

# Contemplation: Exploring its Meaning and Implications

Celia Deane-Drummond and Séverine Deneulin<sup>1</sup>



One of the core orientations of the collective work at the LSRI is contemplation. The purpose of this briefing note is to articulate our understanding of the term in the specific context of a research institute committed to research excellence and which is rooted in the Jesuit tradition and is inspired by the arguments set forth in the papal encyclical

Laudato Si'.<sup>2</sup> This note is not an exhaustive account of contemplative practice or its many forms; rather, the aim is to highlight key facets of contemplation in the context of our work as an academic research institute in caring for our common home. We propose three inter-related facets of contemplation: 1) contemplation and wonder; 2) wonder and paying attention; and 3) paying attention and ecological virtues, and conclude by exploring some of the implications for structuring our work and research priorities at the LSRI.

## Contemplation and Wonder

The practice of contemplation – of being still and wholly attentive to the present moment and the reality surrounding us – often leads to experiences of wonder. These experiences differ according to individual sensitivities and backgrounds and the contexts in which contemplation is practiced. A botanist contemplating 'the shade of an ancient eucalyptus' will have a different experience of wonder from a political sociologist contemplating the 'underground waters well[ing] up to embrace the water that falls from the Andes'.<sup>3</sup> Given the fragility of what is being contemplated, contemplation and the wonder associated with it may, therefore, include undertones of fear or anxiety as well as joy.<sup>4</sup> How will the eucalyptus survive changes in atmospheric systems due to global warming? Will the

underground waters continue to well up after new hydro-highways are built along the Amazon banks? Post-Enlightenment thought often derided wonder as either childish or an expression of ignorance, but, in earlier centuries, wonder was associated with the border between the known and unknown. In philosophical terms, wonder provides an opening for alternative ways of thinking compared with pure rationalism, which assumes a more contained or controlled psychological state.<sup>5</sup> In religious terms, writers such as Augustine linked wonder with religious awe. For us, contemplation is connected with religious experience of the sacred and goes beyond pure rationalism.

For the pioneer ecologist Rachel Carson, who first documented the relationship between pesticide use and environmental destruction in the United States in the 1950s,<sup>6</sup> the

experience of wonder is explicitly grounded in contact with the natural world, so that 'The more clearly we focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the world about us, the less taste we shall have for destruction'.<sup>7</sup> She urges us to recover the awe of a child, for 'A child's world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement. It is to our misfortune that for most of us that

## Key Points

- '*Contemplation*' is the practice of standing still and being wholly attentive to the present moment and reality that surrounds us. This practice often leads to experiences of wonder.
- *Contemplation* implies a process of deep encounter with creation, a condition for wonder and paying attention, and a detachment from the egoism that dominates Western cultures in particular.

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*Rachel Carson*

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clear eyed vision, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe inspiring is dimmed and even lost when we reach adulthood'.<sup>8</sup> Pope Francis invites us to have the 'awe-filled contemplation of creation which we find in Saint Francis of Assisi', to follow the example of Jesus who 'was able to invite others to be attentive to the beauty that there is in the world because he himself was in constant touch with nature, lending it an attention full of fondness and wonder'.<sup>9</sup>

Not all experience this contemplative wonder as a specific motivation for environmental protection; by itself, wonder offers no guarantee that ecological responsibility and action will ensue. For naturalists like Carson, wonder

is associated with profound gratitude for the encounter, rather than a desire for control. It is this gratitude, rooted in the Ignatian spiritual tradition and indigenous mysticism, which informs our own understanding of contemplative wonder. As Pope Francis notes, this 'indigenous mysticism that sees the interconnection and interdependence of the whole of creation' is also 'the mysticism of gratuitousness that loves life as a gift'.<sup>10</sup> It is no exaggeration to suggest that literal or virtual immersion in the natural world, for those receptive to change, can potentially initiate or deepen concern and motivation to care. Not surprisingly, indigenous peoples living in this context of wonder and gratitude of what

the forest gives them are its best protector.

