

# ANCIENT WISDOM FOR A CURRENT CRISIS: SACRAMENTAL ONTOLOGY AND ECOLOGY

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I am going to give great hostages to fortune with these remarks, because I am going to lean on the ontology of the Patristics and Scholastics to formulate a Christian approach to valuing nature.<sup>1</sup> It will come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the conversation between Christianity and ecology that neither the Patristic Fathers nor the Scholastic Masters are considered as valuable resources for many current ecotheologians.<sup>2</sup> In fact, many theologians and ecotheologians have dismissed the Fathers and Scholastics as sources of Platonizing dualism that blocks the rich, biblical teaching on nature's value from view.<sup>3</sup> For example, noted ecotheologian Michael Northcott claims that creation's redemption recedes from view early on in Church Father's works, especially in the thought of St. Athanasius of Alexandria.<sup>4</sup> This claim about the Fathers is also supported by church historians like Jaroslav Pelikan who identifies Platonic and Neo-Platonic thought at work in multiple Christian doctrines that emerged in the Patristic era.<sup>5</sup> This paper will contend that this familiar picture of the Great Tradition's theology is ill conceived and is built upon a shallow understanding of their worldview, especially their participatory ontology.<sup>6</sup> Rather than being the source of a theological drift that robs creation of significant value, the ontology of the Great Tradition gives creation a lasting value because the Patristics and Scholastics ground creation's existence in the life of God. This paper will, therefore contend that the ontology of the Great Tradition can provide an excellent way for Christians to understand creation's value. St. Thomas Aquinas gives us some insight into the Great Tradition's ontology and the value of creation that is derivative of it:

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 1–11; Hans Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie* (Oxford: OUP, 2009); Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural* (New York: Crossland, 1998), 15–25.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (Oxford: OUP, 1996), 207–15; Colin Gutton, *The Triune Creator* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); Richard Young, *Healing the Earth* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1996). Most books on ecotheology contain a critique of the Patristic Father's theology as dualistic and dangerous.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 34.

<sup>4</sup> Northcott, *The Environment*, 210; See also Donnie McDaniel's "St. Athanasius and the Redemption of the Created Order" in *Theoecology* forthcoming August, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, Lecture series given at the University of Edinburgh, mentioned in Northcott's, *The Environment and Christian Ethics*, 209.

<sup>6</sup> Throughout this paper, the term Great Tradition will be used to describe the theological enterprise of the Patristic and Scholastic eras.

Since all creatures, even those devoid of understanding, are ordered to God as an ultimate end, all achieve this end to the extent that they *participate* somewhat in his likeness. Intellectual creatures attain it in a more special way, that is, through their proper operation in understanding him. Hence this must be the end of the intellectual creature, namely, to understand God.<sup>7</sup>

This paper will argue that this ontology can provide Christians with a value for creation that could sustain their efforts in social actions, including environmental ethics. The debate about nature's value serves as an excellent arena in which to discuss the Great Tradition's ontology. Creation's value may appear to be a problem that arises within the relatively new science of ecology, but the issue has antecedents within the Christian tradition. Issues such as cosmology, ontology, the relationship between nature and the supernatural, and the relationship between nature and grace are all areas where the question of nature's value can surface.<sup>8</sup> However, it remains true that the awareness of the global ecological crisis has elevated the question of nature's value to the forefront in environmental ethics. Within this sub-discipline of both ecology and ethics the issue revolves around, for the most part, whether nature has intrinsic value or instrumental value, or some mixture of both. For the sake of initial clarity, a few explanations from the *Journal of Environmental Ethics* will help clarify the concept of creation's value. John O'Neill writes the following about instrumental value, "An object has instrumental value in so far as it is a means to some other end."<sup>9</sup> O'Neill also offers the following about intrinsic value, "An object has intrinsic value if it is an end in itself."<sup>10</sup> Modern Christian thinkers who comment on environmental ethics operate within these same parameters of intrinsic and instrumental value.<sup>11</sup> However, that is not how the issue was addressed in the Fathers and Scholastics. Rather than seeing the created world's value as intrinsic or instrumental, the Great Tradition's commitment to ontology meant that creation's value was derivative. What this derivative value means is that for Christians during the first 1400 years of the church thought of creation's value

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<sup>7</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentes* Q. 25.

<sup>8</sup> John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate concerning the Supernatural* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 48–56.

<sup>9</sup> John O'Neill, “

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>11</sup> Without offering a series of quotes to illustrate this fact, I will simply point the reader to the following. For an example of a Christian approach to instrumental value see Cal Beisner, *Where Garden and Wilderness Meet* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Acton Institute, 1996). For an example of Christian support for intrinsic value see Michael Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996).

as an extension of its participation in the life of God as its creator and sustainer.<sup>12</sup> The rest of this paper will focus on explaining and unpacking how this participatory ontology can provide Christians with a value for creation that can sustain activism for the foreseeable future.

This paper will present the participatory ontology of the Great Tradition as follows. One, the ontology of the Patristics and Scholastics will be presented as an expression and extension of their sacramental worldview. Of special importance here is the notion of creation as a sacrament of God's presence, and the belief that the cosmos is a unified created order.<sup>13</sup> Two, the sacramental worldview reveals the nature of God's relationship with the created order. Three, the means by which the Christian tradition may recover the participatory ontology of the Great Tradition will be highlighted. In this subsection, this paper will offer the historic liturgy of the church as the best means to recover the worldview of the Patristics and Scholastics. Finally, this paper will briefly translate this Christian approach into hope for the Falls Lake project. Before hope can be offered, however, the worldview of the Great Tradition should be understood.

