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# “Supernatural Selection”: Evolution and Going to Church

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“Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, everything in the universe, cry out: / ‘To the one who sits on the throne and to the Lamb / be blessing and honor, glory and might, / forever and ever.’” (Rev 5:13)

“There is a great deal of scientific proof in favor of evolution, which appears as a reality that we must see and that enriches our knowledge of life and of being as such.” (Pope Benedict XVI, “Pontiff: Evolution Does Not Exclude a Creator,” *Zenit: The World Seen from Rome*, July 27, 2007. [www.zenit.org/article-20238?l=english](http://www.zenit.org/article-20238?l=english))

### Introduction: Taking Darwin to Church

In the 1907 edition of the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, in an article entitled “Evolution,” the Catholic Church’s position on the scientific theory of evolution is stunningly summarized by E. Wasmann as follows: “It [that is, evolutionary theory] is in *perfect agreement* with the Christian conception of the universe” (*The Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Evolution”). Of course, this claim leaves one begging for more explanation, and perhaps a

little skeptical. “*Perfect agreement*” is a very strong phrase. But this perfect agreement makes perfect sense if we change the quote’s final words from “the universe” to “Mass participation” or “why we should go to church.” The way that evolutionary theory explains the biological origins and diversity of all living things, including our own bodies, is strikingly similar to why we should go to Mass and receive the Eucharist as often as required and even daily. As I hope to demonstrate, going to church is nothing less than the supernatural survival of the fittest.

Unfortunately, a connection between Mass attendance and spiritual vitality does not exist in the minds of many faithful, and blind obedience is always a shaky foundation for a perpetual obligation. But perhaps in our scientifically advanced and well-educated society, the symmetry between evolution in the natural world and personal growth in the life of the Church, the order of grace that we call “the seed and the beginning” of the Kingdom of Christ and of God can help reveal how essential and life-giving this obligation to go to church really is (Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 5, in *Vatican Council II*:

*Volume 1: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery [Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996]). Both nature and grace come from God, so we should expect a corresponding pattern between them. I believe that understanding evolution is crucial to seeing their symmetry and shows us how utterly essential going to church is for taking up a new and eternal life in Christ even now, as we live our natural lives.

## **Biological Evolution in the Light of Faith**

First, let us lay to rest any rumor of incompatibility between the Catholic faith and evolutionary biology. Some believers who are uncomfortable with the scientific theory of evolution are suspicious of it, because it offers a natural explanation for the marvelous diversity of living things. They think that the more we can explain “naturally,” the less there is for the Creator to do. If one claims that an insect species came to be through the natural processes of evolution, they see this as a rival explanation to saying that God is the Creator of the world and everything in it.

In other words, some see nature and God as being in competition with each other. This mistake is based on a failure to understand the fundamentally important notions of primary and secondary causality. In God’s great play entitled “History and the Universe,” the primary cause (the author, God) creates his story *through* the actions of the secondary causes (his creatures). That is why it would obviously make no sense to ask, “Does this insect species

exist because it evolved, or because God created the universe that way?” The answer is, “Both/and,” not, “Either/or!”

Of course, God can act directly without making use of secondary causes. But God’s use of natural causes reveals his power, intelligence, and skill in an even greater way than if he directly caused all things:

If God produced the universe by a single creative act of his will, then its natural development by laws implanted in it by the Creator is to the greater glory of His Divine power and wisdom. . . . St. Thomas says: “The potency of a cause is the greater, the more remote the effects to which it extends.” (*Summa c. Gent.*, III, c. lxxvi); and Francisco Suárez [says]: “God does not interfere directly with the natural order, where secondary causes suffice to produce the intended effect” (*De opere sex dierum*, II, c. x, n. 13). (Wasmann, Erich. “Catholics and Evolution.” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 5. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1909. 22 Feb. 2011, [www.newadvent.org/cathen/05654a.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05654a.htm).)

The Church has always taught that there is a natural order that comes from God, and the *greater* the powers and potentialities that God has implanted in nature, the *more* his power and greatness show forth.

