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Eucharist and Ecology

How do ecological issues, such as global climate change, impact on our celebrations of the Eucharist? How is eucharistic worship related to ecological action and lifestyles? What is it to live an ecological vocation before the God of Jesus Christ? What is the relationship between ecological practice and Christian spirituality? In this last chapter I will attempt a response to these questions, taking up, first, some suggestions for an ecological theology of the Eucharist, and then some reflections on spirituality and praxis.

Towards an Ecological Theology of the Eucharist

The proposal advanced in this section is that, when Christians gather for Eucharist, they bring the Earth and all its creatures, and in some way the whole universe, to the table. I will explore this proposal by working through five steps: Eucharist as the lifting up of all creation, as the living memory of both creation and redemption, as sacrament of the cosmic Christ, as participation with all God's creatures in the Communion of the Trinity, as anticipation of the participation of all God's creatures in the life of the Trinity and as solidarity with the victims of climate change and other ecological crises.

The Lifting Up of All Creation

John Zizioulas, a distinguished theologian and bishop of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of the Orthodox Church, has spelled out his ecological theology in a series of lectures given at Kings College London.¹ He argues that the ecological crisis cannot be met simply by arguments based on reason. While these clearly have their place, far more is required. Zizioulas insists that, if we hope to change priorities and life-styles, we will need a different *culture* and a different *ethos*. As a Christian theologian, Zizioulas is convinced that what is needed above all is a *liturgical* ethos. While ecological conversion can be inspired by many other sources as well as Christianity, I think Zizioulas is right in seeing the Christian community as possessing a unique foundation for a radically ecological ethos in its eucharistic spirituality.

Like many Orthodox theologians, he sees human beings as called by God to be "priests of creation." He distinguishes this priestly task from notions of sacrificial priesthood that he associates with medieval and Roman Catholic theology. He sees each baptised person as called to be, like Christ, a fully *personal* being. This involves being relational rather than self-enclosed, being able to go out of self to the other, in what he calls *ek-stasis*. Persons are always ecstatic, in the sense that they achieve personhood only in communion with others. Humans are relational beings. Their vocation is to relate in a fully personal way to God, to other humans and to other creatures of God. According to Zizioulas, humanity and the rest of creation comes to their completion in the life of God through each other.

When humans come to the Eucharist, they bring the fruits of creation, and in some way the whole creation, to the eucharistic table. In the Eucharist, creation is *lifted up* to God in offering and thanksgiving. In the East, the central eucharistic prayer is known as the *anaphora*, a word which means the lifting-up. The gifts of creation are lifted up to God and the Spirit is invoked to transform the gifts of creation, and the assembled community, into the Body of Christ. The exercise of this priesthood is not confined to the ordained but is the God-given role of all the

faithful. It is not restricted to liturgical celebrations but is meant to happen in the whole of life. It is meant to involve all human interactions with the rest of creation. The “lifting up” of creation is meant to be played out around the planet continually by every human being. Fundamentally this priestly task is nothing other than an authentic personal love for other creatures in all their specificity, a fully human feeling for them and celebration of them in God. Our stance towards the rest of creation, our personal engagement with it as fully relational beings, is a central dimension of our life before God and salvation in Christ.

The ecological crisis requires the deepest resources of the human community. With Zizioulas, I believe that in the Eucharist Christians have a profound source for an authentically ecological ethos and culture.² Christian eucharistic practice, when understood and lived in all its depth, is capable of sustaining an ongoing conversion to a personal and loving stance before the rest of creation. It does not provide answers to the practical questions that confront us, but it does offer a motivation and a genuinely ecological ethos.³

The Living Memory of Both Creation and Redemption

The concept of *anamnesis* is central to eucharistic theology. This Greek word can be translated as a memorial or simply as memory, but I think it is best translated as living memory. In every Eucharist, we remember the events of our salvation in Christ, in such a way that they are made present to us powerfully here and now and anticipate the future transformation of all things in Christ. This kind of memory not only recalls the past but acts powerfully in the present and opens out towards God’s future. In the Eucharist, the Christian community naturally focuses on Christ’s liberating death and resurrection, but what is often forgotten is that every Eucharist is a thanksgiving memorial for God at work in creation as well as in redemption.

