

## Contemplation of the beauty of nature in the light of Christianity

Ivan Platovnjak\*

[ivan.platovnjak@teof.uni-lj.si](mailto:ivan.platovnjak@teof.uni-lj.si)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7779-0889>

<https://doi.org/10.31192/np.22.3.8>

UDK / UDC: 57/59:111.852

27-145.2:27-583

Pregledni članak / Review

Primljeno / Received:

19. ožujka 2024. / March 19, 2024

Prihvaćeno / Accepted:

25. srpnja 2024. / Jul 25, 2024

*When we stand in front of a work of art, we perceive not only its physical presence, but also the beauty that emanates from it and the artist behind it, deepening our connection with both. Similarly, when we are immersed in nature, when we appreciate its beauty. The question is whether we also encounter its »artist«. This paper explores the contemplation of the beauty of nature from a Christian perspective, proposing that through such contemplation Christians can deepen their relationship with God. After introducing the concept of beauty, the author examines biblical perspectives on the beauty of nature in the first chapter and explores patristic and medieval theological views in the second. The final chapter is concerned with the contemplation of the beauty of nature. In the conclusion, the author affirms the thesis and outlines essential considerations for engaging in this contemplation.*

**Key words:** *Beauty, Christianity, Contemplation, God the Father, Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ, Nature.*

---

\* Ivan Platovnjak, PhD, Assoc. Prof., University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Theology; Address: Poljanska cesta 4, SI-1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia.

## Introduction\*\*

Nowadays, we have many opportunities to encounter various artworks in different places. When we are in front of a piece of art with our entire being and senses, we can perceive not only it, but also the beauty it radiates and, indirectly, the artist who created it. In this way we can enter into a deeper relationship with the artwork and, through it, with the artist. But what happens when we are in nature? Most probably we can encounter the beauty it radiates, but the question is if we can also encounter its »artist«.

Nature certainly appeals to many people. Many of them venture out into nature to relax, to enjoy its beauty, to deepen their connection with it and with themselves, and to find new inspiration. Naturally, everyone experiences the beauty of nature in their own way. It is a subjective perception and experience that people undergo while observing, tasting, or exploring nature. For some, the beauty of nature is associated with aesthetic aspects such as colours, shapes, and textures, while for others, it is linked to a spiritual experience, a sense of connection with nature, feelings of peace and harmony, or an experience of closeness, goodness, and the beauty of the Transcendent, the Absolute, God.<sup>1</sup> However, there are not only subjective but also objective elements of the beauty of nature, which can be expressed through aesthetic, harmonious, and symmetrical properties of natural phenomena. For example, there are mathematical proportions, such as the golden ratio or the Fibonacci sequences, that occur in nature and are associated with aesthetic principles that many people commonly perceive as attractive.<sup>2</sup> In general, it can be said that the beauty of nature is a combination of subjective experiences and objective characteristics. While individual preferences vary, there are certain elements of nature that have broader appeal and can be appreciated by people from different cultural and geographical backgrounds.<sup>3</sup>

There are many understandings and criteria of beauty. We believe that the teachings of Thomas Aquinas (1224/5-1274) provide a good foundation for un-

---

\*\*This paper was based on work done in the research program »Religion, Ethics, Education, and the Challenges of Modern Society« (P6-0269) and also in the Research project »The Power of Emotions and the Status of Female Characters in Various Literary Genres of the Old Testament« (J6-50212), financed by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (ARIS). Proof reading by Barbara Hočevar Balon.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Piotr ROSZAK, John Anthony BERRY, Moral Aspects of Imaginative Art in Thomas Aquinas, *Religions*, 12 (2021) 322, 1-10, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12050322>.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Salim KEMAL, Ivan GASKELL (eds.), *Landscape, natural beauty and the arts*, Cambridge, University Press, 1993; Rasim BASAK, Golden ratio and Fibonacci sequence: universal footprints of the golden flow, *Turkish Online Journal of Design Art and Communication*, 12 (2022) 4, 1092-1107, <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/tojdac/issue/72513/1144318>.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Mile MARINČIČ, Berislav ČOVIČ, Življenje istine i ljepote prema dr. fra Ignaciju Gavranu [Living of beauty of Dr. Fr Ignatius Gavran], *Nova prisutnost*, 11 (2013) 1, 73-88.

derstanding the beauty of nature, as he consistently employs three criteria of beauty:

»‘Integrity’ or ‘perfection’, since those things which are impaired are by the very fact ugly; due ‘proportion’ or ‘harmony’; and lastly, ‘brightness’ or ‘clarity’, whence things are called beautiful which have a bright colour« (ST, I, q. 39, a. 8).<sup>4</sup>

According to him, beauty is a quality common to God and to things (cf. ST, I, q. 36, a. 2). Beauty possesses a realist, ontological foundation, residing within the object of perception rather than solely within the subjective perception of the observer. Recognizing and appreciating beauty is a skill, with varying levels of proficiency among individuals. It is plausible that there exist aspects of beauty that we have not yet learned to recognize.<sup>5</sup> The word »beauty« is also linked to the word »splendour«. Thus, the beauty that radiates from an object moves and transforms those who look and see it.<sup>6</sup>

In this paper we aim to explore the contemplation of the beauty of nature in the spirit of Christianity. We posit the thesis that through contemplation of the beauty of nature, Christians can, in accordance with their Christian faith, encounter God and deepen their personal relationship with Him. In order to confirm or refute this thesis, we will first investigate the understanding of the beauty of nature in the Holy Scriptures, followed by an examination of the theological perspective on it by certain patristic and medieval theologians. In the concluding chapter, we will present the contemplation of the beauty of nature.

