they are inconsistent with a deterministic universe. In such a universe, God becomes a problem. How intelligible is a world in which God intervenes from afar to give human beings free will and a soul, but lets the Lisbon earthquake kill tens of thousands in 1755?

But what if God is not a God from afar who created a separate deterministic universe and put human beings in it? Instead, what if we live in an unfolding cosmos that is pregnant with the living God, a cosmos that is an integral part of the fullness of reality?

In short, suppose there is one reality. In such a reality there is no place for a deterministic cosmos. God could not come from afar because there is no separate "afar" to come from: there is but one reality.

So, what kind of a universe do we live in? Quantum mechanics says that it's not deterministic. Ironically, it is the two world assumption – a deterministic universe into which God intervenes from afar – that is unintelligible. What good is it for a deterministic natural world to be intelligible if human existence must be explained by God's interventions? How can it be intelligible for an all powerful God to intervene from afar to give us free will and a soul, and then to sit idly by while all manner of disaster decimates us? Human sin can be used to explain disaster that we visit upon ourselves, but not the ravages of nature.

Suppose, instead, that we abandon a God who intervenes from afar. We still have the Lisbon earthquake, but it is not necessary to conjure up an all powerful God to blame for this or other natural disasters. Simply put, God's presence is more integral to our reality than intervention from afar. Power is a human label that we paste on God. A God of love takes a different course, less showy but more profound. We are made whole in this knowing.

In the last several essays I have talked about Aristotle's demons, and how they have made it difficult for the institutional Church to see the implications of the small place that planet Earth occupies in the cosmos. In the most recent essay I argued that the prospect of other sentient civilizations in this vast cosmos, similarly graced by a loving God, requires a shift in focus from the institutional Church to the people of God. Vatican II began this shift by locating the discussion of the people of God ahead of the discussion of the role of the bishops[4]. Vatican II also recognized the role of the sense of the faithful, the *sensus fidelium*, in channeling the guidance of the Holy Spirit to the Church[5].

But these teachings of Vatican II are mere hints of what is yet to come. There remains a chasm that the institutional Church is not yet prepared to jump. Some theologians are making preparations, but prelates concerned with doctrine are not comfortable, and are

attempting to restrain theologians who see a more promising future across this chasm.

The chasm is stubborn and persistent. On this side of the chasm is the comfort of knowing that faith in Jesus Christ overcomes the power of death in this life and leads to an eternal life hereafter. On the other side of the chasm is essentially the same comfort, so why the chasm? What is different on the other side?

What is different is a fresh appreciation of Christ's summary of what his ministry was about: "the reign of God is at hand!"[6] In many ways it is the same understanding that the Church has always taught. We are to love one another, here and now. We are to make life on earth new. We are to make the presence of the living Christ felt in the daily lives of those around us. What is different, then?

What about heaven? On this side of the chasm heaven is after death. On the other side of the chasm is one reality. It is not about living a good life and then going to heaven; it is about living in the fullness of reality – there is no "then". Yes, there is death, but there is no "then".

The skeptic may say, "precisely! You die and that's it. The end." No, to paraphrase Christ's summary: "the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Eternal life is to be lived now, and simply continues. Death is not a "then" event, any more than God is a God who intervenes from afar.

For those on this side of the chasm there are still two orders of being, this life "then" a next life. And there is nothing illogical about that. The sequence seems perfectly sensible.

In recent times the book of nature has raised questions about this perfectly sensible sequence. For those on this side of the chasm the natural world is like a set for the drama of this life. The natural world is what it is, but we leave it behind at death. For those on this side of the chasm death is a critical transition: there is an accounting, and "then" a next life.

On the other side of the chasm is a more integrated existence. When we say "God's ways are not our ways" it is not an unintelligible distinction between God's intervention to cure one child but not another. Rather, God's healing presence is of another order entirely. It is a freeing presence that calls us to live by loving one another, to share the joy of the parents whose child was cured and to share the grief of the parents whose child died. This is the life for which one sells all that one has and buys the field with the treasure in it.[7]

This is a different kind of intelligibility, one that is a continuing struggle that never quite ends. Is it enough that our struggle is also the struggle of a God who is with us, a God whose shared reality seems to be both intelligible and full of surprises – like quantum entanglement – which bring hope for a fuller intelligibility. Strange, indeed, or perhaps not so strange. More on that next time.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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[1] Paraphrased from a comment in Einstein's letter to Max Born of December 4, 1926. The full comment is: "*Quantum mechanics is certainly imposing. But an inner voice tells me that it is not yet the real thing. The theory says a lot, but does not really bring us any closer to the secret of the 'old one.' I, at any rate, am convinced that He does not throw dice*."

[2] Paraphrased from a passage in the article "Physics and Reality" by Albert Einstein, published in the March 1936 issue of the Journal of the Franklin Institute, at p. 351; reprinted in *Ideas and Opinions* (Crown Publishers: New York, NY, 1954) at p. 290, 292. The full passage is: "*One may say 'the eternal mystery of the world is its comprehensibility.' It is one of the great realizations of Immanuel Kant that the postulation of a real external world would be senseless without this comprehensibility. In speaking here of 'comprehensibility,' the expression is used in its most modest sense. It implies: the production of some sort of order among sense impressions, this order being produced by the creation of general concepts, relations between these concepts, and by definite relations of some kind between these concepts and sense experience. It is in this sense that the world of our sense experience is comprehensible. The fact that it is comprehensible is a miracle*."

[3] Paraphrased from Lonergan, *Insight*, p. 125-126. A fuller quote is: "*There remains the task of working out the generic properties of a world process in which the order or design is constituted by emergent probability. … inasmuch as combinations of classical laws yield schemes of recurrence. … Schemes can be arranged in a conditioned series, such that the earlier can function without the emergence of the later but the later cannot emerge or function unless the earlier already are functioning. … Emergent probability is the successive realization … of a conditioned series of schemes of recurrence. … World process is open. It is a succession of probable realizations of possibilities. Hence, it does not run along the iron rails laid by determinists nor, on the other hand, is it a non-intelligible morass of merely chance events*"

[4] *Lumen Gentium*, ¶¶9-17.

[5] Op.cit., ¶12.

[6] Mark 1:15.

[7] Matthew 13:44.

Theology for a Small Planet

A collection of essays by Clyde Christofferson © 2009-2011

Comprehending Reality: A Work in Progress

How intelligible is reality if it makes no difference whether a neighbor's child lives or dies? How intelligible is reality if the test is not whether the child lives or dies but whether we rejoice with the neighbor if the child lives and mourn with the neighbor if the child dies?

Such intelligibility would take some getting used to. There is a certain serenity made possible by an acceptance of what we cannot change, but it is unsettling to suppose that a loving God accepts such things. Are we not here precisely to make this world a better place? The neighbor whose child is suffering from cancer is in pain from waiting, and from fearing the worst. Is it too much for the neighbor to hope, and for us to hope – and pray – with the neighbor?

What can we do? There is a prayer – sometimes attributed to St. Augustine – which asks God for "the courage to change what I can change" and "the serenity to accept what I cannot change," and finally "the wisdom to know the difference." If my neighbor's child is dying of cancer, I can help the neighbor even if I can not help the child. Prayer stands as a wedge of hope, an act of courage in the face of fear. Is this a time when there is "wisdom in knowing the difference," or does that wisdom come later, after the child lives or dies? What is such wisdom, anyway? Can we know the difference while there is still hope?

Strangely, this has a familiar ring. In my last essay I described the peculiar features of an aspect of quantum mechanics called "quantum entanglement." True, that was about subatomic particles. But the measurements can be done in any physics lab, and these measurements routinely confirm the strangeness of physics: a result – a particular quantum state – is neither known nor knowable until it is measured. And for particles "entangled" in a single quantum system, measuring one particle determines the state of the other particle as well, even if the other particle is distant. It is, to use Einstein's terminology, "spooky action at a distance."

This conundrum was expressed in terms closer to human experience by Erwin Schrodinger, one of the founders of quantum mechanics. Instead of two subatomic particles, suppose one subatomic particle and a cat. The subatomic particle and the cat are "entangled" by the following artifice: the cat is put inside a box, along with a small vial of radioactive material that has one chance in two of emitting an electron. If the electron is emitted, this would trigger release of a poison which would kill the cat.

In the original version of "Schrodinger's Cat" the cat can have only two "states" – alive or dead. I'm going to change the story slightly and suppose that there is no poison, and that the two states of the cat are "black cat" and "white cat." Because this is the quantum world, there is no such thing as a "gray cat," and the probability is 50-50 that when you open the box the cat will be black or white, depending on whether the "entangled" electron was emitted or not.

The reason physicists puzzle over this example is because they are curious about the state of the cat while the box is closed. The mathematics – which works so well in describing experimental results overall – simply "superimposes" the probabilities, but denies that there can be a "gray cat" or a "speckled cat" or any other kind of combination cat. The superimposed probabilities "collapse" when a measurement is taken, so that only a black cat or a white cat is actually "seen."

The key idea is that the allowable states are distinct, and there is no "gray" between them. That's the nature of the quantum world, which appears to be our world, the world that is being shared with us by a loving God.

What if this God of ours is an integral part of this quantum world, this one reality? Surely that must be if reality is one. Quantum mechanics is not simply an odd concept tossed into reality just to challenge our comprehension, as if God were somehow outside of reality.

Christians have an understanding of God that seems peculiar to other monotheists. The idea of three distinct persons in one God is not understood by Jews and Muslims, the other people of the Book. And it does seem a rather strange notion, perhaps as strange as quantum entanglement.

There are aspects of faith that we have trouble getting our arms around. And it is easy enough to resolve the struggle with the Trinity by invoking the mystery of a God who is with us, deeply and inextricably. That is the meaning of the Christ, after all, the God who is with us, in the flesh. Indeed, it is Christ with us, in the flesh, that is the reason for the Trinity in the first place.

I'm not sure I want to push the metaphor too far, but what if we have a quantum God? God with us, in the flesh, a presence experienced again at Eucharist, is the same God, yet distinct like a quantum state is distinct. The Spirit is not as earthy, but still very present and distinct. Does "quantum state" work better than "person"? Probably not, at least for me. I can relate to "person," and I have trouble relating to a "quantum state."

But the quantum state does not become particular until its measure is taken. Does faith take God's measure, serving to accept a constant invitation to experience what is real? Combine that with the notion of "distinct" – whether "persons" or "states" – and perhaps "three" and "one" may be understood as the same. This God of ours is all over and through us, in distinct and discrete ways. "Subtle is the Lord," said Einstein. And yet God's presence is palpable. It is said that we are the hands and feet of Christ. That metaphor doesn't quite work with the Spirit, whose guidance we seek, but the distinct presence of the Spirit remains palpable. The intertwining of Christ and the Spirit in the same God takes the edge off an otherwise distant Creator.

We do not know who God is or how God works, but the Trinity may be viewed as an approximation of a reality whose comprehension we can only grasp at.

There is but one reality, and we are blessed to share in it. The Trinity is a glimpse of the encompassing oneness of this reality. That may seem ironic, because our faith cousins in the line of Abraham have on occasion argued that the Trinity bespeaks three Gods, not one. For example, Islam views Christ as contrary to the oneness of God, who has no "associates."

But the oneness of reality has a quite different implication. A loving God is sharing that reality. The sharing is a marvel, because it does not create two realities. The integrity of the one reality is not compromised. God is awesome.

How can we comprehend the oneness of reality and at the same time comprehend one God who is distinct from us? That is the necessary consequence of being independent. The sublime beauty of this oneness – which is an integrated and seamless whole – is difficult for our meager minds to comprehend.

Yet this comprehension is coming into being. Suppose the Trinity was not revealed to us, in a conventional sense. Suppose it is our own, our feeble attempt to grasp the fullness of the reality that includes our sharing in it. The reality is awesome, just awesome.

We are independent. This one and awesome God is doing this without breaking reality. Independent beings we are, able not only to love but to comprehend, even if through a glass and darkly. The work is ongoing, in process, now but not yet. We are living it. We are part of it. Amazing.

But until Christ, the unity escaped us. We thought of God and God's creation. Our comprehension was two, not one. But that was then. Our comprehension itself is a work in progress, an integral part of cosmic evolution. The consciousness of sentient beings, who *resonate* to the dance of love, is a surprise that we take for granted, a surprise that enables these sentient beings to comprehend the further surprise that is the Christ, with further surprises yet in store, including the end times or *parousia*. Cosmic evolution puts the emphasis upon the surprise. As with Schrodinger's cat, we have not yet opened the box, in the "now, but not yet."

God and a separate creation are divisions of our own construction. We are called to a more sublime unity. We approximate that unity in the Trinity.

This is progress.

Christ is central to this progress. The Risen Christ prompted those who experienced the surprise of the living Christ to create a new paradigm. To have the Spirit "proceed from the Father **and the son,**" the so-called "filioque" language that distressed the Orthodox Church, is simply a recognition of the role that Christ has played in our construction of the Trinity.

The Trinity is not given to us. It is our construction. In an important sense, we made it up. It is not simply that God is one, and that the three persons in one God is mystery. Reality – the fullness of reality, outside of which there is nothing – is one. We have mistaken our independence – which is quite real – as a token of a separate creation. Thus have we viewed God and creation as two, a separation unredeemed by a pantheistic approach. Pantheism is not an adequate approximation of the unity of reality.

The Trinity is our first good approximation of the unity of reality. It is not about the unity of God, but about the oneness of reality. The theology of the Trinity has deftly maintained the coherence of this construction. Christ as God incarnate, as Logos prior to creation, avoids the temporality of a mere bodily and therefore subordinate creation by a prior "God the Father".

A loving God is enveloping us. We cannot maintain a distant God. We confuse our independence – real as it is – with distance from God. We are to share, and we are to live in the unity of Christ. Even the construction that "God sent his only Son" is inadequate, reflecting some measure of the "God and creation" duality. God and the Son are one. God and the Spirit are one. Reality is one, and we are blessed to share in it, as independent and comprehending beings.

But the Trinity is just an approximation to unity. It serves well enough, however, to overcome the distance of duality. This loving God is with us, in a very palpable

sense. Prayer life is simply a participation in God's loving presence. Our cup runneth over.

Prayer is a place to be with God. It is a place to come back to for refreshment as we struggle with daily life. The monks have chosen the better part.

Or have they? They are our prayer as we struggle with daily life. Daily life is also integrated into this sharing of reality. Daily life is not a way station, where those who are not in prayer mark time until a passing over. The activities of daily life are the objects of our sharing of God's love. We make investments of love in these activities. There is nothing in daily life that is not an opportunity for such investment.

"Daily life" is perhaps too confining a term. Society and its institutional realities are built up from the activities of daily life, but have lives of their own that are not aptly comprehended by the term "daily." They, too, require investments of love. These investments of love are part of our common journey toward the end times, whatever surprise that turns out to be.

How awesome is God's love for us! God is an integral part of what we do, however and whenever we experience yet another opening of the box, at Eucharist or in sharing small acts of kindness with a stranger.

This is the meaning of the Trinity.

Or one meaning of the Trinity. In *Quest for the Living God*, Elizabeth Johnson has a section about the mystery of the Trinity. She quotes from St. Augustine who, as usual, has an engaging way of putting things: "But still you ask, 'three what?' … 'Three persons' was coined … in order that we might not be obliged to remain silent,"[1] to which Johnson responds: "In other words, 'person' is the best of an inadequate lot."[2]

Upon reading that section it occurred to me that cosmic evolution, and in particular our development as a sentient civilization, provides an opportunity for reflection.

We are not alone in the cosmos. If scientists are cautious about that conclusion – waiting for physical evidence – the eyes of faith are clearer. If a loving God is sharing existence with beings who are independent and able to love one another – if that is the point of creation – then what science tells us about the vastness of this evolving cosmos simply confirms the scope of God's generative powers. There are tens of billions of stars in our own galaxy, and a good many of those have a size and pattern of gravitational formation that produce rocky inner planets and gaseous outer planets like our own solar system. And there are a hundred billion galaxies.

Do the math. God is prolific. This is yet another chapter in the ongoing story of an earthly humanity that is less and less the center of anything. Our ancestors thought the universe revolved around the Earth, and now it turns out that the universe is expanding, has no center, and that our Sun is just one star out of billions in a galaxy out of billions. And with the prospect of uncountable numbers of sentient civilizations in this vast cosmos, humanity on planet Earth does not retain even a spiritual centrality.

Maybe that's a sign of humanity's maturity, coming to grips with a life story that suggests we take a seat at the foot of God's cosmic table. Humility and maturity go together. Other sentient civilizations may be doing better with their talents, and come more quickly to humility and maturity.

The perspective provided by the prospect of other sentient civilizations in distant galaxies makes prudent the task of rethinking – or, better, re-imagining – how we take our religious tradition. Somehow we must allow for some measure of symmetry, a symmetry that recognizes that God's children are many.

These many children share with humanity that they are loved by God. That others besides humanity on planet Earth are sentient means that they, too, have a consciousness that *resonates* to small acts of kindness. It is this consciousness which is aware of the Spirit, through which *resonance* operates, not as an oracle but gently enabling discernment of which alternatives *resonate* more. The *sensus fidelium* flows out of this process of discernment, and other sentient civilizations will have their own *sensus fidelium*, however differently it may develop and be described. The institutional realities that accompany community are rooted in, and are expressions of, this developing *sensus fidelium*, although that may be a conclusion that is only gradually embraced by those who are fiduciaries for these institutional realities.

Fortunately, the evidence we have of an evolving cosmos suggests that we ought not to be surprised if our own consciousness, graced as it is with the capacity for love, nonetheless grows gradually. We champ at the bit in order to make progress, as we see what *resonates* with us as progress, toward a better world. Other sentient civilizations on other worlds, in response to the same loving God, are tending to their own gardens.

And our own reflections on the other, the stranger in the land, and the stranger in a distant land, can but slowly absorb what this means.

Do other sentient civilizations see God as a Trinity?

There is a story about a corporate executive who had climbed the ladder of success, and when he reached the top and looked around found that he had leaned his ladder up against the wrong wall.

If the Church may be understood in these terms, as having over the millennia constructed a ladder of teachings and is now able to look over what theologian Roger Haight describes as "the postmodern world," the

question is not whether post modernity contains the usual distractions from spiritual discipline, but rather what has been the reason for climbing this ladder in the first place. That's the point of the corporate executive's story.

And if the reason for climbing this ladder of teachings and tradition is to construct a universal religion that is fully endowed in comparison with other religions that are less fully endowed, then it would be reasonable to wonder whether the ladder has been leaned up against the wrong wall.

So why has the Church been climbing this ladder in the first place? If Jesus Christ is given as the reason, would Christ agree that the ladder has been leaned up against the right wall, or is this wall a human construct, prey to the usual follies of human endeavor?

Happily, the existence of at least one other sentient civilization somewhere in the vast cosmos provides a useful foil for testing whether the Church's ladder has been leaned up against the right wall. Clearly, such a civilization cannot know Jesus of Nazareth (or Abraham, for that matter). It is also evident that the Logos cannot be limited to one incarnation in the cosmos. Cosmic evolution suggests a more integral understanding of the Christ event, as flowing out of a seedbed nurtured in a remote corner – and probably in other equally remote corners – of a fecund and pregnant cosmos. It cannot be otherwise without conjuring up the same singular misapprehension that found Earth and humanity at the center of the universe.

Jesus of Nazareth is the Christian story, but even within that story the Logos must be able to come to fruition elsewhere. We should turn to understanding the nature of the seedbed and its nurturing. Mary probably plays a large role, a role for which the virgin birth is but a placeholder, waiting for a more adequate understanding of what an awesome God has wrought in this vast and pregnant cosmos.

There is, I think, a common thread that links an Earth centered universe and the virgin birth. Both are placeholders for truths that *resonate* deeply in the human soul. The Earth centered universe was a fitting expression for the deeply *resonant* sense that we are loved by God. Now that we as a people are further along in years, older and wiser, we can know God's love for us without the placeholder.

It will be the same with the virgin birth, which seemed a fitting attribute for the Mother of the Risen Christ. It may come down to another understanding of God's love for us, a love that is with us, a love that finds expression in a different quantum state of the same loving God, a love that was nurtured by a remarkable woman and mother, without whom Jesus would not have come to be the Risen Christ.

At least I offer that for your consideration. It is an effort to come to grips with the existence of other sentient civilizations elsewhere in the cosmos that are also loved by God.

We may never be able to communicate with another sentient civilization elsewhere in the cosmos. The distances in time and space may be too great. But that does not matter. The perspective provided by such a distant civilization loved by the same God allows a return to planet Earth with a fresh outlook on other civilizations in our own midst.

In the latest issue of *America* magazine (dated October 24, 2011) there is an article about "The Changing Face of Theology." The article notes that today's theologians are lay people rather than primarily clerics. In a section "Context Matters" the author, who has been teaching theology for forty years, comments that the formulation of church teaching changes with changes in the historical, social and cultural context.

That conclusion seems fair enough, but as I read it I wondered whether "context" adequately accounts for another dynamic which is part and parcel of humanity's participation in an evolving cosmos, namely, the evolution of human comprehension itself. The "real" that we can get our arms around is inching toward some further surprise. Theology and physics are not that far apart, really, for they are both about what is real.

The *America* article refers to what we now know about the cosmos and asks, "How do theologians do theology in light of this expanding, exploding knowledge of the cosmos?"

How is change to be rooted? It is in the nature of evolution that some change will take us by surprise. As Lonergan reminds us, change is not a reduction from first principles. Yet how can the prospect of change that may be surprising be integrated into a present understanding of what is real? A cautious answer to a comparable question may have prompted (and may continue to make reasonable) rejection of Jesus as the Christ. Jesus as Christ simply does not *resonate more* for those who find nourishment in another tradition. But then what difference does that make if Jesus is not unique as Christ, a Christ that can also come to fruition in some distant sentient civilization?

Are we in a position to address these questions about what is real without the conventional limitations of either physics or theology?

TO BE CONTINUED.

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[1] Augustine, *On the Trinity*, book V, section 10.

[2] Elizabeth Johnson, *Quest for the Living God*, p. 212.

Theology for a Small Planet

A collection of essays by Clyde Christofferson © 2009-2011

Vatican II and the New Missal

We are now in Advent, and in parishes around the country the New Roman Missal is in use. Some – including many in this community – see the new translation as a less than adequate response to the call of the Spirit for liturgical prayer that engages the worshipper.

Perhaps the most prudent course is not to focus on the new translation and, instead, continue with liturgies that engage, for it is these liturgies that call the people to be the hands and feet of Christ. Father Gerry Creedon, a friend of NOVA who is well known for his pursuit of social justice, observed recently that there were more important matters to attend to than objections to language changes in the new missal.

Nonetheless it is timely to provide a brief retrospective on how the Church came to this place. It says something about who we are as Church. Not only is it true that "we are the Church" in the sense of the mystery that is the Church, but we are also part of the institutional reality that has come to be known as "the Church." It is this Church that is a work in progress, present but not yet. In this brief sketch I look at the New Missal for what it can tell us about not only being Church but being part of a larger Church that is itself becoming.

The journey to the New Missal began at Vatican II with the document on the sacred liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, which was published by Pope Paul VI in December 1963. In retrospect, this conciliar document itself prefigured the controversy that followed. On the one hand it stated eloquently the need and purpose for reforms, and that these reforms should grow out of the tradition. At the same time it acknowledged that responsibility for reforms rested with the hierarchy. As the process played out, the eloquent statement of need and purpose was subordinated to a more practical objective: assure that the English translation conformed closely to a Latin text prepared under the direction of the Congregation for Divine Worship.

In fairness, the underlying theme for this objective was not the pedantry of accurate translation but a broader concern for the unity of the Body of Christ. Concern for continuity with a long tradition morphed into a timidity that buried the talents so much in evidence at Vatican II. If unity was the principle, conformity became its measure.

Many in this community are old enough to remember the Tridentine Mass. The Latin words in the Missal were part of the ritual. I distinctly remember feeling empowered by my ninth grade course in Latin to participate in this aspect of the ritual. Even though the English translation was on the opposite page, the struggle to read the Latin directly gave me a sense of initiation into sacred rites.

There is a difference between ritual and contemplation, and between contemplation and action. For English speakers, the Latin language was part of the ritual, serving as a context for prayer and contemplation. I remember that the congregation answered together in Latin, but contemplation was personal not communal. Saying the Latin words was part of the ritual in the same way that standing and kneeling were part of the ritual.

Vatican II spoke powerfully of the centrality of the liturgy: the life of the liturgy is engaging the people in the task of being Christ to one another and of being the hands and feet of Christ in this world. It is hard to imagine Latin prayers making a contribution to this vibrant conception of what liturgy is about. If the people were to be engaged beyond contemplation and toward action, this would have to come from the readings and the homily.

I think the bishops at Vatican II saw the vernacular as a way of transforming the prayer language of the Mass so that the communal prayers would not only be understood but would engage the people in the work of Christ. If the old Latin Mass left these prayers as ritual context for an essentially interior reflection by the individual parishioner, a reformed liturgy in the language spoken by the people held the promise of communal engagement, a fire within the Body of Christ.

The ICEL translation, approved by a majority of bishops in 1998, went whole hog for engagement. It included cultural adaptations and new wordings, as well as a variety of new options including substitution of the Apostles' Creed for the Nicene Creed, omission of the Gloria, and omitting gender limitations in the washing of the feet on Holy Thursday. For some bishops this was perhaps a bridge too far.

And so now we are on this bridge, and it is not finished. It does not go to the other side. Is it a bridge to nowhere? Or is this simply another example of the Church being "now, but not yet"?

TO BE CONTINUED.

Theology for a Small Planet

A collection of essays by Clyde Christofferson © 2009-2012

An Incarnational God, and the *Sensus Fidelium*

It is the season of the Incarnation, and that is where this essay is going. But I begin with two snippets from ordinary experience, a phone call with my mother and an article from a recent issue of *National Catholic Reporter*. The title contained the words “big history,” and the article was about a course now being taught to all freshmen at the Dominican University of California.

One of my favorite Teaching Company courses is titled "Big History," which is why I was attracted to this article. The course has been in development at Dominican for some time, going back to a class offered in the 1990s based on the work of David Christian, who coined the phrase "big history". Christian is somewhat apologetic about the title in his Teaching Company course, but the title seems appropriate enough for a course that begins with the Big Bang and ends with projections several thousand years into our future.

If the basic course has been taught for more than ten years, what is new about the current offering? First, the new course reflects a basic change in focus from the required freshman course in Western or world history. Second, the course includes a sophomore follow-up component in social and environmental justice – the students watch Brian Swimme's "Journey of the Universe" film, which those of us at the Shrine Mont retreat this past September will remember.

Third, the course objectives draw upon the hope that these concepts will encourage humans to reinvent themselves. The *NCR* article quotes one of the professors involved in the project: ***"If big history undermines our former sense of God, but we find ourselves unable to abandon our deepest intuitions of spiritual presence, then how shall we understand those intuitions in light of the deliverances of big history?"***

My mother turned 89 in October. She is the only person I know has read all of these "Theology for a Small Planet" articles. Mothers are kindly in this way. She called on the feast of Christ the King to share her recollection that it was on this Sunday more than fifty years ago that my brother and I went to Mass for the first time. Then the conversation turned to a point in one of my articles. There were lots of other sentient civilizations out there, I thought. The stuff from which life emerges is spread too uniformly throughout the cosmos for it to be otherwise. But my mother was not persuaded. She understood my use of a hypothetical "other" sentient civilization to provide perspective on our own Earthly circumstances, but she thought it still possible that God did this creation thing once, here.

I had my mother in mind when I read the above ***quote*** from the *NCR* article. My mother's ***"deepest intuitions of spiritual presence"*** led to her becoming a Catholic in the first place. These intuitions remain strong. I would go further than that. These are not mere intuitions. They are as fundamental as existence itself, reflecting a loving God who is sharing existence with independent beings able to love one another and thereby image God. These “intuitions” are so fundamental to a living and pregnant cosmos – so my argument to my mother went – that God had no need for a more obvious form of intervention to create humanity on Earth (or other sentient civilizations elsewhere).