Long ago Louis Bouyer pointed out that the early Christian eucharistic prayers had their origins and models in Jewish prayer forms used in synagogues and especially in homes, above all in the Passover meal.⁴ These prayers begin with a blessing of the gifts of creation. They are based on the memory of and thanksgiving for God’s work that involves both creation and salvation. Both Jewish prayer forms and the early Christian eucharistic prayers involve an *anamnesis* of creation and redemption.⁵ Zizioulas makes the same point, insisting that all the ancient eucharistic liturgies began with thanksgiving for *creation* and then continued with thanksgiving for *redemption* in Christ, and all of them were centred on the lifting up the gifts of creation to the Creator.⁶

This is of fundamental importance in a time when human action is radically altering the climate with disastrous effects for human beings and for other creatures on Earth. When we come to the Eucharist we bring the creatures of Earth with us. We remember the God who loves each one of them. We grieve for the damage done to them. We feel with them. We can begin to learn the kind of ethos that Zizioulas speaks of, an ethos that leads to a different way of acting.

This ancient theology is still found in current liturgical texts. In every Eucharist, we begin by bringing creation to the table, bread and wine, “fruit of the Earth and the work of human hands.”⁷ Our everyday eucharistic prayers bring out the radical inner relationship between God’s action in creation and redemption: “He is the Word through whom you made the universe, the Saviour you sent to redeem us” (*Second Eucharistic Prayer*). They make it clear that when we come to the Eucharist we bring creation with us and praise God on behalf of all

of Earth's creatures: "All creation rightly gives you praise" (*Third Eucharistic Prayer*); "In the name of every creature under heaven, we too praise your glory" (*Fourth Eucharistic Prayer*). In every Eucharist, we remember the events of Christ's life, death and resurrection and experience their power to bring healing and salvation. We also remember God's good creation, the 14 billion year history of the universe, the 4.7 billion year history of Earth and the emergence of life on Earth in all its diversity and beauty. We remember the vulnerable state of the community of life on Earth today and bring this to God. All of this is caught up in the mystery of Christ celebrated in each of our Eucharists. In the great doxology at the end of the eucharistic prayer, we lift up the whole creation through, with and in Christ, "in the unity of the Holy Spirit" to the eternal praise and glory of God.⁸

Sacrament of the Cosmic Christ

The Christ we encounter in the Eucharist is the risen one, the one in whom all things were created and in whom all are reconciled (Col 1:15-20). God's eternal wisdom and plan for the fullness of time is "to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph 1:10). Even when, in the Eucharist, the focus of the memorial is on Christ's death and resurrection, this is not a memory that takes us away from creation. On the contrary, it involves us directly with creation. It connects us to Earth and all its creatures.

When we remember Christ's death, we remember a creature of our universe, part of the interconnected evolutionary history of our planet, freely handing his whole bodily and personal existence into the mystery of a loving God. When we remember the resurrection, we remember part of our universe and part of our evolutionary history being taken up in the Spirit into God. This is the beginning of the transformation of the whole creation in Christ. As Rahner says, this resurrection of Jesus is not only the *promise* but the *beginning* of the glorification and divinization of the whole of reality.⁹

The Eucharist is the symbol and the sacrament of the risen Christ who is the beginning of the transfiguration of all creatures in God. In eating and drinking at this table we participate in the risen Christ (1 Cor 10:16-17). Bread and wine are the sacrament of the Christ who is at work in creation. According to Christian faith, what is symbolized is wonderfully made present. And what is made present is Christ in the power of resurrection, as not only the promise but also the beginning of the transformation of all things. Every Eucharist is both sign and agent of the transforming work of the risen Christ in the whole of creation.

I believe that this kind of sacramental theology is the context for interpreting for today the prayer of Teilhard de Chardin in his *Mass on the World*:

All the things in the world to which this day will bring increase; all those that will diminish; all those too that will die: all of them, Lord, I try to gather into my arms, so as to hold them out to you in offering. This is the material of my sacrifice; the only material you desire.¹⁰

Over every living thing which is to spring up, to grow, to flower, to ripen during this day say again the words: This is my Body. And over every death-force which waits in readiness to corrode, to wither, to cut down, speak again your commanding words which express the supreme mystery of faith: This is my Blood.¹¹

As Teilhard's prayer unfolds, he sees the power of God at work in Christ and present in the Eucharist as transforming the Earth from within. Because the Word is made flesh, no part of

the physical universe is untouched. All matter is the place of God. All is being divinized. All is being transformed in Christ: "Through your own incarnation, my God, all matter is henceforth incarnate."¹² Because of this, Earth, the solar system and the whole universe become the place for encounter with the risen Christ: "Now, Lord, through the consecration of the world, the luminosity and fragrance which suffuse the universe take on for me the lineaments of a body and a face – in you."

The Eucharist is an effective prayer for the transformation of the universe in Christ. It points towards and anticipates the divinization of the universe in Christ. The one we encounter sacramentally in the Eucharist is the one in whom all things were created and in whom all will be transfigured. Human action, which is an expression of love and respect for the living creatures, the atmosphere, the seas and the land of our planet, can be seen as not only in continuity with, but also as in some way part of the work of the eucharistic Christ. Wilfully contributing to the destruction of species, or to pumping up more and more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, cannot but be seen as a denial of Christ. It is a denial of the meaning of all that we celebrate when we gather for Eucharist.

