



# A HEART FOR CREATION AT CHRISTMAS

A REFLECTION BY CLARE JOHNSON



## RECOGNISING THE LOST 'HEART FOR CREATION' AT CHRISTMAS

Christmas is a season of celebration, bonding, and love. For Catholics, it heralds the 'Good News' – the arrival of the long-awaited Saviour and Messiah, the incarnated loving God who restored the interconnected bonds of love between God, people, and Creation (the natural environment). It's the first transformative encounter with the human and yet divine 'Sacred Heart of Jesus'. In the simple yet dignified setting, people and Creation bid God a joyful, loving welcome with heartfelt gifts of honour and gratitude. But, unfortunately, Christmas has also become a secularised season of excess, overconsumption, and waste. A season where 'care for Creation' is neglected in the stress and striving for the 'perfect' Christmas. God's 'heart for Creation' is lost.

Nowadays, Christmas celebrations centre around gift-giving, feasting, and a festive setting - the bonding customs for expressing love, confirming identity, and affirming relationships. Whilst these Christmas customs are good things, they, unfortunately, have an adverse impact on Creation. Christmas has been called by climate researchers the 'world's greatest environmental disaster'. For example, the household carbon footprint dramatically rises over Christmas because of celebratory practices, such as buying Christmas trees, increasing food demands, importing goods, and regulating house temperatures. Preferences for certain seafood species or cutting conifer Christmas trees affect biodiversity due to over-fishing or habitat change from Christmas tree plantations. Many Christmas products (such as gifts and decorations) are environmentally unsustainable, often of poor quality, with a short lifespan, and made with non-biodegradable, polluting materials (like plastic). Retailers order excess goods, with surplus going to waste or manifesting as overabundance in charities. Waste increases from unwanted gifts, uneaten food, discarded batteries, and excessive/polluting packaging. The effects of Christmas on Creation are detrimental; yet for a society and a Church slowly gaining an environmental conscience, changing Christmas practices or values to 'care for Creation' is often not considered or made a priority.