What about Jesus the Christ? What about the Incarnation? For me, the pregnant cosmos works for Christ as well. If a tree falls in the forest, does it make a sound if no one is there to hear it? The point of the question is to distinguish between physics and human perception. These ***"deepest intuitions of spiritual presence"*** make it possible to hear – to perceive – Jesus as the Christ.

And just as these intuitions – which in earlier essays I have associated with the term *resonance* – represent something new borne out of this pregnant cosmos, so Jesus is something newer still, but also borne out this pregnant cosmos.

I think I lost my mother at this point. She followed my insistence that the Incarnation is of the same Logos, whether here as Jesus or elsewhere in some other form. But the distinction between Jesus of Nazareth and a Logos "pre-existent from all eternity" is not something ***"our former sense of God"*** has ever had to deal with. The possibility of other sentient civilizations elsewhere in the cosmos and also loved by God leads me to questions about the uniqueness of this man we call Christ.

I have a sense that my mother is not yet ready for those questions. And, quite frankly, since we don't yet have physical evidence of intelligent life elsewhere, there is no need to ask the question. My mother is off the hook. She will have better knowledge soon enough, and will be delighted with whatever she finds.

Why do we have these questions, anyway? Why didn't Aristotle have these questions? Aristotle had no idea about "big history", although the evidence passed through his hands as it passes through ours. Quite literally. The cosmic background radiation has always been with us, but it made no sound that we had the presence of mind or technology to listen to. Until 1964.

There is a connection between the cosmic background and *resonance.* I have used the term *resonance* throughout these essays, often in connection with judgments that we make: one alternative may *resonate more* than another, and ***"our deepest intuitions of spiritual presence"*** calls us to choose the alternative that *resonates more*. The term *resonance* is more economical than "our deepest intuitions of spiritual presence," so I will continue to use it in this essay.

The connection is by way of analogy. First, the analogy. The cosmic background radiation is our evidence of the Big Bang. It's the evidence that settled the question whether the cosmos was eternal or whether it came into existence at some point in time and space. How did we know where to look for this evidence? In some sense, the evidence has been hiding in plain sight for a very long time.

But this is the analogy. Second, the connection. It is my contention that *resonance* – that sense of spiritual presence within each of us – is our evidence for God in the same way that the cosmic background radiation is our evidence for the Big Bang. I believe it is *resonance* – which is accessible to each of us, and to sentient beings elsewhere in the cosmos – rather than some more clearly articulated form of *revelation* that enables us to know, love and serve God and one another. I would carry this one step further and suggest that it is *resonance* – through the simple process of choosing alternatives that are *more resonant* – that provides the community with a "sense of the faithful" (the *sensus fidelium*) for what is handed down by the Church as *revelation*.

In this sense – I would argue – the *sensus fidelium* is primary, and there is no need for a separate revelation from on high. The process can certainly begin with a new thought or understanding that *resonates* with an individual, who may be articulate enough that *resonance* spreads through the community. The *imprimatur* is ultimately provided by the community in the form of the *sensus fidelium*. This process is not inconsistent with human safeguards to the integrity and coherence of the broader community while a *sensus fidelium* is developing, but the very gradualness of the process – dependent as it is upon how well our limited human minds are able to frame alternatives for *resonance* to evaluate – is of a piece with an evolutionary understanding of the cosmos.

Th early followers of Jesus had the benefit of their own *resonance* in evaluating the alternative understandings of the Risen Christ that blossomed in the first centuries after the Crucifixion. Over time this young movement coalesced around a "sense of the faithful" in support of what we now hold as Catholic doctrine.

But let me return to my mother, and to her sensitivity to the uniqueness of Christ. She has a perspective acquired after long years of experience that *resonates* with the belief that the Incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth is unique, period. She is not alone, for the current "sense of the faithful" is of the same mind. For my own part, it is compelling to me to suppose that a loving God – our loving and immanent God – could be not only loving but also immanent to other sentient civilizations in the cosmos. It is compelling to me that this loving and awesome God has so arranged the cosmos that other sentient civilizations besides our own could experience the Incarnate and living Christ, by whatever circumstances and under whatever name. Personally, this understanding of God's gracious indwelling across the cosmos *resonates more* than a single Incarnation that can only be known by distant sentient beings if communicated by us. But my mother's own *resonance* gives the nod to what the Church has always understood. I understand that as well.

For myself, however, I am prepared to push the envelope a little further. Consider it a thought experiment. Suppose there are other sentient civilizations elsewhere in the cosmos. And by "sentient" I mean those who also have "deep intuitions of spiritual presence." In that case, it makes no sense to me to suppose that God's immanence – God with us, incarnate in our flesh – depends upon a separate act of divine intervention, independent of the pregnant cosmos. It makes no sense to have a system of belief that, on the one hand, asserts that God is all powerful and, on the other hand, finds contradiction in God being Incarnate in more than one sentient civilization. Surely we don't want to maintain yet another in a long line of failed assumption that the universe revolves around us.

Who knows whether and when human beings on planet Earth will find evidence of intelligent life elsewhere in the cosmos. But that is not what is at issue. The *sensus fidelium* changes slowly. Why so slowly? And how does it change, anyway? The process of *resonance* provides a mechanism for

understanding how and why the *sensus fidelium* changes slowly. An individual is only able to make a judgment between alternatives if the alternatives make sense. If it takes a paradigm shift for a new alternative to make sense, then we are just going to have to wait. Even science has to deal with paradigm shifts, why not religion? If science took decades to transition from classical physics to relativity and quantum mechanics, it should not surprise us if a paradigm shift in our understanding of the Incarnation also takes decades, or longer.

With regard to the Incarnation, Gerry Stockhausen's Advent homily provided a predicate for seeing the Incarnation of Jesus in a different light. Gerry spoke about Mary, and Mary's "yes" to God's offer to have an abode within her, and led from that to the Eucharist and God's offer to have an abode within each of us.

The relevant quote from Gerry's homily is as follows:

"That tradition carries on, and God would like to do the same to us, and continually invites and says, 'I would like to take flesh in you.' And we find that most explicitly in the Eucharist when we gather and actually receive the body and blood of Jesus. And God invites us to ponder that same mystery, place of wonder that Mary is left with. Do you believe God actually wants to take on your human flesh and blood? Be inside you, find a dwelling place within you, and out of that bring forth life for God's people?

"And we celebrate the mystery, when we gather around this table, that has often been called transubstantiation. And the mystery is, on the one hand, that bread and wine can become the body and blood of Jesus. The mystery, on the other hand, is that the real transformation is not what happens up here [gesturing to the altar] but what happens here [gesturing to those gathered], that we are transformed into the body and blood of Jesus. That, of course, is not once for all. That is over and over. And God keeps waiting for that to reach fullness, which we know is never going to happen in this life. But God is waiting to welcome us into that life where there is fullness, and where we are caught up fully into the dwelling place that is God.

"It is that we long for; it is that we live for, that that we try to bring forth life in others, to make [the living God] more present."

The early followers who wrote the Gospels, and the early Church fathers who met in council to discern the meaning of faith in the Risen Christ, did not have the benefit of what we now know about the cosmos. For them it made perfect sense to conceive of a God who could certainly intervene directly in an unruly world. They didn't know enough to see pregnancy in the cosmos itself. Their alternative – direct intervention to set things straight – is the most *resonant* they could come up with. "God sent his only son" certainly suggests that kind of intervention. And it has the advantage of being clear and straightforward.

The early Church preserved a sense of mystery. Jesus was fully God and fully human. The early Church considered and rejected the notion that Jesus was God in a "human suit," a divine Spirit separate from the human body of Jesus and immune from the suffering of Jesus. What, then, does it mean for Mary to be "overshadowed" by the Spirit? If Jesus the man -- fully God and fully human -- suffered, died and rose again, surely Jesus born of Mary experienced the human sufferings of childhood and adolescence, and growth to maturity, as an integrated whole.

When was Mary "overshadowed"? For those comfortable with a *deus ex machina* God, Jesus became God at conception. For the ancients, this was God as father in a literal sense. As understood in ancient times, a mother's womb was a place of nurture, but the seed is provided by the male. They knew nothing of DNA and X and Y chromosomes.

Does what we now know about the cosmos allow us the freedom to have a more integrated sense of the possibilities of an evolving creation? We are the product of that evolution. If God has taken time with us, why not with Jesus? In that event, Mary's being "overshadowed" by God need not have been accomplished at conception, leaving a complete God/man at birth. A complete God/man at birth would portray baby Jesus as God in a human suit. What we now know makes us free to see Jesus becoming Christ not as an event manhandled by God but something rather more awesome, the outpouring of God's pregnant cosmos. Mary's "yes" – the time of her being "overshadowed" – is not only free but effective over time, the same human time God takes for each of us to come to know who we are.

Who knew? It is said that Mary treasured these things in her heart. Surely so. The Risen Christ and the early Christian communities give witness that Jesus came to know who he was in the fullest sense, and Mary not only came to know this but incubated this fullness until the end. Truly, Mary was *theotokos*, the mother of God. The example of her "yes" beckons each of us, as we are reminded at every Eucharist, to allow the living God to take on our flesh and blood, as Gerry so eloquently said in his homily.

A cosmic paradigm does more than preserve the mystery of Jesus Christ as fully God and fully human. It provides an understanding of this awesome and incarnate God that is both personal and prolific. God is so personal and intimate to us that we say "our God" as if God possesses us in our flesh and blood. The Eucharist is the sacrament of that possession. Yet this incarnational God is an expansive presence in and through a vast cosmos, present to the distant "other" in the same personal and possessive way, waiting only for "yes."

Can it be doubted that elsewhere in this vast cosmos the slow measure of God's time is marking out the freedom of other sentient beings able to say "yes" as Mary said "yes"? From this pregnant cosmos has emerged one surprise after another. Human consciousness, able to *resonate* with the small kindnesses of everyday life, is itself a surprise, not predictable from the biochemistry of animal life on planet earth. Jesus the Christ is a further surprise, and the fullness of his possession in and through God is a reality that *resonance* enables us to recognize. And who is to say that the surprises are at an end? If past is prologue, this loving God of ours has many children and incarnations elsewhere, born of the same pregnant cosmos. It is not our God but the God of all, and incarnation is the nature of his being.

The incarnational nature of God's very being somehow seems closer and more vibrant in light of the "big history" which marks the unfolding of a pregnant cosmos. Yet it is a struggle to come to that kind of understanding of the Incarnation. It is not only a struggle for my mother, but a struggle for the institutional Church.

A particular line in the translation of the New Missal makes the point. Before communion we say, "I am not worthy to receive you." But the more exact translation from the Latin is, "I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof." Note the change in subject. In the simpler translation it is the same person that is both unworthy and yet receives, implicitly saying "yes." The newly approved translation goes back to the pre-Vatican II Latin (which is literally translated as "enter under my roof") and complicates the sentence by making explicit that God is the actor. Our active reception, our "yes," is pushed to the background. It is a return to a *deus ex machina* motif, and away from a more incarnational vision of a God whose presence is so integral to our own being that a simple reception, a "yes," is sufficient. Somehow, a God that must "enter under my roof" is more distant and less incarnational. It is a wooden Incarnation, rather than real flesh of the living Christ.

But all is not lost. Far from it. A cosmic perspective shows an Incarnation that is proceeding in good time. The full meaning of the Incarnation is "now, but not yet." The *sensus fidelium* may develop its own "yes" in God's time rather than our time. An evolving cosmos makes sense of this – we are coming into a fullness of being that is still beyond our grasp. And yet it is our nature to grasp as it is God's nature to share existence intimately with us. Unity is a work in progress.

And the cosmic perspective provides another insight that is worth noting. All that I have said is from the perspective of a Catholic on planet Earth. How would this incarnational God be expressed elsewhere in the cosmos, by sentient beings who are too distant in space and time to know of the suffering and death of the historical Jesus of Nazareth? We do not know what their story is, or when or whether they have experienced or will experience the surprise of an Incarnation.

But that very prospect provides a different lens for looking at the other cultures on our own planet Earth and, indeed, for looking upon our own Catholic culture from the perspective of the distant and sentient "other." There is a symmetry here that must be found before it can be broken and then transformed by yet another surprise from this unfolding cosmos.

TO BE CONTINUED

Theology for a Small Planet

A collection of essays by Clyde Christofferson © 2009-2012

Vatican II: the Promise Behind the New Missal

In an earlier essay I gave a brief account of how we arrived at the New Missal. But that account did not do justice to the Vatican II document that had promised renewal of the liturgical texts. There is something stirring about the words of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.

The Council states the goals of renewal with clarity and passion:

"*This sacred Council … desires to impart an ever increasing vigor to the Christian life of the faithful; to adapt more suitably to the needs of our own times those institutions which are subject to change … The Council therefore sees particularly cogent reasons for undertaking the reform and promotion of the liturgy. For the liturgy … is the outstanding means whereby the faithful may express in their lives, and manifest to others, the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church. It is of the essence of the Church that she be both human and divine, visible and yet invisibly equipped, eager to act and yet intent on contemplation, present in this world and yet not at home in it; and she is all these things in such wise that in her the human is directed and subordinated to the divine, the visible likewise to the invisible, action to contemplation, and this present world to that city yet to come, which we seek. …The Council also desires that, where necessary, the rites be revised carefully in the light of sound tradition, and that they be given new vigor to meet the circumstances and needs of modern times.*"[1]

This preamble is followed by Chapter I entitled **General Principles for the Restoration and Promotion of the Sacred Liturgy**, which includes the following language:

"*… Thus by baptism men are plunged into the paschal mystery of Christ: they die with Him, are buried with Him, and rise with Him … From that time onward the Church has never failed to come together to celebrate the paschal mystery: reading …the scriptures … celebrating the Eucharist … and at the same time giving thanks … through the power of the Holy Spirit. To accomplish so great a work, Christ is always present in his Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations …in the person of His minister …especially under the Eucharistic species … He is present, lastly, when the Church prays and sings, for He promised: 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them' (Matt. 18:20). … But in order that the liturgy may be able to produce its full effects, it is necessary that the faithful come to it with proper dispositions, that their minds should be attuned to their voices, and that they should cooperate with divine grace … fully aware of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rite, and enriched by its effects. …all the faithful should be led to that fully conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy. Such participation by the Christian people … is their right and duty by reason of their baptism. In the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy, this full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else; for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit …*"[2]

The Council then concludes the general statement of objectives with the following: "*In order that the Christian people may more certainly derive an abundance of graces from the sacred liturgy, holy Mother Church desires to undertake with great care a general restoration of the liturgy itself. For the liturgy is made up of immutable elements divinely instituted, and of elements subject to change. These not only may but ought to be changed with the passage of time if they have suffered from the intrusion of anything out of harmony with the inner nature of the liturgy or have become unsuited to it. In this restoration, both texts and rites should be drawn up so that they express more clearly the holy things which they signify; the Christian people, so far as possible, should be enabled to understand them with ease and to take part in them fully, actively, and as befits a community.*"[3]

The foregoing recitation leaves out one passage that is perhaps wistfully ironic in light of subsequent events: "*… when the liturgy is celebrated, something more is required than the mere observation of the laws governing valid and licit celebration ….*"[4] This sentiment was reflected in guidance for translation issued a few years later: "*… it is not sufficient that a liturgical translation merely reproduce the*

expressions and ideas of the original text. Rather it must faithfully communicate to a given people, and in their own language, that which the Church by means of this given text originally intended to communicate to another people in another time. A faithful translation, therefore, cannot be judged on the basis of individual words: the total context of this specific act of communication must be kept in mind, as well as the literary form proper to the respective language. Thus, in the case of liturgical communication, it is necessary to take into account not only the message to be conveyed, but also the speaker, the audience, and the style. Translations, therefore, must be faithful to the art of communication in all its various aspects, but especially in regard to the message itself, in regard to the audience for which it is intended, and in regard to the manner of expression"[5] (emphasis supplied).

How is it possible to reach a "*general restoration of the liturgy itself*" for all the worthy reasons stated at Vatican II with great passion and obvious hope and expectation when – as we have now seen – the task is reduced to how accurately the translation conforms to a Latin text that yearns for the past? Does Rome not understand – as the fathers at Vatican II understood – that Christ is alive and well, becoming again, in and through the Spirit within the People of God?

Alas, the Church's talents for liturgical renewal are being buried. In the years following Vatican II fear rather than joy has become ascendant in the corridors of the Vatican. The fiduciaries of the institutional Church have conflated and confused unity with uniformity. Unity of the People of God is an aspect of the mystery of the Church, but its meaning shines with a gold that is debased by uniformity. One is left with the sense that the Vatican seeks to maintain a form of unity that falls short, and the careful conformities of the New Missal stand in contrast to a full and vibrant diversity that would better comport with the full unity in Christ of the People of God.

Yet this discouraging turn of events goes back to the same conciliar document on the liturgy that spoke of renewal in such soaring terms. Having stated the objectives of the reform effort, the Council then sets forth the norms for implementation. These norms have two components. One component makes clear who has authority to make changes. The second component provides substantive guidance.

The substantive guidance is provided by the following norm:

"*That sound tradition may be retained, and yet the way remain open to legitimate progress. Careful investigation is always to be made into each part of the liturgy which is to be revised. This investigation should be theological, historical, and pastoral. Also the general laws governing the structure and meaning of the liturgy must be studied in conjunction with the experience derived from recent liturgical reforms and from the indults conceded to various places. Finally, there must be no innovations unless the good of the Church genuinely and certainly requires them; and care must be taken that any new forms adopted should in some way grow organically from forms already existing."* (Emphasis supplied.)

This language retains the sense of renewal earlier stated with such conviction. The two underlined passages are worthy of note. The first is a reference to reform experience of the kind exhibited by NOVA's own experimental charter. The second is a prudent recognition of continuity with a long tradition.

With regard to authority, the regulation of the liturgy depends "*solely on the Apostolic See and, as the laws may determine, on the bishop*."[6] In addition, certain authority was provided to "*competent territorial bodies of bishops legitimately established*."[7] This provision is the basis for the subsequent formation of ICEL (International Commission on English in the Liturgy). No one else has authority to make changes in the liturgy.[8]

The history of the New Missal is best summarized in terms of the authority structures set up to implement *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. ICEL was set up by a number of bishops conferences and approved by Pope Paul VI soon after the conciliar document was promulgated, and produced its first version of the Roman Missal in 1973, some four years after the first Latin version was produced. These were somewhat hurried versions, intended to put something in the hands of the faithful quickly.

On the 25th anniversary of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* Pope John Paul II issued a letter that reaffirmed the importance of the liturgy, quoting or restating the objectives of the conciliar document. In particular, John Paul II amplified the connection between restoration of the liturgy and the unity of the Church. Earlier that same year John Paul had issued *Pastor Bonus*, which said that the Congregation on

Divine Worship (CDW) exercised the Apostolic See's authority over liturgical texts.

A second English version of the Latin Missal came out of ICEL in 1998, and was sent to CDW after approval by the various bishops' conferences. The CDW was continuing to work on its own update to the Latin version. In 1999 the head of CDW, Cardinal Medina Estevez, issued a letter indicating that ICEL's role was to provide a faithful translation into English of the Latin version, and that "any proposals for cultural adaptation, modification or the composition of original texts remain the province of the individual Bishops' Conferences … subject to the approval of the Holy See."[9] The Cardinal noted the "undue autonomy that has been observed in the translations prepared by [ICEL]."

This decision essentially derailed the ICEL 1998 translation, which included "cultural adaptation, modification [and] composition of original texts." Yet how could the Council's call for renewal be achieved without such adaptations?

The Council had said, "*in this restoration, both texts and rites should be drawn up so that they express more clearly the holy things which they signify; the Christian people, so far as possible, should be enabled to understand them with ease and to take part in them fully, actively, and as befits a community.*" It is difficult to see how "a faithful translation … of the Latin version" would help energize the people toward the work of justice. The people can be taught the words, but owning them is another matter. The hopes of the Council have been set aside in order to preserve a unity that is careful and precise, not the vigorous and diverse unity that would be worthy of the Risen Christ.

Perhaps this is just the political reality. Politics has a bad name, and seems out of place. On the other hand, Church communities have always had to tame the political tiger. Progress comes slowly, but it does come. The untamed political tiger simply means that the Church is "now, but not yet."

If we take that perspective on what is going on, then what is happening with the New Missal can be seen in a fresh and hopeful light. This is not simply politics, where conservatives in the Curia have come to the rescue of conservatives in the People of God. It is a continuing opportunity for dialogue about what it means to be a Christian in the world, and what it means to flow Christ out into the world from the fountain of perpetual renewal that is the liturgy.

No one said this would be easy. The Holy Spirit does not protect us from either earthquakes or politics: we must work these things through ourselves. The Council spoke eloquently about the central place of the liturgy in energizing the people to be the hands and feet of Christ. And although the eloquent words are not self-executing, this eloquence is more likely to withstand the test of time than the politics that has transmuted reform into conformity.

The Church is all of us, including the institution. If the institution has succumbed to the political tiger, burying the talents called forth by the Council's eloquent words, should we not give some consideration to helping our brother in the faith (institutional though our brother may be)?

To put the matter quite bluntly, how can dialogue be reconciled with the Church's concern for a careful and precise form of unity? It's not about the New Missal so much as a style of dialogue within an organizational structure that dates from the Roman Empire. Vatican II promoted parish and diocesan councils, which have languished but might become vehicles for dialogue if some way can be found to engage them without the incivilities of the democratic process. There is hope. Also, the American Catholic Council is providing a lay led initiative that may be instructive on how a style of dialogue can be organized as the hands and feet of Christ. Furthermore, NOVA's own experience with the consensus process is relevant to these questions.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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[1] *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, excerpts from paragraphs 1, 2 and 4.

[2] *Ibid., excerpts from* paragraphs 6, 7, 11 and 14.

[3] *Ibid.,* paragraph 21.

[4] *Ibid.,* from paragraph 11.

[5] Concilium for Implementing the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Comme Le Prevoit), issued January 25, 1969; paragraphs 6 and 7.

[6] *Sacrosanctum Concilium.,* paragraph 22(1).

[7] *Ibid.,* paragraph 22(2).

[8] *Ibid.,* paragraph 22(3).

[9] Letter of Cardinal Medina Estevez to Bishop Taylor, 26 October 1999; Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Prot. n. 2322/99/L.

Theology for a Small Planet

A collection of essays by Clyde Christofferson © 2009-2012

The Spirit of Lent

The Spirit of Lent is with us, and has been with us for a long time. As the Gospel reading from Mark put it last Sunday (first Sunday in Lent), "The reign of God is at hand! Change your hearts and minds and believe this Good News!" Is not this what Jesus was able to get across to his hearers, before (as Dan Madigan pointed out in his homily) there was what we now call "the Good News"? It may have taken the Resurrection to ring our bell on this point, but all along it was the Incarnation – waiting to be born in each of us and, anon, in all of us together as the People of God. Lent is a time for doing something different, as a ritual reminder to change our hearts and minds.

I read an article[1] a few days ago about habits, and about consumer buying habits in particular. The author, Charles Duhigg, spoke about breaking his afternoon cookie habit in order to lose weight. Habits are hard to break but it is easier if you piggyback on an existing habit. The article also described retailers who worked statistical magic on what they knew about their customers, and then gave coupons to customers likely to be open to changes in their shopping habits.

I also read a reflection[2] by Drew Christiansen on whether Vatican II's confidence in the Spirit is being confirmed, or not, by what is going on in the Church today. After noting few signs in Rome of the 50th anniversary of the Council, Drew gave examples over these fifty years demonstrating that the Spirit has been at work.

The season of Lent is upon us. After the first article I might have titled this essay "The Habits of Lent." But after Drew's reflection it seems to me better to emphasize the Spirit.

What is Lent? I remember the days of giving up something, as a penance, to see whether resolve could overcome desire. Giving up a favorite dessert food is a common Lenten practice. As I read the article about habits I wondered whether the author's effort to break his afternoon cookie habit might have been easier if it had been a Lenten resolution.

Perhaps not, as our own experience might suggest. Will power – a brute force technique – depends upon constant vigilance. If vigilance lapses, the old habits reassert themselves. Duhigg described a more thoughtful approach, treating the problem as a puzzle to be solved. To change a habit ("routine") the trigger ("cue") that prompts what is desired ("reward") must be identified. It turned out that the cookie was not the reward, but simply something to keep his hands busy as he broke up the loneliness of his desk by chatting with colleagues at the water cooler. The cookie was the first step on the way to the water cooler. The solution was to go directly to conversation with his colleagues. He did not miss the cookie at all.

What do habits have to do with Vatican II? There is some tension in the Church today about the reforms of Vatican II. Old habits die hard. There are those in the pews as well as in the pulpit who were – and are – not happy with some of the directions taken by the bishops at Vatican II. They were habituated to the practices and perspectives of the Church before the Council; they were not as impressed as John XXIII and the majority of Council fathers with the need for *aggiornamento*, and they have been relieved by interpretations of the Council that emphasize continuity rather than rupture.

Where is the Spirit in all this? We still stumble because we see through a glass, darkly. Is Lent an opportunity for self discipline and sacrifice? That would fit the model of sharing in the suffering and sacrifice of Christ, leading up to Good Friday. One way of looking at the self discipline of Lent is establishing a new (if temporary) habit that involves some measure of sacrifice. That is certainly part of the Catholic tradition.

Habits are part of the human condition. Without them our minds would not be free for other pursuits. On the other hand we may become "set in our ways" because of habits that are too comfortable. The traditional "giving something up" serves to make us uncomfortable, but does it prompt us to think about how we have become "set in our ways"?

Vatican II was this kind of Lenten discipline. The Church had become too set in its ways, and was in need of an *aggiornamento* that would take old habits and make them new. This Lent – on the eve of the 50th anniversary of the Council – is therefore an appropriate time to consider how our ways as church may, or may not, be carrying forward the Spirit of Vatican II.

Last June in Detroit members from NOVA and PAX talked about their experiences as Intentional Eucharistic Communities (IECs). These sessions were part of a larger gathering – calling itself the American Catholic Council – self-consciously concerned with preserving and extending the Spirit of Vatican II. Elsewhere in this newsletter is a proposal (originally posted on the ACC website) that seeks to make the IEC experience more widely accessible. See whether this speaks to you about the Spirit of Lent. Is not our experience as a community (to extend Eric Robinson's gentle but passionate reminder to each of us after Dan Madigan's homily) our calling as a community?

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[1] "How Companies Learn Your Secrets" by Charles Duhigg (New York Times Magazine, February 19, 2012).

[2] "Of Many Things" by Drew Christiansen (America Magazine, February 20, 2012).

Theology for a Small Planet

A collection of essays by Clyde Christofferson © 2009-2012

What does the cosmos say about "the law written on their hearts"? Part 1

Bernard Doering's excellent article in the March 23, 2012 issue of *Commonweal* discusses the thinking of Jacques Maritain and his confessor, Cardinal Charles Journet, about contraception, *Humanae Vitae*, and submission to authority.

The article is interesting for several reasons. First, it uses contemporaneous letters which enable the reader to listen in, as if unnoticed, on a private conversation about a public topic. Second, it preserves the nuances of the different directions in which these first rate Catholic thinkers were being pulled. Third, it leaves the reader -- at least this reader -- with a fresh perspective from which to ponder the relationship between Church teaching and change.

It has been decades since Vatican II, the turmoil of the 60s, and *Humanae Vitae*. The article nicely places in historical perspective the current controversy over contraception, and suggests that the question of whether and how Church teachings can change has been fermenting beneath the surface.

How are we to be faithful to a loving God? By loving one another, of course, but Church teachings have provided a more specific framework of principles and concrete guidance to assist the faithful conscience. On the one hand, Church teaching is acknowledged to be a work in progress: tradition and the *sensus fidelium* play a role. On the other hand, Church teaching should reflect and maintain the continuity and identity of the Church. As Doerings's article suggests, there continues to be tension between these aspects of Church teaching.

