

PRAYER AND THE HEALING OF NATURE

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OUR MENTAL ATTITUDES, CONVICTIONS, desires, wills, and indeed prayers not only affect ourselves, but necessarily also influence the existence of other beings and, ultimately, the global and cosmic totality. I would like to argue that the mental disposition and spiritual openness that help to attune us to God's will and prepare us to receive God's grace, within ourselves and within wider creation, are crucial for the healing of the self and of nature. As such, I consider that the prayer and spiritual seeking that aim to involve our entire being in attunement with the wider creation are human capacities indispensable for universal well-being. I shall seek for inspiration especially in St Paul, in the Gospels, in the Byzantine saint Maximus the Confessor, and in modern science.¹

The Context of Human Existence

With the early Church fathers Gregory of Nyssa (c.335 – c.395) and Maximus the Confessor (c.580–662) we can envisage that the path of created reality moves from division into multiplicity towards harmony in unity.² The divisions that are omnipresent within created reality fragment and distort a creature's particular existence; they divide the various created realities from each other; and above all they divide those realities from God the Creator.

Earlier than Gregory or Maximus, Paul had affirmed that the unity of creation, in which divisions have been overcome, is reached through and in Christ. The ultimate destiny of both humanity and the universal creation is reached when all things have been subjected to

¹ This article is indebted to André Louf's 'Prayer and Ecology', *The Way*, 45/4 (October 2006).

² For references see Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 72, 156, 212.

Christ, so that God becomes ‘all in all’ (1 Corinthians 15:28; and see Galatians 3:28). At that point a new creation will have been established (Galatians 6:15). Paul holds that even the enemies of God and Christ will be subjected: he speaks of ‘every ruler’ (*archē*), ‘every authority’ (*exousia*) and ‘power’ (*dynamis*) (1 Corinthians 15:24) that is to be abolished, and he adds that these include death (15:26). It is likely that in the combined use of these three Greek terms Paul is envisaging an opposition to God that is comprehensive in scope, embracing spiritual powers as well as malevolent earthly rulers, and possibly even the very natural forces that bring about death and decay. The spiritual and earthly spheres are seen as interdependent.³

***Beyond the
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Paul’s perception is mirrored by the cosmic scene presented in the Gospels. They show Jesus as confronted and opposed by Satan in the desert; by unclean spirits inhabiting people; by Judas Iscariot under the spell of Satan; by the religious authorities and rulers; even by the agitated sea and wind. Jesus is seen as overcoming these opposing powers, and as having permanently restrained them (Colossians 2:15). They are restrained, however, only within those who are willing to adhere to him (Romans 8:35–39 and James 4:7), that is, within the Church: within those who keep in touch with him through earnest prayer, those associated with him by their good intent, and those who are known by God. In particular, Jesus’ last week in Jerusalem, his holy week, is seen in Mark’s Gospel as a *re-creation*—as introducing a new creation. Gerald O’Mahony suggests that this week reflects the week of creation of Genesis 1, but it is shifted a day forward so that the re-creation through Jesus’ self-sacrifice takes us beyond the Sabbath and into the realm of God’s new creative initiative.⁴ Jesus makes death no longer an end-point and ultimate punishment, but a gate towards the fullness of life, entered in trust through God the Father.

Jesus was thus a perfect forerunner, a human being devoid of sin, the unstained image of the Father (Colossians 1:15). As such, he could show us in himself who God is and also what it is to be truly human. In this light, the faithful are called to form themselves in the image of

³ See Douglas Harink, *Paul among the Postliberals: Pauline Theology beyond Christendom and Modernity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2003), 122, 148.

⁴ Gerald O’Mahony, *Praying St Mark’s Gospel* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990), 81–87, 98–104, 133.

Jesus, the perfect image of God (1 Corinthians 15:49).⁵ This does not imply that we are to become identical copies of Jesus' humanity. Rather, the faithful should become an authentic and integral part of a pattern centred upon Jesus. This ultimate and harmonious pattern is expressive of Christ, the incarnate Son of God—in Jesus himself as well as in each part that makes up the pattern.⁶ Each human being is, as it were, to become another humanity of Christ, while Christ is found both in each and in the totality. The effect is something like a holographic plate, which as a whole shows a three dimensional image; and yet if it is broken up, each fragment of the original plate still shows the entire image. We can further note that this configurational pattern, as expressive of Christ, is not an undifferentiated simplicity, but a harmonious multiplicity, forming a unity. It is therefore not multiplicity, but division, that we strive to overcome.

