Laudato Si': A Commentary

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Introduction

At Pentecost on May 24, 2015 Pope Francis issued his environmental encyclical, *Laudato Si’ (Praise Be To You)* On Care for our Common Home. He addressed it to “every person living on this planet,” adopting the well-known phrase “to all people of good will” that has characterized many previous Papal encyclicals – his aim was “to enter into dialogue with all people about our common home” as “a shared inheritance.”¹ Amazingly the world rejoiced in his call, secular and religious communities alike. With remarkable astuteness, in his description of the environmental crisis that threatens creation the Pope emphasized the crucial role of climate change. He shrewdly anticipated the policy discussion at the United Nations in December 2015 where delegates from nearly 200 countries approved a landmark accord called the *Paris Agreement* to pursue the most far-reaching changes in climate policy ever achieved internationally.²

In the time between these two world-changing events (the publication of the Pope’s encyclical and the United Nations’ agreement), in Fall 2015 Duquesne University hosted the inaugural event of an annual conference series on the *Integrity of Creation* that celebrates the Spiritan Mission of the University. The theme of this first annual conference was *Climate Change*, recognizing the Pope’s leadership on this key issue. What an occasion to have the Pope’s encyclical address a topic that is so central to the Spiritan Mission. In this essay there is no need to discuss the papers of this inaugural conference – they will be published soon and the presentations are available via online streaming.³ Rather, this essay offers an ethical reflection on the Papal encyclical to explain how it offers new insight into the Catholic tradition of respecting nature and creation. It is worth noting that the call of Pope Francis for “a religious respect for the Integrity of Creation” highlights not only the Spiritan mission but also reflects the formal teaching of the Church on the integrity of creation in the *Catechism*.⁴

The Papal Encyclical

Unlike so many other encyclicals, *Laudato Si’* is written in plain language, making it extraordinarily accessible to the non-expert lay person. After indicating the challenges that we face to nurture the common home of planet earth,
the Pope turned to Scripture to explain how the Gospel of Creation calls us to harmony and communion. When faced with this divine call to stewardship, the human roots of the ecological crisis that we currently encounter become apparent – our selfish response to God’s invitation has compromised our stewardship responsibility. Only by appreciating the common good in our shared heritage can we begin to be accountable for future generations as a matter of basic justice. We need a sense of stewardship where religion and science constructively engage each other to inspire different approaches and actions that will foster environmental responsibility. Only in this context can we have sound ecological education and spirituality as sacramental signs of God’s grace. All of these points are discussed in the various chapters of the encyclical. These insights are worth exploring to understand how the Pope’s critique and optimism are well grounded. To begin, it can be helpful to say a few words about the connection between the encyclical and Natural Law for which Catholic ethics is well known.

Creation and Natural Law

The revelation in the story of Genesis is that God’s creation was very good (Genesis 1:31). However, humanity’s fall in original sin led away from a sense of stewardship based on harmony with creation to a selfish view of selfish dominion over creation (Genesis 3:17-19). Unfortunately, this disruption has led us to exploit rather than to nurture creation. But the redemptive message of the New Testament is to enable a return to harmony with God. This includes a sense of stewardship that fosters the harmony of creation as exemplified in the canticle of Saint Francis of Assisi.

Catholic ethics expresses this responsibility to creation in its emphasis upon what is referred to as Natural Law. This tradition seeks to decipher responsibilities from nature as God’s creation. This does not occur in a narrow manner of deductive reasoning. Rather, the Natural Law integrates the divine revelation of Scripture with Church teaching down the centuries to clarify ethical responsibilities when we encounter dilemmas or uncertainties. This means that the Natural Law in Catholicism is a theological endeavor. Often it is mistakenly understood as a merely rational enterprise in the sense of the Church explaining its ethical teachings through the use of reason – that is an important element of Natural Law, but at its core it is
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a theological enterprise that engages reason to interpret ethical responsibilities.

Pope Francis adopts this approach. However, he explains that the word “creation” in his encyclical has a broader meaning than the word “nature” – his point is that nature can often be used narrowly in terms of systems such as physics or biology. In contrast, he uses the word creation to express God’s gift as “a reality illuminated by the love which calls us together into universal communion” – that is, “Creation is the order of love.” He further explains that within this perspective “a fragile world, entrusted by God to human care, challenges us to devise intelligent ways of directing, developing and limiting our power” – hence, he emphasizes that “in this universe, shaped by open and intercommunicating systems, we can discern countless forms of relationship and participation.”