### **Sacramental Worldview and Ontology**

Thus far, this paper has already mentioned the participatory ontology (theory of being) that marked the Great Tradition. While it is difficult to posit an adequate definition of this participatory ontology, its basic meaning is that all of the created order draws its primary and continual existence from God himself.<sup>14</sup> Within Christian thought, contra Platonism, this existence is not a necessary emanation from the divine source, but is an absolute free gift. Consider the following from Milbank:

In the realm of ontological difference, gratuity arises before the necessity or obligation and does not even require this contrast in order to be comprehensible. The creature as creature is not the recipient of a gift; it is itself the gift. The same consideration applies to a spiritual creature: as spirit he does not receive a gift; it is itself the gift of spirit.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 27.

<sup>13</sup> I have in mind the concept of a moral, created order that is expressed in Oliver O'Donovan's *Resurrection and Moral Order* (Grand Rapids: IVP, 1986), 17–34; See also Christian Smith's *Moral, Believing Animals* (Oxford: OUP, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 34; Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 17; de Lubac, *Mystery*, 145.

<sup>15</sup> Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 43.

The Patristic Fathers may have utilized philosophical categories from their surrounding cultures, but the driving force behind their ontology was the scriptures. Acts 17.28 says, “For in him we live, move, and have our being.” Also, Colossians 1.17 claims, “Christ is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” Beyond these key verses is the doctrine of the Incarnation whereby Christians express the belief that God the Word took upon himself human flesh via the Holy Virgin’s womb and participated in creaturely existence.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, after his death and resurrection, according to Christian belief, Christ ascended back to his Father with his humanity intact. Christ’s Incarnation is nothing less than the embodiment of the participatory ontology of the Great Tradition. Patristic and Scholastic theologians would further add that St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians tells the Christian faithful that those who are “in Christ” that is, those who by virtue of salvation participate in his divine life, are seated already in the heavenly realms.<sup>17</sup> The theology of the Great Tradition reveals that the participatory ontology of the sacramental worldview remains active in the communion of saints. In fact, the relationship between the sacramental worldview and participatory ontology is essential to truly grasping the Great Tradition.

The sacramental worldview of the Fathers and the Scholastics is the basis for their ontology.<sup>18</sup> The first aspect of the sacramental worldview is the belief that God gives us grace by material means.<sup>19</sup> Jamie Smith writes, “This liturgical affirmation of materiality is commonly described as a sacramental understanding of the world—that the physical material stuff of creation and embodiment is the means by which God’s grace meets us and gets hold of us.”<sup>20</sup> Evangelical scholar Leonard Vander Zee agrees, “God reveals himself in created things. As

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<sup>16</sup> For an excellent examination of how Patristic Christians interacted with the philosophy of the surrounding culture see E. P. Meijering, *Orthodoxy and Platonism in Athanasius of Alexandria* (Leiden: Brill, 1968), and one of the best introductions to the significance of Christ’s Incarnation remains St. Athanasius’ *De Incarnatione*.

<sup>17</sup> There is still much debate as to the authorship of Ephesians, but I find the defense of Pauline authorship offered by Tom Wright in his *Paul: Fresh Perspectives* (London: SPCK, 2006) to be convincing.

<sup>18</sup> However, this sacramental worldview is also the basis of much of the current distrust expressed towards the Christian faith. For those outside the faith, the sacramental worldview is the means by which the church looks its most unreasoned. For many within the faith, but who have modernist commitments, the sacramental worldview is little more than magic. For many Protestants, the sacramental worldview should be jettisoned as it extols a priestly class of clerics who control people’s access to the grace of God. While these fears can and must be dealt with, this paper is not the place to do so.

<sup>19</sup> Article 25 of the 39 Articles of Religion articulates this belief in material grace clear.

<sup>20</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 134.

God's creation, the world may offer a sacramental window into a transcendental reality."<sup>21</sup> Christopher Hall in agreement offers the following, "The Fathers believed that God delights to use tangible, concrete earthy means—matter itself—to communicate his grace, redemption and presence to us."<sup>22</sup> As stated earlier, the anchor for this sacramental worldview is the Incarnation of Christ which the Fathers take as shorthand for the sum total of his redemptive work.<sup>23</sup> Essentially, the key to the sacramental worldview is a belief that physical acts have a spiritual impact. It is from this basis that any sacramental theology of Baptism and the Eucharist is built. Because the world is already a sacrament, the water of Baptism and the elements of the Lord's Supper can take on a special significance. Gerald Manly Hopkins, despite many attempts to make him into a new-age pantheist, was right, "The world is charged with the grandeur of God."<sup>24</sup> Creation itself is a sacrament of God's grace to us.

