

Reflections of a Green Thomist on Pope Francis's *Laudato Si'*

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MY INTENTION HERE is to reflect on a few themes in Pope Francis's 2015 *Laudato Si'* that strike me as foundationally important for our age. I am a self-proclaimed "Green Thomist." What I mean by this is that I am a disciple of Thomas Aquinas and I have a particular interest in applying sound philosophical and theological principles to pressing issues of the environment, or more precisely of human stewardship of creation. I also have a conviction, rooted in what I take to be fundamental principles of Aquinas's moral theory, that man's relationship with the natural world around him (we could call it our common home) bears more serious moral reflection than it commonly receives from Catholic thinkers.

I will not address how this encyclical should be understood in light of the tradition of social teaching of the Catholic Church. I will refrain from addressing controversial aspects of the encyclical such as the fittingness of the Pope's invoking particular scientific positions on global warming and other environmental issues or the fittingness of various specific suggestions at the political or macro-economic level.

As a disciple of St. Thomas, I approach the encyclical with, among others, especially two convictions that I take as given. First, the natural world is a primordial avenue of God's communication to man, conveying fundamental truths of who God is, who we are, and how we should live. And second, the human relation to the world that can be captured by the term "steward" is not only a significant aspect

of the human vocation, but also an archetype of that vocation.¹ In short, standing in right relation to the natural world² is in no sense a peripheral moral issue.

In this article I have chosen to highlight a few points from the encyclical that strike me as insights worthy of special notice. I will divide these into two parts: first, speculative truths about God, creation, and human vocation, and second, practical points that indicate a need to change our lives. Under the former, I include God as father and owner, man as instrument, and economics as intrinsically moral, and under the latter, our personal responsibility in relation to the environment and meaning and implications of the “technocratic paradigm.”

Speculative Truths about God, Creation, and Human Vocation

Chapter 2, “The Gospel of Creation,” gives the key theoretical underpinning of the encyclical, and in its second section, titled “The Wisdom of the Biblical Accounts,” Francis gives what I take to be the lynch pin of his overall approach. The final paragraph reads:

A spirituality which forgets God as all-powerful and Creator is not acceptable. That is how we end up worshipping earthly powers, or ourselves usurping the place of God, even to the point of claiming unlimited right to trample his creation underfoot. The best way to restore men and women to their rightful place, putting an end to their claim to absolute dominion over the earth, is to speak once more of the figure of a Father who creates and who alone owns the world. Otherwise,

¹ By “steward” I mean a person who voluntarily, indeed lovingly, lives out and carries out an ordering that he has received from another who can be called “the master.”

² Regarding terminology, in §76, Francis notes: “In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the word ‘creation’ has a broader meaning than ‘nature,’ for it has to do with God’s loving plan in which every creature has its own value and significance. Nature is usually seen as a system which can be studied, understood and controlled, whereas creation can only be understood as a gift from the outstretched hand of the Father of all, and as a reality illuminated by the love which calls us together into universal communion.” In the present article, nevertheless, I use the terms “natural world” and “creation” interchangeably. The notion of nature in Aquinas, while not being equivalent to the notion of creation, is in no way contrary to it, not having the Cartesian connotations the term has come to have in modern usage.

human beings will always try to impose their own laws and interests on reality. (§75)

A few pages later in this chapter we find:

The created things of this world are not free of ownership: “For they are yours, O Lord, who love the living” (Wis 11:26). This is the basis of our conviction that, as part of the universe, called into being by one Father, all of us are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family. (§89)

In both of these texts, Francis emphasizes God as *father* and as *owner*. The personal being who is creator of the world at once has absolute authority (and sovereignty or lordship) and also exercises it for our good as loving father. The notion of “owner” points to the unique, primordial prerogative of the creator, while the notion of “father” especially conveys that the creator rules out of love, for the good of the governed.³

I find it significant that, while Francis did not lead with these notions in opening the encyclical, he here unequivocally puts them forward as essential to his project of calling mankind back to its proper relation to the created world. The proper relation to the created world is rooted in the recognition that there is a naturally-given plan that governs all creation and that likewise demands to govern our actions.

