

## ECOLOGICAL THEOLOGY: TRINITARIAN PERSPECTIVES

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How should we think about life on our planet—its evolutionary emergence, its abundance and diversity, and its vulnerability to human behaviors—in relation to the Christian view of God the Trinity? In exploring this issue I will begin with an example of ecological diversity and vulnerability, the Great Barrier Reef. Then I will take up insights on the relation between the Trinity and the natural world from three points in the history of trinitarian theology: its emergence with Athanasius, its systematic expression in Aquinas, and its contemporary evolutionary articulation. I will conclude by taking up Pope Francis' thought on the Trinity in relation to human persons and their ecological conversion.

### *The Great Barrier Reef*

The Great Barrier Reef is the largest living structure on our planet, the only living thing that can be seen from space. It runs for 2,300 kilometers along the north-east coast of Australia. It is, then, the largest of the world's coral reef ecosystems, containing about 3,000 reefs and 1,050 islands, ranging from small coral cays to large continental islands. The brilliant, beautiful, colors of the Reef come from 600 different types of coral. These corals are not plants, but colonies of small animals called coral polyps. Some of them are hard corals, which form the building blocks of the reefs, while others are soft corals, which do not form a skeleton, and appear more plant-like. The polyps live in symbiotic relationship with photosynthetic algae, called zooxanthellae, which feed the reefs, and give them their brilliant colors.

The Great Barrier Reef is built on limestone platforms that are the remnants of earlier reef systems, which existed from about 600,000 years ago. The current living reef is believed to have begun its life about 20,000 years ago. The Great Barrier Reef includes enormous areas of seagrass beds, mangroves that represent 54 percent of the mangrove species of Earth, 1625 species of fish (many of them spectacular in their coloring), 133 species of sharks and rays, 30 species of whales and dolphins, 100 species of jelly fish, and 3,000 types of mollusks. It is home to an important population of dugong and to six of the seven species of marine turtle.

The Great Barrier Reef received world heritage status in 1981. It was described by the World Heritage Committee as having outstanding universal value, so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries and to be of common importance for current and future generations of humanity. It amazes and delights millions of visitors a year. It is of enormous significance to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who are the traditional owners of the Great Barrier Reef region. There are about 70 indigenous groups for whom the land and sea country of the Reef has cultural, spiritual, social, or economic value.

From algae to marine turtles and whales, the Reef supports a wonderful diversity of species and habitats. Conserving the Reef's biodiversity is essential for the future of life on the planet, but this biodiversity is under extreme threat, with much of the Reef already damaged. The Great Barrier Marine Park Authority lists four major causes. The first is climate change that results in warmer oceans, more extreme weather events, and ocean acidification. The other causes are poor water quality because of run off from

agriculture and industry, coastal development, and illegal fishing. In 2016 the Great Barrier Reef suffered a catastrophic bleaching event, and as I write this there is drastic news of a second major bleaching year in 2017. Bleaching occurs when corals lose or expel zooxanthellae. Increased water temperature impacts the coral's ability to supply the algae with nutrients for photosynthesis and leads to their expulsion. Bleaching can lead to the death of the coral through starvation. It seems that 80 percent of the Great Barrier Reef was affected by the 2016 bleaching event, and it left about 20 percent of the coral dead. As the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority points out, this same bleaching event impacted many tropical reefs:

Since 2014, severe mass coral bleaching has been occurring in most tropical regions across the world in the longest mass bleaching event ever recorded. This global event was triggered by record-breaking sea surface temperatures caused by climate change and amplified by a strong El Niño. For the Great Barrier Reef, this resulted in the worst ever coral bleaching in 2016.<sup>1</sup>

Scientists see increasing sea temperature as the single biggest risk factor for the Great Barrier Reef in the short and mid-term.<sup>2</sup> Over a longer time scale, ocean acidification is likely to become even more dangerous. Carbon dioxide from human activity, released into the atmosphere, ends up in the oceans and affects the abilities of corals and other organisms to form skeletons or shells, which threatens the existence of the carbonate structures that make coral reefs what they are. Future degradation of this extraordinary ecosystem is inevitable: "Even if the causes of global climate change were addressed today, residual greenhouse gases in the atmosphere will prevent the global climate from stabilising this century."<sup>3</sup> So the Reef will certainly suffer further damage. Whether it survives in anything like its glory depends upon how the human community deals with climate change, along with the other issues of water quality, coastal development, and fishing.

The Great Barrier Reef is a wonder produced by the evolution of life on our planet. It has emerged at the edge of the Australian continent, in interaction with the sea and the photosynthesizing energy of the sun. Coral reefs can live only within a narrow temperature range and in a situation of relatively shallow depth— they need to be below the level of the sea, but they also need sunlight, which means that they can grow only above a depth of 150 meters. Coral reefs are a product of the symbiotic relationships between coral polyps and the zooxanthellae, in interaction with the countless microorganisms, algae, plants, crustaceans, fish, and birds that inhabit them. The Great Barrier Reef is a marvel of biological interrelationships, complexity, and diversity. For human beings it is inexpressibly beautiful. In what follows I will explore how this glorious interrelated world of life can be understood in connection with the dynamic

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<sup>1</sup> <http://elibrary.gbrmpa.gov.au/jspui/handle/11017/3044>. I have grown in my own engagement with the Great Barrier Reef through dialogue with Brother Timothy Graham, a doctoral student at Australian Catholic University, who is working on a thesis on ecological theology in relation to the reef.