The belief that creation itself is a sacrament is the second major aspect of the sacramental worldview, and it is also the aspect that has the most impact on the ontology of the Great Tradition. The late Alexander Schmemmann posits the following about the sacramental character of creation:

The world, be it in its totality as cosmos, or in its life and becoming as time and history, is an epiphany of God, a means of his revelation, presence, and power. In other words, it not only posits the idea of God as a rationally acceptable cause of its existence, but truly speaks of him and is in itself an essential means both of knowledge of God and communion with him.<sup>25</sup>

Schmemmann speaks much more directly about the sacramental nature of reality in another place:

Christ came not to replace 'natural' matter with some 'supernatural' and sacred matter, but to restore it and to fulfill it as the means of communion with God. The holy water in Baptism, the bread and wine in the Eucharist, stand for i.e. represent the whole of creation, but creation as it will be at the end, when it will be consummated in God, when he will fill all things with himself.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Leonard Vander Zee, *Christ, Baptism and the Lord's Supper* (Grand Rapids: IVP, 2004), 113.

<sup>22</sup> Christopher Hall, *Worshiping with the Church Fathers* (Grand Rapids: IVP, 2004), 21.

<sup>23</sup> St. Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*, §2.

<sup>24</sup> Gerald Manly Hopkins, *The Major Works* (Oxford: OUP, 2004). 112

<sup>25</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (New York: St. Vladimir's Press, 1975), 120.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

Schememann reveals that the items we usually identify as sacramental draw that nature not from a magical fiat, but from the fact that they are already a part of the sacrament of creation. The stuff of creation is not transformed into sacraments; rather their sacramental nature is just intensified. Boersma notes, “The entire cosmos is meant to serve as a sacrament: a material gift from God in and through which we enter into the joy of his presence.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, the particular sacraments of Christianity flow out of the prior sacramental nature of the created order.

Two questions emerge, however, from the assertion of creation’s sacramentality. The first question is in what way is creation a sacrament, and the second is how does the sacramental nature of creation relate to the participatory ontology of the Great Tradition? The first question forces one to examine the difference between symbols and sacraments. A large number of Christians and many non-Christian observers as well, often use symbol and sacrament as equivalent terms, but this is not correct. Hans Boersma offers an example of how a symbol works:

A road sign with the silhouette of a deer symbolizes the presence of deer in the area, and its purpose is to induce drivers to slow down. Drivers will not be so foolish as to veer away from the road sign for fear of hitting the deer symbolized on the road sign. The reason is obvious: the symbol of the deer and the deer in the woods are two completely separate realities. The former is a sign referring to the latter, but in no way do they coinhere.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, when one says that an item symbolizes another, the relationship is not real but nominal. In agreement with this construction, many Christians would say that creation is symbol of God’s love for his creation or even a symbol of his grace. The sacramental worldview of the Fathers, however, offers a much different picture. Again, Boersma is helpful, “Things are different with sacraments. Unlike mere symbols, sacraments actually participate in the mysterious reality to which they point. Sacrament X and reality Y co-inhere: the sacrament participates in the reality to which it points.”<sup>29</sup> We now come to the scandalous claim of the Great Tradition’s sacramental worldview; creation itself participates, passively except for humanity, in the Divine life.<sup>30</sup> Smith clarifies, “Implicit in the materiality of Christian worship is the sense that God meets us in

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<sup>27</sup> Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 9.

<sup>28</sup> Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 21.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>30</sup> De Lubac, *Mystery*, 115.

materiality, and that the natural world is always more than just nature—it is charged with the presence and the glory of God.”<sup>31</sup> Boersma again states clearly, “A sacramental ontology insists that not only does the created world point to God as its source and ‘point of reference’ but it also subsists or participates in God. In other words because creation is sharing in the being of God, our connection with God is a real or participatory connection—not just a nominal one.”<sup>32</sup> Therefore, when one claims that creation is a sacrament, they posit that creation is participating in the life of God at some level.

Our answer to the question of “in what way is creation a sacrament?” has guided us to the second question, which is, what is the relationship between the sacramental worldview and participatory ontology? Simply put, the two terms are functionally synonymous. To posit a sacramental worldview is to claim a participatory ontology. Boersma writes, “For now, it is enough to observe that the reason for the mysterious character of the world is that it participates in some greater reality, from which it derives its being and its value. Hence, instead of sacramental ontology, we may also speak of participatory ontology.”<sup>33</sup> Smith is also helpful, “The understanding of the world implicit in Christian worship walks the tightrope of a ‘theological materialism’ that both affirms the goodness of materiality but also that the material *is* only insofar as it participates in more than the material.”<sup>34</sup> It is axiomatic then that an expressed belief in the sacramentality of creation is also an expressed belief in a participatory ontology where all of creation draws its being and value from its ongoing relationship with God in Christ. Again, St. Paul’s claim in Acts 17.28 summarizes this truth well, “In him we live, move, and have our being.” The answer to these two questions moves one deeper into an examination of God’s relationship with the created order, a relationship that requires a more nuanced response.

### **God’s Relationship with Creation**

The participatory ontology of the sacramental worldview leaves one with several questions to answer in regards to the created order. The first is what exactly is God’s relationship with the natural world? The second is how should we value the created order in light of God’s

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<sup>31</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 127.

<sup>32</sup> Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 24.

<sup>33</sup> Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 24.

<sup>34</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 143.

relationship with nature? These questions will be answered in order. The ontology of the Great Tradition may cause many modern Christians to ask, if creation participates in the life of God, then is not the Christian faith reduced to pantheism or panentheism? Boersma addresses this issue directly, “Doesn’t a sacramental or participatory cosmology lapse into a pantheist divinizing of nature? If created being participates in the being of God (the eternal word), does this not make created being divine?”<sup>35</sup> In other words, many Christians would claim that this ontology completely blurs the distinction between creature and creator. While this latent pantheism appears to be a troubling element, the issue was and is easily avoided within Christian thought via its doctrine of creation.

