

Laudato Si' and the Rise of Green Thomism

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I

LAUDATO SI' (2015) IS an extraordinary encyclical.¹ Through it, the Holy Father teaches, in a manner not previously specified, a central thesis of the Christian faith: because everything is created by our loving Father, we inhabit an earth that we share with his creatures. Thus, the gift of this beautiful earth is not to be ignored or regretted; this world is, rather, the central setting in which the Christian life is to be attentively lived and joyfully pursued.

The putative subject matter of *Laudato Si'* is the ecological concerns that have emerged at the conclusion of the twentieth century as a result of the practical abuses consonant with industrialization and modern development. But *Laudato Si'* is much more than a meditation taking aim at environmental practices and policies. It is a magisterial call to recover creation itself and, in recovering creation, to discover the moral fabric that binds us to ourselves, each other, each creature, and the Creator. Indeed, there is scarcely an aspect of contemporary life that is not addressed in some fashion in the encyclical. Its breadth, however, does not suggest anything trivial. Instead, it affirms the foundational character of the discussion the Holy Father seeks to undertake.

¹ Portions of this essay are taken from my “The Treasure of *Laudato Si'*,” *Principles: A Publication of Christendom College* 1, no. 3 (2015): 1–7. Hereafter, section (§) numbers given in parentheses with no further identification are from this encyclical and, when the encyclical must be differentiated from other sources in the same citation, the abbreviation “LS” will be used.

Taken as a set of practical observations in isolation from the broader theological implications, *Laudato Si'* does not constitute an extraordinary moment. It merely re-iterates some of the conclusions and findings of both the scientific and ethical communities. And yet, when read against the broader claims of theological reasoning, *Laudato Si'* marks the occasion of historic doctrinal development.

Simply stated, the Pope's call for a comprehensive "integral ecology" is essentially a call to confirm a comprehensive vision of the cosmos and our vocation within it. It is a mandate for the natural law tradition in the twenty-first century and beyond—not the rarified, conceptualist accounts one sometimes encounters in the scholarship of the post-modern milieu,² but the fully enfleshed, perennial articulation that sees the spontaneous *inclinatio* of human aspirations within the movement of a universal *trahi ad deo* expressed in the drama of every creature's living, where God is both inspiration and end of the entire cosmos. In other words, *Laudato Si'* is the manifesto for "Green Thomism."³

The Holy Father's repeated claims that "everything is connected" and that no creature is, therefore, superfluous are not mere sentimental, nostalgic, or poetic fancy; his intention is to declare a fundamental doctrinal claim: "Nature is nothing other than a certain kind of art, namely God's art, impressed upon things, whereby those things are moved to a determinate end" (§80).⁴ For, God is the Creator of all things, and thus, "each creature has its own purpose" (§84). Moreover, "the entire material universe speaks of God's love; . . . the universe as a whole, in all its manifold relationships, shows forth the inexhaustible riches of God" (§86).

Laudato Si' consistently affirms a theology of "nature" as a divinely arranged, ordered complex of organic wholes, each with its own note of intelligence, together forming a symphony of meaning in

² For an excellent account of various approaches to the meaning and significance of "nature" in natural law ethics, see Matthew Levering, *Biblical Natural Law: A Theocentric and Teleological Approach* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

³ For an account of the importance of Thomism for developing an integral ecology, see the collection of essays derived from a 2009 symposium entitled "Renewing the Face of the Earth: The Church and the Order of Creation," hosted by The Saint Paul Seminary School of Divinity, published in *Nova et Vetera* 10, no. 1 (2012): 61–278.

⁴ Citing St. Thomas Aquinas, *In octo libros physicorum Aristotelis expositio*, bk. 2, lec. 14.

motion—a theology that has been honed over the centuries through the Church's repeated engagement with its central questions. Whether in its encounter with the Manichaeism of the fourth century, the Albigensians of the thirteenth, or the reductive materialists of the twenty-first, the Church's consistent witness has been on behalf of the order, beauty, and goodness of creation.⁵ Francis's encyclopedic appeal to witnesses from the ancient tradition (as well as more recent bishops' statements from around the globe) demonstrates that *Laudato Si'* is the magisterial expression of that core conviction in the twenty-first century. Its central significance lies in the clear affirmation that the native habitat of the human person as a spiritual creature is precisely this material cosmos of organic beings. The human person, whose dignity lies within a spiritual destiny, is nevertheless *a creature of this ordered earth*—a living, organic being among other organic beings whose immortal soul by nature transcends the cosmos and yet, by grace, permeates it with eternal significance.

