A COMPREHENSIVE SYNTHESIS 
FOCUSED ON CREATION

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I. CREATION AND THEOLOGY

1. CONTEMPORARY ENVIRONMENTAL SITUATION

Creation has long been divested of the "vestigium Trinitatis", the cosmos has been demythologized and nature has been reduced to mere material resources for consumption. Yet, today the environment is experienced as inseparable from society and integral to the understanding of human dignity. The environment (the biophysical context of all our relations) has become a focus of concern and compassion for the well being of all being. People are seeking a sense of meaning and companionship in their exhausted environment and the vastness of an otherwise cold cosmos.

Creation, in the more recent life of the church (i.e. people of God as distinct from the magisterium), has been presented in a way that emphasizes the difference between humankind and nature (i.e. the rest of creation), missing the overriding commonality in the face of the Creator. As a result, the church is having to reflect anew upon the fullness of what the magisterium has thought in the first article of faith that: "We believe in one God, the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible."1 Such speculative theology is nec-

ecessary so that communities (i.e. local church) gathering in liturgical celebration may actively profess their belief and knowingly live out their lives in the full dynamics of the Creator-creation relations.

2. PASTORAL AWARENESS

There is an evident need for a pastoral response and apologetic discourse in communities faced with widespread degradation of the environment. We need to pay attention to creation as it is our context as the people of God for living out our faith life. Furthermore, with the most popular image of God still remaining, that of the Creator, creation is an evident starting point for understanding and deepening our faith. Therefore, there is a great need for communities to continually experience God through creation. This focus on creation must affirm God as Creator in a way that broadens the context of our understanding of Christ’s promise of salvation and deepens our participation in and relations with creation in accordance with God’s plan.

Today we recognize creation as the environmental and the biophysical context of God’s continuing self-revelation and reconciliation with us and our redemption as a people acting in faith. In this context, on hearing and living the Word of God, new questions arise. With regard to the environment in particular, the theological question arises, for us as a people who believe the fullness of revelation found in Jesus Christ: how can we faithfully, clearly and meaningfully speak of creation?

3. RELATED CHURCH DOCUMENTS

With the Second Vatican Council we are made increasingly aware of the need today to understand Christ’s relation to the world. However, the Council continues to speak of “mankind’s ability and duty to strengthen its mastery over nature and of the need to establish a political, social and economic order,”

2. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 40.
3. Ibid. no. 9.
in an effort to readdress the social imbalances. The Council was unable at the time to acknowledge explicitly the social importance of the biophysical order in overcoming these injustices. Since the industrial era we have lost sight of creation in the biblical sense of humankind caring for and being sustained by all forms of life, and taken on a dominant and destructive role of man over nature.

In this regard Sollicitudo Rei Socialis shows a marked development in the concern for the environment when it speaks of “taking into account the nature of each being and its interconnection in an ordered system,” the limitedness of resources, and the industrial/urban “pollution of the environment.”

Furthermore, we can draw from Sollicitudo Rei Socialis a second point not made explicit in the Council, but traditionally held. We are reminded that “man remains subject to the will of God, who imposes limits upon the work” of creation, as the divine plan “is meant to order all things to the fullness which dwells in Christ (Col 1:19).” An earlier way of expressing this relation of creation to Creator is that: all life gives objective glory to God, and the human works within the limited good of creation to give formal glory to God.

In this sense the sustaining role of nature in relation to humanity is never to be separated from the human’s directing role of nature toward God, such that nature is never to be reduced to only the material needs of the human but must be seen in its breadth as a source of giving praise to God. In this way, the emphasis is rightly restored to the necessary overall balance of relations within creation, relations that acknowledge the differences without ever separating human society from nature. Human society is faithful only when acting with, in and for the whole of creation. Society’s responsibilities to God as Creator of all, override any sense of particular power or self service.

5. Ibid. no. 31.
6. Ibid. no. 29.
4. THEOLOGICAL INTEGRATION

Creation needs to be presented anew as a unifying theme in our faith. Our faith today in God as Creator is necessary not only because it points to the eternal God at the beginning of time and place, but because today creation is seen as the continuing activity of God. Creation is the context by which in the Spirit we participate and are united with Christ in responding to the Father, and because in the eschaton all will be taken up and transformed into the new creation. It is this movement from creation to redemption to final destiny in God, that is the context for understanding God’s plan for all of creation today. Redemption has to be understood as “penetrating the created order itself, healing and sanctifying; that it incorporates the world, in all its abiding naturality, into the mysterium Christi.”

