NATURE, CULTURE AND THE THEOLOGY OF RECONCILIATION

1. Nature

Currently, the most widely used signification of the term ‘nature’ refers to the ‘environment’ and more specifically to what is non-human or divine. There is nothing wrong with the fact that such a rich concept, with such a broad analogical signification, be used in this sense.

Nonetheless, we should ask ourselves if this current signification of the term has relegated to the wayside other fundamental aspects of ‘nature’ that were once emphasized in different historical periods, and if these other meanings are important to better understand this wonderful non-human dimension in its greatness, and at the same time, recognizing its partiality, illuminate more of the totality of what is real.

It is impossible to review the many historical significations of the term “nature”, but it seems convenient to remember that the classic meaning of this term in ancient and medieval philosophy referred to the way of being of each entity, and was also a term sometimes inter

exchanged with the concept of essence. “Nature” then referred to what is originally given in each being, that is to say, from the moment of its birth (Natura), and therefore could only be understood in relationship with an end (Telos) that was already in some way present in the original nature of each being.

Without going further into precisions about this classical understanding of nature I’d like to highlight why certain aspects of this signification are important for our understanding of what today we call nature: a. In the first place, we find an emphasis in the idea that what is most proper to a reality is given to it previous to any human action or intervention; b. In the second place, that this given identity is the most proper characteristic of a reality in its totality, and therefore being the framework in which the non-human environment must be understood; and c. In the third place, that the given is in ‘tension’ towards an end, and is not something amorphous or chaotic, but ordered and intelligible, that is containing a direction and a meaning.
2. **Nature in the horizon of a broader reality**

I will refer to the first aspects previously highlighted in relation to the classical conception of nature, in order to then refer to the third aspect, since it seems that one of the first central problems in the relationship between the human being and non-human nature is found, precisely, in the broader difficulty of modern man to relate to reality as reality, that is, of recognizing that there is something that is actually ‘given’, independent and beyond his own conscience and action. This given reality has its own consistency, is something that can be truly known and its humble recognition and valuation are indispensible for human fulfillment.

This difficulty expresses itself, for example, in the many current and widely diffused forms of subjectivism, relativism, skepticism or nihilism – not only in their theoretical expressions but above all in their practical and daily dimensions. These deformations of reality carry unprecedented characteristics in the history of humanity, to the point that we can affirm that the central problem of mankind in our times rests is the “rupture with reality”. In effect, traditionally it was understood (in the fields of epistemology, ethics and ontology) that there are two fundamental alternatives to the human relationship with the environment. The first is to seek to establish one’s own existence and action in being, that is, in the given reality. The second is to seek to establish reality in one’s own conscience and action. In our times, the self affirmation of conscience (often confused with arbitrary imagination) and action (often times reduced to *poiesis*, that is, a merely productive or instrumental form of action) have prevailed. In this way, being, the given, or simply, reality, is understood as a chaotic or amorphous mass that must be ordered or transformed into the image and likeness of subjective human impulses.

As Pope Benedict XVI said, in his memorable speech to the German Parliament, the ecological movements of the 20th century have the merits of being “a cry of fresh air” over and against the way of seeing the world artificially, that is self referentially and reduced, like “a concrete bunker with no windows, in which we ourselves provide lighting and atmospheric conditions, being no longer willing to
obtain either from God’s wide world”. But, he added, that although this cry must be valued, the environmental movement has not been able to “open windows” of our dark bunker. The reason being, precisely, in not being able to comprehend non-human nature within the broader horizon of the totality of reality. The opening of windows seems therefore to require a renewed and broader existential disposition of open and humble reverence, and not prejudiced entrenchment, to absolutely everything that comes from beyond our conscience, that is, a disposition or an ethos that allows us to recover the relationship with reality, and not only one aspect of reality.

