

**SAINT AUGUSTINE AND THE ECOSYSTEM:  
SUMMA CREATIO**

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**Abstract**

The topic of ecosystem is a compelling but complex concept. This paper therefore aims to suggest that Augustine's voice requires greater hearing in the current debates on ecology. Even though, regardless of his fame as one of the most important figures in Western theology, Augustine is not famous in current theological conversations on ecological issues. He made four distinct efforts to lay out a clear and coherent interpretation of Genesis 1. His first attempt was his allegorical interpretation in his work *On Genesis against the Manichaeans* (389 A.D.), next, he made an unsatisfactory effort to give a literal interpretation in his *Letter of Genesis: Unfinished Book*, written in 393 A.D. but was later published with some revisions in 426. To complement his earlier effort, he later expressed his views at a greater length in his new task *The Letter of Genesis* (401-415 A.D.), between 413-427 A.D. he summarized all his previous works with some adjustments in *The City of God*. There might not be direct argument against the possible misrepresentation of submissions by some contemporary theologians who have solid ecological concern in this paper, however, it will surely provide a flipside interpretation of Augustine that will possibly shed positive light on classical doctrines which can help promote the so-called "ecological conversion" today.

**Keywords:** Saint Augustine, Ecosystem, Environment, Allegorical, Literal, Interpretation, Doctrine

## Introduction

The advent of the concept of ecosystem has resulted in a paradigm shift in the ethical and social foundations of the conservation of biodiversity<sup>1</sup>, from the conservation of nature because of its inherent value to the particular emphasis on anthropocentric use values. I have been fascinated by creation from childhood, because some of my happiest moments have been going to the stream to swim, hunting around the mountains, and playing at night at the beauty of the moon. I have also been captivated by the intelligence of our livestock knowing what time to return home and move into their respective habitats. I have come to realize therefore, that whoever forays any short distance into the academic circle will probably understand what Aristotle means when he said: “The more you know, the more you realize you don’t know.”<sup>2</sup> Stewart Lee, in an interview with *The Guardian*, August 10, 2010 said that to participate in further education entails embarking on a “quest to enlarge the global storehouse of all human understanding”. This is possibly true, however venturing into academia means that the more answers you acquire to challenging scientific puzzles, the more questions spring up. And that is the circle of academic endeavor.

The thought of St Augustine has always been outstanding and has as well been one of the most significant set of ideas in Christian history. He has been captivated by a desperate search

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<sup>1</sup> By this I mean the huge variety of life on Earth, i.e., every living thing – plants, bacteria, animals, and humans.

<sup>2</sup> William Wians, “Aristotle and the Problem of Human Knowledge”. *The International Journal of the Platonic Tradition* 2 (2008): 41-64, p. 43.

for Truth. While realizing that Truth is basically the face of reality, he sought to discern the nature of the universe in creation itself. As Augustine understood the Christian doctrine of creation, he immediately found the beginning, the explanation and the end of man. The doctrine of creation is one of the most controversial and yet much neglected. And still it has very enormous practical relevance – there are hardly any spheres of life that are not enriched by thinking about createdness, and it is very useful in treating the areas that neglected: arts, vocation, culture, even things like exercise and diet and sleep. Most times, our concern is in terms of being a sinner, being a Christian, and we tend to forget to reflect in terms of being human.

To engage a very important pre-modern thinking like Augustine would be a very important step to confront the idea of creation (ecosystem), with the view of bolstering the neglected areas as well as calming and directing the contested areas, bearing in mind some facts in Augustine that I find interesting about creation.

\*Augustine's conversion to Manichaeism was largely influenced by his perception that Genesis chapter 1 is unrefined, and his realization of alternative, less "literalistic" interpretations of the same Genesis 1 was influential in his return back to orthodoxy, thanks to St Ambrose's allegorical homily.

\*The first chapters of the book of Genesis were not so easy for Augustine as he struggled with them in his entire theological career. For that he had to write five distinct commentaries on them and also inserting them widely in his other works and

sermons, engaging creation at the deepest existential level. For him, it is the key to understanding the deepest longings of the human heart.

\*Christianity as a whole made sense to Augustine because of how he approached creation in line with the apologetics' concerns.

\*One view that was greatly influential on the medieval Church was Augustine's adoption of a kind of framework interpretation of the first chapter of Genesis, where he rejects the idea that days had 24-hour periods of time.

\*The question of whether Adam and Eve were symbolical was considered by Augustine, thereby developing a nuanced and literally sensitive approach to this particular question defending their historicity while also acknowledging stylization and symbolization in the second and third chapters of Genesis.

The target of this paper therefore would be to explore the meaning and significance of Augustine's thought regarding the issue of the relationship of human beings and the natural world, i.e., the ecosystem. The paper will also discuss as a classical Christian thinker, offering a reasonable, insightful and a sensible ecological insight towards the environment that is also decidedly God-directed. Though Augustine did not use the term ecology in the same way as it was done in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but going through his major works there is evidence of a huge acknowledgement of the ultimate value of God the Creator with a significant but subsidiary

valuation of the created order. Augustine supplies much to believers concerning the environmental problems that the contemporary world faces, aiding us to appreciate nature without eventually falling into idolatry. Augustine offers something different and special by virtue of a methodology of conversion.<sup>3</sup> He does that by way of representing an encouraging model of openness to a different attitude and reflection about creation amidst human crisis. In his scheme, only the Creator has intrinsic value, which is value in and of himself. Creation has inherent value derived from the Creator which is dependent upon the level creation is tilting toward, i.e., the original design of the created order. Augustine proffers a profound insight about the nature of creation in virtue of the emphasis he lays on the intrinsic and irreversible goodness of creation that comes into being from an all-good Creator. We are greatly encouraged by this doctrine of the spotless goodness of creation to think in terms of an ethical attitude toward the environment – we see the environment as something innately dignified and to be valued for its own sake. Augustine continually reflects on the goodness of creation, he however, does not neglect the destruction that humans have often experienced in their encounter and connection with and to nature. One obvious fact we must acknowledge in Augustine is that his thought is balanced and he takes into consideration the real, and often ambivalent, human experience of nature. As