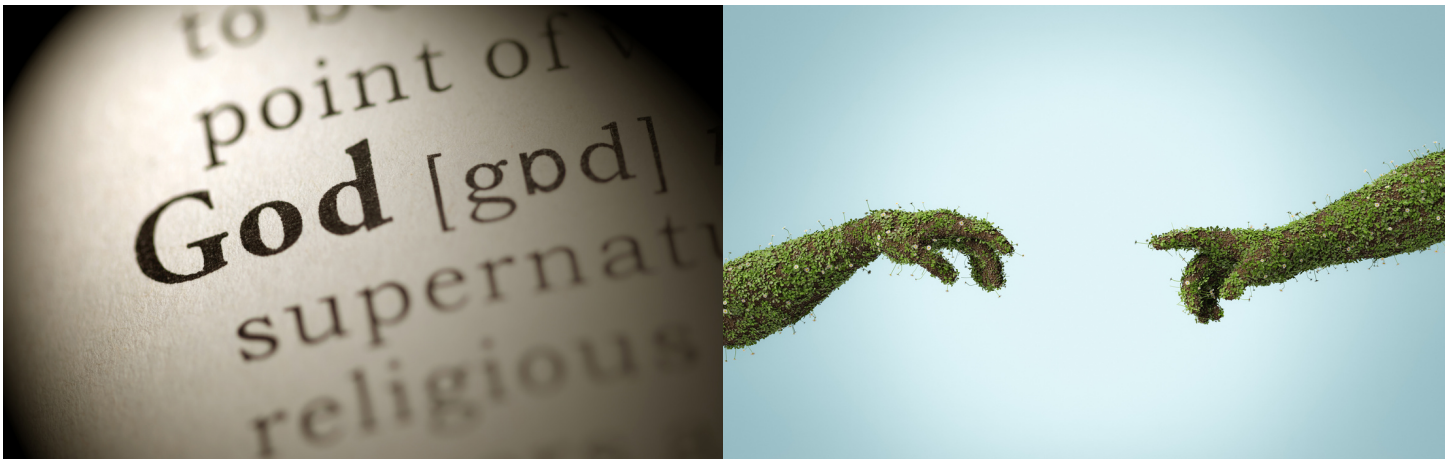


Indeed, the Christmas and Catholic values of hospitality, charitable love, and ‘care for Creation’ are competing with and subverted by consumerist economics and individualism. For example, whilst expressing love and affirming relationships remain central values of the Christmas gift-giving rituals, gifting practices and expectations have changed from personal, handmade items (‘labours of love’) to mass-produced, commercially purchased goods. Even ‘green’ (socially responsible, ethical, sustainable) consumers are not necessarily ‘green’ givers or receivers as complex social and cultural factors outweigh ‘green’ considerations. Faced with pressures to meet social/cultural obligations, satisfy the selfish ‘I want’ demands of individualism, or maintain identity/status through the appearance of financial/material abundance (by hosting the perfect feast, giving the ideal gift, or hosting a lavish celebration), often consumerism wins, and Creation loses. Christmas plays an integral part in keeping the consumerist economy working, with businesses relying on Christmas sales to remain viable and any sign of reduced spending causing anxiety to those directing and depending on financial markets. This economic anxiety leads to an extended Christmas purchasing season, with consumer marketing using symbols, smells, and sounds of Christmas from as early as October to drive sales. Christmas is the ultimate consumerist festival!



Reclaiming Christmas from consumerist distortions requires a significant shift in individual, social, and cultural values, practices, and customs. Materialistic values (pleasure, status, and identity from owning/using goods) and a ‘throwaway’ culture (limited lifespan, easily replaceable goods) reduce Creation and people to resources and create disconnection from inherent worth. Changing values and behaviours, such as those found in Christmas rituals and traditions, is challenging, particularly when they are firmly grounded in emotion-laden memories, nostalgia, or personal, family, societal, and cultural identities/bonds. Everything Christmas related, from decorating the Christmas tree to preparing/eating traditional Christmas foods, has overtones of the sacred. Only ‘something significant’ could transform hearts and minds and open them to a different perspective.

The 'something significant' is God. Placing God at the 'heart of Christmas' recalls the love and deep interconnection between God, people, and Creation in the celebrations. The unconditional love of God (*agape*) inspires humans to love as God loves and to love what that God loves, including Creation which 'God saw was good' (cf. Gen 1:1-31, NRSV). This love counteracts the pervading anthropogenic view of Creation that sees it as a resource at humanity's disposal. It recalls that profound experiences of God occur from contemplating Creation and realising that the fruits of Creation enable God present in the Eucharist as bread and wine. There is a need for personal and communal transformation and God's mercy to forgive human conduct (greed, injustice) towards Creation. The transformation required is an 'ecological conversion' - the intellectual, moral, and religious shift in the understanding, attitudes, values, and practices that allows an individual to see that the natural environment has inherent value as God's Creation. Simply by existing, Creation honours and glorifies God and is thus owed kindness and respect (c.f. CCC 2416).



God's heart for Creation is revealed in Catholic tradition and writing, particularly in Scripture, the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), and the encyclical letter *Laudato Si* (LS). The key themes of Catholic Social Teaching, 'common good', 'human dignity', and 'care of our common home', are drawn from this revelation. In Gen 9:1-7, the covenantal relationship between God, people, and Creation is established. Creation sustains life (in resources, habitat, and waste repository), and people (in service to the Creator-God) are responsible and accountable for managing and protecting ('tilling and keeping') Creation with respect, justice, and holiness. The Catechism states that "*a religious respect for the integrity of creation*" (CCC 2415) is required and that "*God entrusted animals [and Creation] to... those whom God created in God's image*" (CCC 2417). *Laudato Si* expands on these ideas, stating, "*the climate is a common good, belonging to all and meant for all*" (LS 23). As Catholics and people who live *Spirituality of the Heart*, 'care for Creation' is a call to action (sacrifice, restraint, changed lifestyle) to honour, respect, and protect Creation and, through that loving relationship, develop a deepening understanding of the Creator-God. At Christmas, 'care for Creation' is a call to rediscover what Creation reveals about God heart's (and vice versa) in the Christmas story.

## FURTHER REFLECTION AND LEARNING

### LAUDATO SI

Visit the *Laity of the Chevalier Family Australia* website and explore *Laudato Si*.

- Read the *Laudato Si* encyclical
- See the endorsement from the *Australian Council of the Laity of the Chevalier Family*
- Make a commitment to complete sustainable actions by signing the Chevalier Family 'Doing Our Part to Care for the Earth' Declaration.
- Find out about the *Laity of the Chevalier Family Australia* 'Laudato Si' logo (pictured right).



