**EUCHARIST AND INTEGRAL ECOLOGY**

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Pope Francis, taking the name after Saint Francis of Assisi as his papal name, signalled to the world the significance not only of care for creation but also of the universal brotherhood and sisterhood, shared among all of God's creatures. In that spirit, it's really important for us to reflect on the Eucharist as an illustration of this integral ecology, the sense of everything being connected, as the Holy Father often says. I think it's important for us, as well, to remember, as Pope Francis encourages us to recall, that *we* are creation, too, that we're interconnected and interrelated, and that we are encouraged to recognize the interconnection between the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.

I know that those here in the United States, those in Australia joining us, and all the folks around the globe, are no strangers to the realities of the effects of global climate change, with wildfires, with the pandemic, with a whole host of ecological disasters. So, we might ask ourselves: what does this have to do with our Catholic celebration of the Eucharist? What does this have to do with the sacraments? We've already heard, in that wonderful introduction, some allusions to what the Holy Father says in *Laudato si’*, in fact, in paragraph 236.

I want to highlight three passages to centre my reflections before Archbishop Mark [Coleridge] offers his.

The first is this opening line in paragraph 236 in which Pope Francis says, “It is in the Eucharist that all that has been created finds its greatest exaltation.” And I want us just to hold that for a minute, that it's not just about the human experience, though we are certainly a part and parcel of creation and part of what God has intended for salvation history. But Pope Francis reminds us that all of creation is summarized, is exalted, is elevated, in the celebration of the Eucharist, in the celebration of the Church's sacraments.

A second passage from this very important paragraph: The Holy Father says that “The Lord, in the culmination of the mystery of the Incarnation, chose to reach our intimate depths through a fragment of matter. He comes not from above, but from within, he comes that we might find him in this world of ours. In the Eucharist, fullness is already achieved; it is the living centre of the universe, the overflowing core of love and of inexhaustible life. Joined to the incarnate Son, present in the Eucharist, the whole cosmos gives thanks to God. Indeed, the Eucharist is itself an act of cosmic love.” Oh! I get chills just reflecting on that beautiful passage.

Then finally, the Holy Father ends this particular passage on the Eucharist with this line. He says “Thus, the Eucharist is also a source of light and motivation for our concerns for the environment.” It's worth reflecting on, again and again. I want to unpack this a little bit and to return to this notion, that through the Incarnation, Christ enters this world, and the Holy Father says, “not top down.” I think sometimes we have this understandable Christian imagination of almost a floating eternal Word, Christ sort of appears from above. But how beautiful it is that Pope Francis points us to this mystery of God who enters the world not from without but from within creation. I'm reminded of the early church fathers, the early church theologians, these first Christian thinkers, who were unpacking the mystery of our faith, the experience of Christ Jesus, and understanding how Scripture makes sense in the light of their times, in the first century, the second century, the third century.

One of the things that was the very key to a lot of these theologians, like Saint Irenaeus of Lyon or Athanasius, was the inherent goodness of creation. And one of the things that is worth reflecting on is this notion of God's choice. God has no inherent need for anything outside of God's self. God as triune is a perfect community of love. God doesn't need you or me or, you know, the Atlantic Ocean or Tasmania, or anywhere else. God needs nothing other than God’s self, and yet out of love God decides to create. God goes outside God's self and chooses to enter into creation as part of creation.

When we think of the Incarnation, there's a phrase that is a relatively modern theological term called, “deep incarnation”. It's kind of fancy theological language to articulate some of what these ancient theologians and early Christian thinkers were getting at, which is that when God became human, when the Word became flesh, this didn't impact just the human family. It didn't impact just men and women, but it impacted the entire material universe. And we might ask ourselves, well, why was Jesus Christ, Jesus of Nazareth, a human being? And what do these early theologians point out in talking about the inherent goodness of the material world? And what do contemporary theologians and scholars point out with this language of “deep incarnation”? I think of the late Australian theologian, Father Dennis Edwards, may he rest in peace, who was really a champion of this kind of thinking about integral ecology, even long before the Holy Father wrote *Laudato si’.*

What these theologians are getting at is that we human beings, as part of creation, too, are made up of the same elements as everything else in creation. So, the Holy Father says that, in the celebration of the Eucharist, this material reality, we're talking about these elements that, at the most molecular and most elemental level, are made up of the same things as everything else in the whole creation, the entire vast cosmos. In that paragraph, Pope Francis actually cites Pope Saint John Paul II who talks about the cosmic significance of the Eucharist. So, that's something worth holding onto, that the Incarnation has significance for all of creation. As we hear in that beautiful passage in Paul's Letter to the Romans, Chapter 8, that all of creation is groaning for that day of salvation. It's a reminder that it's not just about us as human beings, but it's about all creation, of which we are a part.

