



# *The Heavens Are Telling the Glory of God*

## Discussion and Reflection Questions

### Preface and Introduction

1. As Anthony Gittins explains, “People do not simply inhabit the world—they live in a particular world, where certain features like this mountain, this lake, this ocean, or this forest have a particular importance in their lives” (*Living Mission Interculturally: Faith, Culture, and the Renewal of Praxis* [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015], 67).
  - How would you describe your “social geography”?
2. In 2009, the Congregation for Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL) initiated an apostolic visitation of sisters in the United States to “look at the quality of life of apostolic Congregations of women religious.” That same year, the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) began a doctrinal assessment of the activities and initiatives of Leadership Conference of Women Religious.
  - What was your personal and congregational experience of the visitation and/or LCWR doctrinal assessment?
3. The central question of this book concerns the intersection between religious life and the New Cosmology,

defined here as the theological reflection on the scientific findings of the universe.

- Do you have a particular response or reaction to the topic? How might that color your reading of this book?



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### SECTION ONE

#### Chapter of Faults: Naming Our Diversity

1. This section of the book is designed to acknowledge our limitations, frustrations, and disappointments, not to do penance, but so as to create a reconciliation of sorts—a way forward that allows us to acknowledge and reverence our differences.
  - The author describes having a “myopic Christology.” How would you describe your Christology? How comfortable are you when you encounter other sisters whose Christology significantly differs from your own?

#### *Chapter One: Whence Comes Wisdom? (Job 28:20): Differences among Age Cohorts*

2. How we view religious life within our congregations and how we respond to the New Cosmology is reflective of both our age cohort and the generation of religious life to which we identify. The survey data demonstrated that the three age cohorts (25–44, 45–64, and 65 plus) generally view the New Cosmology differently.
  - To which age cohort do you belong? Do the responses for your age cohort resonate with you?

- Were you surprised, delighted, or concerned by any of the responses?

*Chapter Two: There Is a Season and a Time (Eccl 3:1): Exploring American Generations*

3. Societal generations are defined by a peer-personality developed during social moments. Two types of social moments—secular crises and spiritual awakenings—have demonstrative effects on generation members who “are socialized (during youth and, perhaps, rising adulthood) and begin to recognize the impact of historic events on their social environment” (William Strauss and Neil Howe, *Generations: The History of America’s Future, 1584 to 2069* [New York: HarperCollins, 1991], 71).

- What social moment marked your generation? How has that moment been formative for you?

4. The four generations that comprise the majority of US women religious include the Silent Generation or the Lucky Few (1925–1942 or 1928–1945), the Baby Boomers (1943–1960 or 1946–1964), Generation X (1961–1981 or 1965–1980), and Millennials (1982–2004 or 1981–1996).

- With which generation/s do you best relate and why?

5. As the survey comments demonstrate, the biggest hurdle to exploring the relationship between the New Cosmology and religious life lies in the misinformation, misperceptions, and missed opportunities for conversation across the chasm of cohorts.

- What do you know about the New Cosmology?
- Do you think it has potential to enliven vowed life?

*Chapter Three: Orienting Ecclesiologies: The Formative Experience of Church for Cohort Identity*

6. “There are real generational differences in perception and attitude between millennial and post-Vatican II entrants and older entrants, differences that manifest themselves most readily to vocation and formation personnel. But they soon become apparent in community living, communal prayer, and ministry settings as well, and must be faced” (Mary Johnson, SNDdeN, Patricia Wittberg, SC, and Mary L. Gautier, *New Generations of Catholic Sisters: The Challenge of Diversity* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014], 76).
  - How have you experienced generational differences among your sisters in community living, prayer, and ministry?
7. “Variations in Catholics’ identification with the faith and their commitment to the Church are rooted in a number of conditions. Chief among these is the generation (or birth cohort) to which a Catholic belongs . . . Catholics who are born at different points in history learn to approach the faith and the Church in different ways” (William V. D’Antonio et al., *American Catholics Today: New Realities of Their Faith and Their Church* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 11).
  - Describe your formative experience of church. How has that affected your ecclesiology?
8. Our orienting ecclesiology—like every other aspect of our lives—is contextual and our personal views of religious life, spirituality, and what it means to be a faithful Catholic are rooted in a particular place and time.

