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Ex nihilo (from nothing)
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In the very beginning, there was nothing. Nothing at all.

There was neither time nor space, neither matter nor energy, neither life nor death. There were no galaxies, no stars or planets; nor were there molecules, atoms, or any of the vast array of subatomic particles that constitute physical reality as we know it. There was nothing.

The concept of "nothingness" is impossible for us to grasp. "Nothingness" suggests a void, an emptiness, bounded by something. Yet nothing existed to circumscribe that void or provide contrast to that emptiness. Nothingness is not just the absence of being; it is its denial, its rejection. It is an absolute negation, immeasurable and incomprehensible. It is non-existence, non-being, a negative power that by its very nature is devoid of all meaning, purpose or hope. As such, nothingness finds its closest human analogy in despair.

Then suddenly, "in the beginning" there was something. In that timeless moment, from a locus that transcends every notion of space or dimension, God created *ex nihilo*. He fashioned being from non-being, space-time from non-existence. Out of that beginning, God – who is Himself the *arche* or ultimate beginning, principle and source of all that is – brought forth the heavens and the earth.

God, the Father or generator of all things visible and invisible, created through what St Irenaeus of Lyon calls His "two hands," the eternal Son or Word, and the Holy Spirit. Creation is a Trinitarian act, an act of communion, an act of love. The Father spoke, and through His creative Word He called forth light. That light, which preceded the appearance of the sun (created on the fourth day), can only be understood as a reflection of the divine Light, the Light that defines the very being of God (1 John 1:5). That light, from the first moment of creation until the last, banishes the darkness. It relegates the primeval *skotos* to its own realm, removed from the sphere of light. That light God called "Day," and the darkness He called "Night." During the first day of creation, God separated one from the other, Day from Night, spiritual illumination from darkness, despair and death.

To make that light shine out of darkness, the Father also required His "other hand," the divine Spirit. At the moment of creation, "the earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters." In that primordial moment, the Spirit moved like a great storm over the abyss, the formless void, to bring into

being the cosmos, marked by order, harmony and beauty.

From that point onward, the work of creation continued, effected by the cooperative effort of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity. From the outset there appeared distinction and separation: day from night, the waters from the firmament (heaven), and the firmament from the dry land (the physical earth). Then vegetation was brought forth, seed-bearing plants and fruit-bearing trees, "each according to its kind." God saw the work of His Hands and found it to be good. And there was evening and there was morning, a third day.

These opening verses are not meant to describe historical process or provide a scientific explanation for the appearance and development of the world and human life. The passage says nothing that can be exploited one way or another in the tedious debate between "creationists" and "evolutionists." Its concern is not with historiography or paleontology, and its curious chronology (water existed before heaven or earth, living things appeared on earth before creation of the sun and moon) should not trouble the minds of any but those who insist on reading the narrative as a description of cosmological or biological development. The Genesis creation story is not concerned with scientifically determinable events. As we shall stress in the next column, it is concerned with *salvation history*, the creating and redeeming work of God, from the first creation to the last.

As the polarization intensifies in our schools and legislatures between "believers" and "Darwinists," it is important for us to remember this point. Increasingly, Christian scientists are coming to see that this is a false choice, that on the question of the origin and development of species there is no necessary conflict between the biblical witness on the one hand and the findings of geologists, paleontologists and molecular biologists on the other. [See in this regard Francis Collins' recent work, *The Language of God* (Free Press, 2006).] "Young earth" theorists and fundamentalists of various stripes will reject this point, as will those who insist on the total "randomness" of mutations in the process of natural selection. Evolutionary process (if not Darwinian theory in all its details) has been confirmed by recent studies of DNA, the genetic code of living organisms. Yet this need not call into question the basic conviction that the Creator of all things is God, that God created *ex nihilo*, that He infuses all things with ultimate meaning and purpose, and that apparent randomness conforms wholly, if for us imperceptibly, to His divine will.

In addition to furnishing a typology for God's redeeming work in Christ, the Genesis creation account calls us to worship. This is the insight conveyed by words attributed to St Basil the Great, which combine a prayer of wonder and thanksgiving with an invitation to offer ceaseless praise to God for the work of

His hands:

"You have adorned heaven, beautified the earth, and populated the sea with its own creatures. You have filled the air with birds, which traverse it in every direction!"

Pious believer, contemplate these works of creation, which God has drawn out of nothing. Behold the wisdom of God everywhere and in all things. Never cease to wonder. And through every creature, glorify the Creator!