

Universal Savior: Ilia Delio reimagines Christ

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A U.S. Catholic interview

What does that mean for how we treat the rest of creation?

We tend to treat the earth sort of like a backdrop for our lives. A “cosmic christology” reminds us that every aspect of the cosmos is in Christ, everything is Word incarnate. Everything bears the infinite love of God, each in its own way, which means that there’s nothing earthly that doesn’t have some divine dignity to it.

The medieval Franciscan theologian St. Bonaventure said the whole world is exemplary of God because everything bears a relationship to God. God created the quark and the star, the bacteria, the snake. Everything reflects God in some way.

Because every created thing has a relationship to God, I can’t misuse, abuse, or control it. Cosmic christology calls us to be in relationship to created things as a sister or brother. We are all part of the one cosmic family.

Would you really abuse and misuse and manipulate a person or thing you claim to love? I hope not.

In that respect we have misused the things of the earth. We’ve been very selfish and self-centered, and we have not treated the rest of creation with a sense of dignity, respect, or reverence.

Understanding God in our midst in the natural world might give us a new consciousness that we use things as gifts. All of life—our life and every life—is a gift. That’s what love is about.

Does that mean God loves everything equally?

Another way to approach this is that each person, every single thing that’s created is created uniquely out of the infinite love of God, which means everything bears in its own unique, distinct way the reflection of God’s love.

When we talk about God’s love, the model is the Trinity. The first person of the Trinity, the Father or the fountain source of love, loves one other than the Father—the Son. That relationship between the Father and the Son is bound in a union of all things, the Holy Spirit.

In other words God’s love is uniquely and distinctly personal. God doesn’t love in some general diffuse way. Your life and my life and every single life is loved in a unique, personal, and distinct way. Everything bears a unique expression of God in a way that cannot be reproduced or clumped together, which makes everything uniquely lovable.

How do we start seeing with this broader vision?

The first thing is prayer. I don't mean just saying prayers, such as the Our Father or Hail Mary. I mean really praying to know yourself first of all. In our very busy world we need to take time to be with God.

People say that they're not sure how to pray, but prayer is really just talking that leads to deep dialogue. Do you talk to yourself? That's part of prayer. Who are we talking to when we talk to ourselves? It's God, the source of life within us.

Prayer is being at home with God in our everyday lives. Scripture can help us because it gives us some language and insight as to who God is. This is the ancient form of *lectio divina*. You read the scriptures and then you meditate. You let them sink in. We're so busy today that we don't even have time to let anything sink in, but there is no christology without that, quite honestly.

The next step is looking at the life of Jesus, at his healing, mercy, and forgiveness. The humanity of Jesus is our humanity. What he did in his life is what we're capable of doing as well. We're capable of being compassionate, of being merciful, of forgiving others.

Jesus sets the pattern for what makes salvation possible. And salvation is really being made whole. The common image of Jesus in the New Testament and the earliest Christian centuries was Jesus the physician. Salvation is better seen in terms of health.

To be saved is to respond to and accept the love of God in our lives, that grace of God that makes us whole. If we are whole, then what? We help make others whole as well.

Can you give some specific examples of what needs healing?

We still have divisions within our local communities and in the churches. We still have a lot of violence in the world. We have wars that continue to proliferate. We still have poverty abounding, probably more today than ever before. Why hasn't Christianity made a difference in the world? How is it we can still have the same problems that Jesus had in his own time?

A lot of that has to do with the fact that we have not yet caught on to the heart of Christianity, which is very simply stated in Jesus' own language: love of God, love of neighbor. Love is the essence of God's incarnation.

G. K. Chesterton said, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult, and left untried." That's a pretty hard saying, but there's truth to it. What if however many millions of Catholics there are really took up living as Christians by living the Christ mystery, by living in the fullness of love?

Whenever there is conflict or there's division, can we forgive? Can we be merciful? Can we be compassionate? Can we love? Can we help bridge those divisions, that brokenness?

If I put this into practice, what does my life look like?

Say you meet a Muslim. You could respond, as some do, "You're a Muslim. You're probably going to go to hell because you believe in the Qur'an, and the Qur'an isn't really the Word of God. That's just a book." You might also judge the person's accent as too foreign, so you don't have the patience to spend time trying to figure out what the person is talking about.

But if you say that God is love, the first thing you realize is that before you is an icon of Christ. This Muslim is one in whom God lives, which means you must be patient and show respect for and interest in that person. In this Muslim, God is revealing God's self.

A mystical Christian encounters a person as an encounter with God. This is incarnation now. We allow that person to be who they are because that's the person God created. I think it's a matter of looking at the person as an icon of God—one in whom God is shining through.

Unfortunately, we don't see people or the created world as icons. Instead we treat them as objects—an object you can manipulate and control.

You used the example of encountering a Muslim. How do other religions fit into this cosmic vision of Christ?

One thing we have to say is that other religions are not outside the Christ mystery. They are part and parcel of that mystery. That's why dialogue with the world's religions is very important. How will we build the bridges of God's love unless we know other religions and their people?

We Christians are called to be bridge builders, and unless we do that, we are going to continue to suffer violence in the world because a lot of the violence is religious in nature. Christianity has the responsibility to incarnate the love of God by reaching out to other religions to talk about this mystery of God.

When you sit down face to face with another person and you start talking about the things that really matter, you're going to find more things in common than things that divide. And I think when you find that bridge of commonality, there is Christ.

I think there is more good to discover in other religions than to be wary of. I think we would do better building bridges with that attitude.

And we each have role to play?

God seeks to be incarnate in an expanding incarnation. The Christ is waiting to be born anew, if I can put it in that language. But Christ cannot be born anew without our saying yes to bringing Christ into the world.

I also think we need to lighten up a little bit and enjoy the ride. Christian life is an adventure, God's adventure in love. We need to recapture a sense of this cosmic adventure in love and that we're part of it.

Science tells us that evolutionary creation will continue on earth for billions of years. The evolutionary universe may go on for 100 trillion years. A lot has happened before us, and a lot is going to happen after us. So stay tuned. I think in the next billion years, the best is yet to come.