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<sup>3</sup>Majority of those who read the *Confessions*, usually read it as a spiritual autobiography of an early Church father who had gone through a series of enthusiasms in his early life before what is conceived as his dramatic or final conversion to orthodox Christianity. Augustine's exclamation that "our heart is restless until it finds rest in you," and also triggered by the "tolle lege: take up and read" of the child in the garden. This does not mean Augustine's conversion to Christianity, because he had long considered himself to be a Christian. Because by definition, conversion would mean a decisive change whereby a person abandons a previous practice or belief and adopt exclusively a new one. It requires a 'turning which implies a consciousness that the old way was wrong and the new is right.' Conf. James O'Donnell, *Augustine, Sinner and Saint: A New Biography*, London: Profile Publications, 2005, p. 3. What he converted to after the encounter at the garden was abstinence from sex and worldly ambition.

modern people, writing in terms of our own modern attempts to reflect on nature, we have so much to benefit from the interplay of Augustine's methodology of conversion, giving his deep conviction about the ethical demands of nature in many of his writings – since it is generated spotless from an absolutely good Creator.

To contextualize Augustine's thoughts in this paper, I shall first look at some of the common accusations of dualism, seeking to clarify and demonstrate that he is not. I shall take a look at some of Augustine's writings that show an essentially nature-affirming outlook (inherently dignified and eschatologically destined for fulfillment. Relying mainly on my two principal sources, *Confessions* and *City of God*, I shall outline a more contemporary understanding of value of the ecosystem and connect it to Augustine's arguments about the value of creation.

### **Dualism in Augustine**

Going through the anthropology of Augustine, he pays some attention to the mind-body dualism which at the end, seem to shroud automatically any positive thing he would say regarding matter and the created order. Rowan Williams writing to defend the bad name Augustine has among ecotheologians says, "It is difficult to construct any profile of what unites the anti-Augustinians of contemporary theology, but it is probably true that they hold in common radically anti-Cartesian perspective."<sup>4</sup> Here obviously he means that Augustine is being accused of the dualism that should have been rightly placed at Descartes' feet. Thus Williams clearly shows that Augustine cannot simply be indicted with inventing

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<sup>4</sup>Rowan Williams, "Good for Nothing? Augustine on Creation," *Augustinian Studies* 25, (1994): 9-24.

or reinforcing a simple matter-spirit dualism. The accusations did not end here, Colin Gunton has been very critical of Augustine as well. His accusation is so strong that he did not just lay the charge of mere environmental degradation, but also of contemporary skepticism and unbelief on Augustine's doctrine of the Trinity<sup>5</sup>. He continues with the charges, claiming that Augustine has "either a modalistic conception of God, or two competing sources of knowledge which tend to discredit each other."<sup>6</sup> Gunton's argument that the unity in the Trinity is so over accentuated in Augustine that modalism is the result, otherwise there will be a divide between the Creator and creation whereby the Creator is essentially unknowable by human beings.<sup>7</sup> I think these interpretations are remarkably damaging to Augustine's legacy and his suitability as a source for environmental ethics in particular. These critics tend to picture Augustine as tilting towards the side of valuation that denigrates the ecosystem to magnify the spiritual.

To give some insight or correction to the critics. It is very possible and beneficial to rethink our gaze more on the fact that Augustine is continually open to conversion in his thinking rather than just focusing on his preference for things that are strictly spiritual. Yes, Augustine tends to bring dichotomy between the material and spiritual realities, the material is subordinated under the spiritual, but that should not be taken as a primary teaching of Augustine with regards to Christian thinking about environment. This only leads to realize that Augustine's teaching was progressive and he eventually came to see nature as having a divine plan that resembles what we

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<sup>5</sup> Colin E. Gunton, "Augustine, the Trinity and the Theological Crisis of the West," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 43, no. 1 (1990): p. 33.

<sup>6</sup> Colin E. Gunton, Augustine, the Trinity and the Theological Crisis of the West, p. 35.

In the *City of God*, Augustine wrote: "The whole Trinity is revealed to us in creation." Conf.

<sup>7</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, trans., Marcus Dods (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 2013): 11.24, p. 331.

conceive of nature's evolution toward some ultimate fulfillment. We should always be careful not to be guilty of materializing the spiritual just as Augustine was spiritualizing the material. Augustine tried to acknowledge and appreciate creation as it is, likewise as it will be. Giving that creation is advancing to some abiding beautiful form, Augustine has always seen its present beauty as a mysterious gift of the promise of its future. This does not mean that creation as we have it and as it has evolved with time is bad in the strict sense of being evil; it only suggests that it is provisional, as we experience it, while evolving to some mysterious fulfillment, but it is difficult to discover the exact shape. Augustine has this to say: "...the eyes shall possess some quality similar to that of the mind, by which they may be able to discern spiritual things, and among these God – a supposition for which it is difficult or even impossible to find any support in Scripture – or, which is more easy to comprehend, God will be so known by us, and shall be so much before us, that we shall see Him by the spirit in ourselves, in one another, in Himself, in the new heavens and the new earth, in every created thing which shall then exist; and also by the body we shall see Him in every body which the keen vision of they of the spiritual body shall reach."

One other aspect of Augustine to dwell on is to reevaluate the presumption that he negates and sublimates the natural and the created order. Augustine's assessment of the beauty and goodness of creation should be seen always in line with his understanding of eschatology and protology (nature's inherent dignity as rooted in God from the beginning of time to the end of time) as evolving toward a recreation in the future, as well as the fulfillment and glorification of its hopeful destiny.