3. The theological sense of nature
The third aspect that has been previously emphasized about the classical concept of nature refers to the importance of understanding that all of reality has an end (telos), and therefore any dimension of non-human or inanimate reality has a purpose or a direction. This was formulated as such by Aristotle, who argued that the end (telos) determined the concept of nature (physis), in the same way as a tree, with its “end” is already present in the “nature” of a certain seed, specifying and orienting its development. And from this teleological sense, he said, inanimate things are not excluded, such as a rock for example, that being tossed in the air does not remain there but rather returns to its “natural place”, which is, precisely its “end”. In this way, despite the limitations of this pre-Christian form of thinking that was unconscious of a spiritual reality that transcended nature (for nature was understood as in fundamental biological terms), the value of the Aristotelian formulation was found in evidencing the “order” of the natural world, that it is a cosmos, rather than a chaotic amorphous mass or some irrational evolutionary torrent. Rather as cosmos it is a reality with an “end” and thus revealing a “logical” structure, intelligent and intelligible, found in its most intimate self.

The revelation of God in His Son Jesus Christ, and with it, the deepest revelation of the nature and end of all of reality, ratifies that logical and teleological sense of the non-human environment. But is also offers the final and deepest explanation of its meaning: in the beginning was the Word and through Him all was made. In this way,
finite reality, once understood as a “physis” enclosed upon itself, is known as “creation”. The windows are opened to the totality of what is real allowing for the understanding of the ultimate sense of partial realities. Finite reality, and within it non-human reality, are discovered not only in their most intimate logical order but now also in their most profound beauty, because they're seen from the vantage point of the foundational and transcendent reality of God. With this in mind we can understand why Benedict XVI said, precisely in this beautiful country of Brazil, that “only who recognizes God knows reality and can respond to it in the proper and truly human way” and also why Pope John Paul II, also while visiting Brazil, marveled at what he called the “superiority of God’s architecture” visible in the ocean, the mountains, jungle and lakes, among which we find the human architecture of human beings of this city of Rio de Janeiro.

The fact is that finite nature of infrahuman nature is not the creation of some impersonal superior being, but rather creation “ex-nihilo” via a Logos who is a Person in a trinitarian communion of Persons, who create, within this communal dynamic, in a overabundance of love which explains the logical and teleological sense that can be perceived in creation. As St. Augustine said: “It is necessary for us, seeing the Creator through the works he has done, to rise to the contemplation of the Trinity, which bears the imprint in creating true and fair share”.

Along these lines, Pope John Paul II observed that the revelation of creation by the Trinity

"presents a logic (Logos: Word) structure of the universe and an iconic (Eikon: image, image of the Father) structure (...) creation carries with it "the vestiges of the Trinity" (vestigia Trinitatis). It is the work of the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit. In Creation is revealed the Wisdom of God: in it the -alluded- dual "logical-iconic" structure of the creatures is intimately linked to the structure of the gift.”

Thus, one can perceive in the teleological order of inanimate natural creations not only a logical order but also a “ordo amoris”, in an analogical sense. And due to their state of being created they cannot be
understood as a “pure nature” ignorant of supernatural reality, since, as Chesterton warned, we would be left not with the merely natural but rather with the unnatural. This “structure of gift” or the dynamic of divine love present in all creatures has been constantly expressed, in many forms and accents, in the Christian tradition, no only among the Augustinian or Franciscan currents, but also within Thomism, as can be seen when Maritain reminds us that St. Thomas “teaches that all beings, including inanimate things, in the ontological aspiration which in the end is what the love of God is in us, naturally love God above all things”\(^1\).

4. The theology of reconciliation
The existence of a creation made by a creative Trinity is the *Raison d'être for a theology of reconciliation.*

Every finite reality manifests an “ontological dependence” in its mere fact of existence. This means that the subsistence of finite realities depend on the foundational reality of God, natural reality depends on supernatural reality, and in this sense the magnificent non-human environment, in its belonging to created reality, not only exists but also speaks of, in its own way, of an essential relationship with the Creator in the most intimate realm of its reality.

The theology of reconciliation, as the term itself indicates, emphasizes, therefore a “first relationship” of all of creation with a creative Trinity, and consequently, an ontological relationship, of many degrees, among the many created realities. It’s not about a “conciliation”, the quest of some form of agreement among realities that were initially separate, but rather about the re-unification of something that, from the beginning, was already united in an essential harmony.

In this sense, the theological perspective of reconciliation emphasizes that from the very beginning of creation there exists of a “fourfold reconciliation” of which the human person, as the apex of the divine plan of creation and lord or steward of

creation must tend to as a fact of reality itself, and which is indispensible not only for human fulfillment but also for the adequate care and preservation of all of reality. This fourfold reconciliations not homogenous, but rather has a hierarchy, in which each level of relationship depends upon the presence and intensity of the level of relationship previously superior to it.

