

God in All Things

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One of the many abstruse debates in Christian theology is about what word best describes God's presence in creation. Should it be theism or deism, pantheism or panentheism? All, or none of these? Deists believe that God has a hands-off approach to the running of creation, whereas theists believe that he intervenes from time to time to steer things in a desired direction. God is conceived as a supreme architect or craftsman, or a superlative artist. 'Nature', Dante famously wrote, 'is the art of God.' For pantheists, God and creation are the same thing and nature is divine. For panentheists however, although God is identified with his creation, he is at the same time somehow distinct from it.

God is beyond these distinctions. For St Thomas Aquinas (writing around the same time Dante was born) there is something of God in every creature, in every aspect of creation, and this presence of God is something we intuit as it were, behind the beauty we sense and the complexity we understand, in whatever it is we pay real attention to, and it is this paying of attention that is all important.

We can imagine that when God (in



the Book of Genesis) actually speaks to mankind for the first time (in the person of Adam), to enquire what he would name the creatures with which he has populated this earthly paradise, what he is really saying is: this is where you will find me, if you use all the gifts of perception and enquiry I have given you, you alone are able to respond to creation in this way, and in doing so care for it as I intended it to be cared for.

In the words of Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'*: our role is to further that plan, 'so that our planet might be what he desired when he created it, and correspond with his plan for peace, beauty and fullness' (*LS*, 53). Whatever words we use to describe it, there is something of God in the mesmerising diversity of life on this earth. Every species, in the words of



Thomas Aquinas, is a unique expression of divine goodness. In the words of Pope Francis, every species has its own value and significance, reflecting a ray of God's infinite wisdom and goodness (*LS*, 69, 76).

Ecologists refer to places where something of nature's wild diversity is still to be experienced as natural or semi-natural 'habitats'. One of the great challenges of our time is the disappearance of these biodiverse places. This is most familiar to us from what we call the 'developing' world, but even here in Ireland the reduction in natural habitats in recent decades has been enormous. A recent survey tells us that over the last ninety years the number of 10 km squares occupied by native plant species has declined by 56%, and in the Irish Republic we rank thirteenth

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from bottom for 'biodiversity intactness' out of 240 countries worldwide (Northern Ireland ranks only one place lower).

Last year the Irish bishops asked parishes, through their pastoral councils and diocesan trusts, to identify and set aside 30% of parish grounds as havens for pollinators and biodiversity. The bishops said returning parish land to nature by 2030 would ensure it could be 'enjoyed in perpetuity by the whole community'. But the spiritual significance of the diversity of life on earth goes way beyond its contribution to our 'enjoyment'. It is given to us, our unique privilege and responsibility, to care for the earth not as we would care for a garden in which we grow the vegetables that sustain us, but because it is the garden God walks in, and we have been invited to walk with him. We are placed in this Garden of Eden to share in God's own wonder and delight at his creation.

So maybe it is time for all of us in our individual parishes to look again at what we should be doing about that 30% ...