

ECOLOGY ON ONE'S KNEES: READING *LAUDATO SI'*

MARY TAYLOR

“Read in a trinitarian key, *Laudato si'* is a song, a hymn to the Creator God.”



St. Francis, “the example par excellence of . . . an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically,”¹ often retreated to the solitude of the hermitage caves of Mount Subasio, at the edge of a forest gorge, for contemplation and prayer. Today at the Eremo delle Carceri, several miles above the crowds of Assisi, three life-sized bronze statues commemorate the site. The learned Brother Leo looks down at markers on the ground depicting the constellations of the Big and Little Dippers, calculating a star’s location by the method of extending the line between the outer two stars of the Big Dipper fivefold. The astonished Brother Juniper points to the star found by those measurements, “the Pole Star . . . the secure point of reference in finding the right direction.” But reclining on his back, the saint “contemplates in ecstasy the shining night, lying immersed in the flow of universal love.”² Rather than a “problem

1. Francis, *Laudato si'*, 10 (hereafter cited as *LS*).

2. This quotation and the one prior are the author’s translation of the

to be solved,” Pope Francis says in *Laudato si'*, the world for St. Francis was a “joyful mystery to be contemplated in gladness and praise,” a “magnificent book in which God speaks to us and grants us a glimpse of his infinite beauty and goodness.”³

The act of reading God’s book is not cryptology—the algorithmic deciphering of a text—but, like reading an icon or musical notes, is something that engages the whole person and embraces “the language of fraternity and beauty.”⁴ *Laudato si'* embraces that language in order to illuminate a way of “reading reality” that distinguishes respect for creation on the one hand and for human dignity and creativity on the other, not in terms of extrinsic opposition but in a mutual, albeit asymmetrical, interpenetration, analogous to the intrinsic relation of humanity and divinity in Christ.

This study attempts to elucidate the connection between reading the presence of God in creation and reading the encyclical itself. The first part introduces the Magi and Dante as additional model readers to whom Pope Francis points, and identifies three major notes in the encyclical—the whole, conversion, and mission.

The second part looks at the current situation of readers of the encyclical and then summarizes three inadequate readings. A high-ranking United Nations official stated that the encyclical was primarily to be read as a “nexus between science, morality, and political will.”⁵ Those who reduce the world to the technological, the moral, or the political (in terms of manifestoes or totalizing ontologies) will read *Laudato si'* in the same deficient way.

How can the technical, moral, and political spheres be understood in their full truth, interpenetrating each other as extensions of God’s love and wisdom for how we relate to creation? The third part suggests that by reading the last chapter of *Laudato si'* first, what Pope Francis says is the true key to reading reality, the Trinity, can be better appropriated.⁶ Stratford Caldecott agrees

bronze plaque at the site.

3. *LS*, 12.

4. *Ibid.*, 11.

5. Author’s notes from a presentation sponsored by the Holy See at the United Nations, June 30, 2015.

6. *LS*, 239.

and fleshes out the movement from the whole, through conversion, to mission: “the Trinity provides us with a hermeneutical key” enabling us “to understand the nature of creaturely being in terms of love and gift.”⁷ The “hermeneutics of the gift . . . at the heart of the mystery of creation”⁸—the Trinity’s generous, overflowing love and the ontological depths of its relationships—is evident throughout the encyclical, and is the revelation of the missionary extension of love in the logic of giving and receiving.

St. Francis, the Magi, and Dante took a journey into the mystery, but the mystery also took a journey to us, through Mary. The fourth part notes that in the penultimate sections of both the *Divine Comedy* and *Laudato si'*, we stand in the presence of the Mother of God. Mary, so often shown in the iconography of the Annunciation as reading a book, is both the incomparable reader in the fullest sense of the monastic *Lectio Divina*—reading as listening, meditating, praying, and contemplating—and, as the Queen of Creation, she herself is God’s “magnificent book” addressed as “*Volumen, in quo verbum caro factum scriptum est.*”⁹ We end with a transposition of the trinitarian key into the Marian key, for Mary “is already in the glory of the Trinity.”¹⁰

1. THREE NOTES

In the months preceding the release of the encyclical, Pope Francis gave two talks on subjects that might serve as patterns for readers not only of God’s “magnificent book” but of *Laudato si'* itself, readers who like St. Francis are open “to categories which

7. Stratford Caldecott, “A Theology of Gift,” *The Imaginative Conservative*, April 14, 2013, <http://www.theimaginativeconservative.org/2013/04/theology-gift-divine-benefactor-universal-kinship.html>.

8. John Paul II, General Audience, January 2, 1980. See also Antonio López, *Gift and the Unity of Being* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014).

9. Wespazjan Kochowski, “Virgin Garden.” This seventeenth-century Polish poet has two poetic lines for each name or attribute of Mary, drawn from the Church Fathers and Scripture. Others names include the Great Book, the Book Opened by the Lamb, and the World’s Unique Thesaurus—our singular treasury of all that is precious.

10. Francis, “Angelus on the Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity,” May 26, 2013. For Dante, Mary is “she who turned the key” to heaven (*Purgatory X*, 42).

transcend the language of mathematics,” of “intellectual appreciation or economic calculus.”¹¹

On the feast of the Epiphany, Pope Francis gave a homily on the Magi, who like St. Francis were also, he said, “watchers of the constellations.”

The star which led them on the journey allows them to enter into the mystery. Led by the Spirit, they come to realize that God’s criteria are quite different from those of men, that God does not manifest himself in the power of this world, but speaks to us in the humbleness of his love. . . . The wise men are thus models of conversion to the true faith, since they believed more in the goodness of God than in the apparent splendor of power. . . . The wise men *entered into the mystery*. They passed from human calculations to the mystery: this was their conversion.¹²

The second talk was on the occasion of the seven-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of the birth of Dante, who also passed from human calculation—leaving behind the attempt to understand the Trinity as a geometer would attempt to square the circle¹³—and like St. Francis was “immersed in the flow of universal love,”¹⁴ the “love that moves the sun and other stars.”¹⁵ In his final beatific vision, he is struck by the revelation of the mysterious wholeness of the created order as a “single volume

11. *LS*, 11. “To transcend” does not mean “to eliminate” but rather to catch up, transfigure, open to something higher and deeper. At no time does the pope suggest eradicating human measure, but rather seeing it in light of the whole and understanding what it can and cannot do.

12. Francis, “Homily on the Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord,” January 6, 2015.

13. Dante Alighieri, *Paradise* XXXIII, 133–35 (hereafter cited as *Paradise*). Squaring the circle, a well-known problem in the history of mathematics going back to the Greeks, is possible in the sense of proving the existence of a square equal in area to a given circle, but it is not possible to construct one using just a straight edge and compass. Dante mentions the problem in the *De Monarchia* and in the *Convivio*. The literal translation is “to measure” the circle, but it is the same problem.

14. See footnote 2.

15. *Paradise* XXXIII, 145; quoted by Francis in *LS*, 77.

bound in love.”¹⁶ And like the Magi, says the pope, Dante “invites us to regain the lost and obscured meaning of our human journey and to hope to see again the bright horizon which shines in the full dignity of the human person.”¹⁷

St. Francis, the Magi, and Dante all transcended human calculation for a turning, a conversion in humility, to the mystery of God and the humbleness of his love. Only in and through him can creation be seen, understood, and loved as “a whole . . . greater than the sum of its parts,”¹⁸ one with “countless forms of relationship and participation,” one “open to God’s transcendence, within which it develops . . . [and which] makes for the excitement and drama of human history.”¹⁹ Conversion in turn calls for “gratitude and gratuitousness, a recognition that the world is God’s loving gift, and that we are called quietly to imitate his generosity in self-sacrifice and good works.”²⁰ The ultimate wholeness, both of God who creates/attracts/loves, and of his creation; the response of conversion, of being drawn out of oneself into the mystery; and a pouring out of that response in a mission that imitates the generous love of the Trinity: these are three notes of one great chord reverberating throughout *Laudato si’*.

16. *Paradise* XXXIII, 85–87.