Is there a word that can summarize this “both/and” relationship of causality between God and creatures so vividly illustrated in biological evolution? Yes, and it is a word we use repeatedly when we go to church. The word is “amen,” a word that expresses “*both* God’s faithfulness towards us *and* our trust in him” [emphasis added] (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], 2nd ed.

[Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana—United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000], no. 1062), both God’s faithfulness to creatures and the response of creatures to God. In natural evolution, we see God’s “amen” to creatures in their very ability to be causes of other creatures. In the actual growth, variation, and adaptation of plants and animals to the environment, which over billions of years brings forth an innumerable multitude of diverse species on our planet, we see their “amen” to God as they realize his purpose for creating the universe, “for [which] God has no other reason . . . than his love and goodness” (CCC, no. 293).

This ability to say “amen” by participating in God’s plan can only come to creatures through the power and presence of God to creation, through the command of God’s Word and the presence of God’s Spirit. Only when God says his own “amen” can creatures respond with the “amen” of their participation in his plan. Some atheists see the long period of the universe’s existence before life appears in it as evidence that there is no divine Creator behind it. But Catholics can see that this long period is something very different and much more amazing—it is a long response, a growing sustained and magnificent “amen” offered by creatures in response to God’s powerful Word and omnipresent Spirit. The billions and billions of years involved simply reveal that it takes finite creatures a very long time to pronounce their “amen,” while God’s “amen” is perfect and eternal, taking no time at all.

A growing chorus of “amen”—from this angle, the evolution of the universe and of living things sounds very much

like what goes on at church! But this is even more evident when we recognize that the drama of evolution is incomplete if we focus only on nonhuman life. Evolution leads up to the bodily appearance of God’s image: human beings. No one of the many living creatures whose origins and interrelationships we discover through the lens of Darwin’s theory can say “amen” to God in the same fashion that God says “amen” to creation, except one. Only one of the creatures able to be studied by science can say “amen” to God with intelligence and freedom. The “amen” of creation would be missing its most perfect expression without the one creature that can sum up the “amen” offered by creation to God in the same “melody” with which God says it to the universe—with reason and freedom, with self-awareness, with love. *The “Great Amen” of creation is ourselves.* When we give our conscious, intelligent, and free response at Mass, we bring the whole development of creation to its summit.

### **Supernatural Selection: The Liturgy and the Emergence of Eternal Life**

To make the connection between evolution and faithful Mass attendance, let’s remind ourselves that “going to church” is more accurately called “faithful participation in the liturgy.” Here’s what is meant by the word “liturgy” in the full Christian sense of the term, based on its original “secular” meaning:

*Leitourgia* [the Greek root for the word *liturgy*] originally meant a work done by a few on behalf of the many. . . . “Public projects undertaken by an

individual for the good of the community . . . would be *leitourgia*.” Christ undertook a work on behalf of the vital interests of the clan to which he chose to belong—the family of Adam and Eve—and his liturgy continues in the activity of His body. . . . By baptismal grace, we are incorporated into the sacred humanity of Christ, his Spirit is poured into our bodies, *and we are made one of a new race*. . . . **Liturgy is Christ’s work become ours** [emphasis added]. (David W. Fagerberg, “*Theologia Prima: The Liturgical Mystery and the Mystery of God*,” *Letter and Spirit* 2 [2006]: 58-59)

Given our look at natural evolution from the divine perspective, the both/and nature of the Christian liturgy should trigger a sense of *déjà vu*. Just as God’s glory is revealed in creation by his wise establishment and guidance of secondary causes which bring about his intent, so in faithful Mass attendance the priestly celebrant, the sacraments, and all the elements of the liturgy become the secondary causes through which God selects and adapts us for, and gradually accommodates us to, an entirely unimaginable new environment—heaven. The liturgy is the necessary environment for a supernatural evolution, in which we become in every way what we already are by Baptism—a “new race,” sons and daughters of God, filled with divine life (see Rom 6:1-11).

