

Pope Benedict XVI on Science: “A Hymn of Praise”

When science is so often used in the modern age to attack religious faith, it is not unexpected that some believers may be tempted to disparage scientific study. Over the years I’ve encountered many well-meaning fellow Catholics who, upon seeing the scientific flavor of the New Atheists’ attack on faith, suspect that science is something inherently dangerous, to be avoided like witchcraft. At the very least, they often consider science to be beneath the Catholic intellect, which should focus on the eternal and transcendent rather than the gross material of the merely natural world. Catholics who take such a position end up agreeing with the Faith’s atheist critics when they insist that science and belief are ultimately irreconcilable.

Pope Benedict XVI, however, takes a different view. In his weekly Wednesday audience on March 24th (full text [here](#)), the Pope used the occasion of reflections on the life of Saint Albert the Great to speak about the relationship between faith and science. More than simply stating that faith and science may be merely compatible, the Pope asserted that scientific investigation can in fact be a positive means for coming closer to God. “Saint Albert the Great reminds us,” the Pope says, “that between science and faith there is friendship, and that men of science can undertake, through their vocation to the study of nature, a genuine and fascinating journey of sanctity.”

Science begins with a combination of two impulses: first, the same wonder and awe that anyone may feel at the sight of a beautiful sunset, and majestic storm, or a breathtaking mountain range. Through such beauty we come to know the source of all Beauty. The Pope notes in his address that, “the phenomena of nature, gifted with grandeur and beauty, are the works of an artist, through which, by analogy, we can know the Author of Creation.”

The second impulse which moves the scientist is the same as that which motivates the engineer or the mechanic: the awe at the integration of parts which produces a delicate, functional whole. My biology students may not appreciate that I make them memorize all of the events that occur in the process of converting sunlight into usable energy through the processes of photosynthesis and cellular respiration. Yet it is such intricate orderedness that the scientist finds so beautiful. He begins with the aesthetic beauty recognizable to anyone in a sunset, or a mountain, or a flower, and asks what explains it. Discovering the scientific laws which underlie such phenomena, he does not find himself satisfied and uninterested, but amazed at the deeper levels of beauty he continues to uncover. To the scientist, elegance and truth are compelling.

Even scientific atheists recognize that awe results from study of the natural world. You only have to listen to the honest wonder in the voices of such atheist proponents of science as the late Carl Sagan to recognize that they share a childlike reverence towards the beauty and grandeur of the world around us. Unfortunately, however, for many such scientific atheists, their wonder at nature is used as a substitute for the human religious inclination, and is the end of their questioning. They fail to follow the signs by which nature points beyond itself.

The Pope’s message reminds such scientists of both the privilege and duty of finding God in their work. Yet it also invites those Catholics who have held science at arm’s length to take a new look at how God may be known through the natural world. Those who are awed by the works must learn to turn their eyes to the Creator, and those who love the Creator can praise him by studying His works. “How many scientists,” says the Pope, “...in the wake of St. Albert the Great, have carried forward their research inspired by wonder and gratitude before a world that, in the eyes of scholars and believers, seemed and seems the good work of a wise and loving Creator! Scientific study is transformed then into a hymn of praise.”