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## Current Social Justice Trends in Spiritan Activities: A Focus on the Influence of Laudato Si'

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## CURRENT SOCIAL JUSTICE TRENDS IN SPIRITAN ACTIVITIES: A FOCUS ON THE INFLUENCE OF LAUDATO SI'

### INTRODUCTION

In 2015, Pope Francis published the encyclical *Laudato Si'*, which translates to "Praise Be". This research sought to understand the impact of the publication of *Laudato Si'* on the prioritization of social justice issues by the Spiritan congregation. In this article, we explore how the influence of *Laudato Si'* manifested through Spiritan social justice work. We sought to understand what types of social issues were prioritized by the congregation and whether or not that had changed over time. There is little research available on this information. In this study, we performed a content analysis of Spiritan publications to identify themes in the congregation's social justice work and to analyze the continuity and change over time regarding environmentally focused themes to understand the influence of *Laudato Si'*.

### SPIRITANS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

In 1703, Claude Francis Poullart des Places, noticing the gross inequalities in the world around him, founded the Holy Ghost Congregation, focusing on the betterment of the poor.<sup>1</sup> This small community would grow into a Catholic religious congregation with around three thousand members with influence in nations around the world.<sup>2</sup> The Spiritan congregation continues to focus much of their modern practice on areas of social justice, inspired by the works of their founders. Social Justice is defined by Dr. Bradley Campbell of California State University as "the idea that the way institutions are organized is of moral concern."<sup>3</sup> The Spiritan practice demonstrates a dedication to promoting systemic social justice through both their goals and approach to advocacy. One of the main goals of the congrega-

1. "Poullart Des Places." Spiritans Roma, May 2, 2018. <https://spiritans-roma.org/poullart>.
2. "Who We Are." Congregation of the Holy Spirit: Province of the United States. Accessed April 16, 2023. <https://spiritans.org/who-we-are>.
3. Bradley Campbell, "Social Justice and Sociological Theory." *Society* 58, no. 5, 2021. 356.

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*Christians are called to strive for peace and justice as a means to show respect for all of God's creatures*

tion is to work towards “advancing Justice, Peace and integrity of Creation (JPIC)”, going as far to say that “For us Mission is JPIC...”<sup>4</sup> They describe an approach to advocacy that contains two prongs, being charity and justice. The charity prong focuses on pastoral humanitarianism, providing goods and services to alleviate the everyday struggles of poverty; an emphasis on the structural systems, as described by Campbell, is present in the justice prong, which includes focus on policy creation and post-conflict state reconstruction. In this way, social justice is inherently tied to the Spiritan Mission. This focus on justice is rooted in both the Bible itself and in years of Catholic social teaching highlighting the importance of social cognizance.

The Spiritan focus on justice and peace stems from the emphasis placed on these topics in the Bible. Throughout both the Old and New Testaments, there are references to the concepts of peace and justice, framing them as inherently good and paramount for any Christian. In the Old Testament, the Prophet Jeremiah calls for justice on behalf of God, saying “This is what the LORD says: Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor, the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place.”<sup>5</sup> In addition, in the New Testament, in the Epistle to the Romans, Paul states “Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, as urged in these individual quotes and throughout the themes of the Bible, Christians are called to strive for peace and justice as a means to show respect for all of God’s creatures, no matter their social status. Members of the Spiritan congregation engage with this message by engaging in works that advance peace, justice, and the integrity of creation.

## LAUDATO SI’

In 2015, Pope Francis released the Encyclical letter *Laudato Si’*, which applies the biblical calls for justice to environmental issues. In this encyclical, Pope Francis notes how members of marginalized communities suffer most from the changes to the environment; “In fact, the deterioration of the environment and of society affects the most vulnerable people on the planet...The impact of present imbalances is

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4. “Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation.” Spiritans Roma, March 10, 2023. <https://spiritanroma.org/jpic>.