God, in his omnipotence, could have saved us in a way that bore no resemblance to the way that he created the universe. But God is not simply perfectly powerful; he is also perfectly consistent. He redeems us in a pattern that is thoroughly harmonious with the way he creates us: by getting secondary

causes in on the act and by beginning a new stage of evolution that transcends the powers and capacities of the created world.

Let’s marvel at the shared pattern. In creation, God establishes an environment that ultimately evolves creatures capable of being his image and likeness, and then he graces them with a spiritual soul. In redemption, the Son of God takes up natural elements and then makes them into a new environment, the liturgy of the Church, which evolves creatures capable of attaining the Kingdom of God. In creation, elements such as earth and water constitute the stuff out of which life emerges. In the liturgy, natural realities such as water, bread, wine, and oil are supernaturalized to form a new environment, and in interaction with this supernatural environment, eternal life emerges in all those who believe as we “come to share in the divine nature” (2 Pt 1:4).

Both creation and redemption begin with a single form of life. The world of living creatures began with one organism that, containing all life within itself, diffused that life to all of its offspring and descendents. In and through the liturgy the one man, Jesus Christ, contains all of eternal life in himself and diffuses that life to all who believe and are reborn in him.

Both creation and redemption involve progress from simple to more complex forms of life. In evolution, matter begins as simple, single-celled organisms that ultimately evolve into more complex forms of life. Through faithful Mass attendance, the Church’s members progress to a deeper and deeper understanding of God’s truth and to more diverse and more excellent

forms of the Christian life. By being sent out for evangelization, they add to the Church an ever-increasing variety of human races, languages, peoples, and cultures.

But supernatural evolution also seems to develop in a way that contrasts with natural evolution while still maintaining the symmetry that exists between the two. Natural evolution is more like the mirror image of the liturgy than the exact image. In evolution, the one form of life becomes many; in the liturgy, the many forms of human life become one in the one Body of Christ. In evolution, simplicity yields to a diversity that divides the species; in the liturgy, the divided are reunited while retaining their diversity. In evolution, the one organism possessing life succeeds in passing on that life by surviving; in the liturgy, the One who bears the fullness of eternal life succeeds in passing that life along by dying, and by making himself our food to strengthen us for eternal life in the Eucharist.

The idea of evolution offers a compelling analogy, with similarities and differences between creation and the liturgy. It helps us to understand what the Church means when it calls the Eucharist, and the liturgy in which we receive it, “the source and summit of the Christian life” (CCC, no. 1324).

Of course, there is a negative fact revealed in this comparison between evolution in nature and in the liturgy. As Darwin recognized, some creatures do not adapt themselves to their environment and so become extinct. Here we see why the Church, our

Mother and Teacher, challenges us with the requirement of Mass attendance on Sundays and holy days of obligation and encourages us to go more often, even daily, if and when we are able. She remembers the sobering words of our Lord about the heavenly environment to which we are destined: “Many, I tell you, will attempt to enter but will not be strong enough” (Lk 13:24). The liturgy adapts us to a new habitat for which our natural lives alone cannot prepare us.

The liturgy does not always feel, maybe does not often feel, like the glory and enjoyment we hope for in eternal life. Evolution in nature is so slow that the members of the evolving species do not fully recognize the change. Similarly, we do not experience a radical change every time we attend Mass. This is because the evolution that the liturgy brings about in us is a slow, lifelong adaptation to grace. But let us never forget the reason that we go to church: in the liturgy, especially in Holy Communion, the new creature we are becoming is fed, and a new “supernatural genome,” in a process the Fathers of the Church boldly identified as divinization, is emerging in us.

Dr. Baglow’s recent book *Faith, Science & Reason: Theology on the Cutting Edge* (Woodridge, IL: MWTF, 2009) is available at [www.pelicanconnection.net](http://www.pelicanconnection.net). (For more on evolution and its relation to the Catholic Faith, see chapter 8 of Baglow’s book, “Going ‘Deeper than Darwin’: Faith and the Origins of Living Things,” 166-199.)

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