Santmire notes that Augustine presents the inherent goodness of creation always against the foil of its future glorification and realization in God in the following lines: "...Augustine's development can be schematized as a movement from a radical dominance of his thought by the metaphor of ascent to a mutually reinforcing formation of his thought by the metaphor of fecundity and migration to a good land. In Augustine's theology, then, we witness a metaphorical metamorphosis of profound scope, which saw him move from radical adherence to the spiritual motif on the one hand, to a thorough going adherence to the ecological motif on the other hand."<sup>8</sup> Apart from the central role Augustine played in the development western Christian theology, that was vehemently opposed by the ecofeminists as patriarchal, Gunton's view of Augustine as a dualist somehow gives a backing to their arguments. He says, "It is well known that Augustine was suspicious of the material world. With the Platonists, he found it difficult to believe that the material and sensible realm could either be truly real or the object or the vehicle of knowledge."<sup>9</sup> There will certainly be minimal hope for recovering Augustine as a fount of environmental ethics. The compelling passage in contradistinction to the one Augustine avowed above, concerning his desire for "God and soul alone," is found in the Confessions. We see him conforming himself with the order, harmony and goodness of creation, and not over and against matter and nature: "I did not now long for better things, because I considered them all, and with sounder judgment I realized that while the things above were than those below, all things together were better than those above would be by themselves."<sup>10</sup> He continues: "There is no wholeness in those who are displeased with any part of your creation, no more than there was in me when I was displeased with so many things that

<sup>8</sup>Augustine, *The City of God*, XXII.29

<sup>9</sup>Paul H. Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology*, New York: Fortress Press, 1991, pp. 59-60.

<sup>10</sup>Colin E. Gunton, *Augustine, the Trinity and the Theological Crisis of the West*, p. 36

You had made.” One good thing Augustine did was to develop, reconsider and even change his notion about his estimation of the dignity of creation. He was not rigid in his dualistic cosmology that only understood matter and the body as evil, while the spirit and the soul as the only summum bonum. He eventually acknowledged greatly the goodness of creation on its own merit. Regardless of his inability to understand every reason behind seemingly insignificant parts, Augustine came to see all of creation as good in his commentary on Genesis 1:24-25: “And you, O God, saw everything that You had made, and behold, it was very good. Yes, we also see the same, and behold all things are very good.” Gradually Augustine is coming to see that the diversity of creation, the fecundity of nature, is truly part of the design and will and blessing of the Creator: “how highly he prizes unity in multitude.” Quoting Psalm 46:9 Augustine exhorts: “Come behold the works of the Lord, what prodigies He hath wrought in the earth.”

Thanks to the revision of the understanding of Augustine as a strict dualist by recent scholarship. There is seemingly a more careful reading of the works of Augustine, as well as a more gracious allowance given him for the possibility of change and theological maturation. Again, this is also as a result of Brown’s biography of Augustine, which seems to focus mainly on platonic influences on Augustine. This means that the first step in restoring Augustine’s legacy is to reread Augustine in light of what he wrote, when he wrote it, and allow for legitimate changes in his understanding of doctrines. This explains why Rowan Williams argues against the view that Augustine is a dualistic Neo-Platonist. His argument was primarily pointing toward Augustine’s positive attitude toward creation. Here is Augustine’s argument, “A good God made

<sup>18</sup>Paul H. Santmire, *The Travail of Nature*, p. 61.

[the created order] good; and that the things created, being different from God, were inferior to Him, and yet were good, being created by none other than He.” Inasmuch as Augustine believes that everything, all visible creatures in particular, are created as a blessing for humanity, this by no means exhausts their *raison d'être*, as far as he is concerned... Instead, for Augustine, the most fundamental telos of the entire creation is beauty, and the glorification of the God who wills such a magnificent community of being, each part of which has its own divinely validated integrity.<sup>18</sup>

### **Creation Debates Finding “Rest” In Augustine?**

At his late teen age, Augustine relocated to the city for studies. He became convinced in school that the first chapter of Genesis is no longer consistent with the most sophisticated intellectual trends of his day. That led him to denounce the Christian faith in which he was raised, so that his 20's was given to youthful sin and worldly ambition. At some point, he encountered Christians who held unto a different interpretation of Genesis 1, and his intellectual critique of Christianity was undermined. His mother Monica never ceased to pray for him, and after much personal struggle, he had an extraordinary conversion experience. This is Augustine's brief testimony. He was arguably the most influential theologian in the history of the Western church. However, in its broad outline, it is a narrative that seems to replay itself again and again in our days. The details are definitely different, for instance, our threat today comes from naturalism, while Augustine's came from Manicheism. But the overall scenario is only too familiar to us, especially because today it lacks a happy ending unfortunately.

### **Creation at the Heart of Augustine**

Most people are ignorant of the influence Genesis 1 had in the conversion of Augustine, and most still would not identify the doctrine of creation as the *capo lavoro* (masterpiece) of his theology. Thinking of Augustine, the first things that come to mind is the emphasis he lays on divine grace, or his high doctrine of the church, or his penetrating insights into the Trinity. But in many ways, his doctrine of creation was at the core of who he was, both as a theologian and as a Christian. If Augustine had not listened to Ambrose preaching allegorically on Genesis 1 in 384, he might never have come to wrestle Donatism or Pelagianism. More importantly, he fought continuously with the doctrine of creation all through his life, and it became an integral part of his entire theological endeavor. Augustine did not only write three distinct commentaries on Genesis, but the doctrine of creation comes up at very essential moment in what are probably his two most important works, *Confessions and The City of God*. He wrestled with the doctrine of creation at a profoundly existential level. At the risk of overstatement, it might be suggested that creation was to Augustine what justification was to Luther, or liberalism was to Barth – a particular area of doctrine which, because of a theologian's own personal journey, comes to an especially vigorous expression and is visible in almost all their writings.

### **What Augustine teaches us today**

What we know for sure is that Augustine totally cared about creation. But the question is, should we who are interested in creation care about Augustine? Of course, does it not seem like

a mere academic nostalgia to think that a figure from the 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> century can help us address challenges that are predominantly related to scientific discoveries of the last few centuries? Let us not forget that Augustine was a man of his own time. Because Augustine approached the doctrine of creation long before the challenge of modernity, his teachings can helpfully reframe issues and reorient us to a broader range of concerns. This is another way to locate avenues of thought that can move us beyond the polarization that characterizes much reflection on the doctrine of creation. We must watch against the hubris that every knowledge comes through smartphones. The same thing C.S. Lewis termed “chronological snobbery.” Augustine is exceptionally a deep thinker, for that reason we have so much to learn from his wisdom, insight and sincerity. We may even find him to be of great help to correct us against some of the characteristic blind spots of our own time. A perfect description of this experience would be travelling to another country. You come to realize the peculiarities of your own culture when you visit other cultures. In this, the question is, what a generous-minded person would regard as a disinclination to learn from that which is foreign as a sign of progress, rather than narrowness?