My own view is that at least one path forward is provided by what St. Augustine called God's "book of nature," although St. Augustine would never have dreamed what creative inspiration the book of nature is now providing us. It is probably only coincidence, but just as Vatican II was concluding, science was discovering the cosmic background radiation. This evidence from God's creation tells us that nature itself is evolving, putting to rest the idea that change is simply about uncovering what we do not yet know.

Even Einstein once thought that the universe was eternal, and that the task of science was to disclose the mind of "the old one." His General Theory of Relativity is elegantly based upon a single assumption: the laws of physics are the same everywhere, all across space and time. This deceptively simple assumption leads to black holes and the Big Bang. It is – as Einstein himself preferred to call it – a theory of invariants (his field equations are "invariant" under transformations across time and space). Einstein proposed this new name for his theory in the early 1920s, after seeing how the public discussion of his theory confused "relativity" with "relativism." Einstein's novel ideas about space and time seemed contrary to the long accepted principles of Isaac Newton, and this led some to suggest that other long accepted principles might also be subject to change. Others saw the specter of "relativism" in the suggestion that long accepted principles were subject to change. Einstein saw this debate as an irrelevant distraction, and responded by trying to change the name of "The General Theory of Relativity" to "The Theory of Invariants." The proposed change didn't stick.

But there were a number of untidy implications to Einstein's field equations. One of them was the possibility that the universe was either expanding or contracting. Either of these possibilities conflicted with the prevailing belief among scientists, including Einstein, that the universe had always existed in essentially its current or "steady state" condition. In order to preserve a universe that was eternal Einstein had to add a "cosmological constant" to his equations, an *ad hoc* addition which he later regarded as the biggest blunder of his life[1].

There is a parallel, I think, between conceiving the universe as an eternal and unchanging reality, about which we gradually learn more, and conceiving of Church teaching as changing only in the sense of greater refinements (developed gradually through tradition). Both conceptions grasp at continuity but do so by overreaching. Continuity is an aspect of what is real, but it was not necessary for Einstein to add a cosmological constant to achieve continuity. Nor should it be necessary for continuity in Church teaching to emphasize the authority of the magisterium at the expense of the *sensus fidelium*.

By adding what is unnecessary, these parallel responses –ostensibly on behalf of continuity and truth – obscure something that is important about reality, a reality that is alive, kicking and screaming its way into existence. This living reality is as familiar and inscrutable to us as our own children. It is this reality that a loving and

utterly awesome God is unfolding before us. What is being obscured is this: continuity does not require certitude in how we look at our past understandings ("Church teachings") of the law of God, any more than continuity requires that our children turn out as we once expected. Instead, continuity requires trust.

Trust in what? In science, understandings change, but past understandings can still be trusted to explain the evidence they once explained. Newtonian mechanics is still trusted with mundane tasks of constructing buildings and bridges, even though Einstein's equations are needed to make our GPS devices work. Newtonian mechanics is still trusted for calculating how galaxies move, even though Einstein's equations are needed to explain how the orbit of Mercury changes. So the understandings of Einstein and Newton are about being useful, rather than true. Einstein did not depose Newton; Einstein and Newton continue to live together, in continuity and in trust.

Vatican I spoke explicitly about the infallibility of the Pope. Vatican II spoke explicitly about the "sense of the faithful," which can serve as a crucible for discerning whether Church teachings are "received." The People of God continue to struggle with these understandings, but they can work together, can they not?

What ties these understandings together in a bond of trust is St. Augustine's "book of nature." Granted, St. Augustine would be surprised by the novelty of this approach but, upon reflection, might well find comfort in a God of surprises. It is remarkable how recent are our current understandings of the cosmos. The cosmic background radiation and a coherent picture of how the universe has evolved (what some who teach about such matters call "big history" from the Big Bang forward) has all come to light in the last fifty years. We have been graced with an unfolding reality, one that unfolds not simply with new knowledge but a reality that unfolds with further surprises, just as our children surprise us. We are, after all, God's children.

There are some among us who do not like surprises, and for whom the ideas of God and change do not go well together. For these folks reality is much more comforting as a known quantity, at least known in God's eyes. But can such a reality be alive? Would such a reality be worth living? Would our own children be able to surprise us in such a reality?

There is a certain comfort in the logic of known quantities, even if only God knows. And it is bracing to contrast that comfort with a logic of surprise, where even God is surprised. But if we are God's children, this more bracing view should come as no surprise. The more comforting logic of known quantities depends upon the tendency (to use Bernard Lonergan's expression) "to conceive the real as a subdivision of the 'already out there now'."[2] If this evolving cosmos is pregnant with life – with our children and God's children, children of surprises – life itself stands as a contradiction to this tendency.

My faith tells me – or, better, suggests to me, subject ultimately to a "sense of the faithful" – that Jesus the Christ is one of these surprises. And what we now know about the cosmos suggests that further surprises await us. Although our understanding may come slowly, because we see "but through a glass, darkly," perhaps what faith teaches about the Second Coming foreshadows another of these cosmic surprises.

In this view creation and reality in its fullness are all of a piece. This is the work of an awesome God. This is in stark contrast with the dualistic view that God's children (or at least their souls) were placed by God within a separately created world. The concepts of "infusion of the soul" and "he sent his only Son into the world" can be interpreted as being consistent with this dualistic view. This would be a God of human construction, a God that acts in *deus ex machina* style. On the other hand, concepts such as "fully human, fully divine" and "I will write my law upon their hearts" fit better with the awesome God of a unified reality that brings surprises out of a pregnant cosmos, a cosmos that is vibrant and alive. This cosmos is not simply playing out what is already implicit in the "already out there now." God is doing a new thing.

But what about the tension that Doering's article summarized by the question: "How can a proposition that is not infallible – such as the conclusions of *Humanae Vitae* – be nonetheless irreformable?" We need a different way of looking at the problem, a different way of understanding how continuity is maintained in a progression from Papal infallibility to the *sensus fidelium*, a progression that proceeds in trust from an ancient heritage that is still open to surprises.

A mechanism for such an understanding is remarkably simple. Suppose that each conscience resonates with the word of God, "written on their hearts." The word is perceived "but through a glass, darkly," so that the choice made by conscience is made between such alternatives as may appear at the point of choice. Life is not an academic setting, and conscientious behavior leaves room for further reflection. An alternative that may have resonated at an earlier time may

give way to another alternative that now is more resonant. Common experience with progress toward maturity recognizes, of course, the role of concupiscence, whose cautionary tales are a mark of wisdom.

Apply this model to the People of God as a whole. Are we not the body of Christ, with a collective conscience that has found *resonance* in the teaching authority of the magisterium, even though individuals struggle with varying degrees of allegiance and submission to the Church's teachings? Is it not a sign of the times that many people are looking for a way of understanding the unity of the Church in a way that yields continuity with the past and yet *resonates more* than current calls for submission of mind and will? Those who are satisfied with reliance upon the infallibility of the Pope may see some form of concupiscence operating among those for whom the concept of "definitive teaching" does not *resonate*, but conscience and the *sensus fidelium* are hard and persistent taskmasters.

Thus the People of God as a whole struggles with what is written on their collective heart. Vatican I provided a doctrine that codified the practice of authoritative teaching by the magisterium. The doctrine was formally limited to seldom used ex cathedra statements. Vatican II articulated a "sense of the faithful" methodology for testing whether teachings were in accordance with the Spirit. But Vatican II also validated the teaching authority of the magisterium and, as Doering's article points out, the concept of "definitive teaching" implements that validation.

But all of this is understandable as the working out of the collective conscience toward ever more resonant formulations of what is "written on their hearts." Viewed in this light there emerges a bridge across any lingering separation between cleric and lay, between church and state: the bridge of dialogue. A style of dialogue becomes a prominent component of an ongoing process involving the whole People of God rather than a dilution of magisterial teaching authority. Vatican II highlighted the importance of parish and diocesan councils, but little has been done with these institutions. The Church continues to grow, slowly, as if seeing through a glass, darkly. General acceptance within the Church of an understanding of continuity that trusts change and nourishes dialogue remains ahead of us, as does greater use of parish and diocesan councils. Lay led efforts toward the same kind of dialogue, such as the American Catholic Council, follow what is "written on their hearts."

These are exciting times. God's surprises in the cosmos, and in the history of our understanding of the cosmos, are a sign. These historical signs are mirrored by the transition noted in Jeremiah 31:31-34 from the tangible and teachable law written on stone tablets to a more direct communication to the heart of each of us, great and small alike.

How do you teach what is written on the heart? Has the Church been teaching as if the Gospel message were written on stone tablets? Must the magisterium speak as if from stone tablets? The *resonance* mechanism described above provides an alternative methodology, one that is more sensitive to cultivation of what is written on the hearts of the faithful, due account being taken of the learned wisdom that recognizes the difference between what we want to do and what is right to do.

It is an approach that replaces certitude with trust. The role of a teaching authority would then be more pastoral than authoritative, focused less on what can be written on stone and more on cultivating and relying upon what is written upon the hearts of the faithful. It is a more challenging role, rather like the transition faced by parents who become mentors and grandparents.

But if the cosmos is any guide, this is the future of the Church. Indeed, the role of the institutional teaching authority becomes not only more challenging but more important. The handwriting is on the wall, on the heart of the Church but not in stone. The formal recognition in Vatican II of the *sensus fidelium* – the "sense of the faithful" – is a sign for the future. As with all change, time works slowly.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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[1] See the initial essay in this series.

[2] Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (New York: Longmans, 1957), p. 257.

Theology for a Small Planet

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What does the cosmos say about "the law written on their hearts"? Part 2

The previous article addressed "the law written on their hearts" (Jeremiah 31:31-34; see also 1 Corinthians 3:2-3) as a different understanding of how God communicates and teaches. This understanding can help the Church move forward from the still current tension within the Church over whether and how Church teaching can change and still remain faithful to a loving God. The article concluded that "the law written on their hearts" requires a different model for exercising authority, one based on trust.

This article continues that theme with a reflection upon the example set by Jesus the Christ. The contrast between Jesus and his contemporaries is starkly summarized in *The Last Week* of Jesus' Passion and Crucifixion. The confrontation of Jesus before Pilate on Good Friday is a central element of the Gospel narrative, but the Gospels themselves do not address an earlier prelude to that confrontation: Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. As *The Last Week* tells it, Jesus entered on one side of the city as Pilate and his Roman guard was entering from the other side.

The events of Holy Week have long been a rich source for reflection. Jesus overturns the tables of the money changers in the temple, the temple authorities connive with the Romans to have Jesus executed, but in the end Christianity becomes the religion of choice within the Roman Empire. But what I want to focus on in this essay is Jesus as leader. The contrast between Jesus as a man of peace and Pilate as a military commander is both obvious and overdrawn. Both men were leaders, and leadership provides a perspective that helps highlight the significance of "the law written on their hearts."

I recall my training years ago as an officer in the Marine Corps. We were taught the use of two distinct aspects of leadership. The preferred method of leadership was called "command presence," where troops follow their commander not because they are supposed to but because they want to. The commander leads by virtue of a presence that inspires others to follow. The great generals – Alexander, Napoleon – had this kind of presence.

There is a second kind of leadership. It is not preferred, but is recognized as a necessary tool in the circumstances of war and discipline. This second form of leadership is leadership by authority. A soldier follows an order because that's what soldiers do, and the consequences of doing otherwise are adverse.

Although I learned the distinction between command presence and authority in the military, it is a distinction that is useful more generally. Jesus the Christ – perhaps paradoxically, since he turned the other cheek and his followers abandoned him at the time of his Crucifixion – demonstrated command presence in the events of Holy Week. The apparent failure on the Cross of the project begun on Palm Sunday embodied both sides of the command presence equation.

First, as to the leader: Jesus submitted not to Pilate and the Romans but to what was written on his heart. He was, after all, fully human. And he did it with passion, because of command presence – God within him. He was, as we believe, fully divine.

Second, as to those led: on Easter Sunday something quite extraordinary happened. His followers – who had been hopeless on Friday – experienced the presence of the Risen Christ on Sunday. It is, as we celebrate at every Eucharist, a very real presence, one that inspires us to follow, not because we have to but because our hearts burn within us. That burning heart is not about authority, it's about love.

As with any leadership challenge undertaken by failed human beings, the institutional Church is not able to avoid at least a hint of authority. But the objective remains the passion of command presence. And the object of this passion is not what is written on stone but what is written on the hearts of the faithful.

In recent times and, indeed, in recent days, the authority of the institutional Church has been on prominent display. The Leadership Council of Women Religious (LCWR) is being set aside, to be remolded. At least that is what appears from the seven page "Doctrinal Assessment" of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF).

There are various perspectives on what the CDF has done, and we have not yet heard from the women religious themselves, who are taking time and care in their response. Permit me to present another perspective, a perspective which returns to the title of this article. It is a perspective which I had intended to address anyway, but the immediate circumstance confronting the LCWR provides a certain clarity of focus.

The institutional Church is operating from a particular frame of reference that is rooted in the history of the last two thousand years. As is to be expected, this rootedness in history comes at a cost. The frame of reference was put together during a time when the Earth was thought to be the center of the universe and humanity was the only object of God's salvation. The recent prospect that God has children

elsewhere in this vast cosmos has not yet been absorbed by the Church's frame of reference.

It is going to be a wrenching adjustment. At least that's my guess.

The Church has a frame of reference, but other sentient civilizations elsewhere in the cosmos will have their own frames of reference, conditioned by historical developments of their own. Yet there are elements of the Church's frame of reference that can encompass these other civilizations. There is but one God, after all. And it is a loving God, who cares for all children. Furthermore, the Trinity can adapt to an expanded cosmos. God is Incarnational (the Second Person) and the Spirit abounds.

Other aspects of the Church's frame of reference face a more difficult adjustment. The Church takes seriously the unity of the People of God and regards itself as the custodian of what has been revealed through Jesus Christ. Revelation is not simply a "deposit of faith" to be received and then transmitted, under the care of a duly delegated teaching authority. In light of cosmic neighbors, there is a different form of care that must be rendered in order to cultivate the unity for which Christ prayed.

This difference may be understood by reflecting upon God's incarnation with other sentient civilizations elsewhere in the cosmos. NOVA's liturgy of April 22nd – John Haughey's homily and the dialogue that followed – provided some insight about the nature of the incarnation: as we walked the road to Emmaus during that liturgy, did we not feel our hearts burning within us? And wasn't that burning a response to John's suggestion that Christ is family, anticipating with joy the prospect of sharing a meal with us. It is this active presence, not some doctrinal abstraction, which we celebrate at Eucharist.

This active presence, this incarnational joy, is being shared – to use the language of the April 29th Gospel – with "other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I will lead them, too, and they will hear my voice." Until recently the Church's frame of reference a) conceived of these "other folds" as other peoples on planet Earth and b) imagined that Christ would become known to these "other folds" through missionary activity. But nature – God's "book of creation" – is now unveiling for us a different picture. There are "other folds" so distant that missionary activity is impossible. First conclusion: these distant civilizations "hear my voice" directly. And if this is true for distant "other folds" it must also be true for "other folds" right here on Earth. Second conclusion: missionary work depends primarily upon "what is written on their hearts." Transmission of our "deposit of faith" plays a secondary role. Third conclusion: our own Catholic frame of reference serves not as a standard for missionary work, but rather as a living embodiment of the incarnational character of God's presence. It is good that we tend to our own garden, but missionary zeal is not about selling the fruits of our garden. Rather, it is about sharing those fruits at a common table – a far more challenging mission for unity on planet Earth. The active and incarnational presence of the living God reaches throughout a life giving cosmos, to civilizations well beyond any capacity for transmitting a deposit of faith.

Obviously, these other independent beings are not insulated by a transmission barrier from a living God who joyfully anticipates sharing a meal with them. God's active presence will not be denied. And what is the vehicle for this sharing of existence? It is the *resonance* rooted in the individual, the seeker who recognizes – however much "through a glass, darkly" – the burning joy from "what is written on their hearts."

Once it is understood that there can be no such insulation, once it is understood that this loving God is an active presence joyfully anticipating sharing existence – beginning with a shared meal – with independent beings everywhere, then it becomes clear that there can be a multitude of independently arising frames of reference that provide a life giving embodiment of this active and joyful presence.

Why does this not raise the specter of relativism? Very simply, because going down that path can't possibly work for sentient beings elsewhere in the distant cosmos. And that recognition gently pushes us to seek a more creative alternative for unity and universality. The answer is not – as it has been when relativism was assumed to be the appropriate question – a single teaching authority that presides over a single deposit of faith. The Church has traveled that path for two thousand years and it is a path overgrown with the weeds of politics, most recently with the Vatican's action against women religious.

What, then, is the common ground that ties together the different frames of reference across the cosmos (and, by extension, across planet Earth as well). The active and joyful presence of the living God is the common ground. Suppose any particular frame of reference is a practical accommodation to the limitations of our humanity (and cosmic sentience more generally) in response to the reality of this active and joyful presence.

The Good Samaritan story is exemplary of the dynamic. The Jews and the Samaritans had been one, but had parted ways and developed different frames of reference. Jesus' message in the Good Samaritan story was that this active and joyful presence of the living God was calling them to a more capacious understanding of "neighbor."

But it is difficult – because of our limitations – to be one family. Yet that is what we are called to be. How can that unity be realized in light of a multitude of frames of reference, each of which is on track

toward redemption if they "hear my voice," (from the April 29th Gospel) a voice whose active and joyful presence will find any open heart, any lost sheep, however isolated.

Patterns of isolation – extending across the cosmos – can then be understood in terms of these frames of reference, whose differences reflect the limitations of sentience. Yet all share the common thread of God's active, joyful and incarnational presence.

How will the Church digest this deeper meaning of the Good Samaritan story? How limited is our collective sentience? As a matter of formal rationality it would be easy enough for the Church to remain isolated by supposing that these other frames of reference – at least on Earth – fall short because they do not fully "hear my voice" as recorded in the deposit of faith. *Dominus Iesus* took this point of view. In the end this rationality founders on the shoals of the proposition that the Earth is the center of the universe.

So, something more is required for the Church to digest the idea that there are other sentient civilizations elsewhere in the cosmos that God also loves. And the question is driven by the limitations of our sentience, not only our individual limitations but our collective limitations. It is, after all, our collective selves – the identity by which we know ourselves as "Catholic" – that functions as a body. The Church's focus on maintaining its identity is in some measure a response to the varying comfort levels, among Catholics, with others who call themselves Catholic but who have frames of reference that differ in some degree from the collective frame of reference.

If we read the Good Samaritan story broadly, the active and joyful presence of the living God – this incarnation among us and to which we are called – is calling us to the next step. Beyond the lesson of Jews and Samaritans treating each other as neighbors, there is the question of unity. Can there be unity among a variety of particular communities, where each community struggles for a coherent identity in service to the same living and loving God?

So the call is the same. What we will come to understand – and modern cosmology may provide a common link for that understanding – is that our particular sense of coherence is destined to evolve into a recognition that its particularity, that is, its need to see other religions as departing from the "deposit of faith" is a reflection of human limitations, not the will of God.

The significance of modern cosmology is that it uncovers a God whose creation is evolving, and that we human beings – and other sentient beings elsewhere – are an integral part of that creation. Consequently, the cosmos – God's "Book" of nature – provides a model for humanity to come to a different sense of coherence: we can "abstract" from cosmic reality to see a coherence in the mind of God that is beyond our own capacity.

Is this capaciousness beyond us? Do our limitations serve to restrict how generously, as a practical matter, we can describe the diversity of God's creation? Do our limitations serve to restrict how capacious our understanding can be, as a matter of principle? In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus did more that recite the basic principles guiding a moral life. He called us to stretch ourselves beyond those basics. Do we need to reduce a call for stretching to simply a more demanding catechetical rule?

The image of sentient civilizations elsewhere in the cosmos provides some clarity about the nature of revelation. For the Church, this means coming to a different understanding of the role of the magisterium in relation to the deposit of faith, and to a different understanding of what underlies the deposit of faith. Other sentient civilizations (here on Earth as well as elsewhere in the cosmos) may come to their own versions of the deposit of faith, and as evolution proceeds will likely face the same need for adjustment.

Yet for the Catholic Church such an adjustment was foreshadowed by Vatican II's emphasis upon the People of God and the "sense of the faithful." The one God can still write on hearts everywhere. There is a connection between the "sense of the faithful" and "what is written on their hearts." As a community of believers, we may always be "now, but not yet," because a style of dialogue is necessary to work with what is written on the hearts of individuals to eventually come up with a "sense of the faithful."

Vatican II's "sense of the faithful" is a sleeping giant, able to provide a more universal underpinning for a deposit of faith that moves ever closer to the active and joyful presence of the living God. It is all about how we dialogue in getting there. This style of dialogue provides a mechanism that, in principle, serves as well for finding unity amid diversity across the cosmos (or between Jews and Samaritans) as within the Catholic Church. It is a much different way of proceeding than the alternative premised on Magisterial authority.

Yet it is this Magisterial authority that is on full display in the "Doctrinal Assessment" of women religious. A different alternative burns in my heart. Perhaps this state of affairs is sufficiently sorry as to move this Church that we love away from reliance upon Magisterial authority and toward a style of dialogue more in keeping with a rootedness in "what is written upon their hearts."

This, I think, is what the cosmos is saying about "the law written on their hearts."

TO BE CONTINUED.

Theology for a Small Planet

A collection of essays by Clyde Christofferson © 2009-2012

What does the cosmos say about "the law written on their hearts"? Part 3

The first two essays in this series make essentially the same point: there is a need to cultivate reliance upon what is written on the hearts of the faithful, through trust (Part 1) and a style of dialogue (Part 2). This third essay deals with the practical challenges of moving the ancient and venerable institutions of our Church in this direction.

As Richard McBrien says in *The Church: The Evolution of Catholicism*, Vatican II asserted that the People of God is all of us, lay and cleric alike. The structures and institutions of the Church are in service to the whole People of God, who are the Church. The preconciliar tendency was to identify "The Church" with the hierarchy, who controlled and delegated ministerial functions to a lay apostolate. Vatican II turned that focus around, from the few to the many, to the whole People of God who directly participate in the mystery that is the Church.[1]

The Papacy has famously understood itself as the "servant of the servants of God." A servant institution must have the humility to understand that its role is cultivation of something not its own. It stands as a fiduciary, not a principal. The long history of this fiduciary institution shows much good will and a dogged persistence toward Gospel values, along with the quintessential earmarks of humanity. It is an article of hope if not faith that the Holy Spirit will protect the People of God from error. Perhaps protection from error, but not from politics.

This essay is about how "the law written on their hearts" can overcome the ravages of politics. At the moment, however, the People of God have little in the way of institutional supports against the ravages of politics. Despite the recognition at Vatican II that bishops and priests are only a part of the People of God – indeed, not even the most prominent part – institutional supports for the faithful have languished.

But this ought to be a sign of life, not a reason to be discouraged. God's book of nature – the cosmos – is telling us that evolution is at work, even if more slowly than some of us would like. In the two thousand years since Jesus first walked among his friends it has been only in the last hundred or so that the Church has discovered what remains its best kept secret. That secret – now called "Catholic Social Teaching" – is that social structures are made by humans and can be changed by humans to better serve the ends of justice. It had once been assumed that institutions such as rule by kings were natural and therefore of "divine right." No longer.

The practical working out of such insight takes time. I recall a talk by Ken Himes – in a series on Catholic Social Teaching in 1999 – in which he used a metaphor of a train leaving a station to describe how this works. He was referring to Vatican II, but the metaphor is helpful for understanding change in general. Ken's description included everyone, from those at the front pouring coal into the boilers to make the train move faster to those in the caboose trying to apply the brakes. There are those sitting in the cars, looking out the window and enjoying the ride. And there are some still on the platform (opposed to the changes of Vatican II) shaking their fists as the train begins to move away from the station.

Where is this Vatican II train going? In a typically preconciliar view, the answer is to be found by looking at what the Pope and the hierarchy are doing and saying. There is a certain irony in this view, for two reasons. First, as a historical matter, it has only been in recent centuries – since the Reformation – that the majority of Catholic faithful have come to understand the papacy as a focal point for Catholicism.[2] Second, perhaps in consequence of this millennial sea change that now associates the Church with the Pope, even reformers who are heartened by the shift in emphasis to the People of God tend to measure the progress of the Vatican II train by how well or how quickly the vision of the Council is being implemented from Rome.

It is true that the Vatican II documents themselves deferred to the Vatican for implementation of the vision. In practical political terms, such deference may mean that the Vatican's procedural controls are able to steer the vision (using Pope Benedict's terminology, toward "a hermeneutics of continuity" rather than "a hermeneutics of rupture"). But if the Vatican II vision understands the Church as mystery, as a People of God whose ministries are served by, rather than controlled by, its institutions, then there is another way of seeing where the Vatican II train is going: the answer is to be found by looking within the whole People of God, to what is burning in the hearts and lives of the faithful across the planet.

In his homily on Pentecost Joe Nangle recounted signs of hope in his travels over the years with Franciscan missioners and sisters in Africa, Asia and South America. The Spirit is alive and well, working among the People of God. Joe recalled one visit in the Philippines with Franciscan sisters from China. These sisters were intent upon returning to the mainland to do missionary work in their homeland. But when the state of the Church in the West was discussed these sisters said that it would be good to bring their "new Pentecost" ministry to revive an older sibling.

Skeptics don't see how a broadly based "People of God" vision can work. They are in the caboose, applying brakes to the Vatican II train. And they believe they have good reason for applying the brakes: what burns in some hearts is different from what burns in other hearts, and the result can be not simply diversity but chaos. How is this vision to be grounded? Love of God and neighbor would seem to be firm grounding, but those in the caboose are looking for a more practical and decisive clarity. A hierarchy

centered in Rome provides that clarity. Why change? So ask those in the caboose.

I have a three part response in support of Vatican II's shift toward the People of God. The first is based on a book, the second uses a cosmic perspective, and the third is practical.

The Book

A recent book provides a rationale for a more participatory model for the Church. The book has nothing to do with religion. It is about the evolution of societies over the last ten thousand years and is particularly focused upon economics. The principal author, Douglass North, won the 1993 Nobel Prize in Economics "for having renewed research in economic history by applying economic theory and quantitative methods in order to explain economic and institutional change."

That is a mouthful, but I want to focus on the phrase "institutional change." Although the Roman Catholic Church does not have an economic focus it is clearly an institution with a long history. The central theme of North's 2009 book, *Violence and Social Orders*[3] is that recorded human history can be explained in terms of transition from a "limited access social order" to an "open access social order." The problem with the former is that participation depends upon the favor of the ruler and the elites that work with the ruler. As it might be applied to the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, the limited circle of "the ruler and the elites that work with the ruler" would seem to fit the Pope and the Curia. Even if the bishops are added, it is still a small group.

North's historical evidence is that *the transition to a more open political structure is correlated with a transition to a more open – and more successful – economic structure*. The data is fairly dramatic: open societies are twice as productive economically as limited access societies. This is not a surprising result, because "open access" engages the people, values their initiative, and provides freedom of action. The book mentions the Roman Catholic Church several times as an example of an institution having trouble making this transition to "open access." I was surprised the Vatican was discussed at all, since the Church is about salvation, not economics. However, North's point is the connection between political structures and economic structures: political structures control how other structures – in particular, those that affect the workings of the economy – operate.

The simplicity of North's model is breathtaking. He contends that two political structures are all that is needed to cover all of recorded human history: the politics of limited access (which still applies to most of the world) and the politics of open access. Of course, his focus is on economics, so it is not self evident that such a simple model would be sufficient to explain the development of non-economic structures, such as modes of religious organization.

The economic metaphor is intriguing, nonetheless. If the energy and creativity of the people are more effectively engaged under an "open access" political order, perhaps that lesson is not limited to economic structures. Perhaps that lesson can be applied to the institutions of the Church. *Surely bishops and pastors would have a positive interest if the effect of a more democratic political structure for Church institutions is that the people are more engaged in the work of bringing the reign of God on Earth*.