Here the Pope’s critique of creation expresses the theological meaning of Natural Law that has characterized Catholic ethics down the ages. This recalls a core insight of Vatican II in Gaudium et Spes that refers to “the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in light of the Gospel” – this insight was further expanded in Gaudium et Spes in this way: “The people of God believes that it is led by the Lord’s spirit who fills the earth. Motivated by this faith, it labors to decipher authentic signs of God’s presence and purpose …” Likewise, the encyclical of Pope Francis deciphers authentic signs of God’s presence and purpose with regard to the environment and our ethical responsibilities to nurture it, to care for our common home.

A similar approach characterizes the first (and so far the only) Papal encyclical on fundamental questions regarding the Church’s ethical teachings, Veritatis Splendor (issued by Saint John Paul II). That encyclical explains how God’s revelation and moral law seek to restore our “original and peaceful harmony with the Creator and with all creation.” Veritatis Splendor describes the “natural law” as “the light of understanding infused in us by God, whereby we understand what must be done and what must be avoided” – this gift was spoiled by the Fall and renewed by the Redemption as “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:2) in the sense that “the New Law is the grace of the Holy Spirit given through faith in Christ.” These remarks emphasize that the Natural Law tradition is thoroughly theological: indeed, it uses reason...
("the rational character of ethical norms belonging to the sphere of the natural moral law") but it also combines this sense of “an ethical order” with “an order of salvation.”

This approach means the following: “this participation of the eternal law in the rational creature is called natural law.” Pope Francis assumes and applies this Natural Law approach to clarify the social responsibility to care for our common home: “every ecological approach needs to incorporate a social perspective.”

Common Good & Mother Earth

Another document of Vatican II on Religious Freedom, Dignitatis Humanae, explained this integration of human and divine law that constitutes Natural Law in this way: “the supreme rule of life is the divine law by which God … arranges, directs and governs the whole world and the paths of the human community.” Similarly, Gaudium et Spes emphasized that “Christian revelation … leads us to a deeper understanding of the laws of social life;” this includes the normative guidance of the “common good” that is defined as “the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment” including “the general welfare of the entire human family” – a definition that is adopted by Pope Francis. In this sense, when the Church provides ethical guidance in its teachings, Gaudium et Spes explained that “she serves as a leaven and a kind of soul for human society” being “the universal sacrament of salvation, simultaneously manifesting and exercising the mystery of God’s love.”

In other words, Natural Law is an expression of the Church’s sacramental mission that fosters God’s love for creation. The encyclical of Pope Francis expresses this tradition when talking of “sacramental signs” whereby “nature is taken up by God to become a means of mediating supernatural life.” Hence, the Pope highlights the sacramental responsibility for “our common home” which he addresses in the words of St. Francis as “our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us” – but unfortunately we have compromised this religious symbol insofar as “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 … reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of
The harm that we have inflicted refers to the “global environmental deterioration” that results from “an ill-considered exploitation of nature” whereby our “natural environment ... serves for immediate use and consumption” – “everything is simply our property and we use it for ourselves alone” with an all too pervasive “habit of wasting and discarding” that characterizes a “dominant technological paradigm” associated with “misguided anthropocentrism,” a “consumerist vision,” the “deterioration of the environment,” and “ethical degradation.”

This is undoubtedly an expansive critique. Pope Francis calls for a radically different approach that shifts from the focus upon individuals and their exploitation of Mother Earth to “an authentic humanity” inspiring an “an authentic human ecology” that is “concerned for the world around us” and ensures “respect for the environment” – requiring a focus upon “the ethical and spiritual roots of environmental problems, which require that we look for solutions not only in technology but in a change of humanity” to foster “an integral ecology” through sustainable and integral development.

This approach combines “faith and reason” to develop a sound ecology that engages the ethical focus upon the common good in the Natural Law. What Pope Francis envisions is a theological view of the common good that is inherently ecological, respecting the environment for what it truly is, a gift of God’s love that nurtures creation and fosters “a sense of deep communion with the rest of nature” and inspires “a wonderful pilgrimage woven together by the love of God,” all encapsulated in this sentence: “human ecology is inseparable from the notion of the common good, a central and unifying principle of social ethics.”

For Pope Francis this vision is in direct contrast to the “many special interests and economic interests” that “easily end up trumping the common good.” This vision can be described as a quest for the common good that integrates humanity with the cosmos. A theologian at Duquesne University, Daniel Scheid, explores this fascinating approach in his new book, The Cosmic Common Good. Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics. Professor Scheid delineates a concept that he refers to as a Catholic cosmic common good that he relates with other major religions to explore interreligious ecological ethics.
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Francis refers in his encyclical to “religious language” that can “spur religions into dialogue” in order to address our “ecological crisis.”

