

The Confessor's Tongue for September 19, A. D. 2021

13th Sunday After Pentecost: Martyrs Trophimus, Sabbatius, Dorymedon

In honor of St. Maximus the Confessor, whose tongue and right hand were cut off in an attempt by compromising authorities to silence his uncompromising confession of Christ's full humanity & divinity.

Book Review

Taking Leave of Darwin

In this engaging book, hot off the press in 2021, agnostic Neil Thomas, a longtime member of the British Rationalist Association and professor at Durham University, examines the Darwinism he had long assumed, tests the evidence for it, and finds it unconvincing, leaving him in the uncomfortable position of rejecting evolution by natural selection and the explanation for life but not being willing to embrace God as the Creator, even though he sees the best evidence pointing precisely in that direction.

In the course of the book's 165 pages, Thomas considers the various theories of the origin of the earth and life on it from ancient times to the present. He surveys the Greek philosophers and the modern figures who preceded Darwin. He focuses on Darwin and his rival Alfred Wallace, who also formulated a similar theory. He considers the objections of Darwin's contemporaries. For instance, the reader chosen by Darwin's publishing house recommended that Darwin should confine himself to pigeons. "At every page I was tantalized by the absence of proofs. . . . It is to ask the jury for verdict without putting the witnesses in the box." John Stuart Mill found the work highly conjectural. Eminent scientists such as Charles Lyell, Asa Gray, St. George Mivart, William Bateson, Louis Agassiz, and Richard Owens lodged serious objections against it. In fact, Darwin's theory was rejected by almost all who "had the power to judge", and his two great supporters, Thomas Huxley and Joseph Hooker were "unpersuaded by his special theory of natural selection." Thomas allows these long-neglected voices to be heard, and finds merit in their objections.

Darwin prevailed in his time and later, not because he had unassailable evidence, but because so many people felt an ideological necessity for finding a thoroughly materialistic explanation for the world as an alternative to the Christian one. Darwin's theory, with all its manifest faults, provided this, and science came to be defined along the lines laid out by Auguste Comte's positivist philosophy which held that "all real science stands in radical and necessary opposition to all theology." Many in nineteenth-century Europe were in rebellion against God and the Christian Church. Darwin provided them with a respectable means of justifying their infidelity. But this came at a cost. As Thomas puts it, "Intellectual integrity was sacrificed on the altar of ideological commitment."

We hear from both the great advocates of Darwin in the twentieth century and his detractors. We learn that even in the twentieth centuries, there have been eminent scientists who were unpersuaded by the Darwinian thesis. Thomas notes, "acceptance of Darwinism has never been universal in the way that,

say, acceptance of Einstein's general theory of relativity has", though school textbooks fail to make us aware of that.

In the end, Thomas concludes,

The present scientific failure to account for it leaves us precious little alternative than to revisit the possibility of an intelligent mode of causation, even, perhaps a supranatural intelligence. That option, which we observed philosopher Antony Flew choosing in a previous chapter, seems to be the only conclusion which is unassailable on strictly logical grounds, however unwelcome that conclusion will seem to many readers, in whose number I count myself. However, it is the only conclusion which I find to be defensible as a logical inference from the data available, a conclusion I arrived at only after assessing the gross explanator inadequacies of all other theories. . . . I am, of course, not blind to the paradox of a rationalist and humanist like myself making this argument, but I would plead on my own behalf that it is a logic-driven inference . . . since it owes nothing either to mystical intuition or to the special revelation said to be vouchsafed to us in the Bible. . . . It would, as I see the matter, be a betrayal of my rationalist convictions not to follow where the evidence leads...

Thomas's book shows that Christians need not at all be intimidated by Darwin. Christian faith is not irrational or contrary to the facts.

Taking Leave of Darwin performs yet another service for us, by focusing on the multitude of complex marvels in the world which properly lead man to wonder and awe. In the fourth century, St. Basil the Great, in teaching his flock about creation (*Hexaemeron*), said, "I want creation to penetrate you with so much admiration that everywhere, wherever you may be, the least plant may bring to you the clear remembrance of the Creator. . . . A single plant, a blade of grass is sufficient to occupy all your intelligence in the contemplation of the skill which produced it." So Christians approached the world. Yet the centuries following the Enlightenment tended to lead man to see our natural surroundings as "prosaic givens of little account." In passages worthy of St. Basil the Great, Thomas writes, inspired by British doctor and writer James Le Fanu's work, "We should be more appreciative of nature's ingenuity and the sheer ease with which we see, hear, talk, eat, drink, make love, and reproduce our kind. Such should be the central core of school biology lessons, promoting a sense of wonder in the young mind at the very fact of existence." He goes on in the same vein:

We betray collectively some element of false entitlement about our innumerable boons: we feel hungry, eat, and by some magical alchemy of which we know little—and couldn't care less about—out bodies transform the food into the very substance of our physical frames. We take it for granted that we are born with hinged bones to provide low-friction articulations, eye-protectors (eyelids), tears secreted by

the lachrymal glands to lubricate the eyes so that they don't feel scratchy, and an optic nerve to transmit electrical impulses to the brain to decode visual cues so that we can know where we are. We shrug off as unremarkable the fact that broken bones will, unlike broken vases, mend, or the fact that minor wounds will heal by the process to which medical people refer with a complacent lack of affect as 'bodily regeneration.'

