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*The*

A JOURNAL FOR THE  
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

*Donal Dorr*

## Pope Francis on Falling in Love with Nature

March 2018

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In *Laudato Si'* Pope Francis says about St Francis of Assisi: 'Just as happens when we fall in love with someone, whenever he would gaze at the sun, the moon or the smallest of animals, he burst into song, drawing all other creatures into his praise.'<sup>1</sup> It is clear from the context that the pope is inviting us to follow the example of St Francis by allowing ourselves to fall in love with nature, with all the creatures around us. In doing so he is calling us to a major enrichment of our spirituality – in fact what for many people would amount to a quite radical transformation. This is a move from a spirituality that in the past, and to some extent even today, sees spirituality as an escape from the world, to one that is nourished by the world around us, that embraces it, loves it, and is committed to protecting it.

That same year, 2015, the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh responded to a request from the United Nations by issuing a statement to which he gave the title 'Falling in Love with Earth.' In it he said, 'There's a revolution that needs to happen and it starts from inside each one of us. We need to wake up and fall in love with Earth. Our love and admiration for the Earth has the power to unite us and remove all boundaries, separation and discrimination.'

I want here to explore what it means to fall in love with nature and to suggest that it should have a central place in our spirituality, in our faith, and in our relationship with God.

## FALLING IN LOVE

We can begin by noting what happens when we fall in love with somebody. The most fundamental element in this extraordinary experience is that it lifts us out of our preoccupation with ourselves. We find ourselves to a considerable extent 'living in the other person's shoes.'

1 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, (hereafter *LS*). Dublin:Veritas, 2015, par. ii.

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We want to be close to the person, to listen to him or her, to be fully *present* to the other. We find ourselves *nurtured* by the presence of the beloved, and therefore drawn to stay in their presence.

When we fall in love we find that we are more interested in the person we love than in ourselves, more concerned for this person's welfare and pleasure than for our own interests. We seek to draw out this person, to convince the person that she or he is utterly lovable.

We experience real passion. But, at its best, this is a non-possessive passion. It does not make us want to control the beloved. If we have fallen deeply in love we find ourselves charmed, enchanted, almost enthralled, by the person whom we love. It may seem paradoxical, but it is nevertheless true, that we find ourselves *willingly captivated by the beloved*. We retain our freedom, but we choose to surrender to the love of the other person.

The person who falls in love becomes *energized*, feels far more alive than before. There is a new excitement and sparkle in everyday experience; life seems to *flow*. The person feels that his or her daily happenings have been transformed, imbued with a new rich significance. At times it seems as though these events have a special message for the person and that an unusual number of meaningful coincidences are taking place.

The experience of falling in love is most powerful and most fully itself when it is reciprocal, when there is mutuality. An extraordinary bond is created between the two persons who have fallen in love with each other. The usual gap between two humans is at least partly bridged. Each of the two seems to feel and know what is going on for other person – though there is also a great hunger to get even closer, to share more of the other person's ideas and experience.

### FALLING IN LOVE WITH NATURE

Does the experience of falling in love with a person have any equivalent in our relationship with nature? Does it throw light on what it might mean to fall in love with nature? This is not a question that can be answered in a theoretical way. We have to explore our own experiences. We may perhaps recall some occasional special situations in which we entered into what might be described as an 'altered experience.' Have there been times when we found ourselves enchanted, almost enthralled, and to some extent 'taken out of ourselves' in the presence of a magnificent landscape, or walking through a woodland, or gazing at the stars, or looking at a new-born infant at its mother's breast, or at the face of somebody who has worked in the fields for seventy years?

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Each of these experiences can be a gateway through which we may be lifted out of our everyday ‘normality’ and led into an encounter with a reality that is much richer and deeper. Another list of such ‘gateways’ is given by Pope Francis: ‘there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person’s face.’<sup>2</sup> In fact Francis extends the list very considerably when in a footnote to that paragraph he quotes the Sufi mystic Ali al-Khawwas: ‘Prejudice should not have us criticize those who seek ecstasy in music or poetry. There is a subtle mystery in each of the movements and sounds of this world. The initiate will capture what is being said when the wind blows, the trees sway, water flows, flies buzz, doors creak, birds sing, or in the sound of strings or flutes, the sighs of the sick, the groans of the afflicted....’<sup>3</sup>

We might add that various explicitly religious symbols or actions can also, for many people, be gateways through which they are lifted out of hum-drum everyday life and into an experience that is transformative. In some cases these religious routes into the Mystery may involve a close relationship with nature; one thinks for instance of the way in which Yoruba-speaking people in West Africa, and those attached to Spiritist cults in Brazil, throng to the ocean beaches to pray exuberantly, even at times ecstatically. In other cases the relationship to nature is less obvious; the contact with Mystery may come for some people when they visit a Christmas crib, or when they gaze at a crucifix, at a statue of the Madonna, or at the monstrance in which the Blessed Sacrament is exposed.

