

Giver of Life: Whirling Through the Cosmos in Pain and Hope

Elizabeth A. Johnson, CSJ

Introduction

In the previous talk, dear friends and fellow Christians, we explored the meaning of Jesus Christ for ecological spirituality and ethics. Today we will search the connection of the Holy Spirit with this beautiful Earth, now under tremendous stress, and do so in three points. To set the stage for this discussion, we begin by attending to our actual situation, both the wonder and the waste. Then we turn to the theology of the Holy Spirit as present in scripture and tradition. We tie these first two points together in view of the difference evolution makes. In conclusion, we return to Christian life and ethics in light of these insights.

Creation Groaning in Labor Pains (Rom 8:22)

Our knowledge of earth's history fills us with wonder. Recall that the universe is unfathomably **old**: (test: Big Bang 13.7 billion years ago; solar system 5 billion; life on Earth 3.5 billion): scientist Carl Sagan memorably used the timetable of a single Earth year to dramatize the cosmic calendar. If the Big Bang occurred on January 1st, then our sun and planets came into existence September 9th; and *homo sapiens* emerged onto the scene on December 31st at ten minutes to midnight. The observable universe is incomprehensibly **large**: over 100 billion galaxies, each comprised of billions of stars, and no one knows how many moons and planets, all of this visible and audible matter being only a fraction of the matter and energy in the universe. Earth is a small planet orbiting a medium-sized star toward the edge of one spiral galaxy. The universe is surprisingly **dynamic**: bringing forth galaxies from gas and, on at least one planet shaped from recycled starstuff, evolving exuberant life all the way to self-conscious humans. The universe is complexly **interconnected**: everything is linked with everything else; on Earth, all living beings share a common genetic ancestry going back to the ancient seas.

This vision of the world makes us stand in awe. But at the same time we humans are inflicting deadly damage on our planet, ravaging its identity as a dwelling place for life. The way we consume and pollute is dealing a sucker punch to life-supporting systems on land, sea, and air. Consider: every year, 20% of earth's people in the rich nations use 75% of the world's resources and produce 80% of the world's waste. An example: Chicago with 3 million people consumes as much raw material in a year as Bangladesh with 97 million people. Such over-consumption is driven by an economy that must constantly grow in order to be viable, one whose greatest goal is a bottom line in the black. Driven by desire for profit, the global market does not factor in the ecological cost. At the same time, increasing human population demands ever greater resources of food, water, and shelter. In 1950 the world numbered two billion people; at the millennium, six billion; by the year 2030 there will probably be ten billion persons

on the planet. Just imagine: earth's human population will have multiplied five times during the lifetime of someone born in 1950 and alive at age 80. To translate these statistics into a vivid image: another Mexico City is added every sixty days; another Brazil is added every year.

The carrying capacity of the planet is being exhausted by our human behavior. Our species gobbles up resources faster than Earth's ability to replenish itself. This assault causes damage to the very systems that sustain the living planet: holes in the ozone layer, rain forests logged and burned, ruined wetlands, collapsed fisheries, poisoned soils, disappearing aquifers.

The widespread destruction of ecosystems has as its terrible flip side the extinction of the plant and animal species that thrive in these habitats. By a conservative estimate, in the last quarter of the twentieth century 10% of all living species went extinct - and the dying continues. We are the un-creators, killing birth itself, wiping out the future of our fellow creatures who took millions of years to evolve. Their perishing sends an early-warning signal about the death of our planet itself. In the blunt language of the World Council of Churches, "The stark sign of our times is a planet in peril at our hands." But like the disciples asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane while Jesus prayed in agony, many of us are asleep while Earth is undergoing its passion and death.

The picture darkens as we attend to the deep-seated connection between ecological devastation and social injustice. Poor people suffer disproportionately from environmental damage; ravaging of people and ravaging of the land on which they depend go hand in hand. In the Amazon basin, for example, lack of just distribution of land pushes dispossessed rural peoples to the edges of the rain forest where in order to stay alive they practice slash-and-burn agriculture, in the process destroying pristine habitat, killing rare animals, and displacing indigenous peoples. In developed nations the economically well-off can choose to live amid acres of green while poor people are housed near factories, refineries, or waste-processing plants which heavily pollute the environment. The bitterness of this situation is exacerbated by racial prejudice as environmental racism pressures people of color to dwell in these neighborhoods.