### 1. Biblical View of the Beauty of Nature

Numerous biblical passages describe the beauty and splendour of all that exists, including the entirety of creation. They particularly emphasize how the beauty of creation helps humanity discover the beauty, goodness, greatness, and truth of God. Psalm 104 serves as a poetic ode to God’s beauty and the beauty of nature. With its opening line, it invites praise to God, who is great, splendid, and radiant: »Praise the Lord, my soul. Lord my God, you are

<sup>4</sup> All quotes are taken from *The Summa Theologiae of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Online Edition Copyright© 2017 by Kevin Knight, <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/> (05.01.2024).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Louis CARUANA, To Marvel at the Manifold Connections: Philosophy, Biology, and Laudato Si’, *Gregorianum*, 102 (2021) 3, 617-631, 618-619; Mateja PEVEC ROZMAN, Tadej STREHOVEC, The Question of Beauty and the Aesthetic Value of the Image of the Mother of God in Pastoral Care and Catechesis, *Religions*, 15 (2024) 1, 101, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15010101>.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. John RICHES, Von Balthasar as Biblical Theologian and Exegete, *New Blackfriars*, 79 (1998) 923, 38-45, 40.

very great; you are clothed with splendour [*hōd*] and majesty« (Ps 104:1).<sup>7</sup> The Hebrew word *hōd* can be translated as »splendour« or »beauty«. <sup>8</sup> The psalmist also uses the same word in Psalms 8:1, 96:6, 111:3, 145:5, and 148:13, emphasizing and glorifying the beauty of God.

In the first verse of Psalm 19, the psalmist speaks of how all of nature should proclaim God's beauty: »The heavens declare the glory [*kābōd*] of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands« (v. 1). For the word »glory« use the Hebrew word *kābōd*, which is one of the eleven Hebrew words for »beauty«, as explained by exegete Loader.<sup>9</sup> This word

»Means a splendid appearance that overwhelms the observer and is frequently used to express this attribute of God. That attribute of humans which overwhelms others when they are impressed by them, *a fortiori* overwhelms the onlookers when they are impressed by God«. <sup>10</sup>

This beauty of God, which astonishes everyone who beholds nature, is described very poetically by the psalmist in Psalm 8, who begins with the words that frame the whole psalm: »Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory [*hōd*] in the heavens« (Ps 8:1). In the psalm, it is clear how God's beauty is visible in the creation that is »the work of his hands« (Ps 19:1). In the psalm, it is clear how God's beauty is visible in the creation that is »the work of his hands« (Ps 19:1). The silent »message« of the days and nights about God's beauty, as described in Psalm 19:1-4a, reveals something that cannot be heard but can be seen if observed. It is visible in the remarkable beauty of nature, as clearly stated by the psalmist in Psalms 8, 19:4b-6, 104:31, and also in Isaiah 6:3. Therefore, we agree with Loader in emphasizing that »God's beauty is carried by visible natural phenomena. They are tasked to exhibit God's beauty. Therefore, nature shares God's beauty«. <sup>11</sup>

The undeniable connection between the beauty of nature and the beauty of God can also be seen in the prophet Isaiah when he foretells that the desert and the wilderness will share in the glory of Lebanon and the beauty of Carmel and Sharon, and the people of Israel will see »the glory [*kābōd*] of the Lord« (Isa 35:1-2). Several places in Scripture reveal the connection between God's beauty and natural phenomena, such as the cloud (cf. Ex 16:10; 24:16; 40:34; Num 16:42; 1 Kings 8:11; 2 Chron 7:1-2), fire (cf. Ex 24:17; Deut 5:24; 2 Chron 7:3); mighty waters (cf. Ps 29:3; Hab 2:14); the rainbow (cf. Ezek 1:28).

<sup>7</sup> All quotes are taken from the *New International Version (NIV) Bible*, <https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-International-Version-NIV-Bible> (07.01.2024).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Blue Letter Bible, s.v. »hōd« (2024), <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h1935/niv/wlc/0-1/> (05.01.2024).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. James Alfred LOADER, What do the heavens declare? On the Old Testament motif of God's beauty in creation, *HTS: Theological Studies*, 67 (2011) 3, 1-8, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v67i3.1098>.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 4.