<sup>2</sup> J.E. Johnson and P.A. Marshall, "The Great Barrier Reef and Climate Change: Management and Implications," in *Climate Change and the Great Barrier Reef*, ed. Johnson and Marshall (Townsville: Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority and Australian Greenhouse Office, 2007), 775. <http://www.gbrmpa.gov.au/managing-the-reef/threats-to-the-reef/climate-change/how-climate-change-can-affect-the-reef/great-barrier-reef-vulnerability-assessment>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 800.

God who creates and renews all things through the Wisdom/Word and in the Holy Spirit, beginning with insights from the theology of Athanasius.

### *The Creative Trinity of Athanasius*

Part of what draws me to Athanasius is that in his work we find a theology of the Trinity that seems fresh and young. It is deeply biblical, a narrative theology of the Word and the Spirit actively engaged in the one economy of creation and salvation. It is always a theology of the Trinity in action. Athanasius's central interest is in the realism of the narrative of creating and saving, hence his strong defense of the full, eternal divinity of the Word and of the Holy Spirit. In his theology a green turtle, swimming over a brilliantly colored reef, exists only because it partakes of the Wisdom/Word in the Spirit. The turtle is the self-expression of divine Wisdom and bears the imprint of Holy Wisdom.

For Athanasius, the saving Word of the cross is the very same eternal Word in whom all things are created. He sees the incarnation, and its culmination in Jesus' death and resurrection, as bringing about the deification of creation. Creation and salvation are inter-related in a fully trinitarian theology: "The Father creates and renews all things through the Word in the Holy Spirit."<sup>4</sup> I will highlight four aspects of Athanasius's trinitarian theology of creation: the immediacy of God the Trinity to creatures, the biblical symbols for the Trinity, the generativity of the Trinity, and the inclusion of the wider creation in deification.

#### *Immediacy of God the Trinity to Creatures*

Many in the ancient world, including many Christians, shared the Platonic assumption that some form of created intermediary is needed between creatures and the transcendent God. For Athanasius's Christian opponents, like Arius, a radical view of divine transcendence ruled out a direct relationship between the all-high God and created entities. A mediator was needed, and they saw the Logos as such a mediator. Creatures participate in the Logos, and the Logos participates in God but is not the all-holy God. For such thinkers, as Peter Leithart says, the Word of God "serves as a buffer between God and creation."<sup>5</sup>

Athanasius completely rejects this approach. There is no buffer, no mediator. The Word of God is not a created intermediary, but fully transcendent, fully divine, and fully eternal. How then is the ontological gap between creatures and God overcome? For Athanasius, it occurs through divine self-humbling and divine condescension. The Word of God is truly God, who "condescends" to engage with creatures in a way that lovingly respects their being and their limits: "the Word condescended

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<sup>4</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *Letters to Serapion on the Holy Spirit* (= *Ep. Ser.*) 1.24.5, in *Works on the Spirit: Athanasius and Didymus: Athanasius's Letters to Serapion on the Holy Spirit and Didymus's On the Holy Spirit*, trans. Mark DelCogliano et al. (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Peter J. Leithart, *Athanasius* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 91.

(*sunkatabebēke*) to the things coming into being when he was creating them at the beginning so that they be enabled to come into being.”<sup>6</sup>

What is happening in this theology, Khaled Anatolios points out, is that Athanasius is radically transforming the idea of divine transcendence by means of the biblical categories of divine mercy and loving-kindness. In Athanasius’s theology, Anatolios suggests, God can be said to transcend God’s own transcendence.<sup>7</sup> God condescends to be immediately present to creatures in the act of creating. The condescending, self-humbling character of God in creating accords with the kenotic character of God revealed in the incarnation. In both creation and incarnation, the Word of God is a self-humbling God, who descends to be with creatures, for the sake of their creation and deification.<sup>8</sup> In Athanasius’s thought, of course, the immediate presence of the Word and Spirit to creatures also involves the immediate presence of the Father, because of the unity of the one divine essence.<sup>9</sup> As Athanasius says, making use of one of his favorite symbols of trinitarian correlation, the one who experiences the Radiance is enlightened by the Sun itself and not by any intermediary.<sup>10</sup> The Three are immediately present to the creature in the one divine act of continuous creation.

