

Linda Gibler

“An Evolutionary View of Sacraments”

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Michael Dowd (host): Welcome to Episode 33 of “[The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity: Conversations at the Leading Edge of Faith.](#)” I’m [Michael Dowd](#), and I’m your host for this series, which can be accessed via [EvolutionaryChristianity.com](#), where you too can add your voice to the conversation.

Today, [Linda Gibler](#) is our featured guest. [Linda](#) is a 25-year member of the [Dominican Sisters of Houston](#), a Catholic women’s community in service to social justice. She is the [Associate Academic Dean at the Oblate School of Theology](#) in San Antonio, [an adjunct professor for the Loyola Institute for Ministry](#), and a science editor for [Collins Foundation Press](#). Her book, [From Beginning to Baptism: Scientific and Sacred Stories of Water, Oil, and Fire](#), offers [a cosmological interpretation of baptism](#) and suggests allowing nature to teach us about God, ourselves, and how to be in right relationship to all life on Earth. Here, Linda and I discuss an evolutionary view of the sacraments.

Host: Hello, Linda Gibler, and thank you for joining this conversation on evolutionary Christianity.

Linda: Hello, Michael. It’s a pleasure to be with you.

Host: It’s a pleasure to be with you, too. I’ve been looking forward to this. So Linda, I want to begin by asking about your own awakening to this deep-time understanding of the Universe and how you found your way to congruence between both science and your Christian faith. Did it happen suddenly or in stages? Could you share some of that story with us?

Linda: I would be happy to. It’s a story I like to tell. But, first of all, about the congruence: For me, there was never a break between the scientific and the religious. As I started understanding the scientific nature of the Universe more deeply, I knew that my spiritual—my religious—understanding of the Universe would change also. They weren’t in competition. They all just led me deeper and deeper into the scientific mystery and into the spiritual mystery.

I was raised as a [Roman Catholic](#)—one of five kids. We would go to church frequently, but not all the time. I was a kid right after [Vatican II](#), and the church was changing. Things were

loosening up, and it led to a much more casual relationship with the church and with God. It was a way for me that opened up an intimacy with the divine—but without a formality, necessarily. So my understanding of God was always the ever-present, but without overemphasis on the fear, or the need to do good, or the need to be the perfect little child, because God’s love and presence were always there.

Years later, as a Dominican sister, one of the sisters brought home the [Canticle to the Cosmos](#) series that [Brian Swimme](#) did. It showed us all the beautiful pictures of the Universe and a different way of understanding Creation. I began to understand that my concept of God was too small—that the image that I had of God was just not large enough to contain the Universe that I was being exposed to in that video series.

Host: What year?

Linda: 1994. Then I came across the [Hubble Deep Field picture](#) in 1995, as it was released in *National Geographic* magazine—and I still have that same [National Geographic](#) magazine. What it did was it showed through a very tiny window of space ten days exposure of the night sky. What the astronomers expected to find in that little tiny window was not much: a couple of quasars, maybe a distant galaxy. They expected to find not much at all. But what they *did* find was 1,500 galaxies.

That image was like shattering the Christmas ornament—as if it just fell and broke on the ground. My image of God, as beautiful as it was—my image of what the Universe was, as beautiful as that was—just broke into shards. But for me, it was a joyful task re-collecting those pieces and reassembling those pieces in a way that would bring even more richness and more depth and more beauty. And that’s what I’ve been doing with my life ever since then: looking at the beauty of Creation in a grander way that just opened my understanding of God in much more grand way. How large the Universe is—God is even larger than that, contained within it but somehow beyond and through the entire thing. So for me, deepening my understanding of the Universe automatically was deepening my understanding of the divine.

Host: It reminds me of a story that I used to tell. I was a pastor in Grandville, Massachusetts, back in the late 80s. One of my parishioners was 88 years old and he was an amateur astronomer. He had been a farmer all his life, but he was an amateur astronomer. He would take me out on cloudless nights when it was around new-moon time. He had a really fine telescope and he would show me things. I remember one time we were looking at Andromeda Galaxy. It’s the one galaxy that you can see with the naked eye, if you know where to look, and it’s quite easy to see with binoculars—and, of course, we had his telescope, so we had a gorgeous view of it. And at one point, he just got really quiet and he said, “You know, Reverend, *the more I learn about this awesome Universe, the more awesome my God becomes!*”

Linda: Exactly.