17. Francis, “Message to the President of the Pontifical Council for Culture for the Solemn Celebration of the 750th Anniversary of the Birth of the Supreme Poet Dante Alighieri,” May 4, 2015. The pope reaffirms “the intimate union of Dante with this Chair of Peter” (quoting Benedict XVI) and says that the poet’s *Comedy* is a “true pilgrimage, both personal and interior, as well as communal, ecclesial, social, and historic.” His is “the paradigm of every authentic voyage” and his works still have “much to say and offer to those who desire to travel the way to true knowledge, to the authentic discovery of self, of the world, of life’s profound and transcendent meaning.”

18. Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 235; Cf. *LS*, 141.

19. *LS*, 79. The paradoxical nature of the whole is that “it is one and the same thing . . . that gathers the various aspects of a thing together into a whole and simultaneously opens that whole up as luminous—that is, as an inbreaking of transcendence” (D. C. Schindler, “A Very Critical Response to Karen Kilby: On Failing to See the Form,” *Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics* 3, no. 1 [September 2015]: 68–87). This dramatic paradox of a “whole open to God’s transcendence” is why “this action ultimately acquires the shape of a definitive commitment of freedom” (Schindler), and why “freedom, growth, salvation, and love can blossom” (Francis).

20. *LS*, 220.

1.1. *The whole*

What is meant here by “whole?” It cannot be simply the aggregation of all that is, a closed and self-contained totality, the natural holism of a Gaia theory that seeks to capture everything in its relational web.²¹ It is not something that can be possessed in finished form, not yet another totalizing metanarrative, not the fool’s errand of a theory of everything. Rather, it is the intelligible but inexhaustible unfolding of an implicate order, an “order of love”²² from the mysterious abyss; for the person open to it, it is like the ever-opening horizon toward which a seaman sails.

The inability to see the luminous form of the whole—the “single volume bound by love”—is one of the hermeneutical problems of reading God’s “magnificent book” of creation, and, in an analogous fashion, of reading the *Divine Comedy* and the encyclical itself. Pope Francis quotes Pope Benedict XV’s 1921 encyclical *In praeclara summorum*, in which the earlier pope says that those who “reduce all the religious content of the *Divina Commedia* to a vague ideology without basis of truth fail to see the real characteristic of the poet, the foundation of all his other merits.”²³ Pope Francis agrees that we must recognize and consider “the importance of a correct and non-reductive reading of Dante’s work.”²⁴ This is precisely the challenge of reading *Lau-*

21. There are so many problems with holism that it would require a separate paper to explicate them all. To take just one issue, for Arne Naess, the father of modern ecological holism: “Things are [only] useful constructs for dealing with constantly changing, internally related phenomena which constitute ‘experience.’ . . . ‘People’ and ‘environment,’ then, result from projecting abstract interpretive schemata . . . upon the incessant play of phenomena. . . . In suggesting that organisms are temporary phenomenal gestalts lacking selfhood, substance, and essence, Naess verges on nominalism” (Michael E. Zimmerman, *Contesting Earth’s Future: Radical Ecology and Postmodernity* [Berkeley: UCLA Press, 1994], 123–26). The Catholic understanding of the whole neither confounds God with the world, dissolving one into the other, nor divides them so completely that there can be no rational knowledge of God or any need of him at all. A better image than “Gaia” would be the altar mosaic of the Basilica of San Clemente, in which the intricate, organic connections of all creation flow out from and return to Christ.

22. *LS*, 77.

23. Benedict XV, *In praeclara summorum*, 9.

24. Francis, “Message for the Solemn Celebration of the 750th Anniversary of the Birth of the Supreme Poet Dante Alighieri,” May 4, 2015.

dato si'. The encyclical covers such a vast and apparently disparate array of topics that it is tempting to explain (or explain away) bits and pieces that have been parsed in the most reductive and fragmented way; all too often there is contentious, ideological attention to minute details of policy coupled with a skeptical or oblivious view of "the broader horizon, which then becomes irrelevant."²⁵ What D. C. Schindler writes of dramatic theology should be true of reading the encyclical: one should strive "to find the center that gives life to all the parts, rather than in the first place marshaling narrowly framed arguments for or against one or another of these parts in isolation from the rest."²⁶ It is that center, not the narrow arguments, which will be the subject of this study.²⁷

1.2. *Conversion*

The "mysterious beauty of what is unfolding"²⁸ that we see over the horizon is rooted in the mystery of the triune God, something so endlessly fecund that Dante said of it that as he gazed, he saw more and more deeply, not because of any change in God, but "rather, as I grew worthier to see, the more I looked, the more unchanging semblance appeared to change with every change in me."²⁹ At the end, not only his vision, but his desire, intellect, and will turned with "the Love that moves the sun and other stars," as

25. *LS*, 110. The pope says that "the fragmentation of knowledge and the isolation of bits of information can actually become a form of ignorance, unless they are integrated into a broader vision of reality" (*LS*, 138). As Francis notes, his predecessor "observed that the world cannot be analyzed by isolating only one of its aspects, since 'the book of nature is one and indivisible'" (*LS*, 6).

26. Schindler, "A Very Critical Response to Karen Kilby," 80.

27. This is not to suggest that thereby one will agree with everything in the encyclical, with nuances of policies, which after all are prudential judgments ("the Church does not presume to settle scientific questions or to replace politics" [*LS*, 188]); the point is to consider the whole in whose light those judgments must be made.

28. *LS*, 79.

29. *Paradise XXXIII*, trans. John Ciardi (New York: New American Library, 1961), 112–14. It has been said that the protagonist or "hero" of the epic poem is not Dante the pilgrim, but the Trinity. See T. K. Seung, *The Fragile Leaves of the Sibyl: Dante's Master Plan* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1962).

Pope Francis quotes (*LS*, 77). While the first movement belongs to God—it is the divine comedy, not the human comedy³⁰—the second is ours; as Benedict XVI says, we live in an open parabola with our center of focus lying outside of ourselves as “ec-centric” beings,³¹ and among the purposes of the *Comedy*’s Magi-like journey into the mystery is to depict the great turning, the “con-*ver*-sion,” as it happens to Dante, and to engender it in us. “Con-*ver*-sion,” then, is the second great note of *Laudato si'*. Pope Francis, quoting Benedict XVI, says, “The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast,” and adds, “For this reason, the ecological crisis is also a summons to profound interior conversion.”³² That ecological crisis, he says, is but “one small sign”³³ of a larger *spiritual* crisis.

Though some readers, as we shall see, speak of moral *exhortation*, any acknowledgment of that larger spiritual crisis, the original rupture from God—that is, *sin*—is noticeably absent from much commentary. Stratford Caldecott points out that it is not enough to urge people to behave morally regarding nature. He writes about the two words for hope used by Tolkien’s elves: *amdir* or optimism (as in placing one’s hope in enough people changing their behavior, or in various international accords);³⁴ and *estel* or trust (the hope that stems from natural trust in the being of things). But, he says, neither optimism nor natural piety is enough, and that is why so “many environmentalists are falling into despair . . . without ‘the greater hope’ that Christianity

30. “The Divine Comedy” is not Dante’s title, but the title by which the poem is known, and for good reason.

31. Mary Taylor, “Faith Is Obvious: The Apologetics of Creation,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 41 (Spring 2014): 86.

32. *LS*, 217.

33. *Ibid.*, 119.

34. In *LS*, 142 the pope notes a problem with putting one’s hope in environmental laws: “Can we hope, then, that in such cases, legislation and regulations dealing with the environment will really prove effective? We know, for example, that countries which have clear legislation about the protection of forests continue to keep silent as they watch laws repeatedly being broken.” In addition, the laws and regulations themselves may be badly formulated, and not take into account unintended consequences which make the remedy worse than the disease.

offers, environmentalism will end in fanaticism.”³⁵ The greater hope, says Benedict XVI in *Spe salvi* 31, “can only be God, who encompasses the whole of reality.”

1.3. Mission

The same God who created the universe is the God who saves, “and these two divine ways of acting are intimately and inseparably connected.”³⁶ God *acts*, and quoting John Paul II, Pope Francis adds, “the nobility of the human vocation [is] to participate responsibly in God’s creative action,”³⁷ which precedes our own.³⁸ This brings us to the third note. Our contemplative encounter with the beauty, truth, and goodness of the whole and our response in conversion brings us into the mystery of communion with the Body of Christ; it is not a private bequest. “To create means to give, and he who gives, loves,”³⁹ and the self-giving, creative love of the Trinity is to be replicated in us in a kind of circumincession.⁴⁰ Salvation in Christ is “no mere absorption

35. Stratford Caldecott, “At Home in the Cosmos: The Franciscan Redemption of Ecology” (Greyfriars Lecture, Taylor Institution, Oxford, May 24, 2010).