Feminist analysis clarifies further how the plight of the poor becomes exemplified in poor women whose own biological abilities to give birth are compromised by toxic environments, and whose nurturing of children is hampered at every turn by lack of clean water, food, and fuel. Women-initiated projects such as the Chipko movement in India, where village women literally hug the forest trees to prevent lumber interests from cutting them down; and the Green Belt movement started by Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai in Kenya, where women plant millions of trees and receive a small income for nurturing them, show how restoring the earth interweaves intrinsically with the flourishing of poor women and their communities. Poverty and its remedy have an ecological face.

For people of faith, the question of God is profoundly involved in this picture. Where is God, and what is God doing, and how does that affect our lives, in a world of dehumanizing social injustice and nature under threat? The ancient but neglected field of pneumatology (study of the Spirit) is poised to make a contribution. Recall how the Nicene Creed confesses belief in the Holy Spirit as "the Lord and giver of life," in Latin *vivificantem*, the Vivifier, vivacious spark of all life. On the frontier of cosmic science in dialogue with ecological

responsibility, the time is ripe for rediscovering the reality of God the Holy Spirit, Creative Giver of Life.

Creator Spirit in Nature: A Rich Heritage

To think about this with fullest benefit, we must remember that the Holy Spirit really is God worshiped together with the Father and the Son. The creed confesses belief in one God, and then tells three stories about this one God who creates, redeems, and sanctifies the world. The point of this triune speaking is to convey that it is the essence or heart of God to be in relationship to other persons. Rather than a lonely monad, the personal reality of God is love (1Jn 4:16), characterized by self-giving and self-receiving. To say that God is one is to negate division, thus affirming the unity of divine being. To say that the persons are three is to negate solitariness, thus affirming relationality at the heart of God. Most basically the symbol of the Trinity points to the livingness of God. Its dynamism calls us into the mystery of profound love that goes out of itself in order create, to heal-redeem-liberate, and to draw all back into communion.

In the late second century, the theologian Tertullian used a wealth of great metaphors to illuminate this mystery. If God the Father can be likened to the sun, then Christ is the sunbeam coming to earth (of the same substance, one in being), and the Spirit is the suntan, the spot of warmth where the sun actually arrives and has an effect. Again, the one God is like an upwelling spring of water in the hills, the river flowing from it, and the irrigation ditch where the water actually reaches plants and makes them grow. A third metaphor compares the Holy One to the root, the shoot, and the fruit of a tree: the deep unreachable foundation, its sprouting into the world, and its effective flowering in fruit and seed. These are all metaphors for the one God made known through revelation: transcendent beyond us, with us in the flesh of history, and immanent within the created world. Be very clear: the Spirit is nothing less than God who actually arrives in every moment, drawing near and passing by with life-giving power.

Taken as a whole, the texts of scripture can be interpreted as tremendously earth-affirming. They teach that God creates and takes delight in the natural world, which enjoys an integrity and value in its own right. One of the themes that conveys this is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the world, kindling the fire of divine love in people and renewing the face of the earth. The opening scene of the Bible sets the stage for all that will follow: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and empty, and darkness covered the abyss, while the Spirit of God swept/blew/hovered over the face of the waters" (Gen 1:1-2). All of creation which follows springs into being by God's own word and is held in being, vivified, by God's own creative spirit. The book of Wisdom puts it simply: "For your immortal spirit is in all things" (Wis 12:1).

