

THE PLACE OF FAITH IN THE GEOGRAPHY OF HOPE

*i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky;and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes*

*(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings:and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)*

*how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any—lifted from the no
of all nothing—human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?*

*(now the ears of my ears awake and now the eyes of my eyes
are opened)*
e.e. cummings †1962¹

Introduction

This year marks the 50th Anniversary of the Wilderness Act. Signed into law by Lyndon Johnson, the act was the first piece of federal legislation to forever designate

some nine million acres of land as “Wilderness Places,” putting them under the protection of the newly created National Wilderness Preservation System. Today, that system includes more than 110 million acres and for many people the passage of the Wilderness Act marks one of America’s greatest achievements concerning the protection of our heritage and the promotion of the common good.

There is a simple text at its core: “A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” The Act goes on to state that such land is to be understood to retain its “primeval character and influence,” to have been “shaped primarily by the forces of nature,” and to have outstanding opportunities for such things as “solitude.”²

The language is succinct, even poetic, and stands in sharp contrast to the often more plodding prose typical of government legislation. More importantly, the language points to underlying claims, implicit convictions about the meaning of nature, its place in our lives, and the role and significance of nature in the development of one’s own character and the common good of the country. Commenting on the importance of wilderness in our collective imagination, the advocate and novelist Wallace Stegner says that even if some of us are never able to enter wild spaces, we can still contemplate the *idea of wilderness*;

¹ E. E. Cummings, *Poems 1923-1954* (New York: Harcourt, 1954), p. 464.

² *Wilderness Act*, Public Law 88-577, (16 U.S.C. 1131-1136) 88th Congress, Second Session, September 3, 1964.

we can “take pleasure in the fact that such a timeless and uncontrolled part of earth is still there. For it can be a means,” he says, “of reassuring ourselves of our sanity as creatures, a part of the geography of hope.”³

Such a seamless identification of wilderness with sanity and hope could only have emerged from a posture toward the world as *cosmos*, an ordered whole brought into existence by a God who is fundamentally good. To put my thesis in its simplest terms: the legislation of the Wilderness Act and the overall movement of environmental concern out of which it came is fundamentally rooted in the often unexpressed but nonetheless unequivocal affirmation that the created order is good and that it has intrinsic values to be shared, that nature in its vastness⁴ offers us something worthy to behold. The opportunity to behold it, moreover, to stand before its veiled splendor, is an essential aspect of our human, our religious, our national flourishing. Ours will forever remain a religious nation as long as our natural piety is preserved and the porticoes of the sacred--that is, our wilderness spaces-- remain open to its citizens.

The Wilderness Act is a miraculous achievement on the part of the American people which put into “concrete” practice the theological conviction that creation is good, indeed, very good. As the Lord employed Cyrus in order to

achieve his aims in restoring Jerusalem (as noted by the prophet Isaiah), he used the Johnson administration in a kind of modern day equivalent. For through him (and others engaged in similar efforts) the foundations were laid for the rebuilding of a new Jerusalem, a Catholic culture which can only be built upon the pillars of the earth, can only be built from the ground up.

And so mine is not a call to some kind of back to nature movement or an altar call to some nature cult. My remarks should be taken as a foreword (really, a plea and a prayer) for a much deeper and profound revolution: to set in motion the conditions in which a renewed, authentic Catholic culture can emerge. For there and only there, squarely within the temple of creation, a Catholic culture takes root, the good news of Jesus Christ moves from its conceptual power to its cultural expression, heaven and earth are wed in the *physical body* of the believer, the *mystical body* of believers, and the *plan of the Incarnation* takes root in history.

There is always a geography to our hope, in other words, because there is always a place to our faith. Christianity is not an idea, an abstraction nurtured in the intricacies of some curriculum, nor is it an insight of an ego marooned on an island of self-preoccupation, nor, finally, is it woven within a political agenda, a labyrinth of like minded citizens united to a cause. Christianity is, rather, the extraordinary invitation of one enfleshed person to another, the bold exchange of an eternal friendship between the embodied being of the human person and the divine person enfleshed in Jesus Christ.

³ Wallace Stegner, “Wilderness Idea,” in *The Sound of Mountain Water* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), p. 115.