- How might the concept of “orienting ecclesiology” help sisters from different generations appreciate the diversity in their midst?



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### SECTION TWO

#### Chapter of Affairs: Responding to the Signs of the Times

1. The author argues that the religious Trinity of Creator, Spirit, and Incarnate One are reflected or refracted in the scientific trinity of cosmology, quantum mechanics, and evolution.
  - How do you understand the relationship and work of the Holy Trinity?
  - Do you think the findings of science can enhance our theological understanding?

#### *Chapter Four: The Cosmos and Creation*

2. The big bang theory explains how the expanding universe emerged at a finite moment in time, but it also suggests that the universe has an end date.
  - How does this scientific theory compare to the theological understanding of Creation rooted in the Book of Genesis, chapter 1?
3. Franciscan theologian Eric Doyle proposed that “original sin is the sinful condition of the human race; it is the turning away from God at the beginning of the human race (not necessarily the first human act) because

it is a turning away from brother and sister which in turn brings a disunity into the order of grace and nature” (Brenda Abbott, “Eric Doyle OFM: Blessed John Duns Scotus, Teilhard De Chardin and a Cosmos in Evolution,” *Franciscan Studies* 75 [January 2017]: 521).

- How do you understand “original sin”?
4. Jon Haught points out that the science puts “an end to the idea that God’s creation has at any time been perfect or paradisaical” (“Teilhard de Chardin: Theology for an Unfinished Universe,” in *From Teilhard to Omega: Co-Creating an Unfinished Universe*, ed. Ilia Delio [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014], 11).
    - What are the implications for you of rethinking creation as an ongoing process?
  5. Cosmologists propose the universe will end, either by a slow cool down or a fiery implosion, billions of years in the future. Christians await the Parousia, the second coming of Jesus, at which time we will experience the fullness of the reign of God.
    - How can we hold in tension what science proposes as cosmic eschatology and Christian hope in the resurrection?

### *Chapter Five: The Quantum World of the Spirit*

6. Quantum mechanics studies the subatomic particles that make up all of matter and their interrelationship. Contrary to Newtonian physics that is based on cause and effect, the quantum world works in probability, as stated in the uncertainty principle. Whether an electron is a wave or a particle depends on its measurement at a specific time.



- What questions come to you as you ponder the workings of the weird quantum world?
7. Entanglement of quantum states of particles means that a measurement of one particle affects the state of the entangled particle, even at a distance—a peculiarity that Einstein called “spooky action at a distance.”
    - How might this aspect of the quantum world compare to the biblical portrait of the workings of the Spirit?
  8. When we observe a quantum object, we are “fixing” it to a particular state (wave or particle) for the purpose of our measurement. Something similar happens with petitionary prayer in which we ask for a change or alteration to occur. As Tim Belben notes, “if it is [God’s] Will, as Creator, to leave something of the probability of our existence undetermined and subject to human freewill, intercession can have a logical basis” (“Quantum Creation? Cosmologists Are Coming Up with Some Strange Theories about the Origin of the Universe. Can Christian Theology Keep Pace?,” *Modern Believing* 51, no. 2 [2010]: 52).
    - How do you understand the effect of petitionary prayer?
  9. Holism refers to the parts that are derived from the whole and is central to the concept of emergence. Ernest Simmons refers to the relationship between entanglement and holism as “truly togetherness-in-separation” (*The Entangled Trinity: Quantum Physics and Theology* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014], 148).
    - How might these insights from the quantum realm by analogy help us understand the relationship of the Trinity?