<https://chevalierlaity.com.au/mission-and-ministries/laudato-si/>

### FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Frankincense, heavily used in religious liturgies, is produced from around five species of *Boswellia* trees. The resin, harvested by cutting the bark to release the sap, should only be collected 12 times a year. However, some trees have been found with nearly 120 cuts (Fobar, 2019). Between overcollection and deforestation, one of the frankincense tree species is approaching the 'near threatened' list.

If we are called to have a 'heart for Creation' at Christmas, how can we change our liturgical practices to ensure the survival of these trees?



## DISCOVERING GOD'S 'HEART FOR CREATION' AT CHRISTMAS

As Scripture is one place that God's heart is revealed, we will reflect on two Scriptural Christmas stories (Luke 2:8-20 and Matthew 2:1-12). Theological writer, Ormond Rush states, "only from dwelling within the heart of God do we get a perspective on things around us that is more likely to be from God's perspective."

### LUKE 2:8-20 (NRSV)

“

Now, in that same region, there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!" When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them, and Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them.

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## MATTHEW 2: 1-12 (NRSV)

“

*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet: ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah, for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’” Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary, his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*

”

Embedded in stories about the shepherds' and magi's encounter with the newborn Jesus are subtle moments of Creation revealing God's heart and honouring God's loving presence.

We meet the shepherds going about their daily lives, 'living in the fields' and 'keeping watch over their flock by night' (Luke 2:8). We can picture them spending time immersed in watching the landscape of Creation and protecting the creatures entrusted to their care. Creation's presence in the story anchors us to the humble simplicity of everyday living and caring before the dramatic events of the Christmas story unfold. The shepherds are cast as loving leaders - role models that Jesus would use in later ministry when claiming 'I am the Good Shepherd' (c.f. John 10:11). We can see the invitation to live like the shepherds to 'care for Creation'.



*In contrast, when we meet the magi, they are doing something extraordinary - leaving behind their everyday lives and journeying to find God guided only by Creation. The magi are revealed as people of faith, wisdom, and learning who have come to understand the connection between God and Creation. ['We observed [God's] star in the east and have come to pay [God] homage' (Matthew 2:2)]. As astrologers, they looked to the stars (Creation) to lead them to the presence of God on Earth. 'They set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east until it stopped over the place where the child was' (Matthew 2:9)]. Indeed, it is the star (Creation) that knew God and acted prophetically to draw the magi (and us) into an encounter with God.*

When we look closely, we can realise that role of Creation is more than being a presence, something to be cared for, or a prophetic sign. Creation is also integral to 'paying homage' to God. The star shone over the place where Jesus was born. The flocks were there to join the shepherds in 'glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen' (Luke 2:20), for in hastening to find 'the child lying in the manger' (Luke 2:16), the 'good shepherds' would not have abandoned those in their care to the dangers of the night. Centrally, the treasures from Creation of gold, frankincense, and myrrh were the magi's choice of offering to God. Gold, a natural substance valued for its rare beauty and ability to remain untarnished, symbolised



royalty and the virtues of knowledge, wisdom, and faith. Frankincense and myrrh, perfumed resins collected by wounding the bark from specific trees, symbolised the anointing of faith leaders (priests and prophets). Creation, in its presence and treasures, draws us closer to God.



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Importantly, we find love, simplicity, and authenticity when we encounter God in the Christmas story. Born in humble settings, our God is welcomed and honoured by loving family, faithful protectors, wise leaders, and magnificent Creation. We witness joyful and awestruck people whose hearts and lives are transformed by God. We see God's heart is one of love, hospitality, and relationship. We discover a God with a 'heart for people' and a 'heart for Creation'.



## FURTHER REFLECTION AND LEARNING

### LECTIO DIVINA REFLECTION QUESTIONS (SCRIPTURAL READING, MEDITATION, AND PRAYER)

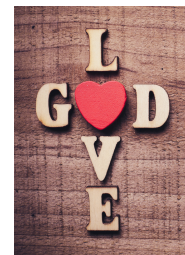
Use the biblical Christmas stories (Luke 2:8-20 and Matthew 2:1-12) for Lectio Divina.

- What words or phrases catch your attention?
- How does Creation draw you towards God in the stories?
- What changes are you called to this Christmas so you can have a 'heart for Creation'?