For the early saints, including early Christian mystics and Celtic saints such as St. Columba, a pregnant sense of the world infused with the presence of God inspired a strong sense of wonderment. The early saints' 'vivid sense of God's hand constantly at work in all his creation fuels their sense of the universe as a great wonder, a continuing miracle'.<sup>11</sup>

## Wonder and Paying Attention

The natural world – its forests, peoples, and animals – acts like a mirror for the presence of God. This implies that 'our primary task in our dealings with the rest of creation



is to “listen” to it and respond by praising God’.<sup>12</sup> The outworking of contemplative experiences of wonder leads to praise for the Creator. But what does this ‘listening’ to creation entail, and how is this specifically related to practical care of the sufferings of our wounded earth (see Briefing Note 2 on Accompaniment)?

There is a paradox here worth addressing. On the one hand, in as much as humanity experiences wonder through an encounter with creation and all it contains, such wonder is a possible response to paying attention to our surrounding reality as it is, including facets that seem to us to be ‘good’, or ‘bad’, or ‘ugly’ according to our own human standards. Thus, we may contemplate a pristine mountain inhabited by people who live almost entirely from its forest as ‘good’, and contemplate as ‘bad’ or ‘ugly’ the nearby machinery that is exploring how much mineral can be extracted from the mountain. Or we may contemplate the technological innovations that humans have achieved as ‘good’ and the forest people resistant to these machines as ‘bad’ or against ‘progress’. On the other hand, that does not mean that either the direct or indirect infliction of suffering on other creatures by human actions is acceptable or tolerable. We might experience a sense of wonder at humanity’s capacity for technological innovation, but this is not wonder

or contemplation when it is not appropriately disciplined by love and justice.

Simone Weil’s understanding of attention is helpful here to help us fill out the relationship between contemplation and social justice. She was no romantic, allowing her attention to be directed both to truth and to suffering. While

so that the ‘radiance of beauty illumines affliction with the light of the spirit of justice and love’.<sup>14</sup>

In a similar way to Weil, who emphasised the orientation to justice and love in what we pay attention to, Augustine warned against unbridled curiosity in the vice of *curiositas*, which is a type of greed for acquisition



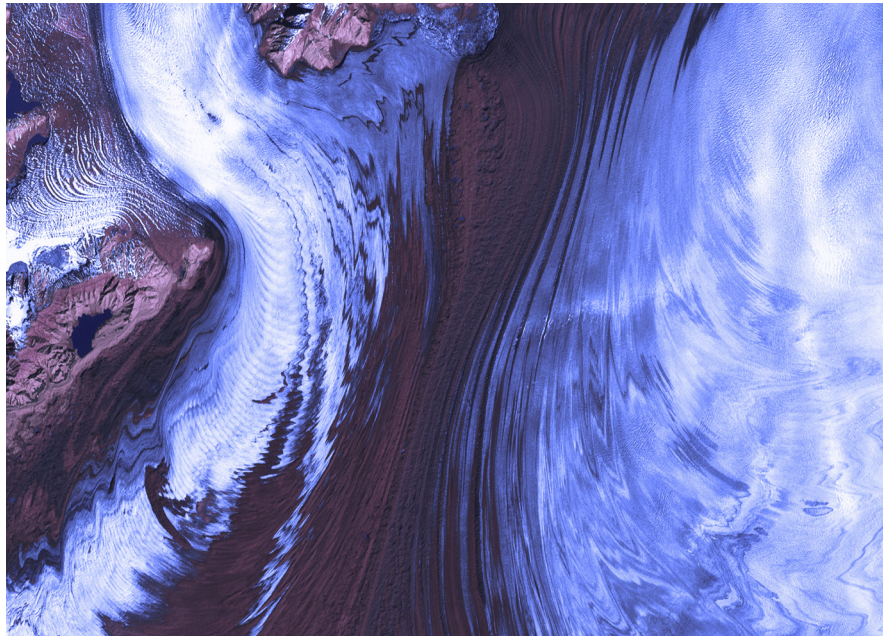
the initial movement of paying attention includes becoming receptive and empty, the inner self is then filled by another emotion which has a moral valence, namely, love. This love is reached through a process of death and dying to self. For her, the human soul has to ‘pass through its own annihilation to the place where alone it can get the sort of attention which can attend to truth and to affliction... The name of this intense, pure, disinterested, gratuitous, generous attention is love.’<sup>13</sup> In a paradoxical way, true beauty confronts suffering, including both human suffering and biodiversity loss,

