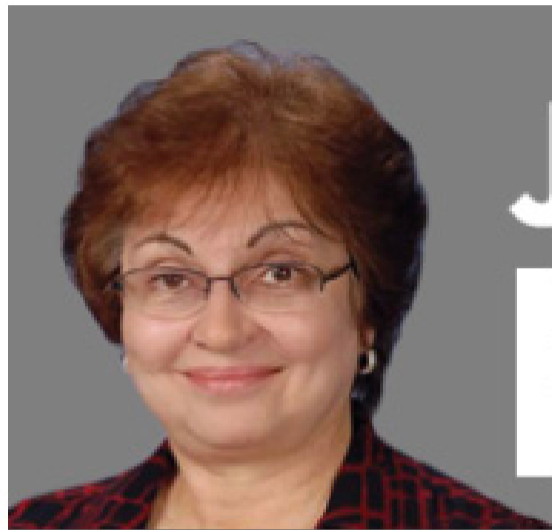


Who are we?

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JOURNEY TOWARD HOLINESS



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By Sister Mary Garascia

Sara, a nine year old girl I know, takes a city bus to her Catholic elementary school. Recently Sara told her Dad about a chat she had with a public high school girl on the bus. The girl told Sara that she belonged to school group which was into demonic stuff, and the group also believed each of them had an animal spirit. Hers was a cat, the girl said, and she told Sara she planned to have cosmetic surgery to make her nose look more cat like. “Wow, what did you say,” asked Sara’s Dad? Sara replied, “I said, why would you do that? You’re beautiful just the way God made you!”

One of the spiritual riches of our Catholic tradition is our understanding of what it means to be human. This “Catholic anthropology” is captured in the short phrase, Image of God (Imago Dei). At only nine, Sara’s comment showed she already had some understanding that her bus mate was an Image of God.

Human persons are created good by a God who is good (and beautiful and true, the other “transsubstantials” of philosophy). In the narratives about creation in Genesis, we see Divine goodness at work. In our own times, our theological understanding of how God creates includes evolution. Evolution shows us that God’s good creating is a continuing action, not just an originating action. God is a necessary component of everything that emerges over the eons, from the smallest and simplest to the largest and most complex, in our universe and any other universes that may exist. In the familiar hymn “All My Days” we sing the scriptural language, “You have made me little less than a god, and...given me rule over all.” But today perhaps we have a bit more humble view of ourselves. We understand that we humans are part of the continuum of everything in the cosmos that images God’s goodness.

Formerly also, being images or “like God” meant especially human rationality and morality, and other traits that flow from having a soul; the soul was said to be like God because “it is a spirit having understanding and free will, and is destined to live forever.” That statement is from The Baltimore Catechism, in use before and after Vatican II (1962-65). The Universal Catechism of the Catholic Church was published about 30 years after Vatican II (1990). Its renewed understanding of image of God has continued to be developed by theologians in the last 30 years. What are some of these renewed understandings?

Note that most of our modern “fields of study,” things our college students major in, did not exist until about 1850. There was no psychology, cosmology, sociology, genetics, etc., that Christian writers could draw insights from. Today we understand that “human” rationality and morality are exhibited also by other creatures, to greater or lesser degrees. Think of the human traits of compassion and loyalty that companion dogs have for their humans. Spiritual writer, Father Richard Rohr even dedicated his recent book, “The Universal Christ,” to his deceased black Lab named Venus, who “was also Christ for me.”

Another renewed understanding is that our bodies, not only our souls, also image God. The body is the way we communicate, and God is a communicating God — perhaps the preeminent trait of God in Hebrew Scripture. Jesus of Nazareth embodied this communicating God in a singular way. Using his body, He spoke, touched, healed, sacrificed, got angry, taught, ate meals...and then he asked us to remember all his embodied revelation about how to live and die each time we gather for Eucharist. As the most exemplary image of God, Jesus of Nazareth, in his historical embodied self, showed us what humans as images of God actually look like. Now Jesus as risen Christ, through the gift of the Spirit, lives in each person — or better said, we live “en Cristo,” in Christ. We are images of God because the Christ of God makes his home in us, so that in our embodied lives, we might grow in being images of Him. Theologians today speak of deep incarnation (the creating God and God’s universe), the historical incarnation of Jesus, and the continuing incarnation of Christ in human persons and cultures.

Another anecdote: Once my deceased priest friend, Paul, was returning by plane from the East coast. A business traveler took the seat next to him. The man asked Paul what he did for a living. On hearing he was a priest, the man said, “Wow, that is so different from what I do. I’m all about money, making it and making it grow.” He went on to explain at length his many business ventures. After a little pause Paul said, “I see, so you’re a squirrel!” “What?” the startled man asked? “Well, you go around all day gathering nuts and burying them!”

Who we are as images of God includes the “telos” or purpose of our lives, and it is not to be squirrels. What we do in life and why we do it, our “work,” images God the Worker — creating, restoring or redeeming, and bringing everything to completion. It used to be that devout Christians fixed their eyes on a heavenly destiny, and saw earthly life as temporary or of less value than the kingdom of heaven. Today we understand that God is our partner as together we work so that “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

As I finish this little reflection, I think of my niece heading off to college. I hope knowing who she really is will help her navigate the complexities she encounters. I think also of the important current discussion about Artificial Intelligence, and the questions it raises about what it means to be human. Image of God is a gift of our Catholic tradition for both our personal spiritual grounding, but also for helping us shape the future.

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