The intention of this synthesis is to affirm a more wholistic and contemporary understanding of creation in line with the magisterial tradition and to contribute to an updating of creation as an integrated theme in Catholic theology. This will provide people with a contemporary reflection that can lead to all the major themes of Catholic teaching. With the outstanding image of God as Creator the synthesis will affirm the Trinitarian origin and direction of creation. With the risen crucified Jesus Christ as savior and summit of creation, the whole human race is seen as center of this salvation without any negation of nature, but rather positive affirmation of its relations in the economy of salvation and redemption.

All that can be presented here are a few points for consideration, remembering the dogmatic synthesis of faith with which to relate it. First, this calls for a clearer grounding of creation in the Trinity and the fullness of this revelation as found in “our reflection on the very practical and saving activities of the true God in our lives.”

the Trinity through the salvific action of Christ, we need to understand God’s call and creation’s response. Third, in understanding the integrity and purpose of creation we will then be more conscious of how we are to respond in continuing the mission of Christ today in the world. With these points more clearly understood, the theme of creation will be better articulated within the proclaimed faith of the church and at a later date can be used as the basis for a more dynamic but well founded creation theology.

II. TRINITY AND CREATION

1. A RELATIONAL GOD AS CREATOR

There has always been an acknowledgement of the general revelation of God through creation both in the Old and New Testaments. With the fullness of Christian revelation it is also made clear that from the beginning the three Persons are active in creation.¹⁰

As the theology developed, creation was appropriated to the Father, as redemption was to the Son, while sanctification was appropriated to all three Persons, though it was the Spirit who was properly present or indwelling in the person. However, with such constant reference and limited understanding creation has at times been seen as the work of the Father. People often stopped with affirming the will of the Father in understanding God as Pantokrator without reference to Son or Spirit. Furthermore, the Son as redemption in creation, resulting in new heaven and new earth was not very clear, nor was the Spirit’s presence in creation.

We are again returning to wonder at God’s creating activity with the realization that only a God who is relational would create. It is the mystery of the Trinity as communion that has given us the mystery of creation. A purely monotheistic God would never find pleasure in creating purely out of love.

¹⁰ “First General Council,” Neuner and Dupuis, no. 305.
2. THE RISEN AND CRUCIFIED AS THE SUMMIT OF CREATION

To understand the Trinity we must turn to the paschal mystery where God for the first time is revealed as Trinity by the Son. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is a Trinitarian event in history where Jesus the crucified is recognized as the risen Son of the Father sending the Spirit. It is in the history of the early faith of the church that the roles of the Son and Spirit are already made clear.\(^1\)

Now in our present context we hear anew the "Word" and "Spirit" of John 1:1-3 and Genesis 1:1-2 with greater wisdom. We understand creation as being carried out from the Father through the Son and in the Spirit. One of the first things the early Fathers\(^2\) had confirmed was this Trinitarian economy in relation to creation when confronting the heresies of the time that claimed the God of creation in the Old Testament and the God of redemption in the New Testament were different Gods. The humanity of Jesus and the divine personhood of all three were also confirmed.

Today we must understand anew this one Godhead, in its Trinity of Father, Son and Spirit, as from the beginning of time creating and orienting all activity toward God’s own incarnation\(^3\) — "in-creation" — as Jesus of Nazareth. With such an understanding of the Trinity active in creation we can affirm the risen crucified Jesus Christ as the summit of creation. In this God’s activity is seen as redemptive, occurring within creation.

Working from below we can acknowledge that nature is the context of human creation, which is the inseparable center of all creation. Furthermore, creation as a whole is seen as the context for salvation, the summit of which is Christ’s own resurrection and promise of the transformation of the whole of creation in the eschaton. Now we can more easily grasp the salvific modality of Christ’s action. The Son of God is recognized as savior of all life and the new creation; this is the historical

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13. Eph 1:9-10; Col 1:15-17.
revelation of God in creation. This affirms the broader context of the resurrection giving place in the eschaton to the whole of creation. This gives us room for hope at a time of environmental destruction, that God is actively working in the world and wants the whole world to share in the fullness of life, rather than experience only the disembodiment or disintegration of creation.

