

Creator of Heaven and Earth

*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth... and God saw that it was good.
(Genesis 1:1, 10)*

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CAT 602: Deposit of Faith

August 11, 2020

Introduction:

The doctrine of creation could be seen as the most foundational of all the Church's teachings. It answers the perennial questions that all human beings face: "Where do I come from?" "Where am I going?" "Why is there anything instead of nothing?" These questions cannot be ignored and the answer to them will set the course of one's life. The Church's answer to these questions is contained in her doctrine of creation.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church expounds the doctrine of creation in Part 1 on the Creed in paragraphs 279-301. It makes the essential elements of this doctrine clear by the use of titles and subheadings. God, the Trinity, created everything that is.¹ All things depend on him for their existence.² He creates all things for his glory and out of wisdom and love.³ He creates out of nothing and places goodness and order into what he makes.⁴ He transcends his creation but is ever present to it.⁵ He upholds and sustains creation with love and guides all things to their ultimate perfection.⁶

The doctrine of creation is rooted first of all in Scripture. The doctrine of creation culminates and comes fully to light in the missions of the Son and the Spirit and is an essential element of the kerygma. Indeed, this doctrine is interconnected with every other because it is the beginning of the whole story of salvation. Throughout the centuries, Fathers and theologians of the Church have deepened our understanding of creation and this understanding has been consistently expressed through the liturgical and prayer life of the Church. In this paper, I will

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Ed. Vaticana, 1997), 279-289.

² *Ibid.*, 291.

³ *Ibid.*, 295.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 296-299.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 300.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 301.

explore all of these facets of this beautiful and fundamental doctrine of the origin of all things in God.

Key Terms:

First, we must examine some essential terms and phrases that the Church uses to explain this doctrine. The first term that must be correctly understood is *create*. We must distinguish the biblical sense of this term from its common usage. When we speak of humans “creating” or being “creative,” we can mean this only by way of analogy to *the* Creator. The Hebrew word for create in the Bible, *-bara-*, always and only has God as its subject.⁷ Humans can make things out of pre-existing materials, but only God can truly *create*, which means to make something *out of nothing*. So God is not an artist or an architect or a builder, but the one and only Creator.

This leads to the next important definition. The Church has long used the Latin phrase *ex nihilo* to explain God’s creation.⁸ *Ex nihilo* is a Latin phrase meaning *out of nothing*. God did not need to create. Nor did he make use of pre-existent materials. He created freely and simply, as only he can, out of nothing.

Scriptural Underpinnings:

Using the cross references and citations provided by the Catechism, we can identify the key scriptural underpinnings of the doctrine of Creation. Out of all of them, none is more central to this doctrine than the first two chapters of Genesis. In the words of the Catechism, “among all the Scriptural texts about creation, the first three chapters of Genesis occupy a unique place.”⁹ The first and second chapters of Genesis tell the actual account of creation (followed by the fall in chapter three). Many deep and important truths can be extracted from these simple chapters. In

⁷Ibid., 290

⁸ Ibid., 296.

⁹ Ibid., 289.

fact, the very first line of Scripture shows us the foundational nature of this doctrine: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”¹⁰ God created everything that exists, both the visible and the invisible, the spiritual and the material.

One very important element in the Genesis creation account is that God creates simply by his word: “Let there be...”¹¹ Pope Benedict XVI, in his book *In the Beginning*, contrasts this with the Babylonian creation account in which Marduk, the god of light, creates the world by killing a dragon and forming the earth from its split body. He then creates human beings from the blood of the dragon. The philosophical underpinnings of this story are many and disturbing: “god” requires pre-existent matter to create, the earth is created out of material that is innately evil, and human beings themselves have this evil within them. In the words of Pope Benedict: “At the very origin of the world there lurks something sinister, and in the deepest part of humankind there lies something rebellious, demonic, and evil.”¹² In sharp contrast to this, the Genesis account of Scripture portrays God creating out of nothing, creating in peace and order, using no violence but only speech (“Let there be...”), and creating everything good.¹³ This account shows us that “God alone, who is the eternal Reason that is eternal love, created the world, and that it rests in his hands.”¹⁴ Pope St. John Paul II draws this same lesson from the first two chapters of Genesis: “By creating the world as the manifestation of his infinite goodness, God created it good. Such is the essential teaching we draw from the biblical cosmogony, and in particular from the introductory description of the Book of Genesis.”¹⁵ There are many more

¹⁰ Genesis 1:1, Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition.