Host: It's that sense of the larger—the more we learn about nature, about the Universe—it's like, rather than a diminishing of our notion of God, there's actually an expansion. There's an enlarging. God becomes more magnificent—less an otherworldly tyrant and more majestic in some very real sense. At least, a lot of us experience it that way.

Linda: Absolutely. It's like [Teilhard](#)'s three infinities: the infinitely large, the infinitely small, and the infinitely complex. So I get a deeper appreciation of the divine by understanding the large scales of the Universe, but also looking deeper *within*—at the complexity of even how cells work, how cells metabolize, and quantum physics. The infinitely small reveal the divine, as well.

Host: It's interesting that you should say that, because one of the most significant books I've ever read in my life is [Joel de Rosnay](#)'s book called [The Symbiotic Man: A New Understanding of the Organization of Life and a Vision of the Future](#). It actually should have been titled *The Symbiotic Human*. Joel de Rosnay is a Frenchman, and it was translated into English. In that book, one of the things he talks about is that the telescope gives us access to the infinitely large and old. The microscope gives us access to the infinitely small. And what he called the *macroscope*—the computer—gives us access to the infinitely complex. But I don't remember that he cited [Teilhard de Chardin](#) on that. So when you just said that, it was like it reminded me that "Wow! He probably got that from Teilhard."

Linda: He probably did, both being Frenchmen.

Host: Anyway, please continue.

Linda: What this opening up of the cosmic view—looking at the largest, the smallest, and the most complex—has brought me to in my studies became looking at nature itself and wondering what these different things could teach me about God. For instance, in a [Roman Catholic sacramental tradition](#), we believe that God is present to every single thing in Creation—and that every single thing somehow images the Creator. [Thomas Aquinas](#) asked the question, "Why did God make the many things instead of the one thing?" And he answers himself, "Because no one thing could perfectly image God." *Everything together gives us the fullest image of God*. So if that's true: like right now, I'm looking out my window at an oak tree, and somehow we know that this oak tree images God. So if I really want to understand God through nature, I could do that by looking more deeply at this oak tree and looking at what oak trees teach me about the divine.

Host: Beautiful.

Linda: I brought that kind of appreciation to my study, working with sacramentals, especially the sacramentals of baptism in the Roman Catholic tradition. The primary sacramental is water, and also oil and fire and white garments. So what would looking at each of these sacramentals do, as far as opening up my imagination to receive what God could possibly teach—or the information or knowledge about God—through these different sacramentals? People ask me, “Why should we baptize people?” If God is constantly blessing and we’re constantly responding, why do we need [baptism](#)? For me, there are many theological reasons to do this, but this is the primary one:

As the Universe is created, God blesses it. God calls it “good” and He blesses the Creation over and over again. When Jesus is baptized, according to [St. Irenaeus](#), the entire Universe is once again blessed through Jesus’ baptism. When Jesus’ human nature is baptized, the blessing ripples out from Jesus through all of Creation—and the blessing is once again restored. And then when each one of us is baptized, we celebrate that blessing in that individual. We celebrate God’s presence—not only to the world but to this one person. And we commit ourselves in that person—that child or that adult—to continually respond to that blessing of God. So, that’s why we baptize. We need to celebrate the blessing in particular and then to make a commitment to walk in light of that blessing for the rest of our lives.

Host: I’m glad you brought up this understanding and practice of the sacramentals because your recent book, titled, [From Beginning to Baptism: Scientific and Sacred Stories of Water, Oil, and Fire](#) shows up on Amazon with high praise from [John Haught](#) and [Brian Swimme](#) and others (see [here](#) for blurbs, intro, and chapter one). I also noticed that what you call “[cosmocentric sacramentality](#)” is important to you. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about what that means?

Linda: I’m delighted to talk about “cosmocentric sacramentality” whenever I get the chance. The idea is that if we look at sacraments in their entire history—in deep time, the time beyond the time we normally teach about, which would simply be the Catholic tradition—but if we look at the sacramental tradition all the way back to what I call “the beginning” (what [Swimme](#) and [Berry](#) call “the flaring forth” and others call the Big Bang), what would we learn? And not only from the sacramentals, but from the sacrament itself? That is, where does something like *baptism* show up in the Universe story—from the very beginning right to the present? What would baptism mean if we knew there was a 13.7 billion year tradition of the initiation into God’s blessing?