### *Symbols for God the Trinity*

Elizabeth Johnson, along with other feminist theologians, has shown how damaging it is both to the cause of women and to the understanding of God when theology and preaching are limited to male language for the Trinity. She insists on the need not only for female symbols, but also for symbols taken from the natural world.<sup>11</sup> Symbols taken from nature, I believe, can inspire a richly trinitarian ecological theology, one that can embrace the Great Barrier Reef and all its creatures.<sup>12</sup> Athanasius offers the beginning of a helpful line of thought on this issue. He insists, on the one hand, that God is radically incomprehensible and beyond limited human language.<sup>13</sup> But he is equally insistent that we have been provided with a source of language for God in the biblical names or symbols (*paradeigmata*) for God. He writes: “Since human nature is not capable of comprehension of God, Scripture has placed before us such symbols (*paradeigmata*) and such images (*eikonas*), so that we may understand from them, however slightly and obscurely, as much as is accessible to us.”<sup>14</sup> Athanasius mines the Scriptures for these symbols, reading them in the light of

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<sup>6</sup> Athanasius, *Arians* 2.64, trans. Khaled Anatolios, in *Athanasius* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 157.

<sup>7</sup> Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 104.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 113.

<sup>10</sup> Athanasius, *Arians*, 3.14.

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

<sup>12</sup> See Denis Edwards, “The Ecological Significance of God-Language,” *Theological Studies* 60 (December 1999): 708–22.

<sup>13</sup> *Ser.* 1.17.6.

<sup>14</sup> Athanasius, *Orations against the Arians* (= *C. Ar.*) 2.32. I am using the translation in Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 127.

Christ according to his intertextual hermeneutics. In his *Letters to Serapion*, for example, he brings together six of these biblically based symbols of the Trinity:

The Light, the Radiance, the Illuminating Spirit (1 Jn 1:5; Heb 1:3; Jn 1:9; Eph 1:17).

The Fountain, the River, the Spirit of Whom We Drink (Jer 2:13; Ps 65:10; 1 Cor 12:13; 1 Cor 10:4).

The Father, the Son, the Spirit who make us Sons and Daughters (Rom 8:15; Jn 1:12).

The Font of Wisdom, the Wisdom of God, the Gift of Wisdom (Baruch 3:10, 12; Rom 16:27; 1 Cor 1:24; Eph 1:17; Ps 146:7–8).

The Source of Life, the Life, Life-Giving Spirit (Jn 14:6; Gal 2:19–20; Rom 8:11).

The Father Works, the Son does the Works of the Father, the Works are actualized in the Power of the Spirit (Jn 14:10–11; Rom 15:18–19).

These symbols matter greatly to Athanasius. In his view they manifest the full divinity of the Word and the Spirit and bring out the true ordering of trinitarian being and action. As Anatolios points out, “in each case the Father is the source, the Son is the outgoing manifestation and imaged content of the source, and the Spirit is the outward actualization of that content in and towards creation.”<sup>15</sup> In my view, Athanasius’ biblical symbols bring out the beauty of the Trinity at work in creation and salvation, and they point to the dynamic generativity at the heart of trinitarian life that finds expression in the world of creatures.

### *The Generativity of Trinitarian Life*

Athanasius’ thinking on divine trinitarian generativity and its inner relation to creation is spelled out in his argument against his Arian opponents, who claim that the Word has a beginning. The fruitfulness of the world of creatures, he points out, can only have its source in the eternal divine generativity of God. But if the Word is a creature who had a beginning, if there was a time when the Word was not, then God would not be eternally generative. Such a view, he declares, undermines the eternal “generative nature” of God.<sup>16</sup> God, then, would be like a fountain gone dry, a light that does not shine forth:

In accord with them, let not God be of a generative nature, so that there may be no Word nor Wisdom nor any Image at all of his own essence. For if he is not Son, then neither is he Image. But if there is no Son, how then do you say that God is Creator, if indeed it is through the Word and in Wisdom that everything that is made comes to be and without which nothing comes to be, and yet, according to you, God does not possess that in which and through which he makes all things (cf. Wis 9:2; Jn 1:3; Ps 104:20, 24). But if, according to them, the divine essence itself is not fruitful but barren, like a

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<sup>15</sup> Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 142–43.

<sup>16</sup> Athanasius, *Arians* 2:2.

light that does not shine and a fountain that is dry, how are they not ashamed to say that God has creative energy?<sup>17</sup>

In Athanasius's trinitarian theology, God is a Light with its everlasting Radiance that enlightens creatures in the Spirit, a Fountain always pouring forth a River of living water from which creatures drink in the Spirit. The God that he defends is a God of endless life, a God who is fruitful by nature. The coral polyps and their symbiotic partners, the zooxanthellae, the glorious reefs themselves, the mangroves and seagrass beds, the spectacular fish in all their diversity and coloring, the rays and dolphins, the dugongs and the marine turtles, all spring from the dynamic generativity of the God who is the Source of Life, eternally bringing forth Life itself and the life-giving Spirit.