5. Jeremiah 22:3.

6. Romans 12:17-18.

“Praised  
be You,  
my Lord,  
through our  
Sister Mother  
Earth,  
who sustains  
and governs us,  
and who  
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with colored  
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and herbs.”

also seen in the premature death of many of the poor, in conflicts sparked by the shortage of resources, and in any number of other problems which are insufficiently represented on global agendas.”<sup>7</sup> There is a long history of Catholic social teaching connecting care for God’s creation to care for the environment, predating this encyclical. St. Francis of Assisi, who lived as a friar in twelfth century Italy, connected the ideals of peacefulness and justice to his relationship with the natural world. In his *Canticle of Brother Sun*, he praises each of the natural elements, along with the sun and moon, and thanks God for their creations. He writes “[p]raised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs.”<sup>8</sup> Additionally, Pope St. John Paul II called for Catholics to follow the teachings of St. Francis, describing a “lack of respect for life evident in many of the patterns of environmental pollution” in his 1990 World Day of Peace Message.<sup>9</sup> *Laudato Si’* further develops the conception that environmental issues are fundamentally tied to Christian understandings of peace and justice. Following its publishing, many Catholics took to works focusing more heavily on the environment. This is evidenced by the birth of the *Laudato Si’* movement, which now has fifty-eight chapters and 967 member organizations across the world.<sup>10</sup>

## TRENDS IN SOCIAL JUSTICE AFTER LAUDATO SI’

The goal of this research is to analyze the trends evident in Spiritan social justice work. Additionally, there is a focus on understanding the influence of *Laudato Si’*’s publication on Spiritan justice work. To gain this understanding, a content analysis was performed, in which we read published works and made notes of relevant themes to create conclusions on the publications and their publishers. The primary subject of the content analysis was the Spiritan *Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation Newsletter (JPIC Newsletter)*, which

7. Francis. (2015). *Laudato Si’*. Retrieved from [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)

8. Willem Marie Speelman, “A Song in the Dark. Francis of Assisi’s Canticle of Brother Sun.” *Perichoresis* 14, no. 2 (2016). 54.

9. John Paul II. (1990). *Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all of Creation*. Retrieved from [http://www.inee.mu.edu/documents/2EcologicalCrisis-pope\\_000.pdf](http://www.inee.mu.edu/documents/2EcologicalCrisis-pope_000.pdf)

10. “Laudato Si’ Movement.” *Laudato Si’ Movement, April 12, 2023*. <https://laudatosimovement.org/>.

was published from 2015 to 2019. Throughout the process of reading each article in the newsletters, we listed each social justice project being undertaken and rendered from them pertinent themes. These themes, which were often hyper-specific to their activity, were labeled as “minor themes”. For the purposes of analysis, these “minor themes” were condensed into more general “major themes” when applicable. We then analyzed these major themes to understand trends. Due to the interconnectedness of social issues, activities were often listed with multiple “minor themes” and, therefore, are sometimes present in multiple major themes as well. For example, Spiritan work in Brazil protecting rubber resources fell into the major themes of “Ending Social Inequality”, “Environmental Issues”, “Justice for Oppressed Groups”, “Ending Government Corruption”, and “Rural Community Building/ Strengthening”. This is because this group of Spiritans worked to preserve natural resources as a means of protecting the rights of indigenous groups to rubber resources, which have often been overrun by the claims of corporations to those resources. Therefore, activities were coded into the various themes that best fit the activity itself.