So that’s what *cosmocentric sacramentality* means: taking the long view and looking at the deep history of the sacraments themselves and of the sacramentals in particular.

When we understand that we live in an evolutionary planet, it gives us a freedom, an opening, a widening, to understand a small-phase tradition in much wider scopes. For instance, one thing we learn about water is that every single life form on the planet is born in water. If it’s an animal, if it’s a plant, if it’s a fungi, every single being on the planet itself is born somehow or another through water. Beyond that, stars are born through water. Water in the

atmosphere around a star helps the star collapse. It's not essential for every single star birth, but we notice in space that stellar nurseries are almost always accompanied by vast clouds of water. Areas in space that don't have vast clouds of water have very little star birth.

Host: Really?

Linda: Yes. The ancients somehow knew this. Somehow they intuited this. They didn't know about star birth. They figured, I believe, that if there was a star in the heavens, that God put it there on a certain day of Creation. The fixed sphere and everything else: God created it and it was stationary. Now with the evolutionary viewpoint, we know that not only human beings and life on the planet evolve, but that stars themselves evolve—and that even the stars have deep time and have life cycles. But somehow or another, the ancients, who understand water as a sign of rebirth and generativity, somehow ... my only word for it is *intuitive*, the deeper meanings. When I investigate any of the individual things that we use as sacramentals, their deep history confirms what our religious forebears believed about the sacramentals.

Host: It's interesting that there was a part of me that was wanting to take issue or question that. But then again, if we *are* stardust—if our bodies are literally made of atoms that were forged inside the womb or the bellies of stars that lived and died before our sun, our star was born, then in a very real sense, [we are stardust](#). We carry that memory at the deepest level of our being. So, I think I can go there with you.

Linda: About human intuition and God's presence to humanity: I think our mystics show us this. They are deeply in tune with a knowledge that they don't even articulate, perhaps—but can see deeper into the world than we more modern people are used to. For instance, especially in a Western culture removed from the Mediterranean where the Christian symbol system initiated: we've forgotten what olive oil is. Me, sitting in San Antonio, Texas: we do have olive trees here, but they were more recently introduced. We're not drenched in olive oil the way a Mediterranean culture is. We have to be *told* why we use olive oil instead of any other kind of oil—because we don't understand what olives are.

Olives are the most abundant fruit in the Mediterranean. It fruits out in the winter when other plants aren't fruiting. It's a rich source of fats and proteins that other fruits don't have—regardless of the time of year. So it's the most generous of all trees—one of the earliest trees to be cultivated—and it seems to enjoy human participation. Olive trees fruit better when they are vigorously pruned. So when humans prune the olive trees, they thrive. They seem to like being around humans, and they seem to be just abundantly generous. And then we use the olive oil sacramentally as a sign of God's presence and as a sign of happiness, a sign of joy. So it's part of what being an olive *is* that is reflected in how we use it sacramentally.

Host: And the fire?

Linda: And the fire, fire is one of my favorite things to talk about. There are two really interesting things about fire. One is the way it burns. I'm not talking about a wild fire or a house fire or what happens in a fireplace, but a lighted candle. Every single one of our cells in our bodies burns the very same chemical process as a candle flame. Now this becomes important because in the Catholic ritual (the end of the baptismal ceremony), the newly baptized person is presented with a candle and told to keep that flame burning brightly until the Second Coming of Christ or upon the person's death. But then, of course, at the end of the ceremony, you blow out the candle or the candle burns out. So how can we keep that candle lit constantly?

Well, here's the secret you learn by understanding fire. When a candle burns, what happens is the wax is melted, it goes up the wick, and it's divided into its component parts. The hydrocarbons within the wax are broken down into hydrogen and carbon. They mix with the air and they turn into carbon dioxide and water. So carbon dioxide and water are released, along with energy. In a human cell, every single living cell of our bodies, we bring oxygen from our lungs through our blood into our cells, and we bring nutrients through our digestive tract into our cells, where the carbohydrates and the oxygen mix. As they mix in our cells, they burn with the very same chemical process as the candle flame, but at a slower rate. It's only the rate that is different. They release energy, carbon dioxide, and water. Every single cell within us burns like a candle flame.

