

Trinity: Heart of the Cosmic Mystery

Into the Depths of God

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*Holy Trinity –
Receptive, giving, living Love
Your life is imaged in the universe
Whose pulsing energy,
Alive beyond all boundaries
Keeps making space, keeps reaching out.*

*Galaxies of countless stars
Whose light burst forth in ages past
Are flowing, dancing, arms-extending
Radiant images of your life.¹*

In recent years there has been a growing interest in what is known as the New Universe Story. Scientists have made amazing discoveries about the origins of the Universe and uncovered so much more of the beauty and complexity of life in all its forms. All Christians, indeed all people who believe in a Creator God, can find in the Cosmos an invitation to search anew the richness and depths of the wisdom and knowledge of God.² If we are open to possibility, the Cosmos can be for us a teacher of prayer. Centuries ago, the psalmist looked to the heavens and saw there the glory of God calling to prayer of wonder, adoration and thanksgiving. With the understanding of the Cosmos that has been opened for us we can explore anew how the whole of Creation is not just calling us, too, to prayer, but showing us how to become people of prayer.

One of the amazing discoveries made by scientists is that the universe is constantly expanding. When we consider that the galaxies are not only expanding in size but are moving further and further into what we call space, we are confronted with Mystery. Space is being created where previously there was nothing! Yet, when seen against the Mystery of God reflected here, this extraordinary wonder is merely a dim reflection of the reality.

A good starting point for pondering the Mystery is the movement outward that is a constant of the universe. We know that movement is intrinsic to the Trinity. The early fathers of the church called it *perichoresis*. Catherine LaCugna, a Trinitarian theologian, speaks of *perichoresis* as a dance in which *'the dancers (and the observers) experience one fluid motion of encircling, encompassing, permeating, enveloping, outstretching movement of reciprocal giving and*

receiving, giving again and receiving again'.³ The dynamics of the cosmos give us hints of what this God is like, but how can an expanding Universe lead us into deeper prayer?

As the cosmos is constantly reaching beyond itself, so too, is God. There is a constant flowing as the Word comes forth in a movement that is ever outward, always seeking to give more, to reveal more. It's as though God can never satisfy the urge to give and never set bounds to fullness. *Fullness has no bounds*⁴ - it keeps on expanding, can never be enough, is constantly replenished. If the universe is always reaching out to create more space, surely we are invited to be at home in this flow of life, to relate to God as the Source and Energy of this outpouring. For that is what prayer is – being at home in the flow of Life constantly moving from God towards us as the Word is ceaselessly coming into creation and our hearts if we keep them open and receptive. It follows that if we are at home in this Trinitarian flow, our hearts will be open and our life, our loves, our attitudes will be characterized by a freedom that allows us to keep moving forward, to abjure the tendency to hold on to what gives us comfort and security instead of what plunges us into Life and Mystery.

In St John's Gospel we are told: *Of God's fullness we have all received*.⁵ In Luke's Gospel Mary is greeted as being *full of grace*.⁶ Perhaps we could say Mary was totally open to receive God's Life flowing into her in a movement that kept on responding to her receptivity. I, too, am offered this fullness but it is up to me to embrace it in my life with, in and for God. I can do this only if I live with openness to the unlimited life of God that invites me to live without limits. Such living is surely prayer – being open to the gift that just keeps on coming!

Sometimes, it is fear that limits our openness to the life that God is pouring forth. St John tells us that perfect love casts out fear.⁷ For some, this might be a burden, something else to overcome. But we might ask: *Is it my love for God or God's love in me that casts out fear? Do I have to strive for perfect love or simply surrender to Perfect Love?* 'Simply surrender' sounds so easy but perhaps one needs to open out gradually and with growing conviction to the natural flow of life echoed in the cosmic story. Perhaps by focusing on the life of the cosmos and allowing it to draw one into its rhythm, one would *'gradually, without knowing it, live along some distant day into the answer'*⁸ as Rilke suggests. One might be overwhelmed by Love!

The 13th Century was blessed with a Flemish Beguine named Hadewijch. The beguines were women who wanted to live a gospel life without being cloistered in convents; they lived very apostolic lives but were also women of real and deep prayer. In one of the letters Hadewijch wrote to her beguines, she prayed: *May God be to you Love that is vast and eternal*.⁹ If we could begin to understand the beauty and complexity of the universe, to see it (with Beatrice Bruteau) as God's ecstasy¹⁰ as reflecting the vastness and eternity of God, perhaps our prayer would take on something of the creativity and expansiveness and surging life of our cosmic home. We might pray:

*God of wonder!
 Let my heart be like the cosmos –
 deep, expanding, seeding life
 giving all like wombs and flowers¹¹*

so that we might be conformed more and more to the image of God – a God who has designed a never-ending universe that keeps on calling nothingness to life.