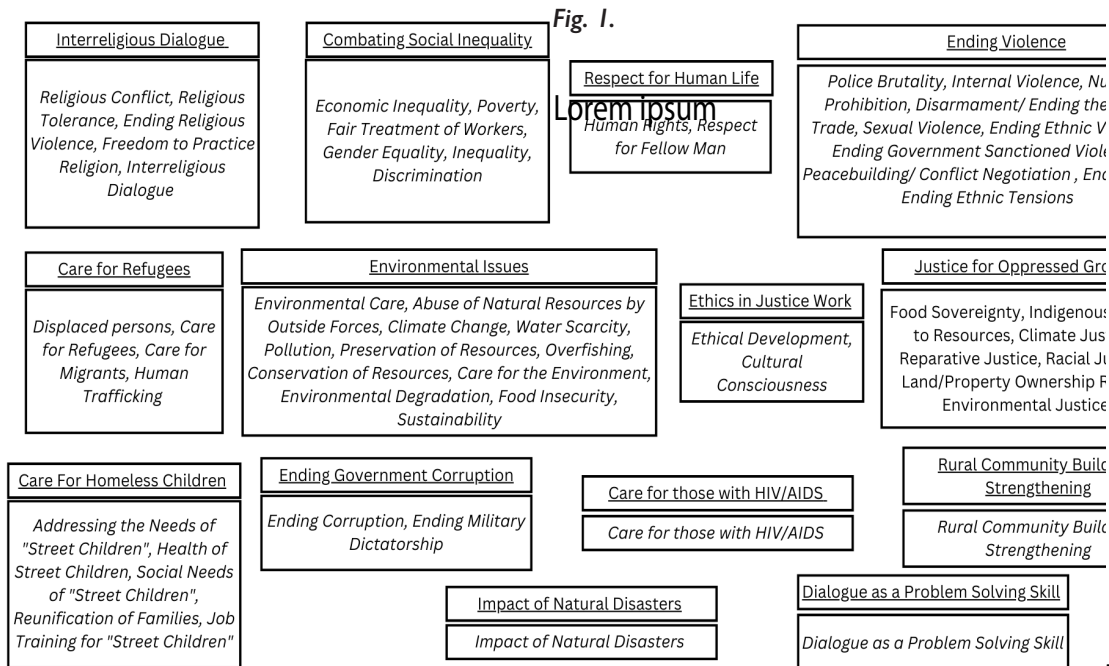
*The number of minor themes displayed in the chart is different from the number of activities that are counted by theme, as displayed later in the text.*

In the *JPIC Newsletters*, there were thirty-six different activities described over seven newsletters. Fifty-nine minor themes were identified and then condensed into fourteen major themes. The chart (fig. 1) shows how these minor themes were grouped into major themes. It is important to note that one activity could have multiple minor themes, and as a result, could be counted across more than one theme. Thus, the number of minor themes displayed in the chart is different from the number of activities that are counted by theme, as displayed later in the text.

**THEMES ASSOCIATED  
WITH SPIRITAN SOCIAL JUSTICE WORK:  
MAJOR THEMES AS DEFINED BY MINOR THEMES**

*(See fig. 1)*

As noted (fig. 1), the major themes included “Limiting Religious Conflict”, “Combating Social Inequality”, “Ending Violence”, “Care for Refugees”, “Environmental Issues”, “Justice for Oppressed Groups”, “Care for Homeless Children”, “Respect for Human Life”, “Ethics in Justice Work”, “Ending Government Corruption”, “Rural Community Building/Strengthening”, “Care for Those with HIV/AIDS”, “Dialogue as a Problem-Solving Skill”, and “Impact of Natural Disasters”. Out of these major themes, the three with the most activities were “Limiting Religious Conflict”, which included twelve activities and



*The most prominent major social justice theme was “Limiting Religious Conflict”, encompassing twelve social justice activities.*

five minor themes, “Ending Violence”, which included nine activities and ten minor themes, and “Environmental Issues”, which included nine activities and twelve minor themes.

The most prominent major social justice theme was “Limiting Religious Conflict”, encompassing twelve social justice activities. Some examples of this work include Tangaza University College in Kenya beginning an interreligious dialogue program,<sup>11</sup> the hosting of an interreligious dialogue summit in Zanzibar,<sup>12</sup> and Spiritan communities assisting Muslim communities in need in the Philippines.<sup>13</sup>

The major themes of “Ending Violence” and “Environmental Issues” were tied for second most frequent, with nine activities in each theme. Some of the activities included in the “Ending Violence” theme were working to teach conflict resolution skills in Sierra Leone<sup>14</sup> and the Lay Spiritan group Voice of Women, which works to elevate female voices for peace in times of conflict.<sup>15</sup> For “Environmental Issues”, activities included work in Brazil to conserve rubber

11. *Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation Newsletter*, Issue 5, January 2018, 11.

12. *Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation Newsletter*, Issue 8, June 2019, 1-8.

13. *Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation Newsletter*, Issue 1, October 2015, 7-8.

14. *Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation Newsletter*, Issue 4, April 2017, 4-6.