Within the Christian Tradition, there is not a belief that God was required to create the cosmos—by whatever means he acted to create it. No, the creation of the universe was the free act of God. Unlike the Platonists, who also posit a participatory ontology, Christian thinkers have said, “The creation was not an automatic or necessary emanation flowing from the being of God without an intervening act of his will.”<sup>36</sup> Milbank translates de Lubac on this topic:

To sustain his suspended middle de Lubac strives rather to say that while creation is the gift of independent existence and grace is the irresistible gift of nonetheless free and deified existence, than the natural desire of the supernatural is the gift of the bond between the two, negotiated by the Spirit’s freedom.<sup>37</sup>

Rather than presenting God as bound to create by his nature, the creative action of God is shown to flow from the love that exists within the Trinity.<sup>38</sup> Stated differently, creation is a gift from God, and as such it continually draws its existence from God. St. Athanasius confirms creation’s dependence upon God:

We also, by God’s grace, briefly indicated that the word of the Father is himself divine, that all things that are owe their being to his will and power, and that it is through him that the Father gives order to creation, by him that all things are moved, and through him that they receive their being.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 70.

<sup>36</sup> De Lubac, *Mystery*, 129.

<sup>37</sup> Milbank, *Suspended Middle*, 39.

<sup>38</sup> Sigud Bergmann, *Creation set Free: The Spirit as the Liberator of Nature* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007); St. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, 42; St. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 176.

<sup>39</sup> St. Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*, §1.



This core truth of creation's participation in the life of God is confirmed by St. Thomas:

It must be said that every being in any way existing is from God. For whatever is found in anything by participation must be caused in it by that to which it belongs essentially, as iron becomes ignited by fire...therefore all beings apart from God are not their own being, but are beings by participation.<sup>40</sup>

These two giants of the Great Tradition are upholding the truth of Col 1.15–20 which proclaims Christ as the creator, redeemer, and sustainer of creation. The truth of God's providential and creative power in Christ has several implications for God's relationship with the created order. First, the Christian doctrine of creation as gift demonstrates that creation is other than God. The otherness of creation means that creation *does not* add anything to God, and thus God's relationship with creation is not pantheistic. The Fathers and Scholastics insisted upon both a sacramental ontology and the creature/creator distinction, and this dual proclamation reveals that they were not trying to collapse Christian doctrine into a form of nature mysticism. Secondly, the doctrine of God's ongoing providential sustaining of creation implies that the creative activity of God is continual. Because God is the source of all being, the created order is contingent the creator God for its continuing existence. One can safely say that while God is other than creation, he is not distant from creation. In fact, he is ever present in the continual subsistence of creation. Boersma notes the following about the Great Tradition's understanding of God's relationship with creation, "They simultaneously conveyed their conviction that Christ was mysteriously present in the created order, but was distinct from God."<sup>41</sup> However, many Christians are not comfortable with this type of theological tension, but when evangelical scholars strive to remove all mystery and tension, an overemphasis on either God's transcendence or immanence will emerge. The sacramental ontology of the Great Tradition avoids this theological conflict by living within a paradox. God is both other than creation and intimately involved in creation. The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 captures God's paradoxical relationship with creation well, "Between the creator and the creature so great a likeness cannot be noted without the necessity of noting a greater dissimilarity between them."<sup>42</sup> Since God continually provides existence to all of

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<sup>40</sup> St. Thomas, *Summa Theologia*, Question 44, Article 1.

<sup>41</sup> Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 39.

<sup>42</sup> Found in Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 45.

creation, the main value that the created order possesses is derivative. This final claim about creation's value needs further clarification.

Creation is other than God. Tom Wright notes, "Creation was from the beginning an act of love, of affirming the goodness of the other."<sup>43</sup> Yet, it is also clear that for the Great Tradition, creation draws its being from God, and is held together as an ordered cosmos by God in Christ. Creation's participation in the divine life, as preserved in the Patristics and Scholastics, means that the created order has a significant value. Boersma notes, "The sacramental ontology of the Great Tradition, the participation and sharing of the created order in the eternal logos immeasurably elevated the value of the terrestrial order."<sup>44</sup> However, neither of the two commonly used terms that describe creation's value—intrinsic or instrumental can actually posit the true value of nature, which the Great Tradition would describe as derivative or sacramental. Insisting that the created order has its own value, in the sense of intrinsic value, means that it is separated from the creator who made it and sustains it. In this view of nature's value, according to Boersma, we make creation into the material necessary to fashion idols.<sup>45</sup> Likewise, viewing creation as a means to another end, usually commodification, also lessens creation's value. The participatory ontology of the Great Tradition, however, posits another way to conceive of creation's value. Nature is valuable, in a participatory model, because it derives its existence from the life of God. It appears that this model of creation's value; creation does not exist for its own end. Rather, it is a sacrament of God's presence. Boersma notes clearly, "Sacramental participation limits the significance of the created order: its truth, goodness, and beauty are not its own, but are merely derived from the being of God."<sup>46</sup> Does this type of value make it impossible for ecologically minded Christians to care for creation? While the answer may appear to be yes, it is actually possible to say no. The fact that creation is a sacrament of God's presence means that the created order is flooded with a value that exceeds any intrinsic or instrumental formulation. Radu Bordeianu demonstrates the immense value that this sacramental ontology can give to creation:

The world thus becomes transparent to God's presence in it. God becomes all in all, even if not with the same sacramental fullness as in the Eucharist. However,

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<sup>43</sup> Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2007), 105.

