A Franciscan Ethic for Justice to Creation

The *Canticle of Brother Sun* was the point of departure for E. Doyle OFM (a participant at the first *Terra Mater* conference held in Gubbio, 1982) in his book *St Francis and the Song of Brotherhood* (1980), in which he shows how belief in the universal brotherhood and sisterhood can help us to create a better world. Foreshadowing much of *Laudato Si*, this is a profound theological and mystical meditation on the inherent value of creation, providing a much needed spiritual vision of relationships and suggesting that we need ‘a religious outlook as the motive of our practical efforts’ in addressing the ecological crisis, since the critical economic, political, and social questions are inter-related and are symptoms of a spiritual malaise. For St Francis creation was sacramental, the visible sign of the all holy God, which expressed itself in his belief in the relational dynamic of brotherhood and sisterhood in Christ, given to every creature. If we recognise water as our sister, for example, argues Doyle, we would not poison her with toxic waste, but recognise our failure to do justice to creation, which possesses its own intrinsic worth.

Grounded in Scotus’ doctrine of the primacy of Christ, this paper will examine Doyle’s response to the ecological crisis, offering a new christological understanding of the broken relationship between humanity and God, the significance of Christ’s eucharistic presence in a ‘Christified’ and glorified creation, and the need for a restorative justice in our duty to save the earth.
Brenda Abbott

A Franciscan Ethic for Justice to Creation

Introduction
Born in 1938, Eric Doyle was a friar and theologian of the English province, who died in 1984 at the height of his contribution to Franciscan life and thought, at the age of just 46. His concern to show how belief in a universal brotherhood and sisterhood can help to create a better world led him to write *St Francis and the Song of Brotherhood*, a profound, mystical meditation on Francis’ passionate belief in the unity of creation, emanating from God’s love for creation. The vision expressed in the book made him an eminently suitable participant at the First World-wide Conference held on the Environment, which included both religious and secular organisations for the first time, held in Gubbio in 1982. Writing at a time when there was little concern for the environment, when the word ‘green’ in its environmental sense had not yet come into general use and the ramifications of humanity’s actions were not centre stage in a way they are nowadays, his vision, grounded in that of St Francis, is more needed than ever as humanity continues to plunder the earth, with little thought save the attitude which seeks to save the planet because it may result in humanity’s own extinction. The serious nature of the problem led Doyle to seek answers, providing suggestions that were based ‘on the conviction that we must have a religious outlook as the motive force of our practical efforts’.

The Intrinsic Value of Creation
In 1967, Professor Lynn White’s now infamous article argued that the root cause of the ecological problem could be traced to the traditional Christian view of man’s dominion over nature, and suggested that because the cause of the predicament was largely religious that the remedy should therefore also be essentially religious. The article received much attention and Doyle also responded, suggesting a thorough study of the biological, psychological, sociological, philosophical, artistic and religious-theological dimensions was required in order to establish whether what had happened in the history of the relationship between humanity and nature could demonstrate that it was the essence of Christianity that had caused the crisis, or whether it was due to a misuse of the world and a misunderstanding of humanity’s place in nature. Doyle asserts that the doctrines of Creation and Incarnation indicate that it is not the essence of Christianity which has brought about

---

2 The exception is Germany where ‘green issues’ were already being taken seriously.
the dilemma, but rather human selfishness due to the inner human problem of alienation and that the only solution is one which acknowledges the intrinsic value of creation. Forty-five years ago he wrote:

\[
\text{Any effort to prevent further environmental carnage on the sole grounds that we humans are in danger of extinction, without asking ourselves at the same time why it is that nature in itself should be respected and revered, is only a new brand of the very selfishness which has brought us to our present unhappy condition.} \]

Despite all debate and discussion in the intervening years, environmental problems have become ever more acute. Numerous alarming reports by the United Nations, and dramatic climate change, are sufficient evidence of the magnitude of the crisis which now faces the earth and Doyle’s argument that humanity’s approach to the crisis should not be one of grave anxiety because we fear our own demise, but one which recognises that not dominion but vice-regency must hold sway, is apposite and arguably the only way forward. For Doyle, the authentic Christian attitude to nature is exemplified most clearly in St Francis’ 

\textit{Canticle}, which is not an outdated ‘lovely piece of medieval romanticism’, but a mystical poem which Doyle describes as having come from a creative, contemplative encounter with God. This encounter was a union which Francis experienced not only with God, but in and through God with all other beings and all of creation. Union of this kind has no shred of selfishness, writes Doyle, and no ulterior motive. The union between the self and the not-self is such that the inner and outer are one. However, there is no fusion, the individual is not lost in the great All because union differentiates. Francis did not regard himself as simply an isolated subject facing objects in the world, observes Doyle, but saw himself as one love-centre in a universal brotherhood and sisterhood. Nature has ‘meaning-in-itself’ because it is created by God, it does not have its value or take its meaning purely from humankind. Humanity, writes Doyle, needs to recover a sense of mystery and approach nature with reverence and respect.