In Psalm 90:17, the psalmist asks God to let His beauty [nō'am]<sup>12</sup> rest upon the people and to establish the work of their hands with it. In this request, we see his faith and conviction that God can also impart His beauty to humans, and that they can find strength for their lives and work in it. Moreover, God can also impart His beauty to the work of human hands, such as the temple, as indirectly stated by the psalmist in Psalm 27:4, where he says: »One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty [nō'am] of the Lord and to seek him in his temple«.

If people can gaze God's beauty [nō'am] not only in creation but also in the house of the Lord, then temple architecture also shares in it, for it can depict it or enable its perception. Places are also recipients of God's beauty, for example, Jerusalem, as the psalmist states in Ps 50:2: »From Zion, perfect in beauty [y'pī]<sup>13</sup>, God shines forth«.<sup>14</sup>

The writer of the *Book of Wisdom* emphasizes that God is the source of beauty in the world. He marvels that the pagans cannot recognize God the Creator from the created things He made. Despite being so captivated by their beauty that they consider things like fire, wind, stars, water, sun, and moon as gods, they cannot comprehend how much more beautiful their Creator is, who is the »originator of beauty« (Wis 13:1-3). He is convinced that from the »beauty of created things«, everyone can »by analogy contemplate their Creator« (Wis 13:5). The Apostle Paul also agrees with him (cf. Rom 1:19-23) and emphasizes that due to the bondage of sin, we have become incapable of seeing the glory of God or enjoying the beauty of God (cf. Rom 3:23; 2 Thess 1:9). Through the life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we have all been freed from the slavery of sin and become capable of seeing the glory of God and enjoying the beauty of God in Him (cf. 2 Cor 3:18; 4:6). With Christ's ultimate return at the end of time, all of us who believe in Him and live in Him through baptism will become partakers of His glory and beauty (cf. 2 Cor 3:18; Phil 3:21).<sup>15</sup>

In his hymn of praise, the psalmist promises God that he will meditate on the wonderful works of God, which »speak of the glorious [kābôd] splendour of your majesty« (Ps 145:5). Jesus Christ, in turn, invites his disciples to be instructed by the lilies of the field, which speak to them by their beauty how God the Father cares for them. And if He cares for them in this way, how much more does He care for them (cf. Mt 6:28-30). In this way, He also makes it clear that God the Father is also the source of the beauty of the lilies and of everything

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *Blue Letter Bible*, s.v. »nō'am« (2024), <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h5278/kjv/wlc/0-1/> (05.01.2024).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *Blue Letter Bible*, s.v. »y'pī« (2024), <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h3308/kjv/wlc/0-1/> (06.01.2024).

<sup>14</sup> Similarly in Ps 46:5; 48:3; 76:5; Isa 52:1; 62:3; Zech 9:17.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. John J. NAVONE, *Toward a Theology of Beauty*, Collegeville MN, Liturgical Press, 1996, 34-35.

beautiful, including the beauty of every human being. In order that we may fully comprehend God the Father, his kingdom and also his truth, goodness and beauty, he encourages his disciples to look and listen so that they may see, hear and comprehend (cf. Mt 13:10-17). Surely Jesus encouraged them to pay attention to beauty, because he himself always looked at nature with wonder, love and respect (cf. LS 96-98).<sup>16</sup> His parables about the Kingdom of God also reveal how he looks at nature, and how we should look at nature to see the presence and work of God the Father and his Kingdom in it (cf. Mt 13:24-33).

The *Direttorio per la catechesi* summarizes this biblical understanding of the beauty of nature with the words:

»Sacred Scripture presents, unequivocally, God as the source of all splendour and beauty. The Old Testament shows creation, with man at its summit, as a good and beautiful thing, not so much in the sense of order and harmony, but of gratuitousness, free from functionalism.«<sup>17</sup>

## 2. *God's Presence in the Beauty of Nature and Through It: Theological Views*

When Pope Francis wrote his encyclical *Laudato si* in 2015, through which he called on all people to unite in a common search and to exercise concrete care for our common home (cf. LS 14),<sup>18</sup> he inspired everyone to admire the beauty of creation (cf. LS 12) and to collaborate with God the Father. Only in this way can our planet Earth be as He envisioned it when He created it, and will it correspond to His plan for peace, beauty and fullness of life (cf. LS 64). He based his Christian view of nature and its beauty on the Bible, Basil the Great, Francis of Assisi, Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas. In his spirit and in the spirit of returning to the sources of Christian theological thinking, we will also explore the theological view of the beauty of nature in these and other well-known patristic and medieval theologians.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430), in his book *The Confessions*, speaks of his admiration for the beauty and order of creation, which he sees as a *reflection of the*

<sup>16</sup> Cf. FRANCIS, *Encyclical Letter Laudato si* (24.05.2015), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html) (10.01.2024).