Laudato Si' poses a fundamental question to every citizen of the globe: how do you and I, as human beings, as sons and daughters of the Father, flourish within this divinely ordered cosmos? As such, one can read the document as an extended meditation upon and application of the natural law, for natural law is nothing other than those principles of moral discernment that emerge from the affirmation that we are embodied rational creatures participating in a divinely ordered reality, otherwise known as the “eternal law.”⁶ Francis's overall aim is to make relevant to twenty-first century audiences the moral imperatives that follow upon the natural inclinations that all of us pursue as embodied creatures drawn to flourishing by the call of a loving Father.

That the phrase “natural law” itself is absent from the document is not determinative, for the nomenclature surrounding natural law ethics in the modern academy has increasingly been cast as an ethic set within a cosmos devoid of a natural teleology. Francis himself alludes to the shifting valuation of “nature” in contemporary culture (§86). In academic circles specifically, the characterization of our participation in the ordered cosmos has been critiqued as: concep-

⁵ For a survey of Western theological engagement with such related issues, see Clarence Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Time to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).

⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (hereafter, *ST*) I-II, q. 91, a. 2.

tualist, idealist, epistemic, or logicist.⁷ By recovering natural law in substance without calling for it explicitly by name, the Holy Father assiduously avoids the predicted paroxysms the language evokes in the contemporary landscape of pundits. Why barter your influence for a phrase when you can wield it on other, less volatile, terms?

Nonetheless, natural law provides the theological warrant for *Laudato Si'* because, as the International Theological Commission already stated in 2009, “there cannot be an adequate response to the complex questions of ecology except within the framework of a deeper understanding of the natural law, which places value on the connection between the human person, society, culture, and the equilibrium of the bio-physical sphere in which the human person is incarnate.”⁸

Or as the Dominican scholar Mislaw Krapiec, O.P., tells us, the “affirmation or a transgression of the Eternal Divine Law does not take place in an abstraction nor directly in relation to God Himself. Rather, *it takes place through the composition of things . . . with which we either do or do not reckon in our conduct.*”⁹ In other words, to live out the principles of the natural law requires more than meeting some epistemic condition of internal coherence within one’s own self-directing principles. Rather, precisely because of the kind of creatures we are (as embodied, organic beings inhabiting a cosmos) our enactment of the natural law is inescapably yoked to our prior relationship with the given order of creatures. Francis weaves this moral and organic character of the natural law into a singular insight of a participated ethics. He says:

Neglecting to monitor the harm done to nature and the environmental impact of our decisions is only the most striking sign of a disregard for the message contained in the structures of nature itself. When we fail to acknowledge as part of reality

⁷ See, for example, Steven A. Long, *Natura Pura: On the Recovery of Nature in the Doctrine of Grace* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010). See also, William C. French, “Natural Law and Ecological Responsibility: Drawing upon the Thomistic Tradition,” *University of St. Thomas Law Journal* 5, no. 1 (2008): 39.

⁸ International Theological Commission, *In Search of a Universal Ethic: A New Look at the Natural Law* (2009; hereafter, *ITC*), §82.

⁹ Mieczysław A. Krąpiec, O.P., *I—Man: An Outline of Philosophical Anthropology*, trans. Marie Lescoe, Andrew Woznicki, Theresa Sandok, et al. (New Britain, CT: Mariel Publications, 1983), 229–30 (emphasis added).

the worth of a poor person, a human embryo, a person with disabilities—to offer just a few examples—it becomes difficult to hear the cry of nature itself; everything is connected. Once the human being declares independence from reality and behaves with absolute dominion, the very foundations of our life begin to crumble. (§117)

Our rational participation in the eternal law unfolds in a distinctively human manner—namely, as an embodied rational creature of the earth. And thus our participation, our inclinations, are inescapably woven within the fabric of relations that makes our living human. The natural law, at its core, asks the question of how I as an organic, albeit rational, being flourish within this theonomic cosmos.

Laudato Si' permanently disowns Cartesian nostalgia and delivers the final eulogy on such modern predilections. “An inadequate presentation of Christian anthropology,” it says, “gave rise to a wrong understanding of the relationship between human beings and the world” (§116). Francis demands, instead, that we extend the analysis of human flourishing to include the participation of other embodied creatures within the divinely arranged cosmos. “Often, what was handed on,” he says, “was a Promethean vision of mastery over the world, which gave the impression that the protection of nature was something that only the faint-hearted cared about. Instead, our ‘dominion’ over the universe should be understood more properly in the sense of responsible stewardship” (ibid.). The genus *animalia* cannot be eclipsed by an overly zealous focus upon the *rationis*—lest the specific difference overwhelm the species; lest the *cogito* engulf the *habito*.

