

long custom.

Faithful to the spirit of poverty right to the end, he had asked for the cheapest possible coffin (good example for the rest of us). And no need to buy a funeral suit, for he had a suit set aside for that. I think it was the only suit he had.

Just after the great snow of 1996, a few minutes past midnight on January 8th, Red died in his sleep.

He had once described being "lost and abandoned and dying for union with God" as "the ordinary human condition," but he

felt it far more than most. He even mentioned a hunger for God that was painful.

Bracketing my own doubt, I like to think of Red on one of his long walks, sauntering happily through the gates of heaven and right into the presence of God. With the trumpets sounding and the angels smiling and passing the word, "Red's here! Home at last."

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Renewing the Face of the Earth

A Meditation

Thomas Storck

In the glorious mysteries of the Rosary there is an interesting shift of perspective between the second mystery, the Ascension of our Lord, and the third, the Descent of the Holy Spirit. After his crucifixion Jesus Christ rose gloriously from the grave and spent a period of weeks putting the finishing touches on his instruction of the Apostles. And then he left this world. This action shows us that Christ's eternal kingdom will not be on this earth. He did not set himself up in Jerusalem as universal king, and compel the obedience of all nations by miracles or force. He turned our attention to the things above, reminding us that someday we too will leave this present life. But then, the very next mystery of the Rosary gives us an entirely different viewpoint. Jesus Christ sends his Holy Spirit to this earth, to the very place he had just left behind. The Church even prays, in the words of Holy Scripture (Psalm 104:30), that the Lord will send out his Spirit so that the face of the earth will be renewed. So on the one hand, by ascending into Heaven, our Lord is showing us that we must not expect an eternity such as the Jehovah's Witnesses propose for most of their believers, everlasting life on a perfect planet earth, with a never ending supply of this world's goods. But on the other hand, he is also showing us that a very important part of our vocation is concerned with this world, the world to which he sent the Holy Spirit and the face of which is to be renewed by the Spirit's coming. If we hold both of these truths in our minds, if we meditate on both of these mysteries of the Rosary, then we are apt to keep these two aspects of our faith in their proper harmony. But it is particularly the second of these mysteries that I want to look at now. And it seems to me that there is much in this mystery that is well worth the consideration of those of us who still dwell on the face of the earth and who might be able to have some role in renewing that face.

The created things of this earth—with the exception of human beings—that the Holy Spirit is sent to renew are all things that will eventually pass away. The Post-Communion prayer for the first Sunday of Advent (in the original Latin)

refers to them as *praetereuntia*, that is, *things that are passing away*. Yet these very things that will pass away, these things that will not last, someday will be arrayed under the lordship of Jesus Christ, the King of all creation, and in some manner will contribute to his glory. In the first chapter of his letter to the Colossians (verses 15–20), St. Paul says of Christ that "in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible" and that "all things were created through him and for him." And that the fullness of God dwelling in him was pleased "to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross." In fact, this is only one of several passages in the New Testament which speak of Jesus Christ as the head or the climax and crown of all creation, or of the related idea of creation being presented or subjected to the Son of God. In the first letter to the Corinthians (15:23–28), St. Paul writes of all things being subjected to the Son and "then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be everything to every one," while in Ephesians (1:10) he speaks of God's purpose to "unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth," and a little later (verse 22) that "he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all."

If these created things are to be presented to Jesus Christ and united in him or reconciled to him, it would seem that they are not to be regarded as merely passing things, in the sense that they have absolutely no lasting importance or meaning. For the passages from the letters of St. Paul that I quoted above refer to the establishment of the eschatological order, the final ordering of things when the fullness of the kingship of Christ Jesus is made manifest. If with the final coming of the Kingdom of God these created things are simply cast off and allowed to perish, then why would St. Paul state that "all things ... things in heaven and things on earth," are to be united in that final and eternal order?

If we were to read Paul without the guidance of the teaching Church we might conclude that Christ is to reign over the planet earth forever, an earth pretty much like it is today, except that disease, poverty, war, etc. have been eliminated. As I said before, this is not to be the case. Obviously there is much here that must remain a mystery to us, but we can ask the question of what effect this mystery might have on us and on our conduct. That is, since we know that the things of this created order, even though they will pass away, have, in some way or other, eternal significance for the reign of Jesus Christ, should that have any practical influence on our present way of life in this world? Can we cooperate with the Holy Spirit in the renewal of the face of the earth and perhaps facilitate the restoration of all things in Christ?

