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Conversion,
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Celebration, Conversion, Commitment: A Cosmic Eucharist in *Laudato Si'*

Hugh O' Donnell

At this moment of environmental crisis on a planetary scale, it is important to realise that in our celebration of the Eucharist we are committing ourselves to the earth and her creatures. For it is at this table we promise to make real our communion with all creation as the reality within which the Divine is intimately implicated and revealed. To ignore this cosmic outreach is to limit love to self-interest and to reduce the Eucharist to a local, devotional event. This article will reflect on the deeper understanding of Eucharist as envisaged by *Laudato Si'* and how it opens us to our need to experience a 'profound ecological conversion'.

AN ECOLOGICAL CONVERSION BEGINS WHEN WE REALISE THAT THE
WORLD IS NOT THERE SOLELY FOR US

A cartoon by Martyn Turner in the *Irish Times* last April 2021 caught my attention. It is presented in two frames; in one, an image of a bandaged earth is accompanied by the headline; 'Yesterday humanity celebrated 'earth Day'; and in the other, the words, 'Unfortunately, for the other 364, the Earth has to celebrate 'Humanity Days'; drive, drive; gush, gush; frack, frack; burn, burn; chop, chop; dig, dig; pollute, pollute; extinct, extinct; and breed, breed'.

One day a year obviously won't do. It doesn't come near the 'profound ecological conversion' that Pope John Paul II identified as the only course of action that can prevent us from going over the edge.

'Mankind, especially in our time, has without hesitation devastated wooded plains and valleys, polluted waters, disfigured the earth's habitat, made the air unbreathable, disturbed the hydrogeological and atmospheric spheres, turned luxuriant areas into deserts and undertaken forms of unrestrained industrialization, humiliating the flower-garden of the universe, to use the image of

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Dante Aligheri'. In effect, he lamented, 'the Creator's steward' has turned 'autonomous despot who is finally beginning to understand that he must stop at the edge of the abyss'¹

When I first came upon that evocative phrase, 'a profound ecological conversion', I wondered could it mean what the words seemed to be saying – that we were being called back to the earth? Indeed, but earth not as an 'it' as Pope Francis makes clear in the first paragraph of *Laudato Si'* (LS) where, taking his cue from Francis of Assisi, he remarks that 'our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us'. In other words, the Earth is alive and behaves as a relational other! We are *Adam* from *adamah*, (our name is mud!). For us to respond to her would seem to call for the development of something close to an 'ecological self', to use a phrase of Arne Naess, founder of the Deep Ecology movement. This involves a broadening and deepening of the self away from the gratification of insatiable ego, so as to embrace all life forms². For centuries we have thought *about* the earth. An 'ecological self' thinks, feels, loves itself *as* earth. While this phrase is not used in the encyclical, the reality it describes is there; as when Pope Francis remarks that 'our (ecological) goal is ... to become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into *our own personal suffering*' (LS 19) (*italics mine*).

IN THE EUCHARIST THE COSMOS IS PRAYING WITH US

This too is *new* for many of us. 'Christians look towards the east, the rising sun', writes Pope Benedict; 'This is not a case of Christians worshipping the sun but of the cosmos speaking of Christ' – from bat squeak to the voices of billions of galaxies with billions of suns (stars) just like ours in a parish 13.8 billion years old and innumerable light years wide!³

The encyclical's 'A Christian Prayer in Union with All Creation' advances this understanding of cosmic praise. It reads like an alternative Gloria with its Trinitarian structure and worth reading in that light;

Father, we praise you with all your creatures. They came forth from your all-powerful hand; they are yours, *filled with your presence and your tender love*.

- 1 'God made man the Steward of Creation', *L'Osservatore Romano*, Vatican City, 24 January, 2001, p 11.
- 2 Arne Naess, 'Self Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World' in John Seed, Joanna Macy, Pat Fleming, Arne Naess, *Thinking Like A Mountain: Towards a Council of All Beings*, Gabriola Island, BC, New Society Publishers, 1988, p 24.
- 3 Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2000, p 68.

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Praise be to you!

Son of God, Jesus, through you all things were made. You were formed in the womb of Mary our Mother. You became part of this earth, and you gazed upon this world with human eyes. Today *you are alive in every creature in your risen glory.*

Praise be to you!

