

# THE MENDICANT

## The Great Chain of Being

RICHARD ROHR, OFM

St. Bonaventure (1221–1274) taught that, for us to work up to loving God, we start by loving the very humblest and simplest things and then move up from there. “Let us place our first step in the ascent at the bottom, presenting to ourselves the whole material world as a mirror, through which we may pass over to God, who is the Supreme Craftsman,” he wrote. “The Creator’s supreme power, wisdom, and benevolence shine forth through all created things.”<sup>1</sup>

I encourage you to apply this spiritual insight quite literally. Don’t start by trying to love God, or even people. Love rocks and elements first, move to trees, then animals, and then humans. Angels will soon seem like a real possibility and God is then just a short leap away. It works. In fact, it might be the only way to love, because how you do anything is how you do everything. As John’s First Letter says, quite directly, “Any who say they love God and hate their brother [or sister] is a liar” (4:20). In the end, either you love everything or there is reason to doubt that you love anything. This one love and one

loveliness was described by many medieval theologians and others as the Great Chain of Being. The message was that if you failed to recognize the Presence in any one link of the

chain, the whole sacred universe would fall apart. It really was “all or nothing.”

God did not just start talking to us with the Bible or the church or the prophets. Do we really think that God had nothing at all to say for 13.7 billion years, and started speaking only in the latest nanosecond of geological time? Did all history prior to our sacred texts provide no basis for truth or authority? Of course not; the radiance of the Divine Presence has been glowing and expanding since the beginning of time, before there were any human eyes to see or know about it. But, in the mid-nineteenth century, the church was quickly losing in the face of rationalism and scientism and grasping for certitude and authority. Catholics declared the Pope to be “infallible” and Evangelicals decided the Bible was “inerrant,” despite the fact that we had gotten along for most of eighteen hundred years without either belief. In fact, these claims would have seemed idolatrous to most early Christians.

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ARTWORK BY HANCY EARLE, S.M.C.

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# Creation as the Body of Christ

ILIA DELIO, OSF

When Love takes hold of us, we begin to yield and let Love direct our lives. Such was the life of Francis of Assisi (1182–1226). As Love took hold of his heart, it opened his eyes to see the world with new vision. In the poor he saw an icon of Christ himself, in the leper he tasted the goodness of God, in tiny earthworms he saw the humility of God, and in the birds he saw the dignity of being a creature of God.

Bonaventure described the world of Francis as an embrace of God. Creation became for Francis the Body of Christ, a Eucharistic earth, with each creature expressing divine beauty in a unique and irreproducible way. Bonaventure wrote: “In beautiful things, Francis saw Beauty itself and through his vestiges imprinted on creation he followed his Beloved everywhere, making from all things a ladder by which he could climb up and embrace him who is utterly desirable.”<sup>1</sup> Francis revered every creature as the very presence of Christ and embraced each one passionately, returning love for love.

Bonaventure grasped Francis’ inner spirit as one of incarnational truth: this world is holy because God has embraced it in love. The very life of God is a communion in love, a vibrant energy that flows from the mouth of God as an eternal yes to creation. This yes swells up in the self-gift of love expressed in Christ. Bonaventure held that Christ is first in God’s intention to love; the whole creation is made for Christ. Creation is not mere physical matter; rather, it expresses God’s infinite love. Earth is holy, a sacrament of God.

How do we come to know the sacredness of this creation, to feel this Body of God, so rich in diversity, yet simple in unity? For Bonaventure, the more deeply

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we come to know Christ at the center of our lives, the more deeply we know Christ at the heart of creation. His spiritual path, rooted in poverty and humility, is a stripping away and a clinging to God, a path that ultimately leads to the crucified Christ.

In union with Christ crucified, we are free to love and to give ourselves away in love. The poor person is not insulated by layers of material things or systems of power and control; rather, the poor person sees all creation as gift. Poverty gives birth to wisdom when the stripping of intellectual power gives way to compassionate love. Wisdom is the inner eye of love that searches the depths of being to reveal what is lasting and true. As the eye of the heart is opened to truth, the wise person travels the earth slowly, taking nothing for granted, allowing each step to bring a new discovery of wonder and awe. The wise person sees that the wild and unpredictable earth reflects the wild, unpredictable God. This is the lesson of Francis. Only when we allow the pain of the world to touch us can we see this earth as the Body of God. Only then do we fall into the arms of love.

<sup>1</sup> Bonaventure, *Legenda Major*, 9.1.

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# The Nested Body

MICHAEL DOWD

There is a reality far greater, more powerful, and intelligent than we are. This reality is our creator, sustainer, and end. This reality is primary; we are derivative. It is the source and expression of all energy, power, wisdom, and wealth. This reality includes and transcends everything. While reality is not literally a person, relating to those myriad manifestations personally—in an I-Thou way—is paramount. Indeed, relating to the ecosphere as divine has been a distinguishing characteristic of every truly sustainable culture in human history.

Reality manifests in this universe as nested systems of relationship and creativity. We are composed of smaller systems of creative intelligence, without which we cannot exist. We likewise depend on larger systems, such as trees and plankton for oxygen and plants and animals for food, shelter, and clothing.

For the first 97% of human history, we mostly lived in a mutually enhancing relationship to primary reality, treating it as a greater Thou. Speaking mythically, our fall from the garden was our shift to human-centeredness. The sad result is what ecologists call “overshoot.” Our species has overshoot the carrying capacity of the living world.