⁴ The act stipulates that portions to be designated as “wilderness” must be “at least five thousand acres of land or is of sufficient size as to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition.”

Christ, the Logos made flesh, *is* the One through whom all flesh, all things, are made. Made visible in the person of Jesus Christ, one and the same Logos remains veiled in His creation. The book of the Holy Scriptures and the Book of Nature are one, because God is the serial editor. Catholics cannot be indifferent to this *preambula fidei* writ-large that is our wilderness, because we are not indifferent to the Word of which it speaks. Christ, the Logos made flesh; Christ the Logos of creation. There is always a geography to our hope, because there is always a place in our faith.

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The native habitat of the human person is as an embodied being among embodied beings, an enfleshed creature in the material cosmos of enfleshed creatures, intelligently arranged by God and intelligibly pondered by man, a nexus of which constitutes the natural environment of the human person as such. The human person, whose dignity lies within his spiritual destiny, is nonetheless a creature of the earth, a living, organic being among living, organic beings, whose immortal soul by nature transcends material creation and yet by grace permeates it with eternal significance.

The entire hierarchy of being, from the lowliest creature up to man (and, beyond, to angels), is permeated by a Provident intelligence that supplies the necessary connections between lower creation and its grace-filled care. Contemplation, conservation, or cultivation -- each vocation unfolds within this milieu; every vocation unfolds in a location.

Take one example, the vocation of the farmer: bent low in respect of the soil, he enters into a relationship with an order of creation that is itself already ordered and whose wisdom becomes his norm. His practical wisdom must submit to a logos which lies hidden in the order of things. This is why his labor was understood for centuries to be an "*ars cooperativa*," a co-operative art, because his achievements are yoked to the intelligible forces at work in creation itself.⁵ Like the teacher who guides the natural desire to know on the part of the student, or the doctor who capitalizes on the natural desire to live, or the husband and wife who enact the natural desire for communion, the prudent farmer labors with nature's creative forces and coaxes from the earth the fruits she is destined by Providence to yield.

The farmer's practical craft is to be distinguished from that of the craftsman, who works to create what is first only in the human mind. The farmer, by contrast, becomes a master in his craft only through the long and laborious tutorial in the fields. Agriculture is a unique human enterprise, for it is through this labor, perhaps more than any other, that one learns of the grammar of the

⁵ John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*, 37, "Man, who discovers his capacity to transform and in a certain sense create the world through his own work, forgets that this is always based on God's prior and original gift of the things that are. Man thinks that he can make arbitrary use of the earth, subjecting it without restraint to his will, as though it did not have its own requisites and a prior God-given purpose, which man can indeed develop but must not betray. Instead of carrying out his role as a co-operator with God in the work of creation, man sets himself up in place of God and thus ends up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature, which is more tyrannized than governed by him."

Creator.⁶ There is always a geography to our hope, because the earth (*geo*) is written (*graph*) by God.

Saint Thomas teaches us as much. Notwithstanding the dignity of the human being as the *imago dei*, the human person nonetheless occupies the lowest order of intellectual creatures, because the human being is utterly dependent upon organic substances in order to engage in any intellectual acts. Thomas's portrait of the person is premised upon the notion that human knowing is dependent upon *things*, things already thick with meaning, immersed in light, pregnant with intelligence. Blinded before the brilliance of beings, I am an apprentice in the Braille of all learning. I feel my way across the texts of the world, discerning through its impressions the message of creation, the message of the Creator. Deaf to its vocation, I listen in solitude, for as the author of Job says, "Ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this?"⁷

⁶ See Chapter 3, "Agriculture and Personal Values," in *The Importance of Rural Life According to the Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas: A Study in Economic Philosophy*. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1945). Also Emerson Hynes, "Consider the Person," *Catholic Rural Life Bulletin* 2.2 (1939) 16. The integral nature of agricultural labor as well as, more generally, the family farm was a constant theme of Catholic rural social teaching throughout the 1930s, 40s and 50s in the United States.

⁷ Job 12: 7 -9.

