

CHAPTER SIX

GOD THE ALMIGHTY CREATOR

(Catechism nn. 198-354)

In this Chapter we reflect on God as presented in the Catechism n. 198-354, except for the section on the dogma of the Holy Trinity (n. 232-267), which we will leave till after examining the Church's teaching on the Holy Spirit (see Chapter 13).

As noted in Chapter 1, it is from our attempt to make sense of creation, including ourselves, that the very notion of 'God' arises. Everything that we experience is contingent: it exists in fact, but cannot on its own provide sufficient explanation for this fact. We have to look beyond it to account for its existing. Since everything to which we look for meaning is also contingent, there must exist, now, a Being that is self-sufficient and self-explanatory, in Aristotle's phrase, 'the uncaused cause', 'God'. The world could not exist if there did not exist a non-contingent Being holding everything in existence: the Being we call 'God'(see Catechism n. 301).

It is in God that we and all creation 'live and move and have our being'(Acts 17:28; see Catechism n. 300). The etymology of the word 'God' is interesting. In Sanskrit, the oldest of the Indo-European languages, the hard g sound is the root of the verb 'to call', and the final d adds the meaning 'the one'. 'God' means 'the one called' or 'the one calling'. When we find ourselves calling beyond any and every created reality, whether in agony, or ecstasy, or wonder, or gratitude, or despair, or exultation, the one we are calling is 'God'. When we experience being called in the same mysterious way the one calling us is 'God'. God is the name we give to the one who is at the heart of creation and of the events of our life. Religious experience is the experience of being in communion with God, present at the heart of creation, yet in no way confined by it, the immanent yet always transcendent God, 'the heart and the beyond of everything' (Teilhard).

The being of every creature is an expression of the Being that is God. We are held in existence in order that we may enjoy this divine intimacy. In the Book of Proverbs, personified Wisdom exclaims: 'I was daily the delight of YHWH*, always rejoicing in his presence, rejoicing in God's inhabited world and delighting in the human race'(Proverbs 8:30-31).

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin writes:

'By means of all created things the divine assails us, penetrates us and moulds us. We imagined it as distant and inaccessible, whereas we live steeped in its burning layers. "In him we live". As Jacob said, awakening from his dream, the world, this palpable world which we were wont to treat with the boredom and disrespect with which we habitually regard places with no sacred association for us, is in truth a holy place and we did not know it'(The Divine Milieu, page 89).

This is picked up in *God's Grandeur* by Gerard Manley Hopkins (see Chapter 2).

*Spelt thus throughout to highlight the fact that it is a proper name, and in deference to Jewish practice of not pronouncing the divine name or writing it in its pronounceable form (see Catechism n. 209). When Jews read YHWH they bow their head and say the word 'adonay' ('Lord').

Ways of envisaging God as Creator

The creation myths of the peoples of the ancient Near-East have a number of ways of speaking of creation. Sometimes they speak of creation as coming by way of generation from the gods. The strong sense of the transcendence of God that is at the heart of the religion of Israel eliminates any possibility of such imagery from the Hebrew Scriptures.

Other mythological images found in the Near East at the time include that of a cosmic struggle between the creating God and forces of chaos. Examples of this are found in the Scriptures:

‘Awake, awake! Clothe yourself with strength, O arm of YHWH;
awake, as in days gone by, as in generations of old.
Was it not you who cut Rahab to pieces, who pierced that monster through?
Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep,
who made a road in the depths of the sea
so that the redeemed might cross over?’ (Isaiah 51:9-10)

‘It was you who split open the sea by your power;
you broke the heads of the monster in the waters.
It was you who crushed the heads of Leviathan
and gave him as food to the creatures of the desert’ (Psalm 74:13-14).

A third set of images portrays the creating divinity as forming the world after the fashion of a potter.

‘You, YHWH, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter;
we are all the work of your hand’ (Isaiah 64:8).