Perhaps the single most important reality that is revealing itself today is that human-centered standards of “progress” and “success” (such as GDP) put millions



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of species, including our own kind, on the path to extinction. Such a scalar notion of nonbeing is crucial for helping us discern ways forward.

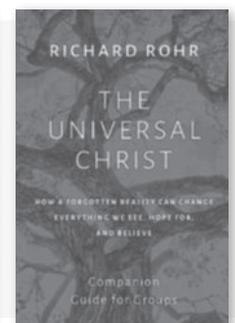
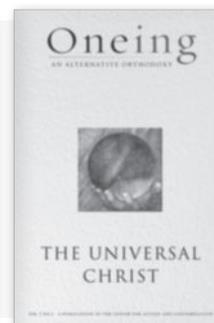
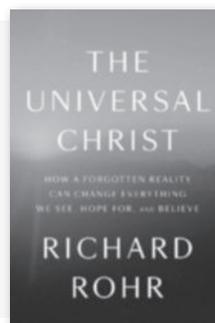
The sociologist William R. Catton, Jr. (1926–2015) stated that, before we start fretting about the possible extinction of *Homo sapiens*, we should recognize that *Homo colossus* (modern cultures energized by the extraordinary power of fossil fuels to mine, transform, manufacture, distribute, and cast off earthly elements and beings as pollution) must go. Whether *Homo colossus* is put to sleep gracefully and compassionately in quest of climate and intergenerational justice, or whether it goes down violently with climate chaos, is still a matter of choice.

Religions must lead the way in grace and compassion. Primary reality must, once again, be honored as primary. Ecology must, once again, be the heart of theology. Our species must once again walk the path of humility, with gratitude for what is truly essential for our global biotic wellbeing.

THE REV. MICHAEL DOWD is a bestselling eco-theologian, sustainability activist, and pro-future evangelist whose book *Thank God for Evolution* was endorsed by six Nobel Prize-winning scientists and diverse religious leaders. He has delivered two TEDx talks and a program at the United Nations. To learn more about Michael Dowd, visit <http://michaeldowd.org/>.

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## The Great Chain of Being

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Creation—be it planets, plants, or pandas—was not just a warm-up act for the human story or the Bible. The natural world is its own good and sufficient story, if we can only learn to see it with humility and love. That takes contemplative practice, stopping our busy and superficial minds long enough to see the beauty, allow the truth, and protect the inherent goodness of what it is—whether it profits me, pleases me, or not.

Every gift of food and water, every act of simple kindness, every ray of sunshine, every mammal caring for her young, all of it emerged from this original and intrinsically good creation. Humans were meant to know and enjoy this ever-present reality, a reality we too often fail to praise—or, maybe worse, ignore and take for granted. As described in Genesis, the creation unfolds over six days, implying a developmental understanding of growth. Only the seventh day has no motion to it. The divine pattern is set: Doing must be balanced by not doing, in the Jewish tradition called the Sabbath Rest. All contemplation reflects a seventh-day choice and experience, relying on grace instead of effort. Full growth implies timing and staging, acting and waiting, working and not working.

All other sentient beings also do their little things, take their places in the cycle of life and death, mirroring

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the eternal self-emptying and eternal infilling of God, and somehow trusting it all—as did my dog Venus when she gazed at me, then looked straight ahead and humbly lowered her nose to the ground as we put her to sleep. Animals fear attack, of course, but they do not suffer the fear of death—whereas many have said that the fear and avoidance of death is the one absolute in every human life.

If we can recognize that we belong to such a rhythm and ecosystem, and intentionally rejoice in it, we can begin to find our place in the universe. We will begin to see, as did Elizabeth Barrett Browning, that “Earth’s crammed with heaven / And every common bush afire with God.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Bonaventure: The Soul's Journey into God, The Tree of Life, The Life of St. Francis*, ed. Ewert Cousins (New York: Paulist, 1978), 63.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “Aurora Leigh,” *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse*, ed. D. H. S. Nicholson and A. H. E. Lee (London: Oxford University Press, 1917), 152.

“*The Great Chain of Being*” is an edited excerpt from Chapter 4, “Original Goodness,” *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope For, and Believe* by Richard Rohr (New York: Convergent, 2019), 57–59. Used by permission of Convergent Books.

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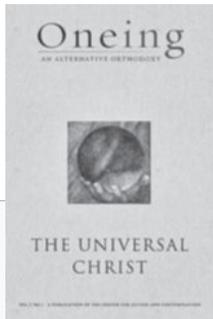
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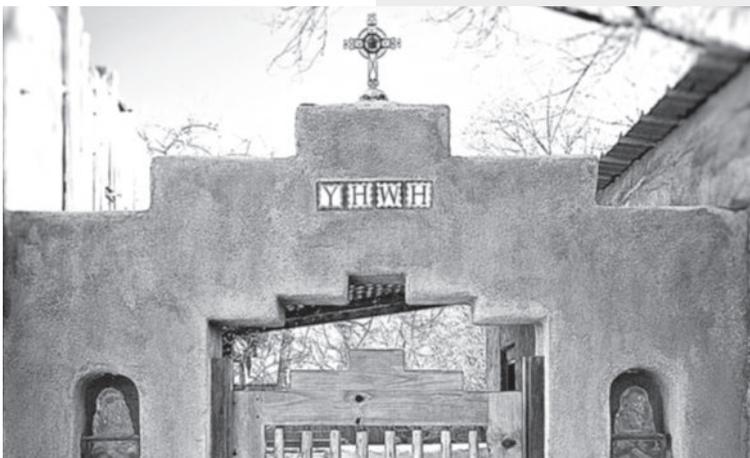
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