¹¹ Genesis 1:3, 1:6, etc.

¹² Joseph Ratzinger, *In the Beginning: A Catholic Understanding of the Creation Story and the Fall* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), pg. 12.

¹³ Genesis 1:12, 1:18, 1:21, etc.

¹⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, *In the Beginning*, pg. 13.

¹⁵ John Paul, *God: Father and Creator*, vol. 1 (Boston, MA: Pauline Books and Media, 1996), pg. 205.

lessons the Church has extracted from these two rich chapters, but we will stop here with a summary of the above: 1) God alone created, 2) God created from nothing (*ex nihilo*), and 3) God created everything good.

Church Fathers and Theologians:

The Church's theologians both past and present have enriched our understanding of this foundational doctrine of creation. This is most true, perhaps, of the Church's "Common Doctor," St. Thomas Aquinas. The first part of his *Summa Theologica* contains a "Treatise on Creation." In this treatise, St. Thomas summarizes and deepens the Church's understanding on creation. He explains that God is the creator and final cause of all things,¹⁶ God creates out of nothing¹⁷ and can create anything,¹⁸ and that God alone creates.¹⁹ Creation is the common work of the whole Trinity,²⁰ and because of this, a "trace of the Trinity" can be found in all creation.²¹ According to Aquinas, everything God creates is good.²² In fact, evil itself does not exist except as a privation of good.²³ Demonstrating the interconnectedness of the Church's doctrines, Aquinas then moves on to explain the angels (spiritual beings), before beginning the "Treatise on the Work of the Seven Days" (corporeal beings). Finally, he moves from this into the "Treatise on Man," who is both spiritual and corporeal. Much more could be said of this magnificent summary of the doctrine of creation but suffice it to say that this portion of the *Summa* encapsulates the essential elements of what the Church has drawn from both Scripture and Tradition about creation and explains them in a way that remains useful and illuminative today.

¹⁶ *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 44, a. 1-4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* I, q. 45, a. 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* I, q. 45, a. 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* I, q. 45, a. 5.

²⁰ *Ibid.* I, q. 45, a. 6.

²¹ *Ibid.* I, q. 45, a. 7.

²² *Ibid.* I, q. 48, a. 1.

²³ *Ibid.*

Another great doctor of the Church who enriches our understanding of creation is the fourteenth century Dominican, St. Catherine of Siena. Her famous *Dialogue* is, in fact, a dialogue between Catherine and the Eternal Father, the Person of the Trinity most often associated with creation. A special focus of their conversation is the dignity bestowed on man at creation, being made in the image and likeness of God. God the Father says to Catherine, “Open the eye of thy intellect, and gaze into Me, and thou shalt see the beauty of My rational creature. And look at those creatures who [are created] in My image and similitude...”²⁴ Flowing from the doctrine of creation, particularly Genesis 1:26, is the doctrine of man’s immortal and rational soul. God the Father enumerates for Catherine the faculties of the soul: “The soul I created in My image and similitude, giving her memory, intellect, and will.”²⁵ Catherine is particularly struck by the beauty and dignity which God bestows on the soul. She knows and rejoices in her identity as both a dependent creature and a beautiful masterpiece. “Thou, Eternal Trinity, art my Creator, and I am the work of Thy hands, and I know through the new creation which Thou hast given me in the blood of Thy Son, that Thou art enamored of the beauty of Thy workmanship.”²⁶ Perhaps more than any other theologian, Catherine shows us the splendor of the human creature, created in the image and likeness of God.

