

“Using familiar examples from daily life, this clearly written book examines the intricacies of economic and ecological cycles. Cloutier not only effectively demonstrates the relevance of these issues to daily suburban life, but shows how choices that affirm human dignity over individualism, and the bonds of community over empty excess, are both practical and spiritually renewing. *Walking God’s Earth* is a faithful call for Catholics to take the steps they can, attentively and patiently working to renew the structures of our lives together for the refreshment of all creation. His vision of green and walkable communities inspires hope that Americans can renew our ways of living together, walking through God’s creation as our own shared, and livable, home.”

—Erin Lothes Biviano
Assistant Professor of Theology
College of Saint Elizabeth
Morristown, NJ

Walking God's Earth

The Environment and Catholic Faith

David Cloutier



LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota

www.litpress.org

Cover design by Stefan Killen Design. Cover photo © Thinkstock.

Excerpts from documents of the Second Vatican Council are from *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations; The Basic Sixteen Documents*, edited by Austin Flanery, OP, © 1996. Used with permission of Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota.

Excerpts from the English translation of *The Roman Missal, Third Edition* © 2010, International Commission on English in the Liturgy Corporation (ICEL). All rights reserved.

Excerpts from the English translation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* for use in the United States of America copyright © 1994, United States Catholic Conference, Inc.—Libreria Editrice Vaticana. English translation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Modifications from the Editio Typica* copyright © 1997, United States Catholic Conference, Inc.—Libreria Editrice Vaticana. Used with Permission.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture texts, prefaces, introductions, footnotes and cross references used in this work are taken from the *New American Bible, revised edition* © 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, DC, and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All Rights Reserved. No part of the New American Bible may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

Scripture texts in this work are from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1952 [2nd edition, 1971] by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

© 2014 by Order of Saint Benedict, Collegeville, Minnesota. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, by print, microfilm, microfiche, mechanical recording, photocopying, translation, or by any other means, known or yet unknown, for any purpose except brief quotations in reviews, without the previous written permission of Liturgical Press, Saint John's Abbey, PO Box 7500, Collegeville, Minnesota 56321-7500. Printed in the United States of America.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Cloutier, David M., 1972–

Walking God's earth : the environment and Catholic faith / David Cloutier.
pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8146-3709-8 — ISBN 978-0-8146-3734-0 (ebook)

1. Human ecology—Religious aspects—Catholic Church. 2. Catholic Church—Doctrines. I. Title.

BX1795.H82C56 2014
261.8'8—dc23

2014014777

Contents

Acknowledgments vii

Introduction: Finding Our Place ix

Part One

1. Beauty 3

2. Losing Our Place 12

3. Basic Theology I: Creation and Covenant 27

4. Basic Theology II: Redemption and Renewal 41

Transition: What, Then, Shall We Do? 53

Part Two

5. Food and Fuel 63

6. The Country and the City 85

7. Work and Play 94

8. The Global Economy 104

Conclusion: Making Places Holy 117

Notes 127

Bibliography 139

Acknowledgments

It is tempting to thank everyone who has played a role in my development from an urban child with little sense of the natural world to a Catholic advocate for living in harmony with the created world. Without them, there would be no book. But their presence is indicated in the text. Here, I would just like to extend thanks to those who helped this book come together. Barry Hudock at Liturgical Press proposed this idea to me at a fortuitous time, during a sabbatical, and I leapt at the chance to put together something that would make this theology more available to the church. He, Andy Edwards, and Stephanie Lancour at the Press have all done great work on this book. I also want to thank my institution, Mount St. Mary's University, and a generous grant from the Louisville Institute, for the sabbatical that left just enough space for me to entertain a second book project. I wrote and edited much of the text at the library of Hood College—the friendly help of the librarians in sharing their resources enabled me to minimize my commute, down to a walk across the street! My dear colleagues and friends Julie Hanlon Rubio and Diane Millis made helpful suggestions on parts of the text. Finally, I am so indebted to my experience of four years at Carleton College. Carleton has great students, great faculty, stimulating classrooms, and an ongoing institutional commitment to the environment. But much more important, it simply sets up different patterns of life. *Living* those patterns allows a glimpse at what could be. That kind of hope is so necessary in addressing the challenges we face.