### **The Relevance of Augustine today**

In his lifelong commitment to this aspect, Augustine has shown a peculiar sensitivity to many of the concerns that are evident in contemporary debate about the doctrine of creation (ecosystem). There are three special ways Augustine can assist us today:

***Expanding Our Vision:*** Augustine pulls us into a new orbit of

concerns within the doctrine of creation.

**Modeling Humility:** Augustine provides a good of how to neither retreat from, nor bow down before, the claims of natural sciences.

**Nuancing “Literal”:** Augustine encourages the reading of Genesis 1-3 that is humbly receptive while remaining sensitive to the nuances and complexities of this portion of the Scripture. Just as a recap that will be useful to refresh the story of Augustine, but in his own words: “In Milan I found your devoted servant Ambrose... Unknown to me, it was you who led me to him, so that I might knowingly be led to you... I listened attentively when he preached to the people... I began to believe that the Catholic faith, which I had thought impossible to defend against the objectives of the Manichees, might be fairly maintained, especially since I had heard one passage after another in the Old Testament figuratively explained. These passages had been death to me when I took them literally, but once I had heard them explained in their spiritual meaning I began to blame myself for my despair.”<sup>19</sup>

### **What we do not remember**

What is the conception of Genesis 1-3? Sometimes it is viewed as a form of exposition to the biblical narrative. Usually when we engage the doctrine of creation more directly, our gaze tends to be myopic, and our questions are normally science-faith based: what is the nature of the days in the first chapter of Genesis? Are Adam and Eve of Genesis 2-3 historical figures? Are they the first human beings, and the progenitors of all modern human beings? They are all very important questions. But if we approach these three chapters as more than a mere

<sup>19</sup> Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, V.13-14.

preamble or preface to the biblical story, we are likely to find that the material contribution of these chapters to Christian theology would not be sufficient exhaust these concerns. This is so because these part of the Scripture offers a holistic framework for how to live as creatures of God in God's world, it helps us fuse every aspect of our existence – from relationship to work, laughter, music, and play – as people who bear God's image. A lot of times we lay such much emphasis on our lives as Christians in the church with no reference to life as a human being. However, the categories of sin and salvation are only intelligible in the light prior category of creation – when for instance a person says, “I am a sinner” is a further specification of the assertion, “I am a creature.” Therefore, engaging Augustine's doctrine of creation is a way to widen our horizon of concerns within the doctrine of creation.

### **The two types of reality**

Being forged in the context of apologetic debate, Augustine's doctrine of creation does have a kind of philosophical flair. His exegetical works as well devote considerable space and energy to digressions regarding the origin of the soul, or the nature of memory. More so, Augustine drew upon the idea of creation *ex nihilo*<sup>20</sup> to distinguish the Christian view of creation from various Manichean, Parmenidean, and Platonic alternatives. For example, the Christian God is not similar to the demiurge of Plato's *Timeaeus*, who shapes the world from pre-existent chaos. Given that God freely brings creatures into being out of nothing, they therefore owe their existence wholly to Him. It means that to an extent they are “less real” that the God who created them. Joseph Torchia aptly summarizes thus, “creatures occupy a mid-rank which situates them between the

plenitude of Being found in God and absolute negation<sup>21</sup>.” Meaning, for Augustine, creaturely existence is a participatory act not autonomous; so it necessarily requires relation, for the only kind of being that any creature enjoys is from the One who is Being itself.

### **The Turning Point**

Augustine is moved to suppose a radical dependence of creatures on the Creator, regardless of the stain of sin. Jared Ortiz says, “for Augustine, creation has a ‘conversion torque,’ a dynamic orientation toward God, indeed, toward salvation.”<sup>22</sup> Of course, sin has brought a fundamentally new problem by disrupting the link between the Creator and the creature. However, because of the radically contingent status of creation, Augustine emphasized a continuity between our redemption from sin and our corporeal, creaturely life. Redemption then for Augustine is not an intrusion into our creaturely status, but its deepest realization. Augustine proclaims that the perfection of every created thing can only occur in Him from whom it derives its being in the first place. For him each created thing “finally coming to rest” in God as the attainment of the “goal of its own momentum.” This momentum he has in mind here is generated by creatureliness i.e., the inherent tilt of all creatures toward God. Augustine continues by distinguishing between two different termini of creation this way: “The whole universe of creation... has one terminus in its own nature, another in the goal which it has in God ... It can come to no stable and properly established rest, except in the quiet rest of the one who does not have to make any effort to get anything beyond himself to find rest in it. And for this reason, while God abides in himself, he swings everything whatever that comes from him back to himself, like

<sup>118</sup> Jared Ortiz, “*You Made Us for Yourself*”: *Creation in Augustine's Confessions*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016, p. 230.



a boomerang, so that every creature might find in him the final terminus and goal for its nature, not to be what he is, but to find in him the place of rest in which to preserve what by nature it is in itself.”<sup>23</sup> For Augustine, all of creation that comes from God must return to him through redemption, like a boomerang. And until then, it is “restless.” And this “restlessness” calls to mind, for sure, the famous prayer of Augustine at the beginning of the *Confessions*, which is another way of summarizing the whole of his theological vision: “you have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”<sup>24</sup> The particularly obvious thing for Augustine’s conception of human experience and longing is the significance of creation. He insists that the deepest human reality is our profound “restlessness” i.e., the loss of everything for which we have been created, and nothing else but God can fill the void. There is basically no particular area of theology that does not have a connection to this meditation on the implications of such a vision, and it will be rather unfortunate if we bypass these important considerations too quickly in our rush just to determine how old the universe is.

### **The Importance of Humility in Creation Debates**

As observed earlier, Augustine fell in love with the first three chapters of the book of Genesis. He wrote continuously and re-writing commentaries on these chapters, that for fifteen years, he worked on a kind of “Summa Creatio” i.e., his finished commentary on the literal meaning of Genesis (*De Genesi Ad Litteram*). This work on creation is second to no other work among the church fathers. However, Augustine himself is very modest about his inputs. His description of his hermeneutical

<sup>119</sup> Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis 4.18.34*, trans. Edmund Hill (The Works of Saint Augustine 1.13), New York: New City Press, 2002, p. 260.