3. IMAGES OF GOD AND CREATION

In order to respond to the question of creation and the eschaton a deeper understanding is needed of the Cosmic Christ and of the Spirit. Once Christ’s participation in Creation is understood anew then the relation of the theme of creation with other themes of Catholic faith becomes clearer and more meaningful.

First, for many people it is difficult to understand the meaning of Christ’s presence at the beginning of time. When we speak of the Son present at creation it is as “the Word” in John, not as the historical Jesus of Nazareth nor as Kyrios.

Second, there is the acceptance of a chritic sense of creation, to the extent that Christ needed a material body for the incarnation. As a result creation is seen as focused on Christ as the summit of creation and, therefore, as being good. However, this is not adequate expression of God’s plan if we are to stop here. We must follow through from this incarnational focus to the resurrection and the divinization of the world in the eschaton, in the new heaven and earth, the new place for the human beatific vision.

Third, the Christ event is not just the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, but includes the protological and the eschatological dimensions. Christ as cosmic savior calls for a re-reading of the past as it does of the future. From this we can understand that creation at the beginning was not absolute, nor was it the fullness of life (being good yet limited), but that it awaited the revelation of Christ in history and ultimately the fullness in him as new creation at the end of time. Here Jesus is seen as the Alpha and Omega.

Fourth, the presence of the Spirit in creation, as it is in the church, is to bear witness to Christ who is made manifest in creation. “It is the Spirit who energizes the cosmic process, imparts life and brings the universe to its order and perfection.”

4. GOD’S ONGOING REVEALING ACTION

In order to give emphasis to these images it is important to stress the presence and activity of God so that creation does not become mere things, but is seen as being related to and worked by God. It is, therefore, through a sense of relating that we can acknowledge the transcendent, without dissolving everything into one, and also avoid the contemporary separation of man and nature. We also avoid presenting God as an interventionalist disrupting the biophysical laws of creation, or as a watchmaker who leaves the world ticking.

This sense of relating gives us an understanding of all creation being a loving act of God who continues, not merely to leave signs of having been present, but to be actively relating through the created world to humanity. Humanity is the center of this creation, all of which share in the revelation of Christ to be brought to its fullness in him. Christ is the historical expression of this sharing in God, which is centered on human salvation, yet cosmic in his relation to being. This grounding of creation in the Trinity is clearly relational, but it must now be further understood as to how creation responds.

III. CREATOR-CREATION RELATIONS

1. THE SUSTAINING POWER


16. Clement speaks of creation as a continuing reality (Stromata 5:16). Origen spoke of all creation coming forth from God yet finding its unity (and so its end) in him. The more modern cosmogenesis understands this as all life converging in Christ.

17. Thomas Aquinas speaks of the “active creation” of Creator to creation; “passive creation” is the ongoing relation of Creator-created (I, 45, a. 3).
One of the most important aspects of a trinitarian understanding of the environment, as all life partakes in the creative blessings and action of God today, is that we see life in its bodiliness, multiplicity and fruitfulness continuing to give glory to God and to share in the promise of the Kingdom. Common to all living creation is the blessing of being fertile, multiplying and filling the earth (Gen 1:22). The added blessing given to humankind of caring for the earth (Gen 1:28) clearly involves responsibility and freedom.

The first blessing is to be understood as a caring and sustaining relation of God with all creation. God sustains the existence of the whole of creation, the interdependent elements of which sustain each other. This is what is understood in the Franciscan tradition as nature being “a graced interlocutor of humankind,” and humankind being the formal expressor of God’s glory.

2. NATURE CHANGING

This blessing of creation is not mechanical in effect. On the one hand, there is in nature an integral process that gives life to previously unknown and undefined forms of life. Such new forms of life sustained by God and patterned in response to the environment with integral coherence result in unpredeterminable uniqueness.

On the other hand, while the whole of creation is good, it is limited and in need of God’s graced action. There is an evident incompleteness, weakness, alienation or occasion to chaos in nature, resulting in physical dis-order. In the human this limitedness is expressed more clearly as concupiscence often resulting in moral evil. To such weakness God responds by caring and healing as well as by forgiving.

In discussing these two dynamics within nature there is a need to avoid the anthropomorphic categories of grace, freedom and sin. There is a need to find categories that express God’s relating

with nature, rather than just to the human level of creation, for creation is not powered, sustained, renewed and diversified by humankind alone. It is here that such terms as harmony, coherence, integrity and integral process are used on the one hand, and chaos, disintegration and physical disorder on the other. With the relations of creation-Creator acknowledged we can now look at the relation within creation of nature and humankind.