Thus, the first relationship of the person with reality is their relationship with that reality that supports their being, that is, God. From this first relationship unfolds the one of a person with themselves, and more specifically, with their deepest identity, or “selfsameness” where one discovers the image and likeness of the trinity which supports one’s being. The third relationship proceeds from this fact, that the person, as image of a Communion of Persons, is not an island but is rather called to relationship, and more specifically, to the encounter and communion with other human persons. And, in this way, from these three fundamental relationships of an essentially personal character, unfolds the meaning of the fourth relationship with all of creation and within it all that today is denominated by nature.

The fact that the relationship with all of creation, and within it, the relationship more specifically with the non-human environment composed of living and material beings, is found at the end of the hierarchical ladder does not imply a devaluation but rather on the contrary its greatest value and respect. In effect, material non personal realities are not left to their own fate, as a chaotic mass, without form or end, but are rather valued and integrated in the realm of the spirit, emphasizing their importance not only in relation to the human spirit but also in reference to the Holy Spirit of God, the supreme Trinity from whom they proceed, being as such congregated in a cosmic act of praise of all creatures to their Creator, as has always been sung in the Christian tradition.

In this sense, the theology of reconciliation emphasizes that matter not only is good but also important. It’s important, in the first place, because it comes from God who, as we know according to Genesis, said it was good. It is important to the point that God
chose to become flesh, or matter, in order that from this path recover and renew everything, leaving as the way to salvation, material signs, that is, sacraments, through which we not only see, hear, touch but also “know God himself”. What is evident to any Christian, even a Christian child who is prepared for first communion, must be emphasized today when ancient Gnostic and even mannequin tendencies are resurging, which see matter as something evil, inert or absent of finality, as seen in certain technological or biotechnological perspectives which become a true “heresy” against creation. Or, we can also verify some nihilist positions that inherit distorted Buddhist tendencies that believe that the spiritual life supposes a negation of what are considered disturbing demands of material reality. There are also “New Age” positions that negate the personal materialized reality of God through the incarnation, and prefer a dis-incarnated, diffuse and impersonal vision of the divine, which Pope Francis has coined as a “divine spray”, that abandons matter and nature in the name of nonsense and blind impulses.

This and many other forms of the denial of the order of creation, that end yp rejecting what before was denominated the given reality of nature, along with its logical and teleological sense, are manifestation of the what the theology of reconciliation calls “ruptures”, which have their source in the original rupture which the Christian tradition calls “sin”.

As told in the book of Genesis, the human person, misusing the freedom that had been given, alters the order of creation, choosing to worship the creature rather than the Creator, and thus introduces the previously non-existent "evil" not only in his personal reality but in the reality of the whole creation. Breaking with the foundational reality of God, he generates the breakdown of the "quadruple relationship", which was inscribed in the order of creation. Breaking with the Self, he is introduced into the abyss of non-being, that is, the absence of good, or evil, namely sin, the desire for anything or for stopping the good and positive dynamism of nature – as longed by Goethe's Mephistopheles or as recommended by Lewis’s Devil to his nephew- and all this is simply the rejection of the given reality of all created or what we called at the beginning of these reflections the "break with reality”. In turn,
breaking with the Trinity, which is Communion of Love, the anti-love is introduced, likeness to God is lost and all creation is contained in immanent dynamism that is not simply a return to the limited realm of Aristotle's pre-Christian world ends, but the curvature of sin itself, the dynamism of the "skotosis", which is the denial of love and thus any sense or purpose that is precisely the way Nietzsche defined the essence of nihilism.

All this "dynamic breakout" is manifested in various ways everyday in our current reality, because as noted by John Paul II in his Post-Synodal Exhortation *Reconciliatio et Peanitentia* -which is one of the main sources of theology of reconciliation, "sin is not only to deny God, sin is also to live as if He does not exist, to eliminate the daily existence". With the consequence that sin is not only an offense against God, but a "suicidal act" of the person who ends up affecting the entire created order, as warned nearly a millennium ago by Hildegard of Bingen—recently proclaimed a Doctor of the Church—when saying: "If a man sins, the cosmos suffers".