of knowledge related to the human mind. Augustine therefore probes the deeper orientation to what is chosen as the object of attention, and also its theological and ethical consequences. It is a warning against an unbridled and undisciplined curiosity that knows no limits. For example, how far can we go in inventing new technologies that will allow humanity to explore ocean floors and extract minerals from it, at the cost of destroying life under water?<sup>15</sup> The wonder of the mystery of the deep sea-beds and the life and mineral wealth that may lie 30,000 feet beneath

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the surface water may be worthy of *curiositas*, but at what costs if such exploration is disturbing the balance of underwater ecosystems? Is such wonder-inspired *curiositas* appropriately disciplined by love for all of God's creatures? This is the reason why these early thinkers thought of *curiositas* as a vice not a virtue.

It is here, in clarifying the type of positive contemplation that is needed, that Thomas Aquinas' understanding of the virtue of *studiositas* is particularly instructive. *Studiositas* is antagonistic to a sensibility that avoids effort in seeking knowledge and so expresses 'a certain keenness of interest in seeking knowledge of things; and from this it takes its name'.<sup>16</sup> He understood *curiositas* as a distorted form of *studiositas*, so that the virtue of *studiositas* is primary. He names the movement of restraint as more critical to *studiositas* compared with the resistance to laziness on the basis that a failure to seek knowledge is an obstacle to gaining that knowledge. In contrast, the overall drive in *studiositas* is towards right, albeit suitably disciplined, types of knowing. In Aquinas, *studiositas* is a *moral* and not an *intellectual* virtue, even though it concerns the use of the mind. Thus, to retake the example of exploring oceans sea-beds, the virtue of *studiositas* would set limits to the exploration if conducting such exploration, even for scientific inquiry, would lead to underwater ecosystem destruction.



Or inversely, when tempered by the virtue of *studiositas*, the use of genetic modification technology can be oriented to restoration of ecosystem balance, such as the use of gene editing to improve resistance of staple crops to known diseases.<sup>17</sup>

Aquinas therefore agreed with Augustine that it was possible for *studiositas* to become *curiositas*, which is driven by a sense of pride in that knowledge, or through misdirected knowledge and importantly, in the case of creatures, 'without referring his knowledge to its due end, namely, the knowledge of God'.<sup>18</sup> He also names curiosity as vice when it inclines someone to 'know the truth above the capacity of his own intelligence'.<sup>19</sup> This might seem strange, but the importance of humility is invoked, since humility is about appropriate judgments regarding one's own capabilities.

Aquinas is most concerned about *precisely* what we give our attention to and why, so to be more aware of the risks of turning attention to those things that are 'not useful' or that lead to a greater likelihood of falling into some other temptation.<sup>20</sup> As will be explored below, work at the LSRI will be particularly wary of this, to what it gives attention to in its activities and why.

