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## Loving Earth: Augustine and Aquinas Weighed in Long Ago ...

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# Loving Earth

## Augustine and Aquinas Weighed In Long Ago...

by Jame Schaefer



Signs of global warming, loss of biodiversity, toxic substances in the air and water, destruction and degradation of forests and other ecological systems, and a plethora of other environmental problems fill the airwaves, television screens, and computer monitors. These alerts to assaults on

the natural environment challenge catechists to share with the Catholic faithful the sources in our tradition that might make a difference in the ways we think and act in relation to God's Earth. The good news is that there is much from which to choose. Often building upon biblical texts, teachings by eminent theologians during the patristic and medieval periods attest to the goodness, beauty, sacramentality, and integrity of God's creation. Some reflected imaginatively on the psalms of the Old Testament in which all creatures are portrayed as praising God in their own distinct "voices." Other theologians thought about and treated creatures in their shared environments as companions in life. A few theologians taught that humans should actually love God's creation.

These theological reflections illustrate trajectories showing how the faithful should act on the basis of what they believe. They should value the goodness of other creatures, appreciate their beauty, reverence them because they mediate the presence and character of God, cooperate with them to bring about their common good, respect their "voices" as constituents of Earth who contribute to its harmony, and love them in distinct ways. Some theologians were more explicit by admonishing the faithful to use the goods of God's Earth in morally acceptable ways.

### THE FOUNDATIONAL LOVE OF ONE'S NEIGHBOR

Loving creation is a particularly inviting theme in the Catholic tradition during this age of widespread ecological degradation, since it draws upon the deepest and most profound of the three theological virtues. Furthermore, according to some theologians, love motivates the faithful to act in morally virtuous ways (e.g., prudently, justly, moderately, and courageously) whereby they seek the necessities of life for themselves while assuring that other humans have what they need to sustain their temporal life as they orient themselves toward eternal happiness with God. While many prominent Catholic theologians reflected profusely on God's love for the world, the few that

8 wrote about the love that humans should have for God's creation

included saints Augustine (354-430) and Thomas Aquinas (1224/5-1274). Aquinas especially thought systematically about God's love for creation and ways in which humans can also love the world God created and actively sustains in existence.

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*Loving other creatures out of love for one's neighbor near and far, now and into the future, may prove to be as materially effective as loving them for themselves.*

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Foundational to theologians' exhortations to love God's creation is loving God with one's entire heart, soul, mind, and strength and loving one's neighbor as oneself (Mark 12:30-31, Matthew 22:38-39, and Luke 10:27-28). In Romans 13:9-10, St. Paul underscored for the earliest Christians the command to love one's neighbor and insisted that their love for one another would preclude causing any evil to one another.

Patristic and medieval theologians followed the Scriptures by urging their listeners and readers to love their neighbors. Especially significant are Aquinas's reflections on the friendship that humans are capable of extending to one another. Humans can love one another through friendship because they can return love to their neighbors, communicate with them on their experiences of life, wish that their neighbors orient their lives toward eternal happiness with God, and share in the intellectual and beautiful life of God (*Summa theologiae* 1.20.2 ad 3). When one loves one's neighbor with the kind of love that is *friendship*, God is loved simultaneously. Love for one's neighbor assumes the wish that neighbors to choose to orient their lives toward eternal happiness with God.

### LOVING CREATION WITH DESIRE

While theologians during the patristic and medieval periods exhorted their followers to love their human neighbors, some encouraged them to also love other creatures and natural phenomena that God created. Augustine attempted an exhaustive list of creatures that humans should love:

Certainly you love only the good, because the earth is good by the height of its mountains, the moderate elevation of its hills, and the evenness of its fields; and good is the farm that is pleasant and fertile; and good is the house that is arranged throughout in symmetrical proportions and is spacious and bright; and good are the animals, animate bodies; and good is the mild and salubrious air; and good is the food that is pleasant and conducive to health; and good is health without pains and weariness; and good is the countenance of man with regular features, a cheerful expression, and a glowing color; and good is the soul of a friend with the sweetness of concord and the fidelity of love; and good is the just man; and good are riches because they readily assist us; and good is the heaven with its own sun, moon, and stars; and good are the angels by their holy obedience; and good is the lecture that graciously instructs and suitably admonishes the listener; and good is the poem with its measured rhythm and the seriousness of its thoughts (*The Trinity* 8.3.4).

