

Catholic Theology of Creation

Nature's Value and Relation to Humankind

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The term “creation” has three meanings in Catholic thought. First is an *action*: the act through which God freely gives being to what is not. Here you find the famous concept of *creatio ex nihilo* (“creation out of nothing”). This formula is intended to make two points:

- First, God alone has being and every other being has its origin from God—there is nothing else that contributes to its being. God brings into being that which is not.
- Second, we are not talking about the first moment of the creation of the universe. Rather in every present moment, the

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“newness of the world,” as Aquinas writes, is created by God and nothing else. This newness of creation around us in each moment has its origin in God’s freedom to create out of love. That is, everything is a gift to the world brought into being by God’s freedom and love.

The second meaning of “creation” is not a verb of action but a noun. The world *is* creation that has its being from God and yet is distinct from God. Humankind and the cosmos make up creation which has value and meaning that is given to it by God. The third meaning of “creation” is perhaps more profound. Here creation means an *event*. It is an event of relatedness in two senses:

- First, creation is an eventing of the relationship between God and what God has created. This means that God is not apart from creation, but “fills all things in every way” (Eph 1:23).
- Second, creation is a relationship between all its elements. Everything in creation is interrelated by God, who fills all things in every way.

It is this third meaning, the relational dimension of creation that I will discuss in more detail because it is here that we find humanity’s relation to nature. To understand this relational dimension of creation, we need to look at its source in the relationality of God, namely, the Trinity.

Here, I am drawing on the writings of Piero Coda, the famous Italian Trinitarian theologian.¹ Coda discusses how the Trinity can be three and one at the same time because of a certain

1. Piero Coda, *Dalla Trinità: L'avvento di Dio tra sotria e profezia* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2011).

kind of “nothingness.” It is a nothingness that is a kenotic, or self-emptying, love (*agape*).² There are two words for “nothing” in Italian. First is “*niente*,” which means the absence of anything, literally “no-entity.” The second is “*nulla*” which means “nothingness.” This nothingness for Coda is a kind of love found in the Trinity:³

- The Father generates the Son by becoming *nulla*, nothing, in loving the Son. Thus, God is “Father,” a relational term, by generating the Son out of God’s *nulla*—nothingness of love. In other words, the Father gives all God’s being to the Son out of love in a dynamic of nothingness or in classical terms, *kenosis*, or self-emptying love. If the Father did not give everything—holding back nothing—to the Son, there would be two gods.
- The Son empties Godself back into the Father through the Son’s nothingness of love, a total *kenosis* of love.
- The Holy Spirit proceeds from both in the *nulla* of their self-emptying, self-giving love; and in that mutual *nulla* of love, the Spirit empties that love fully into Them.

This dynamic of the nothingness of love as the essence of God involves a mutual interrelatedness, a mutual interpenetration, and a mutual indwelling. All three of these terms are categories about the true nature of the cosmos presented in Huayan Buddhism. For Christians, these categories reflect the dynamic of divine kenotic love that is the source of the event of creation. Creation in each

2. See Philippians 2:7.

3. Here, Coda is inspired by the spiritual writings of Chiara Lubich, the founder of the Focolare.

present moment arises from this nothingness of love. Coda says that from the perspective of self-giving love (*agape*), one can reformulate *creatio ex nihilo* to *creatio ex nihilo amoris*: creation arises from the nothingness of love.⁴ From the nothingness of love in the event of creation, God gives being to what is not in each present moment. This divine relationality of kenotic love is the essence of the relational “eventing” of creation, of humanity in relation among persons and in relation to nature.

How does this relational eventing take place? Coda and traditional Trinitarian theology teaches that the Son in the Trinity is the Word of God by which God creates. “God is Love” (1 Jn 4:8), so God expresses that Love in infinite tones that converge in the Word that is the focus of Love. The Father contemplates in the Word the infinite expressions of Love that Catholic theology has called “divine ideas.” These include all God’s loving ideas of the things of creation. God then projects these expressions of God’s Love outside Godself as creation—humanity and nature. So, all things are the expressions of God’s relational creative Love. They all arise linked together in God’s Love in each present moment. The entire cosmos is flowing out of God, coming into being interrelated in God-Love. This is perhaps a bit like dependent co-arising. The entities of creation arise together interdependently.

Once created, Coda notes, this interdependence in love continues so that from a Christian perspective there is a Trinitarian “imprint” on creation. This imprint is found both in the true nature of each thing and the relationship between things. Here are

4. Piero Coda, “God and Creation: Trinity and Creation out of Nothing,” *Claritas: Journal of Dialogue and Culture* (2015): 10.

Chiara Lubich's own words about her experience of this aspect of creation:

In creation, everything is Trinity. Things are Trinity *in themselves*, because their Being is Love, is Father; the Order in them is Light, is Son, Word; and the Life in them is Love, is Holy Spirit. The All shared with the Nothing [*Nulla*]. And they are Trinity *among themselves*, because one is Son and Father of the other and, loving each other, all work together in contributing to the One out of which they came.⁵

Coda describes *nulla* as “the other side of the being.”⁶ So, one could say that the other side of creation is the loving *nulla* of God, the nothingness of love that is the creative *kenosis* of God in the act of creation.⁷ Chiara saw this in the natural world. She says:

I remember that during those days, nature seemed to me to be enveloped totally by the sun; it already was physically, but it seemed to me that an even stronger Sun enveloped it, saturated it, so that the whole of nature appeared to me as being “in love.” I saw things, rivers, plants, meadows, grass as linked to one another by a bond of love in which each one had a meaning of love with regard to the others.⁸

5. Ibid., 13 (italics mine).

6. A conversation with the author, May 2015.

7. See Donald W. Mitchell, *Spirituality and Emptiness: The Dynamics of Spiritual Life in Buddhism and Christianity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 9–31.