Clearly, there are hundreds of different situations in the world around us in each of which we may find ourselves drawn into Mystery. Perhaps, for those of us whose temperament is activist, the word ‘drawn’ is too strong; let me say rather that we feel *invited* into Mystery. And the invitation is very delicate, fully respectful of our freedom. If we respond wholehearted to this invitation, it is not too much to say that we are allowing ourselves to be *willingly captivated by the Mystery*. In that sense we can see what Francis means when he speaks of falling in love with nature.

Mary Oliver, in her poem ‘Where does the Temple Begin’ says:

I look; morning to night I am never done with looking.  
Looking, I mean not just standing around,  
but standing around as though with your arms open.<sup>4</sup>

2 *LS*, par 233

3 *Ibid*, footnote 158.

4 Mary Oliver, *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver*, Penguin Press, 2017, pp. 187-8

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In her other poem ‘The Messenger’ she spells out more fully how she experiences her relationship with nature:

My work is loving the world. ...  
Let me keep my mind on what matters, which is my work,  
which is mostly standing still and learning to be astonished.  
The phoebe, the delphinium. The sheep in the pasture, and the  
pasture.  
Which is mostly rejoicing, since all ingredients are here,  
which is gratitude ...<sup>5</sup>

Of course falling love with nature is not an all-or-nothing experience. It can range in depth from an event that is surprising and stimulating but transitory and forgettable to an experience so intense that it leads to a lasting transformation of our whole spirituality and of what it means for us to relate to nature and to the Mystery in which we live.

Even if the experience is not quite as intense as this, we may still find ourselves *nurtured* by nature, in a somewhat similar way to the sense of nurture we find in the presence of a person with whom we have fallen in love. Mary Oliver describes this experience in her beautiful poem ‘When I am among the trees:’

When I am among the trees ....  
I would almost say that they save me, and daily.  
...  
Around me the trees stir in their leaves  
and call out, ‘Stay awhile.’  
The light flows from their branches.  
And they call again, ‘It’s simple,’  
they say, ‘and you, too, have come  
into the world to do this, to go easy,  
to be filled with light, and to shine.’<sup>6</sup>

### A MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

When the experience of falling in love with nature is truly profound we find ourselves drawn into an experience which Rudolf Otto describes as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. Note that here we shouldn’t translate the word ‘*tremendum*’ as ‘tremendous.’ What Otto has in mind is an experience that causes us to tremble, both with awe and with fear. And when he goes on to use the word ‘*fascinans*’ he is referring to the sense of being *drawn in* deeper and deeper into the Mystery – to such an extent that the person

5 Mary Oliver, *Thirst: Poems*, Beacon Press, 2007, p.1.

6 Mary Oliver, *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver*, Penguin Press, 2017, p. 123

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feels almost entranced, but in a manner that does not deprive this person of her freedom.

Otto says: ‘The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its “profane,” non-religious mood of everyday experience.’<sup>7</sup>

The Mystery into which one is drawn is experienced as limitless. If one looks for an end-point, one finds that it recedes ever further. So the boundary between us and this imagined end-point has become blurred. For at least some of the mystics the gap between the person and the Mystery no longer exists. In his poem ‘It Was Arranged So,’ R. S. Thomas gives us a sense of what this might feel like:

There were times  
when, bending close over a flower,  
thinking to penetrate the transparency  
of its expression, we lost our footing  
and fell into a presence illimitable  
as its absence, descending motionlessly  
in space-time, not into darkness  
but into the luminosity of his shadow.<sup>8</sup>

### NAMING THE EXPERIENCE?

In the presence of the Mystery we find ourselves pulled in two opposite directions. On the one hand, we sense that it can never be adequately named, and so there is a part of us which at times feels content to just remain as long as possible in the presence of this nameless Mystery. But at the same time another part of us senses that the experience is crying out for expression - and we want to *name* it, to find some words that would enable us to hold on to it.

Those of us who have been brought up with a belief in God usually find it natural to say that the Mystery which we are experiencing is the God whom we have been worshipping all through our life. We confidently say that the experience of being drawn into the Mystery, through one of the many ‘gateways’ that are all around us, is one of being drawn into God. Pope Francis puts it like this: ‘The Universe unfolds in God who fills it completely.... The ideal is not only to pass from the exterior to the interior to discover the action of God in the soul, but also *to discover God in all things*’.<sup>9</sup> And he

7 Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, HardPress Publishing, 2012, p. 19.

