

Donal Dorr

Finding God in *Nature*

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When I was a child my parents taught me to pray. The very first step was to close my eyes to shut out 'distractions'. Later in life, when I was learning to meditate, I was told to 'go inside' in order to find God deep within me. Nothing wrong with that; in fact I find it very helpful. However, Pope Francis has helped me to realize that this is not the only way to engage in meditative prayer.


Nowadays when I want to pray I often walk out to one or other of two little parks near where I live in Dublin. In Dartmouth Square I look at the beautiful trees and flowers and at the dogs racing around and playing with each other. In Ranelagh Gardens there is a lovely pool so I can also look at the ducks living their own lives there. And of course the birds are a constant source of wonder. Pope Francis encourages me to find God in all of these different aspects of nature – and also in the different people whom I meet.

A couple of years ago Francis wrote a very important encyclical letter called *Laudato Si'* about the environment. In it he invites us to have a loving, intimate and tender relationship not only with people but also with all the creatures of our world. He wants us to experience nature in all its aspects – the animals, birds, fish, trees, flowers, scenery, weather, stars, and people – as wonderful gifts from the outstretched hand of God (*Laudato Si'* paragraph 76).

In this way we recover 'a capacity for wonder which takes us to a deeper understanding of life' (*Laudato Si'* paragraph 225). This is at the heart of what Francis calls 'an ecological conversion' which brings about a great enrichment of our spirituality. It leads us into a sense of deep thanksgiving and softens our hearts: *This conversion calls for a number of attitudes which together foster a spirit of generous care, full of tenderness. First, it entails gratitude and gratuitousness, a recognition that the world is God's loving gift, and that we are called quietly to imitate God's generosity in self-sacrifice and good works.* (*Laudato Si'* paragraph 220)

The effect of this conversion is that we are more peaceful, because we are in 'serene harmony with creation.' It comes, for instance, from being filled with wonder and trust as we gaze at the beauty of the wild flowers; we realize that even King Solomon in all his regalia was not dressed as beautifully as them.

Mary Oliver has a lovely poem called *When I am among the trees*. In it she says:



*When I am among the trees
I would almost say that they save me, and
daily. ...*

*Around me the trees stir in their leaves
and call out, 'Stay awhile.'*
*Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary
Oliver, Penguin Press, 2017, p. 123*

This sense of healing and harmony brings about a liberation from worries and calculations about the future or the past. We are no longer worried about, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'" (Matt. 6: 28-31).

Pope Francis goes on to suggest that we will then be able to resist the temptation to buy the latest model in clothes, toys, or computers. He says that 'the constant flood of new consumer goods can baffle the heart and prevent us from cherishing each thing and each moment'. He reminds us that in Christianity and in various other religions there is an ancient wisdom that 'less is more' – that we can actually find more fulfilment in settling for what we have, rather than wanting more of everything (*Laudato Si'* paragraph 222).

Francis goes much deeper. He invites us not only to experience creatures as gifts of God but also to *experience God in these gifts*. This means that when we really take time to be fully in touch with the people and the non-human creatures around us we can come in touch with God. He says: 'The ideal is... to discover God in all things'. That is why when we wish to pray to God we do not always have to go into a church or kneel down at home. It may at times be just as effective – or even more effective – to go outside and let ourselves be lost in wonder at the beauty all around us. Francis says, 'there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person's face' (*Laudato Si'* paragraph 233).

Francis is careful to point out that the trees, the animals, and the people are not divine. But he insists that 'God is intimately present to each being' (*Laudato Si'* paragraph 80). And just as every human person is made in the image of God, so every creature around us reflects some aspect of the reality of God, and is therefore a *manifestation* of God. If we

take time to contemplate and savour them we can *feel* that we are in the presence of God.

This is beautifully expressed by the Anglican priest-poet R. S. Thomas in a poem called *The Bright Field*. In it he says: *Life is not hurrying on to a receding future, nor hankering after an imagined past*. So he urges us to take time to really look at some beautiful scene in nature. Recalling how Moses experienced God in a burning bush, the poet suggests that, if we take time, we too can experience God in some particular aspect of nature. By doing so we will have found 'the pearl of great price' and 'the treasure in the field' of which Jesus speaks in the Gospels.

In his ecology encyclical Francis reminds us that we humans are not the only ones who praise God. Other parts of nature can be seen as praising God in their own way. The words of Psalm 19 are particularly striking:

*The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.
They have no speech, they use no words;
no sound is heard from them.
Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.*

The sky and the clouds don't need to speak in order to give glory to God. They do so simply by being what they are. We are the ones who give them words, by gazing at them in wonder and uttering thanks to God on their behalf.

The director of the Vatican Observatory is the Jesuit Brother Guy Consolmagno. In a recent interview he was asked what he meant when he said that studying the cosmos is an act of worship. In his reply he said: 'Worship is a way that we come closer to God; and that's what we do when we study the cosmos. ...We get to learn God's personality by getting used to God's way of making creation work... a way that is elegant, rational, and full of joy!' ■

This article is based on Fr Donal Dorr's new book *The Pope Francis Agenda* published by Veritas. Further inquiries to www.veritas.ie. Fr Dorr is a theologian, a writer and a priest of St Patrick's Missionary Society and lives in Dublin, Ireland.