<sup>44</sup> Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 124.

<sup>45</sup> Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 31.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

our attitude toward creation should be as toward the Eucharist, to which we show so much attention and care, so that no miniscule crumb will fall and be trampled upon or wasted.<sup>47</sup>

Those of us from Protestant traditions certainly have reservations about some of the theological convictions of Roman Catholics, Anglo-Catholics, and the Orthodox have concerning the Eucharist, but we must not doubt the sincere piety that practitioners of these traditions bring to the celebration of the Great Thanksgiving. For all three of these high church traditions, the elements of the Lord's Supper deserve extreme attention. They are placed within chalices and patens of silver and gold. They are revered because they, at some level, participate in the life of God in Christ. Likewise, the ancient writers like St. Augustine and Maximus the confessor teach us that God is sacramentally present in all of creation. Hans Urs von Balthazar offers us Maximus' view of the final restoration of creation when God's sacramental presence will be replaced by his immediate presence:

The unity of God and the creature will go as far as the point of "indivisible identity" and will stop just short of the irreducible difference of natures. It is a "sameness as to assimilation," or identity in the realization of two natures, like the bridge reaching out from two shores meeting over the abyss.<sup>48</sup>

Based upon this sacramental understanding of the created order, Christians should value creation in a way that reflects the piety that Catholics, Anglo-Catholics, and the Orthodox display during the celebration of the Eucharist. Thus, even though a Christian approach to ontology prevents creation from having either intrinsic or instrumental value, the derived value of the sacramental worldview grants to creation a value that surpasses these other conceptions of worth. However, most modern Christians have lost this sacramental understanding of the universe, and it will greatly profit the church if this worldview is recovered.

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<sup>47</sup> Radu Bordeianu, "Maximus and Ecology: The Relevance of Maximus the Confessor's Theology of Creation for the Present Ecological Crisis," *Downside Review* 127 (2009): 103–26.

<sup>48</sup> Hans Urs von Balthazar, *The Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor* (New York: Ignatius Press, 1998), 353.

## The Loss of the Sacramental Worldview

The sacramental worldview of the Great Tradition is built upon a form of philosophical realism whereby things that exist in the world participate in a common source such as beauty, humanness, or felineness. This type of participation is labeled as a realist sharing. In Platonic philosophy these sources are called the forms and they are considered to be eternal. In Christian thought, however, the doctrine of creation prevents a belief in a multitude of eternal forms. Rather, all of life is said to participate in the life of God via his Christ who holds the universe together. The sacramental realism of early Christianity remained a hallmark of the Great Tradition until the rise of a new philosophical theology called nominalism, which denied the existence of the realist categories. This new philosophical system originated among Catholic theologians in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries but grew in popularity in and through the Protestant Reformation.<sup>49</sup> Nominalism in theological circles, according to Boersma, destroyed the sacramental ontology of the church and gave rise to many of the conceptions of the public order that exist today.<sup>50</sup> A philosophical system that can usher in the demise of 1400 year of tradition merits further examination.

While it is outside the scope of this paper to offer a full genealogy of nominalism, a survey of its key figures and aspects can help one understand the retreat of the sacramental worldview in the modern period. The first of these key figures is Duns Scotus who introduced the concept of the univocity (sameness) of being. The Great Tradition explained God's participatory relationship with creation via the analogy of being. In the analogy of being model, God's ontology was different from the rest of creation, and the various parts of the created order participated in the life of God differently as represented in the great chain of being.<sup>51</sup> Scotus' new concept of being, however, denied the validity of the analogy of being. Boersma clarifies:

Duns Scotus argued that the idea of analogous being simply does not make sense. Something either exists or it does not. To say that God exists and to say created objects exist is to say one and the same thing. All being is being in the same sense.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Alister McGrath, *Historical Theology* (London: Blackwell, 2000), 178.

<sup>50</sup> Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 17.

<sup>51</sup> Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 145.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

This rejection of *analogia entis* flattened the created order. There was no longer anything special about God's nature, including his ontology. In fact, within Scotus' system, there is only one attribute of God that can take center stage—his will. Scotus' model of ontology creates a flat world where voluntarism is the only logical conception of reality. At this point, the emphasis on God's love that marked the work of St. Augustine recedes and the focus on God's will gains momentum and becomes central in the Protestant Reformation. Apart from this new focus of God's will, Scotus' position destroys any link between God's being and the created order. Again, Boersma is helpful:

With Scotus, we might say, it became possible to deny the sacramentality of the relationship between earthly objects and the logos as their eternal archetype. No longer did earthly objects (as sacramentum) receive the reality (res) of their own being from God's own being. No longer was there a mysterious reality hiding within what could be observed by the senses. The loss of analogy meant the loss of sacramentality.<sup>53</sup>

The world was no longer mysterious, no longer revelatory, and no longer sacred. Scotus' teaching on being meant that creation was entirely independent from God, and that its being was equal to God's own ontology. The univocal ontology of Scotus coupled with the teachings of William of Ockham severely damaged the worldview of the Great Tradition.