The *Dialogue* of St. Catherine also provides insights into *why* God created us. God had no need of us but created us to love him and share in his life. He says to Catherine, “This truth is that I have created man to My own image and similitude, in order that he might have Eternal Life, and might partake of Me, and taste my supreme and eternal sweetness and goodness.”²⁷ We

²⁴ Algar Thorold, *The Dialogue of St. Catherine of Siena* (Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, 1974), pg. 27.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pg 130.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 332.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 73.

are created to come to know and love God and share in his life forever. God is love and we were created to share in his love. This tells us what is most important in human life: love. The Father says to Catherine, “The soul cannot live without love, but always wants to love something, because she is made of love, and by love, I created her.”²⁸ Catherine’s theology sheds new light on this foundational truth: God creates solely out of love.

Another important aspect of the doctrine of creation, pointed out by Fr. Thomas Joseph White in his book, *The Light of Christ: Introduction to Catholicism*, is that creation is not exclusively or even primarily, an event in time. Rather it is a continual relationship between God and creation. “The idea,” he says, “is not only that God once made all that there is but that God *continually* creates and sustains in being all that exists at any and every moment.”²⁹ This understanding highlights the intimate and loving relationship we have with our Creator at every moment. It also shows our dependent status as beings that receive existence as a gift: “All that exists can be or not be, and is held in existence by the causality of God.”³⁰ Although realizing our radical contingency can be startling or even frightening, ultimately it helps us understand the sheerly gratuitous nature of God’s creative love. Frank Sheed, a Catholic theologian from the mid-twentieth century, gives a poignant description of this experience:

“I was speaking on a Catholic Evidence Guild platform in Hyde Park. I remarked for the hundredth time, or perhaps the thousandth, that God had made me out of nothing. But this time, I heard what I was saying, and the experience was utterly shattering. To realize that one is made of nothing gives a feeling of hardly being there at all, a feeling that one has

²⁸ Ibid., pg. 130.

²⁹ Thomas Joseph White, *The Light of Christ: An Introduction to Catholicism* (Washington, D.C., DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2017), pg. 89.

³⁰ Ibid.

no hold on existence and might vanish away. But the next moment comes a new realization of God's providential care as I realized anew the truth that follows upon our being made of nothing- namely, that God continues to hold us in existence."³¹

God does not need to create us but does so only out of love. Nor does he create us at one point in time and then send us on our way. He holds his creature in existence at every moment, tenderly sustaining her by his creative power. The consequence of this doctrine, therefore, is that we are never alone. God's loving hands hold us, his loving eyes see us, and his eternal, unchanging will desires our existence at every moment.

Creation Connected to the Missions of Son and Spirit:

The revelation that began at the very beginning of time was brought to perfection in the Incarnation of the Son and the coming of the Holy Spirit. From the beginning, God always planned to save his creation through the missions of the Son and the Spirit. The early Church father St. Irenaeus is an important contributor to this point. The Catechism cites twice from his work, *Against Heresies*, to show the interconnectedness between creation and the missions of the Son and the Spirit. First, he points out that the Son and the Spirit, who are fully revealed only in time, are present with the Father eternally and through them God made the world: "There exists but one God... he is the Father, God, the Creator, the author, the giver of order. He made all things by himself, that is, by his Word and by his Wisdom... by the Son and by the Spirit [who] are his hands."³² The union of the Trinity is so deep that Irenaeus can say that the Father created "by himself" while still meaning that it was the common work of the whole Trinity.

³¹ Frank J. Sheed, *Theology for Beginners*, 3rd ed. (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant books, 1981), pg. 50.

³² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 292.

St. Irenaeus also demonstrates that the life giving power that God manifested in creation bursts forth in fuller splendor in the missions of the Son and the Spirit: “If God’s revelation through creation has already obtained life for all the beings that dwell on earth, how much more will the Word’s manifestation of the Father obtain life for those who see God.”³³ God is the source of all life. He gave life to all thing in the beginning, even while veiling his splendor behind creation. How much more life will radiate out from the full manifestation of divinity in the coming of the Son and the Spirit?