God is envisaged to become all in all. Accordingly, humanity and the wider creation are to become deified.⁷ This, however, is not to be understood as implying that they cease to be created beings. Instead, there remains an abyss between God the Creator and the creature. What deification implies is that somehow, entirely through God's grace, the creaturely is taken up into the divine communion of Father, Son and Spirit. As consciously aware and intelligent creatures our task is continuously to orientate ourselves towards God. Following the example of Jesus, we need to pray, to live humbly, to love and to worship God. As such, we are called to contribute to the greater glory of God.

To enable this, Christian tradition encourages the faithful to progress upon a threefold spiritual path. In the teaching of St Maximus the first step along this path is a conversion of life involving the pursuit of virtues, of self-discipline and of prayer. The second step (which is not

⁵ See also Panayiotis Nellas, *Deification in Christ: Orthodox Perspectives on the Nature of the Human Person*, translated by Norman Russell (Crestwood, NY: SVS, 1987), 23–25.

⁶ Russel Bradner Norris Jr, 'Logos Christology as Cosmological Paradigm', *Pro Ecclesia*, 5 (1996), 183–201, here 195–198 and David S. Yeago, 'Jesus of Nazareth and Cosmic Redemption: The Relevance of St Maximus the Confessor', *Modern Theology*, 12 (1996), 163–193, here 183.

⁷ The term 'deification' (*theosis*) is not scriptural but is found in Gregory Nazianzen and in Maximus: for references see Nellas, *Deification in Christ*, 252, as well as Maximus, *Difficulty*, 7 in *Patrologia Graeca*, edited by Jacques-Paul Migne (Paris, 1863) (hereafter PG), volume 91, 1084C; an English translation is provided by Paul M. Blowers and Robert Louis Wilken in *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ: Selected Writings from St Maximus the Confessor* (Crestwood, NY: SVS, 2003).

subsequent but complementary to the first) is a 'natural contemplation' that aims to discern the divine Word at work within the universal creation (Genesis 1 and John 1:3). Vittorio Croce finds that Maximus associates with this contemplative activity not only the contemplation of 'God's creatures, but also the Bible, the Liturgy, the writings of the Fathers, and the declarations of the Councils'.⁸ As a corollary, natural contemplation can relate us more intimately to all that is informed by the same Word and that exists around us. Maximus considered that by discerning the true nature of beings and their intended destiny we take up the various realities with us in our ascent towards God. At the same time we ourselves are being taken up by wider reality in its existential dynamic towards God. These two steps that are constitutive of the spiritual path prepare for the third step that takes place because of God's grace alone, namely a unification with God.⁹

Universal Interdependence

Church fathers from both East and West have believed that all created entities naturally tend towards their Creator. They hold that all the various creatures aim for the fulfilment of their natural tendencies, as instilled by their kind, and that all kinds are informed by the creative Word of God. It is, however, especially the fathers of the East, perhaps Maximus foremost among them, who perceived that creatures can only attain fulfilment of their existence when moving on an interrelated path towards God. According to Maximus, rational beings, both spiritual and human, have been given the capacity to orientate this universal dynamic towards God.¹⁰

As such, the faithful have a crucial role to play in this process. For while the whole natural world tends indeed towards fulfilment, it is also susceptible to division, corruption and distorting influences. Prayer and Christian life therefore benefit not only the self but all things. As Jesus was, the faithful are called to be forerunners, in their

⁸ Aidan Nichols, *Byzantine Gospel: Maximus the Confessor in Modern Scholarship* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1993), 29; Nichols refers to Vittorio Croce, *Tradizione e ricerca: Il metodo teologico di san Massimo il Confessore* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1974), 28.

⁹ Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor* (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 1995), 332–368.