William of Ockham posited the philosophical system called nominalism which also undercut the sacramental worldview and its participatory ontology. As stated earlier, Christians in the Great Tradition were sacramental realists. This realism meant that, "the various members of one species share a common essence."<sup>54</sup> Within this conception of Christian ontology, Christ served as the anchor of existence for the entire created order. Rather than an eternal set of forms as in Platonism, the Great Tradition taught that God in Christ was the source of all being. Ockham's nominalism, however, denied the existence of forms and ideas, except in the human mind, and claimed that the universals were not real but were only names that people apply to similar particulars. Frederick Coppleton writes the following about Ockham, "Ockham's main point was always that there is no need to postulate any factors other than the mind and individual things in order to explain the universal. The universal concept arises because there are varying

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 80.

degrees of similarity between individual things.”<sup>55</sup> Boersma also offers a helpful summary of Ockham’s thought:

And by putting his razor to work, Ockham nearly shaved the universals right off. The tradition that followed Ockham insisted that universals are simply names (nomina) that we apply to individual objects that happen to look alike. Hence the term ‘nominalism’ for the philosophical position that universals do not have real existence in the mind of God but are simply names that we assign to particular objects.<sup>56</sup>

It is clear that the univocity of being championed by Scotus and the nominalism proffered by Ockham combine to devalue that sacramental ontology that was so central to the Christian faith. People awoke within a world where God was no longer mysteriously present around them. In this new world, there was no value possible for the created order other than instrumental value, and while the effects of Scotus and Ockham’s philosophical theology were not immediate, but they were lasting, even molding modern theology.

When the nominalism of Ockham and Scotus was combined with a certain reading of St. Thomas’ theological system, it became possible to proffer a realm of “pure nature,” that did not require any contact with the supernatural realm in order to exist. Within this system, anything that occurred supernaturally was considered to be a super-added grace. The promotion of the realm of “pure nature” fell mainly on two catholic scholars—Denys the Carthusian and Cardinal Cajetan. However, these two thinkers were themselves responding to the intensification of nominalism with the theology of the Reformers. Nearly all of the Reformers, regardless of their theological stripe, were nominalists, and as such they employed Ockham’s razor to shave off any ties to a sacramental vision of reality. The further one moves toward the fringe in the Reformation, the stronger the presence of nominalism becomes. Unfortunately, the Catholic response to the Reformation was equally nominalist with its realm of pure nature nearly acting as dogma. It was not until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that Catholicism began to reclaim the sacramental ontology of the Great Tradition with the *nouvelle theologie* movement that had a major influence on Vatican II.<sup>57</sup> Thus, for 500 years the participatory ontology of the Great Tradition was

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<sup>55</sup> Frederick Copleton,

<sup>56</sup> Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 82.

<sup>57</sup> Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 10.

minimized, but, thankfully, during this same period the sacramental worldview was also preserved in the worship life of the church, and it is within the liturgy itself that the participatory ontology can be presented afresh to the church today.

### **The Recovery of Participatory Ontology**

The church's liturgy has served as the repository of faith in regards to sacramental theology. While this truth is most clearly seen in the higher liturgical traditions, it is present across the Christian spectrum. Music is the key aspect of the church's worship life that has been especially effective in preserving the Great Tradition's participatory ontology. Consider the words of *This is My Father's World* by Maltbie Babcock:

This is my father's world; he shines in all that's fair. In the rustling grass I hear him pass, he speaks to me everywhere. This is my father's world, oh let me neer forget that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet. This is my father's world, the battle is not done. Jesus who dies, shall be satisfied and earth and heaven be one.<sup>58</sup>

While this is a relatively new hymn, it reaches back to the sacramental theology of figures such as St. Francis and St. Patrick. The participatory ontology that moved those men is clearly at work in Babcock. The last line about earth and heaven being one is the place where this ontology is most clearly seen. The opening lines from St. Francis' canticle of Brother Sun are also instructive. St. Francis writes, "Passed by you my lord with all your creatures, especially sir brother sun, who is the day through whom you give us the light. And he is a beautiful adornment with great splendor, of you most high, he bears the likeness."<sup>59</sup> St. Francis notes that while we see the sun's brightness, it is God that is giving us light. The sacramental ontology could not be clearer, the brilliant light of the sun is, according to St. Francis, the sacramental presence of the uncreated light that shrouds God the Father. Even St. Patrick's Trinitarian prayer has one stanza that seems to be out of place. The patron saint of Ireland writes, "I arise today through the strength of heaven: light of sun, radiance of moon, splendor of fire, speed of lightning, swiftness of wind, depth of seas, stability of earth, firmness of rock."<sup>60</sup> Again, one can see that the

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<sup>58</sup> Baptist Hymnal, 309.

<sup>59</sup> St. Francis, *Canticum of Brother Sun*.

<sup>60</sup> Breastplate of St. Patrick.

everyday life of mankind is a gift of God, and it is God that is active in the mundane minutia of the created order. Many more examples of the sacramental worldview could be pulled from modern hymnody, but these songs demonstrate how participatory ontology was preserved in song.