The universe beyond our solar system is often described as deep space; the image captures something of the mystery and the immensity that defies our experience. It suggests depths that are unknown and maybe calls us to begin to explore the unknown depths of our own souls. Hadewijch advises us:

Now understand the deepest essence of your soul, what "soul" is. Soul is a being that can be beheld by God and by which, again, God can be beheld...Soul is a way for the passage of God from his depths into his liberty; and God is a way for the passage of the soul into its liberty, that is, into his inmost depths, which cannot be touched except by the soul's abyss.¹²

The language here is worth noting; two images that Hadewijch uses, 'depths' and 'abyss', also capture the awe and mystery of outer space. The abyss conjures black holes that seem to consume all that approaches them but which scientists believe are indeed sources of energy. Perhaps there is an invitation here to sense my soul as an abyss alive with energy. Could the Cosmos be challenging me to see my soul as a Black Hole consuming all that touches me and transforming it into energy that propels me into the depths of God?' Could the Cosmos be revealing a way of prayer, a pathway into the heart of God?

The cosmic story is a window into the Mystery of our Trinitarian God. It has intimations of the flowing life of God, the ceaseless sending forth of the Word, the eternity of God who has no limits. It also draws us into the Mystery of the Unity of God and invites us to discover how we are invited to live in communion with God and each other. As Pope Francis has said: *Because all creatures are connected, each must be cherished with love and respect, for all of us as living creatures are dependent on one another.*¹³ We know that all things have one origin and within Creation there is an amazing force of Allurement that is constantly attracting and bonding through gravity and other physical laws. It holds the galaxies together and creates balance and unity throughout the cosmos. Created life, we know, is all related. As in the Trinity of persons, there is distinction but shared life. We know, too, that it is the Spirit who draws all things into Unity. So once again, we can see the cosmos as a reflection of God's life and an invitation to us to be united with God and all of Creation. We are called to echo the Unifying life of the Spirit as revealed in the universe, to learn from the Cosmos what it means to be immersed in prayer.

One of the masters of prayer, St Ignatius of Loyola, teaches us an examen of consciousness. It is a way of recognising and bringing together the threads of our daily life, bringing them into the Unity of God. So just as each morning we can be one with the Word sent by God into the world so each evening we can be one with the Spirit in gathering up all that we have been and done and returning it to the Father, into the Heart of God. The Trinitarian life that energises the cosmos draws us into prayer, into sharing the Life that is always calling us to fullness in God. Whenever we acknowledge the oneness of creation we are recognising the unifying work of the Spirit and potentially uniting ourselves with the Spirit's dream for creation. As Pope Francis reminds us: *The Spirit of life dwells in every living creature and calls us to enter into relationship with him.*¹⁴ When we affirm the dignity of all peoples and races, own our connection and relationship with the refugee, the immigrant, the dispossessed and abused, show care for the environment and all of creation, we are living in the embrace of the Unifying Spirit and so are sharing God's life, immersed in prayer.

An image that has always been associated with the Holy Spirit is Fire. We think of the Spirit coming at Pentecost with 'a sound as of a violent wind ... and tongues as of fire'.¹⁵ Brian Swimme, a mathematical cosmologist, in his book, *The Universe is a Green Dragon*, invites us to

"Imagine that furnace out of which everything came forth. This was a fire that filled the universe - that *was* the universe. There was no place in the universe free from it. Every point of the cosmos was a point of this explosion of light. And all the particles of the universe churned in extremes of heat and pressure, all that we see about us, all that now exists was there at the beginning, in that great burning explosion of light."¹⁶

Surely this is language that evokes all the traditional images associated with the Holy Spirit: 'Lord of Light', 'our fire Divine', 'pure beaming radiance', 'Light of all that lives'. Swimme has captured here both the intensity of the Big Bang and its creative outpouring that we have already seen as mirroring the Trinitarian life of God. This description of the origin of the cosmos seems to suggest the universe was created in a moment of utter freedom where all potential exploded, setting off a chain of creativity. It points to prayer as a way of bursting into freedom, as a launch pad into the dance of Trinitarian life, the *perichoresis* referred to earlier. It embodies an invitation to discover the joy of the Divine Dance and radiate it to others.

Planet Earth is just a tiny part of the universe we inhabit. Yet, here, too, God has given us so many patterns of prayer. Take the plants; each one begins as a seed that falls into the earth and is nourished in the darkness and warmth of the soil. It does nothing but respond to the conditions in which life can develop. Gradually it opens so that a small shoot can make its way towards the light, so essential for photosynthesis and the plant's contribution to life on this planet. From the plant we learn prayer as a way of being. Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish woman who died in one of Hitler's death camps, came to believe that *We have to become as simple and*

*as wordless as the growing corn or the falling rain. We must just be.*¹⁷ Like the lilies of the field,¹⁸ we do not have to strive for results; all that is required is that we accept how we are invited to be a part of the great flow of life that depends entirely on the Creator. Our prayer, then, becomes simply being who and what we are, conscious that all life is being drawn towards its Origin and that we share the invitation to live in the Light and be brought to completion in the heart of the Trinity.