What is integral ecology? It is the intentional practice of those principles of human flourishing that emerge from our reasonable pursuit of a hierarchy of goods to which we are spontaneously inclined, a pursuit that we enact alongside every other creature of the universe, a pursuit that is ordered toward goods that are perfective of our status as creatures within a common home. This universal attraction to the love of God, Francis affirms, “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, a sublime communion which fills us with a sacred, affectionate and humble respect” (§89).

II

Francis does more than simply restore the natural law; the single greatest achievement of the document lies in his effort to develop it both extensively and intensively. Extensively, he expands the circle of ethical demands to include those creatures of our natural environment that share in the universal call to wholeness. In much the same way as Aldo Leopold attempted nearly fifty years ago in his *Sand County Almanac*, Francis demands that we now include the biotic community in our vision of bioethical considerations. Intensively, Francis focuses our moral evaluation on the embodied character of our own unique natural human flourishing. Habituated as we are to speaking of our human dignity in terms of our immortal soul, we can sometimes forget the “bottom half” of the equation: that the human soul belongs to a human body; that there is therefore no “I” that is not “me;”¹⁰ that I am someone who is inescapably somewhere. There is always a “place” in the landscape of faith, a location, an environment in which ensouled soil, or soiled soul, seeks perfection. Whether we till the soil directly or live off the labor of those who do, each one of us reveals the dust from whence we came. To till it and to keep it is thus part of our pledge to God and each other.

In sum, “there can be no ecology without an adequate anthropology” (§118). One might add to these remarks, “and vice-versa.” For, the very conditions that constitute an adequate anthropology precisely include a consideration of the ecological conditions in which the “anthropos” flourishes. It is not irrelevant to my argument that the International Theological Commission, precisely in its efforts to provide a robust account of the importance of natural law ethics, captures the essential thrust of *Laudato Si’* when it states:

An integral ecology must promote what is specifically human, all the while valuing the world of nature in its physical and biological integrity. In fact, even if man, as a moral being who searches for the ultimate truth and the ultimate good, transcends his own immediate environment, he does so by accepting the special mission of keeping watch over the natural world, living in harmony with it, and defending vital values without which neither human life nor the biosphere of this planet can be maintained (cf. Gen 2:15). This integral ecology summons every human being and every community to a new

¹⁰ ST I, q. 75, a. 4.

responsibility. It is inseparable from a global political orientation respectful of the requirements of the natural law.¹¹

What for centuries was devolving as merely an option for Christian living (and in many instances ignored entirely) has now been declared an essential facet of the Christian way. Creatures matter because their Creator matters. By retrieving *natura* from the brink of ethical oblivion, “integral ecology” has officially been declared a fitting species of moral theology. No longer the muse of transcendental whimsy, “something only the faint-hearted cared about,” or the blunt instrument of bourgeois bureaucrats, ecology—the *scientia* of our common home—has been redeemed and declared “integral” by the gospel of creation.

Some may think it sufficient simply to affirm the union of the body-soul composite as the shibboleth of Thomistic anthropology. It is not. For, while it may be true that the human soul is apt for the body, it is essential to affirm that the composite is apt for the universe, that phantasmagoria of intelligible objects, any one of which is the proper object of human intellection. The body is for the sake of the soul; this is true enough. But its powers are made fecund not on account of the body alone, but on account of the presence of a sensible object. Brains may flourish in a vat; Thomists cannot.¹² Their native habitat is the glorious cosmos of intelligible objects whose *esse* is freely given by God in all manner of flora and fauna.

Notwithstanding the dignity of the human being as the *imago dei*, the human person nonetheless occupies the lowest order of intellectual creatures, since the human being is utterly dependent upon organic substances in order to engage in any intellectual acts. Thomas's portrait of the person is premised upon the notion that human knowing is dependent upon *things*, things already thick with meaning, immersed in light, and pregnant with intelligence.

Moreover, the disruption of original sin does not penetrate to the orders of lower creation. The natures of animals, Thomas says explicitly, were not changed by man's sin (*ST* I, q. 96, a.1). Their habits of

¹¹ *ITC*, §82. Note the use of “integral ecology.”

¹² See Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 4: “Descartes was asking for absolute certainty from a brain-in-a-vat, a certainty that was not needed when the brain (or the mind) was firmly attached to its body and the body thoroughly involved in its normal ecology.”

being are precisely now what they would have been prior to the fall; for it is only the intellectual creatures (the angels and humans) who are directly caught up in the drama of sin. It is not unfair to suggest here that Thomas's entire treatment of the praeternatural gifts is due, in part, to his indefatigable defense of the gift that is lower creation.