The Great Tradition's sacramental ontology was also preserved in the prayer life of the church. The canticles that exist within the Christian tradition are a part of the antiphonal worship of God's people. These are the words that believers use to offer their gratitude to their Father in heaven. They are often rich with creational language. Consider section III of Canticle I from the Book of Common Prayer:

O let the earth bless the Lord; O ye mountains and hills, bless ye the Lord; O all ye green things upon the earth, bless ye the Lord; O ye seas and floods, bless ye the Lord; O ye whales and all that move in the waters, bless ye the Lord; praise him and magnify him forever.<sup>61</sup>

The author of this canticle is drawing our attention to the worship life of the created order, because earth's creatures are aware, at some level, of their dependence upon God for their existence. The Great Tradition's ontology is also preserved in the prayer for the natural order from the Book of Common Prayer entitled *For Knowledge of God's Creation*:

Almighty and everlasting God, you made the universe with all its marvelous order, its atoms, worlds, and galaxies, and the infinite complexity of living creatures: Grant that, as we probe the mysteries of your creation, we may come to know you more truly, and more surely fulfill our role in your purpose; in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.<sup>62</sup>

The prayers of the church also call for humanity to remember its calling in the created order. *For the Right Use of God's Gifts* says the following:

Almighty God, whose loving hand hath given us all that we possess: Grant us grace that we may honor thee with our substance, and, remembering the account

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<sup>61</sup> 1979 Book of Common Prayer (Cambridge: CUP, 1979), 48.

<sup>62</sup> 1979 Book of Common Prayer, 827.



which we must one day give, may be faithful stewards of thy bounty, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.<sup>63</sup>

These prayers that center on creation remind the church that reality is not always as it seems. The cosmos may appear, to human understanding, to be a closed system that is not influenced by a transcendent God, but the prayer life of the church challenges the closed universe concept. Jamie Smith notes, “Perhaps this is the first thing we should note about the practice of prayer with respect to the Christian: it is a practice that makes us a people who refuse to settle for appearances. Or, to put it otherwise, it makes us a people who always see that there is more going on than meets the eye.”<sup>64</sup> While the church’s prayer life does help proclaim a sacramental ontology, it is within the dominical sacraments that the participatory relationship between God and the created order is most clearly presented in worship.

The liturgy surrounding baptism is rich with the language of participatory ontology. Even the scriptures that are read on such occasions are resplendent with the truth of our participation with Christ. Romans 6.34 is the clearest example, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.” The baptismal liturgy of the Book of Common Prayer builds upon this biblical foundation:

We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, in joyful obedience to your Son, we bring into his fellowship those who come to him in faith, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.<sup>65</sup>

The words of the baptismal liturgy reveal that the baptized participate, in a real sense, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. St. Paul does not describe something for us that is only a name for an action that functions as an initiation. No, he proclaims an actual participation in the Christ event. Likewise, St. Paul also posits the participation of all creation in the Christ event.

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<sup>63</sup> 1979 Book of Common Prayer, 827.

<sup>64</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 192.

<sup>65</sup> Book of Common Prayer, 307.

Without delving into the exegetical minutia of Col. 1.15–20, it is clear that for the Apostle to the gentiles, the restoration of creation is bound to—participates in—the atoning death of Jesus Christ. As with baptism, the sacrament of the Lord’s Table, also demonstrates this sacramental ontology.

The Eucharist, or the Lord’s Supper, seems rather mundane. The elements are simply bread, and wine. These elements represent both creation and culture; creation in the sense that grains and grapes are involved. It is the fruit of culture because these grains and grapes have been transformed into wine and bread. This is the Lord’s Table; it is a place where he promises to meet us. At this meal, we eat the very bread of heaven, and this bread is as Jesus proclaims “gives life to the whole world” (Jn 6.35). Just as the disciples, our response should be, “sir, give us this bread always.” The thanksgiving of the Eucharist is a celebration of what God has done for us both in creation and redemption and this meal gives meaning to the rest of creation. Schmemmann writes, “We know that real life is ‘Eucharist’ a movement of love and adoration toward God, the movement in which alone the meaning and value of all that exists can be revealed and fulfilled.”<sup>66</sup> Just as in baptism, the sacrament of the Eucharist is a participatory event. When we partake in the meal, the church’s common fellowship is actually generated. The church comes together to form the body of Christ. Boersma writes the following about Augustine’s view of the Eucharist, “He maintains that when by faith, we share in the one Eucharistic body, the Spirit makes us one ecclesial body. As Augustine would say, we become what we received.”<sup>67</sup> The doxology of the Eucharist captures this participation well, “By him, and with him, and in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit all honor and glory is yours, Almighty Father, now and forever. Amen.”<sup>68</sup> All of our thanksgivings are taken up into our participation in Christ. Human beings, acting as priests in God’s world, return creation’s praise to God in articulate worship.

The interplay between creation and the Eucharist is also preserved in the various forms of the Eucharistic prayer. Form C states:

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<sup>66</sup> Schmemmann, *Life of the World*, 34.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>68</sup> 1979 Book of Common Prayer, 369.