From the cosmic perspective of God’s creation, an interesting thought experiment might generate a sense of modesty regarding our place in the cosmos. At the beginning of his encyclical Pope Francis refers to the encyclical *Pacem in Terris* of Pope Saint John XXIII “that peace may be assured on earth.” This was written just before Vatican II when global nuclear war was an urgent threat to humanity. Pope Francis sees a similar threat regarding the degradation of the environment. The thought experiment might be stated in this way. If humanity exterminated itself through nuclear armageddon, or if humanity suffocated and poisoned the human species and planet through environmental exploitation, would God’s cosmic glory end with the demise of humanity? Not so: God’s cosmos would continue and the planet earth would likely recover (after all, over the millions of years of evolution there have been extensive periods when humanity could never have survived on earth). Even though the wonder of God’s creation in the species called humanity may end, the resplendent glory of the cosmos would continue to reflect God’s mystery – albeit tarnished due to human irresponsibility. The call of Pope Francis is to avoid such a catastrophic scenario by encouraging the human species to flourish in a manner that cares for our common home, Mother Earth, as a cosmic common good. This is especially evident in the problem of climate change.

**Climate as a Common Good**

Of all the aspects of Pope Francis’ encyclical that have attracted attention from world leaders, climate change is the most prominent, perhaps because it presents the most immediate danger for catastrophe. In December 2015 the *Paris Agreement* that was approved by delegates from nearly 200 countries was undoubtedly a pivotal achievement. The outcome is a global climate action plan that seeks to limit global warming to 2 degrees centigrade (and even try to restrict this to 1.5 degrees centigrade) above pre-industrial levels, entering force in 2020. With the earth’s population heading for two billion by 2050, this agreement is not too soon. Efforts will be made to have global emissions peak as soon as possible so that rapid emissions reductions can occur thereafter. The hope is to achieve climate neutrality by the end of the 21st century, meaning that the planet...
can naturally absorb pollution and address the ecological concerns that radically threaten it today.

To support this crucial goal, governments will meet every five years adopting transparency and accountability systems to review progress, and to set more ambitious targets. In addition, the national delegates agreed to strengthen the ability of society to deal with the threatening impacts of climate change, including addressing loss and damage and planning early warning systems and emergency preparedness. Furthermore, developed nations promised enhanced international support to developing nations. The success of this agreement combines technology and economy with political will: technological developments will focus on harnessing solar, wind and ocean power combined with emerging storage technology; economic pressure against polluting resources such as fossil fuels could mean that their increased costs will enable alternative less-polluting renewable energy resources to become more pervasive; and the political commitment in the Paris Agreement indicates the will and planning to meet the necessary emission restrictions to make the threshold difference that is required.28

These significant accomplishments reflect the view of Pope Francis: “climate is a common good, belonging to all and meant for all” and “a very solid scientific consensus indicates that we are presently witnessing a disturbing warming of the climatic system” – hence, we must address “the human causes which produce or aggravate” climate change such as “greenhouse gases … released mainly as a result of human activity” with two major culprits, “the intensive use of fossil fuels” and “deforestation for agricultural purposes.”29 The Paris Agreement by the United Nations has responded to what Pope Francis described as the urgent need to develop policies: “in the next few years, the emission of carbon dioxide and other highly polluting gases can be drastically reduced, for example substituting for fossil fuels and developing sources of renewable energy” – by renewable the Pope has in mind “sustainable use” by which he refers to “each ecosystem’s regenerative ability.”30

The Pope’s message that climate change is a common good reflects Papal teachings that emerge from the Natural law on other topics. Unfortunately, some Catholic politicians appear unwilling to recognize the Pope’s authority regarding this topic, though they exuberantly support this authority with regard to other issues with
which they agree. For example, in the current Presidential primaries a Catholic candidate has mentioned that the Pope should not talk about climate change, claiming that the Pope should focus on theology and ethics and leave science to the scientists. This indicates a surprising lack of recognition of climate change as a theological and ethical issue. Apart from the political undercurrent in this statement, the remark evidences a significant misunderstanding of how Papal teaching functions with regard to Natural Law. Interestingly, this candidate robustly defends the Pope’s teaching against abortion. However, the controversial stance appears not to recognize that traditional Church teaching on abortion relies as much on science as does the teaching of Pope Francis on climate change. The Catholic Natural Law applies to ecology as well as to embryology. In other words, it is the consistency of Pope Francis’s teaching on ecology with Natural Law that makes his teaching so robust and challenging: climate change is a common good just as protecting the natural process of procreation is a common good.