<sup>120</sup> Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, p. 14.

method was more of “asking questions rather than making affirmations;” he concludes his finished commentary by emphasizing its “many uncertainties;” in Augustine’s *Retractions* he calls it “a work on which more questions were asked than answers found; and of those that were found only a few were assured, while the rest were so stated as still to require further investigation.”<sup>25</sup> Whoever slogs through Augustine’s commentary work will perceive a genuinely reverent quality to such great works. Augustine believes that creation was a deeply mysterious doctrine, and can only be approached through the kind of awe that a child feels while looking up at the stars on a cloudless night.

### **Humility before Scripture**

Augustine is usually concerned to treat the Scripture carefully. Often, he warns against the danger of “rashness” – *temeritas* in Latin; a word that comes up very often in his commentaries. One of his usual maneuvers is to canvass a number of interpretative options, clue toward a possible answer, but ultimately withdraw from needing a definitive position from his reader. For example, Augustine suggests two possible ways of understanding the “expanse” of Genesis 1:7, and he exhorts, “you may choose whichever you prefer; but avoid asserting anything rashly, as well as something you don’t know as if you did; also remember you are just human investigating the works of God to the extent you are permitted to do so.”<sup>26</sup> Humility before Scripture for Augustine meant a certain willingness to countenance multiple exegesis of unclear passages that we think is open to only one interpretation. “Let us never,” he kindly warns, “throw ourselves head over heels into the

<sup>25</sup> Augustine, *Retractions* 2.24, in Saint Augustine, *On Genesis*, trans. Edmund Hill (The Works of Saint Augustine 1.13) New York: New City Press, 2002, p. 1.67

<sup>26</sup> *De Genesis ad litteram liber unus imperfectus* 9.30, in Saint Augustine, *On Genesis*, trans. Edmund Hill, p. 133

headstrong assertion” of our personal opinion of a biblical passage, so that we put ourselves forward as “championing what is not the cause of the divine scriptures but our own, in a way that we want it to be of the scriptures.<sup>27</sup>” Augustine is astutely aware of how easy it is to proclaim to defend the Scriptures when in reality we are only defending ourselves.

### **Humility before Science**

Another call from Augustine, but this time the call is for topics we would categorize as natural sciences – astronomy and geology, what the ancients considered as part of philosophy. While working on his commentaries, he sought to comprehend current opinions about subjects like the cycle of the planets and the phases of the moon – he however warns, that it is not the intention of the Bible to answer all human curiosities on such issues. He famously declared: “There is knowledge to be had, after all, about the earth, about the sky, about other elements of the earth, about the movements and revolutions or even the magnitude and distances of the constellations, about the predictable eclipses of the moon and the sun, about the cycles of years and seasons, about the nature of animals, fruits, stones, and everything else of the kind. And it happens frequently that even non-Christians will have knowledge of this kind in a way that they can substantiate with scientific arguments or experiments. Now it is quite disgraceful and disastrous, something to be on one’s guard against at every costs, that they should ever hear Christians spouting what they claim our Christian literature has to say on these topics, and talking such nonsense that they can scarcely contain their laughter.”

Augustine’s compelling concern here is obvious in his hyperbolic language, which conjures up an almost cartoonish

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<sup>27</sup>De Genesis ad litteram liber unus imperfectus 9.30, in Saint Augustine, *On Genesis*, trans. Edmund Hill, p. 133

image of Christians rambling in ignorance while non-Christian “scientists” are doubled over in an uncontainable laughter. What for Augustine is more disturbing about a scenario like this, is that it misrepresent the Christian faith itself. He writes: “And what is so annoying is not that misguided should be laughed at, as that our authors should be assumed by outsiders to have held such notions and, to the great detriment of those about whose salvation we are so concerned, should be written off and consigned to the waste paper bin as so many ignoramuses. Whenever, you see, they catch some members of the Christian fold making mistakes on a subject which they know inside out, ad defending their hollow opinions on the authority of our books, on what grounds are they going to trust those books on the resurrection of the dead and the hope of life eternal and the kingdom of heaven, when they suppose they include any number of mistakes and fallacies on matters which they themselves have been able to master either by experiment or by exact calculations? It is never possible to say what trouble and pain such rash, self-assured know-all cause the more cautious and experienced brethren.”<sup>29</sup>

### **Humility: Conviction or the Lack?**

When discussing the issue of humility there is a possibility of someone arguing that, “it is all-too-easy to trump for humility in areas considered less weighty. But if what we are talking about is concerning the deity of Christ, you wouldn’t have to be warning about the dangers of rashness!” Even at that, Augustine did not consider humility as an antonym to conviction, as if to be humble requires adopting a vaguely deferential mindset on all issues. He made a clear distinction between the clear/central aspects of creation, on one hand, and

<sup>29</sup>De Genesi ad litteram 1.18.37, pp. 185-86

the relatively murky/peripheral, on the other – what he called ‘certainties’ versus ‘opinion.’ For Augustine, humility signified an unflinching allegiance to the former as much as a prudential discretion about the latter. For example, at the beginning of his unfinished commentary on Genesis, Augustine advocates for a questioning posture toward the doctrine of creation, because the “rash assertion of a person’s uncertain and dubious opinions... can scarcely avoid the charge of sacrilege.”<sup>30</sup> But he continues to caution that our doubts and questions must never exceed the rule of faith, offering an extended account of the Apostles’ Creed in its African form (with occasional references to the Nicene Creed) as a criterion for “the bounds of Catholic faith.” The particular places he lays more emphasis as inviolable are Trinitarian agency in creation, non-eternality of creation, the goodness of creation, and the redemption of creation through the work of Christ.<sup>31</sup> Humility for Augustine therefore, within the doctrine of creation concerns the kind of methodologically self-conscious balance, whereby we are as eager to affirm the weighty matters of orthodoxy as we are circumspect in our private judgments about the debated areas. To summarize punchily, humility does not signify saying “I don’t know” to every question. It means rather, saying “I don’t know” when, in truth, you don’t know.

### **Ecosystem at the center of Augustine’s thought**

To approach the topic of ecosystem in Augustine, the City of God offers the contemporary Christian thinking on creation a great positive influence. This is so because it concerns the current state of human relationship to the rest of the entire creation. Augustine says: “I speak only of this particular life

<sup>30</sup>De Genesi ad litteram 1.19.39, p. 186.