At your command all things came to be: the vast expanse of interstellar space, galaxies, suns, the planets in their courses, and this fragile earth, our island home. By your will they were created and have their being.<sup>69</sup>

The truth of God's provision for the created order is confirmed in this section from form D of the Eucharistic prayer:

Fountain of life and source of all goodness, you made all things and fill them with your blessings; you created them to rejoice in the splendor of your radiance. Countless throngs of angels stand before you to serve you night and day, and beholding the glory of your presence, they offer you unending praise. Joining with them, and giving voice to every creature under heaven, we acclaim you, and glorify your name.<sup>70</sup>

In the Great Thanksgiving, the church takes what God has given humanity in creation, transforms it into bread and wine, and offers back to God the glorious adoration of creation. All of this takes place as the church participates in Christ who is the unseen host of his bride's celebration of the marriage supper. Schmemmann emphasizes this point with the following:

We offer the world and ourselves to God. But we do it in Christ and in remembrance of him. We do it in Christ because he has offered all that is to be offered to God. He has performed once and for all this Eucharist and nothing has been left unoffered. In him was life—and this life of all of us, he gave to God. The church is all those who have been accepted into the Eucharistic life of Christ.<sup>71</sup>

Christ carried to the Father the very life of the world and offered it to him. God, in turn, accepted this sacrifice, and returned to Christ the same life of the world via his resurrection and glorious ascension. Christ as the perfect God-man currently sits at the right hand of God and provides being to everything that exists in the cosmos. He is, according to all Christian thought, the source of life. As St. John said in the prologue to his gospel, "in him was life."

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<sup>69</sup> 1979 Book of Common Prayer, 370.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 373.

<sup>71</sup> Schmemmann, *Life of the World*, 35.

Now that it is clear that the church's worship life preserved the participatory ontology of the Great Tradition, it is easy to offer a way to reintroduce this sacramental ontology into common Christian thought. The church does not need to formulate a new theological paradigm, or even a new education program to ensure that its members understand this participatory ontology. No, the church does not have to do anything other than the chief thing for which it was created—worship the Triune God. However, the church must worship well if this sacramental ontology is to be visible in its liturgy. This liturgy must be intentional in its proclamation of this central truth, “in him we live, move, and have our being” (Acts 17.34). Worship that proclaims a sacramental ontology should be clear in its practices. When baptism occurs, all of the participatory and sacramental elements should be celebrated. The Lord's Supper or Eucharist should, likewise, be celebrated in all of its sacramental fullness. While there must be space for a variety of expression in the Christian tradition, even the ‘lowest’ expression of the Eucharist can still be rich with sacramental reminders of Christ's creative and sustaining relationship with creation.

As with the sacraments proper, the musical life of the church will continue to proclaim the participatory ontology of the Great Tradition, and the church year with its various colors, smells, and other sense perceptions will also highlight this sacramental ontology. All that is necessary for Christ's church to remember that God gives continual existence to the created order is already present in her liturgy. As long as Christian worship requires water for baptism, bread and wine for the Eucharist, oil for the anointing of the sick, and bodies to bow before God, the truth of God's provision for creation will always be present. If only Christ's body could be lead in meaningful, intentional worship of God that took seriously the embodied practices of the sacramental worldview, then a much deeper value system for the created order could be generated among Christians. The derivative value of the sacramental worldview could even be strong enough to sustain a long term engagement with environmental causes and generate a strong and lasting sense of hope, a hope that can even help Falls Lake.

### **Hope for Falls Lake**

Everyone is here today because they love and care about Falls Lake. This watershed provides the drinking water for the majority of the people sitting here today. In addition, Falls Lake provides

this community with a beautiful space for recreation and relaxation. However, the lectures offered here by learned scientists show us that Falls Lake is not healthy. For those of us who live within this watershed, the annual stories of beach closings due to high fecal bacteria counts have become commonplace. We hear our local governments argue over the best way to manage this lake, and we see many local environmental groups diligently working to restore Falls Lake. Within many of these same local governmental and environmental groups, Christians work quietly behind the scenes as they live out their convictions. Some churches and Christian groups even take an active role in issues surrounding Falls Lake.

However, America's largest Protestant denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention, only has minor, or an officially oppositional, interaction with many environmental causes. This very symposium is an attempt to understand why many churches within the SBC have taken this position. The listening project was designed to hear the concerns of local Southern Baptist ministers in regards to Falls Lake. While I have not had the opportunity to review all of these concerns, I hope that this lecture presented an ontology that Christians can use as an anchor for sustained engagement with environmental concerns. When we learn that God is the continual source of life, a new and deeper value for creation can emerge. If creation is the sacrament of God's presence, as this paper has argued, then Christians will be far more likely to treat the created order as having a significant value. Many of the concerns that Christians have about environmental theology can be overcome with the sacramental worldview posited in this lecture. The distinction between creation and creator can be preserved. Both God's immanence and transcendence can be sustained. Creation can be used properly, while God remains what we enjoy. When all of the cosmos is grounded in the life of God via Christ, a proper Christian view of reality can emerge and guide the church into a proper interaction with the created order.

The sacramental ontology of the Great Tradition can and does provide a basis for hope for Christians striving to protect Falls Lake. Operating from the belief that God continually grants existence to the created order transforms the way Christians conceive the created order. Nature is then no longer a space devoid of enchantment; rather it is free to be that which it was created to be—a sacrament of God's presence. This participatory ontology can only increase our value of the created order, which is what Falls Lake needs. In order for this watershed to survive it must be thought of as more than just a resource, but at the same time it should not be

worshiped as God. Only the sacramental ontology of the Great Tradition can provide the means for a proper conception of the created order to influence Christian environmental action. The more that ministers and congregations around Falls Lake embrace this worldview, the more likely that Christians will get actively involved in preserving Falls Lake. This is the end goal of the Falls Lake Stewardship Project, and thus, information about this participatory ontology should be made readily available to those who are interested. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.