But not only in direct forms of offense against God, i.e., sin, but in cultural and scientific ways that show dichotomous, antagonist or even conflicting points of view, can one see that "dynamic breakout" which claims the support of that positive vision of synthesis, unity and integrity that is typical of the theological perspective of reconciliation. So, to refer only to "break with the creation" and, more specifically, subhuman nature, the perspective of the so-called modernity, led since its inception an opposition between the individual and nature, including respectively as subject and object, which is projected in various ways to this days, manifesting more incisively, through what is now called "technoscience". For example, beyond the positive aspects of the prospect of Galileo Galilei, his objectified and distant vision of nature as a book characterized merely geometric characters without intrinsic purpose, that is, as mere "inert geometric space," or the Descartes’ vision of nature in a mechanical sense, as "res extensa" (extended thing), or Kant's view of nature as a witness or defendant held to answer the judge's questions, reflect a conflictive and non-relational perspective in which the subject dictates the nature object converted.
into submission to the self-referential and arbitrary reason of the subject, at the other extreme of the "righteous dominion over creation"—designated as human vocation in the book of Genesis— which does not impose but respects and cares for the natural order of creation. In a conflictual reverse sense, we could mention the postures of some environmental groups that put nature, or what they call "Mother Earth", with characters or rights that are not proper but subjective imagination projection and that end up visualizing the human person as an enemy of nature that should be subordinate or virtually eliminated from the field of creation.

However, the theology of reconciliation does not stop at these conflicting or negative aspects. If it checks them is because it has certainty of the persistent goodness of creation that speaks louder and, above all, because it focuses on the gift and the historical event of Reconciliation, operated by the Incarnation of the Logos, through whom all things were created, which is able not only to restore broken relationships and to recover the lost unity, but to renew and enhance the creation towards a more fully horizon. It’s worth recalling how this positive view, amid the realization of the evils of our time, is expressed in Reconciliatio et Paenitentia: "However, the same questioning look, if sufficiently acute, quickly captures a distinct division desire (...) to mend fractures, heal wounds, to establish at all levels an essential unity. This desire arouses in many a true longing for reconciliation, even if they use this word (...) But reconciliation cannot be less profound than division. The longing for reconciliation and reconciliation itself will be complete and effective only to the extent—in order to heal— that original wound that is the root of all the others, which is sin."4

So, as we know, the answer to such radical break could only come from an even more radical reconciliation that could only be operated by God himself. In Jesus Christ, the incarnated Logos, not an idea or a project, but in the Person of the God-Man, by his Incarnation, Death and Resurrection, everything is renewed and reconciled. In Him, man is discovered in their identity and vocation, and is raised to a previously unsuspected relationship of communion as a child of God, called to deploy this dynamic reconciler at all levels originating relationship that had been affected by
various ruptures, thus unfolding what John Paul II called a "quadruple reconciliation." St. Paul says in his Letter to the Corinthians: "Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation (...) All this is the work of God, who reconciled us to himself in Christ and entrusted to us the message of reconciliation". Henceforth, human persons become, according to Paul's exhortation, "ambassadors of reconciliation", called to cultivate relationships with all reality as reconciling this dynamic, i.e., forming a reconciled and reconciling culture, as discussed below. But not only is man reconciled with God. St. Paul adds emphatically that "in Christ, God was reconciling the world to Him." And in that sense, Jesus appears as the "Lord of Creation" as "King of the Universe" as "Pantocrator", of whom the men of his time were astonished wondering: "Who is this that even the winds and the sea obey him?".

Thus Benedict XVI said about Christmas-Incarnation that "the mystery of salvation, as well as its historical dimension, has a cosmic dimension: Christ is the sun of grace, whose light “transfigures and ignites the universe in expectation” (...)". And he drew from this fact a beautiful didactic explanation: "The very placement of the Christmas party is linked to the winter solstice, when days in the northern hemisphere, begin to lengthen. In this respect, perhaps not everyone knows that San Pedro Square is also a meridian, in fact, the great obelisk casts its shadow along a line that runs along the pavement toward the fountain beneath this window, and these days the shadow is the longest of the year. This reminds us of astronomy function to mark the times of prayer. The Angelus, for example, is recited in the morning, at noon and in the afternoon, and with the meridian, which once served precisely to know the "true noon", clocks were regulated."