Participating with All God's Creatures in the Communion of the Trinity

Every Eucharist is an eschatological event, meaning that it is an event of the Spirit that anticipates the future when all will things will be taken up into divine Communion. The Eucharist is profoundly trinitarian. Our eucharistic communion, our communion with each other in Christ, is always a sharing in and a tasting of the divine Communion of the Trinity, in which all things will be transfigured and find their eternal meaning and their true home. This trinitarian Communion which we share is the source of all life on Earth; it is what enables a community of life to emerge and evolve; and, in ways that are beyond our imagination and comprehension, it is what will be the fulfillment of all the creatures of our planet, and all the wonders of our universe. As we participate in the Eucharist, we taste in anticipation the fulfillment of all things taken up into the divine life of the Trinity.

This means, as Tony Kelly has said, that the "most intense moment of our communion with God is at the same time an intense moment of our communion with the earth."¹³ By being taken up into God, we are caught up into God's love for the creatures of our planetary community. This begins to shape our ecological imagination: "The Eucharist educates the imagination, the mind, and the heart to apprehend the universe as one of communion and connectedness in Christ." In this eucharistic imagination, a distinctive ecological vision and commitment can take shape.¹⁴ With this kind of imagination at work in us, we can see the other creatures of Earth as our kin, as radically interconnected with us in one Earth community of life before God. We can begin to see critically – to see more clearly what is happening to the Earth. We are led to participate in God's feeling for the life-forms of our planet. An authentic eucharistic imagination leads to an ecological ethos, culture and praxis.

Solidarity with Victims

The Eucharist always involves the memory of the cross. The theologian Johannes Metz speaks of this as a "dangerous" memory.¹⁵ The cross of Jesus is an abiding challenge to all complacency before the suffering of others. It brings those who suffer to the very centre of Christian faith. It challenges self-serving and ideological justifications of the misery of the poor and the victims of war, oppression and natural disasters. The resurrection offers a

dynamic vision of hope for the suffering of the world, but it does not dull the memory of the suffering ones. They are always present, forever imaged in the wounds of the risen Christ.

This dangerous and critical memory provides an alternative way of seeing and acting. It leads to solidarity, to alternative life-styles and to personal and political action. The World Council of Churches, in its reflections on solidarity with victims of climate change, points to the many communities of people, especially in the Southern hemisphere, who are particularly vulnerable to climate change: "Though their per capita contribution to the causes of climate change is negligible, they will suffer from the consequences to a much larger degree."¹⁶ Climate change and other aspects of our ecological crisis aggravate the social and economic injustice between rich and poor in our global community. To contribute to this destruction of lives, of homes, of livelihoods and of communities "is not only a sin against the weak and unprotected but also against the earth--God's gift of life."¹⁷

The Eucharist, as a living memory of all those who suffer, calls the Christian community to a new solidarity that involves all the human victims as well as the animals and plants that are destroyed or threatened. Solidarity involves personal and political commitment to both of the two strategies that have been identified as responses to climate change, those of *mitigation* and *adaptation*. Adaptation will mean re-ordering society, budgeting in readiness for ecological disasters, training personnel and allocating resources. In a particular way it will involve, as a matter of justice, hospitality to environmental refugees.

When we Australian Christians gather for eucharistic celebrations, we gather in solidarity with Christians who assemble for Eucharist in Kiribas, in Tuvalu, and in Bangladesh. We gather in solidarity with those who share other forms of religious faith in the Pacific, in South-East Asia, in Africa, and in all parts of our global community. We remember those already displaced from the homes and their heritage. We cannot but be painfully aware of the threat to many millions of other people. We are challenged to be mindful of Australia's contribution to greenhouse, of our wealth created by coal, of our use of motor vehicles. We pray in solidarity with the global community, that the Eucharist that brings us into peace and communion with God, may "advance the peace and salvation of all the world" (Third Eucharistic Prayer). We commit ourselves again to discipleship, to an ecological ethos, lifestyle, politics and praxis, as people of Easter hope.

Peter Scott has said that in the Eucharist, "the eucharistic community is bound in sociality to the wider ecological society, and interprets and clarifies it." He describes the Eucharist as an event of divine hospitality and points out that this hospitality "has no ecclesiastical restrictions, and encompasses the non-human."¹⁸ He sees the Eucharist as a powerful political resource that Christianity offers an ecological age. In every Eucharist, we gather in one place with all our ordinariness and limitations. We take up the fruits of the earth and the work of human hands. We encounter Jesus, in all the healing, liberating love poured out in his life and death and know again his presence as the risen one transforming all things from within. In the power of the Spirit, we participate in and taste the eschatological Communion of the Trinity. In the Spirit, the assembly is made one in Christ, in a communion in God that has no borders, but reaches out to embrace all of God's creatures. Every Eucharist calls us to ecological conversion and action.

