

# Holding the Earth in Holiness.

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Illuminating the Horizon of Hope



This is the jewel of our solar system, our sacred home. We share it with countless creatures, human and non-human, animate and inanimate. In the third Eucharistic Prayer, we pray the words, “by the power and working of the Holy Spirit, you give life to all things and make them holy.” For we humans, our earthly home is the place and context of holiness.



There are three creation stories in Scripture. The first two we know, though we ignore the fact that they are inconsistent. The first, Genesis 1-2:4, is the familiar 6 days of creation with the sabbath. Humankind is created at the end of the story. Human beings are given dominion over the other creatures.



“See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them as food.” Gen. 1:28





The second creation story is also in Genesis (2:4b-25). God creates humankind at the beginning of the story. The second story includes the tree of knowledge of good and evil – which we have made into an apple tree.



The third creation story is one we may not know. Found in Genesis 8, it is a kind of re-creation story. It comes at the end of the story of Noah and the Ark. As in the first creation story, earth emerges from the waters. This time, however, God establishes a covenant, and a covenant with the entirety of creation: “But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals that were with him in the ark.” “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you.... I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” (9:2-4)

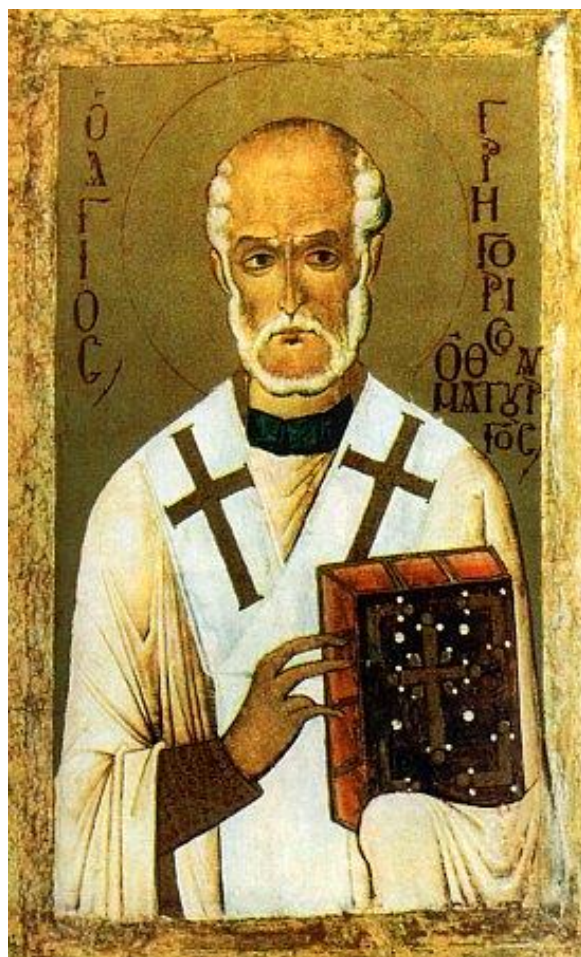
At the same time, there are hints of a new relationship between humankind and the rest of creation. Something is amiss: “The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing shall be food for you; just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything.”  
Genesis 9:2-4



Especially in the west, we have taken the notion of dominion – in itself a concept with more than one meaning, and one that needs a good deal of unpacking – and turned it into subjugation, grounded in fear, dread, and ownership. This has been the dominant paradigm in the west, Although we are latecomers in the history of the earth, we have acted as if the earth was created for us alone, to do with as we choose. We have acted as if we have no obligations to the rest of creation. We see ourselves as not part of “nature,” but above nature. Hard dominion has become, for some Christians, a religious practice and an affirmation that we alone are made in the image and likeness of God.



Although mainstream Christianity has come late to environmental awareness, Catholicism has taken the lead, especially under our Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis. Francis has repeatedly called for a new respect for the entirety of creation. He has reminded us that we are part of creation, not above it, and that the whole of creation is interdependent. This is what he has said: “To protect creation, to protect every man and every woman, to look upon them with love, with tenderness, is to open up a horizon of hope, it is to let a shaft of light break through the heavy clouds.” But Francis is neither a pioneer nor a radical. In fact, Catholicism has a centuries-old tradition of care and concern for the environment, articulated most eloquently by our heroes, the saints. This is what some of them have said about the environment.