To speak of this indwelling Spirit, scripture avoids anthropomorphic images such as father, lord, or king, and turns instead to images whose imaginative resonance are taken from the natural world. The Hebrew word for spirit, *ruah*, means literally a blowing wind, or your breath as you breathe in and out. It is something in motion, dynamic, impossible to capture. Besides wind, scripture also refers to the Spirit with imagery of water poured out that cleanses

and refreshes; fire that warms and brightens; a cloud that overshadows and cools. Recall the Pentecost scene, where the Spirit comes upon the community in rushing wind and tongues of fire (Acts 2:1-4); or Paul's teaching that "the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit given to us" (Rom 5:5), poured like water from a jug. None of these elements has a definite, stable shape; they can surround and pervade other things without losing their own character; their presence is known by the changes they bring about. The closest the Bible gets to an image that can be pinned down is a bird: a bird that hovers over her nest, or that shelters those in trouble under the protective shadow of its wings, or that bears the enslaved up on his great wings toward freedom. In every instance, this way of speaking refers to the presence of the living God active in the world, the whole world, the world of human beings, certainly, and also all of nature: from the highest mountain to the deepest canyon of the sea, from the point of sunrise to the western sunset, and even in the dark (Psalm 139).

In varying degrees, early Christian and medieval theologians took this view of things for granted. I cite three theologians from the 5th, 13th, and 16th century, but there are many more.

~ Augustine wrote that the natural world is a revealing pathway to the knowledge of God. God has given us two books of revelation, he thought, scripture and nature, and to appreciate fully divine wisdom, power, and love, we have to learn to read both. In this framework, he envisioned the Spirit's indwelling in memorable terms: "I set before the sight of my spirit the whole creation, whatsoever we can see therein (as earth, stars, trees, mortal creatures); yes, and whatever in it we do not see And Thee I imagined on every part encircling and pervading it: as if there were a sea, everywhere and on every side, through unmeasured space, one only boundless sea, and it contained within it some sponge, huge, but bounded; that sponge must needs, in all its parts, be filled with that immeasurable sea: so conceived I Thy creation, itself finite, yet full of Thee, the Infinite; and I said, behold what God hath created ..." Present as sea to sponge, the Spirit makes the world dripping wet with divine presence.

~ In the Franciscan tradition, Bonaventure instructs the young soul journeying toward God to see the universe as a wonderful work of art in which one can recognize the presence of its Maker: "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; and whoever after so much evidence does not recognize the First Principle is an idiot" (*stultus est*, is a fool).

~ Martin Luther, too, had a rich and sophisticated understanding of divine presence: "How can reason tolerate that the divine majesty is so small that it can be substantially present in a grain, on a grain, over a grain, through a grain, within and without a grain ... entirely in each grain, no matter how numerous these grains may be? And how can reason tolerate that the same majesty is so large that neither this world nor a thousand worlds can encompass it and say 'behold, there it is'? ... Yet, though it can be encompassed nowhere and by no one, God's divine essence encompasses all things and dwells in all." Luther's sense of the overflowing creative power of the Spirit in creation even led him to observe: if we truly understood the growth of one grain of wheat, we would die of wonder.

This awareness seems to have been eclipsed at the time of the Reformation in 16th

century Europe. The fierce conflict over how we are saved from sin ~ by faith alone (the Protestant position) or by faith and good works (the Catholic position) [and I am terribly oversimplifying here] ~ focused attention on the human drama of salvation. As happens in any fight, people lost sight of the wider reality. In the centuries that followed, Catholic theology tied the Spirit very tightly to church office and the teaching of the magisterium, while Protestant theology fastened on the Spirit's work of justification in the individual soul. The stress on sinful humanity led both sides to forget the witness of biblical, early Christian, and medieval theology to the **cosmic** presence and activity of the Spirit from the beginning, throughout history, and unto the end. In subsequent centuries the rise of the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution in Europe coupled with the church's conflict with political and intellectual modernity kept the focus on the human dilemma in a way that blinkered theology's eyes to the rest of creation. Unlike Eastern Orthodox theology which has never forgotten the Spirit, theology in the modern West has woefully neglected this third person of the Trinity. Largely forgotten, the Spirit is the "Cinderella of theology," staying home to work in the kitchen while the other two get to go to the ball.