For the "poetry of the earth is never dead;"⁸ divine wisdom speaks in things. The coherence of living organisms as well as the community toward which they naturally tend are objectively given in reality and express "the design of love and truth of the Creator Himself." Such an order "is prior to us and has been given to us by God as the setting of our life."⁹ It is not contrived from a set of clear and distinct ideas of some disembodied cogito; it is not the projection of a transcendental ego; nor is it the remnant of some human habit or social custom. Wisdom is intrinsic to things and its apprehension by reason is an exercise in objective knowing.¹⁰

This wisdom, moreover, written into the very order of things, is not directly implicated in the fall. The punishment of original sin, the loss of original justice, does not directly affect the lower orders of creation, specifically the animals, the plants, or inorganic matter. Rather, it is our grasp of the logos of creation that is now fleeting and fraught with error due to original sin. Already limited by its

⁸ John Keats, "On the Grasshopper and the Cricket."

⁹ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate* 48.

¹⁰ "The first act of the intellect is to know, not its own action, not the ego, not phenomena, but objective and intelligible being." Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, OP, *Reality: A Synthesis of Thomistic Thought*, translated by Patrick Cummins, OSB. (Saint Louis: Herder, 1950), p. 388. Cf. *Summa theologiae* I 84.7. "The proper object of the human intellect, which is united to a body is a quiddity or nature existing in corporeal matter; and through such natures of visible things it rises to a certain knowledge of things invisible." For a recent discussion of the practical implications of this priority of being for moral theology, especially medical ethics, see, Edward J. Furton, "Ethics Without Metaphysics: A Review of the Lysaught Analysis," *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly*, Spring, 2011, pp. 53 – 62.

dependence upon organic experience, the human mind is further wounded by a disordered will. As Christopher Franks so aptly put it, “We resent our nature, and we resent nature in general. We struggle against it, and we seek ways to triumph over it through technology. Ours is a pathological ingratitude, a special sort of ingratitude, because it amounts to being resentful of who we are.”¹¹

But for their part, Aquinas says, “all natural things were produced by the Divine art, and so may be called God’s works of art.”¹² Divine providence continues to extend to the communities of creatures, even in this post-lapsarian state, for the nature of animals, he explicitly states, was not changed by man’s sin. (I.96.1) Their habits of being are precisely now what they would have been prior to the fall, for it is only the intellectual creatures, the angelic and the human, which are immediately caught up in the drama of rebellion. In contrast to our checkered history, each creature of lower creation has always born the *vestigia dei*, indeed the *vestigia Trinitas*. The universe of things placed before us this very day, “the gay great happening illimitably earth,” continues to reflect the beneficent wisdom of God.

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This thesis that the integrity of lower creation remains intact throughout the drama of our salvation history is one of the most important aspects of our Catholic

theological tradition and seems to be increasingly beclouded in Catholic intellectual circles. The loss of confidence in integral natura-as-given, as the medium through which divine wisdom is discerned, hobbles our capacity to build a vibrant Catholic culture.

In the first place, in matters of preaching the gospel in contemporary times, the flight from *natura* impedes the potential convergence between our living Catholic doctrine and the environmental movement more broadly. For seen in its best light, the movement is at the core the un-thematic revolt of conscience among those generations of modernity who intuit that something is deeply flawed in our posture before the natural order; that our habits of treating nature as a mere raw datum of purposeless matter is not consonant with the facts on the ground.

This would not be the first time the Church could be called upon to correct a widely held but alien vision of material creation and our place within it. The Albigensian heresy of the 12th century (itself an ancestor of a still earlier heresy – Manicheism) was, (somewhat anachronistically), an environmental philosophy that endorsed a vision of material creation as utterly corrupted, and the human person as an abomination in a disordered world. Thomas, of course, was among that Order of Preachers who responded; and he can supply us with the necessary tools to address the meaning of the environment and our place within it still. Of course, it will not be enough to merely repeat the insights of the 13th century mendicant; Thomism is never a matter of learning by rote. But we would be very

¹¹ Christopher Franks, *He Became Poor: The Poverty of Christ and Aquinas's Economic Teachings* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), p. 10.

¹² *Summa theologiae* I.91.1.

well served if we would renew our efforts to consider how the Church's affirmation of creation, and Thomism in particular, can address some of the fundamental questions surrounding environmental stewardship.