Holy Spirit, by your light you guide this world towards the Father's love and *accompany creation as it groans in travail.* You also dwell in our hearts and you inspire us to do what is good.

Praise be to you!

Triune God, wondrous community of infinite love, teach us to contemplate you in the beauty of the universe for *all things speak of you (LS 246)*, (italics mine).

As this makes clear, God is not only the God of humans with other creatures drawn in as extras to the human drama. It is an attitude that still prevails though sharply challenged by Teilhard de Chardin in his prayer;

‘Shatter my God, through *the daring of your revelation* the childishly timid outlook that can conceive of nothing greater or more vital in the world than the pitiable perfection of our human organism’.⁴

For it matters deeply how we respect other creatures, their habitats and living conditions, *their habits of acclaim.* And matters above all to the Creator who is ‘alive in every creature in his risen glory’ (LS 246). Too seldom we recall that our delight in the beauty of diversity can only be the smallest fraction of what it must mean to the One who brought it into being as personal revelation and in whose presence not even the fall of a sparrow is forgotten, (Matt 10: :29).

And this invites our *contemplation.* But contemplation not as a flight from the earth but as a way to love the world:

‘the Lord chose to reach our intimate depths in a fragment of matter. He comes not from above, but from within, he comes that we might find him in this world of ours’ (LS 236).

Such contemplation involves a returning on our part to the sacredness of our ‘home place’ as we face up to the damage inflicted on our mothering earth by our rampant consumerism, extraction,

4 Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Hymn of the Universe, ‘The Mass on the World’, London, Collins, 1965, p 24).

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suffocation. If we do not repent of our excesses, and the attitude – ‘this little bit won’t matter – how can we hear and believe the good news about ‘nature as a magnificent book in which God speaks to us and grants us a glimpse of his infinite beauty and goodness’ (*LS 12*).

A COSMIC EUCHARIST

In his encyclical on the Eucharist in 2003, Pope John Paul II has a memorable passage in the language and spirit of Teilhard de Chardin which is wonderful in its broad vision and personal expression.

‘I have been able to celebrate Holy Mass in chapels built along mountain paths, on lakeshores and seacoasts; I have celebrated it on altars in stadiums and in city squares... This varied scenario of celebrations of the Eucharist has given me a powerful experience of its universal and, so to speak, cosmic character. Yes, cosmic! Because even when it is celebrated on the humble altar of a country church, the Eucharist is always in some way celebrated on the altar of the world.’⁵

Pope Benedict finds an equally forthright expression for the same insight where he says;

‘The cosmos is praying with us. It, too, is waiting for redemption. It is precisely this cosmic dimension that is essential to Christian liturgy. It is never performed solely in the self-made human world. It is always a cosmic liturgy. The theme of creation is embedded in Christian prayer. It loses its grandeur when it forgets this connection’.⁶

Because our focus is local and narrow, it’s easy to forget that in our liturgy we pray in union with all creation including the millions of animals consumed by forest fires or those pushed towards extinction by the loss of sufficient habitat in which to thrive. Easy to forget that the Eucharist needs to be understood in its widest significance, namely, as expressing Christ’s intention to offer his nourishing presence to the whole of creation; that it belongs within the narrative of an unfolding universe; that the whole earth is invited to supper with the Lamb!

Laudato si’ puts it succinctly:

‘It is in the Eucharist that all that has been created finds its greatest exaltation It is the living centre of the universe’ (*par 236*).

5 John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 2003, par 8

6 Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, p 70

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This of course was Teilhard de Chardin's transformational insight that the Eucharist extends and prolongs Christ's presence in creation. Which is yet another reason why we must commit ourselves to the survival of this planet. It is where we experience the incarnate God. It is the garden in which God plays and invites us to dance with him⁷.

We had been brought up to think of incarnation exclusively in terms of the historical Jesus. But there is a cosmic incarnation also to which Pope John Paul II drew our attention in these words;

'The Incarnation of God the Son signifies the taking up into unity with God ... the whole of humanity, the entire visible and material world. The Incarnation then has a cosmic significance, a cosmic dimension'.⁸

This is an important corrective to the notion of 'spiritual' things coming from above and strengthens the idea of creation and incarnation as one movement of divine love from the beginning. How wonderful then to think of the universe seeded with Christ's promise of fulfilment and how one day we shall sing with every creature in the heavenly kingdom, a hope replenished in every celebration of the Eucharist!