In our day, the stunning world opened up by Big Bang cosmology and evolutionary biology, the same world being ravaged by human actions, allows, even begs, theology to rediscover nature as a subject of religious interest, and to find once again the Creator Spirit within and around the emerging, struggling, living, and dying circle of life. More than just a backdrop for the human drama of sin and redemption, the natural world is a marvelous creature in its own right, loved by God for its own sake. A great project lies ahead: to design and use teaching materials and catechisms, liturgies and homilies, music, art, and prayers of private devotion that would empower the whole church to love the natural world as God does, with a loving and appreciative eye. If and when we do, we will discover that there are insights everywhere in the Christian tradition, in scripture and tradition, in art, architecture, liturgy, and poetry as well as theology, mysticism, and prayer that bear witness to the presence of God's Holy Spirit in the natural world, which in turn "is charged with the grandeur of God," as the English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins envisioned.

Characteristics of the Spirit's Activity

Theology today is discussing at least three characteristics of the Spirit's activity in creation. Each provides a way for us to deepen appreciation, both intellectually and spiritually.

Creative Presence. At the end of his popular book *A Brief History of Time*, British physicist Stephen Hawking asks a famous question: "What is it that breathes fire into the equations and makes a universe for them to describe?" In the integrity of his adherence to atheism, he leaves the question open. But faith dares an answer, believing that it is the Spirit of God who breathes life into the equations to bring forth this exuberant universe. The mystery of the living God, utterly transcendent, is also the dynamic power at the heart of the world and its growth. This refers to divine creative action not only in the beginning, but even now, persistently, as the universe takes shape in an act of continuous creation into the future.

How precisely God acts creatively in nature is a matter of fierce debate among theologians of different religious persuasions. By and large Catholic theology holds to the

classical position of primary and secondary causality, which sees that God acts through natural causes. As the unfathomable Source of the world's existence (primary cause), God gifts nature with power to act in its own integrity (secondary causes). These two causes are not two different types of causes united on a common ground of generating effects. They operate on completely different levels (itself an inadequate analogy), one being the Cause of all causes, the other participating in this power to act, as things that are burning participate in the power of fire (Aquinas). Working in this tradition, Australian Denis Edwards observes, "God's work is achieved in and through creaturely cause and effect. It is not in competition with it. Thomas Aquinas never knew Darwin's theory of evolution, but he would have had no difficulty in understanding it as the way that God creates." This is key: rather than intervening from without, the Spirit acts by empowering the process from within. Divine creativity acts *in, with, and under* cosmic processes.

For centuries the natural world was thought to be static, set up by God in the beginning according to a certain blueprint. Evolution changes all that: things develop, new things emerge, unpredictably. Today's science has revealed the existence of extensive zones of openness in nature. In these areas what happens next is *intrinsically* unpredictable. This is not because we have not yet developed instruments capable of measuring such systems. Rather, there is something in nature itself that defies total measurement. The microscopic realm studied by quantum physics is one such zone; large, non-linear, dynamic systems such as weather studied by the physics of chaos are another; the biological development of species by natural selection is a third.

Take biological evolution as an example. Things run along smoothly until some slight change is introduced: a gene mutates due to bombardment by solar rays, or a hurricane blows a few birds off course to a new island, or the Earth is struck by an asteroid. This disrupts smooth operations to the point almost of breakdown. Then out of this turbulence emerges a more intricately ordered creature, adapted to the new conditions.

Technically speaking, random events working within lawful regularities over eons of deep time have crafted the shape of the world that we inhabit today. If there were only law in the universe, the situation would stagnate. If there were only chance, things would become so chaotic that no orderly structures could take shape. But chance working within nature's laws disrupts the usual pattern while being held in check, and over millennia their interplay allows the emergence of genuinely new forms that cannot be reduced to previous components.

How does this knowledge impact our understanding of the Spirit's agency? Theology now discovers that the indwelling Creator Spirit not only grounds nature's regularities, being the source of law and order, but also empowers the chance interruptions that bring about the new. Boundless love at work in/with/under the processes of the universe, the Spirit embraces the chanciness of random mutations and chaotic conditions of open systems, being the source not only of order but also of the novelty that causes chaos to happen in the first place. Divine creativity is much more closely allied to disorder than our older theology ever imagined. In the emergent evolutionary universe, we should not be surprised to find divine creativity hovering very close to turbulence.