Spirituality and Practice

Conversion is central to Christian life. It is never something that is done. It always appears before us again as an invitation and a grace offered in the new circumstances that we face. As Brennan Hill says, “Christian spirituality is a journey on the earth that constantly calls for conversion and maturing.”¹⁹ This book has been an extended argument that the following of Jesus in the twenty-first century will involve ongoing ecological conversion. The scope and intensity of the ecological crisis challenge us in a radical way. No other generation has had to face up to human-induced global climate change, and the knowledge that their action or inaction will determine the future of life on the planet. And, as Sean McDonagh points out, no other generation has had to accept responsibility for the survival of the biodiversity of the planet:

The task quite simply is to take decisive action to stave off the extinction of species which could sterilise the planet. If this generation does not act, no future generation will be able to undo the damage that this generation has caused to the planet. It is an extraordinary and awesome moment that the behaviour of single generation of humans can have such a profound and irreversible impact, not just on human history, but on the life of the planet as well.²⁰

The ecological conversion to which we are called involves a new way of seeing, thinking and acting. Whether one’s meaning system be that of Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Indigenous Australian religious traditions, or some form of humanism, the state of the planet is a challenge to a profound conversion that involves mind and heart, life-style and politics. I suspect that each of the great religious traditions has within itself resources for this work of ongoing conversion, and I believe that it demands a response from all of our traditions and collaboration between all of them. My hope is that this book might function as a partial sketch of how this work of ecological conversion can find inspiration from within the tradition of Christian faith, as part of this wider conversation.

The Way of Wisdom

Those who understand their lives as a following of Jesus see him not only as the one who lived in Galilee two thousand years ago, proclaiming the compassion of God and the coming Reign of God in words and deeds, but also as the Wisdom of God, the eternal Word made flesh, the crucified and risen one who is the beginning of the transformation of the whole creation. I am proposing that discipleship of Jesus means following the way of wisdom and that this involves loving respect for all of God’s creatures. I will not attempt an ecological ethics from the perspective of Wisdom, something taken up by Celia Deane-Drummond in a number of works,²¹ but simply a sketch a theological approach to ecological praxis.

Paul not only sees Jesus crucified as the true wisdom of God (I Cor 1:24,30), but also sees human beings as participating in true wisdom, because in Christ they find the revelation of God’s hidden purpose in creation (I Cor 2:7-10). We humans can possess wisdom, but it comes as a gift, the gift of the Spirit who “searches everything, even the depths of God” (I Cor 2:10). In Ephesians we read: “with all wisdom and insight God has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, to gather up all things in himself, things in heaven and on earth” (Eph 1:8-10). Wisdom is “the plan of the mystery hidden for all ages in God who created all things” (Eph 3:9-10). We participate in this divine wisdom by an enlightening of the “eyes of the heart” that allows us to know the

hope to which we are called (Eph 1:18). The basis of this hope is the risen Christ at work in the universe beyond all cosmic powers (Eph 1:22-23).²²

The way of wisdom involves both enlightenment and action. It is an enlightenment that bears fruit in action. Enlightenment springs from the hope we possess that all will be taken up and transfigured in the risen Christ. It is a seeing and valuing of all things in relation to Christ and faithful action in the light of this. To follow Jesus-Wisdom is to see every sparrow as held and loved by God. It is also to see every sparrow and every great soaring tree as created in the Wisdom of God that is made flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. To live in wisdom, in the full Christian sense, means seeing the whole of creation as coming forth from the dynamic abundance of the Trinity, as evolving within the dynamism of the life of the Three, and as destined to find fulfilment in this shared life.

Bonaventure tells us that every creature is “nothing less than a kind of representation of the wisdom of God.”²³ He sees each creature as a work of art produced by the divine artist and as reflecting this artist: “Every creature is of its nature a likeness and resemblance to eternal wisdom”²⁴ The human practice of true wisdom, then, involves seeing each creature in its relationship to its eternal origin and destiny. This way of seeing specific creatures in God is what Bonaventure calls “contuition.” It is important to note that this is not a by-passing of the specificity and particularity of the individual creature, but an embracing of each in its uniqueness and in its unique relationship to the living God.

