

# Along the track

## Embracing Mystery

The Hunter Valley offers some extraordinarily beautiful vistas. In the early morning the fog rests in valleys and over low lying hills. Recently I watched the sun rise out of the mist – there was a stillness in the air and, all of a sudden, six hot-air balloons emerged from the fog and silently floated across the valley. The next morning offered a repeat performance and, as I watched this beautiful sight, I became aware of about twenty others who were also silently enjoying the spectacle.

Nature offers us similar experiences every day – sometimes they can literally take our breath away. If we let them! We can't always explain why or how we are so deeply moved by sights or sounds or songs or poetry or whatever - sometimes our reactions defy explanation, words can't explain them.

In a recent talk at the Vatican, Noam Chomsky (philosopher, cognitive scientist, logician, political activist and 'not a believer'), spoke about the limits of human knowledge, arguing that a fundamental understanding of the world is likely to remain forever beyond the reach of scientists. He urged his audience to embrace mystery, explaining that he did not share the urge of many of his colleagues to reduce all phenomena to a set of basic building blocks.

It's a good expression – 'to reduce all phenomena to a set of building blocks'. We can't explain everything – we can try but some things defy words. Finding a place for mystery, a place for wonder and imagination is an integral component of having 'life to the full'. It is an integral component of science and of religion, or more accurately, faith.

Exploring the mysteries and wonders of science opens up many more questions than answers. We are discovering almost daily more and more about the vastness of our universe, for example. Some of the 'laws of science' that we have assumed are unchanging are now being challenged by new understandings and discoveries. Often we are too quick to close the questions, too quick to find explanations, to settle for formulas and certainties when we are really being led deeper into mystery. We can be too quick to find answers rather than letting loose the energy and wisdom of the Spirit.

There is a graphic image of the work of the Spirit in the opening to the book of Genesis at the dawn of Creation.

In the beginning the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep and the wind (spirit) of God swept over the waters. God said "Let there be light" and there was light..(Gen 1: 1-3).

The story illustrates just how integral to the work of Creation the Spirit really is. Some writers suggest that the point of this section of the Creation story is that it is the Spirit who casts light on Creation, the Spirit who reveals the joys and wonders, the mysteries of Creation, the wonders of the presence of God. But much of creation is

also invisible. Love and compassion, creativity, generosity, awe, wonder, curiosity also belong to this world. Such activities help us to explore physical creation and to look beyond to see and experience this deeper level of life, to experience the goodness and beauty of the God who lies deep within each of us and all of creation.

We can also 'reduce' our faith to a set of building blocks, limiting it to a set of formulas and doctrines. Just like scientific formulas, they do help describe our understanding, but they are limited. They don't tell us all. If they don't lead us to wonder and to question, if they don't lead us to want to discover more about God and God's ways, they have not achieved their purpose. As the Catechism puts it: We do not believe in formulas, but in those realities they express, which faith allows us to touch. (CCC #170) They allow us to express our understanding of some of the mysteries of our faith and help to pass it on, to celebrate it. We could say the same for scientific discoveries too. But there is more to understand and discover and both science and faith lead us on to greater understandings, deeper into greater mysteries.

In a real sense, creation is still unfolding. So is the work of the Spirit, continuing to reveal to us its mysteries and wonders. The gift of modern technology has offered us so much, it has been an extraordinary vehicle to aid further research and discovery. It has helped us to describe more accurately so much about our world, our universe and how it works. It has been spurred on by one of the other gifts of creation, one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit – curiosity, our innate desire to wonder and to question, to seek further understanding. We might even say, one spurs on the other! Albert Einstein remarked: "Science without religion is lame; religion without science is blind." Pope John Paul II asserted this same fundamental point when he said: "Science can purify religion from error and superstition. Religion can purify science from idolatry and false absolutes."

Religious dogmas and ethical principles should not stifle thinking any more than scientific formulas and definitions stifle the thinking of the scientist. They do not "spare us the trouble of thinking" but, on the contrary, they help us to think in a structured way, providing us with the very categories we need in order to be able to enter more deeply into scientific reality. Similarly, religious dogma and sound ethical teaching give us tools and language to enter reasonably into a discussion of the ultimate questions that every person faces, questions of purpose, morality and human destiny.

Albert Einstein suggested: "The most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible." So let's embrace some mystery in our lives and, out of that experience, we might discover more of the wonders of this world and it's Creator.

Regards  
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