There are more than just a few reflections given to us by our emeritus pope on the issue that would require a deep meditation to better develop theological reflection on this level of reconciliation with all of creation and, specifically, what we now call nature. To conclude this section it is worth quoting another reflection of Benedict XVI, now of the mystery of the Lord's Resurrection, watching the fine way he connects with the everyday beauty of
the rhythms of nature: "As the rays of the sun make buds sprout on the branches of trees during spring, so the radiance that comes from Christ's resurrection gives strength and meaning to every human hope, to every expectation, wish and plan. Therefore, the entire cosmos is rejoicing today, caught up in the springtime of humanity, which gives voice to the silent hymn of praise of creation. The Easter Alleluia, resounding in the pilgrim Church in the world, expresses the silent exultation of the universe and, above all, the desire of every human soul sincerely open to God, moreover, grateful for his infinite goodness, beauty and truth."

5. A reconciled and reconciling culture

In the previous section we marked out, recalling St. Paul, that God's reconciling action, makes the human being "Ambassador", "minister" or "messenger" of reconciliation through all his actions and deeds, and one of them, emerged from the more encompassing human freedom is precisely culture, whose mode of being depends to a large extent on the way people perceive, approach and relate to the reality of nature. Now, just as at the beginning of these reflections it was considered necessary to remember the original meaning of the term "nature", so it is essential to go back to the origin of the word "culture" not only as a matter of precision in language, but because today it seems to have lost an essential sense of the original term, which is important in order to better understand the current cultural problems, as well as dynamic link with the dynamic culture of reconciliation.

It is commonly accepted that it was Cicero who coined the term culture to refer to "human growth". The term derives from the Latin verb meaning colere, which means "to grow". Prior to this formulation of Cicero, the term "culture" was used, with different prefixes, to designate the reverent cultivation of something. So it is observed in particular noticeable way in the word agriculture, which means the "land farming". And so, before one of the faces of this nature, as it is the land that provides food, it was clear that it was necessary to know and respect their rhythms, adapt to the times of planting, watering and harvesting, in short, understand that we were before a reality that, although it was open to external intervention, had its own dynamics, which, if they were not
addressed, could make this "culture of the earth" (agriculture) turn into quite contrary their true culture. The fact that the Latin tradition, through Cicero, has chosen the term "culture", now without prefixes, to refer to "human culture" seems, then, to note that any "growing momentum" must have deep aware that what is going to grow is a "reality" that is beyond that initiatives to grow, that is, which is initially "given" and not "created" by humans.

Culture, then, is the way the human person grows all reality given, including especially their own, so that reality, in general, we provide the best fruits. And so it is –according to what the Second Vatican Council recalls, through Gaudium et Spes— that this dynamic culture, one of its richest sense, a 'dynamic humanization", comes to be reflected on mode objects, lifestyles, customs, institutions and countless other concretions, ending setting up a "habitat", an "environment" a "dwelling", to be offered as "properly human habitation", that is, worthy of being inhabited by the human.

The memory of this original meaning of the word "culture" seems to be eloquent enough to see the way it is linked to the dynamism of reconciliation operated by God. Given the various "breakdowns" that can be verified in the culture and the cultures of today –especially the "break with reality itself"— reconciliation, operated from the "foundational reality" of God, is offered as a deep response not only to recover the essential dynamism of culture as a "culture of reality" but to direct it to a greater fullness, that makes it to operate as a "cultural vibrancy" that carries itself and projects the "reconciling dynamism" to all spheres of reality. This is what the American bishops have been emphasizing in various pastoral documents proposing a "culture of reconciliation".

It is not possible to delve into this very important topic and its links with the evangelization of culture, the inculturation of the faith, the multiculturalism and the dialogue between faith and culture, which have occupied such a central place in the teaching of recent popes -depth issues identified, among others, by the Pontifical Council for Culture, and which are so important in the perspective of a theology of reconciliation. Serve just as an example that, precisely here in Brazil, when the last
Conference of Latin American Bishops in Aparecida took place –whose final document being as highlighted by Pope Francisco– bishops wanted to clarify the meaning of culture as "the particular way in which men and peoples cultivate their relationship with nature and with their brothers, with themselves and with God, in order to achieve a fully human existence" and, in that sense, it is evident how as reconciliation, through what John Paul II called the "quadruple reconciliation" can and should be operating in these four relationships, but also in the breaks, so they can configure reconciled and reconciling true cultures.