36. *LS*, 73.

37. *Ibid.*, 131.

38. Benedict XVI: “[I]t is not we who must do all that God expects of the world but we must first of all enter this ontological mystery: God gives himself. His being, his loving, precedes our action and, in the context of his Body, in the context of being in him, being identified with him and ennobled with his Blood, we too can act with Christ” (Visit to the Pontifical Roman Major Seminary in Honor of the Memorial of Our Lady of Trust, February 12, 2010).

39. John Paul II, General Audience, March 5, 1986.

40. “The crucial point . . . is that the relation to God, and to others in God, that establishes the individual substance in being is generous. The relation itself makes and lets me in my substantial being be. This ‘letting be’ implies a kind of primordial, ontological ‘circumincession,’ or ‘perichoresis,’ of giving and receiving between the other and myself. What I am in my original constitution as a person has always already been given to me by God and received by me in and as my response to God’s gift to me of myself—indeed, has also, in some significant sense, been given to me by other creatures and received by me in and as my response to their gift to me” (David L. Schindler, “The Embodied Person as Gift and the Cultural Task in America,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 35 [Fall 2008]).

into the Beloved, but our own integrity and fulfilment in the very measure we give ourselves away.”⁴¹ And we give ourselves away in action, in a missionary response, an imitation of God’s generosity in “self-sacrifice and good works.”

Reading *Laudato si'* demands a constant remembrance of this triadic chord. Its “integral ecology” should not be heard as a discordant run of unrelated tones, and certainly not as a one-note drumbeat: as Cardinal Peter Turkson said, the pope “did not set out to write an encyclical on climate change”; instead, its foundation is “*a contemplative, prayerful attitude toward creation.*”⁴²

2. INADEQUATE READINGS

Note the readers to whom the encyclical is addressed: “every person living on this planet.” As readers of God’s “magnificent book,” all persons are like the Magi, created *quaerere deum*,⁴³ seeking, as Francis says, “the mystery in which God is hidden.”⁴⁴

Pacem in terris, to which Pope Francis refers, was similarly addressed by John XXIII to all men of good will.⁴⁵ But 1963 was a time of shared fear of nuclear war that had as a background at least some residual agreement on, and respect for, shared moral ideals, natural law, and reason. The “environment” is a far more controversial and divisive topic,⁴⁶ and any acknowledgment of shared concerns is mostly gone: for many those three goods have been “unmasked” as power plays, and too often we see illusory

41. Stratford Caldecott, “The Science of the Real: The Christian Cosmology of Hans Urs von Balthasar,” <http://www.secondspring.co.uk/articles/scaldecott11.htm>.

42. Peter Turkson, “*Laudato si'*: On the Care of Our Common Home” (presentation sponsored by the Holy See, United Nations, June 30, 2015).

43. Acts 17:27.

44. Francis, “Homily on Epiphany.”

45. *LS*, 3.

46. Even the *term* “environment” is a problem. It is used here because it is used in the encyclical, but Christians tend to prefer “creation” for its deeper relational meaning; even many “environmentalists” see it as implying a fragmented, mechanistic opposition between humans and nature. (“Nature” in turn has a variety of meanings, and is not a synonym for “creation.”)

and sometimes volatile forms of uneasy accords, such as a “consensus” based on a “tolerance” that demands mastery over the other, often obtained by political or rhetorical violence.

Reading the sign of the star, the Magi “grasped its message and set off on a long journey.” But “how often sight of the star is lost” amid “deceptions of the world;” the archetype, says Francis, is Herod, the man who seeks not God but power.⁴⁷ This loss of our guiding light, this shattering of the cosmos due to pride and greed and a desire for control beyond human measure and for “the splendor of power,” is the “dis-aster” (from “tear asunder” and “star”), that the encyclical, with its themes of humility, beauty, and community, seeks to avert.

This means that an analogy for the setting of the first chapter of the encyclical, which starts with a description of the disordered state of our “common home,” might be drawn from Plato: as D. C. Schindler notes, the discussion of Book I of the *Republic* “takes place in the cave, that is, within an inadequate horizon that cannot allow the whole truth to be seen.”⁴⁸ Those who look only at shadows dancing on a wall need a conversion, a turning to the light. A Christian analogy would be Paul’s address to the Greeks at the Areopagus.⁴⁹ Paul acknowledges their beliefs, even borrowing the language of their poets, but only in order to reveal to them the inadequacy of their dominant ideology in the light of the truth about the Creator God, in whom “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). Throughout the encyclical, Pope Francis makes clear the woeful inadequacy of a world considered apart from its Creator, and of an environmentalism devoid of transcendence: “Our relationship with the environment can never be isolated from our relationship with others and with God. Otherwise, it would be nothing more than romantic individualism dressed up in ecological garb, locking us into a stifling immanence.”⁵⁰

47. Francis, “Homily on Epiphany.”

48. D. C. Schindler, *Plato’s Critique of Impure Reason: On Goodness and Truth in the Republic* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 36.

49. Acts 17.

50. *LS*, 119.

The “disorder” of our “common home”—whether poverty or pollution or any other kind of degradation, human or natural—is not the cause of evil but its effect, and no amount of social engineering will have any results, says Francis, as long as we have misunderstood the nature of persons and their relation to other created beings: “There can be no ecology without an adequate anthropology.”⁵¹

This is not an abstraction or a sound bite but a fact. Persons are not simply individuals, nor are they purely social; the constitutive form of their existence is the “both/and” of human-beings-in-community; each person is an unrepeatable, unique being and at the same time has things in common with all other persons. Human dignity is the foundation of all rights; the right to life is prior to other rights because they depend on it, and human ecology is prior to natural ecology. But that does not mean that creation is an inert backdrop, “a mere setting in which we live.”⁵² Pope Francis says that conversion “entails a loving awareness that we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures, but joined in a splendid universal communion.”⁵³

Inadequate anthropology follows from an inadequate and truncated ontology, that is, “the ways [a society] grasps reality.”⁵⁴ The pope enjoins us “to remain constantly open to reality in all its inexhaustible richness”⁵⁵ and to resist imposing our own laws and interests *on* it while ignoring the limits posed *by* it.⁵⁶ He echoes the Aquinian coextensiveness of being with goodness and truth,⁵⁷ and in referencing his predecessors’ writings on the

51. *Ibid.*, 118.

52. *Ibid.*, 139.

53. *Ibid.*, 220.

54. *Ibid.*, 139.

55. *Ibid.*, endnote 141.

56. *Ibid.*, 75, 204.

57. *Ibid.*, 105. Pope Francis also writes about the third transcendental, beauty: “the desire to create and contemplate beauty manages to overcome reductionism through a kind of salvation which occurs in beauty and in those who behold it” (112); “If someone has not learned to stop and admire something beautiful, we should not be surprised if he or she treats everything as an object to be used and abused without scruple” (215).

damage done to both human and natural ecology, he does not pit them against each other but says that “both are ultimately due to the same evil: the notion that there are no indisputable truths to guide our lives, and hence human freedom is limitless.”⁵⁸

Francis draws deeply on Romano Guardini’s *The End of the Modern World*, and the pope’s take on “climate change” mirrors his.

What the sick world needs is a *metanoia*, a conversion, a reappraisal of our whole attitude toward life, accompanied by a fundamental change in the “climate” in which people and things are appraised. It is to them, those in search of a genuine realism, that the following is addressed.⁵⁹

Three deficient appraisals of reality are reflected in inadequate readings of *Laudato si’* exemplified by reductions to the components of the “nexus between science, morality, and political will;”⁶⁰ while there is a great deal of overlap between them, they will be examined separately.

2.1. Technology

The first reduction is to technology, which encompasses an entire mindset. Relentlessly utilitarian, mechanistic, naturalistic, materialistic⁶¹—the point is that it is a mindset closed to any possibility of transcendence or of truth as an authentic revelation. It explains things by explaining them away; the most cursory reading of the popular press reveals that many people think nothing humans do, no act of love or kindness or compassion, is truly understood until science has come up with a “nothing but” explanation—nothing but physics, or chemistry, or biology. Suffice

58. *Ibid.*, 56.

59. Romano Guardini, *The End of the Modern World* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute Books, 2001), 212.

