

EXPERIENCING THE DIVINE IN CREATION

Commentary by James Profit, S.J.

The cloning of sheep, genetically engineered foods, nuclear energy, fish factory trawlers, bigger pig barns . . . Father Kolvenbach is correct in stating the ecological crisis arises out of faulty thinking and that the problem is more an ethical than a technical one. Technology has brought us many benefits and can continue to be of help in providing solutions. However, it has perhaps never been clearer that we need to address ethical concerns about technology. Two among the many moral questions are Who benefits from technological advances? and Whether we should be doing something merely because it is technically possible? Kolvenbach suggests that a better appreciation in philosophy is needed for re-establishing a correct balance between all creatures of the earth. While I do not disagree, I contend that the more fundamental issue is spiritual not philosophical. This is implied in Father General's discussion of Francis of Assisi and Ignatius of Loyola.

Many factors have contributed to the present crisis. One of them is that we have become accustomed to separating the spiritual from the physical, and often have understood the natural world as merely physical. The Church, with its emphasis on the transcendent God and other-worldly speculation, has not always been of great help. The experience of the spiritual within the natural world (within creation) needs to be encouraged. We encounter God when we encounter creation; its beauty is an expression of the beauty of God. Once we experience God within creation, our treatment of the earth must automatically change.

Exposure to the sense of the sacred within creation means that, for some, exposure to the beauty of the natural world is in order. People can be encouraged to observe and experience their own environment. A dandelion

growing through the crack of a sidewalk can speak much to us about God. Many people can live their lives oblivious to the reality of God's presence all around them. However, I suspect that for most of us, the problem is not one of exposure but of expanding our notion of God. The relationship we have with the natural world is a relationship with God. We experience joy and peace when we walk in a park, take a canoe trip or climb a mountain because we have touched into God. This is a spiritual experience.

I remember a conversation that I once had with a lobster fisher. He commented that, even after some twenty years of fishing, he still experienced seasickness. This happened only when the sea, the wind and the storm patterns of the previous week were of a particular combination. He went on to describe all of the various possible combinations and the one combination that brought on the sickness for him. I was amazed at his knowledge of the sea. He lost me after the first sentence! Yet, the excitement in his voice and love for the sea was very noticeable. It was obvious to me that he was describing spiritual consolation. Nevertheless, I suspect that if I were to ask him if he experienced God on the sea, his answer would have been no. The God that he learnt about in church was not what he experienced in his work on the sea.

I know this too from my own experience. My family was devoutly religious and I was encouraged to seek God through our church. I also spent much time on the farms of my cousins and camping with my family along PEI's beaches. I loved these times, and was always very happy in the outdoors. As a result I have a relationship with the land, beaches and ocean of PEI that is very much a part of who I am. It was only years later, with an experience of Native Spirituality while studying theology, that I came to realize that roaming the fields and beaches as a youth was a spiritual experience. In a way that Christian rituals failed to do, the rituals of Native Spirituality spoke to my experience of a God of love and beauty who is a nurturing Mother. No one had to explain the rituals to me. They simply expressed my experience. Upon reflection, I real-

ized that without even realizing it, I received this experience of God from my exposure to the outdoors. It was, in fact, in sharp contrast to the knowledge of a judging God received within the church.

An experience of nature in its spiritual and physical totality can teach us about certain realities of life that can guide us in our quest to live in balance. For example, any great amount of exposure to nature exposes us to the reality of death, and its importance for life. Our culture avoids death. Evidence of this is everywhere. I recall an advertisement trying to sell a kit for making wills that never mentioned the word "death" once! Even some environmentalists, products of our culture, romanticize nature and fail to accept the aspect of death that is a part of it. As a result they can often become very critical of people who make their living off the land, and fail to see the very real relationship these people have with the land.

I remember once observing a bumper sticker saying that we must remember the recent gun control law the next time we vote. On the sticker was a beautiful image of a loon. It struck me as strange at first to have such a beautiful image of life on a pro-hunting sticker. However, as I have come to know hunters better, the image does not seem so contradictory now. People hunt for many reasons I would suppose, but one of them is for the chance to be renewed by the land and have an experience of connectedness to the earth -- what I would call a spiritual experience. For them, causing the death of an animal is truly one aspect of being a participant within creation.

This does not say that all death within creation is a good, or that there are no hunters who are participating in immoral practices. Obviously, many forms of death are causing the destruction of the earth. There is death that only leads to death, and there is death that leads to new life. The former is what I would call sin, and the latter is what I would call resurrection. A deep relationship with the earth can help us get in touch with the beauty of the latter. It also makes us weep over the destructive sin of

humans that results in the abuse of the earth. Our task as ethical Christians and environmentalists is to discern between the evil and life-giving forms of death. We decry and avoid the sinful destruction of the earth, and are renewed by and cooperate with the death that leads to new life.

We need to be continually renewed by our experience of the sacred within nature. Like all prayer, this should be a daily occurrence. The occasional immersion in nature is not enough as this may result in simply a romantic experience of nature that leaves us quite separate from the earth when we return home. Being sensitive to the spiritual in the natural world around us, no matter what that may be, is of more benefit. Contemplating a compost heap in our back yard can be a wonderful spiritual encounter with the death that gives life! If we strive to have a spiritual experience of the universe, we receive a sense of being a part of a greater whole that is beyond our understanding. We can receive a reverence for the mystical reality of the universe, and as a result may not be so liable to fall for the temptation of playing God with our environment.

Hope is a powerful by-product of contemplating the spiritual in creation. Given the perilous situation of the earth and the sinful abuse we are giving her, it is invaluable for energizing our actions. Through contemplation, we touch into and are renewed by the mystical presence of God in the earth, or to put it another way, the amazing ability of Mother Earth to bounce back and regenerate herself though she has been so abused by human sin. 'The birds still sing the day after the atomic bomb explosion.' This presence within Mother Earth is not unlike the presence of God that enabled Jesus to rise on Easter Morning in spite of the sin that caused his death on Good Friday. Our experience of the resurrection nurtures our hope!

I was aware of this once when I worked in Jamaica and attended a lecture by a person from Europe who had written some important works on eco-theology. He began

his lecture with a litany of sins that we are afflicting on the earth, similar to those articulated by Father General. At the end of the lecture, someone asked the question, "Where is the hope?" but he was unable to point to much reason for hope. I wanted to say that I am hopeful in spite of the sin of humanity, because I experience and believe in the resurrection. This was not a mere pious statement, but the expression of my experience of working with peasant farmers who certainly knew their share of suffering. It constantly amazed me that hand in hand with the experience of Good Friday that many people had to endure, there were so many signs of the resurrection. Ironically, it was by working with people who suffered daily that I came to understand what the resurrection was all about. I also experienced this resurrection in the Earth when I saw how the people and land of Jamaica bounced back from the devastation caused by Hurricane Gilbert in 1988. When I see a dandelion overcome great odds by poking through a crack in a sidewalk, I experience this again.

As a result, I have confidence that the Earth will survive. The renewed interests of people in the earth and our awareness of the destructive sinful behaviour are two other signs of resurrection. This hope-filled confidence is a statement of faith, but a faith rooted in an encounter with God in the earth. It is not an empty statement that allows me to get off the hook while I let God do all the work. Rather, it energizes me to truly allow myself to be a part of the earth community, working for the healing of the earth in the same way I strive to work for healing in the community in which I now live. Remaining a person of hope is a great grace. I am also aware that this grace is very much connected to the gift of being able to roam the fields and beaches of PEI as a small child.

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