In reconciled cultures, humans would appear more clearly, in relation to all creation and, within it, with respect to nature, as "lord of creation", in the sense that it protects, but is also called to develop and configure it to work with the divine; he would appear as superior, but also participant in it; would appear as an actor, but also as a recipient of the wonders of nature, which allow their survival and their orientation towards God when contemplating the grandeur and beauty of the works of their hands.

6. Hacia una ecología humana
I cannot conclude without referring, albeit very briefly, to the rich concept of 'human ecology', as it has been recently proposed within the Church and that, in my view, is closely linked to a conceptual proposal of a "reconciled and reconciling culture". It is a term that, although it has been previously used in other areas, needs to be properly analyzed and developed from the elements that have been identified by the recent Papal Magisterium of John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

The first element that can be seen in the approach of this term, as proposed in Centesimus Anus and in Caritas in veritate, is the rescue and assessment of what is in the positive contribution of the term "ecology" by environmental movements in general but, at the same time, the attempt to correct certain perceived naturalistic reductionism used by some environmental groups that exclude the human being in their approach.

The second element is related to the rescue of original meaning of the term ecology, from the Greek "oikos" meaning house or dwelling and is highlighted, especially in Centesimus Anus, as an "environment"
which, if understood as the "habitat" of the human being, it cannot be reduced only to the "natural environment" but has to be also referred to the "human environment", i.e. to "culture" understood as ethos or dwelling, and where the family, for example, has a fundamental sense.

The third element, the more emphasized by Benedict XVI, is the attention to the specifics of human "nature", which seeks to rescue, to my view, the classical concept of "nature"-in the line of what is recalled to beginning of these reflections, as that which is given and typical of a being, before the intervention of free will, and that the Pope has sought to develop in various texts, by focusing on the notions of "moral law" or "natural law, "which John Paul II called "owned theonomy".

It is a pending task to integrate these three elements or meanings of the term "human ecology", as well as other possible elements that can be found searching these suggestive pontifical texts. One sign that this is possible and necessary is in the next response offered to Peter Seewald by Benedict XVI, which can be read as synthesis key of at least some aspects of the three elements mentioned above: "We have recognized the problem of environmental destruction. But the fact that, in order to save ecology, it is required, as a condition, that we save our spiritual ozone layer and, in particular, save our spiritual rainforests, is something that seems to penetrate only slowly into our consciousness. Do we not should have long wondered what about the pollution of thought, and the pollution of our souls? Many of the things we allow in this media culture and commerce in the background correspond to a toxic load, which almost necessarily have to lead to a spiritual pollution".

7. “All things are yours, you are Christ’s and Christ is God’s”

This magnificent appeal of the First Letter to the Corinthians, summarizes the "assuming" and "incarnated" meanind of hierarchical synthesis, integrative and holistic that, while respecting the meaning of each of the levels of reality, distinguishing, yet never separating them, is typical of a theology of reconciliation.

In this horizon reconciler, nature and culture feed off each other and the whole creation finds its full meaning in its origin and its end, in its fundamental orientation
to the Creator, Redeemer and Lord. One of the most beautiful expressions of this dynamism is the beautiful song of all God's creatures, that the book of Daniel tells us that was recited by three young Jewish adverse precisely when they were threatened with death and whose song is heard God who saves. On this song, which until now we are accustomed to pray in the morning prayer, said the soon saint John Paul II: "(...) it is a song of thanksgiving that the faithful rise to the Lord for all the wonders of the universe. Man gives voice to all creation to praise and thank God (...) no one is excluded from the blessing of the Lord, even the sea monsters. A fortiori, we, human beings, must join together this concert of praise with joyful and confident voice, accompanied by a consistent and faithful life."

From our beloved present Pope, whose name Francisco is eloquent and whom we will accompany during the coming days amid beautiful Brazilian nature, we will surely hear a renewed appeal in that sense, as that which led us precisely during Mass, at the beginning of his pontificate: "be «custodians» of creation, of God's plan enrolled in nature, guardians of each other, of the environment; do not let the signs of destruction and death accompany the way of our world."