60. See footnote 5.

61. The problem is not with material, with matter, but the way in which matter is viewed; as Conor Cunningham said, it is not that modern man makes the world material but that he made it a given rather than a *gift* (*Darwin’s Pious Idea* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010], 409).

it to say that it moves in the opposite direction of St. Francis, the Magi, and Dante, seeking mastery while denying mystery.⁶²

Those who read reality in this reductive manner also misread the encyclical. They are blind to the pope's purposes, one of which is to open their eyes to this very blindness. Instead, much commentary on the encyclical repeated the charge that he is a Luddite, fearful of science and technology, despite the fact that the achievements of both, as "products of God-given human creativity," are praised for their ability to remedy evils and to aid in the contemplation of beauty.⁶³ Any apparent "opposition" by the pope, or indeed by the Church as a whole, is not a rejection of technology or science, but is a rejection of the two poles of "science deified" and "science defied." M. D. Aeschliman writes that "science deified" is "scientism, radical empiricism, materialism, or naturalism, an implicit or explicit rejection of all nonquantifiable realities or truths, including truths of reason," while "science defied" is "the temptation to defy science from the standpoint of either romantic/pantheistic Gnosticism or theological fideism."⁶⁴ Science deified sees the world as "formless, completely open to manipulation," in a confrontational relationship of raw power and exploitation,⁶⁵ while Romanticism, which lies at the heart of various forms of "eco-spirituality," sometimes collapses into a sentimental attempt to recapture what was lost by mechanization and industrialization.⁶⁶

However, the two problems have deeper roots. Science and technology are not neutral; they have an internal logic that dominates everything but can be aimed toward differing ends, in

62. The pope contrasts the Promethean vision of mastery over the world (*LS*, 116), or "limitless mastery over everything" (*LS*, 224), with those like St. Francis who refuse "to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled" (*LS*, 11).

63. *LS*, 102 (quoting John Paul II), 103.

64. M. D. Aeschliman, "C. S. Lewis on Mere Science," *First Things* 86 (October, 1998): 16–18.

65. *LS*, 106, 108.

66. Pope Francis is explicit in saying that St. Francis's love of nature was no "naïve romanticism, for it affects the choices which determine our behavior" (*LS*, 11).

accord with differing values.⁶⁷ The pope joins numerous voices that have critiqued the apparent metaphysical neutrality of technology, which include Heidegger, C. S. Lewis, and Guardini. He reminds us that when “the method and aims of science and technology [become] an epistemological paradigm which shapes the lives of individuals and the workings of society,” then “imposing this model on reality as a whole” will result not only in environmental deterioration but will affect “every aspect of human and social life.”⁶⁸ That this model eventually and inexorably subsumes the human person is a point of agreement with some postmodern eco-philosophers; as one put it, “the modern subject’s project of using technology to free itself from material constraints backfired, because modern technology reveals everything, *including* the subject, as raw material for enhancing the power of the technological system. In trying to dominate nature, the subject turns itself into another means for an irrational end.”⁶⁹

In the “technocratic paradigm,” says the pope, life “gradually becomes a surrender to situations conditioned by technology, itself viewed as *the principal key to the meaning of existence*.”⁷⁰ To read the world with technology as the hermeneutical key is to rely on a remedy that separates “what is in reality interconnected.”⁷¹ We need to “look at reality in a different way.”⁷²

2.2. Moralism

The second reduction is to moralism, to a system of ethics originating within ourselves, denying that truth is accessible to persons, and so limiting us to “finding rules for a praxis that can better the world. And like this, faith becomes sub-

67. *LS*, 108, 114.

68. *Ibid.*, 107.

69. Zimmerman, *Contesting Earth’s Future*, 96. He is referring to the position of postmodern theorists who accept the positions of Heidegger and Adorno on this particular topic.

70. *LS*, 110 (emphasis added).

71. *Ibid.*, 111.

72. *Ibid.*, 114.

stituted by a moralism without deep foundations.”⁷³ In the commentary on the encyclical there were many iterations of the theme that “science and politics cannot do this alone; we need moral suasion.”

Raw moralism has no foundation in truth that transcends it, and results in the misreading of the encyclical as a moral tract. This is fraught with dangers, among them the appearance (more often the reality!) of opportunism: “When the desired ethics of a particular movement appear to be aligned with the teachings of the Catholic Church, activists will seek to partner with the Church to benefit from its hierarchical structure, which can easily disseminate a teaching to all the pulpits and pews in the world.”⁷⁴ The activists’ oft-repeated defense is that the environment is “the single greatest moral issue for the sake of future generations.” If their concern were about conversion to the care of the gift of creation as part of the generative hope for our progeny, then well and good; but it is hard not to be skeptical, for at the same time, so many evince such contempt for those future (and present) generations of children.⁷⁵

The activists do not see their cherry-picking as to which moral demands to champion as hypocritical or contradictory, however. They see the pope as “unevolved” regarding things like abortion, euthanasia, and marriage, but say that those who disagree with the Church on one set of ethical issues could work

73. Benedict XVI, “To Participants in the Plenary Meeting of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith,” January 27, 2012. See also, “Christianity is not a type of moralism, simply a system of ethics. It does not originate in our action, our moral capacity. Christianity is first and foremost a gift: God gives himself to us—he does not give something, but himself” (Benedict XVI, “Homily for the Mass of the Lord’s Supper,” March 20, 2008).

74. William Patenaude, “Lessons from the Magi: Considerations for Ecological Advocates, Civil Authorities, and Theologians,” College Theology Society 61st Annual Convention (University of Portland, May 30, 2015).

75. *LS*, 50: “Instead of resolving the problems of the poor and thinking of how the world can be different, some can only propose a reduction in the birth rate. At times, developing countries face forms of international pressure which make economic assistance contingent on certain policies of ‘reproductive health.’” And see my “A Deeper Ecology: A Catholic Vision of the Person in Nature,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 38 (Winter 2011): esp. 584–87, for the connection between environmentalism and “something profoundly anti-human.”

together on others.⁷⁶ While this is true to an extent, it completely misses the constitutive heart of the encyclical.⁷⁷ It is certainly true that issues of natural ecology are ethical ones, but Pope Francis makes the point—as did John Paul II and Benedict XVI—that *they cannot be separated from issues of human ecology*. They are not merely to be juxtaposed; they flow from one single source, a source that lies deeper than science, politics, or ethics. This is the meaning of “integral ecology,” which is “inseparable from the notion of the common good.”⁷⁸ As his predecessors so often said, Francis warns that ignoring human ecology ends by destroying natural ecology.

Once the human being declares independence from reality and behaves with absolute dominion, the very foundations of our life begin to crumble, for “instead of carrying out his role as a cooperator with God in the work of creation, man sets himself up in place of God and thus ends up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature.”⁷⁹

Rather than reading the encyclical as a moral tract serving as handmaid to a political agenda, the document in its ethical

76. See for example, “The ‘Scientist’ Pope Who Challenges Everybody,” interview with Thomas Reese by Luca Fiore, *Traces* (July/August 2015), 10–13. Climate change may be, says Reese, “the important moral issue facing the twenty-first century.”

77. There are other problems as well, such as whether in some cases we may not be working together for a common good at all, but a simulacrum—the temporary overlapping of interests. Also, actions seen as ethical are aimed to an end; those ends may be widely divergent and even contradictory. Conflicts that arise from opposing interests can sometimes be negotiated, but other conflicts mask underlying, non-negotiable principles: problems will be displaced when it is noted that, for example, an ecological “fix” may be technically efficacious, economically affordable, and politically acceptable, yet still cause intense disagreement because of the diversity of ethical positions. The starting point for ecological ethics was Aldo Leopold’s “Land Ethic” in *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949). Its basic principle was that “a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community; it is wrong when it tends otherwise,” a statement that sounds compelling but which quickly unravels as ultimately inadequate both in regard to what it means for persons, and how one makes a judgment about claims that are in conflict. Ethical positions do not stand on their own but are supported by underlying philosophical perspectives, which in turn may confront each other as utterly opposing worldviews.

78. *LS*, 156.

