

THE BEGINNING: CREATION

The creation, though marred by sin, is good

We believe that creation is good. Genesis bears witness to this goodness: “And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good” (Gen. 1:31). Other places in Scripture speak of God’s *delight* in creation (Ps. 104:24-26; Zeph. 3:17).

Although the creation is marred by human sinfulness, its fundamental goodness is a consequence of God’s having made it, and therefore creation’s goodness cannot be entirely effaced. Moreover, because creation is good, humans have a duty before God to take care of it and not to destroy it. This duty has become especially urgent in our day, as population growth and technological advancements have magnified the effects of human activity on creation. But we also rightly delight in and study that creation — our joy mirroring God’s own delight in making it, our rational study participating in the wisdom that established it (1 Kgs. 4:29-34; Prov. 3:13-20, 8:22-36).

The analogy of creation

We believe that creation bears witness to God. St. Paul says, “Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made” (Rom. 1:20). Indeed this might be said to be an original purpose of creation: God’s communication of himself.

Writing in the fourth century, St. Gregory of Nyssa said that creation is God’s artwork, and that just as an astute observer can come to know the mind of an artist by contemplating his works, “so too, when we consider the order of creation, we form an image ... of the wisdom of the One who has done all things wisely” (*Homily 6*).

In Genesis 1, God gives mankind dominion over creation. The material world, the plants and animals, are given to humanity both to use and to care for. Our dominion over creation is thus subsidiary to God’s ultimate dominion, and, as such, its exercise must be characterized by wisdom and benevolence. This is a duty that we owe to God as stewards of the good things he has made.



**In the beginning,
God created the heavens
and the earth**



THE
LIVING CHURCH

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Scripture bears witness in its opening verse that God is the Creator of everything that exists:

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1).

The prologue of John’s Gospel confirms the account from Genesis and expounds on the role of the divine Word in the Creation: “He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made” (John 1:2-3).

We believe that God created all things out of nothing. Theologians call this the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* (“out of nothing”). For example, St. Paul says that God “calls into existence the things that do not exist” (Rom. 4:17; see also Ps. 33; 148:5). And this belief was taken up and taught also by the Church Fathers. For example, St. Irenaeus of Lyons writes in *Against Heresies* that “God, according to his pleasure, in the exercise of his own will and power, formed all things (so that those things which now are should have an existence) out of what did not previously exist” (2.10.2).

We believe therefore that God is behind and above creation, that he is prior to it. He is eternal and uncaused. Yet, conversely, creation has a beginning and depends upon God for its existence. Theologians refer to this as creation’s contingency. It means that everything that exists depends upon God for its existence, from neutrinos to flowers to men and women. The fact that God is eternal does not mean that he exists infinitely backward and forward on the timeline, but that he is altogether timeless. The Psalmist says, “Before the mountains were brought forth, or the land and the earth were born, from age to age you are God” (Ps. 90:2).

God creates in wisdom and love

From the fact that God is eternal we can deduce that when he creates, he does so eternally. “Before” God made the world, there was no time. We can hear an echo of this theological conviction in an insight from modern physics, namely, that space and time go together. Time began at the Big Bang, according to contemporary physics and cosmology, and so it makes little sense to ask what there was *before* the universe was created. There can be a before only where there is time, and time is a feature of creation.

This insight is not new. St. Augustine of Hippo said in the early fifth century: “It is idle for men to imagine previous ages of God’s inactivity, since there is no time before the world began” (*City of God* 11.5).

From the earliest centuries of the Church, Christians have understood that the six days of creation in Genesis 1 do not necessarily mean six 24-hour periods. Clement of Alexandria, for example, says concerning Genesis 1 that “the expression ‘when they were created’ intimates an indefinite and dateless production” (*Miscellanies* 6:16). Christians are therefore at liberty to understand the earth to have come into existence many eons ago, as modern science indicates, as well as to embrace the theory of evolution. We confess only that God is the cause of all that the heavens and the earth, things visible and invisible; we do not profess to know precisely how or when he caused everything to be.

In *The City of God*, Augustine hints at the manner of God’s creative activity. God created the world, says Augustine, knowingly. “This suggests a thought which is surprising, but true; that this world could not be known to us, if it did not exist, whereas it could not have existed if it had not been known to God” (*City of God* 11.10).

The same can be said of God’s love for his creation: that it too is eternal, and that on account of God’s eternal love for creation, he calls it into being out of nothing. This act of eternal love also means that, from our timebound perspective, God stands in an intimate relation to all of his creatures (see Ps. 139).

