

Homily VII.

St. Basil, Archbishop of Caesarea Cappadocia



The creation of moving creatures.

1. “And God said, Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life” after their kind, “and fowl that may fly above the earth” after their kind. After the creation of the luminaries the waters are now filled with living beings and its own adornment is given to this part of the world. Earth had received hers from her own plants, the heavens had received the flowers of the stars, and, like two eyes, the great luminaries beautified them in concert. It still remained for the waters to receive their adornment. The command was given, and immediately the rivers and lakes becoming fruitful brought forth their natural broods; the sea travailed with all kinds of swimming creatures; not even in mud and marshes did the water remain idle; it took its part in creation. Everywhere from its ebullition frogs, gnats and flies came forth. For that which we see to-day is the sign of the past. Thus everywhere the water hastened to obey the Creator’s command. Who could count the species which the great and ineffable power of God caused to be suddenly seen living and moving, when this command had empowered the waters to bring forth life? Let the waters bring forth moving creatures that have life. Then for the first time is made a being with life and feeling. For though plants and trees be said to live, seeing that they share the power of being nourished and growing; nevertheless they are neither living beings, nor have they life. To create these last God said, “Let the water produce moving creatures.”

Every creature that swims, whether it skims on the surface of the waters, or cleaves the depths, is of the nature of a moving creature, since it drags itself on the body of the water. Certain aquatic animals have feet and walk; especially amphibia, such as seals, crabs, crocodiles, river horses and frogs; but they are above all gifted with the power of swimming. Thus it is said, Let the waters produce moving creatures.

In these few words what species is omitted? Which is not included in the command of the Creator? Do we not see viviparous animals, seals, dolphins, rays and all cartilaginous animals? Do we not see oviparous animals comprising every sort of fish, those which have a skin and those which have scales, those which have fins and those which have not? This command has only required one word, even less than a word, a sign, a motion of the divine will, and it has such a wide sense that it includes all the varieties and all the families of fish. To review them all would be to undertake to count the waves of the ocean or to measure its waters in the hollow of the hand. "Let the waters produce moving creatures." That is to say, those which people the high seas and those which love the shores; those which inhabit the depths and those which attach themselves to rocks; those which are gregarious and those which live dispersed, the cetaceous, the huge, and the tiny. It is from the same power, the same command, that all, small and great receive their existence. "Let the waters bring forth." These words show you the natural affinity of animals which swim in the water; thus, fish, when drawn out of the water, quickly die, because they have no respiration such as could attract our air and water is their element, as air is that of terrestrial animals. The reason for it is clear. With us the lung, that porous and spongy portion of the inward parts which receives air by the dilatation of the chest, disperses and cools interior warmth; in fish the motion of the gills, which open and shut by turns to take in and to eject the water, takes the place of respiration. Fish have a peculiar lot, a special nature, a nourishment of their own, a life apart. Thus they cannot be tamed and cannot bear the touch of a man's hand.

2. "Let the waters bring forth moving creatures after their kind." God caused to be born the firstlings of each species to serve as seeds for nature. Their multitudinous numbers are kept up in subsequent succession, when it is necessary for them to grow and multiply. Of another kind is the species of testacea, as muscles, scallops, sea snails, conches, and the infinite variety of oysters. Another kind is that of the crustacea, as crabs and lobsters; another of fish without shells, with soft and tender flesh, like polypi and cuttle fish. And amidst these last what an innumerable variety! There are weevers, lampreys and eels, produced in the mud of rivers and ponds, which more resemble venomous reptiles than fish in their nature. Of another kind is the species of the ovipara; of another, that of the vivipara. Among the latter are sword-fish, cod, in one word, all cartilaginous fish, and even the greater part of the cetacea, as dolphins, seals, which, it is said, if they see their little ones, still quite young, frightened, take them back into their belly to protect them.

Let the waters bring forth after their kind. The species of the cetacean is one; another is that of small fish. What infinite variety in the different kinds! All have their own names, different food, different form, shape, and quality of flesh. All present infinite variety, and are divided into innumerable classes. Is there a tunny fisher who can enumerate to us the different varieties of that fish? And yet they tell us that at the sight of great swarms of fish they can almost tell the number of the individual ones which compose it. What man is there of all that have spent their long lives by coasts and shores, who can inform us with exactness of the history of all fish?