<sup>31</sup>De Genesi ad litteram 1.19.39, pp. 186-87.

which we know, and which we now are. [Who] can describe the gifts of God's goodness that are extended to the human race even in this life?<sup>32</sup>" We can see that he gives an empirical approach. For this reason, he invites us to find the answers but reflectively looking at our life's experiences. Augustine's major contribution to aid understand better the inherent problems with our interaction with the rest of creation centers around his view of the autonomy or the dignity of nature. Again, Augustine is ever ready to vehemently point out that human experience of nature in itself offers us no answer to the inner value of their fundamental dignity. He seriously points out: "What man can go out of his house without being exposed on all sides to unforeseen accidents? And while returning home sound in limb, he slips on his own door-step, fractures his leg, and never recovers. What can seem safer than a man sitting on a chair? Eli the priest fell from his own, and broke his neck. How many accidents do farmers, or rather everyone, fears that crops may suffer from weather, or the soil, or the ravages of destructive animals? Commonly they feel safe when the crops are gathered and stored. Yet, to my certain knowledge, sudden floods have driven the laborers away, and emptied the barns clean of the finest harvest."<sup>33</sup>

We can see a narrow equivocation between human experience of creation and creation itself that makes our judgment about the relationship prejudiced or biased. To put it another way, our experience of creation, frequently thumping at our perilous existence as it does, naturally makes us to have an anthropocentric concern or bias toward nature. This makes us become more concerned about our own comfort and continued survival than our treatment of nature. This experience we have

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<sup>32</sup>De Genesis ad litteram liber unus imperfectus 1.1, p. 116.

<sup>33</sup>Augustine, *The City of God*, XII.22.

of creation makes us a bit uncertain about it. This is because creation is both a blessing and a curse in our histories, myths and experience. The environment enhances and sustains our life, but it can as well reek havoc upon us and take away our life. In theory, our relationship with creation is influenced by the bias of self-concern. Of course, Augustine is so much aware of the risk of judging creation from this biased, self-concern perspective, even given the worst case scenarios, he considers it as non-valuable or bad in itself. He is also careful not to spiritualize or deify creation, but makes great attempts to think of it for its created God-given reality and as an objective empirical fact. Failing to remember the blinding, unthinking presumptions of self-concern – survival instinct – we either forget that we cannot understand the mysterious organic portrait of creation, of which we are part of, or we fail to remember that God created all of the natural order as good. For Augustine, nature gets its intrinsic value and dignity, not in virtue of its inherent mystery, but in light of being created by a good Creator and in constant connection to the Creator from the beginning through to the end of time, regardless of human experience and human judgment. Hear Augustine: "... beauty does not strike us, because by our mortal weakness we are so involved in part of it, that we cannot perceive the whole, in which these fragments that offend us are harmonized with the most accurate fitness and beauty. And therefore where we are not so well able to perceive the wisdom of the Creator, we are very properly exhorted to believe it, lest in the vanity human rashness we presume to find fault with the work of so great an Artificer... the natures themselves displease men, as often happens when they become hurtful to them, and then men estimate them not by their nature, but by their utility; just as in

the case of those animals whose swarms scourged the Egyptians. But in this way of estimating, they may find fault with the sun itself; for some criminals or debtors are sentenced by the judges to be set in the sun. Therefore it is not with respect to human convenience or discomfort, but with respect to their very nature, that the creatures are glorifying to their Artificer... For [humans] wish to see [by the light of the fire], but not be burnt. But they forget that this very light which is so pleasant to them, does not go well with and hurts weak eyes; and in the heat which is disagreeable to them, some animals find the most suitable conditions for healthy like. All natures, therefore, inasmuch as they are, and have a rank and a species of their own, and a kind of internal harmony, are definitely good.<sup>34</sup>”

The notion of Augustine on creation in connection does not rely heavily on biased human self-concern and judgment, which is vague and connected to self-interest; it is rather on the presupposition that the Creator of creation is good and therefore created a good creation in totality regardless of human experience and testimony. This is not something we may see because of our lack of objective distance and our consideration of nature based on utility, rather than in its essence. Augustine continues his teaching: “For what else is to be understood by that invariable chorus, “And God saw that it was good,” than the approval of the work I its design, which is the wisdom of God... there is just one source of everything, and that no nature which is not divine can exist unless originated by that Creator...accept with a good and simple faith this is so good and simple a reason of the world’s creation, that a good God made it good<sup>35</sup>.”

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<sup>34</sup>Augustine, *The City of God*, XII.22-23.

<sup>35</sup>Augustine, *The City of God*, XII.4-5.



The wisdom of God is seen in the creation he made which is good. This is to say that we may not always have a clue as to how certain aspects of creation are in fact good, but we can be certain they are because a good God created them. As a basis to respect the inherent dignity in creation, Augustine lays down this foundation. In essence, creation has an inherent dignity, set in stone, if you will, by the mysterious order and design of the Creator of creation. In addition, we can say with Augustine that God is not just unintelligible, but so is God's handiwork that shows forth the mysterious hiddenness of God through God's creativity.<sup>36</sup> In any case, although nature mediates and reflects the goodness and mystery of God, created is not God. This should help Christians not to be afraid of exalting nature to divine status in a pantheistic mood. Even in this facet, the autonomy of creation is not only separated and appreciated apart from humans, but is distinguished from God, the Creator, and therefore definitely allowed a goodness of its own accord: "He governs all things in such a way as to allow them to perform and exercise their own proper movements. For although they can be nothing without him, they are not what He is."<sup>37</sup> God is God; creation is creation. The world becomes a standing miracle, foreshadowing the wonderful fullness of creation in the future.<sup>38</sup> The corruption of created nature is not in its nature, since nature is created by a good God; corruption comes from the perversion or abuse of nature, and carries with it its own punishment<sup>39</sup> Augustine seem to press the dignity and integrity of the inherent goodness and value of the created order to an extreme position, to the extent of teaching that the most malicious of natures is naturally to be considered good: "There is a nature [God] where evil does not and cannot even

<sup>36</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, Cf., X.12, XI.24&XII.24.

<sup>37</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, VII.30.

<sup>38</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, Cf., X.12&XII.23.