‘Remember that you moulded me like clay. Will you now turn me to dust again?
Did you not pour me out like milk and curdle me like cheese,
clothe me with skin and flesh and knit me together with bones and sinews?
You gave me life and showed me kindness,
and in your providence watched over my spirit’ (Job 10:9-12).

‘The dead are in deep anguish, those beneath the waters and all that live in them.
Death is naked before God; Destruction lies uncovered.
He spreads out the northern skies over empty space; he suspends the earth over nothing.
He wraps up the waters in his clouds, yet the clouds do not burst under their weight.
He covers the face of the full moon, spreading his clouds over it.
He marks out the horizon on the face of the waters
for a boundary between light and darkness.
The pillars of the heavens quake, aghast at his rebuke.
By his power he churned up the sea; by his wisdom he cut Rahab to pieces.
By his breath the skies became fair; his hand pierced the gliding serpent.
And these are but the outer fringe of his works; how faint the whisper we hear of him!
Who then can understand the thunder of his power?’ (Job 26:5-14).

Almighty

In the inspired poem/hymn offered us in the opening chapter of the Book of Genesis, it is God's power that is highlighted: God creates simply by God's word. In this way the author carefully preserves the transcendence of God. God's word is enough. God speaks and it is done. The Genesis narrative focuses on the power of God, on the basic goodness, indeed sacredness, of creation, and on God's word that, as promise, is the driving force of history.

In the Book of Exodus we find the narrative of the encounter between God and Moses at the burning bush (Catechism n. 205). God is portrayed as calling Moses to be God's instrument in redeeming the Hebrew slaves from Egypt. God assures Moses:

'I will be (Hebrew *'ehyeh*) with you'(Exodus 3:12).

Moses wants to know God's name and God replies:

'I am (*'ehyeh*) who I am (*'ehyeh*). You shall say to the Israelites: I am (*'ehyeh*) has sent me to you ... YHWH has sent me to you'(Exodus 3:14-15).

God is to be addressed as YHWH, but it is not a name like other names. We cannot contain God in a name. Since the Hebrew *'ehyeh* can be translated 'I am' or 'I will be', God seems to be saying: 'Do not concern yourself with my name. I will be with you. Walk with me and I will reveal myself to you.' Yet, however limited and mysterious the revelation, God is revealing God's Self to invite us into communion. As the Catechism says (n. 203):

'To disclose one's name is to make oneself known to others; in a way it is to hand oneself over by becoming accessible, capable of being known more intimately and addressed personally'.

Standing out among the many images used to speak of God in the Older Testament, is one central insight. It can be called the 'creed' of ancient Israel. We find it repeated throughout the Bible:

'YHWH, a God who is tenderly compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in kindness' (Exodus 34:6).

Almighty

What does it mean to call the Creator 'Almighty'(see Catechism n. 268)? This is a notion that needs careful handling. In Chapter 4 (page 47) we suggested that one of the basic misunderstandings about God that is found throughout the Older Testament is that God is thought of as controlling creation, such that the happenings that are judged to be good are seen as expressions of God's blessing, whereas the happenings that are judged to be bad are seen as expressions of God's disapproval and punishment (see also Chapter 1, page 25). The basis for this misunderstanding is our understanding of 'power'. In our experience power is often abused. It is often expressed as control. When we call God 'Almighty', declaring our faith that there are no limits to God's power, it essential that we remember that God is love, that the power of God is the power of love. It is God's love-power that has no limits.