Introduction



Finding Our Place

The duty to emphasize an appropriate catechesis concerning creation, in order to recall the meaning and religious significance of protecting it . . . can have an important impact on the perception of the value of life itself as well as on the satisfactory solution of the consequent inevitable social problems.

—Benedict XVI¹

First, go out and take a walk. Really, just walk. No smartphone, no car, no destination. Just you and your own two feet. Go.

Walking is perhaps our most fundamental way of being in the world. Abraham was a wandering Aramaean. Moses walked with the Israelites for forty years through the desert. Jesus had “nowhere to rest his head” (Luke 9:58) and took a final walk to his death on a cross. Scientists tell us that a major evolutionary reason why humans have such large brains is that they walk on two legs and free up their hands for toolmaking, for a new way of interacting with the world. And modern self-improvement gurus will point out that one of our worst cultural habits is how much we sit.

When you walk, wherever you are walking, I'd call your attention to two things—things you will notice because you are going slowly, connected to the ground, grounded. First, notice all the *variety* around you. Varieties of colors, countless differing trees and flowers and grasses, different creatures scurrying or flying around. Green, white, blue, pink, brown, black—or maybe you see the indescribable array of autumn colors. Notice the pitch of the ground—sloping up or down, perhaps toward a creek or a hill. Look up at the sky—the clouds differ in shape and texture; perhaps there is darkness gathering in one direction, contrasting with the clear blue elsewhere. Or perhaps it is night, with the waxing and waning moon and the endless constellations of stars that fascinated the ancients. And don't just look: listen for all the sounds of the creatures and the wind, smell the unexpected scents, touch all the myriad textures. Maybe there's even something to taste.

Amidst all this amazing variety, around us all the time and accessible within a few blocks, notice something else: notice how *small* you are. Sure, the ants crawling underfoot are smaller (though their swarming sometimes seems unstoppable). But compare yourself to the sky or the trees. Try to imagine buildings as tall as the mountains on the horizon. Try to think how far it is just to the moon, much less the sun, ninety-three million miles away. Try to imagine the tremendous force of the blowing wind, the shining sun, the ever-flowing water. And—this works best in the woods, but it applies to your neighborhood too—try to think about how all this goes on and on and on, mostly all by itself.

Now, hopefully your walk was something like mine—early May, a leafy Maryland town on a creek with mountains on the horizon, after a morning rain, sunny but with those clouds creeping in again. But maybe you listened, and all you heard was some guy's leaf blower. Maybe it's January, and the sense of variety is . . . less obvious. Or maybe you walked out of a bookstore into a huge mall parking lot or into Times Square. Leaf blowers, asphalt, even January—there's something to learn here, too, although perhaps the insights are about *absences*.

The real lessons are about the sheer abundance and vastness of what is right outside your door, even in our developed age. This is a sheer abundance that *we did not make*—we may have *tended* it, but we did not make it—and it is gifted to us in the most direct, immediate, and constant way, that is, if we are walking and paying attention. Learning how to walk with this vision of vast abundance is at the heart of what this book explores: a Catholic understanding of the environment.

This first lesson, I think, is really hard to learn in the abstract, simply from pretty words on a page. We learn it by seeing it embodied in specific, *particular* places. I learned it by taking a specific walk, which inspired me to realize what to write in starting this book. This emphasis on particularity matters theologically too. The whole biblical story points us to the experience of particulars—the particular people and land, the particular Person of Christ. Even today, Catholicism recognizes that there is no people called “the church” other than in the particular *place* people gather around a bishop for the Eucharist. We meet Christ specifically, not in the abstract; we meet him as Lord and Friend, not as philosopher or idea. So too we learn God’s creation in the particular.