In contrast to our checkered history, each creature of lower creation, Thomas says, bears the *vestigia dei*, indeed the *vestigia Trinitate* (*ST* I, q. 45, a. 7; *LS*, §237), and, taken as a whole, the lower creation manifests the divine goodness more perfectly (*ST* I, q. 47, a. 1; *LS*, §86). Creatures can lead us to contemplate God (*ST* I, q. 65, a. 1, ad 3), and precisely by their exercise of hope, they give witness to the Divine Intellect at work (*ST* I-II, q. 40, a. 3). Such themes run throughout both St. Thomas and *Laudato Si'*.

This thesis that the integrity of lower creation remains intact throughout the drama of our salvation history is one of the most important aspects of our Catholic theological tradition. It nonetheless is becoming increasingly beclouded in Catholic intellectual circles. It is an historic achievement of *Laudato Si'* that Francis has brought us back from the brink.

III

The stakes could not be higher. In this age of technocratic *eros*, the new evangelization of culture will come to nothing if it does not include the unequivocal affirmation of the splendor of creation upon which authentic Christian culture depends. For Christianity is not a philosophy, a set of abstractions nurtured in the labyrinthine ways of one's own mind. It is not the insights of an ego marooned on an island of preoccupation. Nor, finally, is it a mere political agenda woven in the fabric of a people united to a cause.

Christianity is, rather, the extraordinary invitation of friendship from one embodied person to another, a friendship between the Logos of the world, enfleshed in Jesus Christ, and every human person enfleshed in the likes of you and me. Christ, the Logos made flesh, is the one through whom all things are made. Visible in the person of Jesus Christ, one and the same Logos remains the invisible source of all creation. No Catholic can be indifferent to our created universe because we are not indifferent to the Word of whom it speaks (§83).

Announcing this "gospel of creation," the Church is that *Lumen Gentium*, a light to peoples who are currently enamored of the environmental movement. At its best, the movement is a revolt of

conscience among those generations of post-modernity who have sensed that something is deeply flawed in our stance before the natural order, that our habit of treating creatures as a raw datum of purposeless stuff is not consonant with reality. Green Thomists seek to accompany the culture at a moment of self-transcendence, much the same way as Francis invites the world, through *Laudato Si'*, into a deeper encounter with Christ.

But our age is also one of contradiction: while we may be attuned to the beauty of creation, we remain deaf to its demands, at one moment celebrating its order and at another declaring its irrelevance. *Laudato Si'* is the anthem of the new evangelization and the culture of life to which it gives birth. The heart of liberty, Francis asserts, lies not in proclaiming one's autonomy from the natural bonds of being, but rather in offering one's freedom as a gift to the Father, the Creator of all life—my life, your life, their lives. If we could but for a moment have the courage to break the spell of our pathological ingratitude for the setting in which we live and move and have our being, we might glimpse the joy that lies waiting for us and summon a vision of authentic liberty that is more than mere license. *Laudato Si'* is the antidote to the ennui of the age, a balm in this era of ontic resentment.

It would be a colossal misunderstanding, however, to hear in my remarks an indictment only of the "left's" inability to appreciate the meaning of creation and its implications for the moral life. That the liberal agenda of the sexual revolutionaries consists in a total resentment of nature seems clear enough. What has been far less clear, and thus the reason for *Laudato Si'*, is how that same light of creation itself has become increasingly beclouded in virtually *every* sector of modern life. We have become a somnambulant Church; Francis is telling us to wake up.

Take, for example, just one of the central achievements of civilization: agriculture. For centuries, we understood its tasks as a kind of *ars cooperativa*, a cooperative art, because its achievements are yoked to the intelligible forces at work in creation itself. Agriculture is a unique human enterprise, for it is through this labor, perhaps more than any other, that one learns of the grammar of the Creator.

As the substantial union of soil and soul, each human person is inescapably bound to the land from which we emerge and upon which we depend. But what seems self-evident to most of us after a moment of reflection nonetheless seems to have eluded the attention of Catholic higher education. What else but the siren effects of the

technocratic paradigm can account for the fact that, of the 244 Catholic institutions of higher learning in the United States, not a single one offers a program of study in agriculture? It would take us too far afield to investigate what may account for the collective amnesia,¹³ but the fact that our food is prepared in collaboration with the creatures of the earth appears not to have registered among the Catholic intelligentsia. *Laudato Si'* declares that this cultured disinterest is now culpable ignorance.

