

## Creation at the heart of Mission

*In the beginning,  
when God began to create the heavens and the earth,  
the earth had no form and was void;  
darkness was over the deep  
and the Spirit of God hovered over the waters (Gn 1:1-2).*

*... God saw all that he had made, and it was very good (Gen.1:31).*

Our traditional way of looking at man in relationship to the created world has been that of seeing man as the supreme being of Creation. Man, even in our religious tradition, has been made the master of the universe, master of all things that have been created. Thus, the idea of reflecting upon man as being just a minute part of the whole Creation, a speck among the billions of creatures, united and interdependent with them, seems a little bit far-fetched. To place the care of Creation at the heart of our Christian mission seems to stretch the idea of mission beyond the normal boundaries of traditional thinking, thus risking the danger of falling into the extreme views of activism or of dancing to the tune of the fashionable ideologies of the day.

Yet, looking at the whole of Creation as the manifestation of the love of God is part of mission. Creation is the continuous work of the Spirit 'hovering' over and 'breathing' life into the universe for billions of years. The whole universe and the marvellous interdependency of all creatures sing of the love of the Creator. Creation is the supreme manifestation of the essence of God, sharing Himself in a continuous life-giving act of love. And 'all that He has made was so good' that God sent His Son Jesus to be incarnated as a creature. God sent His Son to help us discover that the whole Creation is full of the Spirit of God. The Incarnation of Jesus brings to fulfilment the whole plan and process of Creation, revealing how God shares His love with all creatures since all eternity.

*... God saw all that he had made, and it was very good (Gen 1,31).*

Christians, men and women around the world, are becoming ever more conscious of the fact that we are an integral part of Creation. We are not the "owners" of the created world. God did not give the creatures of the world to us as a "gift" to be owned, dominated and subjugated. No. God created the human being as an integral part of the whole universe. The bible says that man (woman) is placed in this world as the 'care-taker' of His work, to rule and master it; that is, to be the faithful manager of the created beings. (Genesis 1: 26-28)

We are children of God; creatures of His love. Hence, our mission is to maintain the harmony of creation, endeavouring to live with God, to live with man and to live with the earth... being one with all creatures in Jesus.

We have been created out of the "earth" and we shall return to the earth... We are earth! when the earth is hurt, we feel the hurt and the pain. When the earth suffers violence, we feel the pangs of pain. We are one with nature, with the planet, with earth; we are one with the whole of creation. Our earth today cries with pain inflicted to it: flooding, draught, storms, land slides, fire, tremors and eruptions... all are shouts of agony and suffering trying to convey a message to us, fellow creatures. Are we able to hear the anguish of this pain we are causing to ourselves?

Jesus, Son of God, came to earth in order to reconcile us to God; to reconcile us to each other; and to reconcile us to earth. Jesus reconciles the whole creation to God. We are His creatures, a part of the whole wonder of the universe. We are the earth; we are the planet; we are the universe, and Jesus reconciles us with the Cosmos. (Col 1:19-20)

In the universe, life and death are part of living. The death of one 'member' gives birth to a new form of life for another creature. Nature has its life-cycle that makes things grow in a continuous and evolving cycle. It is only when this cycle is interrupted that nature suffers and more pain and destruction ensues.

"I am the Bread of Life", says the Lord; "come and eat, that you may have life". The Spirit of God fills the earth, and the creative life of the Spirit fills all creatures. It is this life giving Spirit of "earth" and nature that gives us life and maintains the universal harmony through our interdependency as created beings.

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**Allow me now to quote directly from the published work of the speakers at the SEDOS Seminar in 2009, held in Assisi. This will show, first hand, the scope and the perspectives of the new approach to the 'theology of Nature' that the Christian community is following.**

*Denis Edwards: Ecological Commitment and the Following of Jesus  
SEDOS Bulletin, Vol. 41, No. 7/8. July-August 2009; pp 159-168*

...  
**1. Creation in the Life and Ministry of Jesus**

*The living memory of Jesus was passed on orally in the Liturgy, preaching and life of the first Christian communities before finding written expression in the Gospels. In this living memory, Jesus is not only celebrated as the messianic Son of God, but also remembered as a great prophet and as an extraordinary teacher of wisdom. And like the long line of wisdom teachers of Israel, Jesus is remembered as someone who sees the natural world as the place of God.*

*Jesus, as a wisdom teacher, speaks of God and God's Reign in parables and proverbial sayings. He makes a gifted use of parables, communicating the deepest things of God in stories and images from the natural world and from the cultural world of human communities. His images come from the whole of life: the beauty of wild flowers, the growth of trees from tiny seeds, crops of grain, bread rising, a woman sweeping a floor looking for what was lost, children playing games, the relationship between a shepherd and the sheep, the birds of the air, foxes and their lairs, rain falling, and the generosity of a parent to a wayward child.*