8. Chiara Lubich, “Paradise '49,” *Claritas: Journal of Dialogue and Culture* 1 (2012): 7–14.

On earth, all is in a relation of love with all: each thing with each thing. It is necessary to be Love to find the golden thread that links beings.⁹

When we arrived in the mountains. . . . I felt that I could discern, because of a special grace from God, the presence of God beneath things. Because God is present, sustaining all things. Therefore, if the pine trees—which I saw—were golden by the sun, if the brooks flowed into the glimmering falls, if the daisies, other flowers and the sky were all decked in summer array, stronger than all this was the vision of a Sun beneath all creation. In a certain sense, I saw, I believe, God who supports, who upholds things. God was preparing me for what would happen. And the fact that God was beneath things meant that they were not as we see them; they were all linked to one another by love; all, so to speak, in love with one another. So, if the brook flowed into the lake, it was out of love. If the pine tree stood high next to another pine tree, it was out of love.¹⁰

So we saw, I saw and then I communicated it to the others who then saw it with me—we saw that beneath the things of the world, like the meadows, the stars, the sky, the flowers, the waterfalls, there was Someone who linked them all together, a light that linked everything: it was the presence of God in things.¹¹

9. Quoted by Callan Slipper, “Towards an Understanding of the Human Person According to the Mystical Experience of Chiara Lubich in the Paradise of '49,” *Claritas: Journal of Dialogue and Culture* 1 (2012): 30.

10. Chiara Lubich, unpublished talk at Castel Gandolfo, December 20, 1999.

11. Chiara Lubich, unpublished talk at Castel Gandolfo, February 23, 2001.

Here we find that things in creation exist together in an inter-relatedness, in a “bond of love,” each being a gift for the others. This interrelated matrix of all things—humanity and nature—expresses in creation “traces” of the Trinity. This matrix of the interconnected wholeness of life is our “Home Ground,” to use Nishitani Keiji’s term, that is discovered in the penetrating insight of enlightened wisdom. With this wisdom, one discovers one’s true self as it was conceived by God-Love in the Word, and one finds a deep unity with all creation.

It is very interesting that Chiara, later commenting on this experience, saw a similarity between her Trinitarian experience of creation and the Buddhist understanding of the cosmos.¹² It is also very interesting that in her unpublished mystical writings from 1949, she wrote: “The true nature of nature is supernature . . . in other words, that which is ‘beneath’ nature.” She noted that since there is a presence of God under all things, “God lets himself be touched by wise people.” The wise of the world find the true Ground of all things—of creation.

Given this notion of creation, especially of nature, what about the ills in our relationship with all living beings today? In this regard it is helpful to look at Pope Benedict’s *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 48:

The environment is God’s gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations and towards humanity as a whole. . . . In nature, the believer recognizes the wonderful result of God’s creative activity, which we may use responsibly to satisfy our

12. Chiara Lubich, unpublished talk to the Gen, December 20, 2003.

legitimate needs, material or otherwise, while respecting the intrinsic balance of creation. If this vision is lost, we end up either considering nature an untouchable taboo or, on the contrary, abusing it.

Nature expresses a design of love and truth. It is prior to us, and it has been given to us by God as the setting for our life. Nature speaks to us of the Creator (see Rom 1:20) and his love for humanity. . . . This having been said, it is also necessary to reject the . . . position, which aims at total technical dominion over nature, because the natural environment is more than raw material to be manipulated at our pleasure; it is a wondrous work of the Creator containing a “grammar” which sets forth ends and criteria for its wise use, not its reckless exploitation.

Pope Francis expands on Benedict’s understanding of nature as a “gift” having its own “grammar” that must be respected:

The human family has received from the Creator a common gift: nature. The Christian view of creation includes a positive judgment about the legitimacy of interventions on nature if these are meant to be beneficial and are performed responsibly, that is to say, by acknowledging the “grammar” inscribed in nature and by wisely using resources for the benefit of all, with respect for the beauty, finality and usefulness of every living being and its place in the ecosystem.¹³

13. Pope Francis, “Message for the World Day of Peace” (2014), no. 9. NOTE: I am writing this before the publication of Pope Francis’s encyclical on the environment.

Pope Francis chose his name because Francis of Assisi was “a man of poverty, who loved and protected creation.”¹⁴ The pope often connects justice and peace in the world with the protection of nature. He said that being a protector of creation “means protecting all creation, the beauty of the created world. . . . Everything has been given to our protection, and all of us are responsible for it.”¹⁵ Therefore, he concluded: “Let us be . . . channels through which God can water the earth, protect all creation, and make justice and peace flourish.”¹⁶

But what is it that leads us to fail in this task, to harm our relation to other living beings? Francis points out: “So often we are driven by greed and by the arrogance of domination, possession, manipulation, and exploitation; we do not preserve nature; nor do we respect it or consider it a gracious gift which we must care for.”¹⁷

And finally, what needs to happen to change this situation? Turning back to Pope Benedict, the need is for “an effective shift in mentality which can lead to the adoption of *new life-styles*.”¹⁸ We need the wisdom to see the truth about nature, about our true nature and the true nature of all living beings, to discover the “golden thread” that links us with all creation. For Christians that means discovering God’s love pouring forth in the interrelated *nulla* of creation that can be the foundation of a new “shift in mentality”—a change of heart and mind in our relationship to all living beings.

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14. Interview: March 16, 2013.

15. Inauguration Mass: March 19, 2013.

16. Easter Sunday Mass: March 31, 2013.

17. Pope Francis, “Message for the World Day of Peace,” no. 9.

18. Pope Benedict, *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 51.