



GENESIS

### SIX DAYS OF CREATION AND THE SABBATH

**1** In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, <sup>2</sup>the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. <sup>3</sup>Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. <sup>4</sup>And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. <sup>5</sup>God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

### Why Did God Create?

Genesis 1 | Bishop Barron

The opening line of the book of Genesis tells us that “in the beginning . . . God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). Why did God, who is perfect in every way and who stands in need of nothing outside of himself, bother to create at all? There are mythologies and philosophies galore—both ancient and modern—that speak of God needing the universe or benefiting from it in some fashion, but Catholic theology has always repudiated these approaches and affirmed God’s total self-sufficiency. So the question remains: Why did God create? The answer provided by the First Vatican Council gives expression to the mainstream of Catholic theology: God created the heavens and the earth “of his own goodness and almighty power, not for the increase of his own happiness.” The ancient theologian Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite said that the good, by its very nature, is diffusive of itself. When you are in a good mood, you don’t hide yourself away; on the contrary, you tend

to effervesce, communicating your joy. God is the supreme good, and hence God is supremely diffusive of himself; the intensity of his joy is such that it overflows into creation.

Now let us take one more step. Love, in the theological sense, is not a feeling or a sentiment, though it is often accompanied by those psychological states. In its essence, love is an act of the will—more precisely, the willing of the good of the other as other. To love is really to want what is good for someone else and then to act on that desire. Many of us are kind, generous, or just, but only so that someone else might return the favor and be kind, generous, or just to us. This is indirect egotism rather than love. Real love is an ecstatic act, a leaping outside of the narrow confines of my needs and desires and an embrace of the other’s good for the other’s sake. It is an escape from the black hole of the ego, which tends to draw everything around it into itself. In light of this understanding, we can now see that God’s creation of the world is a supreme act of love. God, it is true, has no need of

anything outside of himself; therefore, the very existence of the universe is proof that it has been loved into being—that is to say, desired utterly for its own sake.

Moreover, since God is the maker of the heavens and the earth (biblical code for “absolutely everything”), all created things must be connected to one another by the deepest bond. Because all creatures—from archangels to atoms—are coming forth here and now from the creative power of God, all are related to each other through the divine center. We are all—whether we

like it or not, whether we acknowledge it or not—ontological siblings, members of the same family of creation and sharing the same Father. In the Middle Ages, Francis of Assisi expressed this idea in his “Canticle of Brother Sun,” speaking of “Brother Sun” and “Sister Moon,” “Brother Fire” and “Sister Water.” That was not simply charming poetry but rather exact metaphysics. Everything in the created order—even inanimate objects, even the most distant cosmic force, even realities that I cannot see—is brother and sister to me.

<sup>6</sup> And God said, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” <sup>7</sup> So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. <sup>8</sup> God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

<sup>9</sup> And God said, “Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. <sup>10</sup> God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. <sup>11</sup> Then God said, “Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.” And it was so. <sup>12</sup> The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. <sup>13</sup> And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

<sup>14</sup> And God said, “Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, <sup>15</sup> and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.” And it was so. <sup>16</sup> God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. <sup>17</sup> God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, <sup>18</sup> to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. <sup>19</sup> And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

## The Genesis Problem

Genesis 1–2 | Bishop Barron

**I'M CONTINUALLY AMAZED HOW OFTEN** the “problem” of Genesis comes up in my work of evangelization and apologetics. What I mean is the way people struggle with the seemingly bad science that is on display in the opening chapters of the first book of the Bible. How can anyone believe that God made the visible universe in six days, that all the species were created at the same time, etc.? How can believers possibly square the naïve cosmology of Genesis with the textured and sophisticated theories of Newton, Darwin, Einstein, and Stephen Hawking?

One of the most important principles of Catholic biblical interpretation is that the reader of the scriptural texts must be sensitive to the genre or literary type of the text with which he is dealing. Just as it would be counterintuitive to read *Moby Dick* as history or *The Waste Land* as social science, so it is silly to interpret, say, the Song of Solomon as journalism or the Gospel of Matthew as a spy novel. By the same token, it is deeply problematic to read the opening chapters of Genesis as a scientific treatise. If I can borrow an insight from Fr. George Coyne, a Jesuit priest and astrophysicist, no biblical text can possibly be “scientific” in nature, since “science,” as we understand it, first emerged some fourteen centuries after the composition of the last biblical book. The author of Genesis simply wasn’t doing what Newton, Darwin, Einstein, and Hawking were doing; he wasn’t attempting to explain the origins of things in the characteristically modern manner—which is to say, on the basis of empirical observation, testing of hypotheses, marshalling of evidence, and experimentation. Therefore, to maintain that the opening chapters of Genesis are “bad science” is a bit like saying the *Iliad* is bad history or the *Chicago Tribune* is not very compelling poetry.

