

The Theology of John Duns Scotus ***Philippe Yates OFM***

The word which summarises Duns Scotus' theology is Christocentric. His is a theology which places Christ at the centre of a universe ordered by love. Christ is presented as the basis of all nature, grace and glory - the most perfect model of humanity. He is at the beginning, the centre and the end of the universe.

Scotus sought to build everything on his Christology - a Christology that was at the same time Pauline, Johannine and Franciscan. Pauline, because it developed the insight that Christ is the 'the first-born of all creation'. Johannine since it saw love at the root of God and of creation. Franciscan in that it sought to harmonise all things in Christ according to the divine plan so that the bond between all creatures could be recognised.

At the heart of Scotus' theology was the doctrine of the primacy of Christ. God is absolutely free and therefore if he creates it is because he wants to create. He wants to create in order to reveal and communicate his goodness and love to another. Because God loves, he wills that his creation should also be infused by love. It is only right and good that the highest object of creation's love should be God himself, for nothing could be a more fitting object of love than the God who lovingly created.

God created creation in such a way that it should love, and above all love Him. For creation to be able to love to the highest extent, there must be at least one creature capable of the highest love. That creature is Christ, for only a human nature united to the divine nature in one person could love to the highest extent, the extent to which God loves. St. Paul tells us that Christ was the first-born of all creation, and Scotus' theology makes sense of this affirmation. The incarnation in Scotus' theology is the whole purpose of creation. Christ is the masterpiece of love in the midst of a creation designed for love, not a divine plumber come to fix the mess of original sin.

Since all of creation is orientated towards Christ's entry, there has to be within creation a nature capable of understanding and freely responding to God's love. Human nature, based on the human nature of Christ, is that created reality.

A corollary of the doctrine of Christ's primacy is the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. It is fitting that the one for whom creation was made (Jesus) should be born of the holiest of the saints (Mary), or as Scotus put it: 'If it is not contrary to the authority of the Church or of the Scriptures, it seems that what is more excellent is to be attributed to Mary.'

There were those who claimed that to accept that Mary was conceived without sin would undermine the redemptive nature of Christ's passion and resurrection. These theologians argued that such an acceptance denied that all redemption came through Christ. Scotus replied that, on the contrary, it followed from Christ's universal redemption that Mary did not have original sin.

The most perfect mediator ought to have the most perfect act of mediation in regard to the person in whose favour he intervenes. Mary, his mother, is the person in whose favour Christ intervenes the most perfectly as mediator of grace. This wholly perfect act of mediation requires in the one redeemed preservation from every defect, even from original sin. Therefore the Blessed Virgin was exempted from every stain of sin.

Instead of belittling Christ and circumscribing his power, Scotus argued, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception exalted him, attributing to Jesus the most perfect and sublime redemption. This redemption is most perfectly won for Mary, and she, far from being outside the realm of redemption, is more indebted than the rest of us to our Saviour Jesus Christ for she has received a more radical redemption.

The primacy of Christ also impacts upon our view of creation and our place within it. Since creation is created to love, it is ordered to allow it to fulfil the role for which it was created. So we live in a universe united around its purpose - which is to love God its creator. The highest expression of this purpose is the one who loves most perfectly: Christ. Thus Christ's entry into creation is the culmination of all that creation is and means. With the incarnation at its centre, creation becomes a cosmic hymn to the Trinity, in which the universe, bound together in and through the cosmic Christ, offers praise and glory to God.

Scotus teaches that we can know God through the created world. The path to this knowledge of God runs through our being. For our being and God's being are of the same order. There is only one order of being and all beings are related in a way that brings out the unity of all that is. This doctrine is called that of the univocity of being.

Scotus does not teach that God's being and created being are one and the same thing but that God's being and created being are two different modes of the one order of being. God's being is infinite and created being is finite. However, since created being and divine being are of the same order, when we arrive at an understanding of being in the created realm, we thereby arrive at an understanding of the first principle of being, God Himself. Thus our seeking to know creation is not something separated from our seeking to know God. When we apprehend the being of anything, we apprehend something of God: the divine mystery can be perceived from within the created order even though it will always remain mystery since our finite nature cannot fully apprehend the infinity of God.

What is true in the basic created order of things (that God is at the root of all that is and all that is shines forth with the light of God) becomes even more explicitly expressed in the incarnation. A created nature becomes united in one person to the divine nature of the Word and in this way creation reaches its fulfilment.

If Christ is the pattern of everything created, does this not make creation too uniform? No. In Scotus' philosophy each particular creature has its own intrinsic, unique and proper being. Thus everything has an inherent dignity,

an essential "thisness" that makes it itself and not something else. So while univocity of being provides a philosophical basis for the unity of all created things, "thisness" ensures that within that unity each created thing has its own place, a place that can be taken by no other. We tell one thing from another by perceiving the "thisness" that each thing possesses.

Scotus' theology provides a powerful basis for a Christian ecology; it also reconciles a deep respect for individuality with an understanding of the profound unity of all reality. By placing Christ at the centre, we find in Scotus' theology a language that speaks to the keenest questions of our time. All from within our British Franciscan tradition. *f*

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