The Kerygmatic Heart of the Doctrine of Creation:

This leads us to see the intrinsic connection between creation and the kerygmatic message of salvation for all in Christ. According to Dr. Matthew Levering, the doctrines of creation and redemption must be held together to be fully understood.³⁴ In fact, he dedicates an entire chapter in his book, *Engaging the Doctrine of Creation*, to the atonement. The Catechism also insists upon this connection between creation and redemption:

“Creation is the foundation of ‘all God’s saving plans,’ the ‘beginning of the history of salvation’ that culminates in Christ. Conversely, this mystery of Christ casts conclusive light of the mystery of creation and reveals the end for which, ‘in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth’: from the beginning, God envisaged the glory of the new creation in Christ.”³⁵

In other words, the doctrine of creation, understood in light of the redemption, is an essential component of the kerygma, the message of salvation in Christ. God created us out of love and

³³ Ibid., 294.

³⁴ Matthew Levering, *Engaging the Doctrine of Creation: Cosmos, Creatures, and the Wise and Good Creator* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), pg. 3.

³⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 280.

destined us for communion with him. When we fell and lost our hope of salvation, God sent his Son to redeem us and bring us back into relationship with him. The whole of God's loving plan "finds its goal in the new creation in Christ."³⁶

Creation in the Church's Liturgy and Prayer:

Catechists must always keep in mind the saying, *lex orandi, lex credendi*: as we pray, so we believe. The Church's doctrines are not simply written in documents. They are *prayed* in a living and life-giving way in the Church's liturgy. The liturgy catechizes because it makes visible, audible, and tangible what the Church believes. This is no less true of the doctrine of creation. According to Pope St. John Paul II, "The account of the work of creation deserves to be read and meditated upon frequently in the liturgy and outside of it."³⁷ This is, in fact, what the Church leads us to do. Every Sunday and Solemnity, the Church puts on our lips at Mass the Nicene Creed, in which we proclaim our belief in "one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen." As we prepare to celebrate the Paschal Mystery in the Eucharist, we must always remember the doctrine of creation. At the Easter Vigil, in which we celebrate "the new creation in Christ, [the readings] begin with the creation account" and culminate in the account of Christ's glorious resurrection.³⁸ The two are inextricably linked and the Church's liturgy reflects this.

Conclusion:

"Nothing exists that does not owe its existence to God the Creator."³⁹ This truth, proclaimed by the Church throughout history, should fill us with gratitude, humility, and wonder.

³⁶ Ibid, 315.

³⁷ John Paul, *God: Father and Creator*, vol. 1 (Boston, MA: Pauline Books and Media, 1996), pg. 203-204.

³⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 281.

³⁹ Ibid., 338.

It is the foundation of our relationship with God. Rooted in Genesis, this reality is woven throughout the whole Bible. Our understanding of God's creative goodness took on new light with the coming of the Son and the Spirit and it forms an essential piece of the kerygmatic message. The Church's saints and theologians have never ceased pondering this mystery of creation and their contemplations have enriched our understanding. Like all the doctrines of our faith, we live out our belief in creation at the liturgy, where we experience sacramentally the creative and salvific love of God. This Love, in which "we live and move and have our being,"⁴⁰ is the origin of all things. This is the heart of the doctrine of creation.

Word Count: 3,044

⁴⁰ Acts 17:28

Annotated Bibliography

Aquinas, Thomas. "Treatise on Creation, I-Q41-49," *Summa Theologica*. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. New York: Benziger Brothers, 1911-1925, I.Q44-74.

St. Thomas Aquinas is the Church's "universal" or "common" doctor and so is perennially relevant and helpful in teaching and learning the faith. His treatise on creation is found within the first part of the *Summa Theologica*. It offers both an elegant synthesis of the Church's teaching on creation as well as Thomas' own insights into this mystery. He is particularly gifted at integrating philosophical terms and ideas to illustrate the mysteries of the faith. In the case of the doctrine of creation, his explanation of creation *ex nihilo*, God as the first cause, and continuous creation are particularly important.

Catechism of the Catholic Church. Città del Vaticano: Libreria Ed. Vaticana, 1997.