So what precisely was that ancient author trying to communicate? Once we get past the “bad science” confusion, the opening of the Bible gives itself to us in all of its theological and spiritual power. Let me explore just a few dimensions of this lyrical and evocative text. We hear that Yahweh brought forth the whole of created reality through great acts of speech:

“‘Let there be light’; and there was light. . . . ‘Let the dry land appear.’ And it was so.” In almost every mythological cosmology in the ancient world, God or the gods establish order through some act of violence. They conquer rival powers or they impose their will on some recalcitrant matter. (How fascinating, by the way, that we still largely subscribe to this manner of explanation, convinced that order can be maintained only through violence or the threat of violence.) But there is none of this in the biblical account. God doesn’t subdue some rival or express his will through violence. Rather, through a sheerly generous and peaceful act of speech, he gives rise to the whole of the universe. This means that the most fundamental truth of things—the metaphysics that governs reality at the deepest level—is peace and nonviolence. Can you see how congruent this is with Jesus’ great teachings on nonviolence and enemy love in the Sermon on the Mount? The Lord is instructing his followers how to live in accord with the elemental grain of the universe.

Secondly, we are meant to notice the elements of creation that are explicitly mentioned in this account: the heavens, the stars, the sun, the moon, the earth itself, the sea, the wide variety of animals that roam the earth. Each one of these was proposed by various cultures in the ancient world as an object of worship. Many of the peoples that surrounded Israel held the sky, stars, sun, moon, earth, and various animals to be gods. By insisting that these were, in fact, created by the true God, the author of Genesis was, not so subtly, dethroning false claimants to divinity and disallowing all forms of idolatry. Mind you, the author of Genesis never tires of reminding us that everything that God made is good (thus holding off all forms of dualism, Manichaeism, and Gnosticism), but none of these good things is the ultimate good.

A third feature that we should notice is the position and role of Adam, the primal human, in the context of God’s creation. He is given the responsibility of giving “names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field.” The Church Fathers read this as follows: naming God’s creatures in accord with the intelligibility placed in them by the Creator, Adam is the first scientist and philosopher, for he is, quite literally, “cataloguing” the world he sees around him. (*Kata logon* means “according to the word.”) From the beginning, the author is telling us, God accords to his rational creatures the privilege of participating, through their own acts of intelligence, in

God's intelligent ordering of the world. This is why, too, Adam is told not to dominate the world but precisely to cultivate and care for it, perpetuating thereby the nonviolence of the creative act.

These are, obviously, just a handful of insights among the dozens that can be culled from this great text. My hope is that those who are tripped up by the beginning of the book of Genesis can make a small but essential interpretive adjustment and see these writings as they were meant to be seen: not as primitive science but as exquisite theology.

<sup>20</sup> And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky."<sup>21</sup> So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good.<sup>22</sup> God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth."<sup>23</sup> And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

<sup>24</sup> And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind." And it was so.<sup>25</sup> God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good.

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AND GOD SAW THAT  
*it was* **GOOD.**

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**Joseph Ratzinger  
(Pope Benedict XVI)**  
(1927–)

### *Reading with Christ and through Christ*

Genesis 1:1–19

"In the Beginning . . ."



Holy Scripture in its entirety was not written from beginning to end like a novel or a textbook. It is, rather, the echo of God's history with his people. It arose out of the struggles and the vagaries of this history, and all through it we can catch a glimpse of the rises and falls, the sufferings and hopes, and the greatness and failures of this history. The Bible is thus the story of God's struggle with human beings to make himself understandable to them over the course of time; but it is also the story of their struggle to seize hold of God over the course of time. The theme of creation is not set down once for all in one place; rather, it accompanies Israel throughout its history, and, indeed, the whole Old Testament is a journeying with the Word of God. Only in the process of this journeying was the Bible's real way of declaring itself formed, step by step. Consequently we ourselves can only discover where this way is leading if we follow it to the end. In this respect—as a way—the Old and New Testaments belong together. For the Christian the Old Testament represents, in its totality, an advance toward Christ; only when it attains to him does its real meaning, which was gradually hinted at, become clear. Thus every individual part derives its meaning from the whole, and the whole derives its meaning from its end—from Christ. Hence we only interpret an individual text theologically correctly (as the Fathers of the Church recognized and as the faith of the Church in every age has recognized) when we see it as a way that is leading us ever forward, when we see in the text where this way is tending and what its inner direction is.