## HAVING A 'HEART FOR CREATION' AT CHRISTMAS

Choosing to make 'care for Creation' a significant Christmas value begins with each of us choosing to live *Spirituality of the Heart* and be missionary leaders that aim 'to be on Earth the Heart of God'. It begins with us reflecting on the question, 'how can I have a "heart for Creation" at Christmas?'. The response will be unique for each of us, but it starts with small changes in behaviour that consider the impact of Christmas choices on Creation.



It could be, for example, reimagining Christmas traditions and gifts, such as choosing services/experiences over goods, giving gifts of care (like food), or finding different ways to celebrate (choosing a tree in your garden to decorate). It could be choosing environmentally sustainable products, such as reusable gift wrapping, LED lights, or native Christmas trees. (If they also are ethically produced or socially responsible, such as not produced by slave labour, even better). It could be making gifts and decorations, such as creating wreaths from pruning activities, designing reusable fabric Christmas crackers, or crafting decorations (origami candles). It could be reducing excess and waste by buying food that could be kept for later and only buying what is necessary. Finally, it could be choosing not to do something and simplifying celebrations, such as not having electric Christmas lights, fireworks, or store-bought decorations. The possibilities are endless with decisions within our control to change, and the effects are immediately observable. Even small changes in our behaviour can positively affect the impact on Creation.



Our sustainable Christmas choices can motivate and empower us to devise consider ways to influence and inspire others into 'caring for Creation' at Christmas. For example, we could develop ways to inform others of the problem and possible solutions, such as posting on social media about sustainability, having conversations with others about Christmas practices, or running formation programs for parishes/schools/lay associations on 'care for Creation'. We could also find opportunities for developing community projects and systems that focus on changing attitudes towards Creation and creating sustainable Christmas practices. The projects could be anything that inspires us and others from making and selling reusable Christmas crackers and donating the profits to social justice charities to working with community groups to distribute potted native trees for Christmas and reuse them for gardening projects. Whatever we choose, our small acts of individual leadership can significantly move others to have a 'heart for Creation' at Christmas.

Indeed, our choices and actions can even make progress towards systematic changes that prioritise 'care of Creation'. For example, we can use our collective purchasing power to create demand for sustainable products, practices, and operating models by supporting and promoting businesses that have them. We can lobby those in power to make changes that would eliminate negative environmental impacts, such as petitioning for banning single-use plastic decorations or stopping celebratory fireworks that generate air pollution. When we advocate for sustainability at Christmas, we are a small part of driving meaningful societal changes.



Having a 'heart for Creation' at Christmas is a choice we can make. It's the choice to forgo the secular 'perfect' consumerist Christmas or the 'ideal' nostalgic one. It's the choice to 'care for Creation' and be sustainable, authentic, and simple. It's the choice to honour God and share the joy of God's presence with others. It's the choice to celebrate with a spirit of gratitude and hospitality and honour others with treasures from our hearts.

As we live *Spirituality of the Heart*, may we realise that 'to be on Earth the Heart of God' is to have a 'heart for Creation' at our Christmas!



## FURTHER REFLECTION AND LEARNING

### SPIRITUALITY OF THE HEART ONLINE FORMATION COURSE

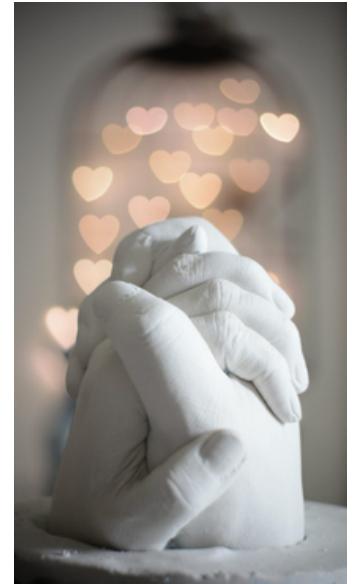
Visit the *Laity of the Chevalier Family Australia* website to download the *Spirituality of the Heart Online Formation Course* by Hans Kwakman MSC. Reflect on how we can live *Spirituality of the Heart* with a 'heart for Creation' (Part 5, Sections 51-70).

<https://chevalierlaity.com.au/resources/online-formation-course/>

### SUSTAINABLE CHRISTMAS INSPIRATIONS

Read the '*Sustainable Christmas Inspirations*' document for ideas on sustainable Christmas choices.

<https://chevalierlaity.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Sustainable-Christmas-Inspirations.pdf>



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