Second, in matters of moral theology, the loss of *natura* makes difficult a proper appropriation of the natural law as the rational creature's participation in the eternal law. Increasingly cast as an ethic set within a cosmos devoid of a natural teleology, the characterization of our participation becomes: conceptual, idealist, epistemic, or, Steven Long says, logicist.¹³ “[But the] affirmation or a transgression of the Eternal Divine Law,” the Dominican Mislaw Krapiec, reminds us, “does not take place in an abstraction nor directly in relation to God Himself. Rather, it takes place through the composition of things ... with which we either do or do not reckon in our conduct.”¹⁴

Our rational participation in the eternal law unfolds in a distinctively human manner, in other words; that means as an embodied creature of the earth. And thus our participation, our inclinations are inescapably woven

within the fabric of relations that makes our living human. The natural law, at its core, asks the question: how do I as an organic, albeit rational, being flourish within this theonomic cosmos.

Third, the adumbration of *natura* makes it that much more difficult for the theology of the body to blossom into a full fledged theology of embodiment, of an enfleshed, organic creature among organic creatures, in which the body is not merely the medium by which the person expresses a gift of self, but is the welcoming threshold by which one receives the originative gift of being in all its splendor. Its recovery may create the conditions for the further development of the theology of the body from the skin outward, if you will, and thus a theology of embodiment within a community of organic bodies. It may allow the philosophical anthropology of the human person to take root once again in its native soil, namely, cosmology, and resist the temptation to cast the analysis of the human person within the horizon of interiority.

Fourth, overcoming the encroaching angelism that besets our intellectual endeavors, the recovery of the body may inspire a re-evaluation of what constitutes “bio-ethics” in Catholic circles, perhaps to include the “non-rational 99%” in its considerations. It may inspire from its practitioners an equally detailed analysis of the first command given to Adam: to till and to keep the earth (remarkably passed over in silence)-- as well as the prohibitions regarding food and what we are permitted to eat.

¹³ Steven A. Long, *Natura pura: On the Recovery of Nature in the Doctrine of Grace*. New York: Fordham, 2010.

¹⁴ Mieczysław A. Krapiec, O.P., *I-Man: An Outline of Philosophical Anthropology*, trans Marie Lescoe, Andrew Woznickia nd Theresa Sandok, et. al., (New Britain, CT: Mariel Publications, 1983), pp. 229-230. His emphasis here pertains to the human person, but the general insight applies more broadly. See also, Bernard Quelquejeu, O.P., “Naturalia Manent Integra: Contribution e l'étude de la portée, méthodologique et doctrinale, de l'axiome théologique “*gratia praesupponit naturam*.” *Revue des sciences philosophique et théologique* 49 (1965): 640-655. And, Jan Aertsen, *Nature and Creature: Thomas Aquinas's Way of Thought. Studien und Texte zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters* (Brill, 1988): 386.

The problem, William French notes, “is not that recent Popes have been too physicalist in their reasoning, but rather quite the opposite. I would submit that they’ have been insufficiently physicalist. If you want to see physicalism, read Medieval theologians on the doctrines of the Incarnation and Creation. Read in Thomas about how God sustains each existent entity and living being in each moment. Read in Francis’s Canticles and other writings how he names a wolf and the sun “Brothers” and the moon, water, and “Mother Earth” as “Sisters.” If ecology [and the tradition] has taught us anything, it is that there is nothing wrong with physicalism.”¹⁵

Fifth, advancing a conception of the human person as the substantial union of soil and soul is the only thing I can think of that might address the remarkable gap in our own Catholic educational mission: namely, that of the 244 Catholic colleges and universities here in the United States, not a single one offers a program of instruction in agriculture. It is difficult to know what accounts for our collective loss of appetite for acknowledging the fact that we eat, and that our food comes from – dare I say it-- dirt. But it might be related to the broader neuralgia concerning the natural teleology of the human body, or embodiment in particular.