It is said that "the Church is not a democracy." But that question is a red herring. As North's discussion makes clear, the point of "open access" is to free up the energies of the people by enabling anyone – regardless of connections within the political elite – to have access to the support structures needed for their initiatives to bear fruit. In limited access politics, individuals must keep at least one eye on those whose favor must be obtained – a sort of "license" that may or may not be renewed – in order for work to continue. In open access politics, no such personal "license" is required. The same ground rules apply to all.

The difficulties of transition from "limited access" to "open access" may help explain the Church's longer history that goes back to the unsuccessful efforts of the Council of Constance in the 15th Century to constrain the power of the Pope. More recently, Pope Paul VI spoke eloquently about dialogue in *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964), but he was not able to part with the structural clarity of hierarchical authority. Vatican II proposed parish and diocesan councils, but the documents of Vatican II retained the structural clarity of hierarchical authority. Little has been done to pursue these better angels of Vatican II. Pope John Paul II initiated a dialogue about the Petrine Ministry in *Ut Unum Sint* (1995), but few bishops have pursued the matter.

What has been missing is a theory which makes these more democratic directions an engine for enlivening the People of God. "Open access" politics provides such a theory.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT TIME with
The Cosmos and **Practical Steps**

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[1] Richard P. McBrien, *The Church*: *The Evolution of Catholicism* (Harper Collins: New York, 2008), p. 166.

[2] John W. O'Malley, S.J., "The Millennium and the Papalization of Catholicism," *America Magazine* (April 8, 2000): "At the beginning of the last millennium—indeed, as late as Luther's posting of the Ninety-Five Theses—relatively few Christians knew that the papacy existed, and surely only a minuscule percentage believed it had anything to do with the way they lived their lives."

[3] Douglass C. North, with John Joseph Wallis and Barry R. Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

Theology for a Small Planet

A collection of essays by Clyde Christofferson © 2009-2012

What does the cosmos say about "the law written on their hearts"? Part 3 (continued)

This essay continues with a response to the skeptics of Vatican II who argue that a broadly based "People of God" vision of the Church can't work. The response has three parts. The first part discussed a book that provides a rationale for a more participatory model for the Church. The other two parts – from a cosmic perspective, and then a practical approach – follow in this essay and the next.

The Cosmos

It is often said the Church is a mystery, and mystery seems an appropriate term. How will the People of God come to be one in Christ? The Pope is a symbol of that unity, but can that symbol apply to sentient beings elsewhere in the cosmos? Indeed, can that symbol apply to other cultures and religious traditions on planet Earth? And what is the point of a symbol, anyway: Must we not be concerned about how the People of God can work together, in love, and thereby achieve some measure of oneness?

The cosmos has a history, but this is a recent recognition. For most of our time on earth the cosmos has simply been "out there." The stars in the sky have been in the same constellations for thousands of years – perhaps forever, as far as anyone knew. The changeless and eternal "heavens" seemed an appropriate abode for a changeless and eternal God. Amid the turmoil and uncertainty of life on earth, it is comforting to see in the sameness of the night sky the handiwork of a God who is eternal.

All that changed about fifty years ago, as Vatican II was changing the Church. Two researchers at Bell Labs in New Jersey discovered a peculiar noise in their new antenna. It was peculiar because it was the same in all directions. No matter where they pointed the antenna, they picked up the same low temperature microwave signal. They could not explain it.

This was (and is) the cosmic background radiation. It takes some time to get your mind around the explanation. The signal is the same in all directions because it is coming to us from so long ago. We are used to looking up at the sky and thinking "space," but the farther away we look the more illusory it is to think of "space." We are looking back in time, toward what has been called the Big Bang. We are still inside the Big Bang, which is why we are looking toward the same point of origin – in time and space – no matter where we look.

Amazingly, physicists have gleaned an enormous amount of "history" from the cosmic background radiation. The cosmos does, indeed, have a history. For the last twenty years multidisciplinary courses in "big history" have been taught at a number of universities. These courses trace the history of the cosmos from the Big Bang to the present, and describe a series of still unfolding transitions. Each transition is something of a surprise, because what emerges is a new level of complexity.

The first few transitions are about physics: the formation of stars, which are the furnaces for the creation of all the chemical elements, which are strewn into interstellar space when these stars burn themselves up and then explode; the formation of planets around new stars formed from the interstellar gas that contains this debris. The next several transitions work their way through formation of the earth some four and a half billion years ago, with its molten core and surface tectonic plates, and the evolution of single celled organisms beginning about 3.8 billion years ago. The added complexity of multi-celled organisms doesn't occur until about five or six hundred million years ago, and human beings don't appear until two or three hundred thousand years ago.

From that point forward the course covers transitions in human society, including the development of agriculture about ten thousand years ago and the formation of more complex cities and states about five thousand years ago. These further transitions depend upon human capacity to learn collectively, that is, to accumulate learning from generation to generation and build on what prior generations learned.

What is interesting about the perspective of "big history" is the contrast of time scales and change. Changes in physics (like the stars in the night sky) are very slow, but the pace of change picks up as the dominant discipline moves to chemistry, then biology, then sociology. In all these transitions there is movement toward greater complexity, and recent transitions move more quickly. We are all conscious of the dramatic changes in technology over the last hundred years – from horses and buggies to airplanes,

and from pencil and paper to iPads. But do we appreciate similar changes in society, and in particular the society that is the Church? Is not Vatican II a part of these changes. What is next? What the history of the cosmos suggests is that further surprises are in store, and that they will happen faster and faster.

Taking this long view, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Church history should be understood as part of this cosmic unfolding. That is, there is a progression of dominant disciplines. Christ lived in a time of kings and prophets, and temple leaders who lorded their positions over the people. It was a pattern taken from the social hierarchies that grew up in agrarian societies as cities grew larger. The leadership of kings was an "emergent property" not present in the smaller communities of the early agrarian era.

The self understanding of the People of God at the time of Christ is subject to its own unfolding, and this ought not to disturb us. As St. Augustine understood, the cosmos is God's "book of nature", from which the Church can learn. The Church is not an institution outside of society, but rather is a leaven from within society. The Church does not learn from the outside, looking at the cosmos as if it were an object to be studied. Rather, the Church itself is part of a pattern of unfolding, with surprises and transitions along the way. The Church is alive.

From this perspective, the changes of Vatican II are of a piece with the history of the cosmos itself. Kings (and Popes) are a form of leadership that emerged to serve the larger communities that developed after the late agrarian era. But the pattern of unfolding continues. There is a reason that kings and social elites have been replaced by a form of politics that is more open and more broadly participatory: more open societies are more productive; more open societies are better at drawing out the energies of the people. This is an age old cosmic pattern, with antecedents in the evolution of cells that could draw energy from the sun. There is real energy in "what is written on their hearts." The sun waited patiently for hundreds of millions of years for photosynthesis to evolve, but the time came. God is waiting patiently for a Church structure that draws upon the energy of the whole People of God.

Such a structure – such a politics – will be more open and accessible. This was the point of the book discussed in the earlier section, *Violence and Social Orders* (Douglas North). The question raised then – and reemphasized by the dynamic and unfolding history of **the cosmos** – was this: Why has not the governance structure of the Church followed suit? Surely bishops would be interested in followers of Christ more effectively energized toward bringing the reign of God to life on earth. Pope John Paul II called for a rethinking of papal authority in *Ut Unum Sint*, a first step. The history of the cosmos verily cries out for this hoped for empowerment of the People of God.

But the Vatican is stuck in an older model, one that has not yet been schooled in the "book of nature" that is our cosmos. There was a time when it seemed an appropriate expression of awe to suppose that God operates from the outside, from "heaven above," in *deus ex machina* style. It made sense to suppose that God sent Jesus from the outside in this fashion; it made sense to believe that our very souls come from the outside in this fashion. There was a fixity and a solidity in this view, a certain comfort in knowing that outside the turmoil and uncertainty of life on earth a loving God was a constant for us, a north star in the heavens.

Yet this is a dualistic model, one that separates reality into heaven and earth. And it is our model, not God's model. The institutional Church – understandably but nonetheless prematurely – has vested itself in the aura of constancy, the rock of Peter, that flows from this model. It is a deceptive comfort that buries the talents of the People of God.

The "book of nature" is telling us that even the Church should be looking for a better model, a model that better serves the reign of God. In some sense, the older model is not being overturned, any more than biology overturns chemistry or chemistry overturns physics. But there is something new that cannot be adequately accounted for by the older model. There is a need for a different focus, and a new discipline. Such a discipline would build upon the current model just as the discipline of biology builds upon the discipline of chemistry, and just as the discipline of chemistry builds upon the discipline of physics. Or, to use a metaphor from scripture, a new focus and a new discipline may be viewed as a new wineskin to replace the old.

So it needs to be with the Papacy. The focus needs to change, so that the People of God more fully participate in bringing the reign of God. There have been signs of this all along. Jesus was born of a woman, not simply sent from above. The early Church struggled with who Jesus was, found human constructs wanting, and ended by preserving the mystery of "fully human, fully divine." The irrepressible Spirit has showered the People of God with surprises throughout the history of the Church, from saints like Francis to outpourings from the people in the form of confraternities in the cities of the Middle Ages to the *sensus fidelium* given formal recognition at Vatican II.

And we are in the midst of a further sign that Church governance needs a new focus. Consider the role of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). In recent decades they have published "notifications" challenging the orthodoxy of noted theologians, but in a manner that leaves the theological community wondering whether the CDF critique has missed the point of the works being criticized. Roger Haight's *Jesus, Symbol of God* and Elizabeth Johnson's *Quest for the Living God* are examples.

Of course, the CDF is charged with addressing doctrine. But one wonders whether the doctrinal emphasis of the CDF is a distraction that diverts the People of God from seeking the reign of God. It is not that doctrine is not important, but rather that the approach to doctrinal discipline needs to be more responsive to "the law written on their hearts." This presence of the living God within us, for expression and also for cultivation by the community, is central to the Church's focus on human dignity. The CDF approach comes across as external and unsettling. Something is missing.

The journey toward the reign of God is what the Church is about.[1] There is a dignity and integrity of this journey that is offended by the current CDF approach. This offense to dignity has been repeated in recent times, most recently with the "Doctrinal Assessment" of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR). It is difficult to read the "Doctrinal Assessment" and not feel the political arrogance of the document. The sisters have responded with a moderate but forceful challenge to the lack of collegial process by the CDF. Was this confrontation necessary?

And yet it would appear that the CDF has the authority to do what they are doing. The LCWR was set up by the Vatican (under canon 709), and can be restructured by the Vatican.

A dialogue is in process. On June 12, 2012, Vatican officials met with LCWR representatives. The contrasting hopes for "dialogue" are instructive. Following the meeting, Cardinal William Levada, head of the CDF, expressed concern that this might be a "dialogue of the deaf." He referred to four years of exchanges with the LCWR in which the CDF position was not taken to heart. This was the reason for laying this position out in the "Doctrinal Assessment." It is reasonably clear that Cardinal Levada's conception of "dialogue" is a means to obtain LCWR compliance with the specifics set forth in the written document.

LCWR president Sr. Pat Farrell has a different set of hopes. She would rather not have the outside control by three bishops, as contemplated by the "Doctrinal Assessment." Yet the LCWR is the vehicle for women religious to have a seat at the table for conversations within the Church, which is what the sisters have in mind by "dialogue." Finally, the sisters may find hope in the statement by Archbishop Sartain that he was open to considering other ways of reaching the CDF objectives than the specifics stated in the written document.

It is not at all clear that the CDF and LCWR are on the same page, but a dialogue is in process.

Stepping back from this immediate example, is there some change in the approach to this dialogue which would be suggested by reflection upon the "book of nature" that is written by the history of the cosmos?

Perhaps it is time for a new discipline, a new focus that shifts attention from doctrine to the integrity of the journey. Isn't that already the practice of many priests and bishops, at the pastoral level? And the benefit of such a shift in emphasis might well be a more open and accessible Church, better able to harness the energies of the People of God toward bringing the reign of God to this challenging Earth.

Next time: **practical steps**.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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[1] *Lumen Gentium*, n. 45.

Theology for a Small Planet

A collection of essays by Clyde Christofferson © 2009-2012

Searching for a Church that is More Catholic than the Pope

The late Pope Paul VI (1963–78), in his address to the opening of the second session of the Second Vatican Council (1962–63) on September 29, 1963, declared: "*The Church is a mystery. It is a reality imbued with the hidden presence of God. It lies, therefore, within the very nature of the Church to be always open to new and greater exploration.*"

Frankly, this last phrase – "*always open to new and greater exploration*" – does not appear favored by current Vatican policy. The development of the New Roman Missal emphasized the unity provided by the Holy See rather than a language that engages the people. Thoughtful theologians have been criticized for not being sufficiently conventional. And, most recently, the Vatican intends to reorganize the Leadership Council of Women Religious (LCWR) because their services to nuns working with the poor and marginalized do not adequately attend to Catholic doctrine.

Yet there are and continue to be hopeful signs. The recent "Nuns on the Bus" tour was in solidarity with the US bishops in calling for a Congressional budget that provides for citizens who are in need. This Gospel engagement of the structures and institutions of society at large follows through on the teaching of Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (literally, "new things") that these structures and institutions are human creations and can be changed to better serve the ends of justice.

And the marvel of God's creation is front page news with evidence of the discovery of the Higgs Boson, another kind of "new thing," confirming human capacity to comprehend a universe whose mysteries continue to unfold.

What is so difficult about change? Would we truly be alive without some sense of mystery going forward? Admittedly, mystery has multiple faces. It is welcome, even anticipated with joy, if past experience provides a sense of competence and sureness of foot. It is less welcome if change threatens to unravel what has been sewn together over time. Or perhaps it is welcome precisely because what has been sewn together is a rag and needs to be unraveled and sewn again. Point of view and attitude make a difference.

In every age this sense of mystery going forward retains its multiple faces. Those in charge of the institutional Church seldom view their handiwork as a rag and often are more concerned – like the servant who buried the talents given by the master – with preserving what has been sewn already. But the Church is not without its prophets, and the prophets speak hopefully, as did Pope Paul VI in his opening address to the second session of Vatican II, about a Church whose nature is openness to "new and greater exploration."

As Richard McBrien describes it:

"To view the Church as a mystery, or sacrament, is to see it not simply as a religious community, institution, or movement (although it is all of these and more), but as the corporate, communal presence of the triune God in the world. The Church is a mystery, or sacrament, because the triune God is present and redemptively active in it on humankind's and the world's spiritual and material behalf."[1]

McBrien doesn't suggest that "the world" is much bigger than "humankind." But I think our perspective on the triune God would benefit from an explicit recognition of the likelihood that God's children include other sentient beings throughout the cosmos. The Church cannot hope to be truly "catholic" without being humbled by the vastness of God's creation.

Such contemplation of the small part that humankind plays in the universe may seem an irrelevant distraction. Yet it leads to a fresh look at who the People of God are, and to a more profound if more humble understanding of catholicity. The Church needs a *metanoia* that makes it more catholic than the Pope.

Change in perspective: the Church

The Higgs Boson is an apt place to begin this venture. One of our celebrants used a pun at the beginning of liturgy to explain the significance of this newly verified particle: "We could not have mass without it." The ability of human consciousness to comprehend such matters is, as Einstein famously noted, incomprehensible.

The institutional Church has been on its own journey toward comprehension, and has not been as adventurous in recent decades as those who have pursued what science has to offer. But the Church has made progress with perhaps its most famous

conflict with science, the episode with Galileo in the early 17th Century.

It has been nearly twenty years since Pope John Paul II's speech before the Pontifical Academy of Sciences at the conclusion of a thirteen year long review – begun in 1979 – of the "celebrated and controversial 'Galileo case'."[2] The speech is a hidden treasure of creative openness to what faith and reason can accomplish together.

We live in an age when change has become part of the public consciousness. We expect change. Substantial change is within the living memory of all but the very young. And these changes are not limited to technology. Vatican II ushered in a new era for a Church struggling to be the presence of Christ in the modern world. Yet time and again science has provided better models for this struggle than faith.

Change in perspective: Physics

Toward the end of the 19th century the scientific community believed it was on the verge of a complete understanding of how the physical world worked. Newton had explained motion on earth and in the heavens, and Maxwell had explained electricity, magnetism and light. Space and time provided a stable framework for the theories of both Newton and Maxwell, and the role of physicists in the 20th century would be to work out the remaining details.

There were some bothersome hints that all was not well with this view of reality. It had been assumed that light could not travel through empty space, and therefore space must be filled with a "luminiferous ether." An experiment designed to confirm existence of the ether" – the 19th century equivalent of the Higgs Boson – came up null. No one anticipated how fundamental the problem was, and even the physics community was slow to accept the new reality: there was something peculiar about space and time.

Einstein lived to see acceptance of this new vision of the relationship between space and time. Galileo had not been so fortunate. It took the better part of four hundred years for the institutional Church to formally recognize that Galileo's vision was worthy of respect rather than condemnation. The Church has its own absolutes, and its own pace of change.

The Vatican and the Nuns

So where are we at this point in time? A resolution may be closer than we think. Within the last few months the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) concluded its summer meeting, resolving to "maintain the integrity of its mission" as it responds to the *Doctrinal Assessment* issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). The CDF has a different priority: to bring the LCWR on board, so that they teach from the same agenda as the bishops.

The term "dialogue" is used by both the LCWR and the CDF, but in different senses. And both positions have common roots in Vatican II, and in particular in *Gaudium et Spes*, the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. To its credit, the institutional Church has taken seriously what *Gaudium et Spes* said about actively engaging the modern world. The framework for that engagement has been doctrinal, but while that form of engagement taken by the bishops may be questioned it is clearly an approach toward engaging the modern world.

For their part, the sisters have taken a different approach. Their work is in the trenches, as it were, tending to the marginalized. The pain and suffering that they deal with every day is palpable. Arguably, the sisters model Jesus Christ more closely than an approach focused on doctrine. For the sisters, the notion of doctrine comes down to the summary famously repeated by Jesus at the beginning of the Good Samaritan Story: love of God and neighbor is "all the law and the prophets."

How can the CDF and the LCWR have a dialogue? They are not on the same page. Cardinal Lavada was concerned that any dialogue would be "the dialogue of the deaf." By that he meant that for the last four years the Vatican has been hinting at the changes that were necessary, and LCWR was turning a deaf ear. For their part, the sisters have a mission that calls for something other than an emphasis on the points of doctrine that are of prominent concern to the hierarchy.

A Common Heritage

While they are not on the same page, they are under the same umbrella: Catholic Social Teaching. It all goes back to Leo XIII and his 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. The point of *Rerum Novarum* was to challenge the existing social structures and institutions affecting labor, asserting that these structures were not given by God but were made by human beings and could be changed by human beings to better serve the ends of justice.

In the last hundred or more years that same principle has been applied to other social structures and institutions – except the institutional Church

itself. Is the institutional Church outside the basic principle of Catholic Social Teaching? The conflict between the CDF and the LCWR exemplifies the inconsistency.

But change remains hard. It requires *metanoia*. Jesus understood this when he said "The reign of God is at hand! Reform your lives and believe the Good News." What we commonly translate as "reform" is *metanoia* in the original Greek, so that a better translation might be, "Turn your perspective around and believe in this Good News, that the reign of God is at hand!"

Change is hard in both science and religion

Yet the real joy of this recognition continues to require a *metanoia*, a change in outlook that can prove stubbornly resistant. One example of this kind of wrenching change in perspective is the transition – beginning about a hundred years ago – concerning the significance of space and time. It had long been thought that space and time were fixed, and that real objects were simply situated in time and space. Time and space themselves were given; they were absolute.

It is not entirely logical, but many human beings find comfort in a reliable frame of reference, and an absolute space and time serve that purpose. Consequently, when Einstein proclaimed that space and time were not absolute many people were concerned that society would drift into *relativism*. It was unfortunate that the title of his theory – the General Theory of Relativity – used the term "relativity," which could be construed as a sanction for a self-indulgent focus oblivious to concupiscence.

This annoyed Einstein, because the heart of his theory was a very simple assumption: *the laws of physics are the same everywhere*. Surely there would be no concerns about *relativism* if the basic principle is that *the laws of God are the same everywhere*. Unfortunately, the public discourse had picked up on the word "relativity" in "General Theory of Relativity" and the debate turned from physics to moral philosophy and religion. In the early 1920s Einstein tried to rename his theory of relativity, and call it the "Theory of Invariants." This was a more accurate description of his theory, because his field equations retained the same form (i.e. they were *invariant*) under transformation from one frame of reference to another. While observers in different frames of reference might see the same event quite differently, the mathematical description of each perspective on the same event would have the same form.

Looking back on history, one wonders what all the fuss was about. True, there may have been people who saw the "new relativistic physics" as a model for rising up against old systems of moral constraints. But that had nothing to do with physics. Even for those who supported existing systems of moral constraints and wanted to see parallel constraints in physics, Einstein simply shifted from one set of constraints to another.

A subtle difference

The shift from absolute space and time to principles that were the same in all frames of reference had an unexpected consequence. In Einstein's universe there is no preferred frame of reference. What ties different frames of reference together is not a common relationship to some preferred frame of reference but rather the *invariance* of the laws of physics, which apply equally to all frames of reference.

If this model is applied metaphorically to the Church, then the changes of Vatican II fit the model:

Physics	Church
Old: there is a preferred frame of reference (represented by the "ether")	Old: the preferred frame of reference is the Vatican's view of revelation; the measure of faith is conformity to Vatican teachings which express this preferred frame of reference
	Vatican II: shift toward a "People of God" vision of the Church; recognition that the Spirit moves through a *sensus fidelium* of the whole people of God
New: there is no preferred frame of reference; each frame of reference is subject to the same laws of physics	New: each frame of reference is grounded by "the law written on their hearts by a loving God"
	Beyond Vatican II: the primary focus is **the integrity of the journey of faith** (i.e. the primacy of conscience); the role of the community (and the Vatican) is to support the integrity of this journey

Metaphors have their limits, of course. But this one seems useful, especially if one takes into account a historical pattern as common to physics as to the Church: resistance to change among those who are well intentioned.

Consider, for example, Einstein's friend and colleague Hendrik Lorentz. Lorentz was very attached to the old theory of the "luminiferous ether," and developed a formula that would preserve the ether hypothesis, notwithstanding the negative test results. If the ether still exists, Lorentz reasoned, the test results would be negative if objects moving through the ether contracted in accordance with his formula. Einstein derived the same formula, but had a different interpretation. Einstein surmised (correctly, as it turns out) that the Lorentz transformation was a matter of perspective, while Lorentz persisted in believing that the ether was real and that physical objects actually contracted. It took decades for the entire physics community to come to the same *metanoia*, and adopt Einstein's new perspective.

Perhaps we are seeing a similar resistance in Vatican retrenchment after Vatican II. Some good and well meaning folks are as convinced as Lorentz of the truth of the old point of view. For Lorentz, the old point of view was the existence of a preferred frame of reference and the ether. For conservatives in the Church, the old point of view is that Christ's revelation is communicated through the teaching authority centered in the Vatican. They do not yet see that what is *invariant* is not the perspective of a teaching authority in continuity with the historical Jesus but rather "that which is written on the human heart." It is this *invariance* – not a preferred frame of reference centered on Jesus Christ here on Earth – that is the foundation for a truly capacious "catholicity".

A process of discernment

From this new perspective the challenge for each of us and for the larger community is discernment: what is it that is "written on our hearts" and how do we come to know it? Life presents us with choices that call to mind an inner voice which, if cultivated, becomes a mature conscience. Alternatives *resonate* differently with this inner voice, and we find ourselves free to choose the alternative that *resonates more* or the alternative that *resonates less*. The Church has always counseled personal responsibility for properly informing such choices, and the priority to be given to conscience.

So what is different about a perspective that looks first to "what is written on our hearts"? Is the Church not already there because of the priority given to conscience? In a sense, there is no difference. To return to the metaphor, Einstein and Lorentz came to the same formula – indeed, it is now called the "Einstein-Lorentz transformation" – and each gave it a different meaning. But Einstein's meaning gave us access to a fresh, productive and resilient understanding of the cosmos.

Similarly, if the institutional Church – the teaching authority of the Church – interpreted its role differently the term "Catholic" would refer to a truly "catholic" understanding of who the People of God are. The mechanism for this transition is disarmingly simple: **give priority to the integrity of the faith journey**. Instead of preaching doctrine as if doctrine were primary, support the integrity of the journey as if conscience were primary.

This *metanoia* is yet to come to the institutional arm of the Roman Catholic Church. Sadly, the teaching authority since Vatican II has placed a greater emphasis upon doctrine and upon the primacy of the Vatican in using a doctrinal yardstick in maintaining the identity of the Catholic Church.

Catholicity is much bigger than that. If the integrity of the journey is paramount, then all God's children fit under the same tent, whether here on Earth or on a distant planet elsewhere in the cosmos. This is an enormously liberating recognition, once it is understood that "what is written on our hearts" provides a rock every bit as solid as the chair of Peter. It is the same rock, the same Spirit, in each of us, across the entire cosmos. Cultivate that rock in each of us and the unity for which Christ prayed emerges. And it emerges more faithfully than by doctrinal imposition.

And we needn't wait to find sentient beings elsewhere, for there are already here on Earth other communities – Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, to say nothing of other Christians – who can be better loved by supporting the integrity of their journeys. The Good Samaritan Story – about whether Jews and Samaritans can be neighbors – is a paradigm whose scope is truly universal.

A Vatican centered catholicity is strikingly similar to an Earth centered cosmos. In the end, freedom suffers as much for us as for Galileo. And if God is sharing creation with beings able to image God, surely independence and love are both part of the image. There is perhaps a third component of the image that contributes by its omission to the drift we

see in the Church. Is not God also sharing with us a comprehension of existence? Einstein mused that such comprehension was incomprehensible, but he recognized that it was a reality nonetheless. A perspective – a *metanoia* – which gives primacy to the integrity of the journey meshes nicely with the "now, but not yet" character of the reign of God.

Nuns leading the way: an alignment of stars

Developments may be coming to a head, sooner than anyone might have thought. Consider the sisters. Their primary goal for their dialogue with the bishops is **preserving the integrity of their mission**. The nuns have provided the People of God with an alignment of the stars that is truly extraordinary. Their focus – their mission, the one whose integrity they are giving first priority – is on those who are in pain and suffering on the margins of society. Importantly, this mission includes those who are in pain and suffering because they are on the doctrinal margins of the institutional Church. It is the emphasis by the Vatican – the sisters would say overemphasis – on doctrinal conformity that is compromising the mission of the Church as a whole, not simply the mission of the nuns.

Integrity. That is the word the nuns have placed first. Not doctrine, but integrity. Each of us is on journey. To borrow the sentiment expressed by John F. Kennedy in Berlin, *I am a nun*. The sisters have crystallized in a very public way – in a circumstance they did not initiate – a struggle that many face on their own journey toward this loving God. There is a remarkable confluence of meanings here. The very work that is their mission – being the hands and feet of Christ to those on the margins – focuses attention on the journey of those who are marginalized, including those who are marginalized by the teachings of the Church.

Is there a better way? Is the Spirit calling the Church to a better way? Blessedly, this is a question that the present alignment will hold to our collective attention long enough so that the People of God may turn the bark of Peter toward a better way. And the nuns have their finger on the pulse of our humanity. The CDF focus on doctrine – Church teaching – places the nuns on the same margin as those they have been serving. And their predicament *resonates* with many who struggle with Church teachings on their own journeys, and who have supported the nuns on that account. The reality of that support does not go unnoticed, certainly among the nuns who rightfully appreciate their solidarity with those on the margins, but also with bishops who see the handwriting on the wall.

The Spirit will not be denied. To use a metaphor from physics, the heat of this alignment will generate the light of something new. What is new is priority to *the integrity of the mission*. In their deliberations in early August 2012 the nuns stood upon this priority, and it is a beacon for the larger Church. It is as if a city on the hill has become a shining star. It all fits, remarkably. *Metanoia!* The unity for which Christ prayed is within the grasp of these awkward and failed human hands. ***Ironically, but poetically, this unity comes when we place the integrity of the journey in first priority, ahead of doctrine***.

