



The Treasure of *Laudato Si'*



By Christopher J. Thompson

And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

Matthew 13:52

With the promulgation of *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis portrays that scribe who has been trained for the kingdom, for *Laudato Si'* brings out in a new and more complete manner what has been implicit in the Church's treasury: that since everything is created by our loving Father, we inhabit an earth which is shared with other creatures who are created by that same Father. 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 pursued.

Despite what some may glean from the pundits, this is not the first time the Church has been called upon to address widely held but distorted visions of creation and our place within it. As early as the fourth century, St. Augustine addressed the Manichaean heresy, which while it may not be described as an environmental philosophy without some charge of anachronism, was

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nonetheless an alien philosophy of nature and our place within it. Manichees believed that cosmic forces were set to work against the human community, and they prided themselves on their appeal to strictly



rational evidence for their positions. The Church found itself embroiled in a controversy, not unlike today's, as to who had the proper reading of creation. The Manichees saw all of nature, and especially fertility itself, as fundamentally at odds with their own hopes and expectations. Against this culture of death, St. Augustine preached a vision of the world identical to that of Pope Francis: as a "joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and praise" (LS, 12). Augustine's theological defense of the goodness of creation gave Christendom an antidote to the despair that characterized the ancient gnostic visions of the world.

The Albigensian heresy of the twelfth century (itself an offspring of Manichaeism) advanced still another environmental philosophy, one that endorsed a vision of material creation as utterly corrupted and the human person as an abomination within it. The Order of Preachers that came to be through the vision of St. Dominic was inspired to address these concerns. And, among others, Thomas Aquinas answered the call to serve. His unparalleled genius and personal holiness were enough

to inspire others in their search, but perhaps more importantly, he defended a vision of the created order that still supplies the necessary tools to address the meaning of the environment and our place within it. For St. Thomas teaches us that the cosmos is a masterful icon written by God.

Laudato Si' is rooted in this theology of creation, which has been developed over the centuries. The central significance of this theology lies in its unequivocal affirmation that the native habitat of the human person, precisely as a spiritual creature, is this material cosmos of organic creatures. The human person's native habitat is this earth, intelligently arranged by a loving Father. The human person, whose dignity lies within his spiritual destiny, is nevertheless *a creature of this earth*—a living, organic being whose immortal soul by nature transcends the environment and yet by grace permeates it with eternal significance.

One of the fundamental questions the theology of creation poses is: how do you and I, as rational human beings, as sons or daughters of the Father, flourish within this divinely ordered cosmos? Francis affirms that this question "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" (LS, 89). By drawing us into a reflection upon our participation within the cosmos, Francis leads the reader through a contemporary meditation upon the ancient tradition of the natural law. He is, in other words, "like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

Renewing the Face of the Earth

The stakes could not be higher in terms of a new charter for Christendom. At the dawn of the millennium, the new evangelization will come to nothing if it does not include the unequivocal affirmation of the splendor of creation upon which it depends. For Christianity is not a philosophy, nor is it the private insight of an ego marooned on an island of self-preoccupation; nor, finally, is it a political agenda of a people united to a cause. Rather, Christianity is the extraordinary exchange of one embodied person to another, the bold invitation of an eternal friendship between the Logos of the world, enfleshed in Jesus Christ, and the human person. His humanity becomes the instrument of our salvation; our embodiment, the hinge.

Christ, the Logos made flesh, is the one through whom all things are made. Made visible in the person of Jesus Christ, one and the same Logos remains the source of all creation. Every search for wisdom is a search for Him. Every cause for wonder is an invitation from Him. Awe before creation is awe before the Word. The Book of the Holy Scriptures and the Book of Nature are one, because God as Creator and Redeemer is the author of the series. As Catholics, we cannot be indifferent to our created universe, because we are not indifferent to the Word of which it speaks: Christ the Logos of creation, Christ, the way of creation (LS, 83).