And finally, retrieving a Catholic theology of creation may finally give us grounds for hope in some of the most vexing matters facing us today. For it follows that if it is we

who are caught up in the drama of sin and creatures are not, a certain docility to their intelligibility would be the only prudent measure to take. Before we propose to modify creatures to suit our expectations, it would be wise to consider how our own ways of acting may be in need of modification. Before we ignore the form and finality of living things – the distinctive principles of organic life, we might pause to consider how our modern biases have lent themselves to reducing the creature to an artifact of our productions. The deliberate, genetic modification of a naturally occurring creature is not just an exercise in human ingenuity; it is a recasting of the divine creature as a mere product of human making. If unchecked by habits of humility, natural piety and the norms of prudence,¹⁶ such practices run the risk of deforming creation, whose original wisdom is our norm, of transforming the creature into a “resource” whose value is to be merely to be “used.”

When our “use” of creation involves the manipulation of its very structures and natural purposes, as in the case of the trans-genetic modification of creatures, such an enterprise cannot be undertaken except in deliberate deference to the order and wisdom of Creation

¹⁵ William C. French, “Natural Law and Ecological Responsibility: Drawing Upon the Thomistic Tradition,” *University of St. Thomas Law Journal* 5.1 (2008): 39.

¹⁶ Because I appeal to the exercise of prudence, it precludes the notion that the deliberate, genetic modification of lower creatures is, strictly speaking, intrinsically disordered. At the same time, prudence would demand the greatest circumspection in such an instance. Because “we are not yet in a position to assess the biological disturbance that could result from indiscriminate genetic manipulation and from the unscrupulous development of new forms of plant and animal life, to say nothing of unacceptable experimentation regarding the origins of human life itself,” (*Compendium*, 458) it is only wise to counsel against such practices.

of which the creature is a part, with utmost care and prudent circumspection, when proportionate goods are clearly identified and reasonably expected, and all other reasonable alternatives have been considered, including the modification of one's lifestyle.¹⁷ It is not a question of using creatures for the benefit of man and the glory of God. It is rather a question of the norms for such use, norms which are not only written in the human heart, but written into creation itself from the beginning.¹⁸

In conclusion, my insistence on the ontic priority given to things, a kind of preferential option for the creature, emerges from a conviction-- in truth--, an inexpressible joy, about the character of the eternal law as manifest in this cosmos of which I find myself a part.¹⁹ In all humility, I suggest that creation's integrity in this present age, its capacity to disclose the divine wisdom at work, is a matter of received Catholic doctrine and needs to be re-

¹⁷ "Thomas understood that by resisting some practices of a developing profit economy, he was defending the very notion that reality is penetrated by divine reason." Franks, *He Became Poor*, 184.

¹⁸ *Compendium of Catholic Social Thought*, 458, 459. Also, "Science and technology must be put in the service of the divine design for the whole of creation and for all creatures. This design gives meaning to the universe and to human enterprise as well. Human stewardship of the created world is precisely a stewardship exercised by way of participation in the divine rule and is always subject to it. Human beings exercise this stewardship by gaining scientific understanding of the universe, by caring responsibly for the natural world (including animals and the environment) and by guarding their own biological integrity." International Theological Commission: *Communion and Stewardship: The Human Person in the Image of God*, (2002): 61.

¹⁹ Elsewhere I have called for a "green Thomism" to emerge as an apt response to the challenges identified here. See my, "Perennial Wisdom: Notes toward a Green Thomism," *Nova et Vetera* 10/1 (Winter 2012): 67-80.

asserted and celebrated in every corner of theology, for the eclipse of *natura* makes the vision of a Catholic culture impossible and is contributing to a kind of theological somnambulance from which we will have to wake up.

At the conclusion of *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre, famously comments that we have to await a new Benedict. I will be waiting somewhere along the Green Mountain Trail, where the Big Meadows meet along Lower Tonahutu at the southern edge of Rocky Mountain National Park. Or maybe our paths will cross somewhere in the back country of the Quetico Superior Region, or sauntering in the native prairies of western Wisconsin. Where ever I meet him, I suspect he'll keep a steady pace because he respects the rules of the wilderness and knows that man is a mere visitor and cannot remain. A rosary in his pocket, a *Te Deum* on his lips, his eyes will be fixed on a point on the horizon -- a spire stands in contrast among the cathedral of the pines, a still point in the geography of hope, where a table is set with bread and wine, where all creation rightly gives Him praise, saying: i thank You God for most this amazing day

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