What do I mean by this focus on the particular, and how it is necessary for the proper study of Catholic teaching on the environment? Let me offer two examples from my own life history, which suggest awareness of the particularities of creation, as well as the variety of forms such awareness might take. The first is growing up in Chicago, in the city. Chicago’s motto is *Urbs in horto*, City in a Garden. Since much of Chicago was built during an era of urban planning called the “City Beautiful” movement, it has certain features that characterized that movement—parks, trees, and the like. True, it’s a city, and it has many environmental embarrassments typical of cities. But two natural features captivated me while growing up. One was the extraordinary, hundred-year-old oak tree right outside my house, between the sidewalk and the street. As a child, the tree seemed indescribably gigantic. The trunk was huge—you could

easily hide behind it—and its branches stretched up and out beyond any other tree on the block. It was “our tree.” The other natural feature, common to all Chicagoans, was “the Lake.” In Chicago, physical geography is all about the Lake, the vast expanse where suddenly all the man-made buildings and roads end, and the water just stretches out endlessly. The city goes no farther. It gives Chicago an odd geography: it does not actually expand in all directions, since the city center is right on the Lake. It is limited. Delightfully, the early city planners intentionally decided to keep nearly all of the city’s lengthy lakefront free of private development and open to the public. To walk along the Lake through a network of parks, then, was our shared experience of a nature much bigger than even our big city.

However, my real education in nature happened in a second, different place, a small Minnesota college town with a river running through it. The campus itself lacked the splendid, pristine quads of other colleges—the central area was called “the Bald Spot,” because it was flooded for broomball on ice every winter! But what it had was a walkable town with a remarkably intact old-fashioned Main Street on one side, and an eight-hundred-acre arboretum on the other, with trails off into the woods that eventually petered out into farm fields. Oh, and a campus rule that virtually disallowed cars. Hence, we all lived a walking life, with town on one side and wilderness on the other. That world was not actually very big, but it seemed enormous on foot. You could *drive* from the far end of the Main Street to the farthest reaches of the Arb in five to ten minutes. But on *foot*, it was rich, varied, and seemingly endless. And truly beautiful.

There’s something else to notice about these places: I *lived* in them, as did others. They weren’t strictly speaking “wild,” even if the Lake would have drowned a person and the Arb was pitch-dark at night. Having lived in such modest Midwestern places, my first trip to the Pacific Northwest was jaw-dropping in its vast scale (as well as in the forest-destroying clear-cuts I saw for the first time). But I think that it’s very important to appreciate the natural wonders of home places, not just of

remote tourist sites. It is good to have national parks, but not if we destroy our own home places. Importantly, my home places shared a walking scale, so that the wonders could reveal themselves to us. Farmer and essayist Wendell Berry notes, in an essay titled “Out of Your Car, Off Your Horse,” that “properly speaking, global thinking is not possible,” because “no one can make ecological good sense globally.” All places are naturally different and to some degree unique. Rather, “everyone can make ecological good sense locally, if the affection, the scale, the knowledge, the tools, and the skills are right.”² Berry is not recommending an NIMBY policy—just keep the landfill, but “Not In My BackYard,” shipping the garbage to some poor rural community elsewhere. He is calling us to remember the ability of all of us to care rightly for our local places and tend their beauty, because this is what actually produces “affection.”

I begin with a walk and these stories because the idea of a nature we *inhabit and tend*, well or badly, is really the vision best suited to a Catholic theology and spirituality of the environment. It’s about a recognition of and wonder at our own particular places, and a renewed recognition of how, too often, we ignore or even degrade their value in our everyday life. Our “walk through” the Catholic tradition will proceed in two parts. The first part of the book introduces the broad spirituality and doctrines on which the tradition is based. We begin by examining more closely our experience of beauty and how this moves our spirit; but we also recognize how our spirits are often distracted and neglectful of this beauty. This loss of our sense of place in a beautiful, ordered creation is due to three spiritual problems: scale, speed, and selfishness. These spiritual counterforces will also be examined. Then we will turn to the basic theological beliefs of Catholics about God, creation, and salvation, drawing especially on the scriptural writings. Various ideas in Christian Scripture can seem to lead to environmental neglect and even destruction. But read properly, the Scriptures reinforce a spirituality of wonder, care, and gift in relation to nature and its abundance.

The second part of the book moves into our lived response. In the transition section, we will see that the Christian life is not simply one of appreciating beauty, but acting on it. We will explore in depth our moral call to live out proper patterns of this vocation as caretakers. Pope Benedict XVI, the “Green Pope,” writes, “*Nature expresses a design of love and truth*. It is prior to us, and it has been given to us by God as the setting for our life. Nature speaks to us of the Creator (cf. Rom 1:20) and his love for humanity. It is destined to be ‘recapitulated’ in Christ at the end of time (cf. Eph 1:9-10; Col 1:19-20). Thus it too is a ‘vocation’” (*Caritas in Veritate* 48). Caring for creation is not a special interest for a few but an integral part of the Christian life for all, because it is based on fundamental beliefs of the faith. Recent papal writings have affirmed that this commitment is essential, not a novel addition or optional extra. From Genesis, which depicts a wholly good creation, in every element, through the incarnation of Jesus in flesh and blood, even to the vision of “the new heavens and new earth” offered in Revelation, the Bible resolutely rejects a purely “spiritual” faith.