Despite the differing world views of the Middle Ages and the present day \textit{The Canticle} contains a vision which is of lasting significance and has universal relevance, and is one that will save the earth. The key to understanding the Canticle is in Francis’ use of the words ‘brother’ and ‘sister’ which, for

---


7 See for example: \url{www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-26810559}. (Accessed 30.08.14). Reports on the environment tend to highlight the planet’s plight and suggest measures to tackle the problems, but do not appear to take the intrinsic value of creation as their starting point.

8 This view is held by the Franciscan Tradition as may be seen for example in the collection of essays in \textit{Franciscan Theology of the Environment: An Introductory Reader}, Dawn M. Nothwehr, ed. (Franciscan Press, Quincy University, Illinois, 2002), which includes chapter 2 of \textit{St Francis and the Song of Brotherhood}, pp.155-174.

9 E. Doyle, \textit{Song of Brotherhood}, p.45.

him, have a sacred meaning. Francis conceived the world as one vast ‘Friary’ in which each brother and sister holds a unique and indispensable place, akin to haecceitas, as Scotus later philosophised it. The two world views, the static and the dynamic, ever present in Doyle’s mind, come together in his statement:

As the key to Einstein’s universe is contained in the devastatingly short statement that time is relative, so is the key to Francis’ universe found in the tremendously simple belief, the grace of brotherhood in Christ, which is given to every creature.11

Francis’ vision of the universe remains relevant today because it is the same underlying belief in the doctrine of creation, then as now, which holds sway. That is to say that all reality originates in a ‘most sovereignly free act of an all-loving God’.12 Doyle explains:

Francis believed the doctrine of creation with his whole heart. It told him that the entire universe - the self and the total environment to which the self belongs (microcosm and macrocosm) - is the product of the highest creative power, the creativity of Transcendent Love. By creation, God brings to being what did not exist, and then in love he lets it be itself.13

This ‘letting be’ is an essential element in Francis’ attitude towards creation. It is a mark of love, a recognition of the absolute priority of the intrinsic value of creation, because God himself loved creation and saw that it was good. If we are to take Francis seriously then, we need to do what we can to emulate him, and in order to do this successfully we need to do so as people of our own age who accept, love and nurture the knowledge that we live in an ever evolving universe. This knowledge, writes Doyle, will increase our love of the earth and transform our understanding into wisdom, ‘because it is this more than all else that reveals our organic unity with the earth.’14

Doyle believed that there is no other doctrine that could proclaim anything more profound about the inherent value of creation than that of the Absolute Primacy of Christ.15 Everything came to be through the Word of God (Col. 1:16). The God-Man is the centre of all creation who unites the material and the spiritual to God and through his holiness makes the world holy.16 In other words, writes Doyle, ‘the essential goodness of human nature is brought out by the very fact of the Incarnation’.17 The doctrine of the Primacy is an ‘assertion of the goodness of matter, the value of work and the meaning of human and cosmic history’. From all eternity it had been God’s will to

11 E. Doyle, Song of Brotherhood, p.42.
12 Ibid., p.73.
14 E. Doyle, Song of Brotherhood, p.138.
15 Ibid., p.68. See also D. Edwards, ‘Teilhard’s Vision as Agenda for Rahner’s Christology’ in From Teilhard to Omega, esp. pp.59-60 where Edwards expounds the influence of the Scotistic doctrine on Rahner’s thought.
17 Ibid.
unite creation in Christ who is its crowning point.\textsuperscript{18} God has revealed a message about the everlasting value of creation, for the Incarnation marked the re-creation and transformation of all things.\textsuperscript{19} Like the Incarnation, the Eucharist is confirmation of the value of the world. The intrinsic value of the bread and wine is to be found in the fact that they are deemed worthy to become the body and blood of Christ. The Eucharist, proclaims Doyle, ‘is one moment in a process of transformation’ and is a reminder that one day Christ will return and that there will be a new world when the whole of creation will be transformed, and taken up into that transformation will be our every effort to build a better world.\textsuperscript{20}

\textbf{A Christocentric Approach to Sin}

In the Christocentric view of reality, humanity’s relationship with creation and with each other, raises the question: if human beings have been created with, to, and for Christ, and hence enjoy primarily a Christic solidarity, how is humankind’s solidarity in Adam to be conceived? Doyle asks this question in the context of discussing original sin, but it is relevant here precisely because of the discussion about humanity’s relationship to the earth in Christ. Doyle asks: ‘If “to live is Christ” are not sin and death to be measured in terms of one’s relationship to Christ rather than Adam?’\textsuperscript{21} The Christian evolutionary aspect looks towards the future to the fully glorified Christ who, as the primary intention of God’s creative action is also the norm by which human deficiency must be judged.\textsuperscript{22} For Doyle, then, the human race has its solidarity in Christ prior to its solidarity in the first parents of the human race. He describes the relationship thus:

\begin{quote}
Spiritual brother/sisterhood is given to the human race in the Absolute Primacy of Christ as an intrinsic element of the free gift of grace and is concomitant with creation itself. On the basis of our unity in Christ, the parent-child relationship (Adam and descendants) takes second place to the Brother-brother/sister relationship (Christ the firstborn of many brethren) to explain both the unity of the human race and the universality of original sin.\textsuperscript{23}
\end{quote}