A section of the third chapter is titled “The Crisis and Effects of Modern Anthropocentrism.” Here (§115), Francis quotes St. John Paul II’s *Centesimus Annus* (1991; hereafter, *CA*) to the effect of connecting two things: respect for God’s plan for the natural world and respect for God’s plan for human nature.⁴ He references it again two paragraphs later:

Once the human being declares independence from reality and behaves with absolute dominion, the very foundations of our

³ Aquinas writes on fatherhood: “The father who begets rules over his sons because of love”; see *Commentary on Aristotle’s Politics* 1.10, trans. R. Regan (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2007), 70.

⁴ *CA*, §38: “Not only has God given the earth to man, who must use it with respect for the original purpose for which it was given, but, man too is God’s gift to man. He must therefore respect the natural and moral structure with which he has been endowed.”

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” [CA, §37]. (§117)

Francis seems especially intent on emphasizing that, in our relationship with the natural world around us, as in the moral life in general, man has received from God the gift of an order that should govern all our actions.

In this last quotation of John Paul II, we see man as a “cooperator” with God. The understanding of God as father and owner naturally fits with the evocative notion of man as God’s instrument.

In the prologue of *Laudato Si’*, Francis calls upon all to see themselves “as instruments of God for the care of creation” (§14). In the first chapter, he returns to this notion in the context of pointing to how we have mistreated our common home: “Yet we are called to be instruments of God our Father, so that our planet might be what he desired when he created it” (§53). Francis again invokes the notion of “instrument” in chapter 3 when speaking of the value of human labor:

Developing the created world in a prudent way is the best way of caring for it, as this means that we ourselves become the instrument used by God to bring out the potential which he himself inscribed in things. (§124)

The notion of instrument shows up often in the works of Aquinas. The signal feature of an instrument is that the effect of its causality is first intended by some other, principal cause. In other words, the instrument works for an end *because* another cause intends that end. To refer, then, to men as “instruments of God in the care of creation” is a clear way for Francis to signal again that the human vocation is an exercise in acting out a *given* teleology.

I want to add that, even if Francis does not make this next point explicitly, it seems that he implies it. Essential to understanding man as the instrument of God is the notion that, in our being his instrument, we become what God calls us to be as agents made in his image and likeness. And in this way, in turn, we see the natural world as itself God’s instrument for *our* perfection. That is, in our very taking care of creation, we are perfected according to God’s design.

My third point under the heading of speculative truths, one intimately connected to the first two points, concerns the nature of economic activity. For Francis, stewardship of the natural world is not an external concern imposed as a kind of limiting factor on the realm of economic activity. Rather, *economic activity is the natural context for being God's instrument in caring for the world*. And it is precisely for this reason that economic activity must be understood as formed and normed from the inside by the teleological ordering of the creator, God.

Economic activity properly understood is the production of wealth to fulfill human needs, first of all in and through actions that express a grateful, receptive, and stewarding stance toward the natural world.⁵ Perhaps nothing makes this clearer than the notion of the universal destination of material goods. Francis gives special emphasis to this principle, quoting John Paul II, who calls it “the first principle of the whole ethical and social order.”⁶ Francis proceeds to unpack this point:

The Christian tradition has never recognized the right to private property as absolute or inviolable, and has stressed the social purpose of all forms of private property. Saint John Paul II forcefully reaffirmed this teaching, stating that “God gave the earth to the whole human race for the sustenance of all its members, *without excluding or favouring anyone*” [CA, §31]. These are strong words. He noted that “a type of development which did not respect and promote human rights—personal and social, economic and political, including the rights of nations and peoples—would not really be worthy of man” [*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, §33]. He clearly explained that “the Church does indeed defend the legitimate right to private property, but she also teaches no less clearly that there is always a social mortgage on all private property, in order that goods may serve the general purpose that God gave them.” (§93)

⁵ Aquinas, following Aristotle, emphasizes a natural teleological ordering in man's acquisition of food, perhaps the most basic of economic activities: “But nature neither leaves anything incomplete nor does anything in vain. Therefore, it is clear that nature made animals and plants for the sustenance of human beings. But when a person acquires what nature made for the person, the acquisition is natural. Therefore, the acquisition by which one acquires such things as belong to the necessities of life is natural” (*Commentary on Aristotle's Politics* 1.6.8, p. 47).