Which brings us to the Eucharist itself and this notion of the elements, the materiality of what is brought to the celebration of the Eucharist, what is transformed by the power of God's grace into Christ, at the altar with the assembly. What we see here is the transformation of the ordinary into the extraordinary, and what we see reflected is ourselves.

Speaking of early Christian theologians, I can't help but think of Saint Augustine of Hippo, that brilliant early theologian, who famously gave a homily to catechumens about the Eucharist. He has this line where he says, “When you look at the Eucharist and you say “Amen”, you say amen not only to Christ's presence in the eucharistic Species of bread and wine, but you say amen to the whole Body of Christ, which is all the baptized believers.” And then he says, and this is always so striking, “See who you are and become what you receive.”

If we unpack that with an ecological lens, this recognition that the elements of wheat and water, of wine and water, of bread that comes from the earth that is made of many different grains, of wine that is made of many different grapes symbolizing, as Saint Augustine also says, the diversity of the Christian family brought together forming the one Body of Christ, we see reflected in the Eucharist itself the whole of God's creation.

Yet again, like the Incarnation, like what we celebrate at Christmas where we celebrate Christ entering the world as part of that material world, this part of that creation, yet again God enters into this world, day in and day out, every Sunday, in the celebration of the Eucharist in these physical material corporeal elemental aspects of our created world.

So, I think it's really important for us to keep that in mind because it can be easy to forget about the connections between our faith as it's lived, particularly our sacramental life, and some of the concerns, the urgent pressing concerns, of the global climate crisis, of the kinds of catastrophes that face us across the globe. These are not distinct silos because God does not have distinct silos. God's Spirit is not limited to particular places and persons, but as Scripture reminds us, it brings life out of chaos. I'm thinking of the psalms, Psalm 104, where the Spirit is sent to renew the face of the earth, or that beautiful passage in Genesis, where the breath of God, which also gives us and all creation life, animates us and comes to bring order out of disorder.

So, when we think about these eucharistic elements, they're made from the fruit of the earth and the work of human hands, but they are also reflective of *us*. So, I would invite us to think about a couple of things. It’s an invitation for us to think about when celebrating the Eucharist, when we gather at Mass.

We're familiar with the source and summit of our life, which is the celebration of the Eucharist, and we're mindful, of course, of the Church's teaching in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, that Christ is made present in the Assembly and in the Word and the Presider, and especially in the eucharistic Species. But, keeping in mind what Saint Augustine says, about saying “Amen” to the Eucharist, not only affirming Christ's presence there sacramentally but affirming who it is that we are, may we think about the Offertory that leads to the celebration of the Eucharist, as bringing forth our representation, our offering of God's gifts back to God, reflective of all creation of which we are a part.

And I might invite us to think of three questions:

When we look at the Blessed Sacrament, do we see the earthen material, the fragile and finite web of creation of which we are a part and into which God lovingly chose to enter? Do we recognize that? Or do we just think about ourselves, or just think about Christ? Can we think on a much larger level, as Pope Saint John Paul II and as Pope Francis remind us, on even a cosmic level?

The second question following the instruction of Saint Augustine when we say “Amen” to the proclamation, “The Body of Christ”, do we recognize that we are also affirming the goodness of the world that God freely created, and renew our own responsibility as Christians, as the Holy Father lays out in *Laudato si’*, to care for this world because the world already cares for us?

I'm fond of saying that we can't even breathe or eat or clothe ourselves on our own without the rest of the created world. Thank God for trees and algae and plant life. Otherwise, we human beings, even now as I talk, we're just spewing out carbon dioxide that is poison to us. So, we need the rest of creation. Indeed, it is caring for us. Can we, in the celebration of the Eucharist when we proclaim “Amen” to “The Body of Christ,” can we reaffirm that cosmic significance and our own baptismal vocation to follow Christ?

Then, my third question for reflection: When we consider the importance of the sabbath day, do we recognize what the Holy Father proclaims in *Laudato si’*, that Sunday is the day of the Resurrection, the first day of a new creation, whose first fruits are the Lord's risen humanity, the pledge of the final transfiguration of all created reality, that in the Resurrection it's not only just a “deep incarnation”, that God enters the world and has this experience of being made up of the same elements, the same cosmic particles as all of us and all of creation. But also, through the Resurrection, when Christ is raised from the dead, it's the first fruits, the beginning, as we hear in the New Testament those beautiful Christological hymns, the firstborn of creation and the firstborn from the dead of all of creation, which we recall in the Letter to the Romans, all of creation yearning, groaning, and looking forward with the rest of the human family to that day of salvation.

*Constructed from the transcript of closed captions from YouTube.*

*This text represents a reflexion by Fr Daniel Horan OFM in the second* Laudato si’Season of Creation *Webinar, broadcast by Zoom from Brisbane, Australia, on 11 September 2020. Permission for publication requested.*