

OF TIMES & SEASONS
The Church & the Created Order

For each day five items of knowledge
Are required of every understanding person—
From everyone, without appearance of boasting,
Who is in holy orders.

The day of the solar month;
The age of the moon;
The state of the sea-tide, without error;
The day of the week;
The calendar of the feasts of the perfect saints
In just clarity with their variations.

Irish, 10th century

ACCORDING TO this brief poem,¹ knowing our location within the created order of sun, moon, and tides and the human order—both civil (the week) and Christian (the liturgical calendar)—fulfills a major requirement for being ordained, or admitted into “holy orders”. Not the only requirement, of course. The poet assumes one’s vocation, piety, theological acumen, and learning, or—since “holy orders” would have referred primarily to a cloistered life—one’s aptitude for learning.

The poem also reflects St Paul’s explication of Epimenides’ line, “We are his offspring”, which Paul explains as meaning that “in [God] we live, and move, and have our being”. (Acts 17.28) Being “in him”, we are also “in” and therefore part of all that he has made and upholds. As part of that created order, and just as we are to conform our being to the ways of the God who made it, we are to attune our perceptions and understanding, our desires and our loves to that order, fitting our lives to its rhythms and living within its patterns, rather than allow our laziness to ignore it, our desires to war against it, or our comforts to subvert or damage it.

Recognizing and confessing the truth of the created order—all that exists and functions “independent from our perceiving it” (so Josef Pieper)—reminds us of our createdness, which reminds us in turn to see that we are not above the rest of creation as its owners, but are rather within it as stewards who labour on behalf of Another. Whatever is within our reach is ours to use (wisely!), knowing that we shall render due account of our usage.

Recalling that it is subject to futility because of that first sin of our father Adam (Rom 8.20-23), we also remember that it shall yet be redeemed in Christ, not only because God sent his son to that end, but because he is also bending the order of creation to its own renewal and redemption—to restore to it its originally intended freedom.

In discussing this poem, Robert Graves says, “For ‘perfect saints’ read ‘blessed deities’ and no further alteration is needed.” (1966, 214) His point in *The White Goddess* is that the Church “merely” adapted the underlying religion of native cultures to Christian teaching by, for example, identifying local deities with Christian saints. This idea may make some cringe, afraid that this undermines the validity of the Christian faith and tradition.² Perhaps, however, we ought to be learning from both Scripture and other cultures a far

¹These lines form the *envoi* to the first section of *Saltair Na Rann* (Irish, 10th C.), according to its citation by Graves (1966, 214).

²Cf. Scruton (2010, 32, 169): “We owe it to our children and theirs regularly to examine our traditions, lest they become mere mouthings of words unknown or unheeded, but the continuity of those traditions with the expressions of other faiths (whatever their origin or nature or practice) ought to encourage us that in the “faith of our fathers” all other truths find their fulfillment, even if not their full expression.” Cf., e.g., Lewis 2001.

greater and deeper reverence for the created order, a reverence and respect that suffers such casual neglect in our churches and culture which is the respect for *time* and *place* and *ceremony* that underlies the worship of, for example, ancient Israel, our ancestors in faith.

We can learn from any tradition that seeks to understand the nature and order of things (including our selves, and our human place within that great order), because we know that all things come from God and shall return to him, that all shall render account of their being and doing through the ages of their existence—the babe that dies at four months, the matriarch who outlives a century, the tree that stands for hundreds of years, the sea that has covered the earth’s depths for millennia, or the galaxies that have danced through space throughout the ages.

The biblical testimony is that the same God who created all things³ also upholds and sustains them by his powerful word (Hb 1.3), including this world’s annual circum-solar peregrination, its attendant seasonal changes, and the movements of the higher heavens, and that they were in fact created so that there might be measured days and months and times and seasons:⁴

And God said, “Let there be lightbearers in the expanse of the sky to divide the day from the night; and let them become signs and seasons and days and years, and let them become lightbearers in the expanse of the sky to shine on the earth”.
And it was so.