From another passage of St. Paul it seems that there definitely is a relationship between us and this renewal of creation. This passage can be found in his epistle to the Romans, chapter 8, verses 19 through 23:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

This passage seems to be saying that the earth and all that is has been waiting for us, for the children of God, for the Holy Church of God. And why? What are we to do to relieve the "eager longing" and the "groaning" of the created world? Perhaps we, by our treatment of creation, could begin, even now, that healing process which the actions of our first parents make necessary. It is true that the wounds caused by the sin of Adam go very much deeper than anything we can do to heal by the way we treat created things. But nevertheless, since mistreatment of created things is rooted in Adam's sin, it does not seem amiss for us, after we have received the grace of our new birth, to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in renewing the sum of created natures. Especially since "the creation waits with eager longing" and "has been groaning in travail" for us. For the earth has been waiting for those who would treat it with the respect due to a work of God, who would not, for example, recklessly bulldoze forests for trivial purposes, but would respect the trees at the same time as we cut down those we need for our churches, homes, schools and other buildings. It has been waiting for those who would (the words are Leo XIII's) "learn to love the very soil which yields in response to the labor of their hands, not only food to eat, but an abundance of the good things for themselves and those that are dear to them." It has been waiting for those who would with their hands work the silver and gold or iron and copper into objects both useful and beautiful, not force them into giant machines, there to undergo impersonal grindings and wrenchings. And if this seems far-fetched, consider the words of the Scripture I quoted above, "creation waits with eager longing." It is not just animate cre-

ation, but the trees, the grass, bushes, rocks, metals within the earth. They are longing "to be set free from [their] bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God." They are "groaning in travail together," waiting for us. It is certainly true that their final liberation will not occur until our Lord returns as judge of the living and the dead. But it is equally true that our life and our actions now are not something unconnected to our life hereafter. In fact, as St. John says, the believer has already "passed from death to life" (John 5:24).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, in its teaching about creation, says much about the relations that ought to characterize man and the rest of creation. In no. 340 it states, "Creatures exist only in dependence on each other, to complete each other, in the service of each other." Moreover, "There is a *solidarity among all creatures* ..." (no. 344, emphasis in original). And what is our role in this? We were created "to offer all creation back to" God (no. 358) and "to share in [God's] providence toward other creatures; hence [our] responsibility for the world God has entrusted to" us (no. 373).

To sum up the argument so far: Although the things of earth will not last forever, they are nonetheless to be offered to God the Father through Jesus Christ, as part of the restoration of all things in him. Only in this way can the wounds of original sin, which affected even inanimate things, be healed. Moreover, the earth and even all the cosmos is waiting for the cooperation of the "sons of God" with this work of restoration and healing, for man was created "to offer all creation back to" his Creator.

In what ways can we share in God's providence toward the world and help offer it back to him? In one way, of course, our task is obvious. For we have much to do with what kind of world will be presented back to Jesus Christ, and through him to the Father. We can offer to God a world of sins, a world of injustices, a world filled with the products of an art and culture which degrade and corrupt. Or, on the other hand, we could offer, in some degree at least, a world in which true community and justice flourish, a world whose artistic works are formed by a local and traditional popular culture, not mass-produced and imposed by the financial might of corporations. But I think there are also other ways in which we can take part in this work, ways which are complementary to those I mentioned just now.

The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is the supreme act, not only of worship of Almighty God, but of that offering of all things to him of which St. Paul and the new catechism speak. Even in its material aspects this is so. In the Mass we offer bread and wine, created products of the earth, products in which the work of man complements the natural growth of wheat and grapes. And we offer them in vessels made from minerals taken from within the earth. If the bread and wine are offered in the setting of a beautiful liturgy within a beautiful church building, then the best works of human culture are also included in that offering, the theology, spirituality, music, art and architecture which were created under the inspiration of the Catholic faith, God's final revelation to man. If the Mass is seen as the height and center of any civilization, then the offering of the Mass sums up that civilization's offering of created nature back

to God. For example, if the bread and wine are products of a system of farming and an economic system that respect the earth and the social nature of man, it could be said, I think, that those farming practices and that economy are offered to God in and through the offering of Jesus Christ. In this way we can attempt to make our offering the best that is possible.