<sup>39</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, Cf., XII.3, XIV.3&XV.22.

exist; but there cannot be nature in which there is no good. Consequently, not even the nature of the devil himself is evil, in so far as it is nature, but it was made evil by being perverted. Thus he did not abide in the truth, but could not escape the judgment of the Truth; he did not abide in the tranquility of order, but did not therefore escape the power of the Ordainer. The good transmitted by God to this nature did not screen him from the justice of God by which order was preserved in his punishment; neither did God punish the good which he had created, but the evil which the devil had committed.<sup>40</sup>

### **Augustine’s “Literal” Reading of Genesis**

The various theories on creation today are mostly summarized in terms of whether one takes the biblical “literally” or not. Augustine’s greatest achievement on the doctrine of creation was the work on the “literal” commentary on Genesis 1-3. We should bear in mind that what Augustine means by “literal” is very different from many modern uses of the concept. The great theologian Inigo Montoya said: “you keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.”

### **Allegorical to Literal Interpretation**

Augustine’s description of his later works on Genesis as “literal,” was intended to differentiate them from the earlier two-volume work on Genesis against the Manichees. They included such ideas as taking the days of the first chapter of Genesis as 7 epochs of redemptive-historical history, and 7 stages of the Christian life.<sup>41</sup> With Augustine’s turn to a “literal” commentary, he wants to move from such allegorical meanings

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<sup>41</sup>De Genesis contra Manichaeos 1.23.35-1.25.43, in Saint Augustine, On Genesis, trans. Edmund Hill, pp. 62-68.

of the text to its historical signification. For this reason, in his *Retractions*, he qualifies the word “literal” in the theme *The Literal Commentary on Genesis* as meaning “not the allegorical meanings of the text, but evaluation of what actually happened.”<sup>42</sup> The fine-tuning of the interpretative strategy did not mean a rejection of allegorical exegesis wholesale – as Yoon Kyung Kim figures out, in the course of his development of Augustine’s understanding of how the literal meaning progresses to encompass the allegorical too<sup>43</sup>. We can find in Augustine’s literal commentaries affirmations of the validity of allegorical interpretation, so too the repetitions of specific allegorical interpretations<sup>44</sup> found in his earlier works.<sup>45</sup> What we see in Augustine thus far, is that his usage of “literal” has to do with historical referentiality, not with the particularly literary genre or style in which that history is recounted. Augustine did not use the “literal” to exclude the possibility of language that is metaphorical, figurative, pictorial or poetic.

## The Days of Creation for Augustine

What exactly does Augustine think Genesis 1 “literally” means? In Augustine’s completed literal commentary, he lays much emphasis on the ineffability of the creation act, and our difficulty in grasping what it means: “it is of course an arduous and extremely cumbersome task for us to get through to what the author meant with six days, however concentrated our attention and lively our minds.”<sup>46</sup> At the end he accepts that the

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<sup>41</sup>De Genesis contra Manichaeos 1.23.35-1.25.43, in Saint Augustine, *On Genesis*, trans. Edmund Hill, pp. 62-68.

<sup>42</sup>*Retractions* 22.24, p. 167.

<sup>43</sup>Yoon Kyung Kim, *Augustine's Changing Interpretations of Genesis 1-3: from De Genesi contra Manichaeos to De Genesi ad Litteram*, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2006, pp. 163-167.

<sup>44</sup>De Genesis ad litteram liber unus imperfectus 2.5, p. 116.

<sup>45</sup>De Genesis ad litteram 2.9.22, p. 202.

<sup>46</sup>De Genesis ad litteram 4.1.1, p. 241.

ordinary 24-hours days “are not at all like [the days of Genesis 1], but entirely different.”<sup>47</sup> For Augustine, God creates all things in accordance, and the 7-day construct in Genesis 1 is an accommodation in which “the Scriptural style comes down to the level of little ones and adjusts itself to their capacity.”<sup>48</sup> Specifically, Augustine affirms that the ordering of Genesis is not according to temporal sequence but the ordering of angelic knowledge.<sup>49</sup> Hence, Augustine did not only differentiate the days of Genesis 1 from ordinary 24-hour days, he distinguished God’s initial creative act as well from his subsequent activity in creation: “When we meditate upon the first establishment of creatures in the works of God from which he rested on the seventh day, we should not think either of those days as being like these ones governed by the sun, nor of that working as resembling the way God now works in time; but we should reflect rather upon the work from which times began, the work of making all things at once, simultaneously.”<sup>51</sup>

## Augustine’s Inspiration

In spite of the fact that Augustine was aware of the wider philosophical concerns in his context, his interpretation of Genesis 1 was ultimately rooted in certain exegetical problems. For instance, Augustine grappled with the nature of the light in days 1-3 before the creation of the luminaries on day 4. Observing the phrase in Genesis 1:14, “let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years,” Augustine questioned, “who can fail to see how problematic is their

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<sup>47</sup>De Genesis ad litteram 4.1.1, p. 241.

<sup>48</sup>De Genesis ad litteram 4.27.44, p. 267.

<sup>49</sup>Augustine has a thoroughgoing appreciation of the notion of accommodation i.e., the very idea that God has adjusted his revelation so that it might be comprehensible to the specific people to whom he is communicating. For example, he speaks of Scripture speaking “in a weak and simple style” when communicating to the weak and simple (*De Genesi ad litteram* 5.6.19), or compare biblical language to a mother teaching a toddler how to walk (*De Genesi ad litteram* 5.3.6).

<sup>50</sup>De Genesis ad litteram 2.6.13, p. 198.