⁶ §93, quoting Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens* (1981), §19.

Here we see the root connection between economic activity and stewardship of the natural world. The very basis of material goods being *my own* is that I am called to use them for the common good. In other words, my use of the goods of the earth is an intrinsically moral affair in which I am called to work for the fulfillment of human needs. Clearly, using creation in such a way as to render it most able to serve my needs *and* those of others, today *and* in future generations, is the heart of the economic project.⁷

True economics,⁸ then, is intrinsically environmental- and stewardship-minded. And likewise, true environmentalism has its natural locus in economic activity.

Changing Our Lives

This second section of my reflections will focus briefly on a couple of ways in which *Laudato Si'* offers very practical direction for our lives.

I begin with what I take to be the most foundational and convicting point, and perhaps the most often missed. I need to see *myself* as failing to stand in right relation to creation and how, to this extent, I have a part in the community's failure to steward creation.⁹ We would all do well to take the following statements from the encyclical as applying, at least to some extent, to ourselves:

This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. (§2)

We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters. (§2)

Pope Benedict asked us to recognize that the natural environment has been gravely damaged by our irresponsible behavior. (§6)

⁷ Sometimes conceptions of a "free" market, in practice if not in theory, seem to include in the notion of "freedom" a denial of the intrinsic moral ordination of economic activity.

⁸ It seems to me that Francis rightly holds that our failure to stand in right relation to the created world is, at its root, connected to our failure to understand the true nature of economics: "We fail to see *the deepest roots of our present failures*, which have to do with the direction, goals, meaning and social implications of technological and economic growth" (§109; emphasis added).

⁹ Regardless of the causal connection between human actions and global warming, the more fundamental and indisputable point is that our (voluntary) failures have had significant adverse effects on creation.

A minority believes that it has the right to consume in a way which can never be universalized. (§50)

People may well have growing ecological sensitivity but it has not succeeded in changing their harmful habits of consumption which, rather than decreasing, appear to be growing all the more. (§55)

In these reflections, I have refrained from joining the debate on the fittingness (including the timing) of an encyclical on the “environment.” Nonetheless, I will state my conviction that such discussions should not avert our attention from the God-given opportunity this encyclical occasions for self-examination of our relation to creation. As Francis has asserted, “living our vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience” (§217).

Francis’s notion of the “technocratic paradigm,” the focus of his third chapter, provides a particularly powerful avenue for self-examination. Central to his articulation of the nature of this paradigm is his assertion of the power of technological devices to influence the character of human life:

We have to accept that technological products are not neutral, for they create a framework which ends up conditioning lifestyles and shaping social possibilities. . . . Decisions which may seem purely instrumental are in reality decisions about the kind of society we want to build. (§107)

The technological paradigm has become so dominant that it would be difficult to do without its resources and even more difficult to utilize them without being dominated by their internal logic. (§108)

Francis uses the thought of Romano Guardini to flesh-out what he means by the internal logic of the technological paradigm:

Technology tends to absorb everything into its ironclad logic, and those who are surrounded with technology “know full well that it moves forward in the final analysis neither for profit nor for the well-being of the human race,” that “in the most

radical sense of the term power is its motive—a lordship over all.” (§108)

Earlier he notes, “This paradigm exalts the concept of a subject who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object” (§106).