However, “being green” and helping the environment can often seem overwhelming. The problems seem so big, the recommended actions so small (and numerous). I propose that we examine four basic patterns that animate our shared life today: how we eat and get energy, how we design our dwelling together, how we balance work and recreation, and how we direct our economic resources. These patterns, as we often practice them in society, are distorted; for the first time in human history, vast numbers of humans live far from any natural rhythm or cycle and have acquired sufficient power to manipulate and even destroy the created order on a large scale. We have stopped working with what Benedict calls “the grammar of creation,” and have begun to believe (falsely) that there is no greater grammar within which we live. Our fundamental calling, then, is to identify these distortions and figure out how to resist them and build up alternative patterns. Our journey concludes with a reflection on how such alternative ways of living are ways of

real holiness, exemplifying the “universal call to holiness” at the heart of Vatican II’s vision of the church.

That is the map for our journey. But here are a couple pre-hike traveling tips so that you avoid some common wrong turns and missteps along the way. The first and most important thing to remember is this: avoid thinking of the environment in either-or, all-or-nothing terms. For example, either we eat, or we preserve nature. Either we drive our cars, or we go back to living in caves. Remember the walk: the world does not exist as this kind of either-or. Dan Misleh, who directs the US bishops’ campaign on climate change, begins his talks with an exercise where he asks people to close their eyes and say what images come to mind when he speaks a word: “environment.” I saw this happen in the classroom; people respond with all sorts of images, but one image is always absent: people! In our rightful concern about environmental degradation, we can sometimes imagine “humans” and “the environment” as two different things, even as enemies. (A popular environmental book is called *The World Without Us!*)

By contrast, it’s essential for a Catholic view to see that we are *participants* in the environment, neither an “invasive species” nor mere disembodied souls. Thus, as we will see, many environmental issues have to do with getting our *scale* right. My opening exercise of walking was an invitation to enter into that proper scale and perhaps a reminder that we are far too removed from that way of experiencing the world. Things tend to go wrong when we lose that sense of scale. We cannot live well on the highest mountain peaks or in vast deserts or under the ocean—nature overwhelms us. But we can overwhelm nature when in our building, our speed, our hunger for harvest, we deplete soils, fisheries, mines, and even the air. We throw off the balance, even as nature still knows how to throw us off balance.

The ultimate choice we must consider as Catholics is whether we are shared *participants* in God’s creation or triumphant *tyrants* over it. This is the real choice we face. The man whom many cite as the founder of modern experimental science, Francis Bacon,

believed nature and humanity were in a battle. We must use science to achieve genuine power over nature, instead of having it have power over us. We learned nature's secrets through experimentation, but the goal was not to wonder at its marvels. Rather, he wrote, "the true and lawful goal of the sciences is none other than this: that human life be endowed with new discoveries and powers."³ Wendell Berry describes this presumption to knowledge as a kind of ignorance, where "wonder has been replaced by a research agenda," but an agenda that *ignores* anything like imagination, sympathy, and affection.⁴ It reduces nature, so that it can be fully comprehended and controlled by humans. In so doing, it distorts nature. As Pope Benedict writes, nature is "prior to us"; therefore, "reducing nature merely to a collection of contingent data ends up doing violence to the environment" (*Caritas in Veritate* 48).