## Paying Attention and the Ecological Virtues

In *Laudato Si'*, following the bishops of Brazil, Pope Francis argues that such contemplative gaze, such wonder and paying attention, discovering God's presence in every creature 'leads us to cultivate the "ecological virtues"'.<sup>21</sup> As he argues later in the encyclical, as much as changes in laws and economic modes of production and consumption are essential, 'the majority of



“Such contemplative gaze, such wonder and paying attention, discovering God’s presence in every creature ‘leads us to cultivate the “ecological virtues” (LS 88).”

the members of society must be adequately motivated to accept them, and personally transformed to respond. Only by cultivating sound virtues will people be able to make a selfless ecological commitment’.<sup>22</sup> And one can add, only by cultivating sound virtues will people be able to link their experience of wonder with ecological responsibility.

We argue, in the context of our work at LSRI, that the cultivation of ecological virtues is linked to the virtue of *studiositas*. It is however important to associate the virtue of *studiositas* with other virtues such as temperance, as any ecological academic research ethic will necessarily involve restraining yet directing desires and motivations in a way that aligns with the needs of all creatures in our common home, and especially in responding to their suffering (See Briefing Note on Accompaniment). At the same time, the positive direction in *studiositas*, disciplined by love and justice, goes further than a simple loving receptivity to wonder, whether ‘in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person’s face’.<sup>23</sup> It also fosters a kind of knowledge that can be directed in ecologically and socially responsible ways. *Studiositas* can deepen our understanding of

what integral ecological justice and ecological virtues require in any given setting. For example, as a recent symposium at the LSRI on Women, Mining and Toxic Contamination discussed, what might integral ecological justice require when we contemplate the faces of women who see their children falling ill to water mercury poisoning? What implications for theological inquiry, and for Catholic Social Teaching, can we derive from our experience of awe at these women’s steadfastness in seeking health for their children and holding those responsible for poisoning accountable for their deeds, despite all the obstacles they encounter?

In Aquinas’ moral theology the most important virtues of all were the three theological virtues directly inspired by the Holy Spirit, namely, faith, hope, and charity. The cardinal virtues were of central importance in living out a virtuous life in this world: practical wisdom or prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude. Practical wisdom or prudence is interesting as it sits between the so-called intellectual virtues, which are about how we use our minds, and the moral virtues, which is more about how we act. The intellectual virtues can be speculative, such as wisdom,

understanding and science; while the practical virtues were prudence and art. While all of these virtues are relevant to the moral life and to the way we live our lives in ecologically sensitive ways, it is the special virtue of *studiositas* that we attend to in thinking about the nature of contemplation in the work of LSRI. What might *studiositas* proper to practical wisdom as an ecological virtue look like in this context? Practical wisdom necessarily includes a close relationship with the theological virtue of charity or love, but it also has the function of setting the mean associated with all other virtues. This is one reason why although practical wisdom or prudence is an intellectual virtue, it is included in the four cardinal virtues of justice, temperance, and fortitude, all of which can be expressed in ways that are pertinent for ecological flourishing. The argument here is to some extent circular: prudence sets the mean of *studiositas* as a moral virtue, but at the same time, there is also a *studiositas* proper to prudential reasoning in relation to its role in the moral life, and, in the case under consideration, ecological responsibility. Nonetheless, *studiositas* can, like any virtue, gradually slip into a vice and when it does so it takes on a

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different name, *curiositas*. Judging what is the mean in *studiositas* and when it has veered away from that mean is a task of prudence.

Aquinas also, interestingly, develops a strong link between attention and prayer, so ‘attention is absolutely necessary for prayer’.<sup>24</sup> But he is realistic about the possibility of a wandering mind – the crucial aspect is the overall intention to pray at the start of the time of prayer.<sup>25</sup> For Aquinas, there is a possibility in prayer that the attention on God, which is the true end of prayer, becomes so strong ‘that the mind forgets all other things.’<sup>26</sup> Aquinas echoes here again Simone Weil who warned against the kind of religious experience that is itself too attached in a type of excessive devotion. Aquinas held much the same position, in that he warned against prayer that went beyond the basic aim to arouse interior

desire.<sup>27</sup> Like Weil, Aquinas affirms that the underlying motivation for prayer comes from the desire of charity.