<sup>17</sup> Pontificio Consiglio per la Promozione della Nuova Evangelizzazione, *Direttorio per la catechesi*, Città del Vaticano, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020, no. 106.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Roman GLOBOKAR, Krščanski antropocentrizem in izkoriščevalska drža človeka do naravnega okolja [Christian Anthropocentrism and Man's Exploitative Stance toward the Natural Environment], *Bogoslovni vestnik*, 78 (2018) 2, 349-364, 361-363; Mateja PEVEC ROZMAN, Upanje za naravo in človeštvo: nekateri etični premisleki [Is there a Hope for Nature and Humanity: Some Ethical Consideration], *Bogoslovni vestnik*, 81 (2021) 4, 835-848, 837-843.



*goodness and beauty* of God the Creator. After years of idolizing the beauty of created things, which also caused unrest in his heart, he came to the realization that his love for the beauty of created things was like steps on a ladder leading to the search for and discovery of the highest beauty of God Himself and also peace within his heart. He also left us a wonderful account of his experience of seeking God in the beauty of nature, as he questioned individual things:

»I asked the breezy air, and the universal air with its inhabitants answered, 'Anaximenes was deceived, I am not God.' I asked the heavens, the sun, moon, and stars: 'Neither,' say they, 'are we the God whom you seek?' And I answered unto all these things which stand about the door of my flesh, 'You have told me concerning my God, that you are not He; tell me something about Him.' And with a loud voice they exclaimed, 'He made us.' My questioning was my observing of them; and their beauty was their reply«. <sup>19</sup>

Based on his own experience and study of the Holy Scriptures, he is convinced that the entire creation, with its beauty, *reveals the presence and character of God*.<sup>20</sup> For him, the beauty of creation is a sign. It points beyond itself. Like the Bible, it »witnesses« and »proclaims« its inspirer and Creator. He is convinced that the beauty of creation is also evidence of the existence of God.<sup>21</sup>

For him, God is the beauty of all beautiful things. He believes that the earth, mountains, trees, wild animals, livestock, birds, and weather elements are wonderfully beautiful because He created them. Therefore, he urges people to praise God for them in all stages of life.<sup>22</sup>

Some patristic and medieval theologians often refer to Romans 1:19-20 and Wisdom 13:1-5 when speaking about *God's presence in the beauty of nature and through it*. They read nature in the light of Scripture. They understand such reading of Scripture and nature as means through which God reveals Himself.<sup>23</sup> Schaefer clearly states that through the beauty of the natural world, individuals discover God's wisdom, power, goodness, and other divine attributes. Their explorations demonstrate a profoundly *sacramental worldview*.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>19</sup> AVGUSTINE, *The Confessions*, Translated by J.G. Pilkington, Buffalo NY, Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887, 10,6,9. Augustine also describes his admiration for the beauty of nature in his book *The City of God*, Translated by Marcus Dods, Buffalo NY, Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887, 22,24. Already before him, Basil of Caesarea (ca. 329-379) urges his hearers to be attentive to all earthly creatures, to admire them always and to praise God for them (cf. *Ibid.*, *Hexameron*, Buffalo NY, Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887, 5,3-8).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Avgustine, *The Confessions...*, 7,15,23; 9,10,24; *ibid.*, *The City of God...*, 12,4.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Avgustine, *The City of God...*, 11,4.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Avgustine, *The Confessions...*, 7,13,19.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Clarence J. GLACKEN, *Traces on the Rhodian shore: Nature and culture in Western thought from ancient times to the end of the eighteenth century*, Oakland CA, University of California Press, 1967, 205-206.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Jame SCHAEFER, Appreciating the beauty of earth, *Theological Studies*, 60 (2001) 1, 23-52, 36.

Athanasius of Alexandria (ca. 295-373) is convinced that God wants us to know Him through the beauty of nature. Referring to Romans 1:20 and Acts 14:15-17, he teaches those natural phenomena, such as rain, sun, moon, and the entire arrangement of the universe, point to God and should lead us to the conclusion that we have one Ruler and King of all creation.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Basil of Caesarea *views nature sacramentally* and encourages Christians to form an image of God, who is more than beautiful, from the beauty of visible things, and to continually honour and praise Him.<sup>26</sup>

Augustine's *sacramental understanding* of nature is found in his work *City of God*, where he wrote, among other things:

»The world itself, by its well-ordered changes and movements, and by the fair appearance of all visible things, bears a testimony of its own, both that it has been created, and also that it could not have been created save by God, whose greatness and beauty are unutterable and invisible.«<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, this understanding of nature is particularly evident in his work *On the Trinity*, where he emphasizes that *traces of the Trinity* can be found in nature<sup>28</sup> and similarity with the Trinity in the human memory, understanding, and will.<sup>29</sup>

Referencing Romans 1:20, Hugh of Saint Victor (1096-1144) in his work *Sentences of Divinity* emphasizes that it is possible to discern the invisible attributes of God from the visible things He has created.<sup>30</sup> However, particularly important for understanding the *sacramentality of the beauty of nature* is his work *On the Three Days*. In it, he emphasizes that the entire world

