

CHAPTER 4

CREATION AND ITS PURPOSE. THE ORDER OF THE CREATION.

Summary

- I. The solemn teaching of the Church: God created all things.
- II. God's Act of Creation. God's primary purpose in creating was His external glory. His secondary purpose was the happiness of rational creatures. His creative act is continuous. He exercises a providence over all that He made.
- III. The order of the Creation: The Bible account. It contains a principal and a subordinate element. The account given by scientists: it cannot be in conflict with the principal element in the Bible account; it is not in conflict with the subordinate element. The seven-day week.

I

The solemn teaching of the Church. God created the whole world.¹ It had no existence until, by an act of His own free-will, He called it into being. He created the sun, earth, moon, planets, stars and all things in the universe. He created the first living things from which all existing plants and animals are descended. He created man to His own image and likeness. He created the angels.² He created all things for His external glory.³ He exercises a providence over all His creatures.⁴

II

God's act of Creation. God created all beings *ex nihilo*, i.e., from nothing. By His almighty power He summoned them into being from non-being. Whenever man 'creates', he uses some pre-existing material and refashions it. But God created the universe from no pre-existing material.

The universe is not eternal, but was created in time—or rather, with time—since time began when the world began: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”⁵

God's primary purpose in creating. God's primary purpose in creating was His external glory. His external glory is His splendour, as manifested outwardly in His creatures. All the works of His hands reflect in their very being and nature His power, wisdom and goodness: His power has raised them from nothingness to existence; His wisdom has designed the nature of each and appointed its purpose; His goodness is the source of all the gifts bestowed on them through His wisdom and His power. All created things are therefore images of their Maker, each in its own imperfect degree. But the word “image” is applied with special appropriateness to men and angels, because, through their understanding and free-will, they have been raised above all other creatures. They have been made personal agents, and have been given a closer likeness to God. The lowliest of mankind, by his very nature, endowed as it is with a spiritual soul, gives God greater glory than the whole material universe with all its vastness. Further, the lowliest of mankind, by a simple act of the love of God, gives Him greater glory than He receives through all the secular learning of scientists and philosophers. The likeness becomes closer still when those noble faculties are correctly used, i.e., when we employ our mind and will in knowing and loving God, for we are thus, in our little way, made active imitators of Him who has an infinite knowledge and love of His Own Divine Goodness. All men therefore whose mind and will work as He would have them work reflect Him more perfectly, and therefore advance His external glory. They further advance it by teaching others to know and love Him.

All creation, all things are good in themselves, although they may be misused. Seven times the inspired writer says, “And God saw that it was good.”⁶ Each time, God saw that it

¹ The Creeds; Lateran IV: DS 800; Vatican I: DS 3002

² Lateran IV: DS 800; Vatican I: DS 3002

³ Vatican I: DS 3002

⁴ Vatican I: DS 3003

⁵ Gen 1:1. Cf. St Augustine, *The City of God*, Bk 11, ch. 6.

⁶ Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31

was good in itself as proceeding from His hand, and because it was a step in the preparation of the universe for the appearance of mankind, for the Incarnation of God Himself in Jesus Christ, and for the unfolding of the history of salvation to culminate in the Church Triumphant, gathered forever around the throne of the Lamb and the vision of the Blessed Trinity.

God's external glory, as arising from His rational creatures, reaches its highest expression in the Blessed in Heaven who enjoy the direct vision of His unveiled Loveliness. Unlike those on earth, they possess a knowledge of Him that can never grow dim or clouded, and a love of Him that can never prove untrue. They have attained to that perfect exercise of the mind and will for which He made them. *God's internal glory* is His intrinsic splendour, or, more strictly, His appreciation and praise thereof. According to the accepted teaching of theologians, the Son is begotten of the Father by way of understanding, and the Holy Spirit proceeds by way of love. Hence in the very life of the Holy Trinity, we have infinite knowledge and infinite love, and therefore infinite glory. We should notice that self-complacency in God follows necessarily from His knowledge of Himself as an infinitely perfect Being, the source of His own existence and of all His perfections; whereas self-complacency in a creature, if it springs from the notion that the creature is the sole author of its excellence, is mere folly, for the creature has nothing of its own.

The word "glory" in its everyday use is similarly applied. It denotes splendour, or the manifestation of splendour, or its appreciation and praise. So we speak of the glory of an artist's talent, or the glory of his works which are its expression, or the glory which he wins from the public.

God's secondary purpose. God's primary purpose in the whole plan of creation was the manifestation of His splendour, but in the creation of men and angels He had a secondary purpose also. He made them, not only that they might by their nature testify to His glory, but that they might win everlasting happiness for themselves.

God's primary purpose cannot be defeated, but His secondary purpose may, because it depends for its attainment on the proper exercise of free-will. But if His rational creatures abuse their freedom, the failure is theirs, not His. Even in their failure, they manifest His Justice by the punishment which sin entails.

Creation was an act of love. "God in His goodness and omnipotence", says the first Vatican council, "drew creatures from nothing, not to increase His happiness, not to gain anything, but to manifest His perfection by the blessings He bestows on creatures."⁷ His chief blessing was conferred on His rational creatures, men and angels. To them He gave a nature capable of receiving the further gift of Grace, and therefore of being raised to the sublime dignity of divine sonship.

God's creative act is continuous. Since God alone is self-existent, we and all other creatures, animate and inanimate, spiritual and material, owe our existence to Him. Existence is no part of our nature; therefore, we need the sustaining hand of God from instant to instant. So fully are we dependent on Him that, if it were not for His unceasing help, we should be unable to perform even the most trivial action. God's creative act, in our regard, is therefore continuous. Technically, we say that to God we owe our existence and our conservation: "God who made the world and everything in it ... Himself gives to all men life and breath and everything ... In Him we live and move and have our being."⁸ Our existence is as the light from a light bulb: just as there is no light unless the electric current is supplied, so we have no existence unless God continuously supplies it to us. "The fool says in his heart: there is no God,"⁹ but the greater fool is he who, while knowing his utter dependence on God, refuses to be subject to Him and to obey Him.

God exercises a providence over all His creatures. That God exercises a providence or ever-watchful care over all His creatures follows of necessity from His infinite goodness and wisdom. He, the infinitely wise and good, who has made all things and holds all things in being, must necessarily desire that they attain the end for which He made them. His providence extends to all His creatures, but in a particular way to man: Christ said, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's will. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are

⁷ DS 3002

⁸ Acts 17:24, 25, 28

⁹ Ps 14 (13):1

of more value than many sparrows.”¹⁰ Man is more precious in the eyes of God than the birds of the air, because to man He has given a higher nature and a higher destiny. In His Divine Providence, God orders the events and circumstances of our lives down to the smallest detail, so as to draw the sinner towards repentance, and the just to higher sanctity. If it pleases Him to send us sorrow or pain, we must accept it with loving resignation, full of faith that He knows what is best for us and that there is no one so kind as He. St Augustine praises God: “O Good and Almighty One, who so care for every one of us as if You cared for him alone, and so for all as if they were but one!”¹¹

III

The Bible account. We read in the first chapter of Genesis that “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep.” Then follows a brief account of the six days’ work. The common interpretation is that the world, or matter in a state of chaos, was created by God before the six days’ work began. The six days’ work was, therefore, a work of organisation or development. The account shows us the order in which the chief things in the world were created:

- (1) On the first day, He said: “‘Let there be light,’ and there was light ... and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day and the darkness He called Night.”
- (2) On the second day, He said: “‘Let there be a firmament¹² in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.’”
- (3) On the third day, He made dry land appear from out of the waters, and bade it bring forth the green herb and the fruit-tree.
- (4) On the fourth day, He said: “‘Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to separate the day from the night’ ... and God made the two great lights, the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night; He made the stars also.”
- (5) On the fifth day, He said: “‘Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth ...’ And God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm ... and every winged bird.”
- (6) On the sixth day, He made “cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth” and “God created man in His own image.”
- (7) Finally, on the seventh day, “He rested ... from all His work which He had done.”

“He *rested*,” that is, He ceased to make or create any new kinds of things. Though, as our Lord tells us,¹³ He is working still, namely, by conserving and governing all things, and creating souls.

In the Bible account, there is a principal and a subordinate element. In the Bible account, we must carefully distinguish what is principal from what is subordinate.

The principal element. The Jews to whom the narrative was primarily addressed were surrounded by idolatrous peoples who believed in the existence of many gods, and paid divine worship to all kinds of creatures, to the sun and moon, plants and animals, and images of wood and stone. Hence, the sacred writer, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, impresses on the Jewish race, with greatest emphasis, that there is but one God, and that He created the whole visible universe with everything in it, living and lifeless. The expression of this great truth is the chief element in his narrative, hence the constant repetition of the words: “God made”, “God said and it was so.” All else is secondary or subordinate.

The subordinate element. The subordinate element is the popular dress in which the inspired message is clothed. Though, for convenience sake, we designate it “the subordinate element”, it is nevertheless as truly a part of inspired Scripture as the principal element; it is the medium through which the Holy Spirit has chosen to speak to us.

¹⁰ Matt 10:29-31.

¹¹ *The Confessions*, Bk 3: 11, 19

¹² A *firmament*. By this term is meant the whole space between the earth and the stars. The lower part of this space separates the waters that are upon the earth from those that hang above in the clouds. See also p.***.

¹³ Jn 5:17

The Church, while insisting that the account of the creation in Genesis is in a certain sense historical—i.e., neither fictional nor legendary, but a true narrative of actual events—tells us at the same time that we may regard it as popular in form. Popular form implies popular expression and popular order. (1) *Popular expression*—things and happenings are described not in strict scientific language but as they would appear outwardly to the senses, and be commonly spoken of and understood by ordinary people. Thus, e.g., God is represented as speaking, as taking counsel with Himself, and breathing on the clay He has formed; the moon is represented as one of the two greater lights in the heavens. (2) *Popular order*—the events, and of these only the most important, are set down in an order, not necessarily chronological, but suited to the understanding of a primitive people, and so to mankind generally.

Popular vs scientific. In ordinary language we say “the sun is in the middle of the sky.” Were we to use accurate scientific language we should speak somewhat as follows: “The earth has so turned on its axis, that our meridian is now directly opposite the sun.” The account of creation offers an example of this in its use of the word ‘firmament’. To the uninstructed eye the heavens appear at night as if there were in the sky a vast concave structure in which the stars are fixed. This structure—something like the inside of a dome—is what is meant by the firmament. Similarly the Old Testament speaks of the ‘upper waters’ (the source of rain) above the firmament.

Popular history vs mythology. Pope Pius XII in *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 1943, stressed the importance, for a correct understanding of the Bible, of a knowledge of the various literary forms used by early writers. There are many literary forms in the Bible, and the sacred writers, primarily interested in theological truth, did not always treat of historical matters in the way a modern historian does. The same Pope also said, “the first eleven chapters of Genesis, although not properly in conformity with the methods of historical composition used by the best Greek and Latin writers or by competent authors of our time, do nevertheless pertain to the genus of history in a true sense, to be further studied and determined by exegetes; the same chapters, in simple and figurative language adapted to the mentality of a people of little culture, both state the principal truths upon which the attainment of our eternal salvation depends, and also give a popular description of the origin of the human race and the Chosen People. It may be that these ancient writers of sacred history drew some of their material from current popular stories. So much may be granted; but it must be remembered that they did so under the impulse of divine inspiration, which preserved them from all error in selecting and assessing the material they used. These excerpts from current stories, which are found in the sacred books, must not be put on a level with mere myths, or with legend in general. Myths arise from the uncontrolled imagination; whereas in our sacred books, even of the Old Testament, a love of truth and simplicity shine out, so as to put these sacred writers on a demonstrably higher level than their profane contemporaries.”¹⁴

The Church has also declared that the word “day” (*yom* in Hebrew) need not mean a solar day of 24 hours, and that it can be lawfully interpreted as signifying a long period of time.¹⁵ It has long been observed that, since the sun itself was not created until the fourth “day”, the word “day” could not mean the solar day before then. (Some writers who think themselves clever make this point as if they were the first to notice it. It was known to Origen, d. 254, and to St Augustine, d. 430).¹⁶

Beyond these general directions and a general condemnation of all methods of interpretation which would impute real error to the Sacred Writings, the Church has decided nothing as to how the subordinate element in the Scriptural narrative is to be understood.

The account given by scientists of the order of Creation. The account given by scientists of the development of our world is contributed in part by astronomers, in part by geologists. Astronomers seek to explain the processes and stages by which the solar system, planets, satellites and other cosmic bodies and gases came to be as they are today. Geologists seek to explain the formation of the earth and its levels, the sea, land masses, and life forms. Scientific accounts do not dispense with the necessity of a Creator, however. Unless we admit His existence, we leave unexplained: the origin of matter; the origin of its motion and energy; the origin of vegetable and animal life, and the spiritual soul of man; the origin of the wonderful order that pervades the universe.

¹⁴ Pius XII, *Humani Generis*, 1950: DS 3898-9

¹⁵ Decree of the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 1909: DS 3519

¹⁶ Origen, *De Principiis* (On Fundamentals) IV, 16; *Against Celsus*, VI, 50 & 60. St Augustine, *Commentary on Genesis*, V, 1; IV, 33

Science cannot be in conflict with the principal element in the Bible account. Physical science, as we have already learned,¹⁷ deals only with causes whose operation comes under the observation of the senses. It shows how one lever in the machinery of the world is moved by another, the second by the third, and so on, but it cannot tell us how the last lever is moved. Its investigations are entirely confined to an examination of these levers. It deals only with things that happen within the visible world. As long as it keeps to its proper work, it cannot assert or deny anything about the existence or acts of God who is a Being distinct from the visible world, and, therefore, outside its scope. Hence, it cannot touch the doctrine of creation, which is the chief element in the Biblical narrative. It follows that the authority which a man may have gained in the field of physical science forsakes him the moment he passes beyond the limits of his subject. If he ventures to discuss questions outside the realm of physics, the value of his speculations will depend, not on his ability as a scientist, but on his ability as a philosopher; but since in philosophy he will be dealing with a type of evidence quite unfamiliar to him and for which he is not fitted by his previous training, his conclusions will, as a rule, be amateurish.

Science is not in conflict with the subordinate element, as is shown by either of two interpretations. The only difficulties which scientists can raise are connected with the order followed by the sacred writer. We give two interpretations, both in conformity with the decisions of the Pontifical Biblical Commission early in the 20th century, and both free from the charge of conflict with physical science.

FIRST INTERPRETATION: *The order followed in Genesis results from the grouping together of similar works.* The inspired writer of Genesis opens his narrative with the words: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.” This primitive world or Chaos consisted, therefore, of three layers: above was a dark space; beneath it was water; beneath the water was earth. The rest of the account tells in popular form how the present world was produced from the original Chaos. This work of development is described as having taken place in six days, the expressions “first day”, “second day”, etc., being used, not to signify days of twenty-four hours each, but to indicate the order in which the writer chose to set down the events of creation. St Augustine and other Fathers say that God made all things instantaneously, although, for the purposes of narration, the writer separates them in time.¹⁸ St Thomas says that “the mode and order of [the world’s] making do not pertain to the substance of the faith”.¹⁹

- I. The sacred writer tells how each layer in turn was divided: on the 1st day, the dark space was divided into day and night; on the 2nd, the water was divided into the water below (sea) and the water above (clouds, air); on the 3rd, the earth was divided into land under water and land over water (dry land with its concomitant vegetation).
- II. Next, he tells us how, on each of the three following days, each region received its proper occupants: on the 4th day, the sun was created to rule the day, and the moon with the stars to rule the night; on the 5th, fishes were placed in the sea, and birds in the air (sky); on the 6th, animals and man appeared on the dry earth.

We may tabulate the interpretation thus:

Chaos' layers	Day	Regions	Day	Occupants
Darkness	1.	Day & Night	4.	Sun (for Day) Moon with stars (for Night)
Water	2.	Sea & Sky (Air)	5.	Fishes (for Sea) Birds (for Sky, Air)
Earth	3.	Land under water & Land over water, with vegetation	6.	[No occupants for Land under water, because insignificant or unknown] Animals and man (for Land over water)

This interpretation, which is given by St Thomas,²⁰ has much to recommend it: (1) It is in conformity with the structure of the account. (2) It arranges events in an order which a primitive people could readily understand, and easily retain. (3) It represents the sacred writer as impressing most strongly on his people that God made everything in the world and gave each thing the place it occupies. (4) It will never require re-adjustment to suit the views of scientists.

¹⁷ p.**

¹⁸ Cf. St Aug., *Commentary on Genesis*, I, 15-16; II, 15; IV, 32, 33, 35; V, 1, 5; St Thomas, *Summa Theol.*, I, q. 74, a. 2; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* (Miscellanies), VI, 16; Origen, *De Princip.* (On Fundamentals) IV, 16; *Against Celsus*, VI, 50 & 60; Athanasius, *Oration 2 against the Arians*, n.60; Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Hexaemeron*, PG 44:69, 72, 77; Isidore of Seville, *Questions on Genesis*, ch. 1-2; *Sententiae*, I, 10.

¹⁹ *Commentary on the Sentences*, II, d. 12, q. 1, a. 2

²⁰ *Summa Theol.*, I, qq. 65-74

SECOND INTERPRETATION: *The order followed in Genesis is in its broad lines a chronological order.* Let us note the following most remarkable points of agreement between the Biblical and the scientific accounts: (1) both accounts represent the world as gradually developing from chaos to order; (2) both represent lower forms of life as appearing before higher: vegetation before fishes; fishes (and monsters of the deep) before birds and mammals; (3) both state that man was the last of all to appear. To these we may add the creation of light on the first day. The inspired writer speaks as though he were an observer on the surface of the primitive earth. He sees the sunlight penetrate the dense vapour for the first time; but the sun itself is not yet visible as a distinct object, and will not be seen until the fourth day. In this interpretation, as the first, we may take "first day", "second day", etc., to denote the order, in this case roughly chronological, in which the writer records events.

This interpretation, regarded by many as satisfactory, is perhaps less so than the first.

The week of seven days. God instituted the Jewish week of seven days as a memorial of the successive periods of Creation: "Six days shall work be done", He said, "but the seventh day is a sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord ... It is a sign ... that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day He rested."²¹ Through His Church, God has ordered us to continue the observance of the week of seven days. In the hymns of the Divine Office for the Vespers of the days of the week, beginning with the Sunday hymn, *Lucis Creator*, the Church commemorates the works of Creation, deducing from each a spiritual lesson. But God has given us a new Sabbath with a new significance. The new Sabbath (Sunday) commemorates the Redemption, a work of greater love than the Creation itself. Thus the Church speaks of God as having wonderfully created us, but as having still more wonderfully redeemed us.²² Its commemoration has been fittingly assigned to the first day of the week, for it was on that day that Light came forth from the tomb, the same day that God created physical light, the image of His Son, who is "the Light that shines in the darkness" (Jn 1:5), the spiritual Light that pierced the darkness of a sinful world. The ancient Sabbath paid homage to God as having completed the work of Creation, while the Christian Sabbath pays Him homage as having begun in the Redemption a new and more glorious work.

²¹ Ex 31:15-17

²² Roman Missal, 1969, Collect of Christmas Day Mass. *Missale Romanum*, 1962, Offertory.