**Origen**  
(184–253)

*Homilies on  
Genesis*



## *Living Creatures and Birds That Fly*

Genesis 1:20

According to the letter “living creatures” and “birds” are brought forth by the waters at the command of God and we recognize by whom these things which we see have been made. But let us see how also these same things come to be in our firmament of heaven, that is, in the firmness of our mind or heart.

I think that if our mind has been enlightened by Christ, our sun, it is ordered afterwards to bring forth from these waters which are in it “living creatures” and “birds [that] fly,” that is, to bring out into the open good or evil thoughts that there might be a distinction of the good thoughts from the evil, which certainly both proceed from the heart. For both good and evil thoughts are brought forth from our heart as from the waters.

But by the word and precept of God let us offer both to God’s view and judgment that, with his enlightenment, we may be able to distinguish what is evil from the good.

<sup>26</sup> Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

<sup>27</sup> So God created humankind in his image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.

<sup>28</sup> God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”<sup>29</sup> God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that

**St. Gregory  
of Nyssa**  
(335–394)

*On the  
Origin of Man*



## *Have Dominion Over Every Living Thing*

Genesis 1:28

“Have dominion . . . over every living thing.” How though, you may ask, since I have a beast within? Actually, there are a myriad, a countless number of beasts within you. You should not take offense in these words. Rage is a small beast, yet when it growls in the heart is any dog more savage? Is not the treacherous soul like fresh bait staked in front of a bear’s den? Is not the hypocrite a beast? . . . [Rule] then over the beasts inside you. Rule your thoughts so that you will become a ruler over all things. So the same one who provides the power to rule over all living things provides power for us to rule over ourselves.

is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.<sup>30</sup> And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so.<sup>31</sup> God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

**G.K. Chesterton**  
(1874–1936)

*St. Thomas  
Aquinas*



## *There Are No Bad Things*

Genesis 1:31

That “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” contains a subtlety which the popular pessimist cannot follow, or is too hasty to notice. It is the thesis that there are no bad things,



but only bad uses of things. If you will, there are no bad things but only bad thoughts; and especially bad intentions. Only Calvinists can really believe that hell is paved with good intentions. That is exactly the one thing it cannot be paved with. But it is possible to have bad intentions about good things; and good things, like the world and the flesh, have been twisted by a bad intention called the devil. But he cannot make *things* bad; they remain as on the first day of creation. The work of heaven alone was material; the making of a material world. The work of hell is entirely spiritual.

**2** Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. <sup>2</sup> And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. <sup>3</sup> So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

<sup>4</sup> These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

#### ANOTHER ACCOUNT OF THE CREATION

In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, <sup>5</sup> when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; <sup>6</sup> but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground— <sup>7</sup> then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. <sup>8</sup> And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. <sup>9</sup> Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

<sup>10</sup> A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. <sup>11</sup> The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; <sup>12</sup> and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. <sup>13</sup> The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one that flows around the whole land

**St. Ephrem  
the Syrian**  
(306–373)

Commentary  
on Genesis



### Why Did God Rest?

Genesis 2:3

From what toil did God rest? For the creatures that came to be on the first day came to be by implication, except for the light which came to be through his word. And the rest of the works which came to be afterward came to be through his word. What toil is there for us when we speak one word, that there should be toil for God due to the one word a day that he spoke? If Moses, who divided the sea by his word and his rod, did not tire and Joshua, son of Nun, who restrained the luminaries by his word, did not tire, then what toil could there have been for God when he created the sea and the luminaries by [his] word?