»a kind of book written by the finger of God, that is, created by divine power [virtus], and each creature is a kind of figure, not invented by human determination, but established by the divine will to manifest and in some way signify the invisible wisdom of God. However, just as when an unlettered person sees an open book and notices the shapes but does not recognize the letters, so stupid and carnal people, who are not aware of the things of God, see on the outside the beauty in these visible creatures, but they do not understand its meaning. On the other hand, a spiritual person can discern all things. When he considers

<sup>25</sup> Cf. ATHANASIUS, *Contra Gentes: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*, Translated by E. P. Meijering, Leiden, Brill, 35-37.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Basil of Caesarea, *Hexaemeron...*, 1,1-11.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Augustine, *The City of God...*, 11,4.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. AUGUSTINE, *On the Trinity*, Translated by Arthur West Haddan, Buffalo NY, Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887, 15,2-5.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 10,12.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. HUGH OF ST. VICTOR, *Sentences of divinity*, in: Boyd TAYLOR COOLMAN, Dale M. COULTER (eds.), *Trinity and Creation. A Selection of Works of Hugh, Richard and Adam of St Victor*, Turnhout, Brepols Publishers, 2010, 113-178, 127-128.



externally the beauty of the work, he understands internally how wondrous is the wisdom of the Creator«.<sup>31</sup>

When speaking about the beauty of all beings, he emphasizes:

»The beauty [pulchritudo] of creatures is perfect, but there are four in which all their beauty [decor] principally consists; that is, in structure, motion, appearance [species], and quality. If anyone were up to investigating these, he would discover the wondrous light of God's wisdom in them«.<sup>32</sup>

In the spirit of Wisdom 13:1 and Romans 1:19-23, Bonaventure (1217-1274) also speaks in his work *The Journey of the Soul into God*, stating that only fools fail to *perceive God through the beauty of nature*. Those who remain unenlightened amidst all this are blind and deaf. Therefore, he encourages every person:

»Open your eyes, alert the ears of your spirit, open your lips and apply your heart so that in all creatures you may see, hear, praise, love, and worship, glorify, and honour your God lest the whole world rise against you«.<sup>33</sup>

In his works, he talks about the *sacramental dimension of creation*, which bears traces of its origin, God. Therefore, he perceives nature as an allegory and every natural reality as a symbol of its author, who is God.<sup>34</sup>

Thomas Aquinas in his philosophy emphasizes that the beauty of the universe reveals God. According to him, *every being in some way reveals God*, with the deepest manifestation of God being the harmonious order of all entities operating according to God's plan (ST, I, q. 47, a. 1; q. 25, a. 6).<sup>35</sup> This hierarchical arrangement, where each being fulfils its purpose in relation to others, is crucial for the glorification of God (ST, I, q. 47, a. 2; q. 65, a. 2).

According to Thomas Aquinas, *every truth, goodness, or beauty* that we encounter originates from God (ST, II-II, q. 27, a. 4; ST, I, q. 5, a. 4, ad 1; q. 6, a. 1; q. 16, a. 1) and thus, even indirectly, offers us insight into Him.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>31</sup> HUGH OF ST. VICTOR, *On the Three Days*, in: Taylor Coolman, Coulter (eds.), *Trinity and Creation...*, 4,3.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 4,1.

<sup>33</sup> BONAVENTURE, *Potovanje duše k Bogu* [The Journey of the Soul into God], Ljubljana, Brat Frančišek, 1999, 1,15. Our translation.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. BONAVENTURE, *Collationes in Hexaemeron (inc. 'In verbis istis')*, Turnhout, Brepols Publishers, 2019, E-knjiga, II, 27.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Piotr ROSZAK, Imperfectly perfect universe? Emerging natural order in Thomas Aquinas, *HTS Theological Studies*, 78 (2022) 2, a7199, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i2.7199>, <https://hts.org.za/index.php/hts/article/view/7199/21575> (20.01.2024).

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Edyta M. IMAI, *Contemplation and the Human Animal in the Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (dissertation), Chicago, Loyola University Chicago, 2011, 224.

### 3. *Contemplation of the Beauty of Nature*

In his encyclical *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis encourages us to adopt a contemplative approach to nature and to develop an ecological spirituality with its help (cf. LS 233). He sees contemplation of the beauty of nature not only as an encounter with the Triune God and a personal relationship with Him, but also as a way of becoming one with Him in caring for every person and all creation. In this he refers in particular to Bonaventure who, together with Francis of Assisi, teaches that every creature bears the imprint of the Triune God and that we could easily contemplate it if our view were not so one-sided and clouded (cf. LS 239).

