Worcester F 80 Distinctiones

14 Rainbow (*Archus*)

The rainbow. “Look upon the rainbow and bless him that made it,” Eccli. 43[:12]. The rainbow or iridescence is a dewy cloud, penetrated by the solar rays striking the earth with its horns, touching the top of the heaven, drying the humidity of the air, pushing in on the boundary of the sun, through its release making the earth fruitful. The rainbow spread out threatens but does not strike, it terrifies because it is a judgment of the future. But not yet does it damn. But the rainbow, however much more it is pulled along, so much more forcefully does it strike. So, it is concerning the last judgment. The rainbow from the four elements opposed to it, is made up of four colors: from the fire, it is red at the top; from the earth, it is green in the lowest; from the water, blue; from the air, yellow.

¶ Again, the rainbow never appears in the southern part, but in the western, eastern, or in the northern, nor is it seen in a moving cloud, but in a quiet one.

¶ The rainbow designates Christ incarnate, by reason of his original generation, by reason of natural figuration, and by reason of spiritual signification.

¶ As for the first, the rainbow or arc is caused from the refraction of the solar rays in the dewy cloud opposite to the sun, according to the Philosopher, 4, *Meteor*;[[1]](#endnote-1) and even according to Seneca, *De questionibus naturalibus*;[[2]](#endnote-2) according to Bede, *De natura rerum*;[[3]](#endnote-3) and according to Isidore, the fourth of the *Etymologies*.[[4]](#endnote-4) The rays proceeding from the sun which is the principal fountain of light signifies the Son of God proceeding from the Father who is the beginning of the whole of divinity, according to Augustine, 4, *De Trinitate*, chapter 14.[[5]](#endnote-5) The clouds designate human nature, according to Rabanus, *De natura rerum*, book [9], chapter 14,[[6]](#endnote-6) where he adduces that of Isaiah 19[:1]: “Behold the Lord will ascend upon a swift cloud,” and human nature burdened of no sin, “and will enter into Egypt,” that is, this world, the rays, that is, the Son of God entering upon the dewy cloud, that is, human nature, that is, assuming human nature, as if refracted

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while being made human. Then something is said, something is broken, when it descends or reclines from straightness to the side. Thus, God the Son of God in being incarnated seems as if to have declined from the straightness of Divine nature to the side of humanity. “But emptied himself, taking the form of a servant,” Philip. 2[:7], because as far as he is man is less than he is God himself.

¶ In the second place, Christ is assimilated to the rainbow by reason of natural figuration. We see that the rainbow has three arrangements toward heaven, it has the figure of a circle, but toward earth not. But on the part of the circle, it is lacking toward the earth. Again, toward the heaven it is raised up, toward the earth it is pressed down. Again, toward the heaven it is closed, toward the earth it is opened. Therefore, it is to be understood through heaven his celestial nature, through earth his human nature, which originates from the earth. Then Christ towards heaven, that is, from the part of his divine nature he is compared to the circle, because it lacks a beginning and end. But from the part of earth, that is, of human nature, the circle is lacking because it has a beginning in conception and an end in death.

¶ Again, towards heaven it is raised up, because according to divine nature he ascends over every creature, but towards earth it is pressed down, because according to human nature he is found below every creature, namely, the angels, [Psal. 8:6]: For “You have made him a little less than the angels.” This is in body, not in mind, for only God is greater than the human mind, or it is said he is less than the angels, not because of human nature, but because of the suffering of death.

¶ Up to this point if through heaven we wish to understand the angelic nature, then the Son of God towards heaven it is closed, towards earth it is open, because the Son of God has not taken angelic nature through the closed way, but human nature. But through the open way they enter, man and what is said in Heb. 2[:16]: “For nowhere does he take hold of the angels, but of the seed of Abraham he takes hold.”

¶ Second, Christ is compared to a rainbow by reason of signification, for the rainbow is the sign of reconciliation of man and God, Gen. 9[:13]: “I will set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be the sign.”

¶ When therefore the heavenly rainbow, that is, the Son of God, is placed in the cloud, that is, united to human flesh, then God and man were reconciled and joined in alliance. Again, the rainbow can designate Sacred Scripture which consists from the wood of the Old Testament and the hearts of the new, of whose wood the crowns are moveable, but the middle remains unmovable, because the ceremonial matters recede, but the moral matters remain, Matt. 5[:43]: “You have heard that it has been said, you shall love your neighbor,” etc.