The opportunity for the People of God because of this extraordinary alignment is a marvel to behold. You will remember where you were when this alignment bears fruit – as it surely will. Mark the day: the institutional Church, in response to this alignment, will become as capacious in its love as Jesus Christ. A fitting turn of events, surely, a consummation devoutly to be wished.

We know in our hearts – in what has been written on each of our hearts by the loving God of all – that the margins of catholicity are too often of our own making. We are graced by a loving God who opens a wide embrace for all who journey with integrity toward what is written on the heart.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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[1] McBrien, Richard P. (2008-08-19). The Church (p. 354). Harper Collins, Inc.. Kindle Edition.

[2] "Faith can never conflict with reason," address by Pope John Paul II before the Pontifical Academy of Sciences on October 31, 1992, on the occasion of the Academy's presentation to the Pope of the conclusions of their thirteen year study of the case of Galileo Galilei. English translation as it appeared in *L'Osservatore Romano* N. 44 (1264) - 4 November 1992.

Theology for a Small Planet

A collection of essays by Clyde Christofferson © 2009-2012

Searching for a Church that is More Catholic than the Pope: Continued

The late Pope Paul VI (1963–78), in his address to the opening of the second session of the Second Vatican Council (1962–63) on September 29, 1963, declared: "*The Church is a mystery. It is a reality imbued with the hidden presence of God. It lies, therefore, within the very nature of the Church to be always open to new and greater exploration.*"

My last article suggested that the Church is on the cusp of a new self-understanding of its mission. In a sense, it's where we have been going all along but we just have not seen it in quite that way. Where is the Church centered? It is not centered in the Vatican, because the Church is the whole People of God.

But if "center of the Church" is not the right description for the hierarchical structure of Pope and bishops that we associate with the Vatican, what do we say about these servants of the Church? Is the Church left rootless and without moorings in the absence of a Vatican centered structure?

No. The moorings are provided by what I have been referring to as "what is written on their hearts" by the one God. This presence of the living God manifests itself as "conscience." The key insight is but a slight shift in emphasis, from the hierarchy to the living God. Put that way, it is not a shift at all because the living God – incarnate in Jesus Christ – has always been the focus. The role of the hierarchy is not to detract from that focus but, indeed, to preserve it.

However, many have become accustomed to a Vatican centered Church. And it is not only Catholics who have this understanding. Non-Catholic Christians and those of other faiths commonly think of the Pope and the Vatican as the heart of the Roman Catholic Church, notwithstanding Vatican II's broader definition of the People of God. There is a concreteness and clarity provided by the Vatican centered hierarchical structure that certainly gives the appearance of solid moorings. "What is written on their hearts" is a mooring of a different kind. For those who need a strong sense of being well moored, it will be a difficult matter politically to shift away from a Vatican centered view of the Church. And yet the shift is remarkable not because it rejects what Catholics have come to understand as the Vatican – whether as a rock or an albatross – but because it both preserves these contentious understandings and frees the Vatican from the chains of a narrow view of catholicity.

In this context it is not possible to avoid the question of how "what is written on their hearts" can provide a solid mooring. In a sense, the music of the heart is the central message of Jesus, because it reflects the in-breaking of the living God into the world. It is through this music that we know that "the reign of God is at hand" (Mark 1:15) as Jesus preached. But in another sense the music from so many hearts becomes a Tower of Babel when put to words.

During the first millennium the Church found unity in ritual and practice, and found pastoral acceptance if not encouragement for a variety of musical scores for "what is written on their hearts." But after the Reformation the Church became much more concerned about the lyrics, and whether the words for these musical scores came from the same songbook. The test of "catholicity" was less a matter of common ritual and practice and more a matter of doctrine. The music of the heart was muffled by words.

It is no small irony that the politics of responding to the Reformation effectively transmuted "catholicity" into a much narrower "Catholic identity." It is not that the goal of catholicity had been reached prior to the Reformation. Far from it. But the detour toward Catholic identity has left catholicity to languish in the backwaters of doctrinal division. There is an unfinished course toward catholicity, and Vatican II began turning the Church onto that course. What I am suggesting in these essays is that a renewed emphasis on the integrity of the journey toward "what is written on their hearts" – a shift from the hierarchy as doctrinal custodian to the living and incarnate God who makes music in every heart – holds promise for dramatically expanding the Church's catholicity.

The difficulty is that "what is written on their hearts" by a loving God provides a different kind of mooring than the rock of Peter as currently understood. This different kind of mooring brings with it not a Tower of Babel but an expanded catholicity that *resonates* with the unity for which

Christ prayed. Seeing this requires a shift in perspective.

In the last essay I argued for this shift by analogy, in terms of a parallel development in the history of physics: the transition from Newton (where space and time provided a fixed frame of reference) to Einstein (where *invariance* was not in the frame of reference but in that which holds true in all frames of reference). In Einstein's universe, there is no preferred frame of reference, yet the laws of physics are the same in all frames of reference. This shift forced Einstein to reformulate the laws of physics. This turned out to be a considerable mathematical challenge to Einstein and, more importantly, a wrenching change in perspective for his colleagues.

The question for Catholicism is how to transition from a catholicity based on a preferred frame of reference centered at the Vatican to a catholicity rooted in something else. How well does the analogy hold? Are we looking for something that endures in all frames of reference, in communities of the People of God not only here on planet Earth but in distant worlds as yet unknown?

Where would such a transition leave the hierarchy? The same approach would presumably apply to the traditional structures of other religions, but our first step as Catholics is to deal with our own tradition. Suppose the role of the hierarchy is not to shepherd the flock to a preferred frame of reference centered at the Vatican but rather to support ***the integrity of the journey*** upon which each one of the faithful is embarked. The focus on the living God is through cultivation of conscience, **not** measuring conscience against a preferred frame of reference maintained by the Vatican.

Is this too subtle a shift? Does not sound pastoral practice already give priority to conscience and to the journey? Well, yes. But this age old pastoral practice has been cast in a different light by the increasing Vatican emphasis in recent decades upon doctrine, upon the pronouncements – *ex cathedra* and otherwise – on the teaching authority of the Church. The distinction is less and less subtle the more the Vatican emphasizes doctrine, as the current dialogue between the LCWR and the CDF makes clear.

Which is not to say that the Vatican's teaching authority is not both important and useful, especially for Catholics. The physics of Newton and Einstein provides a parallel even for this. Engineers continue to use Newton for the practical tasks of building bridges and sending rockets to the moon. The assumption that space and time are an absolute frame of reference only breaks down at the margins. It is only necessary to invoke Einstein's teaching (that there is no preferred frame of reference) when the question is how the cosmos came to be (i.e. the Big Bang) or, at a more mundane level, when the challenge is ensuring that a GPS correctly identifies position. It turns out your GPS would drive you off the road after a few days if it used Newton's equations to compute position. To keep you on the road, your GPS must use Einstein's relativistic equations.

There are other examples that require Einstein's equations in order to explain observed reality. The axis of Mercury's elliptical orbit around the sun rotates at a rate slightly different from what Newton predicts, and this difference is accounted for by Einstein's General Theory of Relativity. But in most everyday applications – from building bridges to sending rockets to the moon – Newton's teachings are quite practical and useful.

So, by analogy, the community of believers that call themselves Catholic could continue to function with the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, even though for purposes of union with the whole People of God the role of the Vatican and the hierarchy would be more pastoral. That is, the mission of the hierarchy would not be to shepherd the flock to a Vatican centered frame of reference but, instead, to help the faithful deal with the challenges of being responsible for their own journeys of faith in response to God's music played on the human heart. The necessary article of faith is that the in-breaking of the one God – so that love may be "on Earth as it is in Heaven" – is the music, and that dancing to this music is what life is about.

From this perspective – the primacy of the integrity of the journey – the journeys of other communities and other listeners to the music of the heart can be joyfully supported. Learning from the experience of others on journey becomes novel discovery rather than subtle condescension. The stories of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son will bear fruit confirming the wisdom of support for the integrity of the journey.

And the sisters will prevail with the integrity of their mission.

TO BE CONTINUED.

Theology for a Small Planet

A collection of essays by Clyde Christofferson © 2009-2012

A Prodigal Church

The late Pope John XXIII (1959-63) is quoted as giving the following advice: "*Consult not your fears but your hopes and dreams. Think not about your frustrations, but about your unfulfilled potential. Concern yourself not with what you tried and failed in, but with what is still possible for you to do*"

This quote from John XXIII is a call to our best selves, and a soothing balm for the pain of a Church unfulfilled.

I keep re-reading this quote as I write, because I do love this Church of ours, warts and all. But it is difficult to avoid being frustrated when the signs of the times are going in one direction and the institutional Church is going in another.

There are three such signs of the times.

First, a shift in prominence for the sources of revelation: from the dominance of scripture to greater reliance upon God's book of nature.

Second, a shift in priorities for the role of community: from a teacher of doctrine to an enabler and nurturer of the well formed conscience.

And third, a shift in perspective on the role of civil society: from civil norms as a mirror of moral law to civil society as a common environment for building the People of God.

Upon reflection, each of these shifts is a work in progress and none of these shifts involves an earthshaking break with the past.

But first, the title: **A Prodigal Church**.

We often use the story of the Prodigal Son to show a wayward heir learning the lessons of life the hard way. And we wouldn't ordinarily put the institutional Church in the category of a wayward heir.

But that's what I'm going to do. I must confess that I am not the first do so. I was reading an article[1] the other day by a former member of our Padre Cadre, Charlie Curran, in which he talks about the late and noted Bernard Häring and the assistance Häring provided to Charlie by accompanying him as an advisor before the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in March of 1986. They met with then Cardinal Ratzinger and other members of the CDF prior to a CDF ruling that removed Charlie's faculties for teaching Catholic theology. I still remember attending Charlie's farewell speech at Catholic University.

The day after the CDF meeting, at a mass whose Gospel reading was the story of the Prodigal Son, Häring looked at Charlie and said "the church was the prodigal son" who had taken a treasure of the Church, Charlie's work for moral theology, and "fed it to the pigs." In the article Charlie does not say explicitly that his work and treasure was a "treasure of the Church." That gloss is mine, but it is a well deserved gloss.

Does the institutional Church know what its treasure is? Is that treasure a repository of faith jealously guarded by the Magisterium? That would be one view of the Church's treasure. Are the signs of the times pointing in a new direction, to a treasure of a different kind? In the Gospel story, the Prodigal Son simply took his inheritance and wasted it. I have heard that Gospel preached many times and I do not remember raising questions about the nature of the inheritance.

What is the Church if not an heir to signs?

First Sign. A shift in prominence for the sources of revelation: from the dominance of scripture to greater reliance upon God's book of nature.

This entire series of essays is a reflection upon our roots in an unfolding cosmos. Our ancestors opined – in Holy Writ – that human beings were placed on Earth, which had itself been created by God. Our ancestors had no way of knowing, but it now appears that creation is of a piece, beginning with the Big Bang some fourteen billion years ago.

Viewpoints change slowly. The evidence that the cosmos is unfolding – as opposed to simply "being there" – came in the middle of Vatican II and is not yet fifty years old. It has not had time to sink in. There are fundamentalists who continue to insist upon a Biblical account, not only about the genesis of the Earth but about the genesis of humanity. The Church – to its credit, and following the advice of St. Augustine – has long accepted the evolutionary view of *homo sapiens* and views the Big Bang as confirmation of God's role in creation.

The Church retains the notion that God has infused a soul into each of us, and that the Incarnation was also a specific intervention. Yet it

would not be out of character for the Church to see that both the Incarnation and our souls arise from an unfolding cosmos. Any god could be credited with a *deus ex machina* appearance to do extraordinary things; it would take an utterly awesome God to fashion a single reality within which Earth, life, and Incarnation unfold.

A more difficult journey for the institutional Church is the role of scripture in revelation. Even here, though, the journey is a work in progress. The Church has long appreciated the role of tradition. And Vatican II noted the role of the *sensus fidelium* in understanding scripture and tradition. But the Church still retains the notion that there is a changeless connection between Christ's revelation – which must be complete – and the institutional Church.

This notion of completeness is not what an unfolding cosmos teaches us. New things emerge, and Christ is and remains new. This is a cosmos of surprises. Interestingly, the fundamental character of uncertainty – Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, Shrodinger's cat, and the other oddities of quantum mechanics – is now an accepted part of modern physics. While it is theoretically possible to have a universe that rolls along like clockwork, our universe is not that universe. Somewhat eerily, the formal proof that surprise – oh, alright, uncertainty – is inherent in our cosmos was made in the middle of Vatican II. It's called Bell's Theorem. The theory of the Higgs Boson was also developed during Vatican II. A lot of important things happened during Vatican II. It's a sign, I think.

If new things emerge, if we as human beings are part of this cosmic drama, if Christ is emergent, if the cosmos is alive in the fullness of reality, then the institutional Church must ultimately come to grips with its own emergent character. Love is important, not perfection. To err is not only human, but essential. If the Church is focused on error it is asking the wrong question. Change is different, not right or wrong. The Church – particularly in the current politics – is not yet prepared to part with perfection.

Parting with perfection would be freeing for the institutional Church, but it's not yet there. The train has left the station, though. Pope John Paul II apologized for the burning of John Hus and for Christian anti-Semitism. What is needed – and is not yet forthcoming – is a sense that the institutional Church is on its own journey, and is in solidarity with human frailty.

When freedom comes, the institutional Church will see hierarchy as an accident of history not a perfection to be preserved. The Church's inheritance is of a different kind.

<u>Second Sign</u>. A shift in priorities for the role of community: from a teacher of doctrine to an enabler and nurturer of the well formed conscience.

The institutional Church's doctrinal focus is regularly in the news. The teaching authority of the Church has been used to silence or discipline theologians. There has been an effort to extend the reach of the Petrine Ministry beyond *ex cathedra* statements to include "definitive teachings" of the magisterium. Where is the community in this?

The most recent – and current – example of the institutional Church's penchant for doctrinal enforcement is the "Doctrinal Assessment" of women religious. The irony is that the sisters are leading the way out of this doctrinal morass by the witness of their ministry. Those souls who suffer because they are disenfranchised by doctrinal rigors are among those to whom the sisters provide comfort and care. God bless them for this ministry.

The Vatican is barking up the wrong tree, and faithful Catholics have been overwhelmingly supportive of the sisters. The Leadership Conference of Women Religious is determined to "preserve the integrity of their mission," which is a model that would better serve the institutional Church. Good teachers nurture and enable.

It is crucial to deal with the institutional Church's current concern about chaos, about a "hermeneutics of rupture" (as Benedict XVI puts it). A focus on the integrity of the journey would address this in a way that may initially be counterintuitive but soon becomes obvious because it relies very simply on what is written on each heart by a loving God (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

Doctrine has a purpose. It is helpful to the community to think through what it is about and come to a statement that expresses that internal dialogue. Knowing how this dialogue has developed provides continuity and a sense of history. But in a tradition whose central ethos is the reign of God, what point is there in carving these statements in stone, as if they had no life in them?

It is too much legalism and not enough life. Is the institutional Church squandering its inheritance by going back to law rather than forward to what is written on the human heart? A servant Church that

addresses what is written on the human heart must focus on education toward enabling the individual (and the small community) to better discern what is written on their hearts, duly accounting for concupiscence. It is the integrity of the journey that is paramount, but the objective is the richness and joy of union with God, not hereafter but in the here and now.

The Prodigal Church has lost its roots in the Spirit. It is an irony that the talent burying caution of going back toward law leaves behind what has all along been central to the Church: the Spirit is with the Church, even as this prodigal detour is undertaken.

The inheritance of the institutional Church is not authority and power in human terms, but what has been with the People of God all along -- the gift of the Spirit. Trust in the Spirit. As with the Prodigal Son, the Prodigal Church will in the end return to the bosom of the Spirit, and will find there a welcome and a joy more profound than the killing of the fatted calf.

Third Sign. A shift in perspective on the role of civil society: from civil norms as a mirror of moral law to civil society as a common environment for building the People of God.

Did you hear about the theologian from Britain who was disinvited to a series of lectures at the University of San Diego? Why was she disinvited? Because several weeks before she was to take up her position at this Catholic university she had the temerity to sign a letter in *The Times* of London indicating Catholics could support civil marriage for same-sex couples. That didn't go over well with some influential alumni, and the university president withdrew the invitation.

This is an old pattern, of course: the institutional Church adopts a stance on what the civil law should be (typically, that the civil law – notwithstanding separation of church and state – should conform to the moral law as defined by the hierarchy), and conservative camp followers line up as enforcers of "Catholic identity." Somehow, catholicity is lost.

As a lawyer this pattern is a particular source of concern for me, not so much because of the separation of church and state but because the emphasis on doctrinal conformity suggests that the civil law – which I have come to love over more than forty years of practice – is being regarded as a tool in service to the moral teachings of the Church.

Salvation is the responsibility of the one who mistakes his inheritance for something else, ultimately recognizes the poverty of that view of inheritance, and returns to his Father's house. Enablement of, and respect for, this ultimately lonely responsibility is the role of the community. It is this role that the institutional Church can and should emulate.

In the modern age this approach becomes viable precisely because the laws of the civil state provide a safe and non-sectarian environment. The laws of the state can be relied upon for the basic requirements of good order and discipline. Furthermore, because the body politic in the modern state is increasingly diverse, the resulting good order and discipline is likely to reflect our common humanity more fully. The Church need not – and as a matter of prudence should not – engage the power of the state in the further task of enforcing the Church's moral code.

Freed of this bondage, the institutional Church can focus on the integrity of the journey, and the hopeful joy of seeing its children flourish. A civil society grounded in our common humanity, purged of even the appearance of subordination to sectarian rules, is a more fertile ground for the freely considered choices that make evangelization meaningful.

Conclusion

God is doing something big, and our institutional Church – the institutional structure as well as the resources of theologians and religious in which the People of God have invested their treasure over millennia – is being a stick in the mud. Or, perhaps more accurately, sticks in the mud have asserted themselves politically within the institutional structure, counterbalancing the *aggiornamento* of Vatican II. In consequence of this rather parochial politics, the institutional Church is behaving fearfully, like the one who buried his talents.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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[1] "Bernard Häring, a witness of critical love for the church," by Fr. Charles E. Curran, National Catholic Reporter, http://ncronline.org, November 24, 2012.

Theology for a Small Planet

A collection of essays by Clyde Christofferson © 2009-2013

The New Evangelization: 'Rebuild Our Prodigal Church' – Part 1

The late Pope John XXIII (1959-63) is quoted as giving the following advice: "*Consult not your fears but your hopes and dreams. Think not about your frustrations, but about your unfulfilled potential. Concern yourself not with what you tried and failed in, but with what is still possible for you to do*"

What does it mean "to build"? The story is that St. Francis had a vision, and that God told him in this vision "rebuild my church!" At first – so the story goes – Francis took that literally, and began putting one stone upon another.

Looking back on what Francis and the Franciscans accomplished there was something different about "rebuild my church." In a sense, Francis did indeed "rebuild my church," not stone upon stone but by providing to the People of God something that was not being provided by the institutional Church. In the 12th and 13th centuries most bishops were in an aristocracy disconnected from ordinary people. Not that this should have been a surprising development: it's the way power works.

Francis preached the good news by walking among the people, "using words when necessary." And when the magisterium finally recognized that their mission was at risk and that Francis was filling a void, it made good sense simply to incorporate the Franciscan mission as part of what the larger Church was supposed to be doing.

The current state of our Church is not nearly as bleak as in St. Francis' time. Yet something is amiss. In the last essay I argued that our institutional Church is not yet paying adequate attention to three "signs of the times": 1) God's book of nature is having more to say about revelation; 2) nurturing a well formed conscience needs more emphasis than the teaching of doctrine; and 3) the function of civil society is less to provide norms that mirror the moral law and more to be a safe environment for building the People of God.

In this and the following essay I argue that it is time to take an expansive view of these signs: God is doing something big, and the drama that is playing out needs actors rather than spectators. That's us folks, you and me. And I'm not talking simply about being the hands and feet of Christ. I'm talking about rebuilding the Church, the People of God that we are.

An impossible task, you say: the institutional Church is self perpetuating and immovable; change comes from the inside, in the manner of Gregory the Great and Bernard of Clairvaux; the impetus of Vatican II has been hijacked by insiders.

But what about the signs? And what about the example of St. Francis? This is not about revolution. That is the point of the signs. The foundation is being laid, and the changes pointed to by the signs are works already in process.

In this community we have long understood the importance of being the hands and feet of Christ. This, and liturgy, is what we are about. And the same could be said for many communities, going back centuries and millennia. But something new happened with Catholic Social Teaching when Pope Leo XIII penned *Rerum Novarum*. The justice of Jesus Christ is a larger project than the Church's social conscience had assumed, and includes reform of institutional realities which had been created not by God but by human beings.

There has been, of course, a lingering exception to this principle: the institutional Church. The institutional Church gets its charter from Christ, right? The hierarchical structure and the primacy of the Pope are written in stone, right?

"But you said you were not talking about revolution!"

Indeed, I did. And I am.

It wasn't the purpose of St. Francis to restructure the Church. Yet that is what he did.

And the laity can do the same, here and now. Not by confronting the existing structure, but by building something that is missing. The forces at work in the signs of the times will do the rest.

This is something that we can do. How would the NOVA Community like to take a two year stint at one of the tasks required for this project?

More in the following essay.

TO BE CONTINUED.

Theology for a Small Planet

A collection of essays by Clyde Christofferson © 2009-2013

The New Evangelization: 'Rebuild Our Prodigal Church' – Part 2

The late Pope John XXIII (1959-63) is quoted as giving the following advice: "*Consult not your fears but your hopes and dreams. Think not about your frustrations, but about your unfulfilled potential. Concern yourself not with what you tried and failed in, but with what is still possible for you to do*"

John XXIII is a remarkable figure in the history of the Roman Catholic Church, for a number of reasons. I recently found an item that adds to these reasons.

Before Vatican II John XXIII was reading a book by Yves Congar with the challenging title *True and False Reform in the Church*. John XXIII is reported to have looked up from his reading and said, "can the Church be reformed?" At the time, Congar was in Curial shackles of one kind or another. John XXIII rehabilitated Congar by making him an advisor to Vatican II.

Congar – perhaps the greatest ecclesiologist of his day – was very active at the Council. He saw the Church as a dynamic and living force in history, and his footprints are evident in the documents of the Council, particularly *Lumen Gentium* and *Die Verbum*. He had much to say about how tradition operates in the life of the Church. Avery Dulles recommended Congar's *The Meaning of Tradition*, which is how I came upon the story about John XXIII.

Vatican II was not of one mind. Progressive bishops were in the majority, and Congar was one of their scribes. But the documents of Vatican II were forged with compromises that left practical initiative with the Pope and – by implication – the Vatican bureaucracy. Pope Francis is now left to deal with the consequent accretions of power and inevitable abuse.

What is amiss in the Church? In recent decades theologians have come under scrutiny for doing what they are supposed to do. Many in the NOVA community have participated in small group discussions of Elizabeth Johnson's *Quest for the Living God*, following a doctrinal challenge to Johnson's work by the U.S. bishops. Ten years earlier the Vatican investigated *Toward a Christian Theology of Pluralism* by Jacques Dupuis.

I happened upon Dupuis' *Pluralism* because of a recent *Commonweal* review of a book (*Jacques Dupuis Faces the Inquisition* by William Burrows) dealing with this episode. I suppose I should thank the inquisitors because it has been their unfavorable interest that prompted me to buy, and read parts of, Johnson's *Quest*, Roger Haight's *Jesus, Symbol of God* and, most recently, Dupuis' *Pluralism*.

For a Church that is built upon the unity of Christ it is odd to take separation to excess. The vice of clericalism comes from an excessive separation between clerics and laity. There is a parallel, I think, between clericalism and more significant separations: I am thinking of the separation between body and soul, and the separation between faith and reason.

One of the reasons I dislike the language "and with your spirit" in the new missal is that it highlights a separation of body and soul that was thankfully muted after Vatican II by the simpler language "and also with you." I am happy that this community has continued with the simpler language. One is good. Each of us is one in body and soul. As a community we are one in the Spirit.

Faith and reason share a similar unity, although contemporary thought appears to be against it. The late paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould coined the acronym NOMA (Non Overlapping Magisterial Areas) to confirm boundaries between science and religion, in the sense of a distinction between scientific thought and religious thought. American culture has long assumed the separation of church and state, but this is a prudent safeguard for the exercise of state power and is not an argument against the unity of reality.

What is faith? The Church has been protective of "the faith" against challenges that have arisen as science and technology have acquired ever greater credibility. Vatican I (not II) affirmed that "*if reason illumined by faith inquires in an earnest, pious and sober manner, it attains by God's grace, a certain understanding of the mysteries, which is most fruitful …. But it never becomes capable of understanding them in the way it does truths which constitute its proper object."* This sets boundaries, consistent with the NOMA approach of Stephen Jay Gould.

This boundary setting strategy is perhaps understandable as a matter of apologetics: defend your turf by drawing lines which contain the opposition. However, two unfortunate consequences

follow. First, this strategy tends to set reason and faith against one another. This can't be helpful for those struggling with their faith by the light of reason. Second, it confines faith to a defensive box. What sense does that make? If science and technology have made reason more credible, should we not be looking for a more credible understanding of faith? Instead, the Church has gravitated toward an emphasis upon authority and doctrine. This is clericalism *redux*. A unity built upon authority and doctrine is a sorry substitute for the unity of the Spirit. Is it any wonder that if ex-Catholics were a denomination they would be the second largest in Christendom?

Faith has a sensible response to the credibility question, a response that does not separate faith and reason. At least that is the argument I will make. I have presented this response before in this series of essays, but have not looked at it from this point of view. It's a very simple understanding, to which I have attached the name *resonance*. In life each one of us faces alternatives, and struggles to make choices. Sometimes we look at these alternatives from a perspective larger than our own, from the viewpoint of "the other" or "the common good." From this graced perspective we are able to choose an alternative that *resonates more* than the others, as best our lights can discern.

There is a dynamic quality to this simple experience of choice, and it is this dynamic quality that gives *resonance* its explanatory power (a topic to which I will return in the next essay). Tomorrow we may see matters in a new light, and find an alternative or a way of looking at a problem that was not evident the day before. This step by step progression is – to borrow St. Anselm's motto – "faith seeking understanding."

Human beings have limited capabilities. The conscious mind is truly remarkable, but has a limited attention span and is forgetful. We need stories to make things hang together. Day to day living provides its own story – a chronology, of sorts – but the cultivation of *resonance* typically involves a different kind of story. For Christians, that story is about Jesus. The Gospel narrative, preached year after year at liturgy, provides a rich soil for discerning the alternatives that are *more resonant*. These alternatives include not only those that *resonate* in our daily lives but also those choices that are faced by the larger body politic, even if those choices often seem *less resonant*. We can hope and pray – and vote – for *more resonant* choices.

Psychology tells us that the senses generate so much information that the mind would be overwhelmed if it did not develop ways to be selective.[1] This is called *selective attention*. I am able to carry on a conversation at a cocktail party full of noise from many such conversations by focusing attention on a particular conversation. A similar selectivity applies to concepts generated within the mind. The mind maintains coherence by developing a frame of reference or perspective, and then selectively attending to concepts that have a place within the existing frame of reference.[2] Stories provide effective scaffolding for a frame of reference. Selectivity is supported by habit, but habits can be changed by conscious attention. In the end, what we know and what we understand can improve over time.