Some are known to the fishermen of the Indian ocean, others to the toilers of the Egyptian gulf, others to the islanders, others to the men of Mauretania. Great and small were all alike created by this first command, by this ineffable power. What a difference in their food! What a variety in the manner in which each species reproduces itself! Most fish do not hatch eggs like birds; they do not build nests; they do not feed their young with toil; it is the water which receives and vivifies the egg dropped into it. With them the reproduction of each species is invariable, and natures are not mixed. There are none of those unions which, on the earth, produce mules and certain birds contrary to the nature of their species. With fish there is no variety which, like the ox and the sheep, is armed with a half-equipment of teeth, none which ruminates except, according to certain writers, the scar. All have serrated and very sharp teeth, for fear their food should escape them if they masticate it for too long a time. In fact, if it were not crushed and swallowed as soon as divided, it would be carried away by the water.

3. The food of fish differs according to their species. Some feed on mud; others eat sea weed; others content themselves with the herbs that grow in water. But the greater part devour each other, and the smaller is food for the larger, and if one which has possessed itself of a fish weaker than itself becomes a prey to another, the conqueror and the conquered are both swallowed up in the belly of the last. And we mortals, do we act otherwise when we press our inferiors? What difference is there between the last fish and the man who, impelled by devouring greed, swallows the weak in the folds of his insatiable avarice? You fellow possessed the goods of the poor; you caught him and made him a part of your abundance. You have shown yourself more unjust than the unjust, and more miserly than the miser. Look to it lest you end like the fish, by hook, by weel, or by net. Surely we too, when we have done the deeds of the wicked, shall not escape punishment at the last.

Now see what tricks, what cunning, are to be found in a weak animal, and learn not to imitate wicked doers. The crab loves the flesh of the oyster; but, sheltered by its shell, a solid rampart with which nature has furnished its soft and delicate flesh, it is a difficult prey to seize. Thus they call the oyster "sherd-hide." Thanks to the two shells with which it is enveloped, and which adapt themselves perfectly the one to the other, the claws of the crab are quite powerless. What does he do? When he sees it, sheltered from the wind, warming itself with pleasure, and half opening its shells to the sun, he secretly throws in a pebble, prevents them from closing, and takes by cunning what force had lost. Such is the malice of these animals, deprived as they are of reason and of speech. But I would that you should at once rival the crab in cunning and industry, and abstain from harming your neighbour; this animal is the image of him who craftily approaches his brother, takes advantage of his neighbour's misfortunes, and finds his delight in other men's troubles. O copy not the damned! Content yourself with your own lot. Poverty, with what is necessary, is of more value in the eyes of the wise than all pleasures.

I will not pass in silence the cunning and trickery of the squid, which takes the colour of the rock to which it attaches itself. Most fish swim idly up to the squid as they might to a rock, and become themselves the prey of the crafty creature. Such are men who court ruling powers, bending themselves to all circumstances and not remaining for a moment in the same purpose; who praise self-restraint in the company of the self-restrained, and license in that of the licentious, accommodating their feelings to the pleasure of each. It is difficult to escape them and to put ourselves on guard against their mischief; because it is under the mask of friendship that they hide their clever wickedness. Men like this are ravening wolves covered with sheep's clothing, as the Lord calls them. Flee then fickleness and pliability; seek truth, sincerity, simplicity. The serpent is shifty; so he has been condemned to crawl. The just is an honest man, like Job. Wherefore God setteth the solitary in families. So is this great and wide sea, wherein are things creeping innumerable, both small and great beasts. Yet a wise and marvellous order reigns among these animals. Fish do not always deserve our reproaches; often they offer us useful examples. How is it that each sort of fish, content with the region that has been assigned to it, never travels over its own limits to pass into foreign seas? No surveyor has ever distributed to them their habitations, nor enclosed them in walls, nor assigned limits to them; each kind has been naturally assigned its own home. One gulf nourishes one kind of fish, another other sorts; those which swarm here are absent elsewhere. No mountain raises its sharp peaks between them; no rivers bar the passage to them; it is a law of nature, which according to the needs of each kind, has allotted to them their dwelling places with equality and justice.

