

Lent, life and purpose

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This year marks the 200th birthday of Charles Darwin and the 150th anniversary of his “On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection.”

Secularism, which had begun to set in with the Enlightenment during the previous century, acquired a broad framework of scientific rationality with Darwin’s work. As science advanced during the 19th and 20th centuries, it began to displace religion as the source of explanation of the phenomena of life on earth and the universe.

I had plenty of time to reflect on this during my annual retreat in the rolling hills of Río Grande. Blessed with faith since childhood, I have long made it a practice to take time out during Lent to take stock as to where I am in life and where I am going. Basically, it is honing the compass and setting direction; an exercise in clarity and purpose in life. This time, because I have been reading about Darwin, my reflections went to the age-old controversy between science and religion. I am no fundamentalist, however. I rather think faith and reason complement each other.

Before the Enlightenment, Darwin and modern science—myths first, and then religion—provided the explanations for natural phenomena. Darwin taught that new species can evolve through a process of blind variation and selective retention. Living things manifest complex design but can be produced by a mindless process, one that does no more than passively register the advantages of particular variations. Darwin provided a detailed explanation of natural design without the need of a designer—the theory of evolution by natural selection—paving the way for a world without God.

Yet, when one reflects on the answers that logic, observations and experiments provide us, one remains unsatisfied because the basic questions aren’t answered. Why is there something instead of nothing? What is life? Given death, what is the purpose of life?

Science can’t provide us with the answers to these questions. Science tells us the universe shows a continuous tendency for the aggregation of simple elements to more complex elements. Life represents for science the ultimate complexity. Plants, stars, galaxies were necessary for the development of chemistry and biology, for the formation of molecules and cells. The energy liberated by our sun drives the chemical reactions that shape life’s molecules. Religion is no longer the source of explanation as to these phenomena.

Science has advanced in leaps and bounds since Galileo was condemned by the Inquisition, and it will undoubtedly continue to advance and to provide us with answers to the laws that govern the universe.

Witness the unraveling of the human genome. However, at the end of the day, one must take the leap of faith to answer the fundamental questions. There is no incompatibility between the discoveries of science and the existence of God. All the discoveries of science are conceivable under a divine design, a purpose-driven creation in a time span encompassing eternity.

The problem for answering the fundamental questions through science lies in that matter, which is the stuff of science, lacks the purpose and meaning to which we aspire in life. Nonetheless, the view of the universe provided by science has given secular humanism a power that has turned millions away from religion. This has created a vacuum of meaning and purpose, which is filled by money, power, pleasures, fame, or the rising expectations of consumerism and instant gratifications. These substitutes don't quench our thirst for meaning and purpose. They do the opposite; they exacerbate our basic instincts and thus we witness the alarming murder rate in Puerto Rico or the equally alarming rate of greed on Wall Street that has plunged the world into the deepest recession since the Great Depression of the past century.

Reflecting on these matters in Río Grande, my thoughts went to Jesus and to the purpose and meaning that derives from his saying: "I am the way, the truth and the life. He who believes in me shall not die forever."

Believing in Him is believing in love; connecting through Him to the Creator is the source of love, the source of meaning and purpose. Love is the way to the truth, to life transcendent. Love from God, to God and to one another is the answer to why there is something instead of nothing, to what is life, and to what is purpose. This we know, not by science but by revelations through Jesus and by the stirrings of the human heart.

Many of us in Puerto Rico are troubled by the deterioration in values, in our quality of life and civility. The appalling crime rate, the corruption, the "mediatic," sterile bickering drag our spirits down. We wonder what we can do to help. Well, we can do so modestly on an individual basis, but powerfully if many seek meaning and purpose in their lives.

During the past secularist centuries, men and women separated their life from their faith, if they had it. Work, study, business, research, politics were separated from life's meaning and purpose. They became ends in themselves. Many who would have us believe they follow Jesus, put life's meaning and purpose aside in their personal, professional or family lives.

Lent is a time particularly well-suited for us to reflect on these matters. Jesus spoke with simplicity about the deepest matters. His message was understood by doctors of the law and fishermen. No one has ever spoken like Him, the moral sublimeness of His message, the miracles He worked. His compassion, His renunciation of all material things, the coherence of all His actions with His message and with the revelation of God his Father, and His love for us ring loud and clear in Lent as we commemorate Jesus' passion, crucifixion and resurrection.

Lent is a call for us to choose between business as usual in our lives or letting Jesus be the way to living our personal, professional and family lives with meaning and purpose.

