

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

*For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth, (Isaiah 55:10-11)*

The Readings and the Responsorial Psalm of today's Mass have a common theme of "nature": They show how God continues to give life to his creation from its beginning to the present day. Today also marks Sea Sunday when we are invited to pray for people working at sea and their families. We know that the oceans occupy three quarters of the earth and that more than 95% of the products we consume are transported by large ships sailing across the oceans. Humanity today cannot live without maritime transport.

While I was meditating on the Word of God for this Sunday, a friend of mine showed me with a very interesting drawing that describes the history of life on the earth. It's called the Image of Biohistory, and describes in the form of a fan how God's work of creation has been done, from the appearance of microscopic beings to mollusks, plants and animals living together with mankind. Life probably began some 3.8 billion years ago, and mankind was born 7 million years ago. This image was conceived as the latest scientific and historical view on life by Keiko Nakamura, Ph.D., Director General Emeritus of JT Biohistory Research Hall, and illustrated charmingly and vividly by Ritsuko Hashimoto. The center of the fan denotes the birth of life, and edges of the fan represent the living world in the present day where we humans are part of all the creatures. Today the theme of caring for the earth and its nature is a challenge to the humanity. I believe the Image of Biohistory can help us to take up the challenge. If we want to survive as a human race, caring for all the other diverse living creatures that have relayed life for 3.8 billion years, we urgently need to change our attitudes and behavior towards nature. We need to realize we are part of our mother earth and protect her with seriousness and great care. The Image of Biohistory is a beautiful reminder that we are called to care for this beautifully diverse world created by God instead of ruling over it.

I'm not sure how much of what I am going to share with you today can be called a homily at Mass, but I am sure that many of you will feel a call within yourselves to want to know more about nature, to take interest in caring for the earth and even to go beyond what we can see with the naked eye, penetrating the depths of the universe and exchanging dialogues with the ever-expanding universe. Thanks to science, we discover new things every day.

My awareness of the wonder of nature

When I was a student of philosophy in Cordoba, Argentina, in 1988-90, I read the book, *The Human Place in the Cosmos*, by German philosopher Max Scheler published in 1928. Like many of you, when I read a book for an exam, the only part left in mind was either the most important point of the book or the part where I couldn't answer my professor's questions. What I remember from that book is its central point, the culmination of what the German philosopher had researched and written throughout his life: He says that we the human are the only creature that are aware of all the other created beings in the cosmos. In other words we are the only creature with the awareness of being alive in the universe created by God. That's why we can stand in awe before a beautiful sunset or sunrise, praise and bless God for the depths of the starry night sky or the sea, make invisible beings seen through a microscope and observe the immensity of the universe captured by Hubble Space Telescope that circles the earth at 593 km above sea level with an orbital period of 97 minutes.

When the Book of Genesis tells the story of creation, the first chapter places man as the culmination of God's creative work, but the second chapter places man in communion with all creation, and he is given the mission to guard and care for it, not to exploit or devastate it throughout the centuries. It would take more than a hundred years for a land that used to be a vast natural forest to grow again. I have seen such a logged forest where not a single tree was left and no one planted new trees. Fortunately, the ecological mentality has changed these days and the present generation is taking more care of nature as a gift from God.

Changing attitude towards nature: my discovery in Japan

When I returned to Japan in February 1997, I went to live in a suburb of Oita City, on a hill surrounded by mountains. A few months later, I spent that year's Obon in my hometown, Saiki City, where I met the children of my cousins. Talking with those elementary school pupils helped me practice the Japanese I had learned as a child. They made me watch the animé, *My Neighbor Totoro* (*Tonari no Totoro*), directed by Miyazaki Hayao. I was amazed at how the film described and conveyed the message that we humans must learn to coexist with nature. Then I saw other works by this Japanese director who kept insisting on how to live with other living things in nature and how to care for our common home, the earth.

A great leap in the knowledge of the universe

What Isaiah, Paul, even Jesus and their contemporaries knew about nature and the universe was slight compared to what we know today. They didn't know how to measure nature with science and didn't realize the revolutionary developments would take place. Until 100 years ago, we still did not know that the universe is expanding. When I studied astronomy at high school in 1974, I was told that there might be more than one galaxy, although they were not seen. Today we know that there are countless galaxies. About 30 years ago, no scientist knew of any exoplanet, nor did they think of its possibility. Today we have registered more than 4,000 exoplanets and estimate that there must be trillions of them. Thus a team of science, astronomy, earth sciences, astrophysics and astrobiology altogether present us today with another vision and history of the universe. The universe is calculated to be 13.78 billion years old, not 6,000 years as the Bible recounts and Isaac Newton believed in the 18th century. Today we know that the earth is about 4.543 billion years old. Until the 1920's, the universe was conceived as eternal and unchanging, composed of a single galaxy. In 1924, Edwin Hubble discovered other galaxies by seeing the change in light and deducing that not only the galaxies but the whole universe are moving. And here, let's not forget the Belgian astronomer and priest, Georges Lemaitre who proposed, in 1927, the cosmological theory of the Big Bang about the origin of the universe: the universe has a beginning and since then it has been expanding.

We can say that we are the first generation to observe the universe with such a scientific base. No one could have been more ecstatic about the mystery of reality than we are. Our generation should be grateful for the privilege of witnessing the new discoveries and knowledge about the truth of the world and the universe over these last years. That means we should have a higher motivation to worship God the Creator than any former generations.

On the Solemnity of Pentecost, May 24, 2015, Pope Francis presented us with his Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si*. It was a proposal to the whole humanity to care for our common home, planet earth. And the Church of Japan, at the Pope's visit last year, promised to take specific steps to care for our common home of this earth.

Note: All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition (NRSVCE).



Biohistory-emaki

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