15. *Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation Newsletter*, Issue 3, October 2016, 4-6



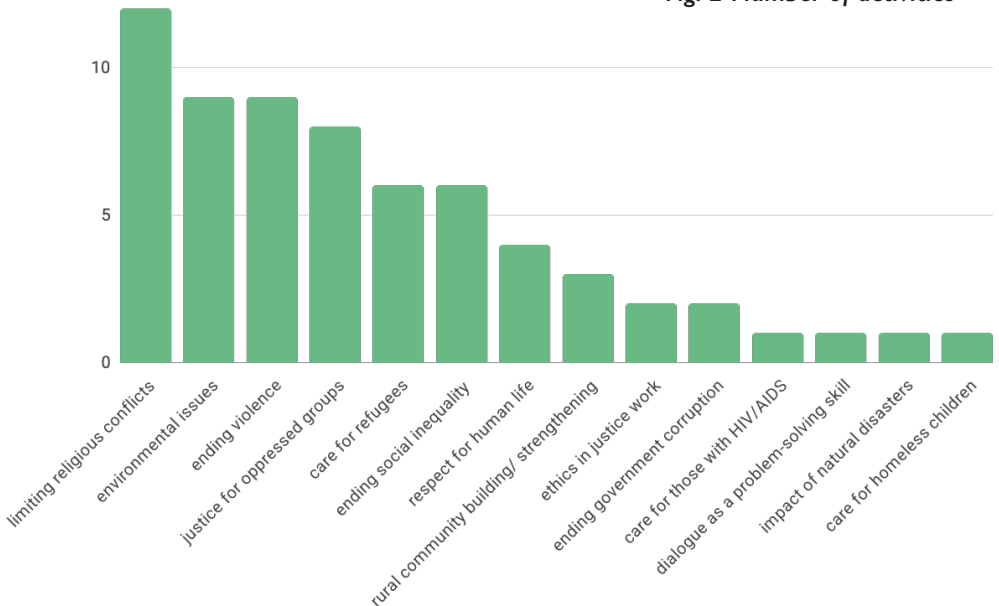
*The activities were too unique to be condensed into another theme.*

and water resources<sup>16</sup> and the hosting of a discussion of research relevant to water scarcity at the Integrity of Creation Conference at Duquesne University in the United States.<sup>17</sup>

The least prominent major themes only had one activity within them, but the activities were too unique to be condensed into another theme. These themes were “Care for Homeless Children”, “Care for Those with HIV/AIDS”, “Dialogue as a Problem-Solving Skill”, and “Impact of Natural Disasters”. We found that the activity within these themes represented something entirely distinctive from the other activities within the other themes. Therefore, we did not condense these activities into another major theme, allowing these themes to only contain a single activity, in an effort to maintain the nuances of those activities.

**FREQUENCY OF MAJOR THEMES IN SPIRITAN SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTIVITY FROM 2015-2019**

*Fig. 2 Number of activities*



***Trends in Social Justice Before Laudato Si’***

We wanted to understand the changes in social justice activity due to *Laudato Si’*. However, the JPIC Newsletter did not exist before 2015, so we relied on *Spiritan*, a missionary magazine published by the Trans-Canada Spiritan Province. We analyzed issues from arti-

16. *Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation Newsletter*, Issue 4, April 2017, 10-13.

17. *Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation Newsletter*, Issue 5, January 2018, 7-9.

cles of the magazine published between 2010 and 2014 as a secondary source to complete our comparative analysis, as they provide insight into social justice activities from before the publication of *Laudato Si'*. Any articles relevant to social justice activity in the magazine were also listed and their “minor themes” were described. Similar to the process followed with the *JPIC Newsletter*, the “minor themes” were then condensed into “major themes”. The frequency of the major themes over time was then used as a unit of comparative analysis.

*Nine of the major themes present in the JPIC Newsletter were also present in Spiritan.*

The themes within *Spiritan* were distinct from the themes within the *JPIC Newsletter*. In total, there were forty-seven “minor themes” present from forty-nine activities. These were condensed into nineteen “major themes”. There were five major themes unique to the *JPIC Newsletter* that did not have an equivalent in *Spiritan*; therefore, nine of the major themes present in the *JPIC Newsletter* were also present in *Spiritan*. Interestingly, the frequency of the themes in *Spiritan* did not mirror that of the *JPIC Newsletter*. The most frequent theme in *Spiritan* was “Access to Education”, including activities like a Spiritan working as an English teacher in Papua New Guinea<sup>18</sup> and the building of new schools in Nicaragua.<sup>19</sup> “Healthcare for the Poor” and “Addressing Poverty” were second most frequent, with eleven activities. “Environmental Issues” only contained two activities from the Magazine, being the creation of a Simplicity Circle to help decrease consumption<sup>20</sup> and a call to action for Spiritans to change their lifestyles to protect the environment.<sup>21</sup>