3. HUMAN IMAGING OF CREATION

We must first acknowledge creation in the context of providing for human needs, material and spiritual, and serving God incarnate, then we can look at the relation from the side of human activity. All materials of human work are derived from nature whether used in their original form or processed, and result in a unique environment that is both natural and human. Beyond human industry, in society there is the notion of institutions that "encompass the full field of stable and enduring mediation." 19 This sense of complex relations can be extended to nature and be referred to as the environment given the evident order and relation to society, and incorporation into the image of humanity. 20 The environment is that which society has looked upon and formed according to its needs. This should bring humankind closer to its creative good and the salvation of all creation.

Human imaging of nature also has a rational dynamic. The human role is to explain, to thematize the transcendental — the immediate consciousness of nature — and give glory to God. In other contexts these relations of Creator-creation, nature-society and society-God spoken of as the God-man-land-God relation.

This clearly calls for a mature image of nature, and a good way of understanding the necessary change is to recognize the radically different image Israel had of God. The great development in the belief of the Israelites over other religions of the time was that they no longer saw God as cruel or one to be

20. Ibid. 43.
appeased, but as a personal, loving and faithful God. Humankind was not a plaything for the God of the Israelites, but a loving creation protected by a jealous God. From this, humanity has to learn to image God’s relation and no longer treat nature as a plaything. Society has got to grow jealous of its land and seas and become protective. In doing so people stop centering upon themselves and learn to truly give and receive, avoiding the self-focusing that is not only selfish but self-destructive.

4. THE CONTINUING WORK OF CREATION

What is now needed in an effort to integrate this chapter with the preceding chapter is to view the over-arching dynamics of creation as found in Genesis. We can see in Genesis 1-11 as a whole, creation past, present and future. Creation has always been viewed as having a beginning, a past. When we see creation as activity, as relation, which is most comprehensible in God’s self revealing to humankind, we can see that nature, as present, shares in history. Nature shares in the covenants (Gen 9:9, Jer 33:19-25), proclaims (Ps 89:6) and serves (Ps 119:91) God. Nature also shares a future as the eschatological context for humanity in the fullness of the reign of God.

Given the revelation of Jesus Christ that God is still working, we can now see that Gen 2:1-3 is also a prefiguring of the end of time, the Sabbath when all give glory to God. The cosmic implications of Christ’s resurrection evident in his own bodiliness which he maintains, are more than we can imagine. The new creation is not only the new Adam, but the whole of creation elevated as the new heaven and the new earth, creation redeemed. All of creation is for the glory of God, shares in the messianic promise and is filled with the Spirit.

In this vision of redemption we can now see for nature much deeper levels of participation and relation that suffer greatly when the rich symbolism of creation is reduced to a concept of utility for a dominant humanity. For this we need to acknowledge again both Christ’s revelation as essential and the graced and free response of humankind.

Finally, therefore, to respond in hope to the promise of new
life, the contextualized human act calls for an expanded soteriology that is not limited to the sinful person, but reaches society and the whole of creation groaning.

IV. CREATION AND THE CHURCH

1. EXPERIENCE OF DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE

The church has contributed to a more balanced overview when she speaks from being in-the-world.21 Paul VI speaks of development in a growing understanding of evangelization as the new word for peace when sought in its fullness.22 John Paul II speaks of solidarity being the real context of development and peace.23 In his New Year message of peace, the Pope develops what was introduced in Sollicitudo Rei Socialis as a worldwide concern for the environment. He sees the importance of better management, but recognizes that the remedy is to be found deeper in the moral order and respect for life. He considers the need to address poverty and strife, and for change in lifestyle and education, in order to respond to the common obligation to care for the environment.24

The World Council of Churches similarly puts in broad perspective the environmental crises when it held its assembly in Korea on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation25 and presented a whole series of charters for action. Likewise, the Philippine Bishops’ Pastoral Letter26 was a reflection based on personal experience and confirmed by many in their call for action.