Doyle explains further: sin which is always ultimately unintelligible, emerges from our freedom, though it is not of freedom’s essence. It is the ‘inexplicable drive to put self first in a way that makes

\textsuperscript{19} E. Doyle, \textit{Song of Brotherhood}, p.138.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., pp.203-204.
\textsuperscript{22} E. Doyle, ‘Christ, the Cosmos, and the Problem of Evil,’ p.4.
\textsuperscript{23} E. Doyle, ‘John Duns Scotus and the Place of Christ,’ p.863. MHQ, p.303.
it a sub-species of idolatry. All sin, then, is divisive because it is a turning inwards and away from God and from other people. He explains:

Sin is destructive of love (unity) which is the going-out to the Other and others for their own sake, in that freedom which is the power of self-determination in the face of the known and acknowledged good. Hence sin is directly and primarily contrary to the unity and solidarity of the human race in Christ. Understood in this way, all sin is christological.

By viewing sin from a christological perspective and within the context of an evolving world, Doyle has not in any way sought to diminish the seriousness of sin, but on the contrary, emphasises the grave nature of sin with its destructive effects on the individual person, which destroys the creative tension between self-love and self-concern, so necessary for self-acceptance, and our relationship with the rest of reality, be that human or otherwise. The corroding of our relationships, asserts Doyle, stunts growth in integrity and generates divisiveness, absolutising what is relative and gives rise to all manner of particularisms: individualism, sectarianism, nationalism, racism, all of which are totally destructive of unity and ‘the vision of a cosmic brotherhood’. Evil, or sin, is therefore not only personal but has a far-reaching effect at the social and cosmic levels as well. Evil destroys our organic, loving relationship with creation so that the Canticle can appear to be no more than ‘preposterous nonsense or subversive romanticism’. However, in view of the present ecological crisis, Doyle’s interpretation is apt. He writes that:

Because we are members of one another our collective guilt, for instance, in polluting and murdering the ocean in certain parts of the world is as morally grave at the level of cosmic relationships as the unjust distribution of wealth and resources is at the level of human relationships. Cosmic and human relationships are collaterals of the all-embracing relationship called fraternal.

Seen from this perspective it is possible to grasp the relevance of the Canticle for all time. Evil, or sin, militates against its vision of brother-sisterhood which extends to all times, places, people and matter, whether in a static or dynamic world view. Like Scotus, Doyle looked first at Christ and then grasped the profoundly christological nature of sin.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, then, Doyle makes a number of suggestions. Firstly, that Christians need to take the lead in saying ‘no’ to themselves in regard to their demands on the environment. Secondly, theologians should formulate ‘a theology of creation which includes aesthetic categories in its essential structure’, since the religious roots of the ecological crisis are as much bound up with our

---

26 E. Doyle, *Song of Brotherhood*, p.189.
27 Ibid., p.190.
ideas about God as they are about our concept of nature. It is interesting to note that thirty-five years after he made that suggestion this is now happening, notably in the work of Scotus scholars.29

Thirdly, Doyle suggested, a theology of the environment needed to be worked out as a logical corollary of the theologies of creation, Incarnation and Eucharist and in close liaison with the theologies of the aesthetic of leisure. His final two suggestions concerned education of the young which should make it one of its basic aims to ‘restore the sense of wonder at the beauty, mystery and fascinating intricacy of nature’.30 Education, he maintains:

…is meant to bring a person to a greater awareness of personal dignity and uniqueness through a mutual sharing of insights and riches which everyone possesses. Education is meant to lead to liberation and peace, so that it is possible to love self and all others in the love that is a true letting-be, the love which seeks no power over others, the love that has no ulterior motive, the love that recognises instinctively the value of every creature encountered.31

For Doyle, the significance of this outlook is realised when it is remembered that everyone in their life is at some time in a learning situation, including the world’s religious and political leaders, and it is at that stage in their lives that what they are taught then will determine their most basic attitudes to reality for the rest of their lives. Doyle believes that one basic aim of education is to inculcate a deep respect for people and the sacredness of the world, and that this could be done by teaching children The Canticle of Brother Sun. 32

Doyle’s suggestions, if implemented, would lead to a world where people are not only more connected to nature, but they would also be more reflective, less selfish and more integrated. The Franciscan vision of the world is both attractive and challenging and demands, in Doyle’s words, ‘a mighty change of heart’. However, it is only this christocentric approach, which Doyle believed would ultimately save the earth and we, for our part, need to remember that God is alpha and omega, and humanity second and penultimate.

(As a summary of his beliefs Doyle composed his own canticle modelled on the Canticle of Brother Sun, The Song of Sister Energy, which expresses the same sentiments as those of St Francis but situated in the context of an evolving cosmos.33)


30 E. Doyle, Song of Brotherhood, p.78.

31 Ibid., p.209.

32 Ibid., p.211.

33 Ibid., p.215.