Opinion

Guest Voices



A pod of sperm whales interacting and socializing near the water's surface in the Atlantic Ocean near Azores. (Wikimedia Commons/Will Falcon aka Vitaly Sokol)



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Last Friday marked the ninth anniversary of the publication of Pope Francis' encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* "On Care for our Common Home." One of the central themes of that text is Francis' strong and repeated critique of anthropocentrism, or the tendency for us humans to not only prioritize our species over and against the rest of creation but also to promote a hubristic sense of our exceptionalism on this planet.

The results of this misguided way of thinking, to borrow a phrase from the pope, have been devastating for the environment. We have put our own comfort, desire for wealth and distorted sense of dominion ahead of all else, rarely asking what the effects of mineral extraction, deforestation, industrial pollution and carbon emissions would be on the planet and the broad planetary community of which we are a part.

Another effect of anthropocentrism, from a spiritual perspective, is the mistaken sense that only human beings have a direct relationship with God. In its most exaggerated form, this outlook holds that humans are the only thing that matters in salvation history while all else in creation serves as a mere backdrop. This way of thinking would seem to limit the possibility that nonhuman creatures have their own relationships with God. And it certainly excludes a view that nonhuman creatures might actively engage with God as subjects in a relationship.

But for those who have been attentive to what ethologists and other scientists have been discovering over the years, a blind commitment to this radical anthropocentrism has proven increasingly difficult to maintain.

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For example, earlier this month, a group of scientists published a paper about sperm whales in the prestigious journal Nature. While few people likely think about these massive mammals of the sea on a daily basis, the publication of this research on the communication of whales captured the attention of The New York Times. In the article, titled "Scientists find an 'Alphabet' in Whale Songs," science reporter Carl Zimmer summarized the significance of the new study and the possible implications it presents.

Scientists identified distinctive patterns of vocalization among whales decades ago, which have come to be known as "whale songs," but the latest research suggests that rather than just some presumably basic communication, the vocal exchange among sperm whales may very well be more complex than originally thought. It appears that they have a phonetic alphabet, one analogous to that which forms the building blocks of human language.

For these whales, the foundations of what could be their language take the form of clicks that are grouped in numbers between 3 and 40. While the scientists have been recording these whale sounds for almost 20 years, it's been the collaboration with computer scientists more recently who helped the marine biologists make sense of the recordings through identification of patterns thanks to a new form of click mapping.

What resulted was the identification of 156 different "codas." These codas are, as one of the researchers noted, a lot like the discrete movements of a human's tongue and lips to create an array of sounds with our mouths. Zimmer summarized this phenomenon in humanity well in his Times article: "A single sound like 'ba,' or 'na' carries no semantic meaning on its own. But we can combine them into meaningful words like 'banana.' The researchers raised the possibility that sperm whales might combine features of codas to convey meaning in a similar way."



A freediver swimming close by a sperm whale underwater in the Atlantic Ocean near Azores. (Wikimedia Commons/Will Falcon aka Vitaly Sokol)

While this is certainly grounds for affirming the hitherto underappreciated intelligence of these giant mammals, it also opens up other possibilities for consideration. For example, language has been among the characteristics cited to justify forms of anthropocentrism. The view has been that only our species has evolved to the point of not only intelligence and communication but symbolism, language and culture. While the research is still in its initial phases, the ability to map and perhaps even eventually "translate" whale language into human form suggests that whales may be more like us in this way than previously imagined.

What might the whales be saying? What observations or judgements, priorities and expressions of love and affection might they be speaking to one another? Do whales harbor resentment or say mean things or gossip behind the backs of their whale family, friends and neighbors?

Admittedly, I realize that to some people, even those open to the truth of the complexity of the community of creation beyond our anthropocentric bubble, this might seem like a flight of fancy. But the striking thing about this research project is that such translation and possible inter-species communication (beyond other instances like sign language with other primates) is not as far-fetched as once thought.

This brings me to the spiritual dimension of this more-than-human communication. The 20th century Jesuit theologian Fr. Karl Rahner famously expressed that human beings are "hearers of the word," which means that God created us with the capacity to receive divine revelation, the communication of God's self to us. What is there to say that whales might not also be made with a certain *capax Dei* or "capacity for God," capable of "hearing" God's word too?

Maybe sperm whales are not hearers of the word according to human terms, but they might be receptive to divine communication in a manner proper to their being-in-the-world, including with its own complexity and nuance. For, as St. Thomas Aquinas was fond of noting, *Quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur* ("What is received is received in the mode of the receiver"). If this is true about humans receiving divine revelation in a human mode, then it is also true of whales receiving divine revelation in a whale mode.

And if whales — and other nonhuman creatures by extension — might be capable of "hearing" divine revelation, then it follows that they, according to their own

modality, might be capable of responding. This form of communication is what we call prayer.



A mother sperm whale and her calf off the coast of Mauritius. (Wikimedia Commons/Gabriel Barathieu)

The agency and communicative capacity of nonhuman creation is not foreign to the Christian tradition. Long before the advent of contemporary natural science, sacred scripture acknowledged an active role of the more-than-human world. Take Genesis 9:8-17, in which God makes a covenant not only with Noah and his human descendants but with "every living creature," an expression repeated at least seven times in this short passage.

Or in the Book of Job, where we read a command to "ask the beasts to teach you, the birds of the air to tell you; or speak to the earth to instruct you, and the fish of the sea to inform you" (12:7-8), a passage made famous as the inspiration for theologian Sister of St. Joseph Elizabeth Johnson's 2014 book, *Ask The Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*.

Or in the Letter to the Romans, where St. Paul includes the whole of creation with humanity as longing for the day of salvation (8:19-23).

The list from scripture could go on and on, but it might be worth returning to the titular inspiration of Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si*', which comes from St. Francis of Assisi's *Canticle of the Creatures*. St. Francis affirms the cosmic chorus of divine praise by proclaiming that all the elements of creation give praise to God be doing what God created that creature to do: the sun through light, water through purity and our Sister Mother Earth by providing all the rest of us with a home and verdant growth. We might add a new verse to this medieval prayer, acknowledging that whales give praise to God in their own manner too.

Whether or not we humans are ever able to fully understand through translation what whales or other creatures are thinking or saying, I believe it would be good for us to humble ourselves before the glory of God's wonderfully diverse and mysterious creation, of which we are a part. For not only has God lovingly brought each creature into existence and actively sustains them, which is a divine gift, but it is also possible that each creature loves and praises God in return, each in their own way.