¶ Again, the rainbow is of two colors, sky blue and fiery, because the Sacred Scripture contains two judgments: one through water already

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made, the other through fire for the future. Or blue on account of the promise of glory because water refreshes. Fiery on account of the threat of hell because it burns. God placed this rainbow

in the clouds, that is, in the apostles according to that of Isaiah 6[:8]: “Who are these,” namely, “that fly as clouds?” They fly quickly through celestial affection, they rain through erudition, they thunder through threatening, they tremble through opposition, which conditions the good preacher ought to have, etc.

1. Aristotle, *Meteorology* 3.4, 373b20-32 (Barnes 1:602): Hence it follows that when it is on the point of raining and the air in the clouds is in process of forming into raindrops but the rain is not yet actually there, if the sun is opposite, or any other object bright enough to make the cloud a mirror and cause the sight to be reflected to the object then the reflection must render the colour of the object without its shape. Since each of the mirrors is so small as to be invisible and what we see is the continuous magnitude made up of them all, the reflection necessarily gives us a continuous magnitude made up of one colour; each of the mirrors contributing the same colour to the whole. We may deduce that since these conditions are realizable there will be an appearance due to reflection whenever the sun and the cloud are related in the way described and we are between them. But these are just the conditions under which the rainbow appears. So it is clear that the rainbow is a reflection of sight to the sun. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Seneca, *De quaestionibus naturalibus* 1.3.2, (LCL 450:30-32): Altera causa arcus eiusmodi redditur: uidemus, cum fistula aliquo loco rupta est, aquam per tenue foramen elidi, quae sparsa contra solem oblique positum faciem arcus repraesentat. Idem uidebis accidere, si quando uolueris obseruare fullonem: cum os aqua impleuit et uestimenta tendiculis diducta leuiter aspergit, apparet uarios edi colores in illo aere asperso, quales fulgere in arcu solent.

Another explanation of a rainbow is along these lines: when a pipe bursts somewhere we see that the water which is forced out through a tiny hole and sprinkled against the rays of the slanting sun presents the appearance of a rainbow. Watch a fuller, if you like, and you will see the same thing happen sometimes. When he fills his mouth with water and gently sprays it on clothes spread out on stretchers it appears as though the various colours which usually shine in a rainbow are produced in that sprayed air. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Bede, *De natura rerum* 31 (PL 90.252): Arcus in aere quadricolor, ex sole adverso nubibusque formatur, dum radius solis immissus cavae nubi, repulsa acie in solem refringitur, instar cerae imaginem annuli reddentis: qui de coelo igneum, de aquis purpureum, de aere hyacinthinum, de terra gramineum trahit colorem. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Isidore, *Etymologiae* 13.10.1 (PL 82.477): Hic autem a sole resplendet, dum cavae nubes ex adverso radium solis accipiunt, et arcus speciem fingunt, cui varios colores illa dat res, quia aqua tenuis, aer lucidus, et nubes caligans irradiata, ista varios creant colores.

Cf. Isidore, *The Etymologies* 13.10.1 (Barney p. 274a): 1. The celestial rainbow (*arcus*) is named for its likeness to the curve of a bow (also *arcus*). *Iris* is its proper name. It is called *iris* as if the word were aeris, that is, something that descends to earth through the air (*aer*). It takes its light from the sun, whenever hollow clouds receive the sun’s rays from the opposite side and make the shape of a bow. This circumstance gives it various colors, because the thinned water, bright air, and misty clouds, when illuminated, create various colors. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Augustine, *De Trinitate* 4.20.29 (PL 42.908): Quem mittet Pater a me: quemadmodum dixit, Quem ego mittam vobis a Patre: videlicet ostendens quod totius divinitatis, vel, si melius dicitur, deitatis, principium Pater est. Qui ergo a Patre procedit et Filio, ad eum refertur a quo natus est Filius. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Rabanus Maurus, *De universo* 9.18 (PL 111.276): Nubes dictae ab nubendo, id est, operiendo coelum: unde et nuptae, quod vultus suos velent; unde et Neptunus, quod nubat, id est, mare et terram tegat. Nubes autem aeris densitas facit. Venti enim aerem conglobant, nubesque faciunt; unde est illud: Atque in nubem cogitur aer. Nubes autem mystice aliquando incarnationem Christi significant, nullo peccati pondere gravatam, sive virginem Mariam, aliquando protectionem Spiritus sancti, aliquando prophetas et praedicatores sanctos. Nam incarnationem Christi significat illud Isaiae: Ecce Dominus ascendet super nubem levem, et descendet in Aegyptum (Isa. XIX). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)