

THE GROANING OF CREATION

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pain until now. (Rom 8:22)

Global Warming

With the world's present concern about global warming and all its dreadful implications for life and survival on planet earth, Paul's expression "groaning of creation" is no longer an abstract reality that is outside the scope of our experience. It is a reality that now touches our very skin, affects the air we breathe, the food we take in, the water that serves our multiple needs, our relationship with all other forms of life – vegetative, animal, and all of subhuman creation.

Creation's Groaning

Does Paul's image of the groaning of creation simply mirror for us the sad and alarming situation that can be verified now not only in our country, but in so many parts of the world, or does it also point to us the way out of this grim situation?

Lest we be overcome by pessimism, I would like to call your attention to the fact that Paul's description of creation's groaning is very specific.

It is not a cry of protest or desperation, but one of labour pains. It evokes the image of an expectant mother about to give birth – suffering, yet filled with hopeful expectation for the emerging new life, for a fresh beginning.

Hope and Patient Endurance

Paul's image of creation groaning is all about hope and patient endurance. It belongs to the same section of the Letter to the Romans from where Pope Benedict XVI derived the title of his encyclical *Spe Salvi* – "In hope we were saved" (Rom 8:24). It is the conclusion of Paul's lengthy discourse about the saving work that God accomplished in Jesus Christ.

It is a work of putting not only the divine-human relationship but also the relationship of human beings with the rest of the created order, enabling men and women to take up once more their stewardship-role in regard to non-human creation.

Creation's labour pangs anticipate precisely this – the birth of the "children of God" – the new humanity "in Christ" who will truly be responsible participants in God's ongoing work of creation. When human action in regard to creation is grounded on what God has accomplished through the redeeming work of his Son, then indeed there is hope.

To understand fully how the image of the groaning of creation is inserted within the dynamics of Paul's message of hope, the passage has to be read in context.

Immediate Context: Rom 8:18-22

"I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now."

Time Dimension	Paul's Portrayal of Creation
Present to Future	1. Creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God.
Past	2. Creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it.

Future	3. Creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.
Past to Present	4. The whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now.

Observations

When Paul uses the term “creation” in this passage, he apparently has in mind only non-human or sub-human entities (matter, plants, animals and heavenly bodies). Human beings are not included in that term, for when Paul wants to refer to human beings, the expression he uses is “children of God” pointing not to humankind in general, but specifically to the believers in Jesus Christ.

Paul indicates that the condition of sub-human creation is closely bound up with that of human beings, and its future destiny is a participation in the destiny that awaits them as “children of God.” Paul personifies creation, that is, he treats it as endowed with human qualities.

In number one (1) creation waits for a wonderful thing that will happen in the future- i.e. the revealing of the children of God. The time dimension is the present looking toward the future. Number four (4) expresses the same idea – the labour pains have to do with the birthing of the “children of God” – but the time dimension is the past moving toward the present. This reference to the past draws our attention to something that happened in the past, which is expressed in number two (2).

We find that creation’s subjection to futility was on account of somebody’s will and not of its own. Although this subjection is a negative thing, it opens to hope which we read in number three (3) – creation will be set free and obtain glory. Once again we notice that the future to which creation is tending is the same destiny in store for human beings when they will be fully revealed as God’s children.

The same glory that God’s children will enjoy will also be conferred on creation.

(To be continued in the next update)

From the book by Bernardita Danzon, FSP: Glimpses of Paul and His Message