Host: That's incredible!

Linda: It is, isn't it?

Host: Yes. I've never been exposed to that; I never heard that before.

Linda: That's one of the beauties of making the connections between the scientific stories and the sacred stories. We're told never to blow that candle out. Of course, a physical candle is going to be blown out. But the candle of the person's living body will not be blown out until her death. So she could not blow that candle out—even if she wanted to. That talks about God's presence and her continual response. That's what fire teaches.

Host: Yes, I love it. Linda, in your book, you attribute the roots of your own functional cosmology to four individuals—three of whom you've known personally. Could you name those spiritual and scholarly mentors and give our listeners a sense of the core lessons or perspectives that you have drawn from each one.

Linda: There is a lineage between [Teilhard](#), [Thomas Berry](#), [Brian Swimme](#), [John Haught](#), and myself. Of course, Brian Swimme studied with Thomas Berry, and Thomas studied Teilhard's work. John Haught, in a parallel way, also studied Teilhard and Thomas Berry's work. So

instead of being four completely different people, we participate in the same lineage of study. John Haught brings his work specifically to the activation that evolutionary understanding gives to Christian faith —the Catholic faith, particularly. Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry don't look at it from the Catholic perspective as much, but draw more from the cosmological perspective. And by *cosmological* I mean [the story of right relationship](#). What does this new understanding tell us about right relationship between humans and the planet in general? So Thomas and Brian developed their work in a way that is different from the way John Haught does. John Haught emphasizes one particular piece of that story. And similarly to John Haught, I'm developing that one Catholic sacramental piece of the story.

Host: Say more about that, because this has really been one of your great gifts to our tradition. So say a little bit more about how the work of Teilhard and Thomas Berry and John Haught and Brian Swimme have informed or expanded your understanding and experience of the sacraments in general—but then, of course, what your book is about: the sacraments in the baptismal ritual of our tradition.

Linda: The most beautiful piece of writing that I see in Teilhard de Chardin is his “Mass on the World.” In “[The Mass on the World](#)” he talks about celebrating the [Eucharistic liturgy](#) without the regular elements—without the bread and wine. Instead he offers the entire Creation, in all of its suffering and all of its beauty, to God. His idea is that the Universe itself is somehow participating in this grand cosmic liturgy. From Teilhard's perspective, noticing that and participating in that is as important and as possible as celebrating the Eucharist with bread and wine. It's that divine contact that is always there—that God always shows us, and we can always reciprocate to God, through the Creation itself. So, that “Mass on the World” and the beauty of Teilhard's liturgical prayers through that piece of writing: I find these stunning.

[Thomas Berry](#) talks about different moments in time as moments of grace. Supernova explosions, things like this, are moments of grace. In a sacramental tradition, we understand moments of grace as sacramental moments. [Kenan B. Osborne](#), whom I mention in the book, at least in passing, helped me quite a bit with this. Osborne's definition of sacrament is “God blesses, and there is a human response of ‘Wow!’” God, the first person of the Trinity, blesses constantly, constantly, constantly. It doesn't become a sacrament until there's a response. And that happens, according to Ken, when we turn back to God and say, “Wow!”

I would move that just a step further and say (and Ken agrees with me on this) that it's not only when a *human* turns back and says “Wow!” to God, but when anyone of the Earth community responds back to God. So all the way from the very beginning, 13.7 billion years ago, God has been blessing Creation, and Creation has been responding to God's blessing. So we have this entire sacramental liturgical reciprocation: God blesses, and then there's the response of Creation. That has been happening for the entire 13.7 billion years of Creation. It continues—and perhaps deepens—with the human sacramental “Wow!” because we can look at God more fully by knowing more fully and intentionally what we're doing. So that response to God becomes conscious and more articulate in the human being *aware* of what she's doing.