*There has been an increased focus on environmental issues over time.*

## **FREQUENCY OF MAJOR THEMES IN SPIRITAN SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTIVITY FROM 2010-2014**

### ***Conclusions***

Overall, this study sought to identify trends in Spiritan social justice work. It was found that activities regarding ending religious conflict, ending violence, and protecting the environment were the most prominent in current social justice work. There has been an increased focus on environmental issues over time. This increase is seen in publications post-2015, when *Laudato Si'* was published.

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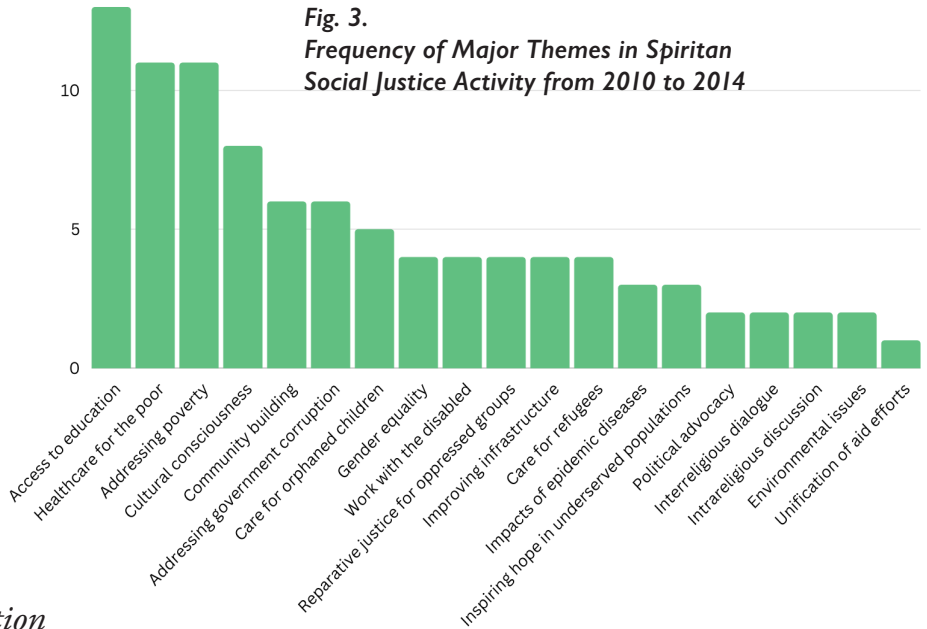
18. *Spiritan*, Volume 35, Issue 3, 12-15.

19. *Spiritan*, Volume 36, Issue 2, 20-21.

20. *Spiritan*, Volume 36, Issue 1, 16-17.

21. *Spiritan*, Volume 37, Issue 2, 12-13.





*A correlation between the publication of Pope Francis' encyclical Laudato Si' and an increase in social justice work prioritizing the environment as a means of achieving justice for oppressed groups.*

Additionally, current activities relating to the environment tend to acknowledge the interconnectedness of social inequalities and environmental degradation, which was not apparent in publications from before 2015. This points to a correlation between the publication of Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'* and an increase in social justice work prioritizing the environment as a means of achieving justice for oppressed groups.

Our analysis showed that current Spiritan social justice activities often focus on working to end conflict globally. The projects meant to achieve this goal are most often fixated on bringing about an end to religious conflicts, focusing on outreach to other religious groups and re-affirming a commitment to peace by standing against violence in the name of their religion. There is also a concerted effort to bring an end to regional or ethnic conflicts. To practice mediation in these conflicts, Spiritans rely on a variety of different methods. They work with the victims of violence in refugee camps, teach conflict resolution skills, and practice a form of political advocacy in which they use their platforms to speak on behalf of the most oppressed by war and violence.