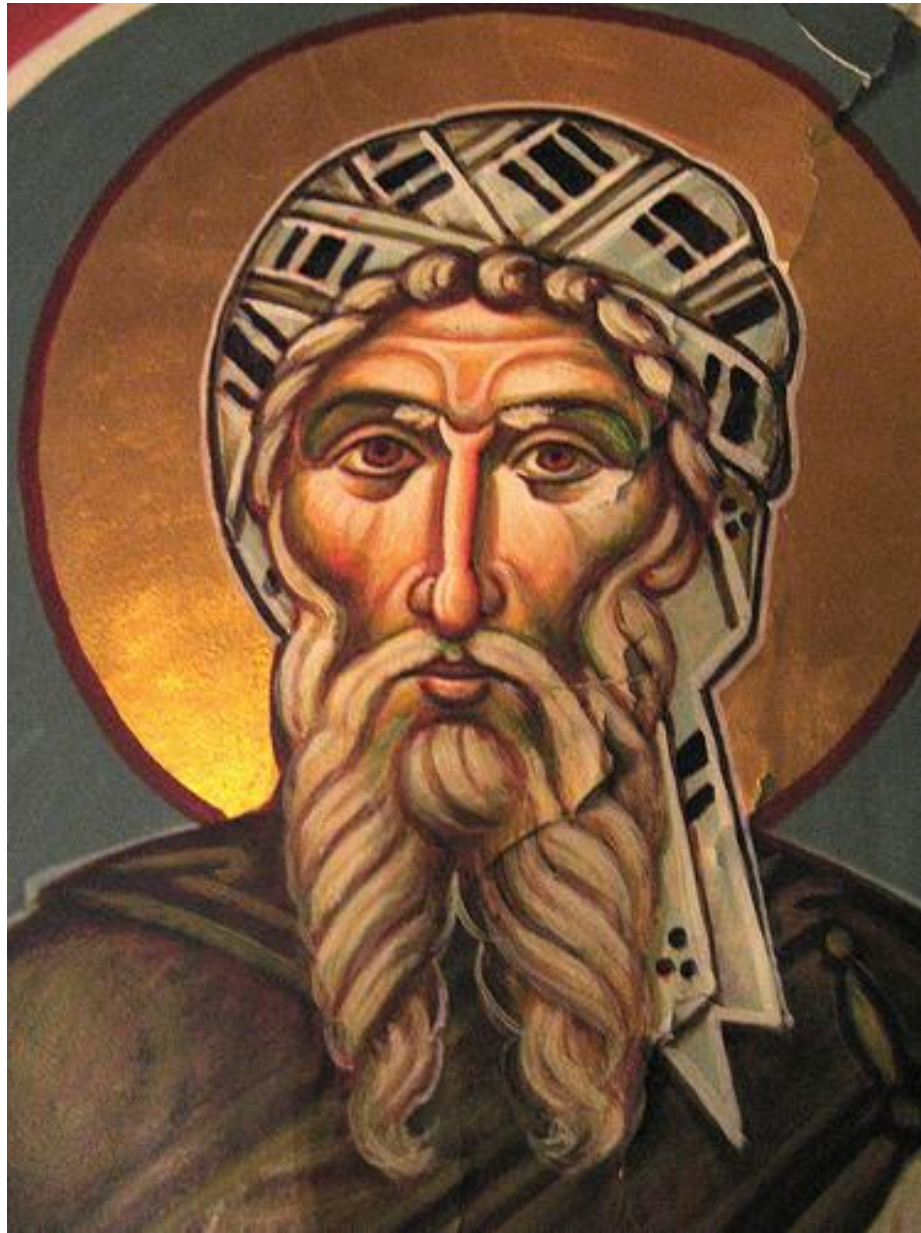




Basil the Great was born in 329, in what is now Turkey. He was the bishop of Caesarea, and was famed for his compassionate care for the poor. “O God, enlarge within us the sense of fellowship with all living things, our brothers [and sisters], the animals, to whom thou gave the earth as their home in common with us. We remember with shame that in the past we have exercised the high dominion of [humankind] with ruthless cruelty, so that the voice of the earth, which should have gone up to thee in song, has been a groan of travail. May we realize that they live not for us alone but for themselves and for thee and that they love the sweetness of life.” We do well to remember that he spoke these words in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, before climate change, industrial waste, and factory farms.



St. Giles (650-710). Born in Athens, lived in southern France. He was a vegetarian, and he was a cultural critic, ahead of his time. He decried the medieval culture of consumption by the wealthy. He framed the issue of our relation to the environment in terms of subjugation, suggesting that just as it is wrong for men to subjugate women, and the wealthy to subjugate the poor, so it is wrong for humankind to subjugate the rest of creation. He built a hut for himself and another for a companion animal (a deer reserved for the royal hunt) on royal hunting grounds.



St. John Damascene (c. 676-749). Doctor of the Church. Syrian monk, lawyer, theologian, poet. Defended the veneration of icons as a popular devotion, defended icons as sacred objects and a means of communication between earth and heaven. Proponent of the notion of “thin places,” where the boundary between this world and the next is permeable. “The whole earth is a living icon of the face of God.”



Hildegarde of Bingen (1098-1179). Benedictine abbot, mystic, composer, poet, herbalist.

“Prayer is nothing but the inhaling and exhaling of the one breath of the universe.”