Paying attention demands that our looking is therefore not possessive – in our modern academic contexts, one could say that our looking is therefore not instrumental to self-ambitions and such an encounter is also crucially informed by love and justice. In this context, it is worth considering the inclusion of attention in Aquinas’ discussion of the irascible passion of hope as a spur to action as well as the concupiscible passions of love, delight, and goodness.

The virtue of hope is a spur to action by making an experience more intense. When the object of our hope is good, difficult, but possible (e.g., cleaning up the social and biological toxicity brought by large-scale mining in Peru), ‘the thought of its being

difficult arouses our attention; while the thought that it is possible is no drag on our effort’.<sup>28</sup> Difficulties, therefore, could be viewed as challenges which then invite even greater attention through the possibility of change. Hope in the face of the enormous challenges of biodiversity loss and environmental and social degradation can, when read in light of Aquinas’s insights on virtues, foster our attention where there is a possibility of change. The point is that right attention directs that attention away from the self towards the other and to God.

Reawakening a sense of paying attention, and we could even say a sacred sense of paying attention, in a non-possessive way not only challenges the kind of egocentrism that fosters ecological irresponsibility, or that always lingers in academic settings in the pursuit of research excellence and academic promotions. It also encourages positive ecological responsibility in academic research. When paying attention is directed towards love of creation and all that it contains, it is freed from the bondage of possessive desires, and academic research becomes service. This may be one reason why Rachel Carson was intuitively accurate when she suggested we needed to recover something of the innocence of childhood in order to experience wonder that will lead to appropriate action.



## Implications for the LSRI

The practical shape of that ecological responsibility appropriate for educational contexts and not just within ecclesial circles could potentially take some cues from biblical narratives and their ancient Middle East agrarian context. In a manner similar to the above account in engagement with Simone Weil, Norman Wirzba, drawing on Wendell Berry and agrarian biblical narratives, argues that the first step in a process of deep encounter with creation, and therefore a condition for wonder and paying attention, is detachment from the egoism that dominates Western cultures in particular.<sup>29</sup> As a research institute, we seek that encounter with creation in the following (non-exhaustive) ways.

First, in keeping with contemplative wonder as *immersion*, as a small research community, we take steps to work together in practical tasks that alleviate climate change, such as ~~tree planting to offset our carbon emissions arising from our work~~, sourcing our food for events locally and sustainably, substituting air travel for train travel for UK and EU travel, finding ways of engaging with communities globally through remote technology platforms and encouraging overseas visitors for longer stays. For example, we are establishing partnerships with researchers who are *immersed* in other natural worlds such as the Peruvian Amazon and North

East India and bringing the voices of these communities into Oxford academia. In keeping with the ethos of the Synod on the Amazon, the LSRI seeks to bring the peripheries into the centre so as to illuminate and transform it.

Second, the concept of listening to creation through contemplation is closely linked to our understanding of accompaniment, which includes an active listening to those with whom we are in communion. This involves seeking knowledge and the truth together, and being open to transformation as an academic research community. This involves conducting research not on marginalized communities, but with them. This will be a particular feature of our hosting role of the Ecclesial Network Alliance, and how the LSRI can facilitate, as an academic research institute, our global journey towards ecological conversion. This approach also informs our seminars, workshops, conferences, research projects, and Visiting Scholar Programme.

Third, the LSRI seeks to root its work in the ecological virtues. We seek to express gratitude arising out of that contemplation of the natural world, whether directly mediated or mediated by others through technology, through joining in, where possible, with the ecclesial liturgical life of Champion Hall and the University chaplaincy. We desire to pay attention to specific research tasks that avoid an obsessive curiosity and is

generous in our willingness to work together on common tasks, thus being driven by *studiositas* and disciplining our pursuit of knowledge by love and justice.

