

# Custodians of the Tradition

*Reclaiming the Franciscan  
Intellectual Tradition*



Those like ourselves who are immediate heirs of the tradition inspired by the spirituality of Francis [and Clare] might better see ourselves as responsible stewards of a treasure that has much to offer for the healing of humanity and of the world at large.

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## The Cosmos, a Symbol of the Divine

by Zachary Hayes OFM

To know nature more deeply is to sense its mystery, its depth, and its value. It is to know as an image of the sacred: a sacrament of the divine. The cosmos truly speaks to us of God.

Scientific knowledge about the cosmos is not the whole picture for us. Even the best positive knowledge and explanation of things does not necessarily tell the whole story. Knowing is not all there is; explanation does not account for everything. Reality is multi-dimensional, and the human reaction to reality is similarly multi-dimensional. Before we engage in scientific knowledge, we relate to the cosmos in other ways. One of these ways is through the human imagination.

In reflecting on this, we shall begin by reaching back to the thirteenth century when the role of the human imagination was of basic importance in the human perception of the universe. I shall draw out a number of the principal images and metaphors used by the Franciscan St. Bonaventure di Fidanza which appeal largely to the imagination. It is through these that Bonaventure describes the universe and its relation to the divine – remarkably concrete images which are related to his understanding of reality and the ways in which it can be known or understood. These metaphors help Bonaventure to interpret the meaning of the universe.

Recognizing the immense changes in the human perception of the physical cosmos that have entered into the Western understanding of reality since the days of Bonaventure, I will attempt to look at the kinds of insights suggested by several of the metaphors used by Bonaventure and to ask whether anything similar to his reading of the cosmos is possible for us today in the face of the radical changes in our understanding of the physics of created reality.

### Imaginations, Metaphors, Cosmic Revelation in the Thought of Bonaventure

*Each creature and the whole of creation is in its truest reality an expressive sign of the glory, truth, and beauty of God.* Only when creation is seen in terms of the self-diffusive love that is its source and its final end is it seen for what it truly is. We shall look at several examples from the work of Bonaventure that give expression to this vision at the level of metaphor and symbol.

- **Circle/River** The image of the circle appears in a variety of ways in Bonaventure. At one level, it is a symbol of the divine trinity which describes God as an intelligible circle, whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. Elsewhere, *the circle may be seen as a symbol of the origin of all things in the creative fecundity of God and the return of creation to the same mystery of divine love as their final end.* The symbol of the circle can be seen in yet another way if the circle is thought of as a river which returns to its point of origin. It envisions the river flowing from the immensity of the sea and eventually returning to the fullness of its point of origin. The divine trinity, then, can be seen as the *fountain-fullness* from which the river of reality flows both within the mystery of God in the form of the triune life of love, and outside the divinity in the form of creation.
- **Water** The Trinitarian God of productive, creative love can be compared to a living fountain of water. Flowing from that fountain as something known, loved, and willed into being by the creative love of God is the immense river of creation. The world of nature in its vastness is the expression of a loving, intelligent creator. Like water, the cosmos has many dimensions and diverse qualities. *Thinking of water in the form of the oceans, it suggests the overwhelming fullness of creation as it flows from the depths of God.* Like an ocean, the cosmos is deep and contains many levels of meaning. Thinking of water in the form of a river, we can see how it reflects the movement and fluidity of the cosmos.



Thus, for Bonaventure the metaphors of the *circle, the river, and water* elicit a sense of the immense diversity, fertility, and fluidity of creation. No one form of created being is an adequate expression of the immensely fertile source that resides in the divine, creative love. Therefore the diversity of beings which in fact exist in creation is a more appropriate form of divine self-expression. And, as the river eventually closes back on its point of origin, so creation is a dynamic reality, directed in its inner core to a fulfillment and a completion with God.