It's as if Christ in the Eucharist, in wrapping his arms around the world, is holding the whole universe close to his heart – 'fixing the number of the stars, calling each one by name' as second by second a supernova explodes in the universe and a star is born (psalm 146).

This is marvellous! We need to allow these words to settle in us; 'Indeed, the Eucharist is an act of cosmic love' (*LS 236*). This is not, I imagine, what is generally in the mind of the one who presides nor of the participating congregation. However, it is worth repeating that the presence of the created world in the Eucharist is not dependent on us. It is there in as much as we are there, an acclaim preceding ours by billions of years.

FROM 'RECEIVING HOLY COMMUNION' TO RECEIVING THE GIFT OF BELONGING IN A HOLY COMMUNION WITH THE RISEN JESUS, OTHERS AND ALL CREATION

Since I was a boy, I have understood the phrase 'to receive holy communion' to mean that in the consecrated host I am receiving Jesus as my Lord. When I hear it now, I find it has become a much

7 Hafiz, *The Gift: Poems by Hafiz, the great Sufi Master*, Penguin Compass, 1999, p 270, 'the God who only knows four words/ and keeps repeating them, saying:/ "Come dance with me";' and p 57, 'I hold the Lion's Paw whenever I dance'.

8 Pope John Paul II, *Dominus et Vivificantem*, 1986, par 20.

more fruitful expression as I realise that I am also receiving *the gift of belonging* to a holy communion; that I am in communion with Christ, with others *and with all creation*. Seen in this way, the Eucharist radiates Christ's risen life to all creatures – 'it embraces and penetrates all creation' (*LS 236*), helping us grow into a *we-awareness* of belonging to a holy communion of life.

With this understanding it is easy to see how the Eucharist, as presented in *Laudato Si'* (236), is meant to become '*a source of light and motivation* for our concerns for the environment', an idea important enough to be repeated almost verbatim in the paragraph following which focuses on Sunday as a healing day for *all* our relationships; 'And so the day of rest, centred on the Eucharist, *sheds its light on the whole week, and motivates us* to greater concern for nature and the poor', (italics mine). From this perspective, Eucharist is our moment to hold our planet dear.

In other words, the Eucharist makes us advocates for the earth, prepared to raise our voice on its behalf as we allow Earth's own voice to be heard. It is like this: we cannot celebrate Eucharist and not commit to caring for the earth and the poor on this day of '*contemplative rest (which)* opens our eyes to the larger picture and gives us renewed sensitivity to the rights of others'. (*LS 237*)

At the beginning of the celebration there is space for our injustices to be brought to light and pardon sought. But as the nature of such sin or sins, is not specified, some weightier matters are easily overlooked! Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople reminds us of these, (quoted approvingly in *Laudato Si'* 8-9);

'For humans to cause species to become extinct and to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation, for humans to degrade the integrity of the earth or its natural forests, or destroy its wetlands, for humans to contaminate the earth's waters, its land, its air and its life with poisonous substances, these are sins'.

On a daily basis, we make war on creation. To talk of moral fault in terms of human relationships alone is not enough. We must deal with global sins against life itself – our unqualified acceptance of corporate and business interests, our polluting the earth on our doorstep, our failure to hear the cries of our precious planet and her downtrodden poor, 'why are you persecuting me?'. Let these be the sins we are mindful of when we celebrate Eucharist. There is an urgency needed which we are failing to heed, an urgency heard in the accusatory lines of Drew Dellinger's well known poem;⁹

9 'hieroglyphic stairway' from *Love Letter to the Milky Way*, White Cloud Press, 2011.

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It's 3:23 in the morning
and I'm awake
because my great great grandchildren
won't let me sleep
my great great grandchildren
ask me in dreams
what did you do while the planet was plundered?
what did you do when the earth was unravelling?
surely you did something
when the seasons started failing?
as the mammals, reptiles, birds were all dying?
did you fill the streets with protest
when democracy was stolen?
What did you do
Once
you
knew?

THE EUCHARIST IS A SACRAMENT FOR THE WHOLE OF CREATION

We can certainly look for references that acknowledge the central place of creation in our liturgical texts and find some. We can point to a comprehensive Sunday Preface V which acknowledges God's part in 'laying the foundations of the world' and addresses our responsibility to care for creation 'in all its wonder'; note in Eucharistic Prayer III the lovely expressions 'all that you have created rightly gives you praise' and 'you give life to all things and make them holy'. And of course we praise the God of creation in our presentation of the gifts of the earth.