That's what I wanted to grab: How does the Universe already respond to the divine? How does the human respond to the divine through Creation? That's kind of a Teilhardian notion of bringing what's already happening to the Universe through the phases of pre-life, life, thought, and then into the [noosphere](#), or what I call the "cosmocentric." It's an intentional deepening, but knowing that it's not only the human who's responding, but [the entire Earth community](#), responding through the human and along *with* the human.

Host: Yes, yes.

Linda: This is where [John Haught](#) comes in, too, because John Haught is very clear in his writing that the Creation is caught up in the same journey as the human's—that the fate of the Earth community is the same fate as the human community on Earth. He spends a lot of time looking at eschatology (things that happen at the end times) and draws his theology on the Creation that brings us deeper into our future—that partners us, that shows us the way, that shares the same pain and joy as the human community. We see that really clearly in ecological issues now, like [the earthquake in Haiti](#) a year ago. The human effects, the human catastrophe, was enhanced so many orders of magnitude because we have so badly used the land in Haiti. With the mudslides and the poverty and everything else, the disaster in Haiti was amplified by human misuse. And we talk about global warming and floods and the rising of sea level, but we don't always notice that it's not only the humans that are going to be displaced, but the creatures that live on the coastlines, the creatures that live in the waters that are also going to be so seriously damaged and affected by these things. The entire planet faces one fate: one physical fate, one spiritual fate.

Host: Yeah, I love it. [Connie \[Barlow\]](#) and I both have been speaking along somewhat similar lines, in that: Teilhard was really the first theologian who really identified that the human story is a subset of the Earth's story, the Universe story—that it's an expression that there's ultimately *one* story. There's the story of physical evolution, biological evolution, and then human and cultural evolution and technological evolution. It's one story. It's one sacred story. When we recognize that, it begins to shift everything. For us to continue to have a vibrant life-giving religious tradition, we have to rethink, What does salvation mean in this context? What do the sacraments mean in *this* context? How do we think about God or ultimate reality in *this* context? How do we understand sin in *this* context, and so on?

This is what I call the [naturalizing or the REALizing](#) of theology—understanding it as real in a *this-world* realistic way—not just in a mythic or an otherworldly or *unnatural* way (which sometimes gets called supernatural) but in this-world realistic way (YouTube clip, [here](#)). How do we understand or reinterpret all [the core elements](#) of our faith tradition? And of course, you have been doing that with the sacraments.

So, Linda, we've got [a number of leading Catholic](#) theologians and evolutionary theologians and ecologically grounded theologians and ministers and nuns involved in this

conversation. I understand that from the Catholic tradition—and actually some forms of Protestantism, as well—there is a very rapid and quick rejection of, or pull-back from, or clear delineation from, any language of [pantheism](#), of confusing the Creator with the Creation or identifying the two and that sort of thing. I can certainly understand that, because historically people have been burned at the stake and killed and ex-communicated for these sorts of beliefs. But I was thinking the other day, if there were a video camera on somebody who was a complete pantheist—that is, for them nature is God and God is nature—and that their devotion to God was in service to clean air, clean water, clean soil, healthy species, and justice on Earth. So, let's say you had a video camera on them, and you watched them over the course of days or weeks or years. You also had a video camera watch someone else who was, say, a [theist](#) who did great work in the world and worked for peace and justice and healthy air, healthy soil, healthy species—but, for them, those actions were simply one way of worshiping God or honoring God. And yet, if you had a video camera on each one of them, I don't know that you would see any difference. I can't imagine what there would be that you would see different. So the emphasis on the religious tradition seems to be on how you *hold* it in your mind—metaphysically or theologically—rather than on the actions, the actual behavior in the world itself.

So I'm just wondering ... these concepts of [pantheism](#), [theism](#), [atheism](#), [panentheism](#): these different sort of -isms that try to or purport to say what God's relationship is to the created order, or the natural world. For myself, I don't see them as that important, because what we have learned about this evolving cosmos (nested emergence, for example), we couldn't have possibly known prior to the last couple of hundred years. Yet the concept of theism and the concept of pantheism and the concept of atheism: all those concepts came into use (and were used for many years) *long* before we had any understanding of [nested emergence](#). So, I find them more problematic than useful, but I'm just wondering if you have anything that you would like to share on that, because I have noticed that within especially the Catholic forms of the Christian Church, there's this sort of very quick, "I'm not a pantheist!" I can understand that from a professional standpoint of anybody involved in working within that context. But from a *practical* and emotional standpoint, I don't know what the difference would be in terms of actual behavior in the world.

