

THEOLOGY AND ECOLOGY

- Topic: An Ecological Theology of the Holy Spirit
in Response to the Signs of our Time
- Convener: Jame Schaefer, Marquette University
- Presenter: Denis Edwards, Flinders University
- Respondents: Dawn Nothwehr, Catholic Theological Union
Kevin Irwin, Catholic University of America

In a cogently crafted and illuminating presentation, Denis Edwards shared his latest effort to develop a systematic theology that is responsive to the ecological signs of our times. He drew upon notions about the Holy Spirit in biblical, primarily Cappadocian, and recent texts, which he appropriated cautiously and informed with contemporary scientific findings. The result was a narrative of the Holy Spirit that is meaningful and relevant for Catholics today.

The story of the Spirit begins not with Pentecost, not with Abraham and Sarah, and not with the first human beings, Edwards explained. The story of the Spirit begins with the "Big Bang" creation and subsequent unfolding of the universe, continues as a story of grace with the emergence of the first human beings, reaches its culmination in the Christ event, and continues in the outpouring of the Spirit that establishes the church as a communion in Christ. In every aspect of this story, creation and grace, incarnation and church, and Word and Spirit are reciprocally interrelated.

Today, the Spirit can be understood as the power of becoming, the power that enables the evolution of the universe and of every living creature. The Spirit is the Faithful Companion to each creature and Midwife as creation groans "in labour pains" (Rom 8:22), enabling the unforeseeable birth in which all things will be made new. The Spirit of God can be considered as "making space" within the divine relations for a relational universe to evolve. The Spirit is the "unspeakable closeness of God" (Moltmann) in the otherness of nonhuman creatures, sometimes a wild and uncontrollable presence, but *someone* who is not less than humanly personal but infinitely more. To be drawn into communion with this Holy Spirit is to be drawn into a personal communion with the whole of creation.

Dawn Nothwehr responded positively to Edwards' proposal, noting the affinity of his work with Franciscan thinking about the transcendence and immanence of God in relation to the world. She lauded his retrieval of the sense of wonder and awe about the pervasive presence of the Spirit in the universe, and she perceived his efforts as a welcome move toward acknowledging to some extent what other religions have been openly claiming about the spirit-filled world. Nothwehr proceeded to detail some of the broad implications Edwards' theology of the Spirit has for Christian social ethics when grounded in the norm of mutuality from cosmic, gender, generative and social dimensions.

In a thoughtful written response, necessitated by having to leave the convention early due to a death in his family, Kevin Irwin characterized Edwards's theology of the Holy Spirit as an "insight-filled, probing, and creative gem." His contribution constitutes a systematic theology with an ecological emphasis which is crucial for the theological enterprise in general, Irwin insisted, and one that is especially urgent today. He related Edwards' theology of the Spirit to Vatican II sacramental and liturgical reforms which placed theological weight on the power and operation of the Holy Spirit. Irwin emphasized the need for theologians to articulate the sacramental dimensions of the connection between the sacred and the secular physical world or they will continue to remain separate in the thinking and behavior of the faithful.

Comments and questions that followed conveyed deep appreciation for Edwards' theology of the Spirit and a desire to probe his thinking into the normative behavior it would require. His notions about the Spirit as Midwife to all creation and Companion of all who have emerged and continue to emerge through the cosmic-biological evolutionary process were identified as particularly promising models to explore for their ethical implications. That Catholic theologians should frame their reflections in a cosmic setting was underscored.

During a business meeting at the end of the session, members expressed the need for some continuity between the subject matter of this session and the next. Among the ideas proffered were asking Irwin to present his thinking about sacramental theology that is responsive to ecological degradation, using Edwards' theology of the Spirit as a springboard, and seeking a moral theologian to reflect on his/her vocation in light of ongoing ecological concerns. Participants also indicated a desire to seek from CTSA members and make available through the CTSA web site the syllabi of environmental theology and/or ethics courses they are offering at their institutions.

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