¹⁰ Maximus, *Questions Dedicated to Thalassius 2*: PG 90, 272AB; an English translation is provided by Blowers and Wilken in *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ*.

own times and places, who draw created reality towards life with God (Romans 8:19, 23 and 1 Corinthians 15:23). We can see this newness of life, with Maximus, as transcending the purely natural, yet not so as simply to leave it behind. Properly understood, ascent towards God is not a going elsewhere. Rather, it is an opening up to God's presence in the very actualisation of our creaturely existences. For, as Jesus announced: 'the Kingdom of God has come near' (Mark 1:15; see Matthew 12:28 and Luke 10:9, 11). He also taught us to pray for its coming in the *Our Father*.

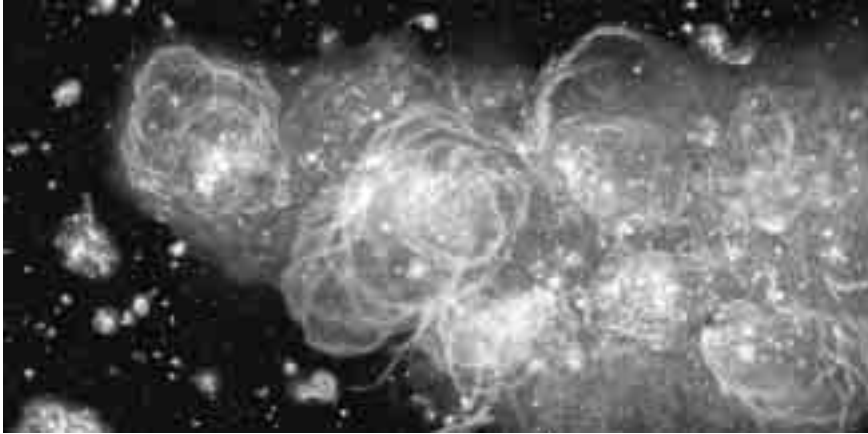
The newness of life that is harmonious existence in God's presence is enabled by God's love. Love is a universal power that allows an overcoming of the divisions within creation, and between creation and God—who is called Love (1 John 4:8). For love brings together. As Maximus affirms, it is inspired within the whole of created reality; it is manifest in the universal natural attraction towards God; it enables harmonious existence;¹¹ it is seen in the very care of animals for their offspring.¹² He holds that human beings, as rational beings, have been given capacities that make us particularly suited for holy love: namely a will and a reason that allow us to orientate our own desire (*epithymia*) and irascibility (*thymos*).¹³

That creaturely existence is designed for universal interdependence is clearly shown by the natural sciences: by field theories in physics that bind localised phenomena in universal networks; by the cosmic principle that physical laws are the same in the entire observed universe; by biological evolution; by the insight that mind and body are strongly interdependent in terms of health or the absence of it. We all require potable water, breathable air, and so on, which come to us through global circulatory systems to which various habitats and creatures all over the world contribute. Hence, if the human race fosters the well-being of universal creation, then creation itself will

¹¹ Maximus, *Mystagogia* 1: PG 91, 664D–665A; an English translation is provided by George C. Berthold in *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist and London: SPCK, 1985).

¹² Maximus, *Difficulty* 10; PG 91, 1189BC; an English translation is provided by Louth in *Maximus the Confessor*.

¹³ Maximus, *Letter* 2: PG 91, 396C–397B; English translation by Louth in *Maximus the Confessor*. Louth's translation of *thymos* is 'incensive power', which is also found in the glossary to the translation of the *Philokelia* by G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber, 1983). They explain: 'the incensive aspect or power (*to thymikon*), which often manifests itself as wrath or anger, but which can be more generally defined as the force provoking vehement feelings' (volume 1, 358).



The birth of galaxies in the early universe

contribute to humanity's own well-being. In this spirit the early Christian writers adopted the Platonic idea that the human being is a microcosm within an encompassing macrocosm.

Despite the promise of a salvation that necessarily includes the wider creation, however, human individuals have sadly tended to deify themselves, in a way reminiscent of the anthropomorphic Greek and Roman gods, each with their selfish will and wiles. We would be better to revive the ancient Celtic belief that creatures participate together in the spiritual world under the well-pleased eye of a holy Father.