21. Gaudium et Spes, no. 10.
23. Sollicitudo Rei Socialis.
2. MISSION OF THE CHURCH

The church has a societal dimension in that she does not work for the salvation of the individual soul, but of communities realized in relations. Furthermore, we recognize much of the injustices suffered today are mediated not only through institutional structures but through the land, sea and air. Injustices uncritically passed off on others result in exhaustion and degradation of the environment which affect the whole of society. The degenerating environment has come within the sphere of scope of the call for social justice, for people’s dignity and the integrity of the environment are being destroyed.

The responsibility of Christian communities does not stop at the level of charters and moral reflection. It is only when we as a community share in the sufferings and joys of the world, when we participate, dialogue and serve in the world, that we can truly witness in the face of environmental problems and disasters, and point to the good and the presence of God Creator and Redeemer. The community must affirm environmental values and actions as part of salvation history, an effort to affirm environmental renewal.

Community service and witness are constitutive of the mission of the church in the world and in particular, her mission in the environment today. The church realizes that she must give lasting meaning to the world, a world which is not only ordinary and secular, but also shares in the reality of the sacred and eternal. Today, the church must acknowledge that her mission, the mission of Christ, is to work for the salvation of the whole world using the values of the world infused by Christian virtues of faith, hope and love.

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this theology, should make ecology a special concern of the social action apostolate down to the parochial level, with the end in view of making everyone a true steward of God’s creation. #2. An ecology desk must be set up in social action centers.” The Council Decrees were promulgated on July 22, 1992. See Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (Manila: Secretariat, Second Plenary Council of the Philippines, Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, 1992) 243.
3. SACRAMENTS AS A SOURCE OF UNITY

Today, many communities are asking: Can the church be a source of reconciliation with the environment and overcome their broken relation with the land? People with nowhere to go and not knowing what to do, cry out from the land — like the blood of Abel. People are experiencing personal shame and moral outrage at how they are forced to live in the environment. Coming from scripture, the eschatological imagery of redemption is seen in reconciliation between persons, but also with society and nature.27 God’s relation with creation is one of total independence while creation’s response one of total dependence. The relation within creation between nature and humankind is one of interdependence or symbiosis. The challenge is to participate more knowingly in God’s creative plan.

This challenge is comparable to that of Israel’s time in Egypt, when they emerged only into a desert in response to the promised land and gave us Genesis. Their return from Babylon gave us the creation story anew and the Lord’s glory in Deuteronomy. The penitential motivation28 in both cases, and not mere appreciation of natural beauty, is again today the source of much hope and renewal of our people and our environment. This reconciliation throws new light on the sacramental life of the church that embodies the hope of a new creation. The need for environmental reconciliation should remind us of the blessings of creation and covenants of old.

Furthermore, the sacramental principle of material reality in communicating the divine should remind us of the sacramental power of creation. There is Jesus’ eucharistic thanksgiving to the Father by Jesus for the fruits of the earth at the beginning of the church’s eucharistic prayer. Jesus’ offering of himself is a covenantal recognition of the integrity of the world and of human dignity in the face of the loving Father. Jesus took bread, said the blessing, broke the bread, gave it and said, “This is my body.” Likewise in the eucharist as in his daily ministry, the actions gave

meaning to the words. He took what humankind had formed: bread, and gave us God. His actions gave reality to his words, he remembered, and he gave thanks.

Not trying to establish any sacramental parallelism, but in order to point to the basic symbolism of life, we can recall at creation: God took clay and breathed on it; then blessed it, gave it fertility to multiply and to reign over the earth, and said, "it is good." The gift of creation is a continuing gift of life, the eucharistic sacrament is a gift of new life wherein again creation participates, wherein we are taken into the life-death-resurrection of Christ and are able to offer our own daily lives and receive the new life promised. We must take the environment, give thanks, allow it to multiply and care for all, for within all of this is the gift of life.

4. PILGRIMAGE IN CREATION

The story of creation is not an idle myth. It is part of the salvation history that the church lives. Creation is in history, creation is the environment in process, and shares in the Christ story. This is the story by which Christ lives amongst us and moves us toward the fullness of salvation history of the whole world. It is the Kenosis of God being poured into all creation from the beginning, that given the fullness of revelation, allows for our creative and just human participation in the plan of God.

We can see the integrity with which creation relates to human society and how we must respond with a greater awareness of human dignity, not human domination. This should give us a deeper experience of how we are called to be the image of God. With renewed wonder we will recognize that creation is centered on humankind and that we are not centered on self but God. Then, on our pilgrimage, we will seek with creation one voice to give glory to God.