Linda: I think you are right. If we videotaped someone, we might not see any difference in the behavior. The behavior would be graciousness toward Creation: cleaning rivers, raising people to respect Creation. I think we would see people doing a lot of the very same things, but probably not for the very same reasons.

What motivates us, I think, is really important when we're looking at our religious faith and our spiritual lives. So the motivating force may end up with the same behavior, but it might come from a whole different place. For instance, an atheist might clean a river because his grandchildren should be able to fish in that river. Or, more deeply, an atheist might clean a river because he recognizes that a river should be clean—that somehow it has its intrinsic rights. He might not recognize rights that come from God; it might just come from being a river.

If I clean a river, it might also be for the same reasons, but I would say the river has rights *because God created it* —and that, for some reason, God has chosen to show God’s self to us *through* Creation, through things like rivers. For me, even this beautiful tree that I’m looking at —this oak tree—I wouldn’t tear down its branches, because there’s something about that tree that has a relationship with the divine, and that the divine is somehow present to that tree. So I give it an extra level of respect because it *belongs*, in a way, to God—and it images, in a way, God to me. Now, unlike a pantheist, I don’t think that the tree has value simply because it’s a tree. But it has value because it is in relationship with the divine. The divine, for me, is not completely contained in nature. There’s a transcendent element, as well: God is present in all of Creation, but is not *contained* by Creation. So there’s a deeper sense of reverence that I have for Creation, because it witnesses to the divine. I don’t know if my reverence for nature is actually deeper than an atheist, because I can’t speak for atheists—and some atheists do some excellent kinds of work.

Host: Yes. The reason that I raised this [question] is because I suspect that the vast majority of people listening in on this conversation share a similar sense and sensibility that *you* have and a feeling-state that comes with that. My own sense is that [the clear distinction between Creator and Creation] is *real* for those for whom it matters. But, for example, if you were raised in a Chinese culture or an Indian culture, it would probably be different. People live all over the world, and our various belief systems, our various mythologies, our various religious traditions, our various practices, I think, are intended to give us—and have served over the course of millennia in giving us—access to primary feeling-states that humans have always needed to thrive, as well as to motivate us to cooperate with our comrades and our community members and to relate to the natural world in healthy ways and that sort of thing. But I’m finding it less important to argue about *what it is* that motivates people to live lives of integrity and generosity and care and consideration and so on, as long as they’ve got *some* motivating system that gets them there. The ones I worry about are those who are simply pursuing their own self-interest —“screw the rest of the world”—or who don’t have a meaning system that provides deep inspiration to [live in integrity](#) and to live with a sense of gratitude and trust and service and those sorts of things.

I think I’m just speaking more of a personal preference, but that exercise of imagining that, “Okay, if all I had was a video camera, kind of like a [Google Earth](#) that could zoom in on any conversation that any people are having—but there was no sound, so you could tell information was being exchanged; you just couldn’t tell what it was. What was motivating people in terms of the actual words—you couldn’t hear that. But you could tell they were being motivated by *something*. Rather, it’s the people’s *behavior* that I’m most interested in—less about people’s belief systems that get them to that behavior, unless of course their behavior is clearly antisocial, in which case I’m very interested in finding *some* belief system that could motivate them.

Linda: Now, my interest would be a little different—because, for me, it is important to motivate people to be able to see the divine within things like the oak tree. If I can bring that richness out, if I can change their motivation or their relationship with the tree, then perhaps their behavior will also change.

Host: Yes.

Linda: My way *in* to ecological care is through this Catholic sacramental avenue. So what they believe—and how I can help them deepen their belief—I hope will also help them deepen their behavior or change their behavior. Faith-filled Catholic people will also do horrible things to the planet, because they won't recognize the sacredness that's there. The criticism that good Catholic, Christian people are one of the causes of the ecological crisis is understandable. [John Haught](#) talks about this somewhat. He says that, so long as we think that we're basically *on* the planet and it's *ours* to do whatever we want to with, then any kind of a theology that allows for *that* also allows us to destroy the Creation.

