



The Gift of the Earth

Andrea Hayes, frequent author on environmental issues, introduces a way of springtime prayer.

There is a fresh opportunity every day to unwrap nature's beautiful gifts. As we welcome each new season, the Earth provides us with precious gifts that are free for all to enjoy. Since I began naming nature as gift and conceiving my daily interaction through the lens of gift, I have profoundly changed my relationship with God. I often end up musing about the many spiritual lessons the natural world offers. As I pay more attention to the sacredness of the planet and allow my nature connection to deepen, I notice a greening of my spirituality. Pope John Paul II states that 'Christians in particular realise that their responsibility within creation and their duty towards nature and the Creator are an essential part of their faith.' I would argue that this teaching is essential as we navigate our faith and the fragile planet we inhabit. Unlike the seasons, our lives may not change in predictable patterns, but there are shifts and patterns of change unfolding in nature that we all need to be attuned too.

Nature offers us crucial lessons. Just like the transition from winter into spring, we are shown that it is never too late for a fresh start. New life blossoms all around and we are



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reminded of the possibility of renewal and growth. As nature signals the start of a new season, we are reminded that we too can embrace a new season of appreciation and protection of the Earth and all its beautiful species. This lesson and shift in consciousness constitutes – in Pope Francis's words – an 'ecological conversion'.

We can all make it our intention to go outdoors with focused, receptive attention, attuned to all the elements in nature. Creating this real presence is entering into the tabernacle of the Earth. Nature awareness fosters a sense of connectedness and this engagement with the natural world builds our sense of self and supports a holistic orientation to care for the



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Earth that supports us.

As we share the gifts and wisdom nature has to offer, one of the most meaningful ways we can reciprocate is by offering gratitude. This might not appear to be a very important response, but the act of giving praise to the Earth can become a daily practice and a powerful prayer; it becomes a heart-centred 'Thank you'. This orientation towards gratitude implies recognition not only of the gift, but of the giver. Using the framework of the daily examen as a powerful prayer for ecological reflection can become a wonderful practice for nature connection. Connecting with nature, even for five minutes a day, can have tremendous benefits for both your health and

spiritual wellness. Nature is quiet and resilient and provides an opportunity for us to reconnect with ourselves and to God during these challenging times. If you really want to engage with nature in a more intentional way, dedicate time cultivating greater mindfulness of God's presence in nature, noticing how this connection can be a meaningful pathway to the divine.

Why not try an 'Earth-centred examen' this New Year by following a few general steps?

1. **Thanksgiving** – with a grateful heart
I reflect on – Where did I feel God's presence in creation today?
2. **Grace** – when our first response is gratitude, then our second is reciprocity: by asking for the grace to ignite my response to nature – Do I see the beauty of creation?
3. **Attention** – connecting to nature isn't just about being in the great outdoors; we attune to the space and notice where God is – and reflect on – How do your life choices impact the natural and human environment?.
4. **Response** – pray about where the light of God is drawing you – How are you responding to God's Call for Earth stewardship?
5. **Look ahead** to tomorrow – praying through images of nature, *visio divina* is a multi-sensory way to connect to God through prayer. This sense of 'divine seeing' allows God to speak into your heart through images of nature.💖