A Guided Transformation

The successively emerging macro-entities of the universe, the Milky Way and innumerable galaxies, our solar system, Earth, sea and land have given rise to the corresponding development on a microscopic scale of elementary particles and the hydrogen atom, then more complex atoms, inorganic molecules, organic molecules, then living bacteria and multicellular organisms. From the earliest macroscopic manifestation and from the most elementary level onwards there is manifested what scientists acknowledge as a noetic feature, a participation in intelligence. Likewise, basic organisms such as bacteria, algae and so on display a degree of apparently purposive behaviour.¹⁴

¹⁴ See for example Harold J. Morowitz, *The Emergence of Everything: How the World Became Complex* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2002), 101–105.

This has developed into more complex forms of awareness and consciousness and, midway between the macro- and microscopic realms, to consciously aware human beings. From the perspective of faith this transformation is not a blind process, but informed by the divine Word and Spirit. This guided transformation does not imply a merely passive created reality; rather, it stirs up intelligence and provokes a response at every level of creation.

As human beings we are capable of the personal, and thus of an individual existence that may be integrated into the personal communion that is the Holy Trinity. This requires that each human being ascend and be transformed from a visible and biological to an invisible and more spiritual existence. The various other forms of creation make this journey towards the Kingdom or the heavenly Jerusalem with us. As the creaturely is deified it increasingly comes to share in the divine powers—either to love unconditionally and to co-create a harmonious world, or to inflict harm, to divide and destroy. There are, moreover, still the demonic spiritual powers with which Jesus and Paul considered themselves interlocked in battle.

As such, the task of the faithful is to work and pray, together with the holy angels, for the Kingdom of God, wherein creation shall find its rest. Creation will be transfigured and purged from all that is evil. Isaiah lets us envisage a peaceable kingdom that is full of the knowledge of God and wherein no being hurts or destroys another (11:6–9). But we also know that the eternal Christ, in whom creation is to be incorporated, still carries in Jesus the signs of nails and inflicted wounds (Luke 24:39; John 20:20 and 27). These wounds are a permanent witness to the opposition and death suffered by Jesus—and they too have been taken up into the transformed life within God's glory.

Creation's incorporation into Christ will take place fully only beyond death, in the realm where time and space themselves will have been transformed. The creature's particularity and distinctiveness will remain, but it will no longer be separated and divided from other creatures. As Jesus and Paul have taught us in word and deed, the faithful are already given the promise of the Spirit; they can already have a share in Christ and spread his reign around them and throughout the world.

Prayer and the Healing of All Creation

Many human beings are afflicted by a physical illness during at least part of their lives, or suffer from a mental handicap. Many others have psychological problems, or encounter injustice in one of its many forms. Still others suffer through their love for others. Humans, however, do not suffer in isolation. Pain and suffering are realities shared with the entire creation (as well as with the Spirit), as is expressed in Romans (8:22 and 26). As William Johnston has put it, 'the universe itself is sick'.¹⁵ In Genesis the ills of creation are at least partly attributed to human sinfulness (3:17).

Placing this in its context, Robert Murray has argued that throughout scripture the notion of a cosmic covenant is being taught, which promises a God-given order including both human beings and the wider natural world (see for example Genesis 8:21–22; Isaiah 24; 54:9–10, 55:12–13 and Jeremiah 33:20–26). This covenant bestows on the human being a responsibility to act justly within creation and to recognise God as the Creator of heaven and earth, so that both human and creature may enjoy peace. Besides human sinfulness, there are also malevolent powers that are rendered ineffective by heeding God's covenant (Isaiah 33).¹⁶ This insight coheres with what has already been said here about the divisions everywhere within creation and the spiritual path that promotes harmony in our relationship with God and with other creatures, and within ourselves.

The Gospels show that for Jesus forgiveness and healing are often present close together. In Luke's Gospel, however, it is also made clear that for Jesus illness and misfortune cannot simply be attributed to a person's sinfulness (13:1–5). What it suggests is that, as sinful human beings, we cannot heal ourselves, let alone others, in isolation from God the Creator. But we can foster healing in our lives by faith, by allowing Jesus to be present in our hearts as the risen one, by asking, receiving and accepting his forgiveness (Acts 5:30–32 and 10:43) and his healing touch. Through a life of humility, love and unceasing prayer, our desires and wills become identified with those of Christ. It is, however, the forgiveness granted by Jesus, rather than our own

¹⁵ William Johnston, *The Science of Meditation* (London: Collins, 1974), 134.