On a different plane, as the representation of the sacrifice on Calvary, the Mass actually takes part in that reconciliation between God and man which must precede and accompany any reconciliation between man and the rest of creation. Moreover, the Victim who is offered at Mass is the God-Man, that is, one of flesh and blood, whose flesh and blood were nourished over a period of thirty odd years with the products of this earth, with plants and animals, water and wine. Thus the physical body of Jesus Christ also sums up the offering of created things to God the Father. This physical body is, of course, made up of the things of earth. Yet Catholics should recall the startling truth that this physical body is itself worthy of divine worship, not because of its own properties, to be sure, but because it is united to the Eternal Logos. As Pope Pius VI (1775-1799) taught against the Jansenists, "...the humanity and the vivifying flesh itself of Christ is adored, not indeed on account of itself and as mere flesh, but inasmuch as it is united to the divinity." Thus the little things of this world, bread and wine, flesh meat and fruit, fish, and all that Christ consumed during his life on earth, were transformed by a natural process into the flesh of Jesus Christ, and thus, in a sense, they were divinized.

Similarly, but in a less concrete way, other human actions and good works helped to form and sustain our Lord in his human nature. He was nurtured by the very human act of being fed, first at his mother's breasts, then by the work of farmers and herdsmen and merchants. He wore clothes and shoes made by some human workman. Furthermore, our Lord was taught, no doubt by his mother and St. Joseph, possibly in a school; he lived under a political system, deeply flawed it is true, but still, as St. Paul makes clear, having the essential properties of a government. This government helped create and preserve that human peace and common good which allowed him to grow up within a human family and community. Thus all the good things, works and actions that in any way contributed to the formation of our Lord in his human nature are, in a way, offered as part of the offering of Jesus Christ in the Mass, for, since it is Christ, man as well as God, who is offered, necessarily all that shaped him in his humanity is offered too.

And of course, a similar thing has happened with regard to our Lady.

Her assumption into Heaven again shows how the things of earth will be taken up and become things that last forever. And when she was crowned Queen of Heaven, in a sense, all creation was crowned in her, for she represents everything here below, as its Mother and Queen. And something similar will also be true for all who will be saved. But obviously, the examples of our Lady and of all the blessed are not something accomplished apart from Jesus Christ. In fact, they are accomplished only as part of his Mystical Body, thus as part of Jesus Christ himself.

If all this is true, what does it say to us? Does it suggest new things for us to do, new devotions or new acts of justice or charity? Not necessarily. Ultimately what I am suggesting in this article is not that we do anything new, anything that we are not, or should not, already be doing, but that we see our good works, whether natural or supernatural, as intimately related to the Sacrifice of the Mass, to the offering of Jesus Christ on the Cross and on the altar, because in this sacrifice he offers not just himself, but all of created nature, because all of created nature is, in a sense, in him. And this offering of all creation in and through the God-Man is itself the cause of the reconciliation not just between God and man, but between man and the rest of creation, and between and among each and every created thing, for it is the sacrifice and death of Jesus Christ that effects this. Does this give us new motives for doing good works and creating just structures? I would think so, for if we can understand the connections between our acts and created works in this world and the offering of creation to God the Father, how could this not give an impetus to whatever efforts we can make here below? Anything we can do "to offer all creation back to" God is more than seconded by Jesus himself, for as both Priest and Victim in the Mass, he offers himself, the sum of all that is and of all the good we have done. Thus we can aid the Holy Spirit in renewing the earth, not just by what we do in our own lives, but by joining ourselves to what Jesus Christ himself does when he offers himself as a Victim in the Mass. Furthermore, these considerations could be fruitful subjects for our meditations, and for connecting our meditations with our life and actions.

St. John, who was both seer and prophet, gives us a very vivid image of the earth and all creation at the end of time. Their exact meaning, of course, will remain a mystery for us until then, but in his words we can see something of an earth truly renewed by the Holy Spirit and entirely pleasing to its Creator:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a great voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away."
(Revelation 21:1-4)

At the end of time, then, this mystery of the final ordering of created things will become clear to us. Then we will see the glory of all things arrayed beneath Jesus Christ and perhaps we will be able to perceive how our cooperation in good works contributed to that glory. Until then we can only pray to the Holy Spirit for grace to cooperate in his renewal of the face of the earth, according to our own vocation as Jesus Christ wills.

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