A few years ago, during a 30-day retreat, I was sitting near a labyrinth, reflecting on my experience of walking it, when a squirrel ran up to the outer rim of the circle, made its way round to a pile of leaves where it found something to eat, then bounded across the labyrinth to the centre. There it drank from the rainwater on the central stone before scampering across the spirals and disappearing into the bush. It took me some time to realize that I was being given a tutorial in prayer. The squirrel was so free, so unrestricted by the pattern of the labyrinth, and yet was able to use it for nourishment and move beyond it. Surely that little animal was inviting me to let the life in me, rather than established patterns or structures, determine how I found my way to my centre where God, the source of Life, dwells.

Perhaps you could reflect on an experience you have had with an animal or bird or insect that was showing you a way into prayer. Or you might have been drawn into prayer by a sunset or the movement of the sea or the mystery of enveloping mist. If you stay with the experience, return to it periodically, it will school you more and more in the way of prayer. Sometimes it is easy to lose oneself and be transformed at some level by what we contemplate. Recognizing what has happened is to discover something important about how to pray. It's about letting one's focus move beyond oneself to the One Who is Beauty, Goodness, Gentleness and Mystery. Creation is always calling us to do this, to be like the universe that is always pushing beyond present boundaries, seeking more, reaching for the infinite.

Recently I came across a quotation from Meister Eckhart: *"There is nothing so much like God in all the universe as silence"*.¹⁹ Nowadays, we might find it difficult to experience real silence. City life doesn't give much space for silence and we might say that God is to be found in the life that generates the noise and bustle of urban living. That is true, but there is always the call, the urge, to go beyond the present moment, to expand one's boundaries as the universe keeps doing. Then, we might find precious moments where we see God *"cloaked in stillness"*²⁰ as Rilke so beautifully suggests. It is, perhaps, when we are entranced by that stillness that we begin to appreciate the mystery and pervasiveness of silence. Then, we might discover how silence can be a manifestation of the Divine and at the same time a way of surrender that takes us into the Mystery that is both Trinity and Oneness. There is something about deep space, about the magnitude of our galaxy and the billions of spiralling clusters of stars that is evocative of a silence that is primordial and eternal. Surely there is a pattern there that not only reflects the

beauty of God but invites us to enter into that pattern, to become one with what is reflected! Could not this be a way to prayer that is deep, vast and eternal like the Love Hadewijch desires for her beguines? Silence that is surrender to Mystery is surely both an opening of one's heart to the very depths of God and receptivity to the beauty of the Divine. Mary's *Fiat* may be for us the perfect exemplar of this kind of prayer. As a woman, a child of the universe, Mary opened not just her womb but the whole of her being to the Mystery of God. As you look at the women, and men, in your life, what do you see in them that can illustrate for you how prayer can be a way of responding to the complexity and the mystery of life? Prayer, after all, is not something that requires formulas and set approaches. Catherine McAuley once said: *Prayer is a plant, the seed of which is planted in the heart of every Christian, but its growth depends on the care we take to nourish it.*²¹ Just as the plant hidden in the soil needs to be able to access warmth and light, so the seed planted in us needs warmth and light which will come to us in good measure if we do nothing to block the Holy Spirit's Fire and Light from streaming into us.

Prayer is a way of participating in the Divine Life. It is something we can learn and grow into simply by being aware of and responding to the cosmos of which we are a part. The cosmos has much to teach us about how we can be drawn into the Divine Life that is so accessible once we begin to notice. If we can be open to the energies of the universe, intentionally and with humility, we will be drawn into the Energy of God, enfolded in the Trinity and alive to, and in, the Mystery of God.

*At the end, we will find ourselves face to face with the infinite beauty of God (cf. I Cor. 13:12), and be able to read with admiration and happiness the mystery of the universe, which with us will share in unending plenitude.*²²

FOOTNOTES

1. Rhodes, Colleen RSM *Trinity* Unpublished poem
2. Rom. 11:33
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4. Rhodes, Colleen RSM, *The Rock Pool and the Sea* Unpublished poem
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6. Luke 1:28
7. 1 John 4:18
8. Rilke, Rainer Maria quoted at <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/717-be-patient-toward-all-that-is-unsolved-in-your-heart>
9. *Hadewijch The complete Works* Translation and Introduction by Mother Columba Hart O.S.B., SPCK London, 1981, Letter 14:1, p.76
10. Bruteau, Beatrice, *God's Ecstasy The Creation of a Self-Creating World* Crossroad Publishing Company, NY, 1997
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13. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si' On Care for Our Common Home An Encyclical Letter on Ecology and Climate* St Paul's Australian Edition 2015, p. 39
14. Pope Francis, *ibid*, p.75
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16. Swimme, Brian *The Universe is a Green Dragon A Cosmic Creation Story*, Bear & Company, Rochester, Vermont, p.27
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18. Luke 12:27
19. Meister Eckhart, quoted at <http://thenatureworld.net/culture/there-is-nothing>
20. Rilke, Rainer Maria, *Book of Hours: Love Poems to God, I Am*
<https://carriecraig.wordpress.com/2015/03/26/cloaked-in-stillness/>
21. McAuley, Catherine quoted in *Morning and Evening Prayer of the Sisters of Mercy*, p.950
22. Pope Francis, *ibid.*, p.187