Host: What you're saying reminds me of what [Thomas Berry](#) used to say a lot, which is that *good people, operating with the best of motives, can do really evil things to the planet if they're operating out of a sense of what's good that is given to them by ancient books, but isn't given to them by having a deep-time understanding of what's really real* all around us.

Linda: That's right. The ancient books weren't working under the premise that there were only so many trees on the North American Continent, and how to sustain forests well and all the rest of it. The ancient books don't have that contemporary wisdom. This is why we need scientific wisdom to help us. Also, I remember Thomas Berry saying, when confronted with the charge that Christianity contributed to the global crisis right now, he would say, "It didn't *cause* the crisis, but it also didn't *stop* it." Basically, a challenge for Christianity, and for all the different faith traditions, is to step up to what they believe and to help stop the crisis now. Our sacred books don't *cause* us to disregard Creation, but they *don't compel* us to regard Creation either. They allowed this to happen.

Host: Good point. That's one of the things that motivates me to speak of scripture, or divine guidance or even God's word or divine communication, in an evidential way: that [God is communicating to us through evidence](#) (also [here](#) and [here](#)). To the degree that we think that divine guidance and divine communication only happen through the tradition or through ancient scripture, we do God a disservice. We're blinded. It's almost like we're autistic. We won't be aware of what God is communicating today and how God is guiding us today if we fail to see evidence as divine communication and divine guidance—God's *word*, as it were.

Linda: Absolutely! In the Catholic tradition we say that *God's revelation is ongoing*. We often forget that because we understand Creation as revelation and we understand the sacred scriptures as revelation. But we also say that that revelation is continuous, though we don't always act on that ongoing revelation. In the Catholic tradition, Vatican II tried to bring us back to that sense—to read the signs of the times, to continually look at what's happening around us as significant, as signifying both the things that need to be addressed and God's continual self-revelation and self-concern being poured out for us.

Host: Well, I certainly hope you're right. This is one of the things that have been motivating me lately to, as passionately as I can, suggest that we Christians need to begin boldly speaking about *how* God is speaking today. The [United Church of Christ](#), for example, as a denomination, has a slogan that's on many of the churches—and it's on their websites and emails. The slogan is, "God is still speaking," and there is an emphasis on the comma at the end. Another quotation is, "Don't put a period where God puts a comma." Well, that's great as far as it goes, but I want us to get a whole lot bolder and say, "[God is still speaking, and facts are God's native tongue!](#)" God is speaking through historical and scientific evidence. We need something to give us a sense that there is not such a divide between science and religion. Scientists actually are helping us understand God's word, what God is communicating, whether they are religious or not.

Linda: I'm with you there. I think people who will listen to this series are on that page with you already, as I certainly am. This idea that science and religion fight with each other is probably overblown and not necessary. We have the two extremes, the scientific materialists and the rigidly fundamentalist Christians, that can't talk with each other. But [in the middle](#): most of us are talking easily. There's no real problem between science and religion [for most of us](#), and I think that the controversies at the ends of the spectrum just get blown out of proportion.

Host: Well, they certainly get a lot of the media attention.

Linda: That they do.

Host: The idea of "[materialist](#)" is an ancient understanding that doesn't take into account that many of us who don't come from a supernatural perspective (that interpret our religion in a natural way) are [emergentists](#)—and that's where divine activity can be seen. That's where grace is unfolding. It feels to me that [each moment of emergence is a moment of grace](#). It's a sacramental moment, to use the language so near and dear to you.

Linda: Absolutely. And again, it's a sacramental moment when there's a blessing and a response.

Host: Yeah—when the human says, “Wow!”

Linda: Or, I would say, that when *anything* turns back and says “Wow!” Plants move to follow the sun—many of them do. The phototropic plants move to follow the sun across the sky. That’s not like a capital “S” sacrament—such as, the way Christians would understand Eucharist—but it is still a *blessing* by God and a *response* by one of God’s creatures. Every time that happens, I believe it’s at least a small “S” sacrament on a continuum from very rudimentary response (that maybe microbes would have) to a response that a profound mystic might have. But God continually blesses, and the Creation continually responds. All of that is a sacrament.