Taking another approach to loving God's creation, Aquinas insisted that the goodness of creatures calls forth the love we call *desire* that humans should have for them. Love for their goodness should direct human actions toward preserving the basic good that creatures have: their existence. Of course, as Aquinas pointed out, the desire that humans have for other creatures differs considerably from the desire that only God can have for them as their creator who sustains them in existence. Only God can love creatures so deeply and thoroughly with the love that is desire, Aquinas contended, since God freely willed them to exist and created them out of nothing (*Summa theologiae* 1.20.2). As *imago Dei*, humans are called to strive to image God's love while realizing and cherishing with humility the difference between their love and the unconditional, creative, and sustaining love of God.

### LOVING CREATION WITH FRIENDSHIP

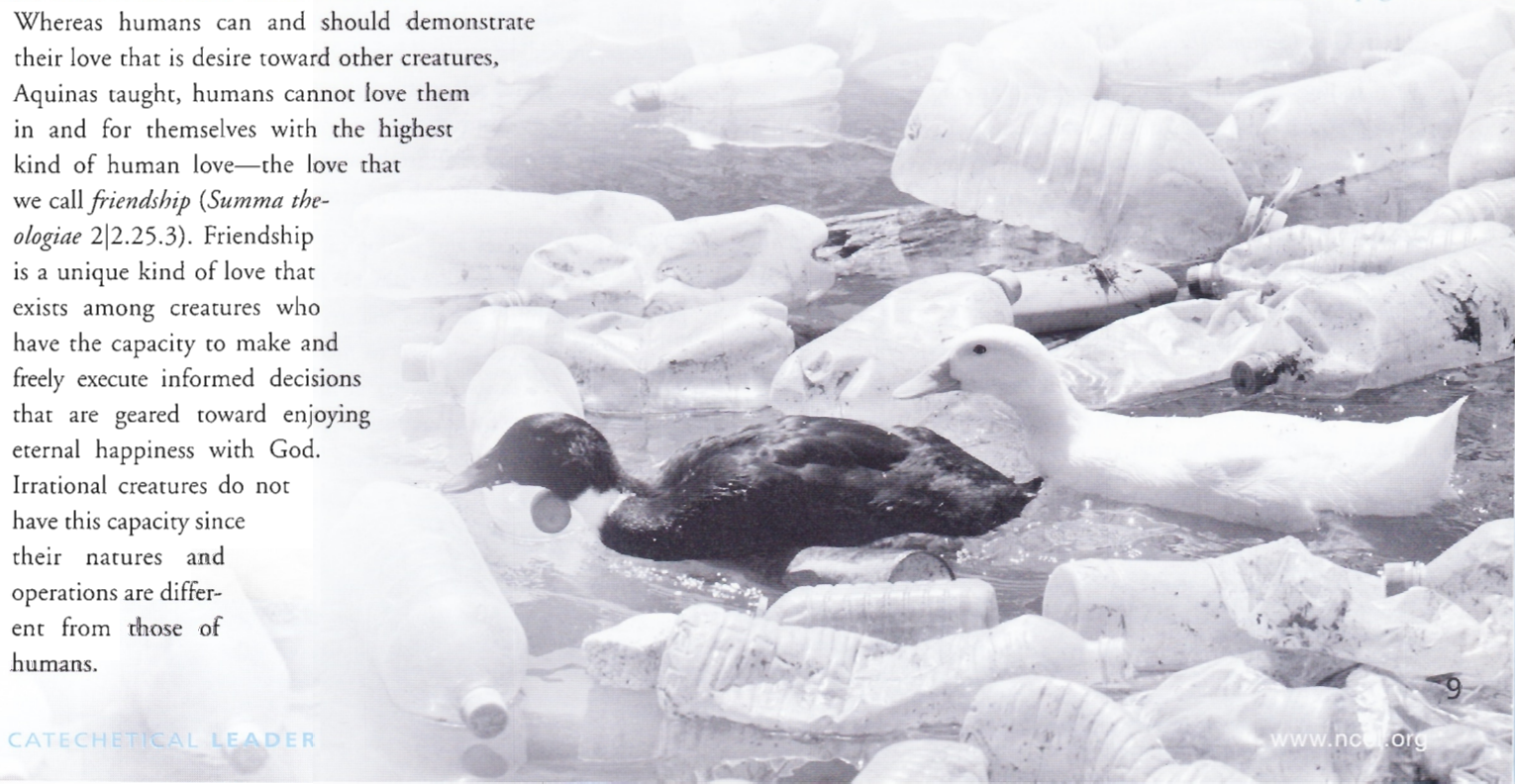
Whereas humans can and should demonstrate their love that is desire toward other creatures, Aquinas taught, humans cannot love them in and for themselves with the highest kind of human love—the love that we call *friendship* (*Summa theologiae* 2|2.25.3). Friendship is a unique kind of love that exists among creatures who have the capacity to make and freely execute informed decisions that are geared toward enjoying eternal happiness with God. Irrational creatures do not have this capacity since their natures and operations are different from those of humans.