### *The Final Fulfillment of All Creatures in God*

Creation and deification are deeply interrelated in Athanasius's thought, so that a commentator on Athanasius says that he "thinks of creation and sanctification as one single work."<sup>18</sup> In his doctrine of creation, Athanasius sees creatures as existing only because they partake of God, through the Word in the Spirit.<sup>19</sup> His theology of deification is also understood as a partaking of God through the Word and in the Spirit, but one that now involves a new, deeply interior, radically transforming, and far more stable participation in God. In his theology of deification Athanasius focuses on humanity's adoption as God's daughters and sons, but he often speaks in the same breath of the transformation of creation: "And thus all creation partakes of the Word in the Spirit."<sup>20</sup> He does not make sharp distinctions between the deification of human beings and the rest of creation. Furthermore, there are times when he refers explicitly to Romans 8:19–23 and Colossians 1:15–20 to include explicitly the whole creation in the liberation that comes through Christ's resurrection:

The truth that refutes them is that he is called "firstborn among many brothers" (Rom 8:29) because of the kinship of the flesh, and "firstborn from the dead" (Col 1:18) because the resurrection of the dead comes from him and after him, and "firstborn of all creation" (Col 1:15) because of the Father's love for humanity, on account of which he not only gave consistence to all things in his Word but brought it about that the creation itself, of which the apostle says that it "awaits the revelation of the children of God," will at a

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> C. R. B. Shapland, *The Letters of Saint Athanasius Concerning the Holy Spirit* (London: Epworth Press, 1951), 37.

<sup>19</sup> Athanasius, *Against the Greeks* 41 in *Athanasius: Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*, trans. Robert Thomson (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1971), 15. In his Second Letter to Serapion he quotes Psalm 104:30, "When you send forth your Spirit they are created," and then comments: "Seeing that this has been written, it is clear that the Spirit is not a creature but is involved in the act of creation. The Father creates all things through the Word in the Spirit. For where the Word is, there also is the Spirit, and the things created through the Word have their strength to exist through the Spirit from the Word. Thus it is written in Psalm 32: 'By the Word of the Lord the heavens were established, and by the Spirit of his mouth all their power' (Ps 32:6)," *Ep. Ser.* 2.14.1.

<sup>20</sup> *Ep. Ser.* 1.23.7.

certain point be delivered “from the bondage of corruption into the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Rom 8:19, 21).<sup>21</sup>

In another example, Athanasius writes to Adelphius of Christ as “the Liberator of all flesh and of all creation (cf. Rom. 8.21),” and as “the Creator and Maker coming to be in a creature so that, by granting freedom to all in himself, he may present the world to the Father and give peace to all, in heaven and on earth.”<sup>22</sup> Can we not, then, think of interrelated creatures of the Great Barrier Reef, as participating in a way that is beyond our imagining, in this final liberation in Christ, and as a most beautiful part of the world that is to be presented to the Source of All by the risen Christ.

### *The Processive Theology of Aquinas*

From Athanasius’s pioneering theology, I turn to a high point in the systematic theology of the Trinity in relation to creation—in the work of Thomas Aquinas. My focus here is on just three aspects of his thought: on the inner link between the trinitarian processions and the process of creation, on the diversity of creation as the self-expression of the Trinity, and the on interrelationships of creation in the light of the relations of the Trinity.

#### *The Processions of the Trinity and the Process of Creation*

In the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas’s theology of the Trinity is followed immediately by his treatise on creation. It is not always noticed that he begins his work on creation by linking it directly to what he has said about the Trinity.<sup>23</sup> He binds Trinity and creation together with his concept of *processio*, usually translated as procession, but which might also be translated as process. *Processio*, of course, is Aquinas’s technical term for the dynamic eternal coming forth of Word and Spirit in the Trinity. What he says at the very beginning of his theology of creation is that, having dealt with the divine persons of the Trinity, he will now discuss the “coming forth” (*processio*) of all creatures from God.<sup>24</sup> As Tony Kelly says: “From the divine processions within God flows the ‘process’ of the universe unfolding through the ages.”<sup>25</sup>

Gilles Emery draws attention to the way Aquinas consistently presents the trinitarian processions of Word and Spirit as the exemplary cause and reason for the further free procession of all things in creation.<sup>26</sup> Emery points to a theological

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 2.63.

<sup>22</sup> Athanasius, *To Adelphius*, 4 (trans. Anatolios, in *Athanasius*, 238, 242).

<sup>23</sup> Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I., q. 44., intro.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Kelly writes: “The relational vitality occurring within the eternal depth of God is named in theology as the “divine processions” of the Word and the Spirit, creating the universe in its dynamic image. From the divine processions within God flows the ‘process’ of the universe unfolding through the ages. This is to say that the divine processions are imaged forth in the unfolding of the cosmic process.” Anthony J. Kelly, *‘Laudato Si’’: An Integral Ecology and the Catholic Tradition* (Adelaide: ATF Theology, 2016), 91.

<sup>26</sup> Gilles Emery, *Trinity in Aquinas* (Ypsilanti, Michigan: Sapientia Press, 2003), 69, 172. See also Gilles Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2007).

principle that can be found in all the major works of Aquinas: “the eternal processions of the persons are the cause and reason for the production of creatures.”<sup>27</sup> This suggests a profound link between what science now tells us about the processes of the emergence of the universe and of the evolution of life on Earth, and their source and distant model in the dynamic divine correlations that Aquinas calls the processions.

