Opinion
NCR Voices



Debris is seen Sept. 29 where homes were destroyed after Hurricane Helene passed through the Florida Panhandle, severely impacting the community in Keaton Beach. (OSV News/Reuters/Octavio Jones)



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Like so many people, I have been grappling with the recent devastating impacts of the back-to-back hurricanes Helene and Milton in the southeastern parts of the United States. Also like so many others, I have friends and family in locations that were hit by the storms, which certainly elevated my anxiety about the destruction and danger such increasingly violent storms pose. (Fortunately, everyone I know personally is doing OK.) All those affected by these climate disasters remain in my prayers.

In the wake of these hurricanes, I have also found myself reflecting on an ancient theological concept that postulates there are two "books" that can be "read" in order to learn something about God: the "book of Scripture," or the Bible, and the "book of nature," which is creation.

St. Augustine of Hippo is credited with being one of the most significant theologians in the Western Christian tradition to advance this idea, although he often does so in an admittedly passing manner.

In the second book of his treatise *On The Trinity* (*De Trinitate*), he opens the section with a prayer asking God to strengthen and guide his journey to understand God more fully.

> If God then as I hope and pray, will defend me from [vices] and fortify me "with the shield of his good will" (Psalm 5:13) and the grace of his mercy, I will not be idle in seeking out the substance of God, either through his scriptures or his creatures. For both of these are offered [to] us for our observation and scrutiny in order that in them he may be sought, he may be loved, who inspired the one and created the other.

Similar remarks regarding the created world as like a book to be read to learn about God appear in Augustine's texts, ranging from his commentaries on the Book of Genesis, his *Confessions*, his commentaries on the Psalms and in other places, such as his short treatise against the Manichean Bishop Faustus.

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One particularly striking example of this appears in his "Sermon 68," which is believed to have been authored by Augustine near the end of his life. He says:

> Others, in order to find God, will read a book. Well, as a matter of fact there is a certain great big book, the book of created nature. Look carefully at it top and bottom, observe it, read it. God did not make letters of ink for you to recognize him in; he set before your eyes all these things he has made. Why look for a louder voice? Heaven and earth cries out to you, "God made me."

Augustine's intuition about the ability we have to read the book of nature, that is if we are properly attuned and "literate" in the language of God's revelation within it, inspired generations of theologians in the centuries after him, too.

In the 12th century, the great Hugh of St. Victor (yes, the same one I wrote about last month) also wrote in his short treatise *On the Three Days* about how the created world is like a book that can be read:

> For this whole sensible world is a kind of book written by the finger of God, that is, created by divine power, and each creature is a kind of figure, not invented by human determination, but established by the divine will to manifest and in some way signify the invisible wisdom of God. However, just as when an uneducated person sees an open book and notices the shapes but does not recognize the letters, so [too] stupid and carnal people, who are not aware of the things of God, see on the outside the beauty in these visible creatures, but they do not understand its meaning. On the other hand, a spiritual person can discern all things. When he considers externally the beauty of the work, he understands internally how wondrous is the wisdom of the Creator.

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In addition to Hugh's exhortation about the capacity of the created world to be "read" like a book, which requires a kind of spiritual literacy and attention, he goes on to warn that "foolish people" fail to see the deeper meaning or resonances that

speak of the Creator:

> Therefore, there is no one who does not find God's works wonderful, but the foolish person admires only their appearance, whereas the wise person, through what he sees externally, explores the deeper intent of the divine wisdom, just as in one and the same writing one person notices the color or shape of the figures, whereas another praises their meaning and signification.

Others, like the 13th-century Franciscan theologian and doctor of the church St. Bonaventure, will likewise carry forward this Augustinian insight in their respective theological works. Even in our own time, Pope Francis in "*Laudato Si'*, on Care for Our Common Home" and authors like Barbara Mahany in her recent book, *The Book of Nature: The Astonishing Beauty of God's First Sacred Text*, which was reviewed in NCR last year, likewise build on and encourage this tradition.

But, for as present as this view is throughout the two millennia of the Christian theological and spiritual tradition, it is striking how few people know about it today. Similarly, it's astounding that so few Christians consider the more-than-human created world as something important for their spiritual lives.

This brings me back to the hurricanes of recent weeks, to which we might add other climate disasters around the globe, from wildfires and heat waves to flooding and droughts. If creation can be read like a book to learn more about God and God's will for us, then what is the message being communicated to us in these disasters?

I want to be clear that I do not believe that God is sending us these devastating weather events as some kind of divine retribution, punishment or lesson. Like Francis and the overwhelming majority of the global scientific community, I believe that the primary reason these so-called "natural disasters" are getting worse is because of anthropogenic causes, that is, human-related shifts to our climate, land and oceans.



A woman stands where the Jet Broadcasting radio station once stood in Erwin, Tennessee, Sept. 29. The staton's entire building was swept away in the flood waters caused by Hurricane Helene. (OSV News/USA TODAY NETWORK via Reuters/The Knoxville News-Sentinel/Saul Young)

But if we have eyes to see and a spiritual openness to "read" these creational "signs of the times," perhaps we can discover something that God wants us to know through both the beauty of creation and the calamity of the climate crisis.

I am reminded of a line from Pope Francis early in the introduction to *Laudato Si*', when he is describing the condition of the Earth today, whom St. Francis of Assisi referred to as our sister and mother. The pope writes:

> This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded

> by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life.

I also think of St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, in which the apostle names the suffering that all of creation experiences, even stating that the more-than-human world longs for the day of salvation alongside human creatures and is at present "groaning in labor pains" (Romans 8:22).

While Augustine and those who followed him largely emphasized the truth, beauty and goodness of God that is revealed through the natural world and capable of being read like a book, today I wonder if the story we are reading with our spiritual senses is from a rather dark and terrifying chapter in the same creational tome.

If we read the book of nature alongside the book of Scripture, we might better appreciate the ethical imperative that challenges us today to do something, to change our lives and social structures, to embrace the call to "ecological conversion" that both St. John Paul II and Pope Francis have taught us about.

We cannot afford to remain illiterate when it comes to the book of nature, for though the chapter we find ourselves in now is indeed grim, the story is not yet over.