Thus the model provides the following dynamism: with tomorrow may come a fresh alternative, or a new way of looking at an old problem, so that what was *more resonant* yesterday becomes *less resonant* in relation to something new, and the conscious mind matures. This is how reason develops the contours of science, and it should not be surprising that reason and faith also work together. *Resonance* is different from the eyes, but the eyes are different from the ears. We often speak metaphorically of the "eyes of faith" or "hearing the Word of God." The same metaphor can be used negatively, to speak of being blind or deaf to a reality that we sometimes know is there but can't always or fully grasp. There are parallels to these struggles in the progress of science, and with some modest imagination it may be hoped that the same reason that has given credibility to science can also do wonders with faith. Science builds on what has gone before, and in that sense is "handed down." Reason has developed a methodology which brings to life what has been handed down. It is the same consciousness working with the same reality, though *resonance* is a different sense, just as the eyes and the ears are different senses.

History provides perspective. Our struggles with "the faith" – understood in terms of a story or doctrinal superstructure (i.e. what is "handed down") – have a history that can be understood as part of development of the same consciousness. The history of physics provides an example. In 1807 French mathematician Joseph Fourier presented for publication a paper on a novel theory of heat. This paper was a seminal advance in human understanding of thermodynamics. But it was not published until

1822 because the reviewers – including noted scientists Lagrange, Laplace and Legendre – expected Fourier to show how his equations could be derived from a physical model of reality. The reviewers believed that "true science" must be put together within the conceptual framework that had been "handed down" from Isaac Newton. The equations which Fourier had developed effectively described thermodynamic reality, but did not fit within the Newtonian conceptual model which dominated scientific thinking well into the nineteenth century. The reviewers eventually saw the light, and Fourier's paper was published – fifteen years after it was presented.

Human reason is frail, even in science. It may be argued that the reviewers were simply awestruck by Isaac Newton and this cannot be compared to the legitimate awe due the revelation of Jesus Christ. But that is beside the point. The problem – as Pogo famously understood – is us. Human consciousness is limited, and understanding grows in steps. Human understanding does not spring like Athena full-blown from the head of Zeus, even when it comes from Jesus Christ. Faith is a source of understanding like waters from a spring. It quenches our thirst, and then we thirst for more.

In this view of "faith seeking understanding," faith is a journey not an endpoint. Of course, many paths in this journey have been well traveled, and our well intentioned Church hierarchs propose to save us much trouble on the journey by urging us to do what "holy Mother Church" says.

Too often the institutional Church runs this good intention into the ground. The recent spate of "notifications" against theologians is an example. In commenting upon the 2001 notification against Jacques Dupuis' *Pluralism*, William Burrows suggests that what concerns the hierarchy about theological outreach to other religions is "*a weakening of Catholic Christian identity*" that, if it takes hold, will unravel the traditional conception of what "the Church" is.[3] There is ample evidence in Europe and America that a certain unraveling is already well advanced, and that growth has shifted to the southern hemisphere. Is secularism an apt diagnosis, or simply an excuse to bury the talents of the People of God under the heavy hand of authority?

This excess of paternalism – one might say "clericalism" – turns "faith" into a form of obedience that would stunt the cultivation of *resonance* if people were scrupulous about obedience. Undoubtedly there are some Catholics who are, indeed, scrupulous about obedience. From all the notifications issued to theologians it appears the institutional Church is hoping to encourage such scrupulosity.

Fortunately, the institutional Church has had no such luck. The cultivation of *resonance* is deep in our bones.

It is perhaps too harsh a suggestion, but has the hierarchy taken its inheritance from God's house and is now finding itself in a sort of wilderness? What would it mean to come home? Regrettably, it is not as if reform-minded Catholics were safely at home, waiting to complain about the return of a prodigal Church. Alas, the rest of us – reform-minded as well as those of conservative bent – are bound up with the magisterium in the same prodigal Church. The wilderness is an equal opportunity employer.

Where is the joy? Wilderness and joy don't seem to go together. Perhaps coming home is to recognize where we began. The disciples on the road to Emmaus recognized that their hearts were burning within them. This is what it means to be alive, and to share that life is what evangelization is about.

We do not need to be a shining city on a hill. Sharing what burns within us must be done from where we are, wilderness or not.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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[1] Apparently, autism – when the outside world is simply closed off – is the mind's self protective alternative when more discriminating filters do not develop.

[2] Social psychologists (e.g. Jonathan Haidt in *The Righteous Mind*) refer to this phenomenon as "confirmation bias."

[3] William R. Burrows, ed., *Jacques Dupuis Faces the Inquisition* (Pickwick: Eugene, Oregon, 2012), p. 16.

Theology for a Small Planet

A collection of essays by Clyde Christofferson © 2009-2013

The New Evangelization: 'Rebuild Our Prodigal Church' – Interlude

The late Pope John XXIII (1959-63) is quoted as giving the following advice: "*Consult not your fears but your hopes and dreams. Think not about your frustrations, but about your unfulfilled potential. Concern yourself not with what you tried and failed in, but with what is still possible for you to do*"

In the last essay I asked whether it was too harsh to suggest that the hierarchy has taken its inheritance from God's house and is now finding itself in a sort of wilderness, with the rest of us along for the ride since we are all bound together in this People of God we call Church.

In the parable, the Prodigal Son tires of the wilderness and comes home. What would it mean to come home?

This past week I had a different experience of coming home. My mother died, and the family met at my mother's farm in Arkansas. That in itself was a homecoming, but we were there to celebrate an eternal homecoming for my mother. At the end of the funeral mass I talked about my mother.

Eulogy for Mom

"We all have memories of our mother.

"I remember one in particular, when I was a teenager. Mom is at the dining room table with a half full cup of coffee, reading War and Peace for the umpteenth time. I pull up a chair, and want to talk. She listens, and we go back and forth. And I feel much better.

"There is a story about St. Francis that describes what Mom was doing. A young friar accompanied St. Francis as he preached the good news around the town. Francis would stop now and then, exchange pleasantries with the people of the town, and continue on. After some time the young friar asked his mentor, "when are we going to preach?" Francis replied, "that is what we have been doing."

"What was St. Francis doing? Stories that are memorable have different levels of meaning, a richness that leads to retelling. At one level St. Francis is preaching through the ordinary greetings and small talk with people as he walks through the town. Indeed, it is this aspect of the story that brings the young friar up short, and gives him – and us – a different understanding of what preaching is all about. This is what makes the story memorable.

"How does this very ordinary way of relating to people constitute 'preaching'? One can imagine a gracious smile by St. Francis that might cheer a weary heart, or an attentive ear that might soothe what gnaws at a troubled soul. Small things do make a difference. The young friar probably saw this, and expected that St. Francis, seeing the weary heart or the troubled soul, would take that opportunity to say something.

"But that's not what happened. Words are not always necessary. As St. Francis said, 'preach the good news always; when necessary use words.' But listening without such words is a step toward the other, a step toward being Christ to one another.

"Looking back on my memories at the dining room table, Mom understood this. But it was a different kind of hospitality, that brings out the best. It was more than listening; it was somehow allowing the fires within me to burn bright.

"St. Francis was a person of experience and wisdom, and had much to say. So the young friar thought. I imagine Jesus also having much to say, and Mary the sister of Lazarus in last week's Gospel thought so, too. She chose to listen to Jesus as her sister Martha toiled to be hospitable to Jesus.

"Did Jesus have something to learn from Mary, and from Martha? Martha certainly thought so, but Jesus thought something else was going on with Mary, whose hunger put her at the feet of Jesus, leaving Martha to toil in the kitchen. The story is perhaps a metaphor. I have in me both Martha and Mary, not as often as I should, but sometimes. Once a year I serve in a homeless shelter, trying to be the hands and feet of Christ. But how often do I make time to listen for Christ in these homeless people?

"St. Francis had wisdom and experience, enough to know that even the weary heart and the troubled soul are graced with the presence of Christ. So at another level St. Francis listened for what that presence was saying. The gracious smile and the attentive ear provide encouragement for hands and feet of Christ that are sometimes timid. And not just for Martha's doing, but for Mary's contemplation.

"Maybe that was Jesus' point, that these two aspects of living a good life need to be in balance. We do good works all the time, in the small

kindnesses of everyday life, like Martha. But how often do we listen to the other, like Mary, to hear the Christ within them. I'm thinking of these homeless people at the shelter. I was serving them in Martha's sense, but how often did I listen for the Christ within them in Mary's sense, so that it shines forth.

"Mom knew how to do both.

"So I remember mother, at the dining room table, not just listening but attentive, not just smiling but encouraging. I'll leave out the gentle -- and sometimes not so gentle -- prodding. She was a saint; she is a saint. As we all should be. We have been blessed, and graced, by her presence. She is still with us, in ways we cannot now comprehend."

Death can be viewed – wrongly, I think – as a chasm that separates 'this world' from a 'next world." The ancients who thought in terms of 'this world' and a 'next world' had no better language for the hope that was within them. Yet the terminology is a prison. Death as a chasm between the two follows logically.

But Jesus preached a different vision. The 'next world' is now: "The reign of God is at hand." There is a wholeness to reality that the 'this world/next world' language didn't contemplate and kept hidden from us. The reasonable conclusion, confirmed by Christ's rising, is that 'heaven' can be lived now and that death is no chasm to such a lived life. Christ preached and lived a reality that built a bridge across that chasm, as an example for us.

We take certain things for granted. I wake up in the morning and see myself as the same person I was the day before. There is a continuity across the night of sleep. That continuity provides a metaphor for another kind of sleep. The wholeness of the kingdom of God is not divided by death.

In this view of reality, human consciousness is not separate from the soul, but encompasses the soul. Under the old 'this world/next world' model it was reasonable to conclude that a soul existed separate from the body, to be released at death for those who have lived a faithful life.

Christ said that "the reign of God is at hand! Turn your perspective around (*metanoia*) and rejoice in this good news." The 'next world' has broken through, and we experience it by loving God and one another. This kind of living **is** the reign of God.

The new view provided by "reign of God" terminology gives death a different interpretation: the continuity of consciousness is not broken by death any more than by a good night's sleep.

This is how I have been looking at my mother's recent death.

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The New Evangelization: 'Rebuild Our Prodigal Church' – Interlude (Continued)

The late Pope John XXIII (1959-63) is quoted as giving the following advice: "*Consult not your fears but your hopes and dreams. Think not about your frustrations, but about your unfulfilled potential. Concern yourself not with what you tried and failed in, but with what is still possible for you to do.*"

A young friar accompanied St. Francis as he preached the good news around the town. Francis would stop now and then, exchange pleasantries with the people of the town, and continue on. After some time the young friar asked his mentor, *"when are we going to preach?"* Francis replied, *"that is what we have been doing."* (quote from "Eulogy for Mom" in my last essay)

This story about St. Francis is a favorite of mine, but until I wrote my mother's eulogy I had not thought much about how a conversation between Francis and one of his fellow residents of Assisi might have gone. My mother's listening and encouragement brought out the best in me, but what does that have to do with preaching the Good News?

The disciples on the road to Emmaus asked, "were not our hearts burning within us?" If his fellow townspeople found the fires within them burning more brightly after talking with Francis, that would be a sign of good preaching.

This approach would recognize that "what burns within" is to be cultivated as a sign of the Incarnation. That is, "what burns within" is a part of us but does not belong to us. It is to be shared. But "what burns within"? It is the spirituality of blooming where each of us in planted.

That is a broad view of spirituality. Yes, we are to serve the least among us. But it is also service to others to reform social structures and institutions, as described in Catholic social teaching. The "priesthood of all believers" is not a priesthood in the sense of the particular charism and expertise of those who are ordained. Rather, it is a priesthood coextensive with society, which is to be evangelized in its entirety.

That evangelization is not about converting "all nations" so that they listen to the teachings of the Church and abandon secularity. Teaching all nations requires the labor of those who have a calling and expertise in activities throughout society. The Magisterium does not have this expertise; it is the laity which have this expertise.

The English term "reform" is translated from the term "*metanoia*" in the Greek, which is better translated as "turning around, to see in a different way." Erasmus made this observation in the 16th century, critiquing St. Jerome's usage of the word "reform" in the passage, "The reign of God is at hand; reform your lives and believe in the Gospel." Would the passage not be better translated so as to bring all of us, not just the Magisterium, into leadership roles in the evangelization of society? Perhaps, "The reign of God is at hand; turn your perspective around to see this Good News, and rejoice!" The point of reference is not "me and God" or the moral life as understood by the Magisterium; it is also the spirituality of an Incarnation "that burns within."

Ken Himes once referred to Dorothy Sayers as a theologian of the secular: if you want to make the world a better place, "be a good carpenter; be a good plumber." The "*metanoia*" that we are looking for is not simply reform of our personal moral lives: it is the bringing to fruition of "what burns within."

If we bloom where we are planted, that does not necessarily mean that we are planted where we prefer. We may have wished to be planted elsewhere, but we come to know -- and, indeed, if we fully bloom, to love -- where we have come to be. Wherever we are planted, we can make it better.

This is not a theology of perfection; it is a theology of steps, some large but mostly small. These are the steps that are driven by "what burns within." It has long been lamented that Catholic social teaching is the Church's best kept secret. Perhaps that is because we do not take Dorothy Sayers seriously enough. We need not deny "what burns within," as if the only proper objects of our love were the poor, the orphan, the widow and the stranger in the land -- the traditional anawim. God so loved the world that he sent his only son, who showed us how to love the world. Awakening to "what burns within" is, as it was with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, the spirituality of the Incarnation.

With passion comes expertise. If service to those who are outcast from society is "what burns within" pursue that love. Society has many parts, and each can be an object of passion and expertise. If it is

good to listen for signs of that passion in others, and encourage it, it is also good to listen for signs of that passion in ourselves, and cultivate it. Is not this what evangelization is about, being church in the modern world?

What kinds of expertise are needed to evangelize society? The expertise acquired by ordained ministers and by the Magisterium is only one kind. Society has a larger waterfront, and full coverage of that waterfront requires more. The work of "making this world a better place" is overwhelmingly the province of those of us who are not members of the Magisterium. If we take Christ's call for "*metanoia*" to mean bringing to fruition "what burns within," then who better than all the rest of the Body of Christ -- we who have expertise in the larger waterfront -- to cultivate a spirituality of the Incarnation. This is a spirituality that would therefore encompass the secular rather than stand against it. This enterprise is worthy to be called "the new evangelization."

So, to return to St. Francis walking around the town of Assisi, suppose that he listened to each one, for a sign of "what was burning within" and provided a word of encouragement so that "what burns within" might bear greater fruit. Good preaching, indeed. And that's the kind of preaching that we all can do and -- come to think of it -- isn't that what we already do? Perhaps not as often as we should, but this is familiar territory.

So, my Mother had the right idea. I knew that, of course.

Theology for a Small Planet

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The New Evangelization: 'Rebuild Our Prodigal Church' – Homeward Bound

The late Pope John XXIII (1959-63) is quoted as giving the following advice: "*Consult not your fears but your hopes and dreams. Think not about your frustrations, but about your unfulfilled potential. Concern yourself not with what you tried and failed in, but with what is still possible for you to do.*"

The last two essays were an interlude in this series, reflections occasioned by the death of my mother. Yet they related to the present topic, using a fabled story about St. Francis preaching without words.

In the essay before this interlude I asked whether it was too harsh to suggest that the hierarchy has taken its inheritance from God's house and is now finding itself in a sort of wilderness, with the rest of us along for the ride since we are all bound together in this People of God we call Church.

In the parable, the Prodigal Son tires of the wilderness and comes home. What would it mean for the hierarchy to come home? Or, since we are all in this together, what would it mean for the People of God to come home?

The interlude since my mother's death has provided time for hints of an answer to that question. Serendipitously, another Francis -- Pope Francis -- has been giving signs that this is still a Church of surprises. There is a new tone in this Church of ours. It is not ours, really, but you and I -- and sentient children of God across the cosmos -- are possessed by this communion we call Church. As Pope Francis said recently, we do not possess the truth but are possessed by it. This is the Eucharist of our existence: Christ is the truth and we share in that mystery at liturgy every Sunday.

Much has been made of the lengthy interview of Francis published in early September. Planning for the interview began at the Jesuit journal *America* shortly after the election of Francis. After collaboration with *America's* counterpart Jesuit journal in Rome, *Civiltà Cattolica*, final arrangements for the interview were made by the Italian journal's editor in chief, Antonio Spadaro, S.J. The interview included questions submitted by a number of Jesuit journals, whose editors had agreed on this strategy at their meeting in Lisbon in the Spring. The interview extended over three sessions in August and Spadaro's compilation was approved by the Pope prior to publication. The interview was in Italian, but a translation into English was arranged by *America* and is available on the *America Magazine* web site (with an expanded Kindle version at Amazon for $2.99).

The interview serves as a capstone on changes in tone and emphasis that have gradually become evident in the Pope's remarks since his election a scant six months ago. When a Catholic pope makes regular headlines in the secular press, you know something is afoot. Francis is shifting emphasis from doctrine to mercy, from a focus on the moral issues of abortion and same sex marriage to the compassion of walking with another as they journey.

Regarding homosexuals -- heretofore regarded as subject to an "inherently disordered" condition -- he said on his plane trip back from Brazil in late July, "if they are of good will and in search of God, who am I to judge?" After that he wrote an open "letter to non-believers" in response to questions from an atheist. His letter made the point that since "the mercy of God is limitless for those who turn to him with a sincere and contrite heart, the issue for the unbeliever lies in obeying his or her conscience. There is sin, even for those who have no faith, when conscience is not followed. Listening to and obeying conscience means deciding in the face of what is understood to be good or evil. It is on the basis of this choice that the goodness or evil of our actions is determined."

Yet Francis is content to lay foundations. He is not challenging Church doctrine, but simply putting doctrine in perspective. At the same time that he places homosexuals and atheists in a non-judgmental light he has pointedly maintained that the Church has spoken on abortion and the ordination of women.

Two quotes from his long interview with Italian Jesuit Antonio Spadaro will suffice:

"We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage and the use of contraceptive methods. This is not possible. I have not spoken much about these things, and I was reprimanded for that. But when we speak about these issues, we have to talk about them in a context. The teaching of the church, for that matter, is clear and I am a son of the church, but it is not necessary to talk about these issues all the time.

"The dogmatic and moral teachings of the church are not all equivalent. The church's pastoral ministry cannot be obsessed with the transmission of a disjointed multitude of doctrines to be imposed insistently. Proclamation in a missionary style

focuses [sic] on the essentials, on the necessary things: this is also what fascinates and attracts more, what makes the heart burn, as it did for the disciples at Emmaus. We have to find a new balance; otherwise even the moral edifice of the church is likely to fall like a house of cards, losing the freshness and fragrance of the Gospel. The proposal of the Gospel must be more simple, profound, radiant. It is from this proposition that the moral consequences then flow."

Francis also talks about the Church in a similar vein. He uses two concepts over and over: journey and dialogue. Quotes from the Spadaro interview are again helpful:

"... the church is the people of God on the journey through history, with joys and sorrows. Thinking with the church, therefore, is my way of being a part of this people. And all the faithful, considered as a whole, are infallible in matters of belief, and the people display ... this infallibility in believing, through a supernatural sense of the faith of all the people walking together. This is what I understand today as the 'thinking with the church' of which St. Ignatius speaks. When the dialogue among the people and the bishops and the pope goes down this road and is genuine, then it is assisted by the Holy Spirit. So this thinking with the church does not concern theologians only.

"This is how it is with Mary: If you want to know who she is, you ask theologians; if you want to know how to love her, you have to ask the people. In turn, Mary loved Jesus with the heart of the people, as we read in the Magnificat. We should not even think, therefore, that 'thinking with the church' means only thinking with the hierarchy of the church."

After a brief pause, Pope Francis emphasizes the following point, in order to avoid misunderstandings: *"And, of course, we must be very careful not to think that this [infallibility] of all the faithful I am talking about in the light of Vatican II is a form of populism. No; it is the experience of 'holy mother the hierarchical church,' as St. Ignatius called it, the church as the people of God, pastors and people together. The church is the totality of God's people.*

In a sense there is nothing new here: the priority of conscience is a very old principle, yet doctrine is alive and well. But the shift in emphasis from doctrine to a sense that pastoral priority should be given to "walking with" those on journey with the church is quite palpable.

There is a further shift in emphasis, at least it seems so to me. Francis seems very comfortable in his own shoes, as if a great burden had been taken from him. The shift from doctrine to mercy has another dimension to it. He is perfectly comfortable with the doctrines of the Church, notwithstanding his pastoral focus. At the same time, he is perfectly comfortable making plain views that those of a doctrinal bent might see as undermining this or that position of the Church.

Is it possible that Francis does not see himself as the legislator of last resort? He is perfectly comfortable because he has a clear idea of the role of pope, as servant of the servants of ... the people of God?

I recall a story about Franklin Delano Roosevelt. During his campaign for President in 1936 a voter came up to him with a list of objectives. He responded, "I want to do these things, but you must make me."

I can imagine Francis thinking in the same terms: he does not have the power to change Church doctrine, since he is only a son of the Church; if the Church is to change, the people of God must make him do it.

If Francis does indeed embody such a shift, then the recent letter written to him by reformers (www.catholicchurchreform.com) perhaps should be redirected to all the people of God, with courtesy copies to Francis and all the bishops. It is not a perfect letter, but I signed it anyway, on general principles. But the reformers have their work cut out for them.

In any event, these shifts in emphasis prompted by Pope Francis serve as fitting steps of a prodigal journeying toward home. Where do we go from here? I confess that Francis has given me hope for a more universal approach to being church, where all God's children are truly one.

Such enthusiasms can prove to be temporary, but retain their attraction nonetheless. What might a universal church look like? What would hold such a church together, considering a diversity that might include sentient beings across a vast cosmos, not simply the human diversity we see here on Earth?

I have been working on a model along these lines, and the elements of this model will seem familiar from prior essays. What I might call "theoretical theology" has two principles tied together by the journey that is faith.

TO BE CONTINUED.

Theology for a Small Planet

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The New Evangelization: 'Rebuild Our Prodigal Church' – A Framework

In the last essay I noted the palpable shift in emphasis of the Francis papacy from the doctrinal focus of the last two popes to a more pastoral focus given to "walking with" those on journey with the people of God. This gives me hope for a more universal approach to being church, where all God's children are truly one.

But what would hold such a church together? Part of the reason for a doctrinal focus in recent papacies is precisely to provide clarity for a "Catholic identity." If unity of the people of God is not to be based upon a belief system, what holds it together?

Francis pastoral focus on journey and dialogue leads to a remarkably simple approach to unity, one that serves not only for unity of the human family but also has sufficient breadth to include sentient civilizations throughout the cosmos. Furthermore -- and importantly -- this simple approach serves across time as well as space.

A journey of faith is measured by its integrity. No journey is perfect, of course. Human cupidity is a constant challenge to maintaining the integrity of the journey. The story of the Prodigal Son is the classic paradigm: one on journey takes a detour, but in the end comes home. This paradigm serves for the individual and for the community, and for the larger communities that are bonded by commonality of religious persuasion.

These journeys are tied together by the common presence of God, however much seen "darkly, as through a glass" (to use the King James translation of Paul's language). It was this presence which burned in the hearts of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. It is this presence that we celebrate and experience at Eucharist every Sunday. It is a universal presence which enlivens the hearts of the people of God in every time and place. In a sense, the hearts of the people of God are the fruit of this presence, which has been working patiently since the beginning of time.

Have you ever read something, set it aside, and then picked up a new insight after reading it again? I had that experience reading Richard Rohr's recent article in the *National Catholic Reporter* about Pope Francis. Perhaps it was the way he began the article, "The top person can never be wrong." Papal infallibility may be a problematic concept, but when I read the article a second time it became clear: "papal infallibility" is about direction not doctrine; Francis is taking stress off doctrine in order to "become a living and happy invitation to all of humanity, even beyond the too-tight boundaries of Christianity."[1]

Then I came across a quote from St. Augustine in Book III of *Teaching Christianity*. He distinguishes between figurative (metaphorical) and literal interpretations of Christian teaching, and then says:

"Anything in the divine writings that cannot be referred either to good, honest morals or to the truth of the faith, you must know is said figuratively. *Good honest morals belong to loving God and one's neighbor, the truth of faith to knowing God and one's neighbor. As for hope, that lies in everybody's own conscience, to the extent that you perceive yourself to be making progress in the love of God and neighbor, and in the knowledge of them.*"

There is a certain simplicity -- I would venture to say a universal simplicity, calling the heart in every time and place -- in loving and knowing God and neighbor, and measuring the progress of one's own conscience in corresponding terms.

"Progress" is a journey term. The journey includes not only prodigal detours and returns but steps -- sometimes clear, sometimes wrenching -- toward love of God and neighbor. Having a clear conscience means appreciating that the journey is not over, that it continues in search of what makes the heart burn.

The idea of a continuing journey has some implications. It's not just that there are a variety of journeys, or that communities provide a context for a variety of individual journeys, or that communities are on their own journeys. The journey is an admission of the limitations of human consciousness (indeed, of the limitations of sentience wherever present in the cosmos). It is an admission that when I step forward on this journey, with some idea of where I am going, with as clear a conscience as I can muster, I know that I may happen upon new things that make me reassess where I am and where I am going.

Do such changes mean that I didn't know where I was going? Well, loving God and neighbor -- as Augustine understood -- is a reliable direction, rather like a north star. But a journey will have more particularity -- detail to provide color and context to love of God and neighbor. And these particulars may be more problematic, or not. I may come to a different view, even if I always measure my choice

by whether it *resonates more* with what "burns in my heart" than the journey place from which I came.

This model is supported by a dynamic that helps explain the innumerable examples in history of experiences of individuals and communities, journey experiences that reflect the prodigal consequences of human weakness. Yet the dynamic is more fundamentally about the burning heart rather than about human weakness. God's presence is a constant source, even if the heart does not always kindle to its light.

The model requires a sense of joy in the living of this journey. God loves me. The living God comes to welcome me upon return from a prodigal detour. I love this God; I would go to the ends of the earth for this God. That is the joy of it. When I am in darkness I know the sun will rise. Or, at least, I hope it will rise. There is a certain playful uncertainty that reminds me that the journey is to be lived.

The journey model can be summarized by two principles. The first principle is the progression from that which is discerned as *less resonant* to that which is discerned as *more resonant*. At each step in the progression our *resonant imagination* discerns that which *resonates more* from among other alternatives which *resonate less*.

The second principle is recognition of the integrity of the journey of the *resonant imagination*. For each individual, for each community, and for the people of God, there is an identity comprised of a collection of *resonant discernments* that struggle for coherence. The struggle for coherence is the journey of life, and the integrity of this journey is to be respected in the relationships among and between individuals and communities at all levels, and within the people of God.

It is not just individuals who are on journey, the integrity of which is to be respected. Our institutional realities are themselves on journey, seeking to maintain coherence among their collection of *resonant discernments* and, thus, an identity, among those who consider themselves a part of this or that institutional reality.

This journey may have a rich history of good events and bad events (to borrow from Joan Chittister's talk at the American Catholic Council meeting on June 12, 2011 [which many NOVA members watched at Barcroft Community Center on October 2, 2011]). The journey is a struggle we all know well.

These journey principles have a certain resilience to them that provides a way of understanding the journeys of others, of our communities, and the communities of others, in a way that is loving and respectful. It is a framework for seeing this Church of ours in a different light.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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[1] Richard Rohr, "It will be hard to go backward after Francis' papacy," *National Catholic Reporter*, 9/24/2013.

Theology for a Small Planet

A collection of essays by Clyde Christofferson © 2009-2013

The New Evangelization: Reflections on *Evangelii Gaudium*

When I began this essay I had intended to say something about St. Augustine's "book of nature," which has a dynamism and a coherence that makes it better suited to the challenges of our day than a scripture based doctrinal program. But when I finished I could not get out of my mind the thrust of *Evangelii Gaudium,* the recent Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis. There is, indeed, joy in the existence that a loving God is sharing with sentient beings able to love one another. I think Pope Francis is serving the Church well by emphasizing joy.

And -- remarkably enough -- it also appears that God is sharing existence in such a fashion that these sentient beings, as limited as they are, can comprehend this existence that is being shared. Thus the relevance of the "book of nature". As Einstein once remarked, the most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible.