Aquinas sees the personal properties of the divine persons as finding expression in the one act of creation. Reflecting on the personal property of the second person as the Word, and on the personal property of the Spirit as Love, he writes:

God is the cause of things through his mind and will, like an artist of works of art. An artist works through an idea conceived in his mind and through love in his will bent on something. In like manner, God the Father wrought the creature through his Word, the Son, and through his Love, the Holy Spirit. From this point of view, keeping in mind the essential attributes of knowing and willing, the comings forth (*processiones*) of the divine Persons can be seen as types for the comings forth of creatures.<sup>28</sup>

Each creature, each star in our galaxy, each dolphin, each wallaby, is an expression of an idea in the mind of God the divine artist. Each is an expression of the Word, as each is the product of the divine will, the fruit of divine Love, the Holy Spirit. Aquinas reflects further on the roles of the divine persons in creating on the basis of the relations of origin. This order determines what is distinctive of the Three in the common act of creation of a universe of creatures:

As the divine nature, while common to all three persons, is theirs according to a certain precedence, in that the Son receives it from the Father, and the Holy Spirit from them both, so it is with creative power, for it is common to them all; all the same the Son has it from the Father, and the Holy Spirit from them both. Hence to be the Creator is attributed to the Father as to one not having power from another. Of the Son we profess that through him all things were made, for while yet not having this power from himself, for the preposition “through” in ordinary usage customarily denotes an intermediate cause, or a principle from a principle. Then of the Holy Spirit, who possesses the power from both, we profess that he guides and quickens all things created by the Father through the Son.<sup>29</sup>

In reflecting on this text, Emery says that as each divine person has a distinct mode of existence, so each has a distinct mode of action in the one act of creation: The Father acts in the world through the Word and in the Spirit; the Son acts “insofar as he is the personal expression of the wisdom of the Father—that is to say in so far as he is God the Word from whom bursts forth Love”; the Holy Spirit acts as “the Communion and

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<sup>27</sup> “*processiones personarum aeternae sunt causa et ratio productionis creaturarum*” (I *Sent.*, d.14, q.1, a.1, sol). See *Summa theologiae* I, q. 45, a. 6, ad. 1; and I, q. 45, a. 7, ad. 3.

<sup>28</sup> Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 45, a. 6. In his *Commentary on the Gospel of John* (1.2.76) Aquinas says that to say that the Father creates all things through the Word is not appropriated to the Word but proper to the Word (“*non est appropriatum verbo, sed proprium eius*”).

<sup>29</sup> Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 45, a. 6, ad. 2. I am using the translations of the Blackfriars edition, 61 volumes, Latin and English translation, with notes, introductions, and commentaries (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964–80).



Love of the Father and the Son,” bringing life to creatures as “Love and Gift proceeding from the Father and the Son.”<sup>30</sup>

*The Diversity of Creatures as the Self-Expression of the Trinity*

Aquinas celebrates the diversity and distinction of creatures as an expression and reflection of the abundance of trinitarian life. He sees the exemplar for all creatures in the Wisdom/Word of God: “divine wisdom holds the originals of all things, and these we have previously called the Ideas, that is the exemplar forms existing in the divine mind.”<sup>31</sup> In the divine Wisdom/Word God comprehends the one divine essence, and also the diverse exemplars of creatures, by which they participate in the likeness of the one divine essence. For Aquinas, then, as for Augustine and Bonaventure, a trace of the Trinity can be found in each creature. In human beings, there is not simply a trace but an image of the Trinity; their minds and wills reflect the divine processions according to the Word of the mind and Love of the will. Humans image the Trinity “when they conceive an idea and love springs from it.”<sup>32</sup>

Aquinas sees other creatures as possessing a likeness of the Trinity by way of a trace. He points out that each creature has a form that is specific to itself. But each is also ordered to relationship with others. Each entity, then, points to its principle and cause, “and so indicates the Person of the Father, who is the beginning from no beginning.”<sup>33</sup> Because it has a specific form, “it tells of the Logos, for form in a work of art is from the artist’s conception.”<sup>34</sup> And because each creature goes out from itself in relationships, “it tells of the Holy Spirit as Love.”<sup>35</sup> Each entity, each green turtle, is a trace of the Trinity; in its very existence it points to the Source of All; in its specific identity it points to the divine artist, the Word; in its participation in an inter-relational world it points to the Spirit who is Love.