Additionally, care for the environment is a prominent theme, appearing as frequently as attempts to end non-religious violence. Much of the advocacy for the environment seen in *JPIC Newsletters* are focused on raising awareness for the wide variety of environmental issues present around the world, like heat waves

leading to wildfires in Australia or flooding in Nigeria caused by climate change. Much of the action being taken by Spiritans towards the betterment of the environment is tied directly to other equity issues. Spiritans in Nigeria speak of how the draining of swampland is a direct reflection of the inequality that native residents face and Spiritans in Brazil note how corporations deprive indigenous groups of the resources they need through intense rubber harvesting practices, leading them to work on conservation efforts.

Throughout the *JPIC Newsletters*, connections were made between societal inequalities and environmental changes. In this way, it is clear that the social implications of environmental problems, as expressed by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'*, have been embraced by many Spiritans. The change in focus on the environment since the publications of *Spiritans* of 2010 to 2014 only serve to further highlight this. First, there were fewer examples of Spiritan activities relating to the environment in these older publications. Furthermore, the activities that did exist focused more on individual and personal changes that could help the environment. For example, a Spiritan described starting a Simplicity Circle, in which a group of neighbors would meet to discuss the ways in which they were making changes to limit their individual consumption. While this type of project would benefit the environment, it does not highlight how environmental issues are interconnected with social issues. These older activities have less of a focus on increasing justice for oppressed people through the protection and support of the environment. Therefore, the increase in presence of activities relating to environmental issues, and the heightened focus on justice as it relates to the environment, since the publication of *Laudato Si'* in 2015 illustrates a correlation between *Laudato Si'* and an increased focus on environmental issues as a means of achieving justice.

Upon review, the major themes reflected in the Spiritan activities from after 2015 align with the United Nations' sustainable development goals. The seventeen sustainable development goals created by the United Nations are a part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which was adopted in 2015. These goals

*The seventeen sustainable development goals ... are an urgent call for action by all countries - developed and developing - in a global partnership.*

... are an urgent call for action by all countries - developed and developing - in a global partnership. They recognize that ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic

growth – all while tackling climate change... .<sup>22</sup>

*These themes mirror each other so closely showcases the differentiation made in the Spiritan mission between charity, or smaller scale, individualized acts of service, and justice, which seeks to alter systems and create permanent, lasting change.*

These goals are “No Poverty”, “Zero Hunger”, “Good Health and Well-being”, “Quality Education”, “Gender Equality”, “Clean Water and Sanitation”, “Affordable Clean Energy”, “Decent Work and Economic Growth”, “Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure”, “Reduced Inequalities”, “Sustainable Cities and Communities”, “Responsible Production and Consumption”, “Climate Action”, “Life Below Water”, “Life on Land”, “Peace, Justice And Strong Institutions”, and “Partnership for the Goals”. There is considerable overlap between these themes and the major themes of Spiritan justice work. For example, the theme of “Ending Economic Inequality” mirrors the UN goals of “No Poverty” and “Reduced Inequalities”. Additionally, “Gender Equality” is, verbatim, a major theme and a development goal. Other similarities include the major theme “Conservation of Resources” and development goal fifteen, “Life on Land”, as well as major theme “Ending Government Corruption” and goal sixteen, “Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions”. The fact that these themes mirror each other so closely showcases the differentiation made in the Spiritan mission between charity, or smaller scale, individualized acts of service, and justice, which seeks to alter systems and create permanent, lasting change. The United Nations carefully crafted these seventeen development goals to identify and highlight the systemic problems that most urgently need to be addressed. Therefore, Spiritan justice work aligned with these goals is evidence of the dedication of the congregation to creating viable, actionable solutions to some of the greatest problems in the world today.

## CONCLUSION

This study does have certain limitations that must be taken into consideration. First, the process of coding, or assigning and condensing themes, is subjective. This makes it hard to reproduce, limiting the reliability of this study. Also, the process of condensing minor themes into major themes eliminates nuance from each activity. This prevents each individual activity from being represented in its entirety in the final results. Finally, as this study relied on content analysis, only information published in the *JPIC Newsletter*, as well as articles published in *Spiritana* between 2010 and 2014, was used for analysis. It is important to note that while the newsletter is congrega-

22. “The 17 Goals | Sustainable Development.” United Nations. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>.

*Interviewing individual Spiritans would be beneficial to gