



LIGHT & LIFE

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Fr. Dismas Sayre, O.P., *Director* May-Jun 2024, Vol 77, No 3 Western Dominican Province

The Elephant in the Room

I think that everyone has probably heard some version of the story of four or so blind men around an elephant, which goes something like this:

Four blind men are standing around an elephant. The first man grabs the elephant's tail and says, "This is obviously a rope." The second man grabs a leg and says, "Nonsense, this is most certainly a tree." The third man grabs the elephant's trunk and counters, "No, it's long, thin, and moves sideways, so it must be some kind of snake." The last one grabs a hold of one of the ears, and says, "No, this is soft, and the shape and size of some sort of palm leaf."

The moral of this parable is to say that no one person has a full grasp of the truth. This is true, to a certain point. I certainly am not capable of explaining every facet of theology, much less every currently accepted scientific theory. However, the parable, like many analogies, tends to fall apart if we press it further. Although St. Paul says that "We walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7), he is not saying that we are as the blind men here, but that we have an advantage given to us by faith that goes beyond that of physical sight. The healing miracles of Our Lord that involve sight are physical signs pointing to or leading someone to a greater spiritual reality. The greatest example might be St. Paul himself, as we hear in Acts that after Ananias laid his hands on then-Saul-soon-to-be-Paul, "Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized..." (Acts 9:18).

But if the elephant in the room is God, then we, by Faith *do* have a greater overall vision of the elephant in the room. We see the tail, the leg, the trunk, and the ear, and we put it all together and can with perfect certitude say, "Well, I can see that this is an elephant." Now, do the blind men have nothing to add? No, we would never say such a thing. One of the earliest post-apostolic apologists for the Faith, St. Justin Martyr, spoke of the idea of these parts of the Word (Logos) being in every "race of men." In his Second Apology, he writes that, "Our doctrines, then, appear to be greater than all human teaching; because Christ, who appeared for our sakes, became the whole rational being,

both body, and reason, and soul. *For whatever either lawgivers or philosophers uttered well, they elaborated by finding and contemplating some part of the Word. But since they did not know the whole of the Word, which is Christ, they often contradicted themselves*" (The Second Apology of Justin Martyr, Chapter 10, emphasis mine).

We all, through our human nature, have *some* contact, as it were, with God, this elephant in the room. It would be *impossible* not to. We all, every human soul, have *some* idea of the Natural Law in every human heart. St. Paul teaches the Romans that. "Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them" (Romans 2:14-15). Even someone entirely sociopathic or psychopathic would know it, but would just pay it no mind, or derive pleasure from intentionally breaking such rules for personal gain.

But even we, with the eyes of Faith, can always learn something from our less visually capable brethren. In our parable, we can come to perhaps learn more about the texture of each elephant part, or the sounds of the elephant's heartbeat or breathing, or the smells – all things which the blind men, by being deprived of one sense, might even be more capable than us of capturing through
(Continued on page 4)



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THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

In the Beginning

By Fr. Dismas Sayre, O.P.

Baltimore Catechism (edition 4):

1 Q. Who made the world? A. God made the world.

The "world" here means more than the earth—more than is shown on a map of the world. It means everything that we can see—sun, moon, stars, etc.; even those things that we can see only with great telescopes. Everything, too, that we may be able to see in the future, either with our eyes alone, or aided by instruments, is included in the word "world." We can call it the universe.

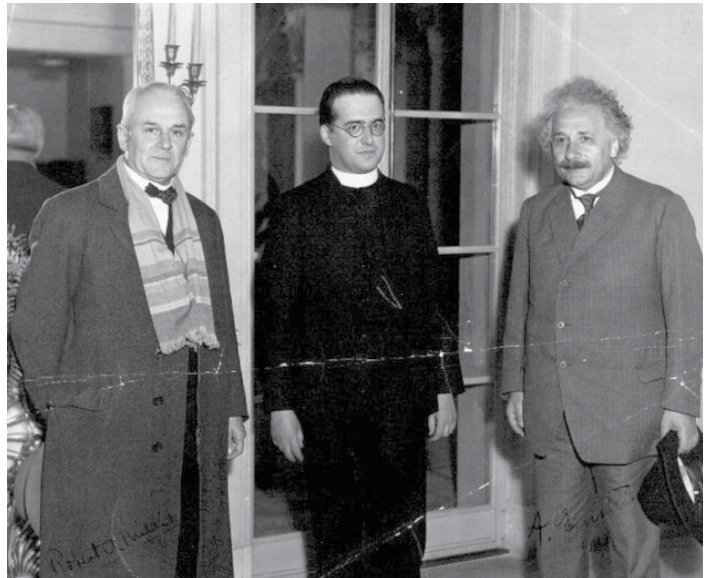
2 Q. Who is God? A. God is the Creator of Heaven and earth, and of all things.