As far as external nature is concerned, we are the beneficiaries of plants' photosynthesis, the process by which plants convert light energy into chemical energy and produce oxygen, yet we give little thought to this bedrock of our existence. (Nobody, by the way, has the first idea about how photosynthesis mighty have evolved.) The same goes for the sun's warming rays and all those cosmological constants described above. As for that huge symbiosis by which all life is connected productively in a web of interrelated functions (rainwater for crops, grazing animals fertilizing the soil with dung, worms aerating the soil so that crops can grow, and on and on), this is just another part of what we see as our entitlement, assuming we even bother to think about such things at all. The list could be extended practically without limit.

Taking Leave of Darwin provides an fine survey of the idea of evolution in its historical context and the many objections to it. It is well worth your time.

Neil Thomas, *Taking Leave of Darwin*, Discovery Institute Press, Seattle, 2021.

Three Principles of Life

Fr. Seraphim Rose

Fr. Alexey [Young] recalls three simple principles of life that he learned from Fr. Seraphim. "I learned them," he says, "not so much from Fr. Seraphim's books as from what he told me in different conversations over the years.

"The first of these principles is: 'We are pilgrims on this earth and there is nothing permanent for us here.' We must constantly remind ourselves of that. We are just sojourners. This life is but the beginning of a continuum that will never end. We tend to treat it as though it's permanent and awfully important in terms of careers and education and getting ahead and all those things. But all of that will die with us when the body dies; none of it will go with us into the next world.

"Fr. Seraphim wanted to teach us principles that would stand us in good stead throughout life and sustain us in new and different situations, circumstances, and problems. Therefore, if you went to him with a question about a particular matter, he might or might not address that specific problem, but he would give a principle by which one could evaluate the problem oneself and come to a reasonably sober and reliable conclusion. This is what was behind his reminding us that we're pilgrims on this earth. This is a *principle a premise*. Let us consider all the problems that we've encountered in the last week or month, all the things in our private lives that seem very important and get us riled up, upset, worried, or threatened; and then let us think about how, if we had

reminded ourselves that we're just pilgrims here and that most of our 'issues' are very unimportant, what a difference that would have made in the quality of our day, our week, our life.

"A second principle Fr. Seraphim taught me was that our Orthodox Faith is not an academic 'thing.' This might seem odd to say because we have scores of volumes of the Holy Fathers and the Divine services of the Church, and also of the Lives of the Saints—there's so much. Of course, there is an academic level to all of this—but that's not the point. Fr. Seraphim wrote to me once: 'Don't let anyone ever take our books away from you. But don't mistake the reading of books for the real thing, which is the *living* of Orthodoxy.' 'Orthodoxy,' he once told me, 'is not so much a matter of the head. It's something living, and it's of the heart.'

"once, when we were walking somewhere on the monastery grounds, I asked him, 'Fr. Seraphim, what's your favorite icon of the Mother of God?' (That's the kind of question converts like to ask, you know.) He stopped and said, 'I don't have one.' 'That's impossible!' I said. 'Everyone has a favorite icon of the Mother of God. Which one is yours?' He paused again and looked at me, actually with astonishment, and he said, 'Don't you understand? It's the whole thing.' That was a very profound answer: you can't just pick out one thing and say this is the best thing, or this is my favorite. It truly *is* everything!

"On occasions like this, Fr. Seraphim was able to remind me over and over again that Orthodoxy is to be lived, not just read, studied, or written about. . . .

"A third principle was probably the most important of all. Fr. Seraphim, told me, 'If you do not find Christ in this life, you will not find Him in the next.' For a Westerner, this is an astonishing statement. What does this mean practically? He wasn't talking about mystical experiences or having visions or something of that nature. Anyone who knows Fr. Seraphim realizes he would have stayed far away from that kind of talk.

"What he meant by 'finding Christ in this life' is this: that one must first keep one's focus on Christ all the time, day in and day out. This not just to have a routine of prayer, not just to tip one's hat to the icons as one goes out the door. Rather, it's to bring to mind Christ all day long in every circumstance, in every opportunity—to raise one's heart and mind to Him.