But green turtles are not enough according to Aquinas. And human beings are not enough. The abundance and diversity of creatures is needed to give finite expression to the fullness and beauty of the Trinity. The distinctiveness and diversity of creatures spring from the divine intention:

For he brought things into existence so that his goodness might be communicated to creatures and re-enacted through them. And because one single creature was not enough, he produced many and diverse, so that what was wanting in one expression of the divine goodness might be supplied by another, for goodness, which in God is singular and all together, in creatures is multiple and scattered. Hence the whole universe less incompletely than one alone shares (*participat*) and represents his goodness.<sup>36</sup>

No single creature can give any kind of adequate expression to the divine Image and Exemplar. Many diverse creatures are needed to better represent the divine

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<sup>30</sup> See Gilles Emery, *The Trinity: An Introduction to the Catholic Doctrine of the Triune God* (Washington: The Catholic University of America, 2011), 163.

<sup>31</sup> Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.44, a. 3.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, I, q. 45, a. 7.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, I, q. 47, a. 1.

goodness, with each a partial expression of divine goodness. All the complexity of the emerging universe, all the biodiversity of Earth, all the creatures of the Great Barrier Reef, are needed to give expression to the divine Trinity. In a world where human actions are causing the destruction of habitats and the extinction of species, Aquinas's concept of the diversity of creatures as representing the abundance and beauty of God has a prophetic word to speak.<sup>37</sup>

*An Inter-Related World of Creatures Participates in God's Relational Being*

Like Athanasius, Aquinas holds that all creatures around us, including of course all the creatures of the Great Barrier Reef, exist only because they participate in the being of God. He thinks of creation as the continuous relation of participation by which creaturely entities continually receive their being from the creative source whose very nature is to exist: "all other than God are not their own existence (*esse*), but participate in existence (*esse*)."<sup>38</sup>

Like all the great theologians of East and West, Aquinas holds that the being of God is radically relational. His way of expressing this is through his understanding of the divine persons as subsistent relations.<sup>39</sup> The Three subsist in the one divine nature. Each of the relations is identical with the very being of God. Unlike human persons, the divine persons do not simply have relations, they are relations. Take away the relations and nothing remains. The divine persons are the relations, each subsisting in the one divine nature. God is love. The Trinity is love beyond human comprehension, beyond human telling, a dynamic inter-relational life far beyond anything possible to human beings.

I think it is important to note here that our understanding of the human has been changing. The old individualistic anthropology has been challenged. We are learning that we are not simply individual persons who may or may not have relationships with others. We are human persons in so far as we are persons-in-relation-to-others. We become who we are only in and through the relationships that begin in our mother's womb. In this way we are constituted by relationships. But it is not only human beings that are constituted by relationships. Jesuit cosmologist William Stoeger has shown how the sciences reveal that all entities, at every level, are constituted by their relationships. If one thinks of an atom, a molecule or a cell, an ecosystem, the solar system, or the universe itself, there is a series of organizations of matter and life in which each is a new whole, but is constituted by more fundamental entities.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> William French points out that, for Aquinas, many creatures are needed to contribute to the perfection of the universe (*Summa theologiae* I, q. 47, a. 1), and the whole universe is ordered to God as its end (*Summa theologiae* I, q. 65, a. 2), and that this implies "that a world with humans, snail-darters, whales, mountain gorillas, and ferns of all sorts is better than one simply filled with humans." William C. French, "Grace is Everywhere: Thomas Aquinas on Grace and Salvation," in *Creation and Salvation, Volume 1: A Mosaic of Selected Classic Christian Theologies*, ed. Ernst M. Conradie (Zurich: LIT, 2012), 147–72, at 159.

<sup>38</sup> Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 44, a. 1.

<sup>39</sup> Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q.29, a. 4.

<sup>40</sup> William R. Stoeger, S.J., "The Mind-Brain Problem: the Laws of Nature and Constitutive Relationships," in *Neuroscience and the Person: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, ed. Robert John Russell, Nancy Murphy, Theo C. Meyering and Michael Arbib (Vatican City: Vatican Observatory Publications, 1995, 1997), 136–37.

The inter-relationship of creatures on our planet is most evident in rain forests and in reef systems. The Great Barrier Reef is constituted by evolutionary and ecological relationships, not only between the coral polyp and the zooxanthellae, and not only with all its plant and animal species, but also with the shelf of the continent, the sea, and the sun. These relationships constitute a whole that gives glorious creaturely expression, even if it is a pale and limited expression, to the unlimited beauty and to the dynamic and ecstatic Love that is God the Trinity.

### **From the Twenty-First Century**

We live in a time when new planets, some of them apparently hospitable to life, are being discovered in other star systems of the Milky Way Galaxy. We have learned that our Sun, with its solar system, is one of about 200 billion stars that make up the Milky Way. We take it for granted that we are part of an observable universe that began from a tiny, dense, hot state 13.8 billion years ago, and that has been expanding, cooling, and growing in complexity ever since. Until recently it was thought that there are about 200 billion galaxies in the observable universe, but recent calculations based on Hubble telescope observations have suggested ten times this number, about two trillion.