And God made the two great lightbearers, the great lightbearer to rule the day, and the lesser lightbearer to rule the night, and the stars. And God put them in the expanse of the sky to shine on the earth, and to rule the day and the night, and to divide the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. (Gn 1.14-18)

Within this greater existence, we ought deliberately to function in harmony with these orders of creation, whether or not we can fully account for their functions and purposes, or even their importance to our human well-being.

Perhaps this awareness begins with such a simple thing as paying attention to the seasons—to the sun’s rising and setting as it moves north and then south from solstice to solstice, to the planets’ and constellations’ processing across the night sky, to the equinoxes and solstices, to the phases of the moon, and even—should we live near the sea—to the rising and falling of the tide. Each of these ought to remind us daily, monthly, and yearly of the divine post-diluvian promise:

For as long as earth endures, planting and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease. (Gn 8.22)

From God’s statement to Noah we might infer that every person (perhaps especially those claiming to believe the Scriptures) should learn to note the turning of the seasons, not only in terms of raking leaves or planting tomatoes or changing our wardrobes (although these too could be celebrated), but also by acknowledging and celebrating the faithfulness of God that yet another change of season demonstrates. And in so doing we remember his redemption of Noah and his saving of the human race, and we anticipate his final redemption of all the whole created order at the revelation of the children of God (Ro 8.19-22).

³The debate is not over *when* or *how* God created; we must uphold the biblical testimony *that* he created, but mere affirmation does not suffice: we must both confess and act in harmony with that confession in ways that will be understood and appreciated by those around us, lest we perpetuate unnecessary barriers to faith.

⁴Without space to discuss it, I mention in passing the Levitical laws regarding the doubled sacrifice every Sabbath and new moon (re-doubled if the new moon fell on a Sabbath), and the far more extensive sacrifices every new moon (Nu 28.9-12). Was this merely a cultic “turning of the page” of the calendar? Could it have been a reminder that the times and seasons and days and years belong to the God who made them, and not to the people who live within them, even when they are the chosen people of that same God. Because time is part of the created order, it is therefore, like any other created thing, worthy of our respectful attention.

Nor would celebrating such sidereal events as equinoxes or new moons or solstices “paganize” the Church—of all people on earth Christians are most free to celebrate what they know to be the truths of God, including the sun, moon, and stars that he created to “govern” the day and the night and to serve as “signs and seasons and days and years” (Gn 1.14), regardless of how these things may have been misunderstood and ill-used.

Far too often, however, we seem to fear that celebrating creation ecclesiastically may make us sound like those who, e.g., “stamp the earth” on May Day or “light up the night” on Mid-summer’s Eve, without pausing to realize that what they celebrate is *real*, part of the order ordained and created by God, and therefore true, and therefore deserving of our attention, respect, and our praise to the Creator and Redeemer of all things.⁵

It might even help to turn us from the frantic pace that this life so easily assumes, by encouraging us to consider time’s “slow wheel” through the seasons and years, i.e., by extending the temporal horizon within which we operate.⁶ We might weigh differently our desire for more sunlight or fewer leaves (by, e.g., cutting down trees) against the brevity of our lives versus the lives of those trees and the generations that may live on the land that we now “possess”.⁷

Distanced from this understanding of creation by our industrial culture,⁸ we find the seasonal ebb and flow of sunlight and meteorological change mere irritations, preferring to purchase nearly any food at any time of year (rather than only “in its season”), to insulate [sic] our selves from the seasons themselves by controlling the climate of our homes and workplaces, and to venture forth in machines that allow us to avoid attending too closely to the look of the sky, the touch of the wind, the feel of the air.

We are also distracted from contemplating reality because we shut up our selves into our selves, encouraged and abetted by nearly every aspect of our culture.⁹ The world’s constant and ubiquitous pressure to find our own “meaningful happiness”, and to find it *now*, discourages us from taking time to ponder the nature of our selves and the meaning of our lives, or to think about who and what we ought to be. Our society’s existential and romantic nihilism recognizes no “meant”, no “ought”, apart from the vague and vacuous goal that we be “nice”, that we accept everyone and everything, and (most especially) that we never let up on “getting and spending our powers” (Wordsworth) so that we can achieve that “happiness” which is our inalienable right.¹⁰

This thousand-year-old Irish poem, however, expects us to know the phase of the moon, the stage of the tide,¹¹ and the liturgical calendar (which, in the tenth century, was far more crowded with saints’ days, feasts, and celebrations than today) in our souls, without our printed and electronic resources.