8 R. S. Thomas, *Collected Later Poems*, Bloodaxe Books, 2014, p. 116.

9 *LS*, par 233, emphasis added.

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quotes a statement of Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople which suggests that perhaps it is a mistake to think there is a gap between God and any of the realities of our world: ‘the divine and the human meet in the slightest detail in the seamless garment of God’s creation, in the last speck of dust of our planet’.<sup>10</sup>

Hopefully, however, we will have some sense of how inadequate our idea of God has been up to now, and how we have unknowingly trivialized and distorted the meaning of the word ‘God.’ We must hope, too, that we will not be so arrogant as to imagine that calling ourselves believers in God puts us in a superior or more privileged position compared to those who may say they do not believe in God, or who feel it more authentic to stay with the experience as nameless. As John Feehan points out, it is the experience that matters; the words are secondary.<sup>11</sup> Because of the inadequacy of prose I’m relying in this article more on poetry to convey some sense of what is involved.

Many people who profess no religion experience the Mystery – and quite frequently they conclude that a wordless response is most appropriate for them. Some of the people who are reluctant to call themselves believers may in fact be far more profoundly and authentically immersed in the Mystery than those who confidently imagine they are close to God and who have substituted the word ‘God’ for the actual experience of mystery.

What about traditional peoples, such as the pre-Christian people of Ireland and many tribal peoples in Africa, Asia, the Americas, and Oceania who practice a primal form of religion? They have always experienced the sacred in specific locations such as holy wells and sacred mountain-tops, or in particular objects such as trees or masks or activities such as ritual dances.

By contrast, Christianity, together with Islam and Judaism, has always stressed the ‘otherness’ or transcendence of the Mystery we call God - and this much more so in recent centuries when we have come to put greater emphasis on the secular nature of our world. Of course, we find in the various forms of Catholic devotions or ‘popular religion’, that there is a deep human need to focus on particular ‘holy’ places such as Medjugorje or Fatima or Knock where many people find themselves more open to the sacred.

One aspect of the process we call ‘secularization’ is that, in recent centuries, many of us in the Western world have allowed our concept of a transcendent God to ‘hoover up’ all the tangible experiences of the divine which pervade the lives of traditional primal peoples and those who practice ‘popular devotions.’ The

10 Ibid, par. 9.

11 John Feehan, *Creation, Evolution and Faith: Reflections on the presence of God in creation*, privately printed, 2015, p. 20: ‘The presence of God ... is in the personal experience of the encounter, not in words.’

result is that for many people the sense of how impossible it is to have any adequate knowledge of the transcendent God, has in practice left them with little or no sense of a divine or sacred presence in the world. So the remote and imperceptible God has no impact at all on their everyday lives. Their awareness of the secular nature of the world around them seems to have morphed into a blindness or indifference to the Mystery.

The Jesus of St John's Gospel offers us an alternative to this kind of impoverishing secularization. Having pointed out that in the past the Samaritans and the Jews each had their own holy mountain where they worshipped God, Jesus said: 'a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem; ... a time ... has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth' (Jn. 4: 21).

The Jesus of John's Gospel is assuring us that God is to be found not merely in traditional sacred places but wherever we allow ourselves to be fully open to the Mystery. In the past, this may have been most frequently understood to mean going *inward* to find God in our deepest souls. But in the light of the radical spirituality to which Pope Francis is calling us, we can now see that worship in spirit and in truth involves finding God in the nature which is present all around us.

The Bible has taught us to temper our emphasis on the otherness of God by also thinking of God, and relating to God, in *personal* terms. However, it is not easy to hold together these two aspects of the Mystery; indeed we may have to take each in turn. This is well expressed by the poet R. S. Thomas:

You show me two faces,  
 that of a flower opening  
 and of a fist contracting  
 like the gripping of ice.  
 You speak to me with two  
 voices, one thundering  
 on the ear's drum, the other  
 one mistakable for silence.  
 Father, I said, domesticating  
 an enigma; and as though  
 to humour me you came.  
 But there are precipices  
 within you. Mild and dire,  
 now and absent, like us but  
 wholly other— which side  
 of you am I to believe?<sup>12</sup>

12 R.S. Thomas, *Selected Poems* (Penguin Modern Classics), 2004, p. 222.



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Alongside the awe, the tremor, there is passion, a hunger for closeness. But it is utterly non-possessive since we experience the Mystery as so incomparably greater, so unbelievably more all-embracing, that there can be no question of trying to control it or even to understand it. The only authentic response is one of acceptance, indeed the kind of total free submission which for Muslims is expressed in the word *Islam*. The Sufi mystic Rumi gives us a sense of what this involves – and of the grace-filled experience to which it opens us:

Be helpless, dumbfounded,  
Unable to say yes or no.  
Then a stretcher will come from grace to gather us up.  
We are too dull-eyed to see that beauty.  
If we say we can, we're lying.  
If we say No, we don't see it,  
That No will behead us  
And shut tight our windows onto spirit.  
So let us rather not be sure of anything,  
Beside ourselves, and only that, so  
Miraculous beings come running to help.  
Crazed, lying in a zero circle, mute,  
We shall be saying finally,  
With tremendous eloquence, Lead us.  
When we have totally surrendered to that beauty,  
We shall be a mighty kindness.<sup>13</sup>

In the presence of the Mystery we experience not just a sense of presence but also one of absence—an absence that has some element of hope as it calls us into an unknown future. This is well expressed by R. S. Thomas, in his poem 'Migrants':

He is that great void  
we must enter, calling  
to one another on our way  
in the direction from which  
he blows. What matter  
if we should never arrive  
to breed or to winter  
in the climate of our conception?

Enough we have been given wings  
and a needle in the mind  
to respond to his bleak north.

13 *The Essential Rumi*, Harper-Collins 1996.

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There are times even at the Pole  
when he, too, pauses in his withdrawal  
so that it is light there all night long.<sup>14</sup>

### ECOLOGICAL CONVERSION

If we really allow ourselves to be drawn fully into the Mystery, then we are ‘ecologically converted’ (in Francis’s sense). It is not just that this experience *leads to* conversion; it actually *is* conversion. We can distinguish different aspects or dimensions of the conversion, provided we don’t try to separate them from each other.

The most immediate and perhaps central aspect is *affective* conversion; we *feel* differently about the animals, the trees, the plants, the landscape, the stars, and the people around us. We have a sense of being linked to them, of being part of this extraordinary web of life and of the whole cosmos. We may have a sense of awe when we look at the face of a child or look through a microscope at the complexity and beauty of a daisy. And we marvel at the whole process of evolution through which all these realities emerged over billions of years.

Furthermore, we can at times experience something of the joy, beauty, the life-energy of the creatures around us. We may even share something of the joyful abandonment described by the poet Patrick Kavanagh, in his poem ‘October’:

‘I want to throw myself on the street  
without caring  
For anything but the praying  
that the earth offers.’<sup>15</sup>

There is also a more *intellectual* dimension to conversion. It is well described by Joanna Macy and Molly Browne in their book *Coming Back to Life*, when they say, ‘we see with new eyes.’ This ‘seeing’ is not just sensing our links with the people and the non-human creatures with whom we share our world. It is primarily a new and richer *understanding* of how and why we are all so interconnected. The process of evolution becomes real for us. We see it taking place all around us; and we have some inkling of the direction in which it is moving.

### THE ENERGETIC, MORAL ASPECT

In attempting to describe the experience of falling in love with a person I suggested that it has a dynamic aspect as well as a

14 R.S. Thomas, *Collected Later Poems*, Bloodaxe Books, 2014 (first published in *Mass for Hard Times* 1992).

15 Patrick Kavanagh, *Collected Poems*, Penguin Classics, 2005.

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‘stillness and presence’ aspect. We feel passionately *concerned* for the welfare of this person, ready to spend ourselves to defend and nurture the one with whom we have fallen in love.

The same can be said of the experience of falling in love with nature. The Mystery evokes in us not only a contemplative response, a sense of *complacencia*, of resting with pleasure and joy in the web of life which we have come to love, but also an active *concern*. We are by no means passive; rather we feel energized, more actively alive, called to protect this world and eager to devote time and energy to this commitment.

Hopefully, as part of the affective aspect of conversion we will respond to the invitation of Francis to allow ourselves ‘to become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering’.<sup>16</sup> When we do so, we may find ourselves almost overwhelmed by the reality of the damage that we humans are doing to the Earth, through climate-change, pollution, and the tragic loss of biodiversity. So the *moral* aspect of an ecological conversion is rooted in the prior *affective* aspect. Since we experience ourselves as an integral part of the web, linked to everything around us, we find ourselves called to take action to protect our environment.

Francis is inviting us to adopt a radically new spirituality – one in which our commitment to care for the Earth is sustained and *effective* to the extent that it is rooted in an *affective* ecological conversion. It is only those who have fallen in love with the Earth who can truly protect it.

<sup>16</sup> *LS*, par 19.