"Fr. Seraphim used to say to me, quoting from the NT: *God is love; and he that dwells in love dwells in God, and God in him. . . . Perfect love casts out fear* (I John 4:16, 18). You see, I was a fearful person, so he would say things like that. And then he would explain, 'Well, we can't have perfect love for God or anyone because we're imperfect. God's love is perfect. But if we dwell in love and God is love, then God is dwelling in us. And that is one of the ways by which we become closer and closer to Christ in this world.' And this is how we become less fearful of life and other people, of challenges and difficulties.

“Other verses he like to quote were *Little children, it is the last time* (I John 2:18), and *Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom* (Luke 12:32). In subsequent years, I remembered Fr. Seraphim repeating such verses to me; and they came back to me in times of fear and distress. These verses were a particular comfort and consolation to me at the time of my Matushka's sudden repose, which occurred several years after Fr. Seraphim left this world. But, of course, the greatest comfort of all at the time of her death was that I knew she was now with him.

“In conclusion, I would like to say, with utmost conviction, that Fr. Seraphim did find Christ in this life. You can't give what you don't have, and he had so much to give. By this, we can know that Christ truly dwelt within him.” pp. 818-821

From Elder Epiphanius (+1989)

“Elder, does that which St. John of the Ladder says—that monastics are light for the lay people—mean that the most virtuous lay person is lacking in comparison to the worst monastic?”

“No! Here, the saint is not speaking of any monk whatsoever, but of the ‘monastic lifestyle’—that is, of monasticism. So, he means that monasticism as an institution is higher than worldly life. Or course, this does not mean that there are not lay people whom monastics cannot even begin to approach!”

Fr. Seraphim Rose on End Times

Fr. S. Rose, His Life and Works

From Fr. Seraphim's last sermon, delivered outside at the monastery overlooking Beegum Gorge.

Beholding the majesty of God's creation, we catch a glimpse, however vague and shadowy, of the beauty of God's eternal Kingdom, for which we were all created. We must always remember that our home is in the heavens; we must shake off all the vain and petty passions and worries that keep us tied to the ground, to the fallen earthly world, that keep us from realizing the purpose of our creation. How easily we forget the very reason for our existence. . . . The end-times are already here; we see clearly the preparation of the world for the Antichrist. Christians will be faced with an unprecedented trial of their faith and love for God. We will have to hide in the wilderness—in land like we see before us here. Of course, in the end they will find us even there. The purpose of hiding is not just for the preservation of our earthly life, but to gain time to strengthen our souls for the final trial. And this must begin even now. Let us therefore at least begin to struggle against the fetters of petty passions, and remember that our true home is not here, but in the heavens. Let us ‘strive toward our heavenly homeland,’ as St. Herman used to say. . . . *Ad astra! Ad astra! [to the stars!]. p. 1013*

On La Fanu and the Christian Study of Nature

Neil Thomas called my attention to James La Fanu, whose work looks quite intriguing, and who models the sort of approach Christians would take to studying nature. Here is a blurb about him from the internet about his book *Why Us?*, and then a sample of his writing on the wonders of the wasp.

In this daring treatise on the current state of scientific inquiry, James Le Fanu challenges the common assumption that further progress in genetic research and neuroscience must ultimately explain all there is to know about life and man's place in the world. On the contrary, he argues, the most recent scientific findings point to an unbridgeable explanatory gap between the genes strung out along the Double Helix and the beauty and diversity of the living world—and between the electrical activity of the brain and the abundant creativity of the human mind. His exploration of these mysteries, and his analysis of where they might lead us in our thinking about the nature and purpose of human existence, form the impassioned and riveting heart of *Why Us?*

Flying Fiends

James La Fanu

The bold and belligerent wasp is never welcome. Still one might hesitate before terminating its threatening presence on a summer's day to reflect on how its life and habits exemplify to the highest degree the intelligence and purposiveness (or so it seems) of even the simplest animals.

For this we are indebted to the reclusive self-taught scientific genius Jean Henri Fabre whose patient observations in his desolate garden in the South of France revealed more new facts about the hidden world of insects than anyone before or since.

Fabre loved insects in all their glorious diversity but his greatest passion was the solitary “hunting” wasp. Two examples must suffice, but first a brief, necessary digression on that most distinctive feature of the wasp's anatomy, its narrow thread-like waist (or petiole). Its “purpose” is in conferring great mobility to the abdomen — up and down, from side to side—allowing the wasp to position the stinger at its tip with devastating accuracy at the most vulnerable part of his prey.

But that narrow waist so constricts its gut it can only feed on liquid nectar. Its hunting skills are thus reserved for the benefit of its carnivorous offspring in their larval phase, to whom it delivers (depending on the species) a regular supply of fresh live caterpillars, bees, spiders or other insects immobilised by its paralytic venom.