Of course, Catholics do not follow Francis Bacon but have a different Francis as the patron saint of the environment, St. Francis of Assisi. Our present pope, his papal namesake, explained the name in one of his first audiences: "For me, [Francis] is the man of poverty, the man of peace, the man who loves and protects creation; these days we do not have a very good relationship with creation, do we?"⁵ In his homily at the papal inaugural, Pope Francis noted that we all, Christians and non-Christians, must be protectors,

protecting all creation, the beauty of the created world, as the Book of Genesis tells us and as St. Francis of Assisi showed us. It means respecting each of God's creatures and respecting the environment in which we live. . . . Please, I would like to ask all those who have positions of responsibility in economic, political and social life, and all men and women of goodwill: let us be 'protectors' of creation, protectors of God's plan inscribed in nature, protectors of one another and of the environment. Let us not allow omens of destruction and death to accompany the advance of this world!⁶

The vocation explained by terms like “protector” and “steward” displays a fundamentally different stance within the world: not of mastery, but of service. It is a stance that sees in the natural environment not merely “raw material” but God’s wisdom, which can teach us if we make careful use of it in sustaining human life.

Another point to keep in mind: concern for the environment should not be seen as something separate from, or in contrast to, other spiritual and moral concerns that are more commonly seen as “Catholic.” The environment is not simply an issue, along with a laundry list of others. They are all connected. In fact, many of the Catholic teachings on life and sexuality are rooted in the same soil as Catholic environmental teaching: respecting and protecting nature, rather than doing whatever we want with it. When we see the larger natural world as something we can exploit however we want, we end up doing the same to human bodies, “encouraging activity that fails to respect human nature itself” (*Caritas in Veritate* 48). Recent popes have described this as *an essential connection between “human ecology” and “natural ecology.”* The desire to master the world, to dominate it, to impose our will, to make our own choice, to manipulate God’s ordering—these are the same sinful diseases that drive Catholicism to cry out against abortion, euthanasia, the death penalty, cloning, sexual promiscuity, and the victimization of the poor and vulnerable. The Catholic tradition believes, as Benedict puts it, that “the book of nature is one and indivisible: it takes in not only the environment but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, social relations: in a word, integral human development. Our duties towards the environment are linked to our duties towards the human person. . . . It would be wrong to uphold one set of duties while trampling on the other” (*ibid.*, 51). As we will see, other basic commandments against lying, stealing, and coveting are routinely broken in the course of our excessive abuse of nature. If we genuinely shared property, used it moderately, and depicted truthfully the impact of our lives on nature, we would certainly do less harm! Thus, both

spiritually and morally, our environmental lives are intimately linked to the basic morality of our faith. Part of the task of this book is to help us see these connections more clearly, in hopes that God's desire for "the renewal of the earth" may be more and more realized in our own desires and in the practices of our communities.

So, off we go!

A stylized graphic in light gray showing two hands cupping a heart shape. The hands are represented by simple, rounded forms with small circles for fingers. The heart is formed by the negative space between the hands.

*Part
One*

chapter 1



Beauty

We need to be re-educated in wonder and in the ability to recognize the beauty made manifest in created realities.

—Benedict XVI¹

The created world is beautiful. This beauty can be so arresting and powerful that our human ancestors marked out certain natural places and forces as spiritual or holy—the sacred tree or stone, the mountaintop, even the sun and the moon. As Mircea Eliade puts it, for a religious person, “space is not homogeneous”: it is not all monotonously the same but is rather a map of the sacred, with spiritual power assigned to certain places and objects.² We should not imagine our ancestors actually believed that trees were gods. What they sensed was that nature made the spiritual appear, connecting us to its larger force and power. True, this idea could lead further, toward superstitious thinking—toward the idea that by manipulating the object, one could manipulate the divine power itself for one’s own advantage. But today’s religions can be used in this false way too—as a manipulation of the divine, rather than a recognition of a transcendent power that is beyond us. Authentic religious experience is not of *control*, but of *reception* and connection, of tapping into something larger and wiser. Such receptivity to God can be found through receptivity to nature’s bewitching and beguiling beauty.

Christianity has at times forgotten this basic insight into the spiritual power of nature's beauty and focused instead on doctrines, or even on purely invisible souls. It's important for us to remember that the first story of Scripture is an extraordinary story about the sheer goodness of the created order made by God. Doctrines and souls are important, of course. But it is not with these that our human religious journey begins. It is with the experience of beauty. Hans Urs von Balthasar, one of the greatest twentieth-century Catholic theologians, begins his fifteen-volume theology not with dogmas or morals, but with "theological aesthetics"—the importance of the experience of grasping and being grasped by beauty.³ Balthasar is recovering an ancient impulse, also seen in the philosophical statement that "all philosophy begins in wonder." Scientists also experience this. Scripture scholar William Brown sees this "overwhelming sense of wonder" that scientists confess as "what unites the empiricist and the contemplator, the scientist and the believer."⁴ Balthasar's work, writes Anthony Ciorra, insists that a modern world that has lost a sense of God "would find God by listening to what God has created."⁵

But what does it mean to say something is "beautiful"? Let us consider three dimensions of our experience of beauty: beauty has a form, beauty reaches out and compels our admiration, and beauty draws us in to learn more about its intricacy.