Earth, “our common home,” began to take shape in the matter surrounding the young Sun 4.5 billion years ago. Surprisingly soon, about 3.7 billion years ago, the first form of microbial life emerged on our planet. In a post-Darwinian world, we know that not only human beings but all the living creatures of our reefs, our rainforests, and our deserts have evolved from this first form of life, and that natural selection played a fundamental role in this evolution. This knowledge provokes theological issues. One of them is that a Darwinian view rules out simplistic views of the argument from design. Far more important is the theological issue of the costs of evolution, the suffering and loss that we now see is built into the natural world, with all its waste, pain, predation, death, and extinction. I am not able to do more than acknowledge this issue here, except to note, along with colleagues such as Elizabeth Johnson, Celia Deane-Drummond and John Haught, that I think it requires us to think of God as present to suffering creation as one who accompanies it in love, who feels with it in its pain, and who promises its healing and fulfilment.<sup>41</sup> At this stage I would like simply to propose a way of thinking of the Word and Spirit in an evolutionary and ecological theology, as the Energy of Love and as the Attractor.

#### *The Spirit as the Energy of Love in Evolutionary Emergence*

Karl Rahner sees creation and salvation as united as distinct aspects of God’s one self-bestowal to creatures. This self-bestowal is a radically trinitarian act: God’s gives God’s self to creatures through the Word who is made flesh and in the Spirit who is

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<sup>41</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 181–235, John Haught, *God After Darwin: A Theology of Evolution* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000), 105–20; Celia Deane-Drummond, *Wonder and Wisdom: Conversations in Science, Spirituality and Religion* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2006), 113–32. I have addressed this issue in *How God Acts: Creation, Redemption, and Special Divine Action* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).

poured out in grace. Rahner has also made an important step towards an evolutionary theology with his view of the Creator as not only conferring on creatures their existence and their capacity to act, something already clear in earlier Christian theologies of creation, but also as enabling the active “self-transcendence” of creatures.<sup>42</sup> In Rahner’s theology, God’s closeness to creatures in self-bestowing love has the effect of setting them free to become. Divine self-bestowal enables creaturely self-transcendence.

I have noted that when Rahner speaks of divine self-bestowal in creation and salvation he expresses himself in trinitarian categories. It is about God giving God’s self through the Word and in the Spirit. But when he speaks about God enabling creaturely self-transcendence he speaks in metaphysical terms. Taking a lead from Athanasius and Aquinas, I suggest translating God’s enabling of creatures’ self-transcendence into more trinitarian categories, so that the Spirit of God is seen as the life-giving Energy of Love immanent in all creatures and the Word of God as the Attractor in evolutionary emergence of creatures as well as in saving grace.

At the empirical level of science, the emergence of the new is completely open to explanation at the scientific level. But, theologically this capacity can be understood as given by the Spirit in the relationship of continuous creation—“When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground” (Ps 104:30). For Athanasius, the Spirit is the energizing presence of God to all creatures. For Aquinas, the Spirit is divine love in person. In an evolutionary and ecological theology, I am suggesting that the Spirit of God can be seen as the Energy of Love that enables entities to interact and to become in an inter-relational world. In a theological vision, each creature exists and becomes in such an inter-relational world because the life-giving Spirit of God holds it in love, enabling its existence and flourishing. It is this same Spirit that is the source of the new in evolutionary emergence through the process of continuous creation. The creative Spirit, then, can be seen as the Energy of Love at work in the emergence of the first particles of the early universe, in the birth of galaxies and stars, in the origin of the first microbial life on Earth, in the flourishing of life in all its diversity, which finds such beautiful expression in the Great Barrier Reef.

### *The Word of God as the Divine Attractor in Evolutionary Emergence*

If the Spirit is the Energy of Love enabling evolutionary emergence, and if, as Athanasius and Aquinas insist, Word and Spirit are always united in God’s action of creating and saving, how might we think of the Word of God in relation to an evolutionary world? I find a helpful insight in the image of the attractor proposed by former Archbishop of Lublin, Józef Życiński (1948–2011). In the light of what science tells us of discontinuities, evolutionary bifurcations, and random processes, Życiński suggests that we need to leave behind the image of the Creator as the author of a preordained cosmic plan. He proposes replacing it with the image of God as the “Cosmic Attractor” of evolution.<sup>43</sup> He points to the use of the concept of the attractor in the physics of nonlinear systems, where the system is found to be drawn to a physical

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<sup>42</sup> Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 183–87.

<sup>43</sup> Józef Życiński, *God and Evolution: Fundamental Questions of Christian Evolutionism* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2006), 161–64.

state which is as yet unrealized but nevertheless gives the appearance that it is attracting to itself the evolution of the system.<sup>44</sup> Of course, in Życiński's usage, when the idea of the attractor is applied to God, it is used by way of analogy, and there is no intention of suggesting that the divine Attractor is a physical reality.