79. *Ibid.*, 117 (quoting John Paul II).

dimension might be read as a kind of pre-confession “examination of conscience.”⁸⁰ It asks us to look in detail at all our actions, from the smallest to the largest, but not to stop there. Examination of conscience is only the beginning step in the sacrament of Reconciliation. John Paul II asks us to consider the four ruptures that cry out for the “reconciliation of man with God, with self, with the brethren, and with the whole of creation,”⁸¹ and Francis returns to this language a number of times.⁸² The original rupture with God is the cause of all others, the reason our actions fall short or fail entirely. And so we end with the need for conversion, which “leads to heartfelt repentance and desire to change.”⁸³

2.3. *Politics*

The third reduction is to politics ultimately conceived of as power. Politics has always strongly and often violently divided people, and certainly the political toxicity of our own time is disheartening. To take just one of many examples along the spectrum of environmental policy decisions, on the one hand Pope Francis has been quite harsh concerning the inconsistencies of those who “demand certain limits be imposed on scientific research” when it comes to animals, but balk at doing the same with human embryos.⁸⁴ Their “concern for the protection of nature is also incompatible with the justification of abortion.”⁸⁵ Environmental elites, as part of their “green rhetoric,”⁸⁶ call for

80. Seen as an examination of conscience, things like the discussion on air conditioning make more sense; it is a small detail upon which people may disagree, but it causes us to consider that each decision of our lives has an effect, and must be seen in the light of faith.

81. John Paul II, *Reconciliation and Penance* (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation).

82. *LS*, 10, 66, 70, 237, 240. *LS* 210 speaks of harmony “within ourselves, with others, with nature and other living creatures, and with God.”

83. *Ibid.*, 218.

84. *Ibid.*, 136.

85. *Ibid.*, 120.

86. *Ibid.*, 49.

population control⁸⁷ and evince “an obsession with denying any pre-eminence to the human person; more zeal is shown in protecting other species than in defending the dignity which all human beings share in equal measure.”⁸⁸ To those at the other end of the spectrum, Francis says that while humans are unique and superior to animals,⁸⁹ that superiority entails a “serious responsibility stemming from our faith.”⁹⁰ That responsibility is both to the creatures themselves as well as to the state of our own souls and those of our neighbors for, as has been shown in so many sad case histories, “the same wretchedness which leads us to mistreat an animal will not be long in showing itself in our relationships with other people.”⁹¹

Oceans of ink have been spilled over where the pope stands politically in this encyclical. Has he “slipped out of the grasp of conservatives” with an emphasis on reframing questions of debt, inequality, etc., in ways that make more explicit the connection between a theology of creation and the universal destination of goods (which seems to some on the right to be rooted in a politically correct indifference), or has he trumped the progressive embrace of issues like climate change by standing

87. *Ibid.*, 50.

88. *Ibid.*, 90.

89. *Ibid.*, 15, 43, 69. *LS* 81 says, “Human beings . . . possess a uniqueness which cannot be fully explained by the evolution of other open systems. Each of us has his or her own personal identity and is capable of entering into dialogue with others and with God himself. Our capacity to reason, to develop arguments, to be inventive, to interpret reality and to create art, along with other not yet discovered capacities, are signs of a uniqueness which transcends the spheres of physics and biology. The sheer novelty involved in the emergence of a personal being within a material universe presupposes a direct action of God.”

90. *Ibid.*, 220.

91. *Ibid.*, 92. See also David Bentley Hart, “Vinculum Magnum Entis,” *First Things* (April 2015): “Granted, ethical discernment requires a sane arrangement of priorities—a baby makes moral demands on us that a budgerigar cannot—but it definitely does not require the suppression of any natural impulse of pity, mercy, concern, or fellow feeling. Compassion, like any of love’s modalities—like any virtue—is not diminished in being extended, but becomes an ever more deeply rooted habitus of the soul. And the reverse is true too. There could be no better way of instilling indifference to human suffering in a child than to train that child in callousness toward the quite obvious sorrows, terrors, yearnings, and hopes of animals.”

firm on abortion, contraception, and marriage (so that he is seen by many on the left as “spiritually bipolar”)?

Progressive versus conservative, socialist versus libertarian: even *within* political discourse, are these dueling binaries really the most adequate way to view our situation as persons? It may be tedious to say once again—in a Church whose Founder chose Simon the Zealot⁹² and the tax collector Matthew, who were, to slip into anachronism originally from the eighteenth-century French National Assembly, as far left and right in regard to the Roman occupation as anyone could be—that the pope is Catholic, that Catholic social teaching approaches politically charged issues not from the left or right but, as Alexander Solzhenitsyn said, from above.⁹³ Pope Francis is indeed “radical” in the word’s true meaning; Catholicism is ever reawakening to its living roots, to newness and surprise, and in Christ. He speaks to present realities; however, while context is important, it is not the political or sociological situation that throws light on the revelation of God, but the other way around.

As Caldecott says that we cannot put our hope in moralism, so Francis says that we cannot put our hope in political efforts and laws, because, “when the culture itself is corrupt and objective truth and universally valid principles are no longer upheld, then laws can only be seen as arbitrary impositions or obstacles to be avoided.”⁹⁴ Those who read *Laudato si'* in the most reductionist political way possible are those who read reality the same way—always as a question of power, never of truth. Asking if a pope is liberal or conservative, while not dealing with the faulty anthropology and metaphysics that underlie that binary, is to engage in a zero-sum game that obscures many other fissures.

92. Some recent scholars argue that Simon’s zeal was for Jewish law, not the Zealot party.

93. See for example Solzhenitsyn’s discussions of political/legal calculations as they relate to the “sphere which is above us” in *Warning to the West* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1976), 45–46; of political expression and doctrine after the Enlightenment, which proclaimed the autonomy of man “from any force above him” in the 1978 Harvard commencement address, “A World Split Apart”; and of the fact that the political sphere is not our primary concern in “As Breathing and Consciousness Return,” in *Under the Rubble* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1975), esp. 20–25.

94. *LS*, 123.

Without the radiant center, the logic of “creation as gift” as the foundational principle, any attempt to solve problems, environmental or otherwise, at the levels of technology, morality, or politics will instrumentalize both the persons and the things of nature that are involved. The three reductions merge into one attitude, which the pope calls the “utilitarian mindset” that belies the giftedness of reality.⁹⁵ Even “sustainability” becomes the ethics of utility projected into the future, rather than resilience or promise.

What vanishes in cybernetic language like the word “ecosystem” (nature reduced to properly functioning component parts), what is lost in the dreary earnestness of moralism, what is suffocated in a toxic political atmosphere of ecological policing, is any sense of amazement at the radiance of being and the joy, gratitude, and humility from whence ethics, policy, and action should spring. Every reductive reading stems from a demand for power, not in the sense of human creativity but as the “lordship over all” which is the motive of the technological paradigm; the politics of power contravenes statecraft’s principled defense of the common good; moral relativism rises in conjunction with the “cult of unlimited human power.”⁹⁶ We need a way to read, says the pope, drawn from religious traditions, which “remind us of the transcendent dimension of human existence and our irreducible freedom in the face of any claim to absolute power.”⁹⁷

3. READING REALITY IN A TRINITARIAN KEY

Certainly one of the most powerful and mysterious novelties that Christianity has brought is that of the Trinity . . . the realization that God is not a distant creative force, wrapped in an infinite solitude, but that at his core, indeed his very heart, is an intimate and personal communion whose love, which moves the sun and other stars, is unceasingly sharing its existence, creating and preserving all things.⁹⁸

95. *LS*, 159, 210, 219.

96. *LS*, 122.

97. Francis, “Meeting for Religious Liberty with the Hispanic Community and Other Immigrants,” September 26, 2015.

98. Michael Dominic Taylor, personal correspondence with author, Oc-

It appears from the fragmented readings above and from popular commentary that many readers of the encyclical did not pay attention to much beyond the first chapter, thus remaining with the flickering shadows of Plato's cave. Therefore, a modest proposal might be to read the chapters back to front, with a concentration on the last chapter, Chapter 6. "In my end is my beginning," said T. S. Eliot,⁹⁹ and "end" can here be understood both as the temporally last, and as *telos*, that from which all things ultimately originate, toward which all things aim, and in which all things culminate.

The last sections of the last chapter of *Laudato si'* parallel the last canto of Dante's *Comedy*: their subjects are the Blessed Virgin Mary and the vision of God in the Trinity. The journey into the mystery, the path to Dante's beatific vision and to Francis's final end, passes through Mary, to whom we will return; here we turn to God.

