

Another New Pentecost? The Holy Spirit and our Theology of Creation

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Abstract

In May 2021, at Pentecost, a joint Pastoral letter was issued by the Catholic Bishops Conferences of England and Wales and of Scotland. This letter linked the feast day to the urgent need to care better for creation in the months leading to the G20 summit later in the summer and the COP-26 conference in Glasgow in November of that year. This paper looks at the letter, taking some account of reactions to it, and begins to explore ways in which our theology of the Holy Spirit can inform our theology of care for the created order as a developing part of Catholic Social Teaching. Some ‘footprints’ of the Spirit: First, the witness of patristic theologians encourages us to see rationality pointing to order in creation as a fruit of the Spirit. Second, the picture of unity in diversity formed by the Spirit in the New Testament points to the need for cooperation in our response to the current crisis. The last footprint is urgency: in the scriptures the Spirit’s activity is constantly seen as urgent, sometimes in an extreme way. This picture suits the urgency of the current crisis in relation to climate change and biodiversity.

Keywords

Creation, Holy Spirit, Climate Crisis

The committees of the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain and the Irish Theological Association began planning a conference on ‘eco-theology’ in what seem now to be the rather distant days of the autumn of 2019. While we appreciated the sense of urgency surrounding the Climate Change crisis, flagged up by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si’* back in 2015, by the time the (online) conference took place two years later this urgency was even greater than we thought.

The Pastoral Letter from the Bishops of England and Wales and of Scotland, Pentecost 2021

Here I want to respond to a little-appreciated but significant event in Britain that addresses the greater urgency of which we are now aware – an unusual joint Pastoral Letter from the Bishops Conferences of England and Wales and of Scotland, which was read in our churches on one of the most important festivals of the Church’s year, the feast of Pentecost in May 2021.¹ The urgency that the bishops addressed was hammered home in July of that year by the UN IPCC report, telling us how bad things were: serious forest fires all over the world that summer heightened the apocalyptic atmosphere. At a conference shortly before the CTA/ITA online gathering,² one speaker, drawing on Isaiah 21:11-12,³ described theologians as watchmen or scouts, looking out for the signs of the times, and this is surely our calling at this critical time. As it happened the conferences both took place in the new *Season of Creation*.

Theologians should always be wary of appearing to be obsequious to those in authority in the Church. While we want good relationships with bishops, many of whom are members of associations of theologians, we are friends who want to help – which might mean challenging them or being critical – as fellow members of the Body of Christ. As it happens the bishops’ Pastoral Letter was criticized by some who are active in the environmental movement for a lack of specific references to *Laudato Si’*,⁴ which seems to me to be rather unfair. Critics overlook the fact that the criticism most frequently made of Pastoral Letters is that they are too long, and clear efforts were made with this letter to avoid that. Moreover, many of us who have quoted and made reference to papal documents in talks or other media in parishes know that people can find this rather alarming or off-putting, so I think the critics missed the point, as the letter is faithful to the core parts of Pope Francis’ message.

First, it needs to be said that the very step that was taken is a sign of the urgency of the issue. Even within a single Bishops Conference a joint pastoral letter is rare, and one from two Conferences is rarer still. It is also worth noting that in some English dioceses priests complained to their bishop about the letter, because they could not understand what

¹ <https://www.cbcew.org.uk/pastoral-letter-environment-pentecost/>

² The International Congress of the European Society for Catholic Theology, Osnabrück, 25-28 August 2021, *Creation - Transformation - Theology*, <https://www.esctcongress2021.uos.de>

³ “‘Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night?’ The watchman answers, ‘Morning is coming, and also the night. If you want to ask, ask! Come back again!’”

⁴ See for example what is described at <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/14163/catholic-climate-group-criticises-bishops-pentecost-letter>

the subject had to do with Pentecost, and there were even reports that some refused to read it publicly. This is not surprising as it reflects an indifference towards Catholic social teaching among priests that is not new, but it shows the scale of the challenge that the Church faces.

It ought to be stressed that the Letter, although brief, is deeply theological, opening with these confident words:

The Solemnity of Pentecost reminds us that everything which exists, every person and the whole of creation, is a gift of 'God the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth'. God our loving Father creates and continues to give life to the world through His Word, Jesus Christ, in the power of His Holy Spirit. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Church, which we celebrate at Pentecost, is not something separate from Creation. God's revelation of himself in Creation is inseparable from the revelation of his love for us in Christ and in his desire to live in us through his Holy Spirit.

The idea of a revelatory God is central: when we learn to respect and honour the created world, we are acknowledging our dependence on God, who reveals himself through his act of creation; perhaps the inability of some to understand what this paragraph is saying vindicates the criticism often made of western Christians by the Eastern Orthodox that we have a shallow or flimsy theology of the Holy Spirit. The bishops go on quickly to link this ongoing revelation to the freedom that we have been given as God's children, a freedom we have not used well:

But how have we used that glorious liberty? How do we honour this precious gift? Are we really demonstrating love, care and respect for our common home?

This idea of the abuse of freedom is important. So often critics of the teachings of Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* are from political traditions that repeatedly stress the value of personal individual freedom, often in ways that are at odds with Christian teaching; indeed arguing against that view is a significant feature of the teachings of Francis' predecessor Benedict XVI. In a nutshell, freedom to commit sin is not freedom at all.

One of the worst falsehoods that is sometimes perpetrated about Catholic social teaching is that it is about only basic principles and shared values such as solidarity, the dignity of the person and so on. This view argues that we simply need to agree on these shared principles, and then every Catholic is free to make up his or her mind about how to apply them to specific situations. This view was popular during the 2016 Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom as a way of managing opposing views within the Catholic community. This understanding is wholly false. Documents from the Magisterium that share the insights of social teaching have never shied away from dealing with specific issues or putting forward solutions to specific problems. This

Pastoral Letter is no exception, as the bishops go on to look at specific ways in which we are harming the created order. They see unsustainable consumption is the real problem:

For all too long we have either been ignorant of, or ignored, the systematic exploitation of our planet and the unsustainable consumption of its resources. While accepting the crucial need and demand for energy for the benefit of the poorest of our brothers and sisters, the provision of our energy must, nonetheless, be by means which radically reduce the use of carbon-based fuels.

This is a letter specifically to be read to Catholics in the pews, not a document aimed at world political leaders, so the bishops stress the need for Catholics, and for Catholic institutions, to see this as our problem, not anyone else's:

We cannot leave the healing of our common home and the wellbeing and care of our brothers and sisters merely to a response from industry and governments. Our own local concern and action is necessary and has far-reaching consequences. We all have a part to play, each and every one of us, in the routines, choices and decisions of our everyday lives and our aspirations for the future. The actions of parishes, families, schools, and individuals will have a significant impact on our efforts to restore our common home. There are now many resources, freely available, to advise us on our choice of food, saving of water and electricity, suggestions about travel, waste, and re-use. These are measures that everyone can employ, in some degree, with minimal inconvenience and change. They are effective ways in which we can each reaffirm our personal vocation to be stewards of creation.

In recent years CAFOD's *LiveSimply* campaign⁵ has enabled parishes to conduct audits of their practical policies in relation to the environment (for example, heating systems, recycling, and church lighting); I imagine it simply has not occurred to many to do this at all, so hopefully the Pastoral Letter will raise a challenge.

A criticism that is sometimes made of the encyclicals of Pope Francis, particularly *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti*, is that they are gloomy and pessimistic. This is a misrepresentation: the pope's tone simply matches the gravity of the problems that he seeks to address; moreover, there is also a strong doctrine of Christian hope in his teachings. So too here the bishops end the letter with a passage full of hope:

In all our human endeavours, we need the presence of the Holy Spirit, 'the Lord, the Giver of Life', whose gift to the Church and the world we celebrate again at Pentecost. Let us keep this Feast with that enduring hope that we can begin to repair the damage we have done and provide a healthy home for future generations. Our hope will be strengthened by

⁵ <https://cafod.org.uk/Campaign/Livesimply-award>

our prayer. May our constant request be that the Holy Spirit guide us, strengthen our resolve and ‘renew the face of the earth’.

In short, the Pastoral was an assertive and serious attempt to impress on Catholics, in the midst of all the concerns of the Covid-19 pandemic, the urgency of the crisis facing the planet, in the light of the Christian faith and what we celebrate on the feast of Pentecost. The letter is short - at the time, restrictions on the length of time we were meant to be at Mass were only gradually being lifted - but it is clear and focussed; and it offers a good starting point for further reflection on how our response to the crisis facing the world can be informed by our doctrine of the Holy Spirit. I want to identify, really only as early reflections, three ‘footprints’ of the Holy Spirit that we can discern.

The First Footprint: Rationality

Ever since the time of Tertullian and the Montanists there have been manifestations of what has been claimed to be the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, which have been marked by the primacy of personal experience and the enthusiasm which results from this.⁶ Elements in the modern day Pentecostal churches, and the Charismatic Renewal movement in the Catholic Church, often seem suspicious of academic theology and the use of reason as a yardstick in religious faith. By contrast many early Church Fathers, with a strong theology of the Holy Spirit and of the *logos*, warn against being slaves to our passions; rather, true faith is marked by rationality. In an early chapter in a fascinating new collection of essays, Rowan Williams looks at the *Gnostikos* by the fourth century monk, Evagrius of Pontus. Williams points to the link between Evagrius’ *logos*-theology and the urgent need now for our theology of Creation to address the climate change crisis. So, reflecting on how Evagrius teaches that being engaged with the *logos* should lead us to be free from ‘distortion of passion’ he writes:

Transformed *sense* is what happens as we become more seriously aware of the interface between my physicality and the physicality around me; when I begin to see and sense what is there, stripped of my passionate intention towards it. When Pope Francis and Patriarch Bartholomew speak of our environmental crisis as a ‘sin against ourselves’ and of the interconnectedness of environmental disorder with other sorts of disorder and imbalance, we are reminded that the effect of ‘passionate intention’ is a state of *irrationality*.⁷

⁶ See the classic survey of this, *Enthusiasm*, by Ronald Knox (Oxford 1951).

⁷ R. Williams, *Looking East in Winter* (London: Bloomsbury 2021) p. 68. Williams refers to sections 16, 34 and 56 of *Laudato Si’*

This is of fundamental importance. Irrationality characterises the hostile reaction to the science of climate change and the gradual destruction of biodiversity; just as the English politician, Michael Gove, was able to say during the 2016 *Brexit* referendum campaign ‘people in the country have had enough of experts’,⁸ so it is that hostility to those warning about the damage being done to the planet stems from a suspicion of expert opinion, intellectuals, and science. It is seen too in the ‘anti-vax’ movement, which has deterred many from getting proper protection from Covid-19. Sadly this attitude is to be found in the Catholic Church and other Christian communities, reflecting opposition to much of the teaching ministry of Pope Francis (who also happens to be, unusually for a pope, a Physics graduate).

A deeper understanding of the Holy Spirit should help us challenge this distorted vision. The gifts we receive from God in creation through the power of the Holy Spirit include the capacity to learn about God’s creation, the capacity to reason, to make rational judgment. The Church values intellectual and academic study and has seen education as a pastoral priority for centuries; there is no place for anti-intellectualism. Disorder in creation is closely related to irrationality.

The Second Footprint: Unity in Diversity

The narrative of the second chapter of Acts tells us: ‘they were all together in the same place’.⁹ Kallistos Ware sees this language as a sign of unity as a gift:

The Holy Spirit makes the many to be one Body in Christ. The Spirit’s descent at Pentecost reverses the effect of the tower of Babel (Genesis 11:7). As we say in one of the hymns for the Feast of Pentecost: *When the Most High came down and confused the tongues, He divided the nations; But when he distributed tongues of fire, He called all to unity. Therefore with one voice we glorify the All-Holy Spirit.* The Spirit brings unity and mutual comprehension, enabling us to speak ‘with one voice. He transforms individuals into persons’.¹⁰

Therefore it is not surprising that the practical measures that Pope Francis puts forward in *Laudato Si’*, parallel to measures in relation to the financial sector put forward by Benedict XVI in *Caritas in Veritate*, require greater international co-operation. The Church supports international bodies like the UN and the EU for a reason.

⁸ 3 June 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/3be49734-29cb-11e6-83e4-abc22d5d108c>

⁹ Acts 2:1 (Nicholas King translation)

¹⁰ K. Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (London: Mowbray 1979), pp 125-126.