Reaffirming the integrity of creatures and calling for the

contemplative gaze of faith upon the world, the Church is again that *lumen gentium*, a light to peoples who are currently taken by the environmental movement. For, at its best, the movement is essentially a revolt of conscience among those generations of post-modernity who intuit that something is deeply flawed in our posture before the natural order of things, that our habit of treating creatures as a raw datum of purposeless matter is not consonant with reality. Francis steps out into the modern-day Areopagus and announces that “the God who made the world and everything in it,” the “Lord of heaven and earth,” “is not far from each one of us, for ‘In him we live and move and have our being’” (Acts 17:24, 27-28). Catching the culture at a moment of self-transcendence, Francis invites the world, through *Laudato Si’*, into a deeper encounter with Christ.

But this age is one of contradiction—so attuned to the beauty of creation yet deaf to its demands; at one moment celebrating its order, a few days later, declaring its irrelevance. Juxtaposed with *Obergefell*, *Laudato Si’* is the anthem of the new evangelization and the culture of life to which it gives birth. Whether in the garden bed or the marriage bed, the heart of liberty lies not in proclaiming one’s autonomy from the bonds of being, but in placing one’s liberty in service before the Father, the Creator of all life—mine, yours, theirs. 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

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being, we might glimpse the joy that lies waiting and summon a vision of human liberty that is more than mere license.

It would be a colossal misunderstanding, however, to read in these signs of the times 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 is clear enough. What has been far less clear, and thus the reason for *Laudato Si'*, is how the light of creation itself has become increasingly beclouded in virtually every sector of modern life. We are a somnambulant Church; Francis is telling us to wake up.

Take, for example, but one of the central achievements of civilization: agriculture. Bent low in respect for the soil, the farmer enters into a relationship with the order of creation that is itself already ordered and whose wisdom becomes his norm. His practical wisdom must submit to an intelligence that lies hidden in the order of things. This is why his labor was understood for centuries to be an *ars cooperativa*, a cooperative art, because his achievements are yoked to the intelligible forces at work in creation itself. Like the teacher who depends upon the natural desire to know on the part of the student, or the doctor who relies upon the natural desire to live, or the husband and wife who enact the natural desire for children, the prudent farmer labors with nature's creative forces and coaxes from the earth the fruits she is destined by Providence to yield.

The farmer's practical craft was distinguished from that of the craftsman, who works to create what is first only in the human mind. The farmer, by contrast, becomes a master in his craft only through the long and laborious tutorial in the fields. 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.

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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. What seems self-evident to most of us after a moment of reflection nonetheless seems to have escaped the attention of Catholic educators for decades. What else but somnambulism 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 that seems to have overcome us since breakfast, 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.¹ *Laudato Si'* declares that this is now culpable ignorance.

By recognizing His earth and His creatures as having standing within our ethical analyses, it is no longer sufficient for farmers merely to discern the most ecological manner in which they may achieve a profit. Instead, the polarity is reversed; farmers are called to discern the most viable means of achieving their primary vocation: the care of God's creation. The challenge of *Laudato Si'* is not to consider how I might run my

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farm in a manner that happens to respect creatures and creation, but how I care for creation in a manner that makes farming my livelihood. Care for God’s creation, not profit, is the primary purpose of Francis’s land reform, for it emerges from the original command to till and to keep His earth.

Affirming the intrinsic value of creatures means that the ethical agricultural leader will need some account of the proportionate good to be achieved in his or her actions and decisions. In the absence of a proportionate good, the indiscriminate use of lower creation may constitute a sin of abuse, a species of theft, and in some instances, a kind of blasphemy against the Creator. *Laudato Si’* makes clear that “the burden of proof is effectively reversed” (186); personal gain, such as profit, alone is no longer a compelling proportionate good when it comes to the use of creatures and creation.