It was not because he rested on [that day] that God, who does not weary, blessed and sanctified the seventh day, nor because he was to give it to that people, who did not understand that since they were freed from their servitude, they were to give rest to their servants and maidservants. He gave it to them so that, even if they had to be coerced, they would rest. For it was given to them in order to depict by a temporal rest, which he gave to a temporal people, the mystery of the true rest which will be given to the eternal people in the eternal world.

of Cush. <sup>14</sup> The name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

<sup>15</sup> The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. <sup>16</sup> And the LORD God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; <sup>17</sup> but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”



Genesis 1–3

**MICHELANGELO** | 1508–1512

## *The Sistine Chapel Ceiling*

Essay by Michael Stevens

Michelangelo's fresco cycle on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel is widely considered to be one of the greatest works of art ever created. Covering an area of nearly six thousand square feet, it is a tour de force of Renaissance technique and style. The central narrative it depicts—the opening of the book of Genesis—gives the answer to one of humanity's oldest and most profound philosophical questions: Why is there something rather than nothing?

These iconic images of Michelangelo's, such as the nearly touching fingers of God and Adam, have come to be the definitive illustrations of the Genesis creation account. When reading the text of Genesis today, it is difficult not to imagine the story in terms of Michelangelo's unique interpretation, which depicts God as an elderly, bearded figure commanding the cosmos with his fingertips. Even in popular culture, images from this fresco cycle have become nearly synonymous with the concepts of God, humanity, creation, and religion.

Despite its familiarity, the true artistic depth and spiritual wisdom of the Sistine ceiling is often overlooked. Ironically, it is precisely its status as a great work of art that often prevents people from entering deeply into the viewing experience. There is a tendency to assume that what is instantly recognized is already well understood. It is only within the work's original atmosphere of novelty and freshness that these frescoes become defamiliarized, allowing Michelangelo's theological brilliance to truly shine.



### THE SEPARATION OF THE WATERS

Michelangelo presents the narrative of Genesis in a chronology that reads from bottom to top—thus, this uppermost panel is actually the third in the cycle. In it, God divides the waters above the sky from the waters below. God appears to sweep over the sea, hovering only a few feet above it.

### THE CREATION OF THE SUN AND MOON

God creates the sun and moon in a single, authoritative gesture. His pointing fingers direct them apart, setting their exact positions in the sky. On the opposite side of the sun, God seems to hurry away, eager to continue his creative activity. Despite the two-part chronology of this panel, Michelangelo uses the central sun disk as the light source for both moments in time, as can be seen by the direction of the figures' shadows.

### THE SEPARATION OF LIGHT AND DARKNESS

In this scene, the first of the cycle, God separates the light from the darkness. With the palms of his hands, he splits a swirling, atmospheric mass in two. While the form he is dividing appears cloudlike, it is important to realize that Michelangelo is not depicting clouds per se, but rather *pure* light and *pure* darkness. The scriptural text does not associate these concepts with any particular material; therefore, Michelangelo imagines what light and darkness would look like in a state of primordial abstraction.





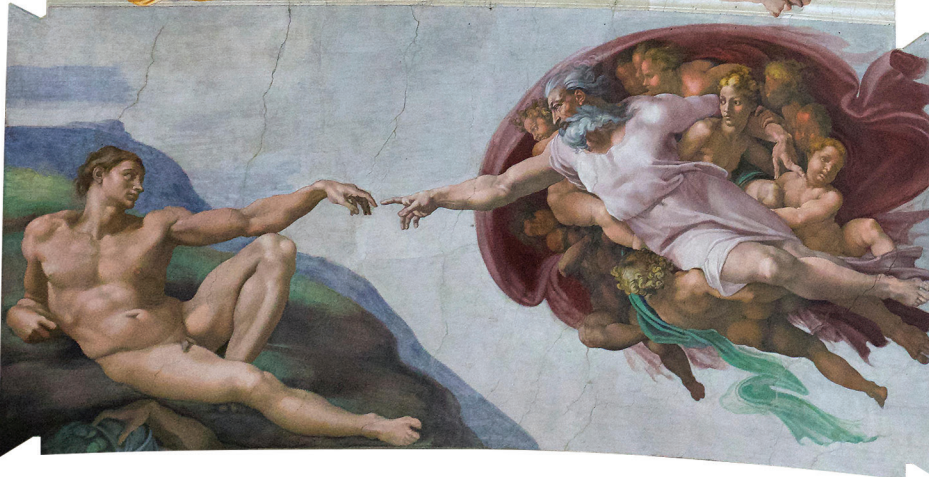
## THE TEMPTATION AND EXPULSION OF ADAM AND EVE

This panel depicts the fall of man and its disastrous consequences. On the left, Eve reaches to take the forbidden fruit from the serpent, whose grotesquely proportioned tail is coiled tightly around the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Instead of an ordinary snake, Michelangelo depicts the serpent as having a humanoid upper body—a detail that symbolizes the creature's intelligence. On the right, Adam and Eve are cast out of the Garden of Eden by a sword-wielding angel. Their bodies appear aged and ugly, having lost the youthful glow of their earlier, pre-fallen state. They walk out onto a barren, featureless plain, which Michelangelo has painted a muddy yellow-green. Through these artistic devices, we see that sin not only changed us—it changed our surroundings as well.