4. It is not thus with us. Why? Because we incessantly move the ancient landmarks which our fathers have set. We encroach, we add house to house, field to field, to enrich ourselves at the expense of our neighbour. The great fish know the sojourning place that nature has assigned to them; they occupy the sea far from the haunts of men, where no islands lie, and where are no continents rising to confront them, because it has never been crossed and neither curiosity nor need has persuaded sailors to tempt it. The monsters that dwell in this sea are in size like high mountains, so witnesses who have seen tell us, and never cross their boundaries to ravage islands and seaboard towns. Thus each kind is as if it were stationed in towns, in villages, in an ancient country, and has for its dwelling place the regions of the sea which have been assigned to it.

Instances have, however, been known of migratory fish, who, as if common deliberation transported them into strange regions, all start on their march at a given sign. When the time marked for breeding arrives, they, as if awakened by a common law of nature, migrate from gulf to gulf, directing their course toward the North Sea. And at the epoch of their return you may see all these fish streaming like a torrent across the Propontis towards the Euxine Sea. Who puts them in marching array? Where is the prince's order? Has an edict affixed in the public place indicated to them their day of departure? Who serves them as a guide? See how the divine order embraces all and extends to the smallest object. A fish does not resist God's law, and we men cannot endure His precepts of salvation! Do not despise fish because they are dumb and quite unreasoning; rather fear lest, in your resistance to the disposition of

the Creator, you have even less reason than they. Listen to the fish, who by their actions all but speak and say: it is for the perpetuation of our race that we undertake this long voyage. They have not the gift of reason, but they have the law of nature firmly seated within them, to show them what they have to do. Let us go, they say, to the North Sea. Its water is sweeter than that of the rest of the sea; for the sun does not remain long there, and its rays do not draw up all the drinkable portions. Even sea creatures love fresh water. Thus one often sees them enter into rivers and swim far up them from the sea. This is the reason which makes them prefer the Euxine Sea to other gulfs, as the most fit for breeding and for bringing up their young. When they have obtained their object the whole tribe returns home. Let us hear these dumb creatures tell us the reason. The Northern sea, they say, is shallow and its surface is exposed to the violence of the wind, and it has few shores and retreats. Thus the winds easily agitate it to its bottom and mingle the sands of its bed with its waves. Besides, it is cold in winter, filled as it is from all directions by large rivers. Wherefore after a moderate enjoyment of its waters, during the summer, when the winter comes they hasten to reach warmer depths and places heated by the sun, and after fleeing from the stormy tracts of the North, they seek a haven in less agitated seas.

5. I myself have seen these marvels, and I have admired the wisdom of God in all things. If beings deprived of reason are capable of thinking and of providing for their own preservation; if a fish knows what it ought to seek and what to shun, what shall we say, who are honoured with reason, instructed by law, encouraged by the promises, made wise by the Spirit, and are nevertheless less reasonable about our own affairs than the fish? They know how to provide for the future, but we renounce our hope of the future and spend our life in brutal indulgence. A fish traverses the extent of the sea to find what is good for it; what will you say then—you who live in idleness, the mother of all vices? Do not let any one make his ignorance an excuse. There has been implanted in us natural reason which tells us to identify ourselves with good, and to avoid all that is harmful. I need not go far from the sea to find examples, as that is the object of our researches. I have heard it said by one living near the sea, that the sea urchin, a little contemptible creature, often foretells calm and tempest to sailors. When it foresees a disturbance of the winds, it gets under a great pebble, and clinging to it as to an anchor, it tosses about in safety, retained by the weight which prevents it from becoming the plaything of the waves. It is a certain sign for sailors that they are threatened with a violent agitation of the winds. No astrologer, no Chaldæan, reading in the rising of the stars the disturbances of the air, has ever communicated his secret to the urchin: it is the Lord of the sea and of the winds who has impressed on this little animal a manifest proof of His great wisdom. God has foreseen all, He has neglected nothing. His eye, which never sleeps, watches over all. He is present everywhere and gives to each being the means of preservation. If God has not left the sea urchin outside His providence, is He without care for you?