One of the quixotic quests in the mind of modern man seems to be, not merely to disregard God, but to *prove* that He does not exist, or that He is wholly unnecessary. This seems a strange thing, indeed, since it is almost impossible to prove a negative, especially one beyond the realm and scope of science, especially physics. And so, we go to various ideas, that well, there *can't* be such a thing as "Big Bang," because a "Big Bang" seems to be a little too conveniently "biblical," or at least, "theistic," requiring what the Ancient Greeks would call a "Prime Mover," the one who would set everything in motion, who would kick off the show, so to speak, knocking over the first domino in a cascading Domino Effect.

And so, in the modern period, various theories came around to explain the observable universe, but tended to go toward some kind of eternally-existing model. In the 1920s comes along a young scientist-priest, Fr. Georges Lemaître, who, after Edwin Hubble's discovery that the far-off galaxies all seemed to be receding from our humble little planet, which hinted toward an expanding universe. Ok, but if the universe is expanding, then, logically, we must be able to work backwards into a first kind of state, and Fr. Lemaître thus theorized that it must've had a singular beginning, beginning with a kind of primordial "atom" (here meaning something that you could not divide further).

"This atom is conceived as having existed for an instant only, in fact, it was unstable and, as soon as it came into being, it was broken into pieces which were again broken, in their turn; among these pieces electrons, protons, alpha particles, etc., rushed out. An increase in volume resulted; the disintegration of the atom was thus accompanied by a rapid increase in the radius of space which the fragments of the primeval atom filled, always uniformly. When these pieces became too small, they ceased to break up; certain ones, like uranium, are slowly disintegrating now, with an average life of four billion years, leaving us a meager sample of the universal disintegration of the past." LEMAÎTRE, G. *The Beginning of the World from the Point of View of Quantum Theory*. Nature 127, 706 (1931).

Fr. Lemaître tried to approach Albert Einstein about his theory, but Einstein himself was initially unimpressed, saying, "Your calculations are correct, but your physics



Robert A. Millikan, Georges Lemaître and Albert Einstein at California Institute of Technology, January 1933, Wikimedia Commons

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:MillikanLemaîtreEinstein.jpg> is abominable." It seems the huge genius crowded out some of the tact in Einstein's mind at the time. Eventually, however, proof of the expanding universe won Einstein over to Fr. Lemaître's side.

This is not to say that Fr. Lemaître believed that he thought that this "proved" Genesis.

"As far as I can see, such a theory remains entirely outside any metaphysical or religious question. It leaves the materialist free to deny any transcendental Being... For the believer, it removes any attempt to familiarity with God... It is consonant with Isaiah speaking of the Hidden God, hidden in the beginning."

His basic point is that the Bible is not trying to prove science, nor is science trying to prove the Bible, at least in so far as it comes to those very fundamental questions of natural science or of God. Each has its own proper sphere, but this has not stopped some on the science side from disproving Scripture, as I mentioned at the beginning.

Even St. Thomas Aquinas' "Five Proofs" (more accurately, "Five Ways"), really show more how it is perfectly logical and reasonable to believe in God, not that this shows, through scientific experiment or mathematical proof, that God exists, or how that the God we believe in exists. Those things must come to us through divine revelation, and divine revelation is not easily testable under a microscope or inside a particle accelerator. But, then again, the ideas of "multiverses" and whatnot are almost certainly impossible to test for, even if they were to exist. Fr. Lemaître's ideas could at least be proved, or at least supported, by later data, such as the cosmic background radiation.

In a way, Judaism and Christianity liberated primitive man from a kind of confusion between the two, because the pagans had often ascribed certain deities or divinities

to what we would call natural processes or phenomena. Yes, God is behind everything as the Creator, but He is not micromanaging Creation. St. Paul tells us in a famous canticle, "For in Him all things were created, things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities. All things were created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together" (Col 1:17). In much more recent times the Church affirms:

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth": three things are affirmed in these first words of Scripture: the eternal God gave a beginning to all that exists outside of himself; he alone is Creator (the verb "create" - Hebrew *bara* - always has God for its subject). The totality of what exists (expressed by the formula "the heavens and the earth") depends on the One who gives it being. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 290).

This initial Creation is really what makes God *the* Creator. To bring something into being out of complete nothingness would require infinite power. One "solution," then, in modern science, is to try to see what this "nothingness" was, if anything, or to go back to some kind of eternal model.

And so, then, the Creator?

But what does the idea of a Creator imply, then? "From the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator" (Wis 13:5). A Creator obviously means that there must be or have been a Creation, but it also strongly implies a *purpose* or a design of some sort. Animals will at least act on instinct, and children out of boredom, but even there, children are still exploring or attempting to relieve boredom, and I do not believe anyone has seriously argued that God was bored before He created, and what does an omniscient God need to explore for? Here, we will not go into the whole arguments for and against Intelligent Design, since that is not necessarily related to us.

One of the modern attacks against believers is to diminish the place of man in the whole of creation. The universe is incredibly vast, so incredibly vast that adjectives like "incredibly" really do fail us. There are stars or celestial objects, that while an infinitesimally tiny speck of the universe, are far more massive than our own wondrous Sun. And somehow, we want to place Man at the center of Creation? Why, yes; yes, we do.

This is not a new observation. The psalmist sings, "When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have set in place— what is man that You are mindful of him, or the son of man that You care for him?" (Ps 8:3-4). The ancient Jews might not have known exactly how big the universe was, but they knew that it WAS immense, more than their imagination could capture. Despite all this, knowing full well of our puniness, God enters into a relationship with Man, and not only that, but *elevates* him, by grace, above ALL that wonder and majesty? This is not a cause for doubt for the believer, but a source of humility, gratitude, and inexpressible joy.

All this still doesn't quite answer the question: Why? The First Vatican Council has a wonderful document on

this, *Dei Filius*, but it summarizes it succinctly: "The world was made for the glory of God" (Dei Filius, no. 5). Or, more broadly, "This sole true God by His goodness and 'omnipotent power,' not to increase His own beatitude, and not to add to, but to manifest His perfection by the blessings which He bestows on creatures, with most free volition, 'immediately from the beginning of time fashioned each creature out of nothing, spiritual and corporeal, namely angelic and mundane; and then the human creation, common as it were, composed of both spirit and body' [citing Lateran Council IV, Ch. 1]". Here, I think we run into problems with the limits of our imagination. It is difficult enough to capture the true scope of our material universe, and then we want to enter the mind of the One behind it all? But yes, somehow, somehow, God *will* bring goodness and glory out of all this.

The World's ACTUAL Oldest Profession

God does not place Adam and Eve in a factory, nor in an artist's studio, nor in a print shop, nor in some computer room – He places them firmly and pointedly in a garden. But ever since the latter part of the previous century, the majority of mankind has been removed from the rural environment for which we could say he was created, into a workshop of his own creation – we are now an urban or suburban-majority race of sentient beings, who were not designed for such an environment. While it has made many good things and excellent things and possible and even increased our capacity and potential for knowledge, it has also withdrawn us more and more from the very natural environment from which God made us. Not only that, but ever since the invention of the light bulb, the very heavens themselves seem closed to us. We now have to return to the desert or the highest peaks to see the heavens as our ancestors did not that long ago.

Our connection to the skies and the soil itself is severed, as is our own original mission statement: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and every creature that crawls upon the earth" (Gen 1:26). Many politicians in the present age seem to make laws and dictates that are sometimes not at all connected to the reality of where and how food comes from.

While we think of manual labor now as a kind of punishment for sin, or a necessary evil for survival, this was not the intended purpose. Rather, it was to share in the goodness of God. God Himself gave us something good, in order to cooperate with Him in that which was good, not our own good as owners, but rather, as steward of God's goodness. We read in the second creation story of Genesis that, "Then the Lord God took the man and placed him in the Garden of Eden to cultivate and keep it" (Gen 2:15).

Just as we delight in our own children's goodness and creativity when *they* design something with the blocks or toys we give them, so does the Lord delight in the goodness and creativity of His creatures. But, again, with us to cooperate, *not* destroy.

In the Parable of the Talents, if one of the servants had melted down one of the talents to buy food to feed the victims of famine, I don't imagine the Master would

have been angry at all, but rather, well-pleased that His servant took the initiative to take care of an emergency that would affect his people. If the servant wantonly destroyed those talents, however, the Master would have had every right to be quite angry, indeed. Creation *is* a talent, in that sense, and a rather large one, that has been entrusted to us.

Pope St. John Paul II, in the World Day for Peace, 1990, stated that, “the earth is ultimately a *common heritage*, the fruits of which are for the benefit of *all*. In the words of the Second Vatican Council, ‘God destined the earth and all it contains for the use of every individual and all peoples’ (Gaudium et Spes, 69). This has direct consequences for the problem at hand. It is manifestly unjust that a privileged few should continue to accumulate excess goods, squandering available resources, while masses of people are living in conditions of misery at the very lowest level of subsistence. Today, the dramatic threat of ecological breakdown is teaching us the extent to which greed and selfishness - both individual and collective - are contrary to the order of creation, an order which is characterized by mutual interdependence” (World Day of Peace, 1990, no. 8).

This isolation from the natural world that I referred to earlier shows itself, ironically enough, in the so-called “green” policies of many corporations and nations. Giant corporations seek to make more and more rapidly-obsolete gadgets that require more and more minerals that are extremely damaging to the environment to acquire. And, of course, exploiting these minerals will affect the poorest and most defenseless the most, whether in Africa, the Philippines, or China, leaving behind toxic sludge pots, while those who can afford such “green” gadgets live in relatively clean environments. A lot of “green” policy is performative political theater, at best, and deceptively destructive, at worst, where we get the privilege of “feeling” green, while doing the exact opposite. This is what is called “greenwashing,” by some.

Pope Benedict XVIth knew of this phenomena when he remarked that, “It is likewise incumbent upon the competent authorities to make every effort to ensure that the economic and social costs of using up shared environmental resources are recognized with transparency and fully borne by those who incur them, not by other peoples or future generations: the protection of the environment, of resources and of the climate obliges all international leaders to act jointly and to show a readiness to work in good faith, respecting the law and promoting solidarity with the weakest regions of the planet” (Caritas in Veritate, Pope Benedict XVI, 50).

There is no easy solution that I can see from my limited vantage point. However, I do know one thing, drawing from the Font of Truth, and that is that we must be willing to have those difficult social and political conversations with each other, and not be satisfied at doing something merely for public appearances and approval – for we know well how Our Lord felt when some of the Pharisees did the exact same thing. May Our Lord, then, give us the Wisdom to deal well with the things of His world, and the courage to carry them out. Amen.

(Continued from page 1)

our own experience. Regardless, no new knowledge or insight gained can take away from our certitude that, “Yep, that’s an elephant.”

Scripture is not meant to be a philosophical work, but the Church has always used philosophies and reason to explain the Faith. Recall that St. Paul, when he preached in Athens, spoke with philosophers and regular folks on their terms, saying: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you” (Acts 17:22-23).

Even when someone is professing some kind of heresy, we can still gather the seed of truth within the heresy. Heresies are often an exaggeration of one point and ignoring other vital points of the Faith to the detriment of the heretic. It is generally easier to begin on where we agree, as we see with St. Paul’s preaching in the Areopagus in Athens.

All this is to lead us to the main point and the real elephant in the room: In our present times we have a lot of folks denying, in some way or fully, that the Catholic Church holds the fullness of truth necessary for salvation, against the very Ecumenical Council they proclaim to be “inspired by,” namely:

This is the **one** Church of Christ which in the Creed is professed as one, holy, catholic and apostolic, which our Saviour, after His Resurrection, commissioned Peter to shepherd, and him and the other apostles to extend and direct with authority, **which He erected for all ages as “the pillar and mainstay of the truth”**. This Church constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him, *although many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of its visible structure*. These elements, as gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, are forces impelling toward catholic unity. (Lumen Gentium, 8, emphasis mine).

The “elements of truth,” sadly, often seem to be sources of division, not “forces impelling toward catholic unity.” Some take advantage of the current theme of Synodality as an excuse, then, to tear down the fabric of Truth and make their own errors, all under the guise of a false kind of diversity, as if multiple errors, illnesses, or problems make for a healthier Body of Christ.

Thus, I feel compelled to state, or rather, *re-state* as plainly as possible, the fullness of the whole truth, and nothing but THE Truth. Because of copyright issues, and for the sake of simplicity, I will use the Baltimore Catechism (1891 edition), attempting to go through most of the articles and expanding on them with whatever Church teaching I can find. This will be the first issue of Light & Life to engage in this endeavor, and God willing, we will all come to a greater grasp of that fullness of the Faith.