■ **Song** Bonaventure reaches back to one of the metaphors of Augustine to compare the universe with a beautifully composed song. He recognizes that it is necessary to grasp the whole of the melody if one is to appreciate the song fully. It is also clear to him that a well-crafted melody relates notes to one another in terms of pitch and rhythm in such a way that the true

significance of the individual note can be discerned only through the network or relations which constitute the melody. Bonaventure also recognizes that, in the depths of the human spirit, there is a desire for a certain numerical proportion which must be present in the structure of the melody if it is to work effectively. *This metaphor suggests the need for a sense of wholeness, a sense of the dynamic inter-relatedness of all the elements that make up the melody of the cosmos, and the hope that there is, in the context of the wild diversity of creatures, some principle of unity and order.*

■ **Book** When speaking of the relation of the cosmos to God, Bonaventure speaks of a book “written and without.” The content of the book is first written in the consciousness of God in the form of the divine Word. That Word contains all that the divine is in

itself, and all that God can call into being outside God. When that Word is expressed externally, what comes into being is the created cosmos, the form in which the Work of God’s consciousness becomes visible and audible as the book “written without.”

■ **Window.** While teaching in Paris, 1273, Bonaventure watched the completion of the cathedral of Notre Dame. Just a short distance from the cathedral was the remarkable building known as Sainte-Chapelle built while Bonaventure was still a student at Paris. Knowing the medieval fascination with the physics, metaphysics and mysticism of light, it is easy to appreciate Bonaventure’s insights on the sun’s shining on stained glass:

*In every creature there is a shining forth of the divine exemplar, but mixed with darkness: hence there is a sort of darkness mixed with light. Also, there is in every creature a pathway leading to the exemplar. As you notice that a ray of light coming in through a window is colored according to the shades of the different panes, so that divine ray shines differently in each creature and in the various properties of the creature. [Collationes in Hexaemeron 12,14 (V, 386)]*

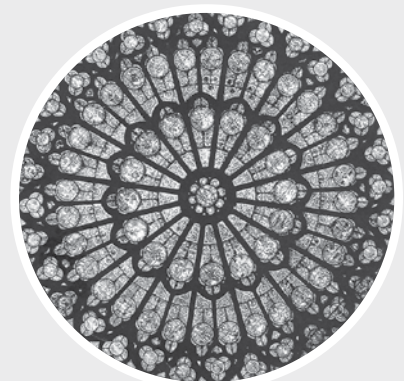
The Cosmos is, as it were, a window opening to the divine.

■ **Microcosm/macrocosm** In humanity we discover that in a representative way, something of all of the elements of creation are present in the human being. In some sense, all creation is present in the microcosm that con-

## The Stained Glass Window

Bonaventure described the created universe as the fountain-fullness of God’s expressed being. As God expresses God’s self in creation, creation, in turn, expresses the Creator. We can compare the manifold variety of things in creation to the stain-glassed windows of a great cathedral. Just as light strikes the various panes of glass and diffracts into an array of colors, so too the divine light emanates through the Word and diffracts in the universe, producing a myriad of “colors” expressed in a myriad of things, all reflecting the divine light in some way.

Ilia Delio OSF, *Simply Bonaventure*, Page 60;  
Bonaventure, *Collationes in Hexaemeron*, XIII, 14.





stitutes the human being. And when Christ, in his created human nature is transfigured in the mystery of the resurrection, Bonaventure can see here the beginning of the transfiguration of the cosmos.

■ **Cross** The cross provides a symbol by which Bonaventure relates the whole of cosmic reality and its history to the revelation of the Scriptures which deal with “the high and the low, the first and the last, and all things in between. The entire universe is an intelligible cross in which the entire structure of the universe is described and made to be seen in the light of the mind.” [*Breviloquium*, Prologue, #6 (V, 208)]

In summary, for Bonaventure, the relation between creation and God may be expressed in terms of manifestation and participation. *All things in the cosmos exist so as to manifest something of the mystery of God.* And all things exist by virtue of some degree of participation in the mystery of being that flows from the absolute mystery of the creative love of God. An appropriate reading of the book of the cosmos gives us some sense of the divine goodness and fecundity; of the divine wisdom and beauty; of the divine intelligence and freedom; and of the relational character of the divine mystery of the trinity in which all of creation is grounded.

## Contemporary Cosmology as Revelation

The question for us is whether the cosmos as we see it today can be read as a revelation of the mysterious richness of divine being. It is my view that the real issue is not proving the existence of God through the use of reason and/or sense experience.

Of greater importance is to show to what extent a religious faith or experience may be seen as a responsible vision of the meaning of reality and of human life, and then to search out the possible coherence between the insights of science and those of theology.