The way of wisdom can be understood as the way of loving knowledge, of “knowledge thought love.”²⁵ It is the fruit of the Spirit of love at work in us. To act wisely is not only to act in accord with all the available empirical evidence, but also to act in a way that is at one with the gift of the Spirit breathing through creation and breathing love in us. Loving knowledge is the kind of knowing we have of a beloved friend. It is not a love that claims to comprehend or to control the other, but recognizes the other, even in the intimacy of deep friendship, as an abiding mystery. This kind of loving knowledge is the essential foundation for ecological practice. It is a stance before reality that challenges the absolute claims made by the economics of the free market on the one hand and by certain forms of science and technology on the other. There are, of course, times when we need to struggle to comprehend what confronts us whether it be in mathematics, biology, economics, politics or theology. But the knowledge that seeks and claims comprehension and control can be a dangerous knowledge. It needs to be situated within a fundamental stance before reality that is recognizes the limits of what we can claim to know, that accepts the mystery of the other in humility.

There is a wisdom saying of Jesus that speaks of the importance of a sound eye: “The eye is the lamp of the body. So if the eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness” (Mt 6:22). A sound eye, seeing things rightly, is of the essence of the way of wisdom. Sallie McFague contrasts the “arrogant eye” with the “loving eye.” The arrogant eye is characteristic of the typical Western attitude to the natural world. It objectifies, manipulates, uses and exploits. The loving eye does not come automatically to us. It requires training and discipline to see things with a loving eye. McFague points out that the loving eye requires detachment in order to see the difference, distinctiveness and the uniqueness of the other. Too often we imagine we know who or what the other is, instead of taking the trouble to find out. McFague writes:

This is the eye trained in detachment in order that its attachment will be objective, based on the reality of the other and not on its own wishes or fantasies. This is the eye bound to the other as is an apprentice to a skilled worker, listening to the other as does a foreigner in a new country. This is the eye that pays attention to the other so that the connections between knower and known, like the bond of friendship, will be on the real subject in its real world.²⁶

What is required is that we learn to love others, human and non-human, with a love that involves both distance and intimacy. This involves cultivating a loving eye that respects difference. This is the way of wisdom, a way of seeing each creature in relation to God, as a unique manifestation of divine Wisdom, as embraced by God in the incarnation and destined to share in the redemption of all things in Christ.

Praxis in the Spirit

The way of wisdom involves praxis – the combination of active engagement and ongoing reflection that is at the heart of all liberation theology. Conversion to the Earth, to solidarity with the creatures that make up our planetary community, must involve action. It is not only a radical reorientation of thought, and it is not only the discovery of a new capacity for feeling for non-human creation. It is both of these issuing forth in personal, political and ecclesial action.

To follow Jesus means being led by the Spirit as he was Spirit-led at every stage of his journey. This involves a truly personal discernment but it is never an individualistic one. The Spirit of God is always the Spirit of communion, communion with our human sisters and brothers and communion with the whole of creation. It is not difficult to see the Spirit at work in great movements of our times – the ecological movement, the movement seeking justice and peace above all for the poor of the Earth, and the feminist movement seeking the full equality of women. In spite of all the human failures and sin that play a role in these movements, they are places where the Spirit of God is powerfully at work, calling us to our own part in these as movements of liberation and hope.

To be led by the Spirit at the beginning of the twenty-first century is to be involved with what Thomas Berry describes the “Great Work.” This Great Work is to carry out the transition from “a period of human devastation of the Earth” to a period when humans will “be present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner.”²⁷ To make this transition will mean expanding our moral community. David Toolan says that “we need to expand our moral concern to include plants, animals, air and water and soils.” We need to recognize that we are one species among others, but, at the same time, we must accept responsibility for the future of the planet: “leaving nature alone is simply not a viable option.”²⁸ Morality must now mean accepting responsibility for climate change, for the state of the fisheries and the future of the Earth’s rain forests.

Toolan locates this ethical challenge in the deeper place of the human being’s role in the emerging universe and in the evolutionary history of life on Earth. It is as if the stardust in our DNA, the microbes that swim in our cells, the bacteria that gave us a breathable atmosphere all now wait upon human beings to finish the great cosmic symphony. It is only with us, with *Homo sapiens*, that the atoms born in stars can become mindful of the meaning of things, so that they can begin to decipher “the mystery hidden from the foundation of the world.”²⁹ Toolan says that human beings are called to give soul to the universe:

We are great mothering nature's soul-space, her heart and vocal chords – and her willingness, if we consent to it, to be spirited, to be the vessel of the Holy One whose concern reaches out to embrace all that is created. When we fail in this soul-work, fail in extending our own reach of concern, nature fails/falls with us. But when it happens, when we say yes to the Spirit who hovers over our inner chaos, the mountains clap their hands, the hills leap like gazelles. They and the quarks have a big stake in us.³⁰