Życiński notes some similarities with Teilhard de Chardin's Omega Point, and with aspects of the thought of Alfred North Whitehead, as well as with theologians who see God as the Absolute Future, like Karl Rahner. He points to related ideas in Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Ted Peters.<sup>45</sup> Ilia Delio has taken up the theme of the attractor in several works, and there are similar ideas in the work of John Haught.<sup>46</sup> What I am suggesting here is a fully trinitarian theology, where the Wisdom/Word in whom all things are created (Athanasius and Aquinas), the Logos in whom are the forms of all creatures (Aquinas), might now be understood in evolutionary terms as the Attractor of evolutionary emergence of the whole universe. In evolutionary terms, this Word can be understood as the divine Attractor, drawing into existence galaxies, stars, and planets, and then, on Earth, calling into existence through evolutionary processes all the diverse species of microbes, insects, birds, fish, plants, and animals, including human beings, and including of course all the wonderfully diverse creatures of the Great Barrier Reef.

The Word made flesh, Jesus crucified and risen, might be thought of as Attractor not only of evolutionary emergence but also of God's final transformation and fulfillment of the whole creation. The analogy of the Attractor can point to the fulfillment and transfiguration of a cosmic world far beyond the human. But it can also be understood in a deeply personal and human way of the Jesus who attracts disciples, crowds, and children to himself, and who attracts outsiders to share his table and to experience his healing ministry. As the Wisdom of God in our midst he cries out: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt 11:28–30). A profound theology of Jesus as the divine Attractor is found in the words from John's Gospel: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all to myself" (John 12:32).

The Christian story, then, in dialogue with contemporary science, can tell a story that science cannot tell. It is a story of hope for human beings, and for the whole universe of creatures. In the power of the creative indwelling Spirit, the Attractor draws into their evolutionary emergence, into their existence, unique identity, and interrelationships, all the creatures of the Great Barrier Reef. And the crucified and risen Wisdom/Word of God, is the Attractor who, in the Spirit, draws the whole creation to its new, transfigured state.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 162–64.

<sup>46</sup> See Ilia Delio, *The Humility of God: A Franciscan Perspective* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2005), 75–85; *The Emergent Christ: Exploring the Meaning of Catholic in an Evolutionary Universe* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 142–46; John Haught, *God after Darwin: 97*; and *Making Sense of Evolution: Darwin, God, and the Drama of Life* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2010), 75.

## Pope Francis on the Trinity and Ecological Conversion

Towards the end of *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis reflects briefly on the Trinity in relation to the creation. He points to the theology of the divine persons as subsistent relations and sees the inter-related world of creatures as created according to the divine model. He is clearly proposing that we can see the inter-relationships we find in nature, including those we find in the sciences, as representing, however distantly, their model in the dynamic mutual relations of the Trinity. He then proposes something that I find particularly inspiring in the context of today's world. He says that discovering and marvelling at the interwoven relationships that make up our world can lead us to discover a key to our own fulfilment as human beings:

The human person grows more, matures more, and is sanctified more to the extent that he or she enters into relationships, going out from themselves to live in communion with God, with others and with all creatures. In this way they make their own the trinitarian dynamism which God imprinted in them when they were created.<sup>47</sup>

In this wonderfully insightful statement, Pope Francis proposes a radically relational view of the human. I think that it constitutes a new, truly trinitarian, anthropology. I see these few words as providing the basis for a Christian anthropology, a vision of Christian life, and a programmatic statement for Christian formation and for Catholic education. The human grows more, matures more, and grows in holiness to the extent that he or she enters into relationships. And these relationships are specified as a threefold communion, with God, with our fellow human beings, and with the natural world around us. Francis goes on to point out that when we embrace this three-fold communion we are true to the trinitarian dynamism that is imprinted on us as made in the image of God. When we enter into this threefold communion we are true to ourselves at the very deepest level of our being. Conversely, when we close ourselves off from the natural world around us, or the human person before us, or the living God, then we distort our own being and live in a state of alienation: "The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast."<sup>48</sup>

Echoing John Paul II, Pope Francis calls us to an ecological conversion, a "profound interior conversion."<sup>49</sup> This conversion involves learning to see everything as inter-related. It means learning to relate to trees, birds, and animals, to rivers, seas, and mountains, and in so doing, coming to our true selves. This conversion involves the continuous discovery of who we are in relation to Earth and its creatures, to our human sisters and brothers, and to God. Pope Francis says that it involves the discovery that we have an ecological vocation: "Living our vocation to be protectors of God's handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience."<sup>50</sup> Ecological conversion means coming to see ourselves as part of a family of creatures before God, in a "splendid universal communion."<sup>51</sup> The conversion involves not only a radical transformation in the way we see the wider

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<sup>47</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), no. 240, 209–210.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 217, 190.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 217, 190.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 217, 191.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 220, 193.

natural world, but also in the way we feel for it and with it. It involves a change in lifestyle, a new asceticism, new priorities, and personal and communal action. A deeply trinitarian foundation for this conversion is offered in Pope Francis' teaching that we are faithful to the trinitarian dynamism imprinted in our being, to the image of God in us, when we grow in relationships. We grow into our true selves, we mature, and we participate in the holiness insofar as we learn to go out of ourselves to live in communion with other human beings, with plants, animals, rivers, mountains, seas, with coral reefs, and with the living God.