¹⁶ See Robert Murray, *The Cosmic Covenant: Biblical Themes of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1992).

effort, which overcomes the obstructions within ourselves that prevent healing. As such, our lives become open channels for his healing power in us and around us. Instead of being obstacles and mere parasites on Earth, we allow the presence and power of God to bring harmony, peace, joy and healing.

Prayer that seeks to attune a person's life to the will of God will be accompanied by an increasing sensitivity to what takes place within our lives and around us. It no longer permits reckless demands for the sake of the self. It allows us constantly to seek to avoid the misuse (which is often the root cause of disease) of the body, of other people and of creation, and seek for health and well-being, and thereby for the greater glory of God.

People of prayer may, however, still be afflicted by problems, ills, frustrations and anxieties; for they still live within a society and a world where much is wrong, and where malignant powers may still beset and confront them,¹⁷ perhaps even more because of the path they follow, just as happened to Jesus. However, as they live in the Spirit, they hope to attain fullness of life in Christ for themselves and for all around them. Blessed are those who wait for the Day of the Lord and who hear his reassuring voice: 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid' (Mark 6:50).

I would like now to recall a striking example of the power of prayer and ritual in bringing healing to a crisis situation in the natural world. It brings to light the spiritual efficacy of the prayer of non-Christians, and as such it challenges us to situate the events narrated within the Christian outlook upon reality presented above.

Two Amazonian Tribesmen Who Made it Rain

During the first quarter of 1998 huge forest fires in Roraima, a state in the extreme north of Brazil, raged largely unchecked for about ten weeks. Even though a state of emergency had been declared in mid January, it was only in March that major firefighting operations were begun—too late, for by then the situation was quickly turning into a major global ecological catastrophe.¹⁸ Weather satellites indicated that

¹⁷ See also *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), n. 395.

¹⁸ Jeremy McDermott, 'Drought Causes Brazil Jungle Fires', *The Daily Telegraph* (17 March 1998), news in brief.

rain in the region was not expected until May. The attempts at control by hundreds of fire-fighters using army helicopters to drop 'water-bombs' proved ineffective.¹⁹ By the end of March the firefighters were praying to God for rain.

In the meantime, the chiefs of seven local tribes called for the help of two Kayapó medicine men from a village in the state of Mato Grosso, who were flown in by the government's Indian Foundation over a distance of 1,500 miles to Boa Vista, the capital of Roraima.²⁰ After having refreshed themselves, the two men went to the banks of a nearby river, carrying some leaves and branches from their homeland; they promised 'we will make water fall' and asked to be left alone to perform their ceremony in the dark. Apparently, they performed a rain-dance, and scooped some water from the river with their hands and poured it over the dry branches. Half an hour later they returned to their hotel and went to bed, confident that it would rain. Within a few hours reports were coming of rain all over the state, and by dawn the capital was hit by one of the heaviest downpours it had ever known. The meteorologists were utterly surprised. The two medicine men returned to their village and were declared heroes of the rainforest. The explanation they gave was that they talked to a famous ancestor with divine powers, who, when he went to heaven, was turned into rain.²¹

The quasi-simultaneity of the medicine men's intervention and the dramatic alteration of the weather, against the backdrop that rain was not expected until May, makes me strongly inclined to believe that prayer and ritual did make a real difference in this case. The fact that an effort was made to call for these tribesmen, who had sufficient reputation to be known by chiefs at a great distance from their home—which indicates that they were not novices as regards such rituals—fits the picture that more than what is normal did occur here. I also note that there are precedents for the efficacy of prayer with regard to rain.

¹⁹ Gabriella Gamini, 'Smoke Halts Air Battle to Douse Amazon Blazes', *The Times* (24 March 1998), 13; Nick Nuttal, 'Brazil Accepts UN Help to Tackle Fires', *The Times* (25 March 1998), 14; Gabriella Gamini, 'Flames Race Along Highway of Destruction', *The Times* (31 March 1998), 11.

²⁰ Gabriella Gamini, 'Brazil Invokes God's Help in Amazon Inferno', *The Times* (28 March 1998), 6.