The first point is recognizing that beauty has a form. Balthasar's first volume is subtitled *Seeing the Form*. The Latin word for beauty is *formosa*. "Form" is a difficult word—we deride "form letters" and worry when someone acts too "formal." Why is "form" so crucial for beauty? We can grasp its meaning first by thinking about how the world looks in a fog, or when our vision becomes blurred, or even when light is dim and indirect. We cannot really "see," because seeing means recognizing and distinguishing certain shapes and their relationships.

The idea of form is especially captured in human terms by considering what it means to see the uniqueness of a face. Human faces are remarkably distinctive, and their forms mark

us more than anything else in terms of our identity. The Old Testament is filled with passages expressing longing to “see the face of God” or pleas to God to “let your countenance shine forth.” Why God’s face? This is a way of expressing what it means to see someone’s true form, for their true identity and beauty to be revealed. To see “face-to-face” is really the culmination of what it means to see. John O’Donohue reminds us that “the first thing the new infant sees is the human face” and nothing else we see will ever “rival the significance of the face.”⁶ The face here represents the form of the person. It is telling that our driver’s licenses and course rosters have head shots for identification purposes! It is telling that when we meet someone, we look into his or her face; compare this to two dogs meeting at the park! One of the greatest nature psalms highlights the relation of God’s face to the whole of creation:

When you hide your face, they panic.
 Take away their breath, they perish
 and return to the dust.
 Send forth your spirit, they are created
 and you renew the face of the earth. (Ps 104:29-30)

The face has a pattern, a form, and O’Donohue notes that it is this “hidden order and rhythm of pattern” that is the foundation of beauty.⁷ Such delightful form can also be found elsewhere: consider the form of games, works of art, music, and dance. To perceive beauty in the activity, we must see the form. This is why (unfortunately) many people consider baseball “boring”! Our world delights us insofar as we see the form.

So let’s ask ourselves, are we looking at the whole of creation in this way? The created world has an intricate, complex form—Pope Benedict calls it a “grammar,” which “sets forth criteria for its wise use, not its reckless exploitation” (*Caritas in Veritate* 48).⁸ Learning nature is like learning the complexities of a spoken language . . . or of baseball! Saint Basil praises God for the gift of human intelligence, for its ability “to learn of the great

wisdom of the artificer from the most insignificant objects of creation . . . the tiniest of plants and animals.”⁹ Much of human history has involved humans discovering how to become fluent in this language. Take the ancient art of beekeeping. Attention to the bees reveals the extraordinary intricacy of their lives. Bill McKibben explains that, among many other practices, beehives deal with summer heat with “a primitive form of air conditioning”: when it gets too hot, some bees bring back water drops, and then they all stop their work and beat their wings together to evaporate the water.¹⁰ Or consider the “beehive democracy” when a hive gets too full and bees must go out and find a new hive—a complex process of decision making involving numerous “scouts” who then return and start “dances” that correspond to how good various possible sites might be.¹¹ Over time, more and more bees gravitate to the better dances, and a decision is made together. McKibben connects all this to the real-life story of small Vermont beekeeper Kirk Webster, who carefully observes the ins and outs of his hives, working with their natural processes, helping them along, and reaping some sweet rewards in the process. And of course, the wider world reaps the rewards, too, since bees pollinate hundreds of fruits and flowers. While Mr. Webster helps the bees, he doesn’t make their lives. The form is not something we as humans made up; rather, it is given to us, as one of millions of processes that make up “nature.”