Divine activity is creative in ways never before imagined. Operating throughout the vast

sweep of cosmic and biological evolution, the Spirit continuously empowers the cosmic process from within. The universe, in turn, is self-organizing and self-transcending, energized from the spiraling galaxies to the double helix of the DNA molecule by the Spirit's vivifying power. The fruitful relationship of indwelling, with the Giver of Life "over all and through all and in all" (Eph 4:6), brings forth the world every day.

Cruciform Presence. There is yet more to be said. For the natural world is not only beautiful in its harmonies. It also presents us with an unrelentingly harsh and bloody picture, filled with suffering and death. Bodily existence requires eating; hence predation is an inescapable part of biological life. On a grand scale, the history of life itself is dependent on death; without death there would be no evolutionary development from generation to generation. The history of life is a story of suffering and death over millions of millennia. The temptation is to deny the violence and loss, and escape into a romantic view of the natural world. But there is another option, namely, to discover the Creator Spirit in the midst of pain.

To do so, theology performs a typical maneuver, taking its eyes off the immediate question to consult the gospel. There Jesus Christ reveals the God of merciful love that knows no bounds; a God of a compassion that enters into the depth of people's sin, suffering and terrifying death, to bring new life. Bringing nature back into the picture theology warrant to cross the species line and extend this divine solidarity to all creatures. In the process of creating, the Spirit dwells in compassionate solidarity not only with human pain but with every living being that suffers, from the dinosaurs wiped out by an asteroid to the baby impala eaten by a lioness, from the sparrow that falls to the ground to the penguin stranded on Ipanema beach. Such an idea is not meant to glorify suffering, a trap that must be carefully avoided. But it works out an implication of the vivifying Spirit's relation to an evolutionary, suffering world with an eye to divine compassion. Nature's crying out is indwelt by the Spirit who groans with the labor pains of all creation to bring the new to birth (Rom 8:22-23). In this view the pattern of cross and resurrection is found on a cosmic scale.

Futuring Presence. Rather than being a settled place, the universe is ever-changing. Biologists such as Stephen Jay Gould warn against interpreting evolution as a victorious linear march from the Big Bang to the human race. The story of the cosmos and of life on Earth is more like a branching bush, with humanity itself one recent twig on one branch of the bush. While granting this point, many philosophers of science argue that since the universe as a whole has in fact moved in a certain direction from its cosmic origins, it obviously has propensities toward ever more complexity, beauty, and ordered novelty. Taking the long view we can see that from the beginning the universe has been filled with promise, seeded with expectation, pregnant with surprise. More has regularly come from less. The cosmic story has been one of restless adventure that produces the genuinely new.

Undergirding this wild, ambiguous, exciting undertaking lies the Spirit of God, the Power of the Future, who continually lures the natural world along paths of creative, evolutionary advance. In an amazing way this realization connects nature squarely with the biblical story, where God always approaches with a call to "come ahead" into the future, promised but unknown. Think of the call to Abraham and Sarah to leave their home and travel to a new land, capped off by the surprising gift of a child in their sterile old age; or think of Christ's commission

to the women disciples at his empty tomb on Easter morning to go and announce that he is risen. Divine presence in human history keeps acting unexpectedly to open up the future. So too with the natural world: the vivifying Spirit is forever at work, generously empowering novelty in the world of nature. The adventure is not finished yet. It moves toward that final day when heaven and earth will be transformed by divine blessing: "Behold, I make all things new" (Rev 21:5).