²¹ 'Strong Rains Fall on Fire-ravaged Amazon State' (31 March 1998), at <http://edition.cnn.com/EARTH/9803/31/brazil.fires.update/index.html>, accessed 23 November 2006 (based on an article from Reuters news agency); Gabriella Gamini, 'Forest Fires Fizzle for Amazon Rainmen', *The Times* (2 April 1998), 17; John Clemens, 'Tribesmen Call in Divine Power to Halt Forest Fire', *The Daily Telegraph* (4 April 1998), 13; and Tad Friend, 'Afterburn', *Outside Magazine* (July 1998), at <http://web.outsidemag.com/magazine/0798/9807burn.html>, accessed 23 November 2006.

A biblical example is the prophet Elijah (1 Kings 17:1–7 and 18:1–45). Tertullian (c.160 – c.220) reports that Christian soldiers in the Roman army ended a drought in Germany by their prayer.²² And during the Second World War, General George S. Patton Jr asked for a prayer for clear weather to be distributed among all soldiers.²³ In the present case, however, it is not only the prayers of the desperate firemen, but also, and especially, those of the confident tribesmen that seem to have decided events. Despite what we would consider to be an inadequate cosmology, their prayer and ritual appeared to be highly effective.

The effectiveness of the tribesmen's intervention may be attributed to some direct mysterious link between their minds (and perhaps also their bodies) and the wider elements induced by their way of life, their cosmic story and the ritual they performed. Alternatively, from a Christian perspective, the medicine men's magical ritual and trustful attitude, along with the prayers of the fire-fighters, reached into the



A Kayapó shaman

²² Tertullian, *Apologeticum* (Apology), 5:6; *Ad scapulam*, 4 and *De oratione*, 29. References are given in *A New Eusebius: Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337*, edited by J. Stevenson and W. H. C. Frend (London: SPCK, 1987), 158.

²³ The example is found in Philip Zaleski and Carol Zaleski, *Prayer: A History* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 6–9.

spiritual and divine realm and found a willing response from God. Despite the fact that the credit would go to ancestor Becororoti and some pagans, God's good will materialised a deluge that solved the crisis. These two alternatives need not exclude one another. In fact, everything that has been said so far suggests an intertwining of both. We could also envisage the deceased ancestor as having helped by his own heavenly prayers.

Human beings are either in touch or out of touch with wider existence; they either can or cannot affect it for the better. Whether they are in or out of touch is dependent upon the integration of their way of life within the natural environment and upon their having a cosmic story in which they believe. This remarkable event shows that when human beings enter with good will into the network of relationships of global existence that encompasses all realms including the divine, the human, and visible and invisible creation, then, by God's gift, harmonious existence is possible.

But we may go further. In their animistic outlook the medicine men attributed significance to the active engagement of the natural elements themselves—in particular here the rain, intimately associated or identified with a revered former member of their tribe—in the restoration of natural balance. In comparison, present-day Christians, especially those reared in a Western or Western-influenced culture, are likely to believe, at most, that human beings and spiritual beings can be actively involved in a relationship with God. They will take for granted that the involvement of non-rational creation, in clear distinction to that of rational beings, is wholly passive. Many Christians today do not pay significant attention to any other beings besides ourselves.

We have already considered here, with Maximus, that there is a divinely guided transformation of the small (the human) alongside the large (the cosmos) and of the large alongside the small, and that there is a universal kinship of love, as well as a common personal origin and personal destiny. Moreover, we have considered with contemporary science that there is a universal participation in intelligence, which from a faith perspective we hold to be divinely informed. In sum, we are invited to consider that spiritual beings, ancestors, people on earth, earthly creatures, forests, rain, the world and the universe form in

every aspect a continuum of existence: all participate in a relationship with the universal Creator.²⁴

In a corresponding integrated way of life, with holistic contemplation as part of the threefold spiritual path, our own prayer may become more apt for the total complex of life forms. Perhaps it will allow us to become more trustful and, in God's grace, more effective both in our present existence and in salvation to an eternal existence in harmony. We are invited to trust in the value of our actions, performed with an attitude of self-giving, of love and prayer. Ultimately, our entire life is to become an unceasing prayer, an effective expression of creation's desire for healing and for its hope upon eternal salvation.

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²⁴ See also John Paul II, 'Created World Exists for New Life in Christ', *L'Osservatore Romano*, 25 (23 June 1999), 11 and 15.