<sup>51</sup>De Genesis ad litteram 4.25.56, 275.

implication that times began on the fourth day, as if the preceding three days could have passed without time?<sup>52</sup>” This problem destabilized Augustine. At the end, he identified the pre-solar light of day 1 with the spiritual/angelic creation. For him, angelology is a significant complicating feature of interpreting Genesis 1, for example, he correlated the morning/evening structure of Genesis 1, and the phrases “let there be” and “thus it was,” with different modes of angelic knowledge.<sup>53</sup> Augustine earmarked angels a significant role in the oversight of creation; at one point, e.g., he ponders whether the stars are “enspirited” by angels or merely “directed” by them.<sup>54</sup>

One further textual difficulty Augustine faced was the problem of relating Genesis 2:4-6 to the week of creation in Genesis, particularly the different usage of the term “day” in chapter 2:4 and the apparent dischronology introduced in 2:5 (“when no shrub had yet appeared”). He dedicates the whole of Book 5 of his literal commentary to how Genesis 2:4-6 “with all their problems, confirm the view that creation was the work of one day.” Expecting the charge that this particular notion of instantaneous creation draws so heavily on Sirach 18:1 in the Old Latin version (“he who remains for eternity created all things at once”), Augustine appeals to the textual proximity of these verses: “now we get evidence in support, not from another book of holy Scripture that God created all things simultaneously, but from next door neighbor’s testimony on the page following this matter.<sup>55</sup>” Again, Augustine drew attention to God’s rest on the Sabbath after the completion of

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<sup>52</sup>De Genesis ad litteram 2.6.13, p. 198.

<sup>53</sup>De Genesis ad litteram 4.25.56, 275.

<sup>54</sup>De Genesis ad litteram 5.5.12, p. 282.

<sup>55</sup>De Genesis ad litteram 2.14.28, p. 207.

<sup>56</sup>De Genesis ad litteram 4.23.40, pp. 264-65.

creation in Genesis 2:1-3. He insists that “God did not delight in some kind of temporal period of rest after hard toil,” he argued that this language must be read analogically.

## Conclusion

Pope Francis in his Encyclical Letter *Laudato si* admonishes that in relation to the present ecological crisis, “there is a need to take into consideration deeper and transcendental questions<sup>57</sup>”, he exhorts that the question of ecology is not only a matter of external and environmental issues, it is above all an interior matter – the ecology of the human soul. This is well in line with Pope John Paul II’s thoughts on ecology, when he points out the problem of consumerism and man’s failure to look at natural environment far more than its utility as the main culprit, and he calls for the so-called “ecological conversion<sup>58</sup>.” It is true that the ecological sensitivity we experience today did not exist during the time of Augustine, his thoughts on creation however, are extremely rich and seemingly ‘futuristic’ that today they can effectively help us comprehend and discover vital aspects of the universe leading us to reflect with greater and sincere profundity on the ecological crisis we face today. Augustine’s thinking is directly connected to story of his conversion, and that bears a very strong mark of an intellectual content and emphasis and it is also born of a crisis-ridden environment. This is the point I have tried to present in this paper, along with crisis context of both Augustine’s day and ours, as metaphorical (and even paradigmatic) virtue. We should have a rethink about our relationship with nature in terms that represent a position in-between the denigration and total denial of the dignity and rights of nature on one hand, and a spiritualization of creation (pantheism) that stands outside

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<sup>57</sup>Pope Francis. Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si*, (04.09.2015). *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 107 (2015).

<sup>58</sup>Pope John Paul II. Encyclical Letter, *Redemptor Hominis*, (04.03.1979). *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 71 (1979).

the context of Christian tradition on the other hand. It remains true anyway, that the teachings of Augustine do not provide any systematic treatment of our relationship with the environment that we may call Augustinian. But his teachings can help with an intelligent conversation about the environment more than an intellectual conversation about certain issues. It is very important to note that Augustine's thought on creation is heavily based on the Word of God. The in-depth reflection of Augustine on the scriptural story of creation, warranted him to design a clear picture of the creator as a Triune God whose impact on creation reflects the concrete works of the three divine Persons in the world, of what place and relation we should have with other creatures, and of the fact that the entire creation has a common orientation towards the fullness of peace and perfection God has designed in all eternity.

Augustine in his life and teaching warns against thinking that we are, or even have, the ultimate reference point when it comes to concerns about the whole of creation. Creation glorifies God in its very nature. The created world for Augustine is like an open book which tells the story of God's beauty and greatness. He describes it as a book which everyone can read because it is not written with ink and paper, but with a living and nonliving, tangible realities which don't cease proclaiming and praising the greatness of their creator. In this Augustine's perspective, the care of the created order does not only have a practical and material intent of gratifying man's need in the present and for the future, but more importantly because the whole of the universe has a sacred value – it is

more or less a form of a sacrament that manifests the presence of God and invites all men to raise their eyes and hearts to the transcendent truth so that they may not remain locked in the material goods of this world. His collective vision of all of history embraces the history of all created order. Furthermore, creation for Augustine, does not only speak of God through its beauty and harmony. His interpretation of Wisdom 11:20 helped him to conceive how creatures have inherent value in themselves as they participate in the divine reality through their measure, number, and weight, thereby making them a concrete manifestation of God, who is in Himself, a Trinity. For this reason, every creature notwithstanding its usefulness, size, and perfection, is not superfluous and is worthy of respect and care because it originates from God, it bears the reflection of God somehow, and vestiges of the creator; and is ceaselessly desired and sustained by God.

Summarily, we are reminded, in Augustine's doctrine of creation of our special place and what role we must play in the created world. Man for Augustine, is the curator of creation – not its owner – because it was God who created and put all things at the service of man. As an administrator, gifted with creativity, intelligence and self-transcendence, man has an exalted responsibility to care and guide creation, so that they may remain fruitful and faithful to their appointed purpose; and most importantly, that they may continue to be a sign of God, who created them not out of necessity, but by the outpouring of “the largeness of His bounty” (*abundantiam beneficentiae*).<sup>59</sup> Creation therefore must not be exploited for any selfish reason and interest, but should be used moderately and rationally (*uti*), and that only in view of man's love for God

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<sup>59</sup>De Genesis ad litteram 1.7.13, p. 42.



that it must be enjoyed (frui). As a way of concluding Augustine's compelling work on ecology, I will love to say that "ecological conversion" which we should all have, is before all else, a "conversion of the heart" as we meditate on nature and our place in it as Augustine exhorts: "Observe the beauty of the world and praise the plan of the creator: Observe what he made, love the One who made it [...] because He also made you, His lover, in His image."<sup>60</sup> Let us bear in mind that not only does the rejection of science by many Christians especially in this our present day of climate, change the planet over which we maintain stewardship as well as future generations to come, it can cause Christians to become stumbling blocks, undermining the very reason of the Great Commission.

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<sup>60</sup> Augustine, *Sermons* 68,5. in Saint Augustine, *On Genesis*, trans. Edmund Hill, p. 201.

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