But it is not just agriculture that is called out for renewal. Rediscovering the gift of creation may allow the Church's anthropology to take root once again in its native soil—namely, cosmology—and help us overcome the temptations to shackle the human person within the confines of a subjectivity or to disperse the person into a cloud of undifferentiated social awareness. The development of an “integral ecology” will not be achieved simply by repeating the formulas about the “dignity of the human person” or the “social nature of the Church.” For, no human being contemplates the good in a vacuum. Rather, the native habitat of the human person as an embodied, social creature is this blessed material cosmos of created natures.

Laudato Si' draws from the aquifer of a realist metaphysics and natural philosophy of being that provides, among other things, a vision of an ordered universe utterly dependent upon a provident God whose causality extends to the operations of individuals—their coherence as well as their purpose.

Some may accuse me of special pleading by appealing to ossified formulas from by-gone days in order to address more contemporary concerns. But I do question why we persistently speak of “climate change” and “the environment” but seldom about “climates changing” and “environments.” The consistent use of the singular, collective noun betrays the fact that what is at stake is not a mere practical inquiry, the solutions of which are as varied as their circumstances, but a speculative one. This is not a debate about the care of nature; this is a debate about the nature of nature, about whether it is a gift to be revered or a problem to be overcome, and about whether we are at ease in our role as stewards or determined to become the masters of the universe.

¹³ See my “In the Temple of Creation: American Agriculture Fifty Years after *Mater et Magistra*” (<http://dottrinasocialedellachiesa.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/Thompson.pdf>).

In contrast to the posture of humility Francis calls for is the “technocratic paradigm” of the one who exalts the concept of the subject and, “using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object” (§106). One recalls the image of the Kantian man as Iris Murdoch once described him: “He is the offspring of the age of science, confidently rational and yet increasingly aware of his alienation from the material universe which his discoveries reveal.” She poignantly concludes: “In fact Kant’s man had already received a glorious incarnation nearly a century earlier in the work of Milton: his proper name is Lucifer.”¹⁴

Defenders of the status quo—and they are legion—rebuke the Holy Father for his Luddite proclivities. It is fair to recognize that debates about technology are necessary when honest. But Francis is simply asserting that “technological products are not neutral, for they create a framework which ends up conditioning lifestyles and shaping social possibilities along the lines dictated by the interests of certain powerful groups” (§107). It was not too long ago that “virtual reality” was a contradiction in terms, the “web” was nature’s way of ensnaring the unaware, and a “cell” was a small room apt for quiet contemplation.

Francis’s recovery of the “joyful mystery of creation” may also supply the much-needed catalyst for the further development of the theology of the body to blossom into a full-fledged *theology of embodiment*. We need a theology of the body from the skin outward, an account of an enfleshed, organic creature among organic creatures, a theological anthropology in which the body is not only the medium by which the person expresses a gift of self but also the welcoming threshold through which one receives the originaive gift of being in all its splendor. Aligned with the trajectory of *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Francis’s defense of *omnis vita* is a brilliant instance of doctrinal development.

It means that a new kind of ecological casuistry in which the creature is granted standing will be necessary in order to guide consciences in matters of the prudential use of things. Will proportionalist moral reasoning, once jettisoned to the margins of responsible moral analysis, be perhaps poised to make a comeback under a different guise? As criteria for assessing intrinsically evil acts concerning human life and related matters, the method was declared out of

¹⁴ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 80.

bounds in *Veritatis Splendor*. As a method for assessing the prudential use of creatures and created goods, it is likely to experience a renewal. Practicing integral ecology will demand a habit of mind that takes into consideration that, to determine whether an action pertaining to lower creation is permissible, “we must look not to the action alone, but to the action in its total context,” a context that now includes the impact of one’s decisions for the environment.¹⁵ As a general rule, any use or modification of a creature must be undertaken only in deliberate deference to the order and wisdom of creation, of which it is a part, with care and prudent circumspection, when proportionate goods are clearly identified and reasonably expected and all other reasonable alternatives have been considered, including the modification of one’s lifestyle.

Laudato Si’ is an extraordinary achievement and has the capacity to inspire in the twenty-first century what the mendicants inspired in the twelfth. That I appeal to St. Thomas and not so much to St. Francis as the hermeneutic of continuity in this essay is not intended in any exclusive sense. It is merely to affirm what has transpired through the ages: the poet of *Laudato Si’* inspires us to action and the poet of *Pange Lingua* illumines the way. Whatever the legacy invoked, one can count on Green Thomists to sing as they go. N&V

¹⁵ Philip Keane, S.S., *Sexual Morality: A Catholic Perspective* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 46.