Bonaventure believes that the bodily senses can assist human reason in discovering the Creator's highest power, wisdom, and benevolence when contemplating things in themselves. Of course, it is necessary to contemplate in the light of faith, understanding that the world is formed by the Word of life (Heb 11:3). In this way, a person can elevate their thoughts to contemplate the power, wisdom, beauty and goodness of God, perceiving Him as present, vibrant, intelligent, purely spiritual, incorruptible, and immutable.<sup>37</sup>

Contemplating all created things enables humans not only to see God through them but also in them:

»Concerning the mirror of things perceived through sensation, we can see God not only through them as through his vestiges, but also in them as he is in them by his essence, power and presence. This type of consideration is higher than the previous one; therefore, it holds second place as the second level of contemplation by which we are led to contemplate God in all creatures which enter our minds through our bodily senses«.<sup>38</sup>

Before him, the contemplations of the beauty of nature had already been well explained by Augustine and Hugo of St. Victor. For Augustine, contemplation is the knowledge that comes from God's love and enables the Christian to love Him more. It involves both rational understanding and loving communion with God. It is not merely passive observation but active participation of memory, intellect, and will/love in a shared relationship with God. In this process, people experience God's presence in all things and are led towards Him. Augustine is convinced that people are integrally involved in contemplation. In it, God's communication utilizes not only sight but also other spiritual senses.<sup>39</sup> This characteristic of contemplation is well illustrated in the text from *Confessions*, where he describes himself:

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Bonaventure, *Potovanje duše k Bogu...*, 1,13.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.1. Our translation; cf. Piotr ROSZAK, Aquinas on the being in God and in Proper Nature, *Bogoslovni vestnik*, 83 (2023) 3, 567-579, 570-577.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Marcin GODOWA, Conditioning of Intellect in Christian Contemplation in the Light of Definitions and St. Augustine's Experience, *Bogoslovni vestnik*, 75 (2015) 3, 525-540, 527-539.

»Too late did I love You, O Fairness, so ancient, and yet so new! Too late did I love You! /.../ You called, and cried aloud, and forced open my deafness. You gleamed and shine, and chase away my blindness. You exhaled odours, and I drew in my breath and do pant after You. I tasted, and do hunger and thirst. You touched me, and I burned for Your peace«.<sup>40</sup>

For Hugh of Saint Victor, contemplation is the penetrating and free gaze of the spirit, which fully embraces the realities that human being can see. He is convinced that contemplation is impossible without faith, but at the same time contemplation upgrades seeing in faith:

»Who have the faith have the sacrament; those who have contemplation have the thing. Faith, then, is the sacrament of future contemplation, and contemplation itself is the thing and the virtue of the sacrament, and we now receive meanwhile the sacrament of sanctification that sanctified perfectly we may be able to take the thing itself«.<sup>41</sup>

He emphasizes that only those who have contemplative eyes can see God and things as they are in Him:

»Man since he has the eye of the flesh can see the world and those things that are in the world. Likewise, since he has the eye of reason in part, he similarly sees the soul in part and those things, which are in the soul. Since indeed he does not have the eye of contemplation, he is not able to see God and the things that are in God«.<sup>42</sup>

For Thomas Aquinas, the driving force of contemplation is charity: »The contemplative life consists chiefly in the contemplation of God, of which charity is the motive« (ST, II-II, q. 180, a. 7).

In contemplation, man unites himself with the persons of God in an intense exchange of knowledge and love. In this way, here and now, he tastes eternal life and the glory of the blessed in heaven in advance as Jesus says: »Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent« (Jn 17:3).

Contemplation of creation is highly significant for believers according to Aquinas. Although a direct encounter with the First Cause, God, in this world is impossible, contemplation of God and the discovery of His attributes are attainable. Aquinas explains that due to the inherent order of things, God is knowable and lovable in Himself, being essentially truth and goodness. Our knowledge, based on the senses, begins with objects near to our senses

<sup>40</sup> Avgustine, *The Confessions...*, 10,27,38.

<sup>41</sup> HUGH OF ST VICTOR, *Sacraments of the Christian Faith. Research Essentials*, vol. 7, Jasper, Florida, Revelation Insight Publishing Co., 2016, IX, 9.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, X, 2.

(cf. ST, II-II, q. 27, a. 4).<sup>43</sup> The culmination of our knowledge, the ultimate concept of understanding, encompasses that which is furthest from sensory perception – God Himself. Initial inclination toward God precedes understanding Him, thus the study of God's creation is a path to the contemplation of God. Love for God naturally extends to love for His creations, through which deeper understanding and love for God Himself can be attained (cf. ST, II-II, q. 27, a. 4).

According to Aquinas (cf. SCG, II, q. 1-3),<sup>44</sup> contemplation of creation promotes admiration for God's wisdom in shaping the universe, reverence for His omnipotent power surpassing all creation, and love for His goodness, which ensures the abundance of beautiful and good beings. Furthermore, such contemplation enables individuals to become increasingly like God.<sup>45</sup> It also serves as a means of eliminating the deification of heavenly bodies and natural forces.

The role of visible things in contemplation, as taught by Aquinas, is well explained by Roszak:

»Contemplation is true seeing, never complete on earth. It indicates the way leading from things seen to things unseen, which Aquinas considers to be a secret communication of John's Gospel. The teaching of Christ is always accompanied by some visible sign, a starting point for deep contemplation. The contemplation of visible things should have this perspicacity, thanks to which it will be possible to reach the invisible. This is the role of the analogies with the corporal and the spiritual life: they open up our minds increasingly to deeper levels of understanding«.<sup>46</sup>

At the end of the last century, John Navone published the book *Enjoying God's Beauty* (1999), which is the result of his years of research on the significance of beauty in Christian theology, contemplation, and the lives of Chris-

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Claudia E. VANNEY, J. Ignacio AGUINALDE SEANZ, Interpersonal Intellectual Virtues: A heuristic Conceptualization from an Empirical Study, *Scientia et Fides*, 10 (2022) 2, 167-181, 169-179, <http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/SetF.2022.025>.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas AQUINAS, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book Two: *Creation*, Translated by James F. Anderson, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1975.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Piotr ROSZAK, Exegesis and Contemplation. The Literal and Spiritual Sense of Scripture in Aquinas Biblical Commentaries, *Espiritu*, 55 (2016) 152, 481-504, 487-500.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 499-500.

tians.<sup>47</sup> In its introduction, he emphasizes: »Both Christian faith and contemplation entail the joy of seeing God's beauty in our lives«.<sup>48</sup>

For Navone, contemplation is »the look of love«, sharing in Jesus' »look of love« on all things, people and God and the Father's »look of love« on Jesus, all creation and us.<sup>49</sup> Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, heals our eyes so that we can see in his way. The reports of Jesus' healings of the blind are for him

»a metaphor for his giving us the Holy Spirit of his love which enables our enjoyment of God's beauty with the 'eye of love' which is Christian faith and the gaze of love beholding the beloved which is contemplation. The crucified and risen Christ gives us the Holy Spirit of his life, love, joy, truth, and peace in the triune communion-community-communications that beautify all creation as the origin-ground-perfection of its beauty«.<sup>50</sup>

Navone believes that the Holy Spirit also empowers the delight of Christian faith and contemplation. The extent of our happiness corresponds directly to our ability to contemplate: our affectionate recognition of the divine essence and goodness permeating the universe. Festivity or genuine enjoyment cannot exist without an element of contemplation.<sup>51</sup>

With reference to Aquinas (SCG, III, p. I, ch. 37)<sup>52</sup>, Navone is convinced that the summit of happiness in the present life is contemplation: the affectionate gaze that perceives the Beloved in all things. Creation is an expression of God's will, signifying that it was brought into being through love and thus, by its very existence, is inherently good and deserving of contemplation. Through the Holy Spirit, we are empowered to partake in God's delight by contemplating the beauty of God's goodness evident in all of creation.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Of course, before him, some theologians and spiritual teachers had spoken of contemplating the beauty of nature, but not in such a profound way. Nevertheless, it is strange that, although he is a Jesuit and quotes various theologians and spiritual teachers from patristic, medieval and modern times in his book, he never mentions Ignatius of Loyola and his Spiritual Exercises. In this he resembles Pope Francis, who also did not mention him in *Laudato Si*. Nevertheless, we are convinced that the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises can help us to discover and practise the contemplation of the beauty of nature, especially through contemplation to attain love (cf. IGNATIUS, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, Translated by George E. Ganss, Saint Luis, The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992, no. 231-234). In this this exercise, he invites us to contemplate the goodness and beauty of all created things and, in the light of faith, to see the presence of God who creates, gives to us and thus takes care of us all. As we become more aware of this, it moves and inspires us to become a gift ourselves and to cooperate with Him, the Giver, in His selfless and serving love for all people and all creation, building a culture of beauty and goodness, caring for our common home and common good. For more, see Ivan PLATOVNJAK, The ecological spirituality in the light of *Laudato si*, *Nova prisutnost*, 17 (2019) 1, 75-91, 87-88.

<sup>48</sup> John J. NAVONE, *Enjoying God's Beauty*, Collegeville MN, The Liturgical Press, 1999, i.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 6-9.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Thomas AQUINAS, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book Three: *Providence*, Part I, Translated by Vernon J. Bourke, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1975.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Navone, *Enjoying God's Beauty...*, x.

Similarly, the *Direttorio per la catechesi*, published by the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelisation in 2020, in the spirit of the teaching of Pope Francis, sees the role of contemplation of the beauty of nature in the life of Christians.<sup>54</sup> It emphasizes that in every beauty, »we can find a path that helps us on the way to God«. <sup>55</sup> The intrinsic connection between beauty, goodness, and truth ensures that the contemplation of beauty evokes in the individual such emotions as joy, pleasure, tenderness, fulfilment, and meaning, and thus leads him to the transcendent. Evangelization follows the path of beauty and its contemplation, and in this way every expression of beauty becomes a vehicle for catechesis and for spiritual instruction.<sup>56</sup>

### *Conclusion*

In researching the biblical and theological understanding of the beauty of nature and its contemplation in the light of Christianity, the following aspects have come to the forefront:

1) In the Bible we find numerous passages that tell us that the triune God is the source of the beauty of nature and that people can discover the beauty, goodness, truth, glory, greatness, and omnipotence of God through the contemplation of its beauty, praising and honouring Him, personally uniting with Him, and manifesting Him anew.