Human creatures are the ones who can consciously give praise, who can lift up creation to God in love. As Sean McDonagh, one of the prophets of ecological praxis, says, "our unique human vocation is to celebrate the beauty and fruitfulness of all life on Earth."³¹ Christian ecological action is grounded in celebration. It is grounded in the Eucharist. But it issues forth in personal and political action. Paul Santmire reclaims the tradition of the martyrs for ecological theology, pointing out that to be a martyr means to be a witness. He sees the church of today, empowered and driven by the Spirit, as challenged to rise to the occasion of these times – as martyrs in other eras rose to the occasions that were thrust upon them. The challenge is to allow the love of God in Christ Jesus "so to pour into our hearts by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that it overflows abundantly, not only to persons, especially to those in great need, by also to the other creatures of nature." We need a new form of the martyr church:

How then will this martyr church in the ecological and cosmic age love nature? Passionately and persistently and pervasively. We Christians will be a voice for the voiceless, for the sake of all creatures of nature who have no voice in human affairs. We will listen to the plaintive cries of the great whales and hear the groaning of the rain forests, and we will be their advocates in the village squares and in the courts of power, by the grace of God. All the more will we hear the bitter wailing of the little children who live on the trash mountains of this world and who wear clothes that have been washed in stream overflowing with heinous poisons and who sometimes drink these very waters.³²

The witness of the Christian community will be carried out in workplaces, in neighbourhoods and in homes, and sometimes in political and activist groups. It can and must be lived in the very way we go about our daily lives, in every trade and profession and in every home. Very often the praxis of individual Christians will be done in collaboration with others far removed from the life of the church. But, as I think Santmire is suggesting, there is also a place for ecclesial action where the church itself witnesses in the public arena through its structures of leadership.

Two recent simple examples of this come to mind. On World Ocean Day, 8th June 2004, the seven Catholic Bishops of the state of Queensland in Australia issued a pastoral letter on the threatened and damaged Great Barrier Reef. They celebrate the reef, with its coral trout, huge gropers, sea snakes, large green turtles, humpback whales, sea grasses, sea fern, sponges and anemones as a beautiful gift of God that arouses wonder, gratitude and praise. They assess the serious dangers facing the reef and call their people to take responsibility for its survival and its health.³³ Then, on the feast of St Francis of Assisi, 4th October 2004, eleven bishops of the Murray-Darling Basin endorsed a statement of Catholic Earthcare Australia that supports political action on salinity and increased river flow and call for commitment to conserving

and re-using water.³⁴ What is important about these examples (and a number of others from around the world), is that **1.** the response is local, involving local church leaders taking a position on ecological issues that arise in their own bioregion, and **2.** in adopting political options, such as increased environmental river flow, the bishops are defending not only the good of human beings, but also explicitly extending their moral commitment and advocacy to include the animals, plants and fish of the Murray-Darling and the Great Barrier Reef.

Listening to the Spirit may well lead Christian believers to get involved in political action through activist and lobbying groups. In my view, it will certainly involve a critical challenge to the dominant economic and political model based on market forces and endless consumption. It will mean accepting that the resources of the Earth are finite, that current Western consumption patterns cannot be sustained by the wider human community, or into future generations, and that they bring death and destruction to other species in our planetary community of life. It will mean personal and political options in support of renewable sources of energy, alternative forms of transport, the conservation and re-use of water, the designing of energy-efficient buildings, the protection of habitats, the limitation of urban sprawl, and the attempt to bring life and beauty to our cities. In many instances, it will mean living more consciously and more fully in a local area, in a particular bioregion, and in a local human community with its local businesses and its local life.

A Mysticism of Ecological Praxis

To be converted to a sense of kinship with and responsibility for the creatures of Earth, and for the land, atmosphere, seas and rivers that support them, can be a joyful and liberating experience. Getting involved with the struggle for a more just and ecologically sustainable world can be fulfilling and meaningful, an experience of communion with other human beings and with the natural world. It may involve the experience of success, a habitat saved, a conservation park established, an international protocol on carbon emissions accepted, but it will certainly also involve suffering and the experience of failure. This can lead to a sense of hopelessness, because of the sheer power of the economic and political forces that are committed to maximum short-term profits with no regard for ecological or social consequences.

Christian hope is based on God, on God's self-bestowal in Christ, and the promise that all is taken up in Christ and will be transfigured in him. Our own commitments, our own actions, our successes and our failures will become the raw material for this final transformation. Saving species, saving habitats matters before God. Our struggles have final and eternal meaning. Individual creatures have final meaning before God.