## THE CREATION OF EVE

God's raised hand summons Eve forth from the side of Adam. As she awakens to life, she finds her gaze already fixed upon the face of her Creator. Her hands are folded, indicating an innate, pre-fallen understanding of God's holiness.



## THE CREATION OF ADAM

In the fresco cycle's most famous panel, God reaches out his hand to infuse Adam's body with life. Eve, who exists only in the mind of God, peers out from under his arm, watching the moment of Adam's creation with fascination. The shape formed by the drapery encircling God, Eve, and various angels is modeled on the cross-section of the human brain and represents the Creator's limitless creativity and intelligence. This inspired compositional gesture reveals Michelangelo's extensive knowledge of anatomy—knowledge that he obtained by dissecting real human cadavers.

## The Garden of Eden

Genesis 2:4–17 | Bishop Barron

**THIS CLASSIC STORY OF THE GARDEN OF EDEN** has been interpreted in myriad ways over the centuries: as an account of the tumble from dreaming innocence to dangerous experience; as a cautionary tale concerning the perils of sex; as a symbolic evocation of the transition from unitary to divided consciousness; as a condemnation of pride and a call to obedience. What I want to offer is a reading that, without necessarily excluding any of the above-mentioned insights, emphasizes the rise of sin precisely in the incapacity to trust, to live in relation to the alluring mystery of God.

Adam is made from the dust of the earth and receives the breath of life from God. There is a kind of elemental dualism discernible here: the first human being is both material and spiritual, both drawn upward from the earth and endowed with the energy of the divine. Unlike the angels, Adam is ontologically split, a child, if you will, of both heaven and earth. However, and this is most important to notice, this split identity is not in itself evil or the source of evil; like all of the Lord's creatures, Adam is good—and his very complexity is essential to his goodness. The Genesis account never follows the all-too-easy path of identifying the battle between good spirit and evil matter as the source of human suffering and depravity. The best spirits in the Judeo-Christian tradition have always firmly resisted the temptation to move in this interpretive direction. Indeed, this spiritual animal is given the garden of paradise—with all of its sensual delights—as his proper field of operation. God delivers to the first human beings the positive command to enjoy and savor the goods of creation, including and especially the beauty and pleasure of each other. Thomas Aquinas speaks for at least one side of the tradition when he says that Adam and Eve experienced the fullness of sexual pleasure in the garden precisely because their bodies and spirits were in such natural harmony. No Manichaeism there. Furthermore, they are commanded to cultivate the garden, implying that they are to exercise their gifts of mind and

will and imagination to bring their world to full flourishing. In their enspirited bodiliness, in loving communion, and in the realization of their natural powers and potentials, human beings are as God meant them to be.

In his splendid spiritual meditation *The Divine Milieu*, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin speaks of the “divinization of human activities.” He bemoans the pious tendency to denigrate our activities, accomplishments, and achievements in the interest of greater “spiritualization,” as if a concentration on what human beings can do is tantamount to pride. On the contrary, he argues, we glorify God inasmuch as we cooperate with God's creation of the universe through our inventiveness, our curious intelligence, our bold dreams. In fact, the “cultivation of the garden” in which God has placed us constitutes an intense spiritualization of our humanity. Teilhard speaks here for the mainstream of the tradition stretching back to the Genesis account of creation: to be intelligently, bravely, imaginatively at work and play in the world, fully exerting our powers, is to give glory to the Creator God and to realize ourselves. Science, technology, poetry, architecture, literature, philosophy, engineering, diplomacy, sports, government, genteel conversation, wit—all of the flowers of civilization—are praiseworthy, humanizing, and sacred. There is nothing in Genesis to justify either a puritanical repression of the sexual or a pessimistic, moralizing denigration of human excellence.