We are realistic about the suffering and pain in human communities and all creatures and seek to find ways to address the structural issues that lead to that suffering. Our contemplative approach encourages the virtue of humility that recognises we are always going to be limited in what we can do as a team, but through accompaniment with others we can begin to make a positive difference in the world. Our embrace of the virtue of practical wisdom, *prudentia*, is informed by the virtue of *studiositas* that helps us recognise where to devote our attention and energy when the demands on our time seem overwhelming. Contemplation encourages the virtue of hope that is not simply optimism, but remains steady in the face of surmounting difficulties and challenges. Contemplation fosters a spirit of love and justice that works towards eco-social transformation in specific contexts and situations, starting with our own transformation at Champion Hall, the university departments we belong to, and our own places of living.





## Endnotes

- 1 Cite as: Celia Deane-Drummond and Severine Deneulin, 'Contemplation: Exploring its Meaning and Implications'. *LSRI Briefing Note 3* (Oxford: Laudato Si' Research Institute, Campion Hall, 2021).
- 2 Many of the ideas set forth in this briefing note are published in Celia Deane-Drummond, 'Biodiversity and Ecological Responsibility: Wonder, Awe and Paying Attention to All Creatures', *Antonianum Journal* 96 (2021): 87–113.
- 3 Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, 2020, §56, 45.
- 4 The natural world historically has been viewed as threatening rather than awesome in terms of its relationship with wonder. Clarence J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore* (San Francisco: University of California Press, 1976).
- 5 For a discussion of the history of wonder specifically in relation to scientific knowing, see Celia Deane-Drummond, *Wonder and Wisdom: Conversations in Science, Spirituality and Theology* (London: Templeton Foundation Press, 2006). For a discussion of the specific role of wonder in philosophy, see Jerome Miller, *In the Throe of Wonder: Intimations of the Sacred in a Post-Modern World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).
- 6 In her book *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, she warned that the birds would no longer be singing in Spring if certain pesticides continued to be used in agriculture. Her book led to the banning of the DDT pesticide.
- 7 Thomas Locker and Joseph Bruhac, *Rachel Carson: Preserving a Sense of Wonder* (Golden, CO: Fulchrum, 2004), p. 32.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, 2015, §125, 97.
- 10 *Querida Amazonia*, §75.
- 11 Elizabeth Theokritoff, *Living in God's Creation: Orthodox Perspectives on Ecology* (New York: SVS Press, 2009), p. 43.
- 12 Ibid., p. 48.
- 13 Simone Weil, 'The Human Personality', in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, edited by S. Miles (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 92.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 For example, see Will S. Hylton, 'History's Largest Mining Operation Is About to Begin', *The Atlantic*, January/February 2020.
- 16 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae, Qu. 167.2.
- 17 Dirk Schenke and Daguang Cai, 'Applications of CRISPR/Cas to Improve Crop Disease Resistance', *iScience* 23.9 (2020): 101478.
- 18 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae Qu. 167.1.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid., Qu. 167.2.
- 21 *Laudato Si'*, §88.
- 22 *Laudato Si'*, §211.
- 23 *Laudato Si'*, §233.
- 24 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae, Secunda Secundae*, 1-91, Vol. 17, translated by Laurence Shapcote, 2012, Qu. 83.13.
- 25 Aquinas describes three outcomes of attentive prayer: merit, impetration (i.e., the action of requesting something fervently), and spiritual refreshment of the mind.
- 26 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae, Qu. 83.13.
- 27 Ibid., Qu. 83.14.
- 28 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae, Prima Secundae*, 1-70, Vol. 15, translated by L. Shapcote, edited by John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcón (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute, 2012), Qu. 40.8.
- 29 Norman Wirzba, 'The Dark Night of the Soul: An Agrarian Approach to Mystical Life', in *Wendell Berry and Religion: Heaven's Earthly Life*, edited by Joel James Shuman and L. Roger Owens (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2009), p. 151.