And, even more strikingly, this knowledge is expected, not of astronomers or oceanologists, but of the clergy: one is qualified (at least in part) to enter holy orders by one’s attention to and knowledge of the world that is the creation of the God on whose behalf those in holy orders serve.¹²

Nor is such knowledge grounds for boasting, says the poet—this is the sort of normal, factual knowledge that underlies and enables everyday life. The stage of the tide determines when it is safe to put out to sea,

⁵See the Appendix.

⁶This “extending” of our sense of time is the main goal of the project of the Clock of the Long Now (Brand 2000), and is also fundamental to the work of systems analysis (Meadows 2008).

⁷In a conversation a number of years ago, our youngest daughter and I decided that since we take nothing into the next life, we merely “rent” or “borrow”, owning or possessing nothing of all that is “ours”.

⁸On the distancing effects of “machine” culture, see Guardini 1994.

⁹I speak now of North America, as the arena of my primary experience.

¹⁰This view of “happiness” was not that of the framers of the Declaration of Independence, many of whom were versed in the moral philosophy of Classical Greece, where “happiness” meant life in harmony with “nature and with nature’s God”, i.e. to grow in virtue so that we increasingly realize God’s creational design and intent. For a brilliant and compelling discussion of this question of virtue’s purpose, goal, and realization, see Pieper 1989, 3-9.

¹¹Those living along tide-washed shorelines soon develop a “sense” of the stage of the tide; “inlanders”, who visit the coast for their annual holiday, require tide clocks, charts, and other reminders.

¹²The requirement that priests, bishops, *et al.* know the “phase” of the liturgical calendar strikes us as expected knowledge, much as doctors know bones and mechanics nuts and bolts.

either to journey or to fish; the overlapping solar and lunar “months”¹³ determine the season, including—in the medieval world—the proper times for breeding cattle, for tilling and planting, for moving flocks and herds to summer pasture, and for all manner of the affairs of life.

Members of the clergy—minister, priest, pastor, elder, bishop, deacon—are to know these things in order to enter holy orders.

Why?

Perhaps so that they can participate in the life of the parish as “normal” members of the parish rather than huddle in scriptoria, cloisters, and chapels, lest, when they do step outside the monastery, they stumble about, clueless concerning the struggles and labours that the laity face in the tasks of that day or week. If every member of the clergy were also a craftsman, ...

Or perhaps so that they can remember in their prayers, in their acts of devotion, in their homilies and sermons, the labours that enable their parishoners to live, and that make possible their own ministries—the work of the season that enables the families of the parish to support the work of the ministry with their gifts and offerings. How could someone ignorant of what was needed in each season know whether or not to pray for rain or sun? Or when to pray for the safe delivery of lambs and kids? Or which fish might be running that week or month?

Or perhaps to demonstrate by their mindfulness of the creation their attention to and attempt to serve the God that they profess to serve. (Ps 123.2)

And perhaps for none of these reasons, or for others.

To live oblivious to the truth that we and all things are created and contingent, that we exist within a *kosmos*—an orderly world—is to live less than half a life, denying that which every thing around us shouts and sings. On the other hand, to live confessing and celebrating the creation and our place within it as joint servants of the God who has made and sustains us all is to live that life for which we were (all) made.

To live as we must if we are to be truly happy in both this life and the next is to live as we are made to be, which is to say, as created, dependent, and thus submissive: obedient to that circumstance within which we find ourselves, seeking to fill it with the knowledge of the LORD as the waters fill the sea, even if it be filled only for a moment, this moment being all that we are given.

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Lent MMXV

¹³Roughly thirty and twenty-eight days, respectively. A solar month one-twelfth of a solar year; a solar (astronomical, tropical) year is the period from one vernal equinox to the next (365 days, 5 hours, 48 minutes, 45.51 seconds). A solar month thus consists of 30 days, 10 hours, 29 minutes, 3.8 seconds. The lunar month is defined and measured in at least five different ways.

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