There is something to build on here, but not enough, without an ecological conversion, to nourish the development of a *creation-based Eucharistic spirituality*. For this is what is being asked of us in the new and challenging articles 236 and 237 of *Laudato Si'* about celebrating Eucharist as a cosmic event.

Today we are much more clearly talking about the sacred and living earth. We have really adopted Teilhard de Chardin's cosmic understanding of Christ and the world with at least a tacit acceptance that evolution is how God creates (*LS 81-83*). But even more than that.

In the wonderful article 85 of *Laudato Si'* we are presented with something completely new to many of us; namely, that there are two books of revelation. Francis writes that 'God has written a precious book, 'whose letters are the multitude of created things present in the universe'. He continues:

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‘We can say that ‘alongside revelation properly so-called, contained in sacred Scripture, there is a divine manifestation in the blaze of the sun and the fall of night’.

But there is a manifestation of the divine in every creature. In other words, we are not just talking of creation in a general sense to which it is easy to give a nod of the head in acknowledgement but of divine revelation expressed in individual lives.

Article 221 takes us further:

‘Various convictions of our faith, developed at the beginning of this Encyclical can help us to enrich the meaning of this conversion. These include the awareness that each creature reflects something of God and has a message to convey to us, and the security that Christ has taken unto himself this material world and now, risen, is intimately present to each being, surrounding it with his affection and penetrating it with his light.’

Consequently, we can say the Eucharist points to the interrelationship of all beings in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. By offering up bread and wine, the human community takes the whole earth (and, by extension, the universe) in its hands in a gesture of thanksgiving. In the consecrated bread and wine, the entire creation gasps in anticipation of its fulfilment in the heavenly nuptial feast. Cardinal Kasper puts it like this:

‘In the Eucharist, the world has once again become one in the praise of the Creator – and this means that the world has become whole’. We must work for that wholeness with our every breath.

CONCLUSION

Informed by the Jewish understanding of Sabbath as God resting in creation, (*LS 237*), Celia Deane Drummond suggests a programme and a form of practice:

- Give time and space to the sacred bond (covenant) between God, humanity and creation.
- Acknowledge our contribution to the destruction of creation, including loss of biodiversity, and our need for a deep conversion.
- Celebrate the presence of Christ in the midst of creation ...
- Understand creation as manifesting the wisdom of God ...
- Develop a sense of wonder, which includes a deep joy in creation ...

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- Find ways to balance activity and rest and promote ecological justice.¹⁰

This I believe is how we must present the sacrament today as we move towards a renewed appreciation of Eucharist as ‘the living centre of the universe’ and ‘an act of cosmic love’ (*LS 236*). And how we must present the Christian hope for creation as expressed in the Eucharist which impels us to take the multiple threats to its survival (and ours) seriously. So seriously, that at the Dismissal we go out to make peace with every living being with whom we have offered praise, recognising a brother, sister, mother; thereby committing ourselves to uphold the rights of every threatened creature so that our Eucharist becomes a resounding ‘yes’ to the cry of the earth and the poor, a living hope that does not disappoint.

10 Celia Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology*, Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 2008, p 16

Gratitude and Joy. Books about positive thinking are plentiful. The fine arts also express joy and gratitude in so many different ways. For example, in Friedrich Schiller’s poem ‘Ode to Joy’ we read: ‘Joy commands the hardy mainspring / Of the universe eterne. / Joy, oh joy the wheel is driving / Which the worlds’ great clock doth turn. / Flowers from the buds she coaxes, / Suns from out the hyaline, / Spheres she rotates through expanses, / Which the seer can’t divine.’ (trans. W. Wertz). Scripture provides many pointers towards gratitude and joy: ‘The joy of the Lord is your strength’ (Nehemiah 8:10) is a strong expression of it. Despite this, Christians are often criticised for being stern and miserable. As such, they are hardly going to convince other people about their way of life, let alone inspire them.

– JOACHIM HARTMANN & ANNETTE UNKELHÄÜBER, *Joy in God*, (Dublin: Messenger Publications), 2021. p.19.