But then there is the prohibition. Yes, they may eat of any of the trees of the garden, enjoying themselves and exercising their dominion fully, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil they are forbidden to eat. Some would argue that all prohibitions—all “thou shalt nots”—belong to a child's world, to a primitive form of consciousness prior to the dawning of real engagement and responsibility. From this perspective, the seemingly arbitrary command not to eat of a particular tree is a sort of fearful childish memory of the race, a dreadful taboo imposed on us in our minority, a primal terror of upsetting parental authority. In the interpretations of Kierkegaard and Paul Tillich, we find something of this: the command not to eat of the tree of knowledge is the expression of humanity's fear of leaving the garden of innocence and inexperience. And thus it is that Adam and Eve fall so quickly, so effortlessly, as if they were following a positive impulse,

the forward evolution of the psyche. Without entirely repudiating this interpretive strain (there is indeed a child's-world quality to the Genesis account), I would prefer to move in another direction, emphasizing what Augustine saw: the temptation inherent in the very godlike exercise of our powers.

Legitimately at play in the garden of the Lord—tasting, mastering, enjoying—the first humans, in this very divinization of their activities, begin to wonder whether they are not the complete masters of their lives, whether they are not in a position to see and control even the deepest things. Feeling what Paul Tillich memorably called *Schöpfungslust* (the exuberance of being a creature), they move in the direction of self-deification, becoming through their own achievements the center and ground of their lives. It is here that we see why God has forbidden the eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This is by no means a prohibition against knowledge per se, born, as the Enlightenment would have it, of a typically religious obscurantism. As we have seen, the pursuit of knowledge, even to the limits of human capacity, is entailed in the permission to enjoy and cultivate the garden. It is not science as such that is prohibited, but the *knowledge of good and evil*—that is to say, the final and unsurpassable understanding of the whole that God alone possesses.

Where does the universe come from and what is its final destiny? What is the deepest meaning of my own life? Why is the cosmos, with all of its light and darkness, all of its shadings and ambiguities, all of its unresolved tensions and puzzles, organized the way it is? Where is the human race being led? What is the very essence of God?

To seek the answers to these questions, to desire to grasp with rational clarity those things that the infinite mind of God alone can see, is to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In forbidding the first humans to eat of this tree, God is teaching them that, after the full flowering of their achievements and activities, they are invited not to be active, not to accomplish, but to surrender in trust. The story implies that we human beings can—to a remarkable extent—*achieve* success and joy through our efforts but that the deepest and most enduring happiness is possible only through the nonachievement of faith in a power beyond ourselves. We can,

to some degree, understand who we are, what the universe is, and even who God is, but the fullness of this knowledge is, necessarily, beyond the powers of a limited soul, and thus we have access to it only through a suspension of our grasping and a deep relaxation of the spirit in trust. Action, then passivity; striving, then letting go; doing all that one can, then being carried; breathing in, then breathing out—only in this rhythm is the spirit realized. Our lives, in the end, are not about us, but about a power beyond us. Is God, strictly speaking, denying us the knowledge of good and evil? No, God is rather insisting that such knowledge comes not through grasping but through being grasped. In fact, we Christians know that the goal of the Incarnation is precisely to lure us, through Christ, into such intimacy with God that we see and know God as God is. It is not the “what” but the “how” of this knowledge that is carefully regulated in the garden.

<sup>18</sup>Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.”<sup>19</sup>So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.<sup>20</sup>The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner.<sup>21</sup>So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh.<sup>22</sup>And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.<sup>23</sup>Then the man said,

“This at last is bone of my bones  
and flesh of my flesh;  
this one shall be called Woman,  
for out of Man this one was taken.”

<sup>24</sup>Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.<sup>25</sup>And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

## *It Is Not Good That the Man Should Be Alone*

Genesis 2:18–24 | Bishop Barron

The biblical view of the human being is not individualistic. The focus is not—as it is in the founding political texts of modernity—on the individual person and his rights; rather, it is on community. “It is not good that the man should be alone.” In accord with this truth, God endeavors to make a partner for Adam. He parades a series of animals before him, and Adam names them, signaling his lordship over them. However, it is clear that none of these is a suitable partner for Adam. In his rationality and capacity for love, Adam needs someone coequal, someone able to look back at him with understanding, to speak to him meaningfully, to share his life. No matter how intelligent, intuitive, and compassionate a dog might be, he is not a soulmate.