This meaning, this promise matters greatly in the midst of our commitments and actions. But more is needed if hope is to be kept alive. We need to be anchored in the promise of God as a matter of experience. We need to be mystics. Karl Rahner has said a number of times that the Christian of the future will be a mystic or he or she will cease to be anything at all.³⁵ Of course, what Rahner has in mind is not mysticism understood as some form of visionary or trance-like experience. And he is not thinking primarily of the experience of quiet, contemplative prayer before God – although this is certainly part of the picture. What he has in mind is what he calls the “the mysticism of everyday life.”³⁶ He believes that, by God's grace, there is an experience of God that occurs in every life, and at the heart of life, whether this be noticed and named or not. It may occur in the deep unquenchable longing of the heart,

in the quest for answers that opens up more and more questions, in the experience of truly radical commitment to a cause, in the utter pain of loss and grief where something enables us to endure and go on, in small acts of love that spring from a radical commitment of oneself. In such experiences there is an openness to mystery, to the transcendent, that Christians call the experience of grace. In the light of Christian revelation we can see this as the place of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we can open our beings to the one who is silently present at the centre of our experience. This is the mysticism of daily life.

What I think we need for the twenty-first century is what might be called a mysticism of ecological praxis. The liberation theologians of the twentieth century and their European counterparts came to recognize that Christians committed to the cause of political liberation need to be both political and mystical. It is only the mystical that can enable us hope against hope, to act with integrity and love in the political and the personal spheres in times of adversity and failure, up to and including death. Edward Schillebeeckx sums up this when he says that authentic faith, or the mystical, seems in modern times “to be nurtured above all in and through the praxis of liberation.” In this experience there grows the awareness that God is revealed as “the deepest mystery, the heart and the soul of any truly human liberation.”³⁷ He points out that the political form of love of God and neighbour knows the same need for repentance and conversion, the same asceticism, the same sufferings and dark nights, as is the case in contemplative mysticism.³⁸ He says: “Without prayer or mysticism politics soon becomes cruel and barbaric. Without political love, prayer or mysticism soon becomes sentimental or uncommitted interiority.”³⁹

The challenge to find the living God in solidarity with the poor of the Earth remains an enormous challenge for Christian faith in this coming century. The argument of this book is that commitment to the poor and commitment to the well-being of life on this planet must go together as two interrelated dimensions of the one Christian vocation. Ecological conversion is not opposed to, but intimately involved with conversion to the side of the poor. And ecological conversion, like conversion to the side of the poor, will need to involve both the political and the mystical, and the discovery of the mystical precisely in the political.

What then would a mysticism of ecological praxis look like? I would suggest that it might embrace some of these kinds of experiences:

The experience of being caught up in the utter beauty of the natural world, when this leads to a wonder and a joy that seem boundless.

The experience of being part of a 14 billion year history of the universe, and part of a 3.8 billion year history of the evolution of life on Earth, and of knowing all this as directed to God’s self-bestowal in love.

The experience of being overwhelmed by natural forces, by the size and age of the universe, of knowing the natural world as other, of feeling it as alien, and in this being taken far beyond human comfort zones into mystery.

The experience of being called to solidarity with the creatures of Earth, of being called to an ecological conversion, of coming to know other creatures as kin, and of knowing this as the gracious gift of the Spirit of God.

The experience of being overwhelmed by the size of the ecological problem, of being defeated by powerful economic forces, of seeing rain forest further destroyed, more species go extinct, more carbon pumped into the atmosphere, of feeling near despair, but still hoping against

hope, of knowing this as a participation in the way of this cross, as an invitation to commit ourselves to go on, entrusting ourselves and our damaged Earth into the hands of God.

The experience of conversion from the model of individualism and consumption to the simplicity of what Sallie McFague calls “life abundant” and knowing in this the truth of God: where what matters are the basic necessities of food, clothes and shelter, medical care, educational opportunities, loving relationships, meaningful work, an enriching imaginative and spiritual life, time with friends, and time spent with the natural world around us.⁴⁰

The experience of commitment to the creatures of our Earth community, that takes us beyond our tendencies to self-righteousness and self-satisfaction, that has the character of a life-long, in fact, an eternal commitment, which we can recognize as sheer grace.

¹Notes

* *Ecology at the Heart of Faith* (Maryknoll : Orbis, 2006).

John Zizioulas, "Preserving God's Creation: Three Lectures on Ecology and Theology," *King's Theological Review* 12 (1989), 1-5, 41-45 and 13 (1990), 1-5.

² On this see Patricia A. Fox, *God as Communion: John Zizioulas, Elizabeth Johnson, and the Retrieval of the Symbol of God* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2001), 70.

³ Zizioulas says: "All this involves an *ethos* that the world needs badly in our time. Not an ethic, but an *ethos*. Not a programme, but an attitude and a mentality. Not legislation, but a culture." See his "Preserving God's Creation," *King's Theological Review* 13 (1990), 5.