When, as adults, we experience someone attempting to control us, we do not experience this as love. While love is demanding, and is willing to challenge and correct, it never controls. Love respects others as sacred and respects their freedom. Love does not (cannot) protect us from suffering the consequences of our misuse or abuse of freedom, for love loves; it does not control. The idea of God controlling is so embedded in our psyche that we have to be determined if we are to listen attentively to Jesus, and watch him reveal God as precisely not controlling. Jesus wept with disappointment over Jerusalem; he did not reorganize it. Jesus pleaded with Judas; he did not take over. Watching Jesus we get some glimpse of what Paul speaks of as ‘God’s weakness’, which he says is ‘stronger than human strength’ (1Corinthians 1:25). ‘Stronger’ because Jesus never sought substitutes for love. God is not doing nothing. God loves. God is inspiring us all to love and offering us the grace to do so. God, the creator, enables us to co-create – that is to say, to love. This is the love of which Paul speaks:

‘Love has space enough to hold and to bear everything and everyone.
Love believes all things, hopes all things, and endures whatever comes.
Love does not come to an end’ (1Corinthians 13:7-8).

Creation is essentially free, free to evolve according to the natural interaction of its energies. God does not intervene to cut across this. God is constantly acting in creation, by loving (self-giving). When creation opens itself to God’s action, beautiful things happen. When creation closes itself off from God’s loving action, God’s design is to that extent thwarted. This is the way God has chosen creation to be: an explosion of love, and so an explosion of being that is essentially free and not determined. We human beings experience this. When we open ourselves to welcome God’s providence, divine love bears fruit in our lives. Closing ourselves to God’s gracious will is what we call sin. God respects our freedom even when our choices hurt us and hurt others. But God continues to offer healing, forgiving, creating love. We are invited by Saint Peter:

‘Cast your anxieties on God, for God cares about you’ (1Peter 5:7; quoted Catechism n. 322).

Paul assures us:

‘We know that in everything God works for good for those who love God’ (Romans 8:28; quoted Catechism n. 313).

Down the centuries, Christians – and not only in the past – have blunted and distorted Jesus’ revelation. In a half-converted way, we have overlain Jesus’ words and deeds with our own prejudices and projections. Some still want God to intervene when what we should be doing is opening ourselves to love, and helping others to do the same. If we were to do this, think of the ‘miracles’ that would happen in this world: miracles that only love can make possible. A common expression for ‘miracles’ in the Newer Testament is ‘signs and wonders’. This has nothing to do with interrupting the so-called ‘laws of nature’. It has everything to do with happenings that arouse wonder and that are experienced as signs of God’s presence. Since God is always present, miracles happen when we open ourselves to God’s presence and act accordingly. Think of the many ‘miracles’ of love that occur in our daily lives.

God: Father – Mother

Jesus revealed God as love. God's love is all-powerful. The only miracles that happen are miracles that happen when love is not thwarted. We can pray, like a child, for whatever it is we desire, so long as we open ourselves to love and allow love to work its purifying and energising effect in us and in our world.

Finally (see Catechism n. 272), we have every hope that beyond death and beyond suffering there is the promise of an eternity of love-communion that is for us, provided we do not obstinately reject it (Mark 12:24). God embraced Jesus from the cross into an eternal love-communion, and our hope is that God will embrace us with him.

God the Father

It is not surprising to find texts in the Hebrew Bible that refer to God as 'Father'. Like a father YHWH accepts the king as his adopted son:

'I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me' (2Samuel 7:14).

'You are my son; today I have begotten you' (Psalm 2:7).

Like a father YHWH cares for orphans as his own:

'Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation' (Psalm 68:5).

YHWH's 'feelings' are compared to those of a father:

'How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? ... My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender' (Hosea 11:8).

'I thought you would call me, My Father, and would not turn from following me. Return, O faithless children, I will heal your faithlessness' (Jeremiah 3:19, 22).

'Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he the child I delight in? As often as I speak against him, I still remember him.

Therefore I am deeply moved for him;

I will surely have mercy on him, says YHWH' (Jeremiah 31:20).

It is Jesus' practice of addressing God as 'Abba!' (My Father) that accounts for this being a favourite address among Jesus' disciples. On his lips 'Father' takes on a new and wonderful dimension, which we will come back to when we speak of Jesus in Chapter Eight. It accounts for the opening statement of the creed: 'I believe in God the Father'. Jesus addressed the one and only God as 'Father'. Jesus' disciples continue this practice, for the God of Jesus is our God, and the intimate relationship that Jesus had with God is the relationship that Jesus shares with us. The fourth Gospel has Jesus say to Mary Magdalene:

'Go to my brothers and say to them: I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God' (John 20:17).

God, our Mother

Of course in calling God ‘Father’ we are using an analogy. We are speaking in metaphors. We have come to realise that ‘Mother’, though less commonly used, is an equally appropriate metaphor for God. Because the ancients were ignorant of the process of conception (they thought that human life was wholly contained in the male seed, which the mother received and nourished), Jews followed by Christians, could not address God as ‘Mother’, since God is the source of life, not the receiver of it. With the change in our understanding of the process of conception, we can speak of God as ‘Mother’ as well as ‘Father’.

The Catechism (n. 239) notes: ‘God’s parental tenderness can also be expressed by the image of motherhood.’ Saint Augustine in his commentary on Psalm 102:7 (‘I am made like to the pelican in the desert’) writes:

‘Christ exercises fatherly authority and maternal love just as Paul is also father and mother ... through his gospel preaching.’

Augustine is referring to Paul’s statement to the Thessalonians:

‘We were gentle among you, like a mother tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us. You remember our labour and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God ... As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children’ (1Thessalonians 2:7-11).

Saint Anselm writes:

‘You, too, good Jesus, are not you also a mother? Is not he a mother who like a hen gathers his chicks beneath his wings? Truly, Lord, you are a mother too.’

He is referring to Jesus’ words in regard to Jerusalem:

‘How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!’ (Matthew 23:37 and Luke 13:34).

We have already reflected on the fact that the notion that best points towards the mystery of God is the notion that God is infinite love-communion, the love best seen in the communion between Jesus and God, and experienced in the community that enjoys communion in the Spirit of Jesus. Creation, then, is best understood as a finite sharing in and expression of this divine love. Creation is ‘full of the radiant glory of God’ (Isaiah 6:3; see Catechism n. 319), and is, therefore, essentially good (Catechism n. 299).

God revealed in ‘Word’ and ‘Spirit’

We touched on this when speaking of religious experience in Chapter 1. Just as Jesus revealed a whole new meaning and intimacy to our calling God ‘Father’, so he revealed in his preaching, but especially in his way of living, indeed in his very being, a whole new meaning to our speaking of God’s ‘Word’ and God’s ‘Spirit’. We will return to this when we speak of Jesus in Chapter 8.

The inter-dependence of creatures

Creator of heaven: Angels

The Catechism (n. 328-336) takes the occasion to speak of angels: creatures of a higher order than humans, since they have intelligence and will, but are entirely spiritual, lacking matter (see Catechism n. 330). A clarification is needed here. When the ancient texts of the Hebrew Scriptures speak of 'the Angel of YHWH', they are speaking of God as we experience God mediated through creatures. They are not referring to a creature, but to God in a way that is careful to acknowledge God's transcendence.

Furthermore, giving names to these experiences of the presence and action of the transcendent God in their lives was a way of highlighting aspects of God. The name 'Gabriel' highlights God's power; the name Raphael highlights God's healing; the name Michael highlights the fact that no 'god' can be compared to YHWH'.

In later Judaism, through Persian influence, the texts start to speak of immortal, non-material, beings, imagined as in attendance at God's throne, ready to carry out God's will. This imagery permeates the Newer Testament.

We should be careful in speculating about the nature of angels. We should note also that we are not dealing here with a belief that belongs to the inner core of our faith.

We conclude our reflections on God as Almighty Creator with the following from the Catechism:

'God wills the interdependence of creatures. The sun and the moon, the cedar and the tiny flower, the eagle and the sparrow: the spectacle of their countless diversities and inequalities tells us that no creature is self-sufficient. Creatures exist only in dependence on each other, to complete each other, in the service of each other' (n. 340).