In Section IX, "Beyond the Sun,"¹⁰⁰ Francis says:

At the end, we will find ourselves face to face with the infinite beauty of God, and be able to read with admiration and happiness the mystery of the universe, which with us will share in unending plenitude. Even now we are journeying towards the Sabbath of eternity, the new Jerusalem, towards our common home in heaven. Jesus says: "I make all things new."

Returning to the themes of the Magi's journey and of St. Francis's "magnificent book," the pope says that the encounter with the beauty of God grants us the capacity to read the mystery of the universe.¹⁰¹ To repeat Dante's description of his own vision

tober 12, 2015.

99. T. S. Eliot, "East Coker," *The Four Quartets*.

100. The phrase "Beyond the Sun" is from the hymn at Lauds of the Transfiguration in the Sarum Rite Breviary, "O Nata Luxe de Lumine." Rupert Brook used it for life after death in two poems: "Tiare Tahiti" (1914) and "Sonnet (Suggested by some of the Proceedings of the Society for Psychological Research)" (1913; popularly titled "Beyond the Sun").

101. Pope Francis uses the term "universe" far more often than he does "cosmos," seeing them as interchangeable. A number of Catholic theologians and philosophers do not see them as synonymous. See for example Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 59–61.

of God's great book: "In its depths I saw ingathered, bound by love in a single volume, that which is dispersed in leaves throughout the universe."¹⁰² The poet here reverses an earlier image: the scattered, and so unintelligible, leaves of the oracles of the Sybil (*Paradiso* XXXIII, 65–66). For Caldecott, the universe is also a single volume, "a book of symbols waiting to be read;" and each of those symbols "is a kind of gestalt, in which a universal meaning can be glimpsed."¹⁰³ But it can be read intelligibly only because it is "an act of self-expression by God, a theophany imbued throughout with the intelligibility of the divine Logos."¹⁰⁴

Recalling Caldecott's insight that the Trinity, as the hermeneutical key, is the means to understand creation specifically in terms of love and gift, we will consider Pope Francis on the three notes of the major chord of *Laudato si'*: the Whole that is the Trinity, the need for conversion, and mission, worked out in human action through the logic of Gift.

3.1. Trinity

Moving backward to Section VII we find the triune God, the creator and center of reality. Dante's final vision of God was not that of a monolith, but of three inter-radiating rainbows, a communion of divine persons. Among the earliest insights of the Church is that, as the pope says, "Believing in one God who is trinitarian communion suggests that the Trinity has left its mark on all creation."¹⁰⁵ Because relational community is the heart of

Caldecott says, "To take religion seriously, to participate in a religious faith, is to inhabit a cosmos, rather than just a universe. That is, unless we have begun the migration by reducing religion to a set of moral laws and customs. For it seems to me that what makes the difference between a universe and a cosmos is not morality so much as prayer. In a cosmos, prayer is the fundamental human act" ("At Home in the Cosmos: The Revealing of the Sons of God," *Nova et Vetera* 10, no. 1 [2012]: 107).

102. *Paradise* XXXIII, 85–87.

103. Stratford Caldecott, *Beauty for Truth's Sake: On the Re-enchantment of Education* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), 48.

104. Caldecott, "The Science of the Real."

105. *LS*, 239. Bonaventure states: "We may gather that the created world is a kind of book reflecting, representing, and describing its maker, the Trinity,

God, it is the heart of all that he created;¹⁰⁶ the mystery of God's love is at the same time the mystery of the very trinitarian structure of that reality. For Dante, each part of creation radiates with its own splendor (“*Ogni parte ad ogni parte splende*”¹⁰⁷), received as a gift from the living source of all life; each part is beautiful in and of itself while at the same time being translucent to another. All of nature is a mystery open to Christ, and so for the pope “we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures, but joined in a splendid universal communion.”¹⁰⁸

3.2. Conversion

But if, as Caldecott says, “the world is transformed into a radiant book,” it can only “be read with eyes sensitive to spiritual light.”¹⁰⁹ The pope continues:

Saint Bonaventure went so far as to say that human beings, before sin, were able to see how each creature “testifies that God is three.” The reflection of the Trinity was there to be recognized in nature “when that book was open to man and our eyes had not yet become darkened.” The Franciscan saint teaches us that *each creature bears in itself a specifically trinitarian structure*, so real that it could be readily contemplated if only the human gaze were not so partial, dark, and fragile. In this way, he points out to us the challenge of trying to read reality in a trinitarian key.¹¹⁰

at three different levels of expression: as a trace, an image, and a likeness. The aspect of trace is found in every creature; the aspect of image, in the intellectual creatures or rational spirits; the aspect of likeness, only in those who are God-conformed” (*Breviloquium: Works of St. Bonaventure* 9, trans. Dominic V. Monti [Saint Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2005]).

106. “The divine persons are subsistent relations, and the world, created according to the divine model, is a web of relationships. Creatures tend towards God, and in turn it is proper to every living being to tend towards other things, so that throughout the universe we can find any number of constant and secretly interwoven relationships” (*LS*, 240).

107. *Inferno* VII, 75.

108. *LS*, 220.

109. Caldecott, *Beauty for Truth's Sake*, 48.

110. *LS*, 239.

We cannot begin to see the whole, to “read reality in a trinitarian key,” without conversion from darkness to light in full repentance for sin. Francis’s second note resounds again when he reminds us that the creation accounts in the book of Genesis reveal human life as grounded in those “fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbor, and with the earth itself” and that “these three vital relationships have been broken, both outwardly and within us. This rupture is sin.”¹¹¹ Reading without prayer, repentance, conversion, and reconciliation is reading in the dark.

3.3. *Mission and gift*

The persons of the Trinity are not merely substances, but substantial relations¹¹² of a love between the persons that overflows, so that every creature receives its being and its life as a gift: “Creation is an act of the Trinity, and existence is a participation in the Trinity—a participation in the trinitarian act of giving, receiving, and being given.”¹¹³ By entering into relationships, persons “make their own that trinitarian dynamism which God imprinted in them when they were created,”¹¹⁴ participating in a similar gift-giving¹¹⁵—the mutual exchange of love—that constitutes the inner life of the Trinity. This love includes the smiles and simple daily gestures of life,¹¹⁶ but as Section 5 of Chapter 6 tells us,

Love . . . is also civic and political, and it makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world. Love for society and commitment to the common good are

111. *LS*, 66. See also footnotes 80 and 81.

112. See footnote 104.

113. Caldecott, “A Theology of Gift.”

114. *LS*, 240.

115. This is similar but not univocally the same as God’s gift-giving; there, the donor institutes the whole order and creates the very context “in which the giver can give back to the donor something already received from the donor. Now in this situation, nothing can be introduced from outside as from an independent source; the situation is *creation ex nihilo*” (Kenneth L. Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation* [Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1982], 63).

116. *LS*, 230.

outstanding expressions of a charity which affects not only relationships between individuals but also “macro-relationships, social, economic, and political ones.” That is why the Church set before the world the ideal of a “civilization of love.”¹¹⁷

What is the decisive form of the move from whole to part, from the contemplation of the vision of God to action within the “macro-relationships”? The missionary extension of ordering love takes the trinitarian form of gift. The logic of gift runs throughout the entire encyclical. Everything is a gift—the world, our bodies, our family life, our intelligence, our neighbors, each moment.¹¹⁸ Understanding that “we are not God. The earth was here before us and it has been given to us,”¹¹⁹ we then see that—whether through science or art, whether in terms of human ecology or natural ecology—“our human ability to transform reality must proceed in line with God’s original gift of all that is”¹²⁰ and “we are called to include in our work a dimension of receptivity and gratuity.”¹²¹

As “gift” not only refers to that which is given, but implies a relationship between the giver and the recipient, the way to a “civilization of love” will involve what Benedict XVI called “a deeper critical evaluation of the category of relation,”¹²² beyond that of the social sciences. Section II of Chapter 6 is entitled “Educating for the Covenant between Humanity and the Environment,”¹²³

117. *LS*, 231. Here Francis is quoting Benedict XVI on love: “the principle not only of micro-relationships (with friends, with family members or within small groups) but also of macro-relationships (social, economic and political ones)” (*Caritas in veritate*, 2).

118. See *LS*, 159, 155, 213, 69, 115, 226.

119. *LS*, 67.

