Laudato Si' at Ten

Francis's Landmark Encyclical

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Among the many aspects of Pope Francis's life and legacy worthy of reflection, his emphasis on care for the environment holds a privileged place. As Providence would have it, this year marks the 10th anniversary of *Laudato Si'*—the first encyclical in the Church's history devoted entirely to creation care. While Francis, like his predecessors, spoke often on ecological issues, *Laudato Si'* stands as his most enduring magisterial contribution to the subject.

If one theme runs through the document, it is the repeated affirmation that everything in our world is "interconnected" or "interrelated" (e.g., *LS* 70, 92, 120). For Francis, this is not merely a biological claim but a theological revelation rooted in the Christian tradition: Every creature in heaven and on earth is bound together in a profound communion with one another and with their Triune Creator—a "covenant between humanity and the environment" (209). This emphasis reflects a distinctively Catholic approach to the natural world—one that sees all creatures as members of a cosmic communion of love and praise in which "all creatures are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family, a sublime communion which fills us with a sacred, affectionate and humble respect" (89). From this perspective, the obligation to care for the natural world does not arise from claims of equality between humans and other creatures, but from their place in our extended covenantal family.

A second hallmark of *Laudato Si'* is its introduction of the concept of "integral ecology" into papal vocabulary. The term itself was coined in the past century as a way of capturing the deep interconnectedness between humans and the wider created world. Integral ecology asserts that what we normally think of with the concept of "ecology" is inseparably bound up with what John Paul II and Benedict XVI called "human ecology"—the truth that human beings have a nature and dignity that must also be respected. Francis explains that the degradation of the environment and the disintegration of human relationships are intrinsically bound up with one another because we ourselves are part of the environment:

> Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it…We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature. (139)

Making a concerted effort to demonstrate that this ecological vision is grounded in traditional Catholic thought, the pontiff

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spells out his vision by citing Benedict's insistence that "man, too, has a nature that he must respect and that he cannot manipulate at will" (155).

One of the most notable expressions of this continuity is the way Francis draws out the pro-life implications of integral ecology. While prior popes affirmed the sanctity of life from conception to natural death, none in their pro-life teaching advocated more forcefully for the dignity of the human embryo than Francis, as seen when he connects the dignity of persons at the origin with those who are poor and disabled: "When we fail to acknowledge as part of reality the worth of a poor person, a human embryo, a person with disabilities—to offer just a few examples—it becomes difficult to hear the cry of nature itself; everything is connected" (117). Shortly thereafter, the pope added that those who grieve the destruction of the broader environment should also be committed to overcoming the evil of abortion:

> Since everything is interrelated, concern for the protection of nature is also incompatible with the justification of abortion. How can we genuinely teach the importance of concern for other vulnerable beings, however troublesome or inconvenient they may be, if we fail to protect a human embryo, even when its presence is uncomfortable, and creates difficulties? (120)

In contrast with a common trend in environmentalism, Francis refuses to replace an uncritical anthropocentrism with an equally problematic "biocentrism" (118). Instead, he warns against a growing tendency to prioritize other species at the expense of human dignity, noting that we sometimes witness an "obsession with denying any preeminence to the human person" in which "more zeal is shown in protecting other species than in defending the dignity which all human beings share in equal measure" (90). Expanding on this at greater length, the pope issued a bold proclamation: authentic ecology cannot be come by in the absence of a proper anthropology:

> [I]t is troubling that, when some ecological movements defend the integrity of the environment, rightly demanding that certain limits be imposed on scientific research, they sometimes fail to apply those same principles to human life. There is a tendency to justify transgressing all boundaries when experimentation is carried out on living human embryos. (136)

For Francis, recognizing the singular dignity of man is not only good for humanity but is essential for the environment. In the frank words of the Argentine pontiff: "Human beings cannot be expected to feel responsibility for the world unless, at the same time, their unique capacities of knowledge, will, freedom, and responsibility are recognized and valued" (118).

Having offered these serious critiques, it is important that Francis also proposes a positive path forward. A particularly rich and constructive aspect of *Laudato Si'* is his call to retrieve the Catholic tradition's emphasis on creation as integral to the spiritual life. Francis describes this renewal as the cultivation of an "ecological spirituality"—a vision deeply rooted in the Catholic tradition and essential, in his view, for fostering the interior dispositions needed for true ecological conversion (216). A key dimension of this spirituality is the development of "ecological virtues" (88), an idea the pontiff

deepened in 2016 by naming care for creation both a corporal and spiritual work of mercy.

While the physical aspects of environmental stewardship are readily understood, its spiritual dimension may be less apparent. For this reason, Francis sets aside some space to articulate how creation is the place where God communicates himself to us. Through "grateful contemplation of God's creation," he explains, we "discover in each thing a teaching which God wishes to hand on to us" (85, 214). Centered on Jesus Christ, this vision encourages a reverent attentiveness to God's presence within the natural order, all the while affirming that created things are not themselves divine. Drawing on biblical passages like 1 Corinthians 15:28 that depict God as "all in all," Francis writes, "The universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely. Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person's face" (233).

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This vision resonates with Benedict XVI's reflections on "spiritual ecology" and "creation mysticism." Or, to see it from another angle, Francis's proposal represents the "little way" of St. Thérèse applied to ecology: the nobility of "simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness" (230). As was St. Thérèse, Francis was aware that these small efforts may not change the world overnight, but he was confident they "benefit society [in ways] often unbeknown to us, for they call forth a goodness which, albeit unseen, inevitably tends to spread" (212). Though terms like "integral ecology" and "ecological spirituality" may be new, the vision they express stands firmly in continuity with Francis's predecessors—and indeed develops their insights further.

Finally, no reflection on *Laudato Si'* would be complete without attending to its eschatological dimension, in other words its vision of creation in relation to the Last Things. As Francis explains, Catholicism sees creatures as more than mere matter "because the risen One is mysteriously holding them to himself and directing them toward fullness as their end" (100). This vision reflects the cosmic hope articulated by St. Paul in Romans 8, where all creation "groans in travail" as it awaits "the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Rom 8:21–22). Just as St. Paul described the world as "waiting with eager longing" for our redemption as sons and daughters of God (Rom 8:19), so, too, Francis emphasizes that we who bear God's image have the unique calling to "lead all creatures back to their Creator"—contemplating creation in such a way that we receive it into our own being, elevating it in the light of loving reason and thereby bringing forth something new and beautiful into the world (83). In saying this, Francis echoes the ancient tradition of the Church wherein, as he puts it, "eternal life will be a shared experience of awe, in which each creature, resplendently transfigured, will take its rightful place" (243). This, then, is one of the most striking aspects of Francis's vision in *Laudato Si'*: The late pontiff understood that all of God's creatures are co-pilgrims on a shared adventure—from our common home on earth to our heavenly homeland—where, together with them, we will praise God for all eternity. ■