## *Chapter Six: Evolution and the Jesus Singularity*

10. Evolution describes the biological development of all organizations from less complex to more complex species, a development governed by natural law. As Darwin noted, this development comes at a cost. Death became a prerequisite for evolution and complexity.
  - Both our Scripture and our theology acknowledge that God is a God of life. How do we make sense of the loss of innumerable species through natural selection?
11. Scientists speak of three big bangs—the creation of the universe, the creation of life on earth, and the emergence of homo sapiens. Through an evolutionary lens, God is seen as “the dynamic power which enables evolutionary change to occur. Creation is understood, now, not as a relationship between the absolute being of God and a static world, but as a relationship between the dynamic being of God and a world in process of coming to be” (Denis Edwards, *Jesus and the Cosmos* [New York: Paulist Press, 1991], 36).
  - What are the implications for your own spirituality when you envision a dynamic God and a world in process?
12. According to Scotus, Jesus isn’t an afterthought sent to fix humanity’s sinful state. The incarnation would have occurred regardless of the missteps of our primal parents.
  - How does evolutionary thinking affect your understanding of the reason for the incarnation?
13. Bonaventure saw the incarnation as demonstrating the primacy of God’s love for all creation: “For as a

human being, Christ has something in common with all creatures. With the stone he shares existence; with plants he shares life; with animals he shares sensation; and with the angels he shares intelligence. Therefore, all things are said to be transformed in Christ since—in his human nature—he embraces something of every creature in himself when he is transfigured.” (Sermo I, Dom. II in Quad. [IX, 215–219])

- What are the implications of seeing Jesus’ incarnation as the beginning of the divinization of all creatures and creation?
14. The primary elements of evolution are change, the movement toward greater complexity, and the incompleteness and ongoing nature of the process. This throws a pretty big wrench into the concept of original sin and an expiatory understanding of the incarnation, which are both based on a steady, complete, and ordered creation.
- If we are still a work in progress, how do we envision sin and evil, and what does redemption look like through an evolutionary lens?
15. As Teilhard de Chardin and others present, the Cosmic Christ is the fulfilled potentiality seeded in the creation, germinated in the human Jesus, and blossomed in evolutionary consciousness.
- How do you understand the relationship between the historical Jesus of Nazareth and the Cosmic Christ?
  - Does the term “Cosmic Christ” help or hinder your spirituality?



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### SECTION THREE

#### Chapter of Elections: Choosing a Future for Religious Life

1. Since Vatican II, women religious have taken to heart the call to respond to “the signs of the times.” As theologian Susan Smith, RNDM, noted, “Faith against culture was out, and the need for a positive relationship between faith and the culture in which a religious congregation lived and worked was emphasized” (Susan Smith, “Whither Religious Life? Reflections from New Zealand,” *Global Sisters Report* [August 5, 2020], <https://www.globalsistersreport.org/news/whither-religious-life-reflections-new-zealand>).
  - In the last half century, have congregational changes (community life, ministry, prayer) been responses to the signs of the times or are some reactions to declining and aging membership?
  - What changes in your religious life have you most welcomed? Which ones have you mourned?
2. If we hope to have a future that is relevant and responsive to the people of God while nourishing our vocation, now might be the time to imagine, envision, and plant seeds for that future.

- Is there a future for your congregation? Why or why not?
- What steps have you taken to imagine, envision, and plant seeds for the future?

*Chapter Seven: The Emergent Disciple: Formation in an Unfinished Universe*

3. Emergence theory includes these general concepts: qualitative novelty, nested hierarchy, and the tendency toward whole-making or holism. The novelty that emerges is both in continuity and discontinuity with what preceded it. It is more than simply the sum of its parts, but at the same time these parts are incorporated into what emerges (nested hierarchy). Thus, “emergence refers to layers or levels of reality that fit with each other and form new systems” (holism) (Roger Haight, SJ, *Faith and Evolution: A Grace-Filled Naturalism* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019], 20).
  - How have you experienced qualitative novelty, nested hierarchy, and holism in your own life?
4. The author proposes that revisiting our Scriptures through the lens of emergence can offer fresh insights for the incorporation of new members and the re-inspiration of our own vocation.
  - What Scripture passages have been particularly meaningful for you in your discernment and membership?
  - How might emergence theory open new avenues for understanding those passages?

5. Such is the way of emergence. It cannot be planned, forced, facilitated, or hurried. It is a process that keeps to its own time and integrity. And yet there is a certain pattern that is discernible. As we view discipleship in the gospels, we see three stages of emergence:
  - On the Way: Potential Qualitative Novelty
  - In the Midst: A Nested Hierarchy toward Wholeness
  - After Easter: Choosing Strong Emergence
- Reflect on your congregation's process of formation. How might the stages of emergence provide a new paradigm for membership and rekindle your charism?