120. *LS*, 5.

121. *LS*, 237.

122. Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, 53 (emphasis in original). Also see footnote 116 for the difference between God’s gift and human gifts.

123. The pope’s immediate predecessors also stressed that we can have a covenantal relationship with creation: Benedict XVI said that the “covenant between human beings and the environment . . . should mirror the creative love of God” (“Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace,” January 1, 2008; and again in *Caritas in veritate* 50 and 69); John Paul II said, “Man

and the need for covenantal relations at every level, including broad social “macro-relationships” (economics, politics, etc.), is evident throughout the encyclical.

To recall Gandhi’s famous story: if there is something you desire, you can buy it from the owner, get it by force, or ask for and be given it. The end appears the same: you possess what you desired. But, says Gandhi, in truth you have one of three different ends: stolen property; a purchased consumer good; or a gift. The story can be extended to the relationships involved. In the first case, a thief, dictator, or bureaucrat can hold a real or metaphorical gun to your head to get what they want, and you are a victim in a relation of coercion. In the second, you are a consumer and the other is a seller in an economic, contractual exchange, a relationship of utility. In the third case you are the recipient of a gift, and your relationship with the giver is a covenantal one, an alliance of love and care that is promised without regard to what you get in return.¹²⁴ It is based on an appreciation of “our common destiny” and the giving of *oneself*, not simply exchanging an item in coercion or utility.¹²⁵

thinks that he can make arbitrary use of the earth, subjecting it without restraint to his will, as though it did not have its own requisites and a prior God-given purpose, which man can indeed develop but must not betray” (*Centesimus annus*, 37). The language of “betrayal” does not have a univocal meaning with the betrayal that occurs between persons but neither is it so different and distant as to be equivocal. Instead, it functions analogously in regard to promises with creation that can also be kept.

124. “To promise, Spaemann argues, ‘causes that form of time-transcending personal identity which is the sign of the highest intensity of life: of the spirit.’ Anyone who freely makes a promise makes himself independent of his nature and transcends it. By anticipating the future and establishing a strangely unconditional claim upon it, he creates a new reality. . . . Promises are thus acts of liberation from the accidents, processes, and laws of nature, because they presuppose freedom” (Holger Zaborowski, *Robert Spaemann’s Philosophy of the Human Person: Nature, Freedom, and the Critique of Modernity* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010], 224).

125. *LS*, 159. Covenants do not eliminate contracts, relations of utility, etc., but allow them to be seen in a different light. No contract is ever strictly and solely utilitarian, for no human relationship could ever be purely contractual; the covenantal relationship does not eliminate the other relations but reorders them. We are told we should never treat another as a means; people are not to be “used.” But, for example, every spouse uses his or her partner for a variety of needs, from money to muscle to specific skills such as cooking, but these are held within the covenant of marriage. So too the things of the earth

3.4. *The Fascists' Goats*

While this study deliberately does not concern individual policy statements in the encyclical, it might serve a purpose to examine just one such passage. Isolated from the vision of the whole of *Laudato si'*, it might be reduced to nothing more than a procedural suggestion that could be accepted or dismissed apart from theological considerations. The pope says:

Attempts to resolve all problems through uniform regulations or technical interventions can lead to overlooking the complexities of local problems which demand the active participation of all members of the community. New processes taking shape cannot always fit into frameworks imported from outside; they need to be based in the local culture itself.¹²⁶

Current examples abound, but Carlo Levi in his memoir *Christ Stopped at Eboli*¹²⁷ gave a classic one that might serve as a paradigm. In the 1930s, the Fascist government of Italy decided that goats were a problem for food gardens, as they eat anything that grows. The solution was to place a very high annual tax on them, one that applied to every town and village in the nation. But many places in the south were too rocky for farming and goats—which did not require pastures, and could eat thorny wild plants—supplied milk and cheese both for family consumption and as a source of income. The law, needless to say, was a catastrophe. People could not sell their goats to their neighbors, who also could not afford the tax; for many, the only choice was to kill the animals.

If read *only* as a political/economic miscalculation, one might say, “Well, we can grant an exemption to these towns.” It is of course true that policy problems are questions of prudential judgment, but this juridical response does not touch the root of the matter, the technical rationalization of the world and everything in it. People are being bureaucratically “managed”; as in

are gifts for our “use,” but not merely instruments without meaning and ends of their own. See for example *LS*, 140.

126. *LS*, 144.

127. Carlo Levi, *Christ Stopped at Eboli* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Company, 1947).

the Gandhi story, they are being coerced. The answer is to see the pope's ontological and anthropological "broader horizon,"¹²⁸ including the relationship of subsidiarity between the state and the communities, recognizing the prior covenantal relationship between the people of the community and with their land and animals, who have coexisted for millennia. Applying Levi's example to current issues, we can see why many countries today are wary of accords and treaties, thinking they will be getting the equivalent of the Fascists' Goats. To put one's hope in juridical agreements alone is to overwhelm that which cannot bear the weight of that hope; they can change tomorrow and are so often ignored.¹²⁹ The people need to be regarded in true communion, as protagonists and as persons in covenantal relationships, not as subjects of ideology who just happen to live side by side.¹³⁰

Read in a trinitarian key, *Laudato si'* is a song, a hymn to the Creator God, to the unsurpassable, inexhaustible, immeasurable depths of his love.

Creation is of the order of love. God's love is the fundamental moving force in all created things. . . . Every creature is thus

128. *LS*, 110. See also the "broader vision of reality" in *LS*, 138 and 141. Pablo Martinez de Anguita writes about how covenantal relations can encompass markets, land and resource use, and regulatory/power relations by seeing them within broader frameworks. Markets will never disappear, as they are a natural human contract, but can be transformed within a *solidarity* that recognizes the value of persons beyond their utility; land and resource use is better conceived within a *sustainability* understood not as mere utility but as respect for the prior givenness, beauty, value, and meaning of creation: and the organizational tool of regulation is fruitful only within a *subsidiarity* guided by the recognition of the common good (*Environmental Solidarity: How Religions Can Sustain Sustainability* [New York: Routledge, 2012], 112–28).

129. See footnote 34.

130. This is standard Catholic social teaching, but sadly, Catholic social teaching itself can be distorted, and wrongly understood and applied. This author attended a presentation by an international Catholic NGO that highlighted the very fine charitable work they do. But the sociological language describing the work, with a few scattered phrases about "relationships," could have been used by any Marxist or other political group. It might be argued that this apparent "neutrality" is the best way to work with a variety of cultures, but this language is not in fact neutral. It bears within itself an ontological paradigm and results in the paradox that the very language of relation, which should point to a deep organic interiority, becomes itself extrinsic and thus mechanical, with God as an afterthought.

the object of the Father's tenderness, who gives it its place in the world. Even the fleeting life of the least of beings is the object of his love, and in its few seconds of existence, God enfolds it with his affection. . . . Dante Alighieri spoke of "the love which moves the sun and the stars."¹³¹ . . . In union with all creatures, we journey through this land seeking God. . . . Let us sing as we go.¹³²

Pope Francis and Dante sing of that love, but before they do, they sing of Mary: "all creatures sing of her fairness."¹³³

4. TRANSPOSITION TO THE MARIAN KEY

The pope's addresses on St. Francis, the Magi, and Dante help illuminate what it means to be a reader. Each has something to teach us; to borrow from St. Thomas Aquinas, quoted in *Laudato si'*, "what was wanting to one in the representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another."¹³⁴ But among created beings we have an unsurpassable exemplar to whom the pope turns in Chapter 6, Section VIII: Mary, not only our model for reading, but she without whom we could not read at all.

Much has been written on Dante's two guides, Virgil and Beatrice,¹³⁵ but there was a third: Beatrice turned him over to St. Bernard, who sang the praises of the Virgin and the necessity for her gracious intercession. St. Bernard gazed upon Mary, "whose face most resembles Christ's," whose mercy and love encompassed Dante's journey from beginning to end,¹³⁶ and Dante followed her eyes, the eyes most "beloved and revered by

131. *LS*, 77.

132. *LS*, 244.

133. *LS*, 241.

134. *LS*, 86.

135. Dante scholarship sometimes sees Virgil as a stand-in for "nature" while Beatrice is "grace," but all three guides are ultimately gifts of grace; Virgil could not have guided Dante through Purgatory otherwise.