*The parables reflect a close observation and delight in the natural world as the place of God. They could arise only in a person who looks on Creation with contemplative and loving eyes. As C.H. Dodd concludes in his classic study, the parables reveal that for Jesus there is an "inward affinity between the natural order and the spiritual*

order.” Dodd argues that “the sense of the divineness of the natural order is the major premise of all the parables.”<sup>1</sup>

*Jesus’ parables of the Reign of God are the products of one who sees Creation as the gift of God and as the place of divine presence. The memory of Jesus’ prayer in the wilderness is a further witness that for him, as for other mystics in the Jewish and Christian traditions, the natural world is a place of encounter with the living God. His prayer in the desert and in the hills of Galilee points to the wilderness as the place where he found communion with the God he proclaimed. 2009/161*

*The Gospels report Jesus going out into the wilderness for thirty days at the beginning of his ministry. There he experiences temptation and, we are told, “he was with the wild beasts” and “the angels ministered to him” (Mk 1:13). Mark describes Jesus as getting up early and going out to a deserted place to pray (Mk 1:35). Luke, in one of his many references to Jesus at prayer, tells of him going out into the hills to pray and spending the night in prayer (Lk 6:12). As his Passion approaches, the three synoptic Gospels tell of Jesus praying outdoors in the Garden of Gethsemane, where he struggles in darkness and pain and entrusts his life and death to God.*

*\* (SEDOS Bulletin, 2009/pp 161)*

*The Gospel memory of Jesus’ parables taken from nature and his prayer in the wilderness provide a context for interpreting Jesus’ explicit sayings about God’s compassion for non-human creation. These are the well known texts, where Jesus teaches that God feeds and clothes each bird of the air and each lily of the field (Mt 6:28; Lk 12:27) and where he speaks of God’s provident care for every single sparrow that falls to the ground (Mt 10:29; Lk 12:6). The focal point of these sayings is God’s provident care for human beings. But the assumption made in them is that every sparrow that falls to the ground matters to God. There is no doubt that the Gospels present God’s provident care for human beings as unique and special — “the hairs on your head are all counted” (Mt 10:30).*

*Jesus sees God as the one who can be addressed in a familial and very human way as “Abba” (Mk: 14:36). He clearly sees God as a God who bends over us with love, a God who cherishes human beings and brings them liberation and hope.<sup>2</sup> But for Jesus this Abba is also the Creator God, the One who makes the Sun rise and who sends rain upon the just and the unjust (Mt 5:45), who is radically a God for human beings, but also a God for all creatures. When Jesus’ words are understood in the context of his other parables taken from nature and his practice of prayer in the wilderness, I think it can said with confidence that Jesus looks on wildflowers and sparrows with loving eyes and sees them as both loved by God and as revelatory of God.*

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<sup>1</sup> C.H. Dodd, *The Parable of the Kingdom* (Glasgow: Collins, 1961), 20-21.

<sup>2</sup> This is a theme of Edward Schillebeeckx in his *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Seabury, 1979).

\*(*SEDOS Bulletin*, 2009/pp 162)

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.... He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.... And the Word became flesh and lived among us (cf. Jn 1:1-14).*

*Jesus is celebrated as the Word made flesh. But we are being told that the story of this Word does not begin with the life of Jesus. The Word was with God in the beginning and had an active role in the creation of "all things." According to this hymn, everything that has ever come to be in the long history of Creation exists only in and through the Word.*

*In terms of what we know today, this would involve seeing this Word of God as the Word of the Big Bang, the primordial hydrogen, star formation, the Milky Way Galaxy, planet Earth, bacteria, clams, frogs and chimpanzees. It is this endlessly creative Word that is made flesh in Jesus. 2009/163*

\*(*SEDOS Bulletin*, 2009/pp 163)

*A third example of a cosmic hymn to the Risen Christ modelled on Wisdom is found in Colossians:*

*He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation;  
for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created,  
things visible and invisible,  
whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers –  
all things have been created through him and for him.  
He himself is before all things and in him all things hold together.  
He is the head of the body, the Church;  
he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, so that he might come to have first  
place in everything.  
For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,  
and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things,  
whether on earth or in heaven,  
by making peace through the blood of the cross (cf. Col 1:15-20).*

*Here the cosmic Christ is celebrated as both the source of Creation and its goal: all things have been created in Christ and "all things" are reconciled in him. All things are created in Christ who is the Image (Icon) of the invisible God. As in the Wisdom literature Sophia is with God in creation and continually sustains all things, so in Colossians the Risen Christ is the One in whom all things are created and in whom all things hold together. The Colossians hymn goes further, asserting that in Christ and Christ's Cross, God has reconciled all things to God's self. Everything in Creation is created in Christ, sustained in him and reconciled in him.*