Sentient beings do not spring full blown from the head of Zeus. They evolve, over time, as individuals, as communities, and in the institutional realities of society. These changes -- which are given the name "evolution" -- are part of journeys, and these journeys have a direction that is manifest in the Incarnation. The recognition of that direction, in any sentient being, is -- in Christian terminology -- a baptism of desire in Christ Jesus. This recognition -- regardless of the terminology -- marks the evangelical stage on the journey, the conscious appropriation of our union with a loving God, an inexpressible joy to be shared.

The coherent dynamism of this evolutionary unfolding of reality was implied by St. Augustine when he described the interaction between God's "book of scripture" and God's "book of nature". At that time, the content of God's word was concentrated in the book of scripture. The book of nature was understood as speaking about reality, but its contents were little known. Augustine appreciated that if reality is one -- subject to the same God -- then interpretations of the book of scripture cannot contradict the book of nature.

God's book of scripture has its own dynamism, reflected in tradition. It is not clear whether Augustine fully appreciated the dynamic aspects of both the book of scripture and the book of nature. It is possible to conceive of both books as complete in their own spheres, needing only their pages to be opened and read, the book of scripture through interpretation and the book of nature through the progress of science. This reductionist dualism persists to this day. But Augustine's insight connects the two books as expressions of the same ultimate reality.

Religion focuses on the book of scripture. Religious tradition opens its pages through interpretation. Religious institutions maintain a sense of ownership -- a proprietary interest -- over what they regard as their sphere or turf in what remains a dualistic view of reality. It is not entirely clear, even if Augustine's advice is followed, how religion is to avoid the embarrassment of conflicts between tradition and science.

The classic example of such a conflict is the Galileo affair. Aristotle's view of the book of nature had been taken as given, and Western society had come to rely upon Aristotle's conclusion that the Earth was the center of the cosmos. This seemed an appropriate implication of God's love for humanity and the special place of God's chosen people in the cosmic scheme of things. The Copernican notion that the motion of heavenly bodies was more easily comprehended if the Earth revolved around the Sun was unwelcome. Galileo compounded this difficulty by satirizing the conventional viewpoint in the mouth of a character called *Simplicio*[1]. Galileo's erstwhile good friend, who happened to be the Pope, had made known to Galileo his preference for the conventional viewpoint and was duly offended by the association of his view with the derided character *Simplicio*. Galileo was nothing if not indiscreet.

Galileo's rehabilitation -- that is, the rehabilitation within the Church of his support of Copernican theory, not his arrogant indiscretions -- has a long history, nearly 400 years. That history culminated in a review commissioned by John Paul II in 1979 and completed in 1992, capped by a papal speech[2] before the Pontifical Academy of Sciences on October 31, 1992. This speech established a methodology for theological reflection to maintain religious attention to further disclosures from God's book of nature. Whether that will be adequate remains to be seen, although the journey metaphor that Pope Francis has used so frequently should be

sufficient to accommodate needed adjustments in what remains a dualistic demarcation between religious and scientific spheres of influence. As the Galileo affair suggests, religious tradition can come to rely upon assumptions that are not only in the "sphere" of science but that turn out to be incorrect upon further turning of the pages of God's book of nature.

A further example of the conflict between religious tradition and science is currently in the making. As with the Galileo affair, a religious tradition is being blindsided by a better understanding of God's book of nature. And, as with the Galileo affair, it will take some time for those on their own journeys of faith on either side of this issue to adjust. In the Galileo affair, it turned out that God's love for humanity did not depend upon the Earth being the center of the universe. Indeed, the remarkable reality is that the universe has no center, and no edges either. We live within an ongoing Big Bang.

The institutional Church is currently opposed to civil statutes authorizing gay marriage, arguing that marriage is between a man and a woman for the procreation of children. Until recent times, non-traditional sexual attractions were closeted and regarded as aberrations. As civil society has more openly experienced, in their families and among their friends, the humanity of no longer closeted members of the LGBTQ community, the implicit discriminations of gender based laws have come under scrutiny and are being reversed.

The common experience of relatives and friends should be a sign of a deeper reality, but religious tradition has focused instead on the book of scripture. And, as it turns out, this focus turns a blind eye to the book of nature. There is some irony in this because one of the arguments in support of current religious tradition is "natural law", which should not conflict with God's "book of nature."

Gender, in biological terms, is a genetic adaptation that appeared early in evolution because it dramatically enhanced the ability of living organisms to more quickly generate variety and thereby survive environmental change. The resulting genetic process dominates plant and animal life forms on Earth, although life forms with non-sexual reproduction are still plentiful. We experience them in the common cold.

However, the genetic process of gender-based reproduction is complicated and subject to natural selection. Consequently, the genetic underpinning of gender identity is rough around the edges. God's book of nature is providing support for an otherwise intuitive sense that gay relatives and friends are no less human and no less worthy of dignity and respect, and that their choices of life partners are no less moral for being unrecognized in the Church's current version of "objective moral norms which are valid for everyone."[3]

I am reminded of the story of the ugly duckling. Are we looking for a set of objective moral norms which apply to ducks or which apply to a community of ducks and swans? How much different is this question from the question of finding relational rules for a community comprised of Christians, as opposed to a community comprised of Christians and Muslims and Jews? Would not Christ transcend these differences and find unity? Is that not what the Good Samaritan Story was about?

Francis is not initiating a reassessment of the current "objective moral norms". Indeed, he is deferential to the work of the U.S. Bishops Conference in this area. He takes note that "the periods of adolescence and young adulthood" are times of particular disorientation and vulnerability. Parents understand this all too well. Even Augustine advised that a yoke during that period enables true freedom of conscience later. Francis cites with approval a defensive statement by the U.S. bishops suggesting that claims of Church injustice against gays often come from "a form of moral relativism" coupled with "a belief in the absolute rights of individuals."

It is clear that this issue remains a difficult one for the Church, certainly as "objective moral norms" are currently framed. But that's the question. How can the community helpfully address this issue, taking due account of the teachings of God's book of nature? Now that civil society has taken the lead, the credibility of the institutional Church is at risk. This is a time for dialogue and reflection, so that the People of God can absorb their human experience with relatives and friends who are in pain over this issue, and take account of what God's book of nature is contributing to the discussion. It is not time for the institutional Church to circle the wagons around what

may well turn out to be ancient prejudices uninformed by the continuing revelations of God's coherent and dynamic book of nature.

Francis concludes that "we need to provide an education which teaches critical thinking and encourages the development of mature moral values."[4] Self reflection and humility suggest that this is good advice for all who are on journey, including the institutional Church.

As Augustine appreciated (and as John Paul II confirmed in his 1992 speech), God's book of nature will ultimately prevail. Religious tradition to the contrary will ultimately prove to have been an embarrassment, as with Galileo.

On the other hand -- taking a philosophical view -- even the institutional Church is on journey, a fact that each of us should appreciate because we are also on journey. The institutional Church is worthy of respect as it proceeds on this journey. As Pope Francis has emphasized, mercy rather than judgment is the appropriate watchword as the People of God, in all their diversity, walk with one another and with their very human institutional realities, all on journeys whose integrity is to be respected. Ultimately, all are on the same journey, toward union with a loving God.

If we can make this accommodation within the human family here on this small planet Earth we will be one step further toward being able to appreciate and take joy in the diversity of sentient beings throughout the cosmos, a diversity that is destined for unity. This is truly the work of an awesome God. How can our hearts not burn within us to share that news? Unity comes in small steps, each step more diverse than the previous. The joy of evangelization is a challenge to us all.

Kudos to Pope Francis on publication of *Evangelii Gaudium*!

HAPPY THANKSGIVING.

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[1] A character in Galileo's *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*.

[2] "Faith can never conflict with reason," address by Pope John Paul II on October 31, 1992 before the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. The remarks were given in French; an English translation appeared in *L'Osservatore Romano N. 44 (1264)* on November 4, 1992.

[3] See paragraph 64 of *Evangelii Gaudium*, an Apostolic Exhortation issued on November 26, 2013, by Pope Francis.

[4] *Op. cit.*

Theology for a Small Planet

A collection of essays by Clyde Christofferson © 2009-2014

The New Evangelization: An Easter People Come of Age

A good man has died. A card distributed at the memorial service for long time NOVA musician and community member Tom Hayes quoted Micah's simple request: "This is what God asks of you, only this ... To act justly, To love tenderly, and to walk humbly with your God." These are good words to remember Tom by.

In recent years I remember Tom and Margaret returning to NOVA after some time away. On each return he was obviously joyful to be back. He so enjoyed being with the community. When you engaged him in conversation he listened with a twinkle in his eyes.

Tom is blessed. His eyes are still twinkling. I dedicate this essay to him.

Background and Setup

Things come together in unexpected ways. Several months ago I was reading an article in the *National Catholic Reporter* about a priest (John Shea) who has been writing letters to bishops. The letters did not formally advocate for women's ordination. Instead, they simply sought a theological argument why women should not be ordained to the priesthood.

The article said that one bishop responded by citing a 1996 article by Avery Dulles on "Priesthood and Gender". This article is one of Dulles' McGinley lectures[1]. If any theologian could give a masterful recitation of the Church's arguments on this point it would be Dulles.

Dulles' article supports the Church's position from four convergent arguments that all seem to run together: Jesus did not appoint any women as apostles, nor did the apostles appoint women as priests, nor did subsequent bishops. The teaching of the Church has always followed this tradition, and contrary examples have been denounced as heretical. Furthermore -- and this is the only mention Dulles makes of "theological reasoning" -- Christ as the Bridegroom of the Church is of the male sex and therefore a ministerial priest sharing in this role of Bridegroom must also be a male.

This is it? I reread the article to be sure I had not missed something. I had missed nothing. This was very thin gruel. But coming from Dulles this is probably the best that can be done to support a continuation of gender discrimination in the central ministries and power structures of the Church. It doesn't get any better than Avery Dulles on a point like this. How did the institutional Church get itself into this box?

Dulles was prudent enough at the end of his article to counsel pastors to "be patient with Catholics who feel unable to accept the approved position." Dulles said that patience is needed because the theology is complex. This is like saying the Gordian Knot is complex.

We don't need patience. We need to figure out how to get out of this box. Necessity, they say, is the mother of invention. I found Dulles' article because it was referred to in another article. Follow the thread. Dulles refers to a 1975 exchange of letters initiated by the Archbishop of Canterbury with Pope Paul VI. The letters are available in *Origins*[2]. The Anglican primate wrote to the Pope with considerable grace, not simply alerting him to current proposals to ordain women in the Anglican church but suggesting that in the "signs of the times" it might be opportune for the two churches to dialogue together about this question.

Paul VI responded with great courtesy but did not engage the suggestion for dialogue. Alas, an opportunity missed. As the current essay argues, there is a path out of this Catholic box. A path forward might have been uncovered earlier had the 1975 opportunity for dialogue been pursued, but that is a road not taken. Journeys are full of roads not taken, and there are many paths. The path argued by this essay is not an obvious path, because it has very little to do with women's ordination. But it is a path nonetheless.

Out of the Box

Alas, the people of God -- led by their institutional Church -- are in a state of sin. The faithful have been playing the role of children when it is long past time to act like adults. The issue of women's ordination is a useful example of the persistence of this sin, but the problem is much broader and deeper.

Yet there is joy in this recognition! Why joy? Because the kind of sin I am talking about is universal, coming out of what Augustine would call "God's book of nature", and opens a gateway to a truly catholic church.

We have been relying altogether too much on Augustine's other book, "God's book of scripture", and have thereby become parochial and lost sight of the kingdom of God. Ironic, isn't it! Christ is present, as we celebrate each Eucharist, and yet the institution we

look to not only for guidance but as a manifestation of the kingdom on Earth is instead burying the talents of the people of God.

Would we not do better to preach what Jesus preached -- the presence of the kingdom of God -- rather than preaching Jesus?

Enough, already! Get back to this business about "sin" -- sin that becomes visible from God's book of nature. Didn't sin come into the world because of Adam's fall, and didn't Christ come into the world, to suffer and die, to redeem us from Adam's sin?

Well, Adam's fall is wishful thinking. We never rose to a point of such grace that a "fall" would be the appropriate metaphor. We are still struggling to rise up from the mud. And that's the joyful reality! We are still rising up, and women's ordination (among other injustices tied to this phony "fall") is as good a banner as any behind which to continue this long climb.

The long climb began with the Big Bang. Augustine had no idea how nature worked, but he knew that it was God's doing. Human beings have come to talk of God's perfection, but that's our idea, not God's. God is love. Perfection has nothing to do with it. We face incompleteness and raw injustice at every turn. And yet there is boundless joy in the struggle to make this world a better place.

"Sin" is the wrong word. It has too close a connection to Adam's fall, which is part of our literary history as one community within the people of God. If our institutional Church is to break out of its box we need a more universal conception of "sin".

The necessary universality is provided by God's book of nature. Look how it unfolds! What appeared in the beginning to be the physics of heat and light begat the chemistry of star formation, which in turn begat biology on rocky outposts -- at least one that we know of. And life on at least this rocky outpost adapted toward organisms that moved, and required brains in order to control their movements. Consciousness emerged, all the while struggling to overcome the baggage of its evolutionary past.

That's who we are -- a struggle to come up from the mud. Struggles are not always successful, and you can call that "sin" if you like, but that misses the point. It's all part of the same cosmic unfolding toward union with a loving God.

Look at what God is doing! Sharing existence with independent beings able -- when our struggles are successful -- to love one another and thereby image God. And, remarkably, we are also graced with the ability -- also after successful struggle -- to comprehend God's sharing.

We are not prisoners of our evolutionary history, but the baggage -- if viewed from one perspective -- is a definite inconvenience. From another perspective, however, our struggles appear to be an integral part of a much larger unfolding. Early on, our ancestors constructed Adam, the fall, sin and forgiveness. That story is part of the pageant of a beautiful cosmic unfolding. Keep on trucking! If mercy and forgiveness gets us up off our knees and back on the road -- to keep struggling toward union with a loving God -- then, by all means, lets have mercy and forgiveness.

But the point is to continue the struggle. What God's book of nature teaches us is this: it is in and through the struggle that we are part of creation.

And our institutional Church needs to get out of the current box to continue the struggle.

Our own experience provides a metaphor for this struggle. We don't usually think of it in these terms, but a child becoming potty trained is part of this struggle. Science -- like a pair of glasses to read God's book of nature -- tells us that this simple learning experience of a child is just an early example of the frontal cortex at work, sending out neurons to gain connection and control over more primitive functions of the nervous system. We might consider our conscience as a sort of "spiritual cortex" that extends the role of the frontal cortex.

So, where is our institutional Church? Stuck. Beholden to a conceptual structure which made sense at some time in the past. It's not that we need to dump that structure. The unfolding cosmos provides a more elegant path. The journey that embodies all our struggles is itself a continuity, step by step.

Stuck at two levels. There is a level of the particular. Women's ordination is at that level. The second level is the more important one for our purposes. Our institutional Church needs a sensible theology of the journey. Struggle after struggle, including blind alleys and wrong turns, our larger community of faith is on a journey together.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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[1] These lectures are collected in A. Dulles, *Church and Society* (Fordham University Press: New York, 2008).

[2] "The Ordination of Women: An Exchange of Letters Between Pope Paul VI and Archbishop Donald Coggan of Canterbury" *Origins*, vol. 6, issue 9, August 12, 1976.

Theology for a Small Planet

A collection of essays by Clyde Christofferson © 2009-2014

The New Evangelization: An Easter People Come of Age -- Part 2

In Part 1 of this essay I used two metaphors, one to describe the role of conscience and the other to provide an image for growth. The first metaphor is the development of the frontal cortex as a model for the development of conscience. Science tells us that as we grow up our frontal cortex slowly gains control over more primitive functions of the nervous system. One way to view conscience is that it develops in a similar manner, almost as an extension of the role of the frontal cortex, a sort of "spiritual cortex" slowly gaining control over our more primitive inclinations.

The second metaphor is the journey. Our own growing up can be understood as a journey. When I was a child I suppose I thought of being an adult as an end point. I don't remember thinking of my parents as growing because they were already grown up. When we become parents we know that being grown up is not quite what our children think. The journey continues, mere mortals that we are.

In this essay I am going to elaborate on the journey metaphor. Is the Church on a journey? Or perhaps – in our role as "children of God" – we think of the Church as children think of their parents: as being "already grown up." As parents we know that adults are mere mortals. A fair reading of history suggests that Church leadership is indeed populated by mere mortals, but the accepted wisdom is that the guidance of the Holy Spirit is sufficient to preserve the Church from serious error. Is this wishful thinking?

There is a conflict between the journey metaphor and the image of the Church as our Holy Mother, the bride of Christ. The journey metaphor is more helpful and also more constructive in describing continuing struggles to improve the institutional Church. The Holy Mother image slips too easily into wishful thinking that conflates "the Church" with the institutional Church. This conflation sidesteps accountability, most recently regarding the sexual abuse of children by priests. It is good to see that Pope Francis is fond of the journey metaphor.

And in the last hundred years or so it appears that Mother Nature -- what Augustine calls "God's book of nature" -- is weighing in on behalf of the journey metaphor. The cosmos itself is a story that is unfolding before our eyes: the Big Bang is the beginning of a remarkable blossoming from physics and chemistry into biology and consciousness, and beyond. Creation cannot be reduced to physics, and is still emerging. We are privileged to be part of this ongoing and creative journey. Nonetheless it must be acknowledged that many faithful Catholics are uncomfortable with the idea that the Church can change, which is what a journey implies.

Without change, however, there is no way for the Church to get out of the box it is in. There is injustice in the institutional Church, and it is not simply the product of a sinner here or a sinner there. There are injustices traceable to Church policy that purports to be "unchangeable." The beauty of the journey metaphor is that it provides a way to look at the past without disowning it. Our past is part of who we are, even though we have moved on (or are in the midst of moving on). This approach to change is preferable to denying love and justice in order to save face for tradition.

There are several aspects to our very human situation that provide insights that may help the Church get out of this box. Interestingly, one such aspect comes from puzzling over the apparent conflict between science and religion. The seeds of this conflict go back to the Ptolemaic picture of an Earth centered cosmos, which seemed an appropriate indication of how central we were in God's plan for the universe. These seeds took root and germinated more fully as Copernicus and Galileo found that observations of heavenly bodies were more simply explained by supposing the Sun rather than the Earth was at the center, a conclusion that the Church condemned.

A currently popular response to this conflicted history is to separate science and religion into their own spheres. Biologist Stephen Jay Gould coined an acronym for this separation: NOMA, or Non Overlapping Magisterial Areas. But suppose there is no separation, and that reality is of a piece. That path of inquiry leads to a different explanation for the Church's flirtation with Ptolemy and slowness to accommodate the findings of Copernicus and Galileo.

This explanation I will call "journey theology", which has a parallel in "journey science". It's a very simple idea: we seek understanding as best we can from where we are. This is little more than common sense, but the idea some useful consequences. Religion is concerned with why we are here, where we are going and how to conduct ourselves on the way. In the Christian tradition we have "faith seeking understanding" and begin with God's love for us and our imaging God by loving one another.

At the time of Aristotle (who fathered the scientific argument for an Earth centric universe) and Ptolemy (who lived in the century after Christ), it seemed quite natural to suppose that the children of God were at the center of God's creation. Human nature being what it is, this good idea took root and became traditional and, consequently, resistant to change.

But this resistance to change is about us and our limitations, not about God. Why should God intervene to correct us? If we are the adults of God and not simply the children of God, we should have the grace to take responsibility for our own mess. Catholic social teaching -- that unjust social structures and practices are our doing (not God's) and we can change them to make them more just -- is built on this sensible understanding.

In this light, we have a different way of looking at the Church's condemnation of the heliocentric vision of Copernicus and Galileo. Indeed, the condemnation was predictable, not because the Church was obtuse and had earthly power that it could abuse (also true) but because the people of God -- folks like you and me -- had become comfortable with the notion that an Earth centered creation was simply an indication of God's love for us.

We are limited human beings, and our institutions -- including our religious institutions -- partake of these limitations. "Journey theology" gives life to this premise. Concupiscence is real and we now and again succumb to the temptation to do what we know is not right, but the human journey is more than this. For the most part, the human inclination is to make the world a better place and to seek a better understanding of what faith we have. We should be encouraged: the Good Book tells us that God looked at creation and found that it was good.

The Galileo affair can be used as an example of how an analysis using journey theology works. It is not that religion got the science wrong, but that religion was seeking God as best it could. Religion and science look at reality through different lenses but the reality is the same. The religious lens is inevitably focused on what is beyond us, while the lens of science is focused on observations that can be repeated by different people at different times with the same results.

Consequently, the journeys of religion and science are different because their lenses are differently focused. In a sense, their respective lenses are focused at opposite ends of reality: religion is about a love that is beyond us, science is rooted in what we know. Yet these journeys are connected. Religion -- as the historical example of Galileo demonstrates -- seeks understanding by giving meaning to concrete images; over time, science catches up with the concreteness of these images. Augustine understood the problem, and recognized that religion would embarrass itself by finding meanings that in the end would conflict with "God's book of nature."[1]

What this suggests -- and which is captured by a "journey theology" -- is that "old time religion" needs to adapt at a more fundamental level than particular doctrines and teachings. This necessary adaptation, however, can be understood as being in continuity with the past: it is simply another step on the journey, where each step is taken in good faith, without denying the good faith of any previous step. Those who oppose change in the Church can be consoled with continuity. As the Galileo example suggests, continuity does not come from sticking woodenly to particular teachings but from a better understanding of who we are as human beings, limitations and all.

What is a next step at this more fundamental level? Journeys are not railroad tracks, already laid down. We are in the woods, and can take less traveled paths. But the journeys of science and religion are not simply different paths. They interact, and are ultimately about the same reality even if they are approaching this reality from different perspectives. Religion has a practical feel for the limitations of human consciousness, but the investigations of science have something to offer as well.

One road less traveled -- among many possibilities -- is a reflection upon truth. One would think that truth would be the dominant criterion in both scientific and religious discourse. Statements about reality should be “true” or “false”. But is that the best question to pose in a discussion among those with differing points of view? As it turns out, somewhat counter-intuitively, the experience of science is that truth or falsity of this or that proposition is often not the best question. A better question is “how useful is this proposition in understanding reality?”

Experimental evidence may be regarded as "true" because experiments can be repeated with the same results. But the conceptual explanations science gives for these results are theoretical constructs that can -- and do -- change. Science may be viewed as a quest for truth, and conceptual

explanations that serve to explain observational data have proven to be quite useful as aids to understanding.

It would be a road-less-traveled for religion to go down this path as well, but there is some sense in it. An argument framed as a question about truth often goes nowhere as the parties dig in their heels. But if the discourse is framed as an inquiry into how useful a proposition is on a continuing quest to understand reality, there is less need for the parties to dig in their heels. Perhaps not surprisingly, the groundwork for this approach has been within the Christian tradition for a long time. In the Gospel of John Christ says, "I am the way, the truth and the life." This is much broader than propositional truth.

The history of Christianity is not a pretty picture when truth was thought to be the right focus. East and West split in 1054 over whether *filioque* -- "an iota's worth of difference" -- was a truth that should be added to the Nicene Creed. The religious wars of the Reformation period were about the truths of "the one true religion" of Christ.

Suppose -- as a journey theology supposes -- that it is more important to ask not what is true but what is helpful on the journey, so that we move more closely toward union with a loving God. Our deepest humanity is about being on a quest. To borrow from Micah, what helps us to love more tenderly? What helps us to act more justly? What helps us to walk more humbly with our God?

It is important -- dare I say helpful -- to look again at what the Galileo affair is telling us about science and religion. It need not be viewed as a conflict between science and religion, because if reality is one -- as it surely must be -- we get a fuller picture with both lenses than with one. The separation between science and religion is not a conflict over what is true, but rather a tension between theories looking through different lenses at the same reality. This tension and these theories have a certain usefulness as we struggle toward union with a loving God. Ultimately this tension confirms the oneness of reality.

When I use my religious lens I look for what *resonates* in my heart. I see others doing good things, and that *resonates*. I see myself failing to do a good thing that I might have done, and I know the good that I might have done would have *resonated more* than what I in fact did. I resolve to do better.

It is the same with concepts. From the point of view of someone living in the Middle Ages, the idea that the Earth was the center of the universe *resonated* because it called to mind God's love for us. For a Medieval peasant, the idea that the Earth revolves around the Sun would have seemed a bad idea for a couple of reasons. An

DIALOGUE AT THE PEARLY GATES

A bishop of the Roman Catholic Church died and went to heaven. At the Pearly Gates he was greeted by the Lord for a final examination of conscience.

Jesus (J): "I see that you supported the practice of limiting ordination to men."

Bishop (B): "We followed your example in selection of the twelve."

J: "Is it loving to practice this discrimination? Where is the justice in it?"

B: "You would not have set this example if it were not loving and just."

J: "Did you not know that I am Love, and ask for justice?"

B: "Of course."

J: "So why would you interpret my example so that it supports a practice that is neither loving nor just?"

B: "All the Church fathers did so."

J: "They were excused in their time because of hardness of heart. Was your heart hardened in your time as well?

B: "I followed the teaching of the Church."

J: "Who do you say I am?"

B: "You are Love, and ask for justice."

J: "Then why were you not my hands and feet in this matter?"

B: "I followed the teaching of the Church."

J: "Were you loving in this matter?"

B: "I followed the teaching of the Church."

J: "Did you do justice in this matter?"

B: "I followed the teaching of the Church."

J: "I asked that you love tenderly and act justly, and walk humbly with your God. Did you bury your talent for doing what I asked?"

B: "I followed the teaching of the Church."

J: "Is not the Church my body?"

B: "Yes, of course."

J: "Does not the Church live through me?"

B: "Yes, of course."

J: "Is it not a living Church?"

B: "Yes, of course."

J: "Then should it not act with love and justice in this matter?"

B: "Yes, it should."

J: "Did you act with love and justice in this matter, or did you follow the teaching of the Church?"

B: "I followed the teaching of the Church."

J: "If given another opportunity, what would you do?"

B: "Act with love and justice in this matter."

Earth centered view of reality was obviously consistent with the path of the Sun across the sky every day. What would be the point of a Sun centered cosmos? Worse, if the Earth were not at the center there is a certain emptiness in the religious heart. Where is God? Never mind that a cosmos without a center, unfolding from a Big Bang toward life and consciousness, testifies to a far more awesome God, a God sharing existence with beings like us, beings able to comprehend this existence and this sharing. This idea is a worthy replacement for an Earth centered cosmos, but it would not become possible until hundreds of years after Galileo.

Stick with the viewpoint of someone living in the Middle Ages. What does that someone do with the hole in his heart, a hole that appears if this arrogant professor named Galileo is taken seriously? From the perspective of the typical Medieval Catholic, it is a relief to see the Church step in to get this Galileo character to recant. The Earth as center of the universe can still *resonate* for another day. God is still in his heaven, caring deeply about humanity at the center of creation.

The respite was short lived. Within a hundred years of Galileo's recantation Isaac Newton removed whatever doubt there had been: the Earth was indeed revolving around the Sun.

There is a more subtle point in these events. It is not that religious excursions into the domain of science are unwise. Indeed, they are perhaps inevitable because the religious lens on reality cannot avoid the stuff of everyday experience, and science will eventually catch up with that experience. The point is, nonetheless, fairly radical: religion is not about truth, but about love; and a focus on doctrine -- on the teachings of the Church -- is no longer adequate to the priority that is due to love, and to justice which is love's handmaiden. (See the insert "Dialogue at the Pearly Gates" on the previous page.[2])

This is not to say that the current emphasis on doctrinal truth is altogether misguided. The doctrinal emphasis has had its days of *resonance*, which are part of the history of this community within the people of God and that history should be cherished rather than disowned.