⁴ Louis Bouyer, *Life and Liturgy* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1956), 15-28.

⁵ *Ibid*, 132.

⁶ Zizioulas, "Preserving God's Creation," *King's Theological Review* 12 (1989), 4.

⁷ For the sake of brevity, I will restrict my examples to current Roman Catholic liturgical texts. Further examples can be found in the liturgical texts and hymns of other Christian communities.

⁸ See Yves Congar's remarks on the doxology in his *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, Volume II (New York: Seabury Press, 1983), 224

⁹ Karl Rahner, "Dogmatic Questions on Easter," *Theological Investigations IV* (New York, Seabury Press, 1974), 129.

¹⁰ Teilhard, Teilhard de Chardin, "The Mass on the World," in *Hymn of the Universe* (London: Collins, 1965), 20. On this see Thomas M. King, *Teilhard's Mass: Approaches to "The Mass on the World"* (New York: Paulist, 2005). See also Mary Grey "Cosmic Communion: A Contemporary Reflection on the Eucharistic Vision of Teilhard de Chardin," *Ecotheology* 10 (2005): 165-80.

¹¹ Teilhard, *The Mass on the World*, 23.

¹² Teilhard, *The Mass on the World*, 24.

¹³ Tony Kelly, *The Bread of God: Nurturing a Eucharistic Imagination* (Melbourne: HarperCollins, 2001), 92.

¹⁴ Kelly, *The Bread of God*, 100-1.

¹⁵ Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Towards a Practical Fundamental Theology* (London: Burns and Oates, 1980), 109.

¹⁶ *Solidarity with Victims of Climate Change: Reflections on the World Council of Churches' Response to Climate Change* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2002), 10.

¹⁷ *Solidarity with Victims*, 10.

¹⁸ Peter Scott, *A Political Theology of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 246.

¹⁹ Brennan R. Hill, *Christian Faith and the Environment: Making Vital Connections* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 267.

²⁰ Sean McDonagh, *The Death of Life: The Horror of Extinction* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2004), 151.

²¹ Celia E. Deane-Drummond, *Creation through Wisdom: Theology and the New Biology* (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 2000); *The Ethics of Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004). While I recognize that Wisdom can refer to a divine attribute possessed by all three trinitarian persons, my approach is focused on Wisdom as a way of speaking of the eternal hypostasis that is made flesh in Jesus of Nazareth,. See Denis Edwards, *Jesus the Wisdom of God: An Ecological Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995).

²² In Colossians we are told that all the treasures of the wisdom of God are found in Christ (Col 2:3). True wisdom is to be filled with the knowledge of God's promise so as to lead lives worthy of the risen Christ and to bear fruit in good work (Col:1:9-10).

²³ Bonaventure, *Hexaemeron*, 12.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 2.12.

²⁵ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1.43.5 ad 2.

²⁶ Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians: How we should love nature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 116.

²⁷ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 2.

²⁸ David Toolan, *At Home in the Cosmos* (Maryknoll, Orbis, 2001), 236.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 215.

³⁰ *Ibid*.

³¹ Sean McDonagh, *The Death of Life*, 150.

³² H. Paul Santmire, *Nature Reborn: The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 119-120.

³³ *Let the Many Coastlands Be Glad: A Pastoral Letter on the Great Barrier Reef by the Catholic Bishops of Queensland* (Sydney: Catholic Earthcare Australia, 2004).

³⁴ *The Gift of Water: A Statement from Catholic Earthcare Australia endorsed by Bishops of the Murray-Darling Basin* (Sydney: Catholic Earthcare Australia, 2004).

³⁵ See, for example, Karl Rahner, "Christian Living Formerly and Today," *Theological Investigations 7* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 15.

³⁶ On all this see Harvey D. Egan, *Karl Rahner: Mystic of Everyday Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), especially pages 55-79.

³⁷ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus in Our Western Cultures: Mysticism, Ethics and Politics* (London: SCM, 1987), 73.

³⁸ Brennan Hill discusses how ecological commitment involves a return to an ancient Christian tradition of self-denial in a new form of asceticism: "Environmental concerns bring new light to the discussion of authentic self-denial. No doubt we will all have to live more simply if we wish to share our resources, replenish them, and share them with those in need. The new asceticism returns to natural foods that are nourishing and healthy, and it sets aside the processed and "fast foods" that are harmful to health and wasteful in their excessive packaging. This spirituality returns to making things, and repairing, patching, and refinishing rather than simply discarding. Such self-denial calls for a detachment from gadgets, faddish items, and luxuries. It is conscientious about adequate exercise and proper health care." Brennan R. Hill, *Christian Faith and the Environment*, 249.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 75.

⁴⁰ Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 209-210.