Francis’s reasoning here invites us to see something to which strong cultural forces tend to blind us: our use of technology has deeper implications than we have realized. The words quoted above from §107 are dramatic. Decisions that *seem* purely instrumental—such as what technologies we will use in our homes or in our work—in *reality* affect the kind of life we will live and the kind of society we will have. Despite the force of these words, many of us in advanced countries have found ourselves responding to this assertion with a shrug.

This point is difficult to grasp and to articulate. It is perhaps even more difficult to apply in our daily lives. But such difficulties do not excuse us from attempting to do so. It seems that Francis’s key move is to connect the use of technology and an assertion of power.

The point is not that every use of technology is *simply* an assertion of power. But technology *as such* is about power. Thus, when not intentionally integrated into the right order of human ends, the use of technology will tend, according to its own internal logic, toward domination of something. When Francis refers to the technological paradigm as problematic, he is not asserting that technology is intrinsically disordered. *What is disordered is when the internal logic of technology becomes the logic that governs the use of technology.* Put otherwise, when the use of technology is not governed by a clear conception and intention of the true human good, then that use will tend toward disorder. It will tend toward the sheer exercise of power in whatever domain it is utilized.

The “technological paradigm,” then, is Francis’s name for the problem that, having lost sight of the true human good offered to us as a gift from a loving Father, modern man has sought to take rather than to receive, to assert power rather than to receive and steward a gift.¹⁰ Our obsession with technology is the incarnation of this anti-stewardship.

This point really hits the mark in an encyclical concerning the right relation of man to the created world, and it connects back to the speculative truths we have considered in the first part of this arti-

¹⁰ See §203: “We have too many means and only a few insubstantial ends.”

cle. Our bodily needs are a gift, and material creation is a gift.¹¹ Our very calling to be stewards of a teleological, moral order is a gift. The technological paradigm cuts at the very root of our ability to become ourselves—to become fully human. For, contrary to the attitude of grateful reception of these gifts, it cultivates an attitude of power and domination.¹² It promotes man as the measure of all things.

As regards how to apply this point to our lives, Francis is well aware that individuals and communities will each have to discern the path of renewal. We all “have the freedom needed to limit and direct technology” (§112), but we are going to have to take specific steps to do so.¹³ Some people, he relates, have made strides in liberating themselves from the technocratic paradigm, opting “for a non-consumerist model of life, recreation, and community” (§12). In choosing what steps to take, we should remember that the heart of Francis’s concern about the technocratic paradigm is its power to “shape” and “condition” human life, especially by mis-shaping our internal dispositions.

Perhaps the most important notion of the encyclical is that of ecological conversion, a conversion closely linked with the deepest Christian meaning of conversion. Francis introduces the notion of ecological conversion by quoting Benedict Pope XVI:

“The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast.” For this reason, the ecological crisis is also a summons to profound interior conversion. It must be said that some committed and prayerful Christians, with the excuse of realism and pragmatism, tend to ridicule expressions of concern for the environment. Others are passive; they choose not to change their habits and thus

¹¹ See §155: “The acceptance of our bodies as God’s gift is vital for welcoming and accepting the entire world as a gift from the Father and our common home, whereas thinking that we enjoy absolute power over our own bodies turns, often subtly, into thinking that we enjoy absolute power over creation.”

¹² Francis distinguishes domination from proper dominion: “Instead, our ‘dominion’ over the universe should be understood more properly in the sense of responsible stewardship” (§116). A steward is always one who first of all receives, and his dominion is exercised in looking to the common good. One who seeks power for its own sake pretends not to receive, and he asserts a self-centered domination.

¹³ See §111: “There needs to be a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies, an educational program, a lifestyle and a spirituality which together generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm.”

become inconsistent. So what they all need is an “ecological conversion,” whereby the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them. (§217)

Francis astutely points to two kinds of Christians who might be resistant to the call to rectify their relationship to the natural world. He invites them to an ecological conversion, a setting aright of their relationship with the created world. He invites them to see this conversion as a facet of the human person’s right relationship with Jesus Christ. N-V