

The Great Chain of Being

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On a visit to Rome some years ago, I spent some time in the library of the Irish College, where I pored over a volume printed in the sixteenth century, many hundreds of foolscap pages thick, in which the details of the Great Chain of Being were explained in meticulous detail. This was the accepted Christian account of where everything stood in relation to God on the scale of worthiness. At the top of the Great Chain was God himself, depicted as an elderly man of power sitting on his throne. Nearest to him were the several choirs of angels, below them the blessed in heaven, whom you can see in the famous picture that sums it up, kneeling on clouds and praying. Next, going about our business here on earth, ourselves. Here all of us stand cheek by jowl, but in the detailed account in the book not at all on the same level; kings and queens and popes and bishops are higher than those who work in the fields; those with pale skin are at a higher level of worth than are people of dark skin, and men are superior to women. Ranged below us humans was the rest of the living world, highest being those animals that most closely resemble us in appearance and structure. Below these was the rest of the animal world, and then down at the bottom were plants, created in

the first place to be at our service in one way or another (and indeed, the whole of creation was thought of in this way).

On another shelf in the library were other great tomes explaining in comparable detail how God had arranged things on a more cosmic scale: the earth at the centre of the universe, the centre of attention, and the planets and stars wheeling about the earth in concentric spheres, in the outermost of which God and the angelic choirs lived their celestial eternal lives. Most of us have some understanding of how utterly inadequate that model of the cosmos has proved to be: the understanding of a child for want of a better way of putting it. We now know not only that our sun is just one star in a galaxy that contains hundreds of millions of stars, but that our galaxy is itself only one of hundreds of millions of other galaxies. Our awareness, our understanding of the Greatness behind it all has expanded – or needs to expand – to the same explosive extent.

What is perhaps less widely appreciated is that the metaphor of the Great Chain of Being is the biological equivalent of the Geocentric Cosmos model, which placed the earth at the very centre of God's plan. The metaphor for the picture that the progress



of our human understanding over time has replaced it with is the Tree of Life. Every creature has descended from a common ancestor, growing from the acorn of its beginning into a great oak of relationships, and we humans are one small twig at the end of one branch. This is utterly awe-inspiring in its implications. It means that we are all brothers and sisters, not metaphorically as St Francis of Assisi might have imagined, but literally: all related to various degrees of genetic distance, some closer to us humans than others, depending on how long it is since we parted company with those further away from us on the tree of life.

This is awe-inspiring on every level

at which we study or contemplate it. Beyond everything else it is awe-inspiring in the way it revolutionizes – brings into shockingly new focus – how our human intellect and intuition can begin to see the direction in which God is at work in the world: even if we can have no more than the merest whisper of an idea as to what its end might be. This is something Pope Francis condenses into one simple sentence in *Laudato Si'*: ‘We should be conscious of the bonds with which the Father has linked us to all beings’ (LS, 220). All of which is something I hope we may have the opportunity to explore in somewhat greater depth in future issues.