136. It was Mary who took pity on Dante and sent Lucy, who sent Beatrice to guide him (*Hell* II, 94–108).

God,”¹³⁷ upward, his last step before the vision of God. For Pope Francis too the turn to Mary is the last step before “coming face to face with the infinite beauty of God.”¹³⁸ Mary, assumed into heaven, “is the Woman, ‘clothed in the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars’ (Rev 12:1). Carried up into heaven, she is the Mother and Queen of all creation. In her glorified body, together with the Risen Christ, part of creation has reached the fullness of its beauty.”¹³⁹ The opening images of the Eremo delle Carceri and the Magi find their convergence here, for Mary, united with her Son, “shines out for us as a sign of sure hope,”¹⁴⁰ the guiding star for all wayfarers; John Paul II said, “When the Church sets out into the deep . . . she does not lose sight of her polar star which orients her navigation. That star is Christ. . . . Beside him we find his and our mother.”¹⁴¹

Mary is the perfect model for readers because reading is not mere decoding; it begins with listening and rises to prayer and contemplation. A Carmelite nun says that with Mary, even in Mary, we need to listen “silently to the silent word and become immersed in the abyss of the silent triune love,” following Christ who was “born in the silence of midnight in the quiet of the cave; lived in the silence of Nazareth, and died while his silent mother looked on.”¹⁴² Mary is the perfect contemplative, the “Mother of silence, who watches over the mystery of God.”¹⁴³

Mary is preeminently fitted to help us to read *Laudato si'*. Her mercy is unbounded; she grieves both for “the sufferings of

137. *Paradise* XXXIII, 40.

138. *LS*, 243. Section VIII of Chapter 6 is on Mary.

139. *LS*, 241.

140. Francis, Angelus on the Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity, May 26, 2013.

141. John Paul II, Angelus Regina Coeli, May 27, 2001.

142. Catherine Thomas, *My Beloved: The Story of a Carmelite Nun* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1955), 194. The Missal for the Extraordinary Form for April 12, the Feast of the Interior Life of the Blessed Virgin Mary, describes that silent life in terms of the following gifts to Mary: “An intimate union with God, a continual and joyful remembrance of His presence, a perfect agreement of will with Him.”

143. Francis, “Profession of Faith with the Bishops of the Italian Episcopal Conference,” May 23, 2013.

the crucified poor and for the creatures of this world laid waste by human power."¹⁴⁴ She overcomes the antagonism between those who "ridicule expressions of concern for the environment"¹⁴⁵ and those who want to "save the earth" and its creatures, for Christ "united himself to this earth when he was formed in the womb of Mary,"¹⁴⁶ and so, in the words of Benedict XVI, "as the Fathers put it, she is the Christian earth, the earth that bore Christ. . . . In Mary the earth has acquired a human face, and more: a Christian face, the face of the Mother of Jesus."¹⁴⁷ And if she "who cared for Jesus, now cares with maternal affection and pain for this wounded world,"¹⁴⁸ then the fear that caring about creation can only be viewed as a collapse into nature-spirituality or "Christianity penetrated by paganism"¹⁴⁹ is misguided:

By turning to her, nature-spirituality is transformed into faith, into an encounter with God's dealings with men in history, which bear their destined fruit in Mary's life, in the Incarnation of God. So it is quite in order to say that, in Mary, faith and nature-religion have been reconciled. . . .

. . . Nature-spirituality may unfold without any anxiety in the Marian sphere because its orientation to the Mother of the Lord has rendered it entirely Christian.¹⁵⁰

144. *LS*, 241.

145. *LS*, 217.

146. *LS*, 238.

147. Joseph Ratzinger, "May Devotions," in *Seek That Which Is Above: Meditations Through the Year* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 131.

148. *LS*, 241.

149. Ratzinger, "May Devotions," 130.

150. *Ibid.*, 131, 133. Ratzinger says that there is a more pernicious kind of paganism (worship of creatures, fear of powers) that enslaves. But, in agreement with John Henry Newman, there is, as the preparation for Christ, "a nature-spirituality that expresses man's genuine nature and is a response to the nature of creation. To suppress this kind of nature-religion would be to trample on the human heart as it waits and looks for Christ; it would be to cut off the human roots of faith" (132) and later, "Through [Mary], nature-spirituality has acquired a face, and a history that opens out into Christ, and so it has been baptized. The truth in it has come to the surface, and now, full of joy, it can bloom in God's garden of faith" (133).

Beyond the encyclical, Mary is the quintessential reader of “reality in a trinitarian key.” Reality is fathomless; “the better one grasps it, the more evident its mystery becomes,” says D. C. Schindler.¹⁵¹ Its most marked characteristic is its “dimension of depth, which understanding works to make manifest.”¹⁵² The mystery in which St. Francis, the Magi, and Dante immersed themselves, the mystery to which Pope Francis has pointed throughout the encyclical—“the mystery of the Trinity,” “the mystery of the Incarnation” culminating in the Eucharist, where the Lord reaches “our intimate depths through a fragment of matter,” and the mystery of Christ “at work in a hidden manner in the natural world as a whole”¹⁵³—is most fully entered into by Mary. Treasuring the entire life of Jesus in her heart, says Pope Francis, Mary “now understands the meaning of all things. Hence, we can ask her to enable us to look at this world with eyes of wisdom.”¹⁵⁴

Her wisdom lies in her humility. In the *Paradiso*, St. Bernard calls her the one who is “most humble and most exalted of any creature.”¹⁵⁵ She is the most exalted *because* she is the most humble. She most sees into the depths because she is most open and receptive to God’s transcendence; she herself is the “magnificent book” of creation, written by the Trinity: “written by the Word-made-flesh in her, by the Spirit in her, by the Finger of God.”¹⁵⁶

The way one grows crystals is by dropping a seed crystal into a receptive medium, which reduplicates the very form of the original, repeating the same dynamic structure. In creation as a whole that structure is trinitarian love, the “infold” from

151. Schindler, “A Very Critical Response to Karen Kilby,” 76.

152. *Ibid.*

153. *LS*, 240, 236, 99.

154. *LS*, 241.

155. *Paradiso* XXXIII, 2.

156. Jean Leclercq, “Mary’s Reading of Christ,” *Monastic Studies* 15 (1984): 106–17. He continues, “Mary is a book because she kept in her heart as the book does the example of the patriarchs, the sayings of the prophets, the deeds of the shepherds, the astrologers (the Magi), Simeon, Anna, and finally the words of and deeds of her Son.”

which everything else “unfolds.”¹⁵⁷ The Father’s self-giving is the express image of himself in his Son; the Son’s response is openness, surrender, obedience even unto death; the Spirit is our breath, our life, working through, not in spite of, the strategies and machinations of the “macro-relationships.” Christ, says the pope, planted the “seed of definitive transformation,”¹⁵⁸ the form which enters creation, through Mary’s acceptance of God’s great gift, and her “*fiat*” echoes and resounds the *fiat* of creation. It made possible the overflowing of that gift-love into the world; it made possible the *fiat* of the Church whose missionary task it is to act as the channel of God’s love to all creation.

The encyclical shows us that we can attempt to read God’s “precious book, ‘whose letters are the multitude of created things present in the universe,’”¹⁵⁹ in a reductive way, blind to what Caldecott calls the “radiant wholeness which accompanies the creature like a star, reflecting within the particular limits of creaturehood the inexhaustibility of the divine goodness as always more,”¹⁶⁰ or we can read it in the light of that wholeness. The isolated fragments and peripheries of reality, and the encyclical, are not comprehensible otherwise. To read in a Marian key is to converge on “the single focal point of surpassing brightness, where the glory flares out.”¹⁶¹

To do this is ecology—human and natural—on our knees, seeking Christ with “the humility to ask the Mother, our Mother, to show him to us . . . and in this way to encounter the Light, *Lumen*, like the holy wise men. May we enter into the mystery.”¹⁶²

Laudato si’! □

MARY TAYLOR runs the nonprofit *Pax in Terra* with her husband, and speaks and writes on, among other topics, creation, Dante, and celestial navigation.

157. “The universe unfolds in God” (*LS*, 233).

158. *LS*, 235.

159. *LS*, 85 (quoting John Paul II).

160. Caldecott, “A Theology of Gift.”

161. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 7, *Theology: The New Covenant* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 18.

162. Francis, “Homily on Epiphany.”