In 1994, Pope St. John Paul II approved and promulgated the Catechism of the Catholic Church, calling it a "sure norm for teaching the faith" (xv). It is a "totally reliable way to present... each and every part of the Christian message to the people of our time" (xv). When teaching any doctrine, therefore, including creation, the catechist should invariably draw upon the riches of the Catechism. The Catechism treats creation explicitly in the section on the creed, but this foundational doctrine is woven throughout the entire work, allowing the catechist to see how it relates to all other doctrines.

Levering, Matthew. *Engaging the Doctrine of Creation: Cosmos, Creatures, and the Wise and Good Creator*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017.

Matthew Levering calls his book, *Engaging the Doctrine of Creation*, "an exercise in faith seeking understanding" (2). He presents some of the most important metaphysical principles underlying the doctrine, such as the transcendent nature of the Creator. He begins the book by exploring God's simplicity as the foundation of creation *ex nihilo* and the understanding of God's creation as a free gift. He then goes on to explore human nature, original sin, and atonement and how each of these connects to the doctrine of creation. Much more a work of theology than catechetics, this book is nevertheless a helpful exploration of the doctrine of creation.

Paul, John. *God: Father and Creator*. 1. Vol. 1. 3 vols. A Catechesis on the Creed. Boston, MA: Pauline Books and Media, 1996.

Pope St. John Paul II gave a catechesis on the Creed in his general audiences from 1985 to 1991. This book is the first volume in a collection of those audiences. In it, John Paul gives a beautiful exposition of the doctrine of creation as well as its philosophical underpinnings and spiritual reflections stemming from the doctrine.

Ratzinger, Joseph. *In the Beginning: A Catholic Understanding of the Creation Story and the Fall*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986.

This book is a collection of homilies given by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI, in Munich in 1981. Responding to the needs of the time, particularly environmental concerns, scientism, and fundamentalism, Ratzinger presents a deeply theological and balanced exposition on the creation account in Genesis, as well as the implications of belief in creation in today's world.

Schonborn, Christoph Cardinal. *Chance or Purpose: Creation, Evolution, and a Rational Faith*. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 2007.

Cardinal Schonborn's book, *Chance or Purpose*, began as a controversial article in the New York Times. Schonborn later expanded it into this book to respond to the controversy surrounding Creation and evolution. He exposes the false dichotomy between faith and science and offers a balanced Christian view of evolution as a scientific theory that could be compatible with belief in a Creator. This is a topic I do not explore in my paper for lack of space but Schonborn's book also provides a thorough and elegant presentation of the doctrine of creation.

Sheed, Frank J. *Theology for Beginners*. 3rd ed. Ann Arbor, MI: Servant books, 1981.

Frank J. Sheed wrote *Theology for Beginners* as a balanced, simple, but rich exposition of the Catholic faith. His treatment of the doctrine of creation in this book is relevant, insightful, and theological and is a helpful resource for catechesis on this topic.

Thorold, Algar. *The Dialogue of St. Catherine of Siena*. Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, 1974.

St. Catherine of Siena is one of the most beloved female saints and theologians in the Church, as well as one of only three female doctors of the Church. She dictated *The Dialogue* while in ecstatic conversation with God the Father. Although creation is a work of the whole Trinity, the Father is the Person of the Trinity we usually associate with creation, and so this work of St. Catherine's offers special insights into this doctrine. Catherine emphasizes God's tender love for his creatures as well as the beauty and dignity he bestows on them in the *imago Dei*.

White, Thomas Joseph. *The Light of Christ: An Introduction to Catholicism*. Washington, D.C., DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2017.

The Light of Christ, written by Dominican theologian Thomas Joseph White, OP, is a beautiful, thorough, and balanced exposition of Catholic doctrine, expressed in a Thomistic lens and in dialogue with the questions of our time. The third chapter, "Creation and the Human Person," offers an elegant elucidation of creation ex nihilo. Fr. White explains the misconceptions modern people often have about creation and the compatibility of science and belief in a creator God. He also gives a beautiful explanation of the deeper, metaphysical understanding of creation, God's continuous creative act, and the contingency of created beings.