In the wonderful language of Genesis, God puts the man into a deep sleep and draws out one of his ribs, from which he fashions Eve. Do not read this as a suggestion of Eve’s inferiority to Adam, but rather of her coequality with him. As he himself says, she is “bone of my bones and flesh of my

flesh.” Aristotle said that one can be friends only with an equal, for only an equal can meet the gaze of another fully.

The relationship between a man and a woman is meant to be the deepest kind of friendship, a sharing of life at all levels. And the mutuality and complementarity of this coequal friendship reaches its culmination in the sexual act: “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.” Is there any better description of sex anywhere in the literature of the world than that vivid, concrete, provocative line? And since “flesh” here carries the sense of the whole person, sexual union is envisioned as a union at all levels.

From the beginning, God wanted community; he wanted friendship; and he wanted this most beautiful and most intense form of friendship that is marriage. This is precisely why the Church, from the beginning, has stood so strongly against divorce. Marriage is not simply a matter of two people, for their own psychological reasons, coming together; it’s a matter of God’s providence and purpose. “Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Matt. 19:6).

## THEREFORE A MAN LEAVES HIS FATHER *and his* MOTHER *and clings* TO HIS WIFE, AND THEY BECOME ONE FLESH.

GENESIS 2:24

**St. Augustine**  
(354–430)

*City of God*



### *A Prefiguring of Christ and His Church*

Genesis 2:21–23

For at the beginning of the human race, the woman was made of a rib taken from the side of the man while he slept; for it seemed fitting that even then Christ and his Church should be foreshadowed in this event. For that sleep of the man was the death of Christ, whose side, as he hung lifeless upon the cross, was pierced with a spear, and there flowed from it blood and water, and these we know to be the sacraments by which the Church is “built up” [literal translation of “made” in Gen. 2:2].

For Scripture used this very word, not saying “he formed” or “framed” but “built her up into a woman”; whence also the Apostle speaks of the edification of the Body of Christ, which is the Church. The woman, therefore, is a creature of God even as the man; but by her creation from man unity is commended; and the manner of her creation, as has been said, prefigured Christ and the Church.

**Thomas Merton**  
(1915–1968)

*The New Man*



## *A Solitude That Became Society*

Genesis 2:23–24

The creation of Eve from the side of Adam brings us to another level of mystery and contemplation. In the creation of human society we have at once the symbol and type of the perfect society, the Church, the union of mankind with God in Christ, which is “the Mystery” *par excellence*.

Adam first realized his existential communion with God when he awoke from nothingness in the first moment of his existence to find himself created in the image and likeness of God. He awoke to the reality of God in living things when he became aware of his mission as a worker in God’s creation. He learned to see and understand other sentient beings and he discovered another means of communion with the hidden holiness of God when he created language. Now he awakens to a most perfect form of existential communion in human love.

The Lord “caused a deep sleep to fall upon” Adam, took out one of his ribs and built flesh around it and made it into a woman, since it was not good for man to be alone. Adam awoke, and once again proved that for him the primary function of language was to bear witness to the hidden meaning of things rather than to “talk about” them. Adam was no pragmatist, and so, he did not begin by conversing with woman, as soon as she was made, but he uttered a gnomic poem at once to himself and to the whole universe: “Then the man said, ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.’ Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.”



The mystery that had taken place in his ecstasy was the mystery of a solitude that became society—the mystery of the person finding himself reproduced and completed in one who is “the same” and yet “another.” Adam, perfectly whole and isolated in himself, as a person, needs nevertheless to find himself perfected, without division or diminution, by the gift of himself to another. He needs to give himself in order to gain himself. The law of self-renunciation is not merely a consequence of sin, for charity is the fundamental rule of the whole moral universe. Without it, man will always be less than himself since without it he will always be imprisoned within himself. He will be less than a man. In order to be fully himself, man needs to love another as himself. In order to realize himself, man has to risk the diminution and even the total loss of all his reality, in favor of another, for if any man would save his life he must lose it. We are never fully ourselves until we realize that those we truly love become our “other selves.” Seeing this, we are capable of beginning to grasp that God also loves us as he loves himself. Without this awareness, there can be no perfect communion.

### THE FIRST SIN AND ITS PUNISHMENT

**3** Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’”<sup>2</sup> The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; <sup>3</sup> but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’”<sup>4</sup> But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; <sup>5</sup> for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”<sup>6</sup> So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.