*The universal role of Christ is driven home not just by the oft-repeated "all things," but also by the repeated explanation that this involves everything in what were seen as the two great cosmic realms of heaven and earth, and by the further insistence that it includes all the cosmic powers — "whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers."*

*In ancient cosmologies, these angelic beings were thought of as controlling the movements of the sun, the moon and the stars. It seems that some at Colossae worshipped these cosmic powers and the Letter makes it clear that all cosmic forces are taken up by Christ and transformed in the power of the resurrection. Everything in the universe is to be transfigured in Christ-Wisdom, the Icon of the invisible God.*

*In Colossians, Christ's death and Resurrection is understood as the beginning of the transformation of the whole of Creation. This same idea appears in Ephesians, where we are told that all things will be gathered up in the risen Christ (1:9-10; 20-23). In Revelation, we hear of "a new heaven and a new earth" (Rv 21:1) and the risen Christ is proclaimed "the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End" (Rv 22:13). In the yearly cycle of the Liturgy, many Christians use these words from Revelation as they light the Easter candle from the new fire of the Easter Vigil.*

*Then, illuminated by the light of the Easter candle, the symbol of the Risen One, they listen to readings from Scripture that tell the story of salvation beginning with the Genesis account of the creation of all things. Every Easter is a celebration of the whole of Creation transformed in the light of the risen Christ. Far from being restricted to human beings, the Christ-event involves everything on Earth, from ants and beetles to pelicans and whales. It involves every part of the 14 billion year story of our universe and of the 3.8 billion year history of life on Earth.*

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\*(*SEDOS Bulletin*, 2009/pp 164)

## **2. Deep Incarnation**

*As theologians have attempted to articulate a Christian ecological theology, they have turned to the central idea of incarnation. At the heart of Christian faith is the affirmation that Jesus of Nazareth is the Word made flesh (Jn 1:14). What is meant by flesh in this affirmation is not only the fully human reality of Jesus, but the whole of humanity embraced by God in the incarnation. As the great patristic theologians like Irenaeus and Athanasius taught, in the Word made flesh God becomes human so that the whole of humanity might be healed, taken up into God and deified in God. However, the meaning of the incarnation, of becoming flesh, is not restricted to humanity. The flesh that is embraced by God is not limited to the human. It includes the whole interconnected world of fleshly life and, in some way, includes the whole universe to which flesh is related and on which it depends. On this basis, Australian theologian Duncan Reid has argued for an eco-Christology in which affirmations about God's embrace of humanity in the incarnation are always to be understood in the context of the wider claim that the Word has become flesh. Flesh points beyond the humanity of Jesus, and beyond the human community embraced by God in the incarnation, to the biological world of living creatures.<sup>3</sup> Flesh evokes the whole world of inter-related organisms. It suggests that in becoming flesh, God has embraced all creatures in the interconnected web of life.*

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<sup>3</sup> Duncan Reid, "Enfleshing the Human" in *Earth Revealing – Earth Healing: Ecology and Christian Theology*, edited by Denis Edwards (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2001), 69-83.

*New Zealand theologian Neil Darragh comments on this line of thought: “To say that God became flesh is not only to say that God became human, but to say also that God became an Earth creature, that God became a sentient being, that God became a living being (in common with all other living beings), that God became a complex Earth unit of minerals and fluids, that God became an item in the carbon and nitrogen cycles.”<sup>4</sup>*

*In Jesus of Nazareth, God becomes a vital part of an ecosystem, and a part of the interconnected systems that support life on Earth. Danish theologian Niels Gregersen calls this the idea of deep incarnation. He argues that, in Christ, God enters into biological life in a new way and is now with evolving Creation in a radically new way. In Christ God is with all forms of life in their suffering limitation. The Cross of Christ reveals God’s identification with Creation in all its complexity, struggle and pain. Gregersen finds in the Cross a microcosm of God’s redemptive presence to all creatures that face suffering and death. He writes:*

*In this context, the incarnation of God in Christ can be understood as a radical or ‘deep’ incarnation, that is, an incarnation into the very tissue of biological existence, and system of nature. Understood this way, the death of Christ becomes an icon of God’s redemptive co-suffering with all sentient life as well as with the victims of social competition. God bears the cost of evolution, the price involved in the hardship of natural selection.<sup>5</sup>*

*... God saw all that he had made, and it was very good (Gen.1:31).*

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*Fr Carlos Rodríguez Linera, OP  
SEDOS Executive Director  
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<sup>4</sup> Neil Darragh, *At Home in the Earth* (Auckland: Accent Publications, 2000), 124.

<sup>5</sup> Niels Henrik Gregersen, “The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World”, *Dialogue: A Journal of Theology* 40 (2001), 205.