Now, bees may make you run away, so we must look to other examples for our second point: that beauty overwhelms us in reaching out and almost *demanding* our admiration. Consider the experience of California redwoods or the Rocky Mountains: in our society, we are still captivated by natural beauty and sometimes overwhelmed by its power, even its sacredness. Beauty like this has a kind of force, power, or inherent attractiveness—a luminosity or splendor—that moves us. We could say it overpowers us. It awes us. It has a kind of magnetism. It is like the (very few!) days when the weather is “perfect.” As Balthasar writes of beauty, it “brings with it a self-evidence that en-lightens without mediation”—that is, its “form is so constituted as to

be able to mediate from within itself the light that illuminates its beauty.”¹²

These breathtaking moments are reminders of the ancient Catholic idea of the analogy of being. This very abstract-sounding term simply means that we experience ourselves and things in the world as a part of some vastly larger whole, something prior to ourselves and deserving of recognition, and even reverence. We can't fully understand it, but we just *know* something special is there. Existence itself is a great mystery—not in the sense of something unknown, but something with infinite depth, like looking down into the sea. As Balthasar puts it, God has made all things “with the grace of participation in the inexhaustibility of its origin. It bears within itself a wealth that cannot be consumed like a finite sum of money. You are never finished with any being, be it the tiniest gnat or the most inconspicuous stone. It has a secret opening, through which flow never-failing replenishments of sense and significance ceaselessly flowing to it from eternity.”¹³ It is always possible to harden our hearts against beauty, but it involves effort. (By the way, this is why so much environmental harm must be hidden from sight, often elaborately.)

This feeling of being grasped by beauty should lead to certain spiritual responses: humility, gratitude, and thanksgiving. For this is all a gift. We didn't make the beautiful day, the sun, the soil that regenerates the grasses. Beauty is like a gift in its sheer excessiveness. It is so much more than we might expect, and we respond best by appreciating it. Beauty is grace, and grace asks only to be received. It is way bigger than what we could have made.

For Christians, God's grace is made manifest in many ways. But we should not forget that a primary experience of it is in creation. Jame Schaefer quotes St. Augustine's praise in *The City of God* for “the manifold diversity of beauty in sky and earth and sea; the abundance of light, and its miraculous loveliness, in sun and moon and stars; the dark shades of woods, the color and fragrance of flowers; the multitudinous varieties of birds,

with their songs and their bright plumage; the countless living creatures of all shapes and sizes.”¹⁴ Augustine is merely echoing the psalmist, who sings the various beauties of creation, and concludes:

How varied are your works, LORD!
In wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures. (Ps 104:24)

These momentary experiences of overwhelming beauty are important, but they are not the whole story. Think about our national parks, for example. The parks themselves—most often remote, forbidding, rocky, dreadfully hot or cold—capture both the power of nature’s beauty and our sometimes limited ability to see it. In these places, we feel some of the rawest power of nature, almost like an emotional “pow” moment. Like our romantic movies, though, we gaze fascinated by the “pow” moment of emotional impact and then forget to develop the far more complicated knowledge involved in *lifelong love* of others. C. S. Lewis notes the many great seekers of romantic love are not interested in loving a person; what they love is the immediate experience, the thrill, of falling in love.¹⁵ Correspondingly, we can fall into the trap of thinking natural beauty is *only* experienced in remote places, where we get the “pow.” We then neglect nature’s beautiful form that is all around us. Much of nature (also like love) involves the humble, difficult task of daily care. Our word “humility” comes from the word for “soil.” The form of nature’s beauty might not be best captured by gazing up at majestic mountaintops, but in the soil beneath our feet.

Is dirt beautiful? What about those nasty bees? Yes, everything is, but we probably need to *learn* to see its beauty. Thus, our third point: while nature’s beauty can pack a kind of irresistible punch, it *also* requires an active response to this invitation—learning better and better to appreciate its amazing form in everything around us. If it is only mountains and eagles that move us, we can be certain that we will go on neglecting and

destroying the equally beautiful and intricate bees and prairies, not to mention our own (mostly urban) spaces. Take the bee example: when I see a bee, it is not a “pow” moment—I think of avoiding getting stung! I need to learn from others that there is a form that requires respect and appreciation. Schaefer, in surveying patristic and medieval texts on the beauty of creation, calls this theme “cognitive appreciation brought about when contemplating the harmonious functioning of creatures.”¹⁶ She notes how the medieval theologian Hugh of St. Victor reflects on seeing God’s handiwork in nature: Some look at the world like “unlettered people” who “see an open book” and can “see the characters, but do not know the letters.” When looking at the beauty of nature, they only see the “external appearance” but fail to grasp the “inner meaning” that reflects “the wisdom of the Creator.”¹⁷ Today, we must learn again to be literate in the language of God’s earth, in order to grasp its beauty.