What I would like is to be able to describe better the cosmic liturgy that is constantly going on—that sacramental celebration that is constantly going on, and that humans enter into in a uniquely human way, with the possibility of seeing the cosmic liturgy that surrounds us constantly. Then we will be living a deeply sacramental life.

Host: Yes. I love it: the phrase, “living a deeply sacramental life.” That language speaks to the way that Connie and I experience our lives. We’ve got these little games, these little rituals, a lot of them are goofy, but they just keep us laughing and sort of playful on a day-by-day basis. But one of them that we’ll say, often many times a day, we’ll see something or hear something or read something—or something will happen—and one of us will look to the other and say, “Oh! We be blessed!” And the other will say, “Oh, we be *mightily* blessed!” This is just a reminder that, yes, we live in a cosmos that is consistently blessing us. And whether we imagine that as God—as a reality outside the cosmos doing that, or how ever we think about it—is less important than that we feel the *gratitude* and the *awe* and the sense of desire to *give back* and to be of *generous service*. It is a sacramental life to live that way—at least that’s *my* experience.

Linda: I think you hit the nail on the head. It is living in the gratitude of that and the grandeur of that—and then what that gratitude calls us *to*, which is changing our behavior and *giving back*. The idea of sacramentally feeling good and warm and cozy and God-in-me: that’s lovely. But it’s not enough. Our blessings should call us to be a blessing for someone or something else—or to treat something with a deeper reverence, or to open our eyes more fully to the suffering that’s around us in the human and in the other-than-human community.

Host: Yes. Amen.

Linda: The sacrament for the sake of *self* is just not enough.

Host: Wow. You've got me completely enrolled. I'm with you... Well, Linda, in beginning to wind down this conversation, I just have a few last questions I want to ask. The first is: *If you could affect just one change in how children are educated religiously, what would that be?*

Linda: They would be taken outside when they are being introduced to the wonders of God or the nature of God. They would be introduced to it through nature, instead of inside the classroom.

Host: Great response! Another question: *If you could affect just one change in how the intersections of science and religion are taught in seminaries, what would that be?*

Linda: Speaking from the Catholic tradition, which is the only one I know well, I would simply introduce it more intentionally. The science and religion conversation that happens in the training that I am aware of is incidental—and in most cases, optional. I would make it part of how we teach [Christology](#), how we teach [Ecclesiology](#) or studies of the church, or how we teach [Patristics](#)—that is, documents from the early church. In each case I would bring in the ecological, for example, what did [Irenaeus](#) say about nature? How do we understand [Christ](#) in nature? So I would bring the ecological dimension, or the evolutionary dimension, into all the classes that we teach. That's a big job because the science and religion conversation doesn't generally happen on Catholic campuses.

Host: I think that's probably true in most Protestant schools and seminaries, as well. Alright, last question: *If you could affect just one change in how the liturgies of the Catholic mass are conducted, what would that be?*

Linda: No fake flowers.

Host: No fake flowers?

Linda: Yes. No fake flowers. And I say that because we put in beautiful silk flowers, but we forget that when we bring in real plants, real flowers, they also *participate* in the liturgy—and they also have something to teach us. The poinsettias at Christmas time, the lilies at Easter: we use those for a reason. And, somehow, when we can use fake flowers, we forget what the essential meanings of these creatures are: that they are worshipping with us, that they are beings that share the rooms with us. So that's one thing I would do.

The other way I would answer the question: The one thing I would do about Catholic worship would be to include Earth and the Earth community in every celebration, so that we become as aware of the suffering planet as we are of the suffering humans. In all of our liturgies, somewhere, we talk about God's preferential option for the poor, our need to feed the

hungry and clothe the naked. I would find a way to include the poor and the hungry of all species—not just the human species.

Host: Yes... Well, Linda, I want to conclude on this note: In reading your acknowledgements in your book, you say: “At [Genesis Farm](#), there is a tradition of gathering around the kitchen table before meals and naming what we are grateful for that day. If I were to stand at that table today and name everyone who has my gratitude as I conclude this book, the food would grow cold before I could count the stars, list the creatures, and name the people without whom I could not have completed this work. Thank you. You are on each page.”

I love that. And I thank you, Linda Gibler, for your great work in world and for sharing you heart as well as your experience with our listeners here today on the leading edge of faith.

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