We start with the philanthus wasp, “the lover of flowers”, not just for their delicious nectar but also the haunt of its chosen victim — shocking to relate — the munificent honey bee. First she builds her nest in a sandy bank, digging furiously with her front legs, the sand flying out behind her. She lays her eggs in its carefully constructed cells, emerges and rakes over the opening. Before flying off she circles over her burrow in ever widening loops taking her

bearings of the immediate vicinity to ensure she finds (unfailingly) the concealed entrance on her return.

"The pursuit of knowledge is not without its cruelties" wrote Fabre. Placing a philanthus wasp together with a honey bee in a glass jar he observes its mode of attack. "Turn by turn, tumbled and tumbling, they roll over and over". The philanthus pinions her victim to the ground and curves her abdomen forward to deliver her paralysing sting "with the certainty of a skilled surgeon" into the vital cephalic ganglion of nerves just beneath its neck.

The bee goes limp but the drama is not quite over. The assassin remains firmly clasping her prey for a couple of minutes less she be harmed by any residual reflex movement of its formidable stinging apparatus. She then squeezes all the honey out of the bee's stomach — a necessary precaution Fabre subsequently established against it becoming contaminated with a fungal infection that might harm the philanthus larvae when munching through its entrails.

Next the ammophila (sand loving) hunting wasp whose instinctive knowledge of the neural anatomy of its caterpillar prey is yet more impressive. Having built her nest and laid her eggs she must locate the caterpillar of the noctua moth family to provision the larder — a formidable task as it lives underground feeding on the stems of young plants.

How she detects its presence no-one can tell but, once unearthed, ammophila bestrides her victim several times larger than herself. Seizing the back of its neck with her curved mandibles she injects her paralysing venom just beneath its head. This is the essential strike, but the caterpillar (unlike the bee) is segmented each of its seven pairs of legs controlled by a separate nervous circuit. The ammophila proceeds to move methodically down its back stinging each set of legs in turn. "The surgeon has finished. The patient lies on the ground motionless, incapable of resistance" before being unceremoniously dragged back through the undergrowth to become a tasty meal for the hungry larvae back in the nest. The further thirty thousand species of hunter wasps provide numerous ingenious variations on the same theme.

Fabre stoutly maintained these highly specialised purposive patterns of behaviour could not readily be accommodated by theory of gradualist evolutionary transformation. "The development of instinct by degrees is not possible" he wrote. "The wasp must excel from the outset in preparing the provisions for its larvae or leave the thing alone". It is certainly difficult to conceive how that wasp-sized brain — no bigger than a couple of grains of sand—could give rise to so complex and protean forms of activity. Published in *The Critic*, May 29, 2021

Reading this account of the wasp, one is moved to marvel at the wonder it represents. This leads us to ponder the goodness, wisdom, and power of the Creator made manifest in the wasp, which in turn leads us to offer Him

thanks, praise, and worship. How marvellous are Thy works, O Lord, in wisdom hast Thou made them all!

Orthodox Asceticism

The term "asceticism" in the Orthodox Church does not have the narrow sense that has often been given to it in the West. Rather, the word points to what every Christian must accomplish in order to benefit effectively from the salvation wrought by Christ. From the point of view of the great Tradition of the Orthodox Church, the work of salvation appears as a cooperation between divine grace bestowed by the Holy Spirit and the effort each baptized person must make personally in order to be open to this grace and to take hold of it. One makes this effort throughout one's life, at every moment and in every act of existence. Besides this, the Greek word *askesis* means "exercise," "training," and "way of life." In addition, the corresponding Russian words *podvig* and *podvizhnichestvo*, derived from the Slavonic verb *podvizatsya* (meaning 'to move or go forward') translate an eminently dynamic conception of spiritual life. These words make it clear that the spiritual life is conceived of as a process of growth; namely, that of the gradual actualization of the grace received in the sacraments and particularly in Baptism. Likewise, the process is that of the progressive assimilation of the grace of the Holy Spirit that effectively incorporates the baptized into the dead and resurrection Christ. Such grace allows man to acquire for himself the human nature that is restored and deified in the person of the God-man. *Dr. Jean-Claude Larchet, in Therapy of Spiritual Illness, volume 1, p. 8.*

From Elder Paisios of Greece

Those who are in the world must not despair when they are overcome by many passions, and when their nature is unruly and races passionately downwards. Rather, they must trust in the almighty power of God and turn the steering wheel of their powerful engine back onto the road toward God, upwards. Soon after they will pass other, slow-moving cars, which for years have been driving the road toward God.

Upcoming Events 2021

19 September, Sunday: Annual Meeting
3 October, Sunday: 20-year Anniversary Celebration
at St. Maximus and the Big White Barn in Decatur.
October 4-8: Diocesan Assembly in Miami
24 October, Sunday: Octoberfest??
31 October, Sunday: All Saints Party
14 November: Parish Thanksgiving Meal

GLORY BE TO GOD IN ALL THINGS!