*Chapter Eight: Seeking the Whole: The Vows through a Hermeneutic of Catholicity*

6. As we integrate new experiences and acquire knowledge, aspects of our social location are changed. This evolving wisdom—like our culture, race, gender, geography, economic setting, and education—provides a lens through which we view and understand our world. Deciphering this lens is properly understood as hermeneutics—the theory of interpretation.
  - What is your operating hermeneutical lens as you reflect on religious life?
7. Robert Schreier describes a “new catholicity” as possessing three dimensions: the universal extension of the church, the fullness of faith, and new patterns of communication that respond to the genuine diversity of communities and cultures.

- How have you experienced these aspects of “catholicity”?
8. Iliia Delio offers a different definition: “The word catholicity was coined to describe a consciousness of the whole cosmos, the whole physical order of things to which the human was connected but distinct from; cosmos was the source for guiding human action” (*Making All Things New: Catholicity, Cosmology, Consciousness* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015], 8).
    - Does Delio’s definition of catholicity resonate with you? Why or why not?
  9. Bringing both definitions together, we find three elements of an integrated anthropological and cosmological understanding of catholicity: the role of interculturality, the shared origin of all creation and its unitive nature, and the evolutionary trajectory toward Omega/God.
    - How would the evangelical counsels look through a hermeneutical lens of catholicity in which the vows are intercultural, unitive, and evolutionary?
  10. Poverty, chastity, and obedience individually and together encourage the individual toward personal wholeness: a simplicity of life, a freedom for relationships, and an attentive listening to the divine.
    - Have the vows brought you simplicity, freedom, and attentive listening to the divine?

*Chapter Nine: “For All the Earth” (1 Cor 10:26):  
Mission and the Reign of God*

11. The reign of God that Jesus preached is both rooted in creation and yet still evolving. The now and not yet of the reign of God is similar to Teilhard de Chardin’s understanding of the process toward Christogenesis and the Omega Point, that point at which humans individually and communally find their end and fulfillment.
  - How do you experience the now and not yet of the reign of God?
12. In the evolutionary process, pain, death, and mass extinction are troubling yet necessary companions of innovation, life, and complexity. Not all pain, death, and extinction in creation is actually the result of evolution. Too many times, human beings are actively engaging in cosmocide, the wanton destruction of the created world.
  - What are the tangible signs of this “cosmocide” in your experience?
  - What steps have you taken to counter this assault on creation?
13. “[Whole Earth thinking] calls for dangerous dreams of emancipation, dreams of freedom from the destructive refrains of domination and oppression. It calls for a vision of a more peaceful, just, and sustainable Earth community, a vision of participatory ecological democracy” (Sam Mickey, *Whole Earth Thinking and Planetary Coexistence* [New York: Routledge, 2016], 147).



- Where do you see the intersection between “whole Earth thinking” and Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato Si’*?
14. Pope Francis’s call to preserve our “common home” becomes a charter that redirects our efforts, so that mission moves from an anthropocentric concern for evangelization and conversion to a cosmic accompaniment, care, and advocacy for all of creation. The “how” of our ministry is directly related to the particular charism gifted to our congregation by the Holy Spirit, a charism most readily seen in our founders and foundresses, but no less evident in our members today—if we look.
- How can your congregation’s charism be put to the service of all of creation?
  - How might you engage collaboratively with others to bring about the reign of God?



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### Conclusion: Community as the Holy Preaching

1. “Where’s Jesus?” It all started with that question. And a deep concern that the enthusiasm for the New Cosmology and its related concepts would cause a rift between those sisters who held a traditional belief and those who advocated for the emerging theology.
  - How might you engage the diversity present in your congregation?
  - In a theological engagement with science, what potentials or pitfalls do you see for the future of religious life?
2. The author concludes that community life can be essential, emergent, and expansive if we are willing to attend to the signs of the times and do the hard work such a life requires. It is not for the faint of heart.
  - How might each of these aspects be developed in your local community?
  - Of the three, which might be most difficult for you?