2) Jesus' healings of the blind tell us that we cannot see the presence of the triune God in all things and His care for us through the beauty of nature unless He heals our eyes by the grace of the Holy Spirit and gives us His and the Father's »look of love«, which is essentially contemplation. The grace of being able to have this »look« is given to us as Christians through Baptism, when we are reborn in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit and begin to live Him. This gift can only be developed if we cooperate with it and are permanent disciples of Jesus Christ and His Spirit.

3) Many patristic and medieval theologians in their works confirm that the beauty of nature reveals the triune God because He created everything and His truth, goodness, and beauty are indelibly imprinted in all things. Through the power of faith and the Holy Spirit, people can discover God through the contemplation of the beauty of nature, as He Himself seeks them through it, and establish a personal relationship with Him, becoming more and more one with Him. Their teachings also find resonance among some later theologians, especially with Pope Francis in his efforts for a new evangelization and integral Christian spirituality, which includes ecological spirituality.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. *Direttorio per la catechesi*, no. 106.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 108.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, no. 109.



4) The beauty of nature can fascinate us and motivate us to search for its »author/artist«, but we cannot, with our senses alone, recognise the triune God and his beauty behind the beauty of nature, believe in Him, establish a personal relationship with Him and unite ourselves with Him. We can do this by the grace of the Holy Spirit, who, through Scripture and the teaching, spiritual tradition and communion of the Church, offers us a »horizon« through which we can experientially perceive God through the beauty of nature, establish a personal relationship with Him, and become His interlocutors and responsible collaborators.

5) Contemplating the beauty of nature helps us to empty ourselves and allow the triune God to fill us. The beauty that captivates us, stirs our spirit, awakens our desire to do good and beautiful things, and stimulates our free will to put beauty and goodness into practice in all our relationships, to build a culture of beauty and goodness, to become close to every human being, to strive for brotherhood/sisterhood, the common good and a common home.

All that has come to the forefront in the research also confirms the thesis we set out at the beginning, that Christians can encounter God and deepen their personal relationship with Him through the contemplation of the beauty of nature in the spirit of their Christian faith. In addition, through it they can also become more responsible collaborators with the Triune God in caring for every human being and for the whole of nature. with the Triune God in caring for all people and all nature.

Before the end of this article, here's an example of what contemplation of the beauty of nature in the light of Christianity can look like in practice. Like all prayer, contemplation requires surrendering to it, that is, surrendering to the relationship with God the Father through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit, in whom we live and who always seeks and visits us through His Word or through all that exists. When we completely surrender with all our being and senses to what we contemplate, and in faith in the triune God allow what will happen to happen within us, the Holy Spirit can fulfil His mission in us: move us, remind us, teach us, inspire us, comfort us, and guide us (cf. Jn 13-17).

The most important thing is to go into nature and just watch and listen. Let what we see, hear, or perceive in various ways in nature not just be material for reflection: for example, how God created it, how He dwells in all of it and continues to act as a creator now, how His beauty, goodness, and truth are imprinted in everything. The crucial thing is to take about half an hour and, in the spirit of faith in the triune God, gaze at a tree, landscape, or anything else in nature. It must be long enough to give God the Father through Christ in the Holy Spirit the opportunity to overwhelm us with His beauty. It can touch us so strongly that we desire nothing else but to surrender to His loving and respectful active presence and care for all humanity and all of nature, and we wish to be His interlocutors and collaborators in this.

Ivan Platovnjak\*

*Kontempliranje ljepote prirode u kršćanskom svjetlu*

Sažetak

Kad stojimo pred umjetničkim djelom, opažamo ne samo njegovu stvarnu prisutnost, nego i ljepotu koja izvire iz njega i iz umjetnika koji ga je stvorio, što produbljuje naš odnos prema djelu i prema umjetniku. Slično tome, kad smo uronjeni u prirodu, cijenimo njezinu ljepotu. Pitanje je susrećemo li se i s njezinim »umjetnikom«. U ovom radu istražuje se kontemplacija ljepote prirode iz kršćanske perspektive i iznosi se teza da takvom kontemplacijom kršćani mogu produbiti svoj odnos s Bogom kao Stvoriteljem. Nakon uvođenja u pojam ljepote, autor u prvom poglavlju ispituje biblijska gledišta o ljepoti prirode, a u drugom istražuje patrističke i srednjovjekovne teološke poglede. Posljednje poglavlje bavi se kontemplacijom ljepote prirode. U zaključku autor potvrđuje tezu i iznosi bitna razmatranja za upuštanje u kontemplaciju ljepote prirode.

*Ključne riječi: Bog Otac, Duh Sveti, Isus Krist, kontemplacija, kršćanstvo, ljepota, priroda.*

---

\* Izv. prof. dr. sc. Ivan Platovnjak, Sveučilište u Ljubljani, Teološki fakultet; Poljanska cesta 4, SI-1000 Ljubljana, Slovenija; e-mail: ivan.platovnjak@teof.uni-lj.si.