“Husbands love your wives.” Although formed of two bodies you are united to live in the communion of wedlock. May this natural link, may this yoke imposed by the blessing, reunite those who are divided. The viper, the cruellest of reptiles, unites itself with the sea lamprey, and, announcing its presence by a hiss, it calls it from the depths to conjugal union. The lamprey obeys, and is united to this venomous

animal. What does this mean? However hard, however fierce a husband may be, the wife ought to bear with him, and not wish to find any pretext for breaking the union. He strikes you, but he is your husband. He is a drunkard, but he is united to you by nature. He is brutal and cross, but he is henceforth one of your members, and the most precious of all.

6. Let husbands listen as well: here is a lesson for them. The viper vomits forth its venom in respect for marriage; and you, will you not put aside the barbarity and the inhumanity of your soul, out of respect for your union? Perhaps the example of the viper contains another meaning. The union of the viper and of the lamprey is an adulterous violation of nature. You, who are plotting against other men's wedlock, learn what creeping creature you are like. I have only one object, to make all I say turn to the edification of the Church. Let then libertines put a restraint on their passions, for they are taught by the examples set by creatures of earth and sea.

My bodily infirmity and the lateness of the hour force me to end my discourse. However, I have still many observations to make on the products of the sea, for the admiration of my attentive audience. To speak of the sea itself, how does its water change into salt? How is it that coral, a stone so much esteemed, is a plant in the midst of the sea, and when once exposed to the air becomes hard as a rock? Why has nature enclosed in the meanest of animals, in an oyster, so precious an object as a pearl? For these pearls, which are coveted by the caskets of kings, are cast upon the shores, upon the coasts, upon sharp rocks, and enclosed in oyster shells. How can the sea pinna produce her fleece of gold, which no dye has ever imitated? How can shells give kings purple of a brilliancy not surpassed by the flowers of the field?

"Let the waters bring forth." What necessary object was there that did not immediately appear? What object of luxury was not given to man? Some to supply his needs, some to make him contemplate the marvels of creation. Some are terrible, so as to take our idleness to school. "God created great whales." Scripture gives them the name of "great" not because they are greater than a shrimp and a sprat, but because the size of their bodies equals that of great hills. Thus when they swim on the surface of the waters one often sees them appear like islands. But these monstrous creatures do not frequent our coasts and shores; they inhabit the Atlantic ocean. Such are these animals created to strike us with terror and awe. If now you hear say that the greatest vessels, sailing with full sails, are easily stopped by a very small fish, by the remora, and so forcibly that the ship remains motionless for a long time, as if it had taken root in the middle of the sea, do you not see in this little creature a like proof of the power of the Creator? Sword fish, saw fish, dog fish, whales, and sharks, are not therefore the only things to be dreaded; we have to fear no less the spike of the stingray even after its death, and the sea-hare, whose mortal blows are as rapid as they are inevitable. Thus the Creator wishes that all may keep you awake, so that full of hope in Him you may avoid the evils with which all these creatures threaten you.

But let us come out of the depths of the sea and take refuge upon the shore. For the marvels of creation, coming one after the other in constant succession like the waves, have submerged my discourse. However, I should not be surprised if, after finding greater wonders upon the earth, my spirit seeks like Jonah's to flee to the sea. But it seems to me, that meeting with these innumerable marvels has made me forget all measure, and experience the fate of those who navigate the high seas without a fixed point to mark their progress, and are often ignorant of the space which they have traversed. This is what has happened to me; whilst my words glanced at creation, I have not been sensible of the multitude of beings of which I spoke to you. But although this honourable assembly is pleased by my speech, and the recital of the marvels of the Master is grateful to the ears of His servants, let me here bring the ship of my discourse to anchor, and await the day to deliver you the rest. Let us, therefore, all arise, and, giving thanks for what has been said, let us ask for strength to hear the rest. Whilst taking your food may the conversation at your table turn upon what has occupied us this morning and this evening. Filled with these thoughts may you, even in sleep, enjoy the pleasure of the day, so that you may be permitted to say, "I sleep but my heart waketh," meditating day and night upon the law of the Lord, to Whom be glory and power world without end. Amen.