It may well be that science, precisely as science and by virtue of scientific methodology, knows nothing about God. This is not a problem as long as we do not claim that science alone defines the range of meaningful discourse. There are clearly other dimensions involved in the human relation to the cosmos. *It is my conviction that the entire range of human experiences and questions ought to be brought to bear on our attempts to understand who we are and what sort of world we live in.*

What is of interest to a reflective religious believer at the present time is the question as to whether we may see a certain sort of coherence between the concerns of religion and the insights of science. How can the cosmos viewed in the light of the best empirical knowledge available to us through the sciences, *be said to manifest the mystery of God* to those who believe in God and who believe that the physical universe which is described by the sciences is the universe which God is creating?

A contemporary view of the cosmos evokes a profound sense of its seemingly impenetrable mystery. Apparently boundless in space and time, it is a dynamic, unfolding, organically interrelated cosmos, marked by some degree of unpredictability together with forms of order which are at times unexpected and yet remarkable in their beauty.

*It was Bonaventure's conviction that if one learns to read the book of the cosmos correctly, one will discover something of God's wisdom, beauty, power, and love.*

Following are some perspectives from which we might see the cosmos as a revelation of God, to see the various forms and rhythms of nature as at least distant reflections of divine qualities.

1. The *incalculable immensity of the cosmos* in both in space and in time inspires wonderment in the face of what seems to be so radically dependent and apparently not necessary. It has led people of all ages to see the cosmos as grounded in some form of mysterious necessity; to see the relative as grounded in some mysterious Absolute.
2. The cosmos reveals a baffling number of diverse forms of created things. Faith and theology see this diversity as *an expression of the divine fecundity* of being poured out in such richness that it would not be appropriately expressed in a single form or even in a few forms of created being.
3. Scientists see a universe of things intimately intertwined at all levels. This points to the possibility that the cosmos is really “systems within systems” throughout; i.e., it appears to be relational through and through. It is the core insight of the traditional trinitarian concept of God that the divine reality is intrinsically relational in character. *Christian believers today can see the cosmos as grounded in and as reflecting the relational character of the trinity.*
4. Science assumes that the cosmos is intelligible but limited in its predictability. A person of faith expects some form in intelligibility because of the divine intelligence but *one would not be surprised if things are not totally predictable, because of the divine freedom.*
5. Contemporary science sees humanity to be deeply imbedded in the cosmic material process out of which life emerges, eventually conscious life with intelligence and freedom. Just as pre-modern man saw humanity as a microcosm, contemporary science realizes that the human being contains within its own development from conception onward the mineral, vegetative, animal, and finally

rational dimensions of the cosmos. A person of faith may see that *humanity is integrated to the material world through the body* but also see that *humanity is integrated in the world of created spirit*. Such a person experiences humanity as being at the point of integration of these two dimensions of matter and spirit.

6. Nature displays a remarkable ambiguity, marked by unmitigated beauty as well as the struggle for life. *The pervasive movement to more and fuller life moves through pain, struggle, and death. This reality might well be represented in the symbol of the cosmic cross put forth by Bonaventure*. Christ as the embodiment of the cosmic-word also gives us the figure of the man on a cross, an image which may well reflect the ambiguity observed in nature.

In all this, nature can still be seen as a revelation of God. It is through nature that God brings us into being and sustains us.

To know nature more deeply is to sense its mystery, its depth, and its value. It is to know nature as an image of the sacred, a sacrament of the divine. The cosmos truly speaks to us of God.

When we look at the cosmos from a Christological perspective, we can say that God loves and cherishes the world and all in it. God desires that the cosmic order be brought to fulfilling completion which is anticipated in the personal destiny of Jesus as the risen Christ. Thus we are in a position to be serious about the sacred character of the world of nature without

turning it into God. And when we look from a cosmic perspective, we can say that, in the final analysis, the cosmos is not cold and indifferent, but finally beneficent and life-giving. In Christian terms, we can say that the creative power that generates and sustains cosmic reality including humanity and draws out its ever new forms of being is a power that is loving, personal, forgiving, and fulfilling. *In Christ we discover that the true nature of creative power is enacted as "humble love."* We find that for human beings, the appropriate way of interrelating with each other and with the world around them is through the *ethics of self-giving love*, even though the world operates on the basis of other principles in other dimensions. And in Christ we find the hopeful vision for a successful outcome for the entire cosmic process, even though the future seems quite dark and unpredictable when we view it simply in terms of the empirical science.

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### Selected Readings

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**This article in its totality is in *Franciscan Theology of the Environment: An Introductory Reader*.**

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