Nevertheless, there are ways in which humans can love non-human creatures *indirectly* with the love we call friendship, according to Aquinas. They can be loved as good things humans wish (1) to preserve for God's honor and glory and (2) to be used by other humans to sustain themselves in temporal life as they seek eternal happiness with God (*Summa theologiae* 2|2.25.2-3). When loving non-human entities as good things desired for one's neighbor in temporal life, they are not loved intrinsically for themselves. Instead, they are loved instrumentally for their use to humans when ordering their lives to God (*On Charity* 4 and 7). Loving other creatures for their use to humans is an anthropocentric and myopic attitude toward relating to the rest of God's creation, especially when we realize that our species emerged over vast time and space from and with other species, and that humans are radically dependent on other creatures for necessities of life. But loving them out of love for one's neighbor near and far, now and into the future may prove to be as materially effective as loving other creatures for themselves.

*Catholics can strive to image God's sustaining love by not interfering with the functioning and self-development of Earth's other inhabitants over time and space.*

Loving other types of Earth creatures so they are preserved for God's honor and glory reflects Aquinas' faith perspective that the physical, visible creation attests to the presence and attributes of our invisible God. Shared by many theologians throughout the patristic and medieval period, this understanding of the sacramentality of God's creation should carry considerable weight today among Catholics

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for advocating the preservation of species, ecological systems, and the biosphere of Earth so they can continue to manifest God's presence and character.

Aquinas raised another promising possibility about human love for God's creation when he taught that the entire universe could be loved with the love we call friendship. He reasoned to this position when reflecting on the order of creatures to one another that culminates in humans, an order that he described throughout his works in superlative terms (e.g., the greatest created good, the highest perfection of the created world, and its most beautiful attribute). Since humans have the capability of enjoying eternal happiness with God, they can also love with friendship the orderly universe that God

*Lovers of Earth will limit their use to the necessities of life and behold them as means through which they can experience God's presence and discern God's attributes of love, generosity, empowerment, caring, and freedom-giving.*

loves above any one or several kinds of creatures (*On Charity* 7).

Finally, friendship motivates the human person's moral behavior. As a manifestation of one of three theological virtues that God infuses in rational creatures, friendship disposes the faithful to acquire moral virtues that incline them toward temporal goods in prudent, just, temperate, and courageous ways. Living virtuously in relation to Earth's other creatures orients humans toward their ultimate destination in God (*Summa theologiae* 1|2.65.2).

By including others that constitute Earth among those that can be loved, Aquinas widened significantly the scope of this highest kind of love and enfolds love for others that constitute Earth in a triad of love with God. However subsidiary loving Earth's others is to loving one's human neighbors, they can nevertheless be loved with the highest kind of love, one that is both oriented toward sustaining human

bodily well-being in the quest for eternal happiness with God and toward assuring that God's many different creatures are preserved for God's honor and glory.

