

Most Reverend Jaime Soto
Bishop of Sacramento

Remarks for the Ecological Society of America
8-13-14

(Adapted from an earlier published column for the local diocesan magazine.)

In 2005 I was in Cologne, Germany for World Youth Day. St. John Paul II had passed away only a few months previously and the Catholic youth from around the world were looking forward to welcoming the then new Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI. During the week of festivities, I joined a California delegation of youth to attend an early morning Mass in the renowned gothic Cathedral of Cologne. From the hotel I found my way winding through the medieval streets of the ancient city to the old town square where the stones of the Cathedral loomed even larger in the darkness of the dwindling night. The light of the new day was still to come. I found the huddled shadows of the young delegation in front of the Cathedral waiting for the century old doors to open. Once these portals creaked wide we shuffled into the darkened Church. We cautiously, quietly stepped across the vast, vaulted nave as if afraid to awaken the chiseled figures -- human, saintly, demonic, and angelic -- still lurking in the shadowed walls.

The Mass was offered in German with a courtesy reading in English. Sometime during the celebration of the Mass I turned toward the east facing the high altar and choir. The stained glass windows were ablaze with the light of a new day. I was transfixed by this startling beauty. The color and images of the windows were brought to life by the rays of the rising sun. All this was intentional. The Cathedral's foundations were purposefully poised to face the east. The windows were arrayed to capture the dawn's brilliance.

Mass was traditionally offered at this hour so as to bring into harmony nature's need to praise the creator with humanity's own desire to greet the Lord of light. The liturgy of the Church and the liturgy of nature came together in a crescendo of praise that took my breath away in that unforgettable matin moment in the Cathedral of Cologne.

Recently, I was sitting with some men on retreat during the early days of Lent. The date of Easter came up along with the question, "Why does the date of Easter keep moving? Why can't it be a fixed date?" My standard response, "It is a fixed date." This statement is always met with looks of incredulity. Like, "You must be joking." My regular follow-up response: Easter is always the first Sunday after the first full moon following the Spring Equinox. This statement requires some biblical and astronomical explanation. Jesus died during the celebration of Jewish Passover. The Jewish Passover is calculated on the first moon after the Spring Equinox because the light of the full moon allowed the people of Israel to escape the clutches of Pharaoh in Egypt during the Exodus. After this brief lesson, there was the usual, "I never knew."

After this, I explained the fixing of the Christmas date, December 25th. Before the set dates of the Gregorian Calendar – still in use today – Christmas was approximately set at the Winter solstice, when the light of day was the shortest and the night was long. From Christmas the daylight, imitating Christ the Light of the World, grows each day.

From there, I explained the setting of a complementary feast, the birth or nativity of John the Baptist. His day is June 25th. Why? This date approximates the Summer solstice. On that date, the daylight is the longest. From June 25th on, the days grow shorter fulfilling the words of John the Baptist in the scriptures, "He (Jesus) must increase; I must decrease." (Jn. 3.30)

The calculations of these significant Christian feast days may strike most of us as curious now. They come from a time when there was more harmony between the natural rhythms of nature and the routines of human existence. For the pre-modern mentality there was nothing extraordinary about these dates. It was assumed that nature would mimic the divine. God revealed the rhythm of his mercy and rhyme of wisdom through the seasons and sense of nature.

The industrial and technological revolutions of the past two centuries have produced amazing advances. They have augmented human potential far beyond the

imagination of those who erected the towering majesty of the Cologne Cathedral. These human revolutions have also put us out of sync with the natural rhythms to which our ancestors were once so accustomed. There is much about this unnatural disconnect that gives us pause in these days. Climate change, diminishing essential natural resources like water and fuel, non-stop productivity fatiguing the human spirit, the prevalence of pharmaceutical fixes to the aches and worries of the body – All of these should cause us to wonder whether the technologies with which we master nature have come to master us. Have we become strangers to the planetary home that whirls around the sun as part of the galactic symphony God has orchestrated for his glory and our well-being?

Borrowing from a common expression of the digital lexicon, we may need to “re-boot” our relationship with nature. This spiritual recalibration begins with our own human nature. Pope Benedict commented in his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, that we are not just a body nor are we just a soul. The human person is both body and soul. (DCE n.5) Our bodies make us part of the earthly creation. Our souls give us a glimmer into the mind of the earth’s creator. We are both created as well as creative. Both of these very human dimensions find a harmonious joy when we revere the wisdom and beauty of the creator who calls us to share in the marvelous unending work of creation.

This, I understand, is the task to which you have whiled away your time here in the intertwining embrace of the Sacramento and American Rivers. May your discussions help us find our place as part of creation as well as stewards entrusted with the unfinished task of a creation that still yearns to be more than even our own feeble minds could imagine.

Like that moment standing before crafted artistry of the Cologne windows ablaze with the majesty of a new day’s dawn, may we aspire to have the created join with the creator in a singular act of awesome glory.

Let me close with these words from the poem of Gerard Manley Hopkins, *God’s Grandeur*.

*THE WORLD is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.*

*And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.*

May we, with that same Holy Spirit, brood over creation. With the wings of our spirit let us work with the creator to craft a redeemed and redeeming creation. (*cf. Rom. 8.18-23*)