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*To all our readers and contributors, greetings
for a Happy Christmas and a peaceful New Year*

The Many Ways of God's Presence

✠ PETER CULLINANE

BEFORE there was the book we call the Bible, there was already the book we call nature. It, too, is there to be read – in quiet and stillness gazed upon.

God has written a precious book, whose letters are the multitude of created things present in the universe ... a constant source of wonder and awe... a continuing revelation of the divine (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, Pquoting Pope John Paul II, and bishops of Canada; para. 85.)

But this book's pages have become smudged. By turning it into a quarry to be unsustainably exploited – instead of a garden to be tilled (Gen 2:15) – we turn it against its own purpose, which is to provide nurture for both body and soul, and to do so for all, not just some. And because we are made 'from the dust of the earth' (Gen 2:7), by distorting the planet's life we distort our own.

Before we were old enough to be arrogant, there was a time for play and wonder and joy. The child within us even now hankers for what the book of nature was revealing to us then. And letting it do so restores us.

The history of our friendship with God is always linked to particular places which take on an intensely personal meaning; we all remember places, and revisiting those memories does us much good. Anyone who has grown up in the hills or used to sit by the spring to

✠ PETER CULLINANE, now retired, was the first bishop of the diocese of Palmerston North, New Zealand, which was created in 1980.

drink, or played outdoors in the neighbourhood square – going back to these places is a chance to recover something of their true selves. (*Laudato Si'*, n. 84)

By revealing God's presence, the book of nature is inviting us to adoration: 'When we can see God reflected in all that exists, our hearts are moved to praise the Lord for all his creatures and to worship him in union with them.' (*Laudato Si'*, n. 87)

However, expecting nature to tell us all we need to know would be like standing at a graveside and expecting it to tell us about the resurrection. And so we look to God's presence in history recorded in the Scriptures and recorded in our lives – in the 'greater works' Jesus promised to do after his return to the Father (Jn 14:12).

We see him fulfilling this promise whenever human nature is mysteriously raised up: as when, especially in circumstances of suffering or injustice, someone experiences that 'peace which the world cannot give – nor take from us' (cf John 14:27); or when love, faithfulness, repentance or forgiveness prevail against great odds; or when great personal sacrifice for others prevails over fear or self-concern; or when serving 'the least' we discover it is Christ we see and serve. In all these ways it is the risen Christ's life we see in those of whom it could be said: 'I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me' (Gal 2:20) – even if, like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, they do not yet recognize him.

WHO GOD IS

In all these ways of knowing God's presence, we see a 'light shining in the dark till dawn comes and the morning star rises' (2 Pet 1:19). In the meantime, the journey is long and the night is dark. The glimpses of light, and the times of remembering graces, are invitations to trust our own experience, and be a little skeptical of religious forms that are too lighted up and too tidy. Karl Rahner famously said: 'the Christian of tomorrow will either be a mystic or will not be a Chris-

tian at all'. If the human heart is made for the infinite, then anything less is ultimately not enough. Religious answers that could seem to subject God to human understanding, and religious practices that could even seem to put God in our debt, all fall short. And walking away from that kind of religion will feel no big deal. Something else is needed that gives our teachings and our practices their proper depth.

We need to experience the stark truth that God does not co-exist with us in the way that other things do. In that sense, God simply isn't (as atheists rightly discover). The experience of God's seeming absence is really only the experience of God's 'otherness'. That is an authentic experience because it is how we know the One whose presence is not owed to us: 'I shall be there as who I am' (Ex 3:13,14). Before this God we can only bow down in adoration.

In adoration we are being true to ourselves as beings whose very existence was not owed to us. Created existence is pure unmerited gift, coming from unfathomable love. (cf *Laudato Si'*, n. 77). That God could so greatly love what need not have been created at all is mind-boggling. When that is the picture in which we find ourselves, we have reached our launching pad out into all the ways that adoration translates into authentic living, authentic relationships, concern for others and for the planet. There are no short-cuts: authentic relationships require an authentic self, and we are never more our true selves than when we acknowledge the source of our being; (cf *Laudato Si'*, n. 118).

The experience of feeling in the dark – of God's seeming absence – is not necessarily an extraordinary event. It can be as ordinary as feeling God is not listening to our prayers. This experience is described well by the prophet Habakkuk. In his opening lines he cries out 'How long, Lord, am I to call for help while you will not listen? ... Outrage and violence is all I see ... The wicked get the better of the upright...' (1:2-4). He was assured that God's help will come – at the right time, and 'if it comes slowly, wait, for come it will, without fail; (2:2-3).

Then comes that ever-recurring assurance of ultimate well-being: 'I will exult in God my savior' (3:18). In the meantime he was being challenged to trust that even the terrible things happening around him had a place in God's bigger plan.

It was like this for Jesus too. On the night before he died, He begged the Father that there might be some other way: 'if it is possible, let this cup pass me by, however, not mine but your will be done' (Mk 14:36). After his resurrection, the letter to the Hebrews puts it this way: 'During his life on earth, he offered up prayer and entreaty, aloud and in silent tears, to the One who had the power to save him out of death, and because of his complete submission his prayer was heard. Son though He was, he learned to obey through suffering.' He too had to choose the Father's will, and because of his faithfulness He was saved out of death, which is so much more than being saved from death; [in the context, 'from death' has this double meaning.] (cf Heb 5:7-9). God's saving, transforming power is most present where creation is most open to it. This is how Jesus became the 'first fruits' of all creation being made new; and what the cross can do for us too.

Both in the dark, and in the glimpses of light, we can know God's real presence and say, as Thomas Aquinas did before the Real Presence: 'I bow down before you, hidden God' – '*Adoro te devote, latens deitas*'.

1

When my soul in wonder stands
beholding trees or grass,
adoro te devote, latens deitas.

In all that yet would nothing be
but noy each moment is,
adoro te devote, latens deitas.

2

Where joy and peace and hope
exceed
in spite of every loss,
adoro te devote, latens deitas.

In anguish of unanswered prayer
hurt to greater trust
adoro te devote, latens deitas.

In heights or depths or distant
 parts,
 always before your glance,
adoro te devote, latens deitas.

Before I knew t'was you I sought
 we met on fondest paths
adoro te devote, latens deitas.

Closer still when seeming far
 that nothing might be lost,
adoro te devote, latens deitas.

Word made flesh in virgin's
 womb
 and dwelling here with us,
adoro te devote, latens deitas.

What disciples saw and loved
 to me through faith no less,
adoro te devote, latens deitas.

In those to whom compassion
 speeds
 and bids me follow fast,
adoro te devote, latens deitas.

In smiles, forgiving, healing
 deeds,
et ubi caritas,
adoro te devote, latens deitas.

In him who even on the cross
 invites me still to trust,
adoro te devote, latens deitas.

His mighty power at work in us
 does more than we can ask,
adoro te devote, latens deitas.

In gospel speaking
 words that shall not pass,
adoro te devote, latens deitas.

The very same as food of life
 and always there to bless,
adoro te devote, latens deitas.

Now even me He calls upon
 to take my turn with Thomas,
adoro te devote, latens deitas.

Within a vessel made of clay
 – O mystery unsurpassed –
adoro te devote, latens deitas.

Friend within abiding till
 your face I see at last,
adoro te devote, latens deitas.