This can be surprising for many Catholics, but Pope Francis is intent on using his Papal authority to protect Mother Earth. He all too willingly concedes that “on many concrete questions, the Church has no reason to offer a definitive answer” recognizing that “honest debate must be encouraged among experts, while respecting divergent views” – but regarding the environmental crisis that we face, Pope Francis unambiguously demands “a frank look at the facts to see that our common home is falling into serious disrepair” to the extent that “we can see signs that things are now reaching a breaking point, due to the rapid pace of change and degradation.” The response of the Pope is to develop an integral ecology.

An Integral Ecology

Pope Francis develops a bold and dramatic vision for the environment. He is unwilling to speak evasively about the ecological threat facing us: “doomsday predictions can no longer be met with irony or disdain … our contemporary lifestyle, unsustainable as it is, can only precipitate catastrophes” – in the face of this bleak outlook he courageously challenges the “ethical and cultural decline which has accompanied the deterioration of the environment” and is emphatic that “halfway measures simply delay the inevitable disaster.”
To develop an integral ecology we must engage the “relationship existing between nature and the society in which it lives” to seek “comprehensive solutions which consider the interactions within natural systems themselves and with social systems” – his point here is breathtaking insofar as he integrates the environmental and social components: “we are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental.”

What is sought is an ethical ecology that is extraordinarily broad including all of these components: an environmental ecology in which “economic ecology” and “social ecology” work together “in the service of a more integral and integrating vision;” a “cultural ecology” that respects our “historic, artistic and cultural patrimony” including “care for indigenous communities and their cultural traditions;” an “ecology of daily life” supporting “human ecology” and celebrating “the relationship between human life and the moral law” which is necessary for “a more dignified environment;” respect for “the principle of the common good” that not only applies “the principle of subsidiarity” (to “develop the capabilities at every level of society”) but also has a “particular concern for distributive justice” as “a summons to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest;” and a commitment to “justice between generations” that promotes “intergenerational solidarity” and “intragenerational solidarity.”

To effectively implement this bold vision, Pope Francis combines several approaches as “major paths of dialogue” to address the “great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge” that emerges before us. His hope for dialogue in the international community was robustly engaged by the United Nations in the Paris Agreement. The Pope encouraged us “to think of one world with a common plan” that fosters “a global consensus” around “systems of governance for the whole range of so-called global commons,” and the Paris Agreement appears to have accepted and responded to this challenge.

The Pope’s agenda delineates a wide spectrum of ecological issues including preventive actions and progressive interventions such as the following: limiting greenhouse gas concentration in the atmosphere; using less polluting forms of energy while progressively replacing fossil fuels; protecting biodiversity; planning sustainable
and diversified agriculture; promoting the efficient use of renewable energy; developing good management of forest resources and sound governance of the oceans; and creating universal access to drinking water.42

Fundamentally, the Pope seeks a “covenant between humanity and the environment” urging an approach to “environmental education … which gives ecological ethics its deepest meaning;” he emphasizes that “an ethics of ecology” needs to foster “an ecological citizenship” that seeks “to instil good habits” and “make a selfless ecological commitment;” and all of this requires an “ecological conversion” based upon “an ecological spirituality” for “a genuine culture of care for the environment.”43

Conclusion

This reflection has used the words of Pope Francis extensively to let his rhetoric inspire and guide us on this very challenging landscape of the ethics of ecology. The connection of his environmental vision with Natural Law is intended to emphasize that while his teaching is extraordinarily bold it is connected in a seamless way with how Catholic moral teaching has developed over the centuries. This has enabled the Pope to integrate faith and reason to engage a meaningful dialogue with people of all faiths and none about our common home. The success of the Paris Agreement in the wake of this landmark encyclical is amazing – the Pope’s call for a global commons and consensus has certainly been significantly engaged by the work of the United Nations in December 2015. Indeed, there is much to accomplish, but this encyclical may have had more immediate success in global politics than any other. Now that is a nice start to 2016!

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Endnotes


4 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, no. 130; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), no. 2415-2418.


6 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, no. 82, 87.

7 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, no. 76-77.

8 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, no. 78-79.


12 Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 36-37.


14 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, no. 93.


16 Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 23, 26; Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, no. 156.

17 Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 40 and no. 45.

18 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, no. 235.


20 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, no. 3-5, 27, 56, 101, 107, 119, 144.

21 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, no. 5-6, 9-10, 13, 112, 124, and chapter four that has the title, “Integral Ecology.”
22Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’,* no. 63.

23Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’,* no. 91-92, 156.

24Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’,* no. 53.


26Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’,* no. 199, 201.


30Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’,* no. 26, 140.


32Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’,* no. 61.

33Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’,* no. 161, 194.

34Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’,* no. 139.

35Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’,* no. 141-142.

36Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’,* no. 143, 146.

37Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’,* no. 147, 155.

38Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’,* no. 157-158, 196.

39Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’,* no. 159, 162.


43Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’,* no. 210-211, 216-217, 229.