Creative, cruciform, and futuring presence: The idea of divine power in this ecological theology of the Spirit is obviously different from omnipotence wielded in a monarchical way. On many fronts today, theology has been working to redefine omnipotence as the power of love. Mature love grants autonomy to the beloved and respects this, all the while participating in the joy and pain of the other's destiny. It vigorously cares for, works for, and urges the beloved toward his or her own well-being, but coercion is not in the picture. While worked out primarily in the doctrine of grace, which sees God inviting but never forcing free human response, this idea gains added currency in the framework of ecology which has discovered the capacity of nature to self-organize and emerge into ever-new, more complex forms. If the source of nature is the Creator Spirit, then divine power is acting here in a self-emptying, infinitely humble and generous way, a christic way, endowing the universe with the capacity to become itself. It is as if at the Big Bang the Spirit gave the world a push saying, "Go, become, explore, have an adventure, bring forth the new, because more is possible. And I will be with you." In more classical language, the Giver of life not only creates and conserves all things, holding them in existence over the abyss of nothingness, but is also the dynamic ground of their becoming, empowering from within their self-transcendence into new being. This is not a denial of omnipotence, but its redefinition. The Spirit of God moves in the world with compassionate love that grants nature its own creativity and humans their own freedom, all the while companionship through the terror of history toward a new future.

To Life

Reflecting on the Creator Spirit in the natural world reframes our understanding of the natural world itself. Instead of being divorced from what is holy, as in older dualistic ways of thinking, matter bears the mark of the sacred, being imbued with a spiritual radiance. For the Spirit creates what is physical - stars, planets, plants, animals, bodies, senses, ecological communities - and moves in these every bit as vigorously as in souls, minds, ideas. Catholic sacramental theology has always taught that simple material things - bread and wine, water, oil, the sexual union of marriage - can be bearers of divine grace. This is so, we now realize, because to begin with the whole physical world itself is the locale of God's gracious indwelling, a primordial sacrament of divine presence. The natural world enjoys its own intrinsic value before God. It was not created simply for human use. Far from being a mere backdrop for our human lives, it is God's beloved creation.

It becomes clear in our day that a moral universe limited to human persons is no longer adequate. Ethical reflection must widen attention beyond humanity alone and recenter vigorous moral consideration on the whole community of life. To recall Pope John Paul II's vision once again, "respect for life and for the dignity of the human person extends also to the

rest of creation.” We need to appreciate that the whole universe is a sacrament, vivified by the presence of the Creator Spirit. We need to see that its destruction is tantamount to a sacrilege. And we need to fathom that human beings are part of the mystery and magnificence of this universe, not lords of the manor but partners with God in helping creation to grow and prosper. Since nature carries the future within itself, positively glows with it, human action that aborts nature’s possibilities by wreaking harm to ecosystems is nothing less than a profound violation. It shortchanges nature’s promise, killing off what might yet be, frustrating the Spirit’s own creative activity. In view of the divine will to create and save an entire *universe*, our ethics must include

responsible, assertive care for the Earth.

As theology takes steps to expand its vision of justice and mercy in this ecological direction, the well-being of the outcast human poor must also be reframed as more than simply a social good to be struggled for. It is essential to the evolutionary intent of God as revealed in the life and preaching of Jesus Christ. His preaching of the reign of God with its central reality of divine love revealed the surprisingly inclusive character of this love, bent over poor and marginalized people. Those who believe in Christ make a wager that love as Jesus enfleshed it is the meaning encoded at the heart of the universe. It becomes clear that plenitude of life for all, all creatures including poor human beings, is God’s original and ultimate intent in creating the world. In light of this conviction, the church can risk the struggle for life in a world where death due to entrenched poverty and violent injustice are a daily possibility for millions of people, and death due to human greed, consumption, and pollution are a daily reality for millions of other creatures. This struggle for life enfleshes the kingdom of God a little bit more, thereby moving evolution in the direction passionately desired by the Creator Spirit.

A flourishing humanity on a thriving earth in an evolving universe, all together filled with the glory of God: such is the theological vision needed in this critical age of earth’s distress. This moment of crisis calls for a spirituality and ethics that will empower us to live in the web of life as sustainers rather than destroyers of the world. Ignoring this need keeps religious persons locked in ultimately irrelevant concerns while the irreversible drama of life or death is being played out on the planet. But being converted to the earth sets our personal lives and the church community off on a great adventure that expands the repertoire of our love.