The Realism of *Laudato Si’*

But it is not just agriculture that is called out for renewal. Rediscovering creation may allow

the Church’s philosophical tradition regarding the human person to take root once again in its native soil—namely, cosmology—and overcome contemporary temptations to limit the discussions of the human person within the horizon of subjectivity alone. The development of an “integral human ecology” of the sort Francis is calling for will not be achieved simply by reiterating a few principles concerning the “dignity of the human person.” For no human being contemplates the intelligible cosmos in a vacuum. Rather, the native habitat of the human person as an embodied spiritual creature is a material cosmos of created natures, the splendor of which prepares the person for an intellectual engagement with Being. St. Thomas insists that, despite the dignity of the human being as *imago dei*, humans nonetheless occupy the lowest order of intellectual creatures because they are utterly dependent upon material creatures in order to engage in intellectual acts.

Laudato Si’ rests upon a metaphysics and natural philosophy of being which provides, among other things, a robust vision of an order of intelligible creatures, utterly

dependent upon a provident God, whose causality extends to the operations of individuals—their coherence, as well as their purpose. It is not enough to “return to the subject,” or even to the poetic and spiritually rich capacities of the *imago*. Rather, in order properly to grasp the human person as a creature inhabiting a divinely inspired cosmos, one will need a philosophy of nature as the necessary complement.

In such a realist world, the order of reason is understood to inhere in things. The coherence of living organisms as well as the purposes toward which they naturally tend are objectively discovered in reality. Such an order is not derived from the mind of a disembodied *cogito* (Descartes); it is not the invention of a human reason (Kant); it is not the mere force of sentiment or custom (Hume). Such an order is intrinsic to things and its apprehension by reason is an exercise in objective knowing. What is needed, according to *Laudato Si'*, is an understanding of the human person as a spiritual creature *precisely as situated within a natural order of intelligible creation*.

In contrast to the posture of humility before the intelligible beauty of creation is the “technocratic paradigm” of the man who exalts the concept of the subject and, “using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object” (LS, 106). As Iris Murdoch once put it, such a character “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.” Murdoch poignantly concludes: “his proper name is

Lucifer” (*The Sovereignty of the Good*).

Defenders of the status quo—and they are legion—rebuke the Holy Father for these 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” (LS, 107). In so shaping culture, technology refashions our language and hence

our modes of thinking; it was not too long ago that “virtual reality” was a contradiction in terms.

The Renewal of Theology

The recovery of the “joyful mystery of creation” and the dignity of each creature will hopefully 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, if you will, an account of an enfleshed, organic creature among organic creatures, in which the body is not only the medium by which the person expresses a gift of self, but is the welcoming threshold through which one receives the origination gift of being in all its splendor. Aligned with the trajectory of *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Francis’s defense of *omnis vita* is a classic instance of doctrinal development.

Advancing this comprehensive revisioning of creation, *Laudato Si'* outlines a moral and spiritual renewal as well. Though there

is ample attention given to policy matters of a regional and international sort, Francis intends his encyclical to be “a summons to a profound spiritual conversion” (LS, 217). “Ecological virtues” will be called upon and demanded as an essential component of our Christian faith, including humility, gratitude, gratuitousness, and “the loving awareness that we are not disconnected to the rest of creatures, but joined in a splendid universal communion” (LS, 217). We thus have to “[redefine] our notion of progress” and instill habits of contemplation and “serene attentiveness” (LS, 194, 226).

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, especially living creatures and their contexts. It will not be a matter of simply turning to the “scientific community” for



the answers, for in many ways the mechanistic reductions, the “technocratic paradigms,” that have led to our scientific achievements are the very origins which have given rise to the looming catastrophes. “We still lack the culture needed to confront this crisis” (LS, 53). Ecological prudence is more than a mere consideration of efficiency. It will require a host of virtues, including scientific competency for sure, but also faith, a natural piety, humility, temperance, simplicity, and justice.

Such virtues will need to be nurtured in newer forms of life, but the Church has always had the capacity to call this forth. At the beginning of the fourth century, amidst the turmoil of a collapsing empire, St. Augustine was given the grace to proclaim the God of this good creation. Eight centuries later, St. Thomas turned our gaze to that same Light. Now at the dawn of this millennium, Francis calls us anew to contemplate the ancient truth. *Laudato Si’* has the power to be the charter for the new millennium. It will be a matter of cooperating with grace. **P**

1 For a fuller treatment of the issue, 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>

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