In order to enter into nature’s beauty, let us not simply take pilgrimages to national parks, the “cathedrals” of the natural world. Let us also see the form in our home “parishes” and local regions. There’s still a “pow” here, but it’s a little more intellectual, more like what we experience when we learn the intricacies of a musical score or football play strategies. A great example of this “cognitive appreciation” of beauty is given by physicist Chet Raymo, who teaches the history of the natural world through what he has observed on his daily walk to work through a one-mile estate-turned-nature-preserve in New England. Raymo notes that after thirty-seven years, knowledge of this landscape “is in my bones” and yet every day still turns up “something noteworthy,” because “every pebble and wildflower has a story to tell.”¹⁸ He is able to take details of this journey and connect them to large-scale geological and evolutionary history, to distant stars, and even to the varieties of human making that have inhabited the place. As he writes, “A minute lived attentively can contain a millennium; an adequate step can span the planet,” and a mile-long walk can traverse territory “as big as the universe.”¹⁹ Let us find those close-to-home places where we can savor such walks.

Another especially important but forgotten learning that we need to recover is the form of farming with nature. Food writer Michael Pollan, in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, made Virginia farmer Joel Salatin a classic example of this skill. Salatin's medium-sized Virginia farm started as a degraded and worn-out set of hills and valleys. On 100 acres, Salatin now produces "40,000 pounds of beef, 30,000 pounds of pork, 10,000 broilers, 1,200 turkeys, 1,000 rabbits, and 35,000 dozen eggs."²⁰ The meat alone would give 2,000 people 75 pounds each annually, and over 17 dozen eggs. His inputs? Salatin says, "I'm a grass farmer"—that is, virtually the whole farm output, outside of a small amount of chicken feed, comes from a single input: grass. Well, grass . . . and an intricate choreography of moveable pens and coops that enables Salatin to graze each portion of the field just the right amount (and with the right amount of, ahem, "leavings") so that it can then regenerate and again be grazed. As Salatin puts it, "We should call ourselves sun farmers. The grass is just the way we capture solar energy."²¹ But the process is by no means automatic. Indeed, it relies on not violating "the law of the second bite" that happens when cows graze one field continuously, using up the grasses they like and allowing species they don't like to take over. To follow this law requires intense human "seeing"—to each section of pasture, to the difference in "recovery times" depending on season and weather, and to the cows themselves, who must be constantly transferred (then the chickens are ported in to eat the bugs out of the cow leavings, and leave their own). Pollan calls the entire operation a matter of "practicing complexity," and Salatin notes that "everything's connected to everything else, so you can't change one thing without changing ten other things."²² The outcome is simple: a lot of very good food for almost nothing. This kind of farm is certainly capable of matching the output per acre of large operations, perhaps even surpassing it, in terms of variety.²³ But the beautiful outcome requires intense attention to how nature can be coaxed to produce such pure gifts.

One might wish we trained all our farmers with the skill that we expect from doctors and physicists; maybe if we paid

them well enough, we would! Sadly, however, nearly nothing in our ordinary food system actually looks like this. In our society, much farming, especially of livestock and poultry, is as machine-like as possible from start to finish—from huge, constantly lit sheds to chickens that cannot stand because they are designed to bulk up as quickly as possible to concrete-walled slaughterhouses with processes that horrify the ordinary person (if they saw them). This is not nature's beauty, but the opposite.

Why is this so? We will need to explore why, but a big part is because, to follow Salatin's process, there is an ineradicable human element, since the beauty of the process must be observed with the kind of intensity and care that the poet uses to choose words or the composer uses for notes. It is an intellectual process, but not a "logical" one. It is not a mechanical one. Working with nature's beauty is a kind of craft process, which can be made more efficient but relies on human attention, skill, and pacing. It is more like teaching or medicine at its best and thus has a labor intensity that we have sought to escape. If nature is as beautiful and bountiful as described here, why have we sought to escape working with it and in it? Why are most of us unlikely to want a job where we tend nature's beauty? In short, why have we lost our sense of this form and our place in it?