

What is the Catholic Understanding of Genesis and Evolution?

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (#337) states, “Scripture presents the work of the Creator **symbolically** as a succession of six days of divine ‘work,’ concluded by the ‘rest’ of the seventh day.” The Catechism also states that the biblical creation account uses “symbolic language” (#362) and “symbolism” (#375). It also says that “figurative language” (#390) is used in the book of Genesis. This leads us to ask: What do the words “symbolically” and “figurative” mean in these quotes from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*?

The Catechism answers this question earlier (#109-110), when it states,

In Sacred Scripture, God speaks to man in a human way. To interpret Scripture correctly, the reader must be attentive to what the human authors truly wanted to affirm and to what God wanted to reveal to us by their words. In order to discover the sacred authors’ intention, the reader must take into account the conditions of their time and culture, the literary genres in use at that time, and the modes of feeling, speaking, and narrating then current.

As Pope St. John Paul II stated in his General Audience on January 29, 1986,

Through the power of this word of the Creator’s fiat, “let there be,” the visible world gradually arises. In the beginning the earth is “without form and void.” Later, under the action of God’s creative word, it becomes suitable for life and is filled with living beings, with plants and animals, in the midst of which God finally created man “in his own image” (Genesis 1:27). ***Above all, this text has a religious and theological importance. It doesn’t contain significant elements from the point of view of the natural sciences.***

Similarly, Pope Benedict XVI stated in his General Audience on February 6, 2013 that, “***The Bible isn’t meant to be a manual of natural science.***”

This view of Genesis was reinforced by Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, General Editor of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), when he stated at a 2006 conference on creation and evolution with Pope Benedict XVI in attendance that,

The first page of the Bible is not a cosmological treatise about the development of the world in six days. ***The Bible does not teach us “how the heavens go, but how to go to heaven.”***

Thus, in the previous quotes from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “symbolically” and “figurative” mean that the Genesis account of creation is primarily concerned with the meaning and purpose of God’s creative work, and not specifically with the historical or scientific details of how it was accomplished.

Furthermore, Pope Benedict XVI, in his Papal Address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences in October 2008, affirmed the Church’s understanding that evolution per se does not contradict belief in God’s creative action when he stated: “Questions concerning the relationship between science’s reading of the world and the reading offered by Christian Revelation naturally arise. My predecessors Pope Pius XII and Pope John Paul II noted that there is ***no opposition between faith’s understanding of creation and the evidence of the empirical sciences.***”

Pope St. John Paul II was even more specific in his General Audience on January 29, 1986, when he stated, “Indeed, ***the theory of natural evolution, understood in a sense that does not exclude divine causality, is not in principle opposed to the truth about the creation of the visible world, as presented in the Book of Genesis.***”

And, as Cardinal Schönborn stated at the 2006 conference with Pope Benedict XVI, “***The possibility that the Creator also makes use of the instrument of evolution is admissible for the Catholic faith.***”

Thus, the Catholic Church has no objection to the concept of evolutionary creation. ***Evolutionary creation, also called theistic evolution, is the idea that God ordained and sustained the gradual evolution of life on earth.*** Evolutionary creation holds that traditional religious beliefs about God and creation are compatible with the modern scientific understanding of biological evolution. In other words, it was God who established the framework and natural laws and processes that enabled development of the vast diversity of life we see on earth today.

The idea of evolutionary creation is supported by Genesis 1:24, which states, “Let ***the earth bring forth*** all kinds of living creatures.” Genesis does not say that God directly created plants and animals in their final form, only that they came forth from “the earth.”

Furthermore, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (#308) states, “***God is the first cause who operates in and through secondary causes.***” Simply put, secondary and natural causes are also an expression of God’s creative activity. This concept was expressed in a 2004 report by the Church’s International Theological Commission (ITC), while Cardinal Ratzinger (who later became Pope Benedict XVI) was its president. The ITC stated,

God wills to activate and to sustain in act all those ***secondary causes*** whose activity contributes to the unfolding of the natural order which he intends to produce. Through the activity of ***natural causes***, God causes to arise those conditions required for the emergence and support of living organisms.

Thus, evolution does not replace or negate God’s creative activity in the origin and development of life on earth. Rather, ***evolution is God’s method of creation.*** It was God’s presence and guidance, subtly working through the natural laws and influencing the natural processes He created, that made likely what was otherwise very unlikely; namely, the overwhelming complexity and diversity of life we see today.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (#302) supports evolutionary creation when it states, Creation...did not spring forth complete from the hands of the Creator. The universe was created “in a state of journeying” toward an ultimate perfection yet to be attained, to which God has destined it. We call “divine providence” the dispositions by which ***God guides his creation*** toward this perfection.

Even though our material bodies may be the product of evolution, the Church holds that our immaterial and immortal soul, that which makes us truly human, is directly imparted by God. Pope St. John Paul II stated in his 1996 address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, “***If the human body takes its origin from pre-existent living matter, the spiritual soul is immediately created by God.***” The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (#366) also states that “every spiritual soul is created immediately by God.”

This was also clarified by Pope St. John Paul II in his General Audience on April 16, 1986, when he stated,

From the viewpoint of the doctrine of the faith, there are no difficulties in explaining the origin of man in regard to the body, by means of the theory of evolution... It is possible that the human body, following the order impressed by the Creator on the energies of life, could have been gradually prepared in the forms of antecedent living beings. However, the human soul, on which man’s humanity definitively depends, cannot emerge from matter, since the soul is of a spiritual nature.

Therefore, the first true humans (body and soul) likely came into being when God imparted souls into their pre-existing bodies. Michelangelo beautifully portrayed this moment of creation on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel when he showed God’s finger reaching out and touching Adam’s finger, thereby passing on the “divine spark of life” (our soul) that creates human beings in the image and likeness of God.