That's the point. The journey toward union with a loving God continues. It is a continuation that promises surprise rather than fulfillment of preconceptions. There is a certain parallel between the Medieval love affair with an Earth centered cosmos and the Church's more recent preoccupation with a doctrine centered unity. It seemed important in Galileo's time for the cosmos to have a center, and for the Earth to be at that center as testimony to God's love for us. The corpus of Church teachings -- doctrine -- is concerned with the unity of the people of God. If our deepest longings are to be connected in union with God, how can that come about? A single Church -- the "one true Church" -- with common teachings would seem to be a logical answer.

But history makes clear that striving for common teachings has divided the people of God, sometimes violently. "God's truth" appears to be the enemy of unity. However, examples from the history of science suggest that if people of good will differ, it may be that the differences are less about what is true – in contrast to what is false – and more about what is useful – more or less – in understanding reality. If it helps someone to love others and to act justly, who are we to judge that some additional criterion of "truth" must be applied?

Yet such judgments are plentiful in human history. This need not be an embarrassment if we adopt a theology that takes a compassionate view of the history of people who, by and large, desire to do love more tenderly, act more justly, and walk more humbly with their God. If the Garden of Eden was a story designed to teach obedience, it is better regarded as helpful for that purpose rather than either true or false.

In the same way, the idea of building unity around common teachings – a common body of doctrines to be accepted and believed – may be regarded as more or less helpful for the purpose of achieving unity. In an earlier stage of the journey the truth of these common teachings may have been the focus, but now many of these common teachings – certainly those not grounded in love and justice -- may best be understood not in terms of truth but in terms of how useful they are. A journey theology takes this transition in stride.

The institutional Church needn't draw lines in the sand and refuse to continue the journey.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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[1] For the concept see St. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Book I (19; 39-40).

[2] Although this "dialogue" is directed to the teaching that the Church has no authority to ordain women, the dialogue could be adapted to address any Church teaching which in practice results in an injustice.

Theology for a Small Planet

A collection of essays by Clyde Christofferson © 2009-2014

The New Evangelization: An Easter People Come of Age -- Part 3

Francis: A Path that Returns us to Christ's Vision

I was in Rome the first few days of October, just ahead of the Extraordinary Synod on the Family which has now ended. There will be another Synod, a Regular Synod, next October to make recommendations based on the *Relatio Synodi* that came out of the Extraordinary Synod. The real work on what Pope Francis hopes the bishops will accomplish will be done over the next twelve months between Synods.

It is a good time – a half way point in the process – to make an assessment. As it turns out, the challenges facing the Church in the next year are related to the same concerns being addressed by this series of essays. I began the series by asking how the Church got itself into its current box; now is time to suggest a way out.

As luck would have it, Francis has found a path that can lead us out.

The time I spent in Rome was part of a Catholic Church Reform effort to have the lived experience of families heard at the Synod, part of a broader project to expand participation in the decision making processes of the Church. On Thursday, October 2nd, those assembled at a *Forum on the Family* at the Caravita in central Rome heard five presentations, each followed by a question and answer session. I recorded the presentations like I record NOVA homilies, and links to the audio files are now available (thanks to Ken Chaison) on YouTube [1]. On Friday I served on a panel of a dozen or so reform organizations worldwide who commented on what should be done this next year and beyond.

My comments picked up on the point emphasized by one of the five presenters – long time Vatican correspondent Robert Mickens – that it was important to learn the language and protocols of this ancient bureaucracy. We should take the time to learn their language and respect their protocols. We need to develop a "phrase book" so that reform efforts to dialogue about justice within the Church are more effective. I expressed the hope that NOVA, for its part, would take this opportunity to contact our own local bishop in furtherance of what Pope Francis is seeking from this synodal process.

The Doctrinal Conundrum

From the viewpoint of the reform community the point is twofold: to have a Church that is more participatory and whose policies are more just. The Synod on the Family is charged with addressing a number of Church policies that are controversial not only because they are not followed by many Catholics but also because they don't do justice to faithful lives as these lives are being lived.

The irony of the Church's current state is stunning: Jesus preached a reign of God distinct from the law and beyond the law, a fulfillment of the law's promise. The Church that we love has lost the distinction, and lost it from the beginning, by turning Christ's vision into law.

But Francis is finding what we have lost. Amazing. I didn't see it. I have practiced law for over forty years, and so I see how the Church has used the law – the same primacy of law that Christ was trying to reform – to impose the vision. And I see how that attempt at imposition has lost the vision, by conflating it with the law. But I didn't see how the vision could be restored without changing the law and restoring the distinction.

Francis has a better idea: do pastoral justice, and leave doctrine aside. I now see how that is a path back to Christ's vision. By focusing on the wounds inflicted on the lives of real families, and by attending to those wounds – as you would do in a field hospital – the Church can do justice at a practical level without confronting the law. This is what lawyers sometimes call "country justice," where you get to the right result even though the reasons are not quite according to Hoyle.

What Francis is doing is a first step along a path back to Christ's vision. The vision of Christ is in chapter 5 of Matthew, which begins with the Sermon on the Mount. Before I saw how this path could restore the vision I was bothered by the language in Matt. 5: 17-20. This is the passage where Jesus tells his followers to keep the law, every last jot and tittle. How could he say this and still reform the law?

Now that I look at it again, the answer is simple. Jesus was calling us – and is still calling us – to a vision *distinct from* the law. The law sets a baseline of behavior to keep good order and discipline within society, but the kingdom of God is not only at hand (Mark 1:15) but is something *different*. In the reign of God the law is fulfilled, not overturned (Matt. 5:17).

Which could be done *right then* – thus Mark 1:15. And it can be done *right now!* This is the beauty of what Francis is urging the bishops to do.

To see how this works, take the very issue that has been the lead story in press accounts about the Synod on the Family. What should the Church do about communion for divorced and remarried Catholics?

When Jesus walked among the Jews the law of divorce was set forth in Deuteronomy: in order to divorce his wife "who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her" a husband "writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house" (Deut. 24:1). This is still the law in Judaism. In practice, divorce was frowned upon unless the predicate ("something indecent") was adultery or other sexual immorality. There are no examples in the Bible of divorce being taken lightly. Indeed, the "altar sheds tears" over a divorce (Malachi 2:13-16).

The Vision of Jesus

So what does Jesus say? As for adultery, just "looking at another woman lustfully" is to commit "adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:28). Surely those who listened to Jesus knew that this was an impossibly strict standard. As for divorce, "anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery" (Matt. 5:32). Was Jesus mocking the meaning of adultery?

What are his hearers to make of this? Jesus is not changing the law, which is to be preserved (Matt. 5:18-19). He is doing something *different*, something glorious that is beyond the law yet not in contradiction with the law. St. Thomas Aquinas argues, in a similar fashion, that God's mercy is beyond God's justice (Book I, Question 21, Article 3). If we need the law because we are hard of heart, Jesus is calling us to a vision of the kingdom that fulfills the promise of the law by being something more. Until we reach this city on a hill the law remains a bulwark of the community (Matt. 5:18).

This vision of Christ is a call to the best that is within us, but it is not law. Indeed, it is *distinct* from the law and – importantly – it is *distinct* from the community disciplines that attend to the law. A love that does more than the law requires is to be encouraged, but not by using the tools of community discipline. Should a parent discipline the best efforts of a child because these efforts fell short? If the law requires the first mile, and the effort to go the second mile falls short[2], should that not be an occasion for encouragement?

So what did the early Church fathers do with regard to marriage? They turned Christ's vision of eternal union into law, a legal proscription. It is a base translation that – as far as I can tell – misses Christ's point. The second mile – beyond the law – was now a matter of community discipline instead of a goal worthy of praise and encouragement. The early Church fathers were familiar with the law, perhaps too familiar. Their Jewish heritage was beholden to the law. To give them credit, they believed they were making the law better by making it more stringent. Christ had admonished them to be more righteous than the Pharisees (Matt. 5:20) if they wished to enter the kingdom of heaven. But instead they bastardized Christ's vision by conflating it with a stricter law.

Jesus had something else in mind. He was a Trinitarian before his Church developed the concept. He was intimate with the Spirit which lies within every heart. Yet his listeners were habituated to practice under the existing tradition, a tradition steeped in the ways of Mosaic law. Jesus used a style of communication designed so that those who heard him might challenge their own habituated way of thinking, and come upon this *different* vision – this reign of God in their hearts – of their own accord. This would implant the vision on firmer ground than if taken as a formulation from one who has authority. Accepting a rule because it comes from an authority fits the Jewish pattern of thinking about God as lawgiver.

Christ came to reform that pattern of thinking. The law would still serve to preserve the good order and discipline of the community. Those who remained hard of heart could still remain in the community by complying with the law. But Christ's vision was not the discipline of the law but a larger vision, one that could coexist with the law but was greater than the law. This vision is a relationship of love, a bond not unlike the bond that the Spirit provides between the Father and the Son. If that vision is kept in mind, notwithstanding the challenges and failures of any human relationship, the bond can strengthen with each new challenge.

Unfortunately, the early Church fathers took what Jesus said about marriage and turned that kingdom vision into law that was simply more strict than the existing law. We are left with a bastard in accordance with the law instead of a joyful vision in accordance with Christ. Law and vision with respect to marriage have been conflated, to the detriment of both the law and the reign of God.

Irony abounds. The same criticism that Jesus leveled against the Scribes and Pharisees about burdening the people (Matt. 23:4; Luke 11:46)

applies to the marriage rules of the Church formed in Christ's name. It is a tragedy, all the more so because it is of such long standing.

Equally ironic, western society has now reached the point where divorce procedures are scarcely more difficult than the minimal procedures – "write her a certificate of divorce, give it to her and send her from his house" – of the Mosaic law. It is a sad commentary on the good intentions of the early Church fathers that the law has not proved to be a stable pedestal for Christ's vision of marriage. Like water flowing downhill, the force of human nature operating upon mere law has reduced the civil law of divorce to more or less the same minimal procedural hurdle it was at the time of Christ.

Perhaps now it makes sense for the Church – much older and wiser after two thousand years – to restore the distinction which Christ made between the law and the reign of God. The vision of marriage deserves better stewardship than can be provided by law. Two thousand years seems a long time to learn this lesson, but better late than never.

Theological Transition

The question then becomes how to understand the Church's poor stewardship of marriage. Why didn't the Holy Spirit come down out of the sky and make clear to those benighted fathers of the early Church that making a law out of Christ's vision for marriage was going to turn out badly?

Apparently, that's not the way God works. The Church's journey continues. Theology will come around, perhaps by becoming articulate about the journey. If the Jews at the time of Christ were not articulate about the reign of God, their conceptual language about the law was equally inarticulate about how to help us on the journey from the law of Moses to the reign of God. God's law was God's law, unchangeable. Human beings were fallen creatures, guided to redemption by a lighthouse erected upon the rock of God's law.

There is a certain journey quality to the struggle of fallen creatures seeking to become obedient and thereby return to the Garden of Eden. But Christ's vision speaks to a journey of a different kind, one of conscience and commitment. The lighthouse of Christ's vision is not the law but the Spirit within. This lighthouse is a call to the self discipline of joyful pursuit, not a warning to stay within channel boundaries. There is a difference in kind; it is the difference love makes.

Popular theology, cultivated by the Magisterium and accepted by the faithful, has never quite shaken its dependence upon the rock of God's unchanging law. Yet the time is opportune to do so. If I were to surmise, this loving God of ours is patient. We are still the People of God. As if on cue, Augustine's advice has become prescient. Augustine understood that God had a Book of Nature as well as a Book of Scripture, and that it would be unwise to interpret the Book of Scripture in a manner contrary to the Book of Nature.

But Augustine had barely a clue about the power and subtlety of God's Book of Nature. Nor could he fully appreciate the extent to which this Book would unfold in history, page after page after page. If we thought the Garden of Eden was a fine story – and it is – it pales in comparison to the cosmic unfolding that has caught our attention and imagination in recent decades.

Remarkably, the truly awesome nature of this God requires the Trinity for its comprehension. This is not a distant God, yet God is beyond our grasp. But being beyond our grasp does not matter, because we are loved by God. We are graced by the continuing presence of the Incarnation. The unfolding cosmos flows from physics to chemistry to life and to consciousness, a consciousness in and of the Spirit. And this flow is ongoing. Reality is of a piece, and it is alive.

Christ's vision, in particular his vision for marriage, and the transition to that vision from the God of law, is sign and symbol of a living and loving Reality. Truly, our cup runneth over.

And a suitable theology for this epic journey follows in the same transition. The premises for such a journey theology fall into three groups. First, a metaphor for concupiscence that flows out of a biology of mind. Second, a dynamic model for the connection between consciousness and the Spirit. And third, a model for community that compensates for the limitations of individual consciousness.

An outline of this theology – together with a proposal for the Synod – will require another essay.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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[1] Click here for a document with brief descriptions of the speakers and embedded links to the October 2nd presentations.

[2] It is noted that this use of the "second mile" does not have the subtler implications of Matt. 5:41, where only the first mile was allowable and walking a second would bring shame – and, thereby, perhaps *metanoia* – upon the one who unjustly imposed the first mile.

Theology for a Small Planet

A collection of essays by Clyde Christofferson © 2009-2014

The New Evangelization: A Note to My Mother

Quite by accident, this morning I stumbled across something I had written for my mother in early July of 2013, a few weeks before she died at the ripe old age of 90. In the years before her death she provided a sounding board for what was on my mind. I don't know whether I actually sent this to her; she was not well in those last weeks. But I think she would have smiled and said something encouraging.

Is not faith seeking understanding?[1]

As Augustine understood, a loving God is in our face. Augustine expressed God's presence to us using a metaphor, the metaphor of the book. He spoke about the book of scripture, and the book of nature.

These books, of course, are there for us to read. They are not themselves the living God, who is directly present to us in the Spirit, in the Christ who was, is and will be, in the Eucharist, and in the love that we show to one another. But if we read these books, and reflect upon them, the presence of our living and loving God can become more manifest.

We are very limited creatures. Our consciousness can only wrap itself around a small fraction of what is available. Of necessity, each of us finds ways of choosing those sensory signals and conceptual structures which survive to occupy the mind at any given moment. And our limited memories provide some measure of continuity, from moment to moment, and from the time we go to sleep until the time we awake to a new day.

As limited as we are, we are nonetheless able to share -- however modestly -- in the existence that a loving God is sharing with us. We are alive. Or, as Paul might say, we are alive in Christ. That depends upon our choices, of course. There is so much to occupy our conscious minds, it is easy to find ourselves adrift in a wilderness rather than in the felt presence of God.

How is the book of nature contributing to the understanding that faith is seeking? Today we are in a graced position. Augustine had barely an inkling of the riches God is bestowing upon us through the book of nature. He understood the beauty of creation and the role of inquiry in uncovering this beauty. But he would be awestruck even more -- and we should be awestruck -- by what our conscious minds can now grasp about creation. Yet we needn't be deer in the headlights. We can put this knowledge to good use, for it tells us more than Augustine ever dreamed it would about our connection to the God that loves us.

Creation is alive. There is a dimension of nature that Augustine and his contemporaries could not see, although through his eyes of faith I do not think Augustine would be surprised, for what he could not see only enhances awe for this loving God of ours. It is a struggle to keep from being like deer in the headlights. We must act. It is through action that we love one another and image God.

But not only in action do we image God. Faith seeks understanding for a reason. It is through understanding that action acquires depth and vision. Without a deeper understanding we only see those opportunities for love that are in front of us, and we act upon those. But what don't we see that is in need of loving attention? Expanding our vision of such needs is the role of understanding. So, in an important sense, God's grace to us is not only love but understanding in the service of love.

We must still contend with the limitations of consciousness. There is much to understand, and even much more to understand in the service of love. Where should we look? One approach is simply to follow our hearts, and see where that leads. As individuals that is surely what we do. Let

a thousand flowers bloom. As Augustine said: love, and then do what you will.

But we act not only as individuals but in community, and more broadly as church. Even if we stay with the heart metaphor, what is the heart of the community, and of the larger Church? God's book of nature, as we are now coming to understand it, can inform the heart of the Church.

It is not necessary to look at the Church as perfect, as if reality were "already-out-there-now."[2] We have a living God and a living cosmos. The Church itself is on a journey, and can improve its approach. It is not as if the current approach the Church is taking is a mistake, although it is less than fully effective. Rather, the current approach is more helpfully viewed as a stage in the further development of what the People of God are becoming.

This development might be called "evolution" but there is an additional element that is not fully captured by the term "evolution." We now know more about the cosmos -- about God's "book of nature" -- than we did when the term "evolution" ripened into its current form during the neo-Darwinian synthesis of the early part of the 20th century. "Evolution" refers to the gene based biological adaptation to environmental change. As a metaphor, the term "evolution" has sometimes been applied to certain longer-term aspects of environmental change, such as the slow process of plate tectonics, but the focus of "evolution" is biological life and the adaptive character of random genetic mutation.

The cosmos is unfolding. It is not -- in the mechanistic parlance that captured public imagination after the discoveries of Isaac Newton – a mere unwinding of the physics clock. As Bernard Lonergan noted in his book "Insight", the logical error of reducing the cosmos to physics depends upon the assumption that what is real is a subset of "the already-out-there-now." While chemistry can be understood in terms of physics, chemistry cannot be predicted from physics. Nor can biology be derived from chemistry. Something different is going on with the cosmos. The cosmos is pregnant with that which our current understanding does not allow us to predict. The process of this developing understanding I will term "unfolding."

The unfolding cosmos is giving us a hint. God is making something new, not according to "plan" in the human sense but according to a more creative and life sustaining dynamic. The term "mystery" is commonly used; "now, but not yet" also captures some sense of this creative dynamic. The presence of a living and loving God is manifest in this unfolding. As a people with some sense of an abiding Spirit, our hope and joy in what is yet to come reflects our nascent ability to comprehend the fullness of this unfolding cosmos, God's creation.

At an earlier stage on this journey, the Church thought God was unchanging. This was not entirely consistent, because it was understood that this loving God of ours is a living God. There is some irony in it, but the focus on "unchanging" seemed of greater comfort to many than a focus on "living". And -- again, the logic is quite human -- if God is unchanging then knowing God is about knowing more fully what has always been "already-out-there-now." Nothing really new.

To take a brief excursion -- to provide some perspective on the cosmos -- that's what Einstein thought, too. In the 1930s he and Niels Bohr engaged in a famous argument about what kind of a universe we are in. Bohr (and the other members of the "Copenhagen school") believed the uncertainties of quantum theory were fundamental. Einstein disagreed, believing that upon further inquiry we would uncover

what at that point in time was unknown. That is, we use the probabilities of quantum mechanics only because of our ignorance.

The argument was not settled until after Einstein died. In 1964 John Bell devised a clever test, now known as "Bell's Inequality", to determine whether Einstein's intuitions about the nature of reality were correct. Using experimental data -- which were explained by quantum mechanics -- Bell showed that a universe based on Einstein's assumptions was not the universe we actually live in.

So, God's "book of nature" is telling us that we live in a cosmos where God can be doing something "really new." What is real is not "already-out-there-now." Is that so surprising? It just means that we are -- or can be -- truly alive. Not just biologically alive, but fully alive. Isn't that what we mean by "being alive in Christ"?

I recognize "being alive in Christ" by a feeling of joy, and I want to share that joy. But talking doesn't quite do it. A somewhat more circumspect approach to evangelization is to listen rather than preach. St. Francis was famous for this approach. As the story goes, he asked a young friar to accompany him on his preaching around Assisi. St. Francis walked through the town, listening to people, greeting them and wishing them well, engaging in the usual chit-chat. At the end the young friar asked, "when are you going to preach." Francis answered, "we just did." The lesson: "preach the Good News always; when necessary use words."

Jesus told a similar story, about a good Samaritan. Among the Jews of his time the Samaritans were outcasts because they did not follow the Torah fully. In a sense, they were apostate Jews. At the beginning of the story a lawyer -- who knew the commands of the Torah to love God above all things and love your neighbor as yourself -- sought to justify the common Jewish practice of attending primarily to the family and clan, and not to outcasts. "Who is my neighbor," he asked. And Jesus told a story that ends with a Samaritan giving succor to the beaten traveler. It was the Samaritan who preached the Good News, without words.

It is not that the hope and joy of the living Christ are absent from dialogue with others who do not share that hope and joy. But the perspective of the larger cosmos suggests that our listening needs to remain alert to signs of hope and joy in the 'other'. The Logos has been there first, as the doctrine of the "baptism of desire" indicates. Why would we adopt a style of preaching that disrespects the prior presence of the Logos? Instead, the prior presence of the Logos is to be found and cultivated. Be patient. Be gentle. Use words when necessary. Is not that the example of Jesus the Christ? The disciples on the road to Emmaus spoke about how their hearts burned within them. Where hearts are burning, there is the Logos.

Now that I have read again this note to my mother I see that it is not entirely out of the sequence I have been pursuing in this series of essays. It has some of the ideas that will be stated more comprehensively in the next essay.

Thanks, Mom!

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[1] This is the way St. Anselm puts it. Note the variation on this theme in the title of Roger Haight's recent book, *Spirituality Seeking Theology* (Orbis, 2014). In his preface Haight says "This book is designed to address a specific problem in the Western church in our day, namely, the decline of Christianity and the steady flow of people out of the churches. … Spirituality is prior the church … and prior to and the basis of the theology and doctrines of the church."

[2] See Bernard Lonergan, *Insight*, p. 257. Lonergan uses this phrase to describe a viewpoint of those who reduce reality to what can be derived from physics, chemistry, biology and (in general) what we already know.

Theology for a Small Planet

A collection of essays by Clyde Christofferson © 2009-2015

A Model for Journey Theology: Care for the Environment

I've been puzzling for months over how to write an essay answering the question (raised in this most recent series of essays) about the doctrinal box the Church is in, and how this two thousand year old institution can gracefully move beyond this box. The content of such an essay was briefly outlined at the end of a prior essay[1].

I'm still not quite there. But I responded to an article in *America Magazine* on "Relational Ecology" by Brad Rothrock. As I read again what I wrote, I see that it has some relevance to the topic of doctrinal boxes, and also to the recent encyclical *Laudato si'* on care for the environment, so I share a slightly edited version here:

Dear Mr. Rothrock,

This is a very thoughtful and provocative article. Two thoughts.

Toward the end of the article you speak about going from experience to judgment, and I wonder whether the two examples you give might miss a third. We may decide, "yes, this understanding is true." Or we may decide, "no, some other explanation is needed." My experience is that these follow one another over time. At one point in time we say, "yes, this understanding is true." Then, some time later, as experience accumulates, we say, with respect to the very same understanding, "no, some other explanation is needed." And then, some time later still, another understanding, perhaps having some relation to the earlier understanding, merits the further decision, "yes, this understanding is true."

Human reason -- a concern of Aquinas -- can proceed in this fashion, but it raises a question about the temporal relativity of truth. Science is full of examples of progressive understandings where there is an element of truth at each stage, but where the truth relied upon did not turn out to be true. Aristotle had a vision of the cosmos with the earth at its center, an argument supported by evidence[2]. Copernicus and Galileo found a way to look at the planetary evidence in way that simplified calculations by using the sun as the center.

A forward to *De Revolutionibus* (written by Osiander not Copernicus) suggested that the sun centered view was simply a convenience for calculation, whereas Galileo insisted on the truth of the matter: the earth actually did revolve around the sun. This famously earned Galileo house arrest for the remainder of his days because, by that time, the people of God had become invested in the truth of an earth centered view of God's attention.

Several decades later Isaac Newton put the matter to rest with his laws of motion, holding to religiously congenial notions that space and time were absolute. So powerful was Newton's understanding that a new planet, Neptune, was predicted and then discovered at the place predicted. Several centuries later even Newton's understanding did not prove adequate for the cosmos.

Einstein responded creatively with an understanding that better explained the evidence, but did so by rejecting the absoluteness of space and time. In Einstein's world the cosmos had neither a center nor edges. On the other hand, his understanding has one of the most simple and elegant premises in all of science: the laws of physics are the same throughout the cosmos.

Religion seems pulled hither and yon by piggybacking on this or that aspect of the reigning theories of physics: the earth was the center, but then it wasn't; space and time were absolute, until they weren't. This succession of understandings, each of which can be used in one way or another to affirm the grandeur of God, has no particular rhyme or reason in religion. The truth seems more elusive. Faith seeking understanding is always now and not yet.

It is worth noting that from the point of view of physics this progression is coherent. Each step in the progression continuing to serve credibly within the observational limitations of its evidence. Newton's understanding, for example, continues to be used in engineering because the accuracy is "good enough" and the mathematics are much simpler than Einstein's.

For religion, by contrast, the role of changes in physics has been disruptive. The progression from Aristotle to Galileo to Newton to Einstein has steadily undermined the initial notion that the Earth was a physically important aspect of creation. It is no accident that Einstein's moniker of "relativity" was greeted from the perspective of religion by concerns about "relativism".

Which leads to a second thought. Has religion no understanding of its own, appropriate to the fullness of reality? Perhaps the best we can do is, to use your quote from Charles Taylor, the "best available account." It would be a different kind of

understanding, as we proceed from one "best available account" to another. And if there is integrity in the progression, who is to say that one community's journey is more central to the life of God than another? We are, perhaps, in need of another "best available account" that makes comprehensible and understandable, and ultimately coherent, the observed diversity of religious understandings.

Perhaps we are closer than we suppose to such an understanding. The very notion that at any one time there is a "best available account" is itself an understanding as different from a revelatory view of truth as Einstein's cosmos is from Aristotle's. It is a straightforward transformation, suggested by the inadequacy in physics of an absolute time and an absolute space, to suppose the overall coherence of radically different progressions of "best available accounts" among religions over different times and places. Dialogue among religions, and among individuals and communities of this or that religious persuasion or no religious persuasion at all, would certainly be more lively with the benefit of such an understanding.

I should add one further thought. You speak movingly about the unity of creation, and the challenge that such unity should be to our debilitating anthropocentrism that lays waste to the environment. Pope Francis speaks to this in *Laudato Si'*.

But at the same time you accept the essential separateness of God, as Creator, as taught by Aquinas. Yes, all creation bears the dignity of God's image. Is this enough, however, in the face of an essential separateness?

My reason for asking is the suspicion that we conceive "separateness" with too much simplicity. It is the simplicity of Aristotle's cosmos, where the visible "heavens" are the playground of the gods, writ large to account for a cosmos much more expansive than Aristotle could have imagined. We imagine a God, in His Heaven, literally outside of creation.

It is now clear that we were mistaken on the centrality of the earth and, indeed, on the notion of centrality itself. Is it possible that our distinction between heaven and earth is comparably flawed? Yes, we are on a journey toward union with a loving God, but if reality is one perhaps that journey has greater continuity than is implied by the separateness of God and the distinction between heaven and earth.

If God is separate as well as 'other', that means that the dominant relational link is one of separation, with our link to the rest of creation being both different and subordinate. If that is our understanding of God, then the subordination of creation is inevitable.

To accord creation its proper dignity we need a different understanding of God. And in the Trinity we have sufficient hints, if only we can overcome our religious prejudice in favor of our ancestors' "best available account," which is so ancient that it has been made sacred beyond inquiry. Christ is God Incarnate; each of us is blessed with the Spirit within us. It is the same Spirit, a source of unity for all reality.

Care for the environment resonates with us. Is it not the Spirit within us that grounds that resonance? This resonance has been growing since at least St. Francis. The pope' choice of name is significant.

Perhaps the shoe is on the other foot. As often happens, the Spirit is there before us. We are laggards at heart. It is not that we need to overcome the separateness of God in order to care for the environment. Rather, the fact that care for the environment resonates with us already shows us that God is not separate.

Thus, death is not a separation from creation in order that we can be with God. Something more marvelous is in God's mind. Care for creation is part of our own salvation. Indeed, care for creation is not only part of our own salvation -- if we adhere to the classic notion of what that means -- but integral to the fullness of our living, a living which does not end at death.[3]

Thanks, again, for a very good and provocative article.

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[1] "The New Evangelization: An Easter People Come of Age -- Part 3"

[2] Aristotle, "On the Heavens", Book II, #14.

[3] This last paragraph I added after submitting comments on-line to *America*. This the way it is with articles, tweaking till the very end.