“Without the Word of God no creature has being. God's Word is in all creation, visible and invisible. The Word is living, being, spirit, all verdant greening, all creativity. All creation is awakened, called, by the resounding melody, God's invocation of the Word.”





St. Francis of Assisi (1118-1226). Founder of the Franciscan friars and sisters, poet, preacher, friend of animals. Refused ordination to the priesthood. “My little sisters, the birds, much bounden are you unto God, your creator, and always in every place ought you to praise him, for that he has given you liberty to fly about everywhere, and has also given you double and triple raiment; moreover he preserved your seed in the ark of Noah, that your race might not perish out of the world; still more are you beholden to him for the element of the air which he has appointed for you; beyond all this, you sow not, neither do you reap; and God feeds you, and gives you the streams and fountains for your drink; the mountains and valleys for your refuge and the high trees whereon to make your nests; and because you know not how to spin or sow, God clothes you, you and your children; wherefore your creator loves you much, seeing that he has bestowed on you so many benefits; and therefore, my little sisters, beware of the sin of ingratitude, and study always to give praises unto God.”



St. Bonaventure (1221-1274), Franciscan, theologian, philosopher, graduated from the University of Paris with Thomas Aquinas, named Cardinal Bishop of Albano. “Whoever is not enlightened by the splendor of created things is blind; whoever is not aroused by the sound of their voice is deaf; whoever does not praise God for all these creatures is mute.”



St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), Dominican, theologian, philosopher, Doctor of the Church. “God brought things into being in order that the divine goodness might be communicated to creatures and be represented by them. And because the divine goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, God produced many and diverse creatures, that what was wanting in one in the representation of divine goodness might be supplied by another. For goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifest and divided. Thus the whole universe together participates in divine goodness more perfectly and represents it better than any single creature whatever.”



Blessed Julian of Norwich (1342-1416).  
Anchorite, mystic, spiritual advisor. Known for speaking of God, and Christ, using both masculine and feminine pronouns. Taught that we sin out of ignorance or naïveté, not because we are evil. Taught that God is all love and no wrath, and that wrath is a human invention. Her *Revelations of Divine Love* (written 1413, first widely-available edition published 1670) was most likely the first book in the English language written by a woman. “The day of my spiritual awakening was the day I saw and knew I saw God in all things and all things in God.” “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.”





Blessed John Henry Newman (1801-1890).  
Theologian, university professor at Oxford,  
author, cardinal deacon, convert from the  
Church of England, founded Congregation of  
the Oratory of St. Philip Neri. “Cruelty to  
animals is as if [humankind] did not love  
God.... There is something so very dreadful, so  
Satanic, in tormenting those who have never  
harmed us, who cannot defend themselves, who  
are utterly in our power.”



Dorothy Stang, SND (1931-2005), “Martyr of the Amazon,” American religious sister, went to Brazil in 1966, advocate for the rainforest and for the indigenous people who live there. Gunned down in 2005 at the age of 73 at the hands of wealthy ranchers, died reciting the Beatitudes to her murderers. Taught the interdependence of every part of creation, including humankind: “The death of the forest is the end of our life.”

# Wisdom of the Saints

- Humankind is not outside of or above nature, but part of it.
- Creation, including humankind, forms a unity.
- Every aspect of creation depends upon every other aspect of creation. Humankind's welfare as a species is tied to the welfare of every other created thing.
- God is present in every created thing. Everything is sacramental.
- Other creatures exist in and for themselves and are not simply there for our use.
- Every decision is a moral decision. We have positive moral obligations to the rest of creation, animate and inanimate alike. We are to be compassionate and merciful with our fellow creatures, as God is compassionate and merciful with us.

Although the ideas expressed by these holy men and women are in some cases hundreds or even thousands of years old, they are utterly fresh and contemporary. In other words, they are timeless. Here is a distillation of their ideas.



The whole of creation, and every aspect of creation – from the windswept peaks of the highest mountains to the unfathomable depths of the deepest ocean canyons, from the blue whales, the largest creatures on earth, to the smallest microbes, with every tree and every leaf and every petal of every flower – it all points to God and to the mystery of God, present in every part, and in the whole. Every place is a thin place, because every place is our way to God. God’s love sustains the whole and every part of the whole. God’s love fills the earth, and charges every aspect of creation with dignity, and beauty, and meaning – and meaning independent of its usefulness to humankind. But like it or not, we are the stewards of creation. We can’t help it. By virtue of our intellect, our opposable thumbs, and the fact that we walk upright, we have power over every creature. We are the stewards of creation. We cannot abstain from this. Neither can we shirk, neglect, or abandon our obligations. There is too much at stake. We see that as we begin to appreciate the reality of climate. Look at the Philippines! If we fail to be wise and compassionate stewards, we become, by default, thoughtless, foolish, and cruel stewards. We have in our hands the power of life and death. Our call as Christians is to be in the world as Christ, which is to say with thoughtfulness, forbearance, mercy, and compassion.









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the face of God.