### ACTING LOVINGLY

Following biblically-based teachings by Thomas Aquinas, Augustine and other eminent theologians in our tradition, Catholics should seriously consider themselves as called during our time of widespread environmental destruction and degradation to love God's Earth with its diverse constituents. God willed the possibility that species and biological systems could emerge out of the evolutionary process, empowered their emergence through that process, and sustains their ability to function through foundational laws. If Catholics truly desire to demonstrate that they are *imago Dei*, they will strive to image God's sustaining love. They will show their love by not interfering with the functioning and self-development of Earth's other inhabitants over time and space. They will strive to approach species and systems lovingly because God is present to and through the natural environment with its diverse species, God lovingly empowers them to function in relation to one another according to their natural capacities, and God lovingly entrusts to rational creatures the responsibility of managing *themselves* so they do not degrade or destroy the natural functioning of species in relation to their habitats, communities, ecological systems and the biosphere. Catholics will also strive to assure that the manifestations of God's loving, caring, generous giving, empowering, and freedom-endowing attributes through biota and abiota — all living and non-living creatures — are not thwarted.

Extending Aquinas's thinking to the functioning of biological systems as they are scientifically understood, faithful Catholics will love them with the love we call desire that they may flourish in symbiotic relationship with their living and non-living constituents, including rational beings who encounter them lovingly in their recreating and self-sustaining activities. The faithful will strive to image God's continuous and uninterrupted care for them through the internal self-sustaining capacity with which God gifted them by avoiding actions that destroy those capacities.

As God loves species and biological systems with the love we call friendship because they are valuable for humans to sustain their temporal lives, faithful Catholics will strive to image God's love for them as sources essential to meet their familial, economic and recreational needs in life. The faithful will show their love by conserving them at the local level and seeking protection for them when necessary at higher levels of decision-making and implementation of environmentally



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sound decisions that are made. The faithful will follow the maxim of causing no evil to their neighbors near and far, now and into the future by degrading, destroying, or using up the goods of Earth thereby rendering them unavailable for their neighbors in the most altruistic sense.

Catholics will also love other constituents of Earth for their capacity to manifest God's presence and character. Those who love species and systems will avoid actions that degrade them so other humans near and far, now and into the future can experience the presence of God. Lovers of Earth will limit their use to the necessities of life and behold them as means through which they can experience God's presence and discern God's attributes of love, generosity, empowerment, caring, and freedom-giving. Those who love them will want them to give glory to God and to honor God by functioning according to their natures unimpeded by selfish or thoughtless human actions. When loving biological systems and species on behalf of one's neighbors, the faithful love God and aim their loving actions toward their ultimate goal of eternal happiness with God.

Infused by God with the theological virtue of love and motivated by love that is friendship, Catholics will be aided by God's grace to *live morally virtuous* lives in relation to one another, other species, and biological systems. The faithful will *live prudently* by knowing about Earth others, what they need to flourish, what can be done to ameliorate their degradation, and actions that should be avoided to prevent additional degradation or destruction. They will *live moderately* by limiting their encounters with sensitive and endangered

species and biological systems so others can have opportunities to enjoy them. They will *live justly* by respecting needs other species and systems have for unencumbered space within which to flourish and non-degrading ways in which people who live in these areas can interact with them. And, they will *live courageously* by standing firm for measures that protect species and systems out of love for them.

#### CATECHISTS AS EDUCATORS AND MODELS OF LOVE

The patristic-medieval theme of loving God's creation out of love for God and love for neighbor holds promise for addressing ecological concerns today. Connections can be made between teachings about loving creation and other teachings that permeate the Catholic tradition, especially the goodness, sacramentality, and integrity of God's creation as well as restraining one's use of God's creation to the necessities of life. Catechists are in unique positions to embrace their rich theological tradition and stimulate their parishioners' thinking about loving God's Earth and acting to protect it. Catechists can also choose to serve as models of Earth loving by demonstrating these teachings in their lives. |

*Jame Schaefer, PhD, assistant professor in theology at Marquette University, focuses on the constructive relationship between theology and the natural sciences with special attention to religious foundations for ecological ethics. Read more in her article "Catholic Foundations for Environmental Ethics: A Critical-Creative Approach to Patristic and Medieval Notions," in Current Issues in Catholic Higher Education 24.1 (2004): 31-68.*