But the Christian vision of a united humanity is not a dull uniformity. Ware points out that the tongues of fire are ‘divided’:

Not only does the Holy Spirit make us one, but he makes us each different. At Pentecost the multiplicity of tongues was not abolished, but it ceased to be a cause of separation; each spoke as before in his own tongue, but by the power of the Spirit each could understand the others.¹¹

The Spirit-filled vision shows how nations and communities will need to talk to and understand each other over environmental measures if catastrophe is to be averted. The diversity made by the Spirit of God also speaks to us of biodiversity – and the eradication of this is one of the worst things that is happening at this time¹² - the beauty of this varied world is what is threatened.

The Third Footprint: Urgency

Throughout the scriptures, the Spirit of God is marked by urgency. Again and again the Spirit inspires valour and violence in figures such as Joshua, Samson, and Saul; but this leads to disturbed and uncontrollable behaviour, such as the frenzy which falls upon Saul’s agents in 1 Samuel 19: 20ff. The Spirit also leads prophets to do unexpected things: Isaiah, for example, speaks of the Spirit anointing the prophet to bring good news to the poor, the afflicted, the blind and prisoners (61:1ff). Perhaps the strongest image of urgency is of the Spirit driving (*ekballei*) Jesus into the wilderness to be tested (Mark 1:12; only Mark has this violent picture). In Luke’s narrative Jesus is described as ‘filled with the Holy Spirit’ (4:1); and in all the narratives what happens next is battle with Satan. Urgency leads to conflict.

Perhaps this is the most challenging manifestation of the presence of the Holy Spirit in relation to the crisis for our planet. The urgency is there for all to see; but many modern-day Christians in the western world recoil from seeing the arguments that we are trying to put forward about climate change, biodiversity and so on as a conflict, marked by real temptations, against the Evil One. For all the urgency, we find it straightforward to see the arguments as an effort to convince people, on the basis of the science, of what we know about what is happening to the world. Can we really see this as a moral conflict? Public and political life is marked by a disturbing polarisation and atmosphere of aggression, sometimes leading to violent outcomes. Is this not made worse by language which speaks of evil and Satan?

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² See, for example, Celia Deane-Drummond, ‘The Cry of the Earth’, *The Tablet* 9 October 2021

Pope Francis has often warned against this coarsening of public life, and called for a renewal of friendship and courtesy, particularly in *Fratelli Tutti*. But Christians cannot avoid the notion of spiritual conflict and struggle. The pope writes in *Laudato Si'*

Human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself. According to the Bible, these vital relationships have been broken, both outwardly and within us. This rupture is sin. The harmony between the Creator, humanity and creation as a whole was dissipated by our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations.¹³

It is perfectly possible to realise that our struggle with sin, in all its forms, is a struggle with evil, without demonising our opponents. The urgency facing the world, and the inability of so many Christians to discern the crisis, surely illustrates how subtle sin can be.

What is needed from the churches is prophetic commitment in relation to our care for creation. Many young Christians are joining in increasingly confident and challenging peaceful demonstrations; a good model is surely the Christian Peace movement – the witness of American Catholics, such as the Servant of God, Dorothy Day, as well as Father Dan Berrigan SJ and many others, the witness in the UK of the *Catholic Workers*, *Pax Christi*, and other groups – which has awakened the conscience of many Catholics and focussed the Church's developing opposition to war. The urgency of the ecological crisis demands an urgent response.

Conclusion

We tend naturally to think of creation as an event, narrated for us in the opening chapters of Genesis. But perhaps the urgent challenges we now face invite us to see it as a *process*, something that is, in a sense, still going on. Nearly forty years ago, Jürgen Moltmann described creation as a 'Trinitarian process'.¹⁴ Drawing on St Basil,¹⁵ he sees the Spirit as the 'perfecter' who is constantly involved with the process into which 'flow the energies and potentialities of the cosmic Spirit'. The urgent challenge in this process is to help one another discern the presence of the Holy Spirit; it is welcome and significant that the Bishops of England and Wales and of Scotland have given a lead in this, in the months leading up to the COP-26 summit. Theologically, as we look

¹³ Section 66.

¹⁴ *God in Creation (Gott in der Schöpfung: Ökologische Schöpfungslehre)*, (London: SCM 1985), pp. 9ff.

¹⁵ *On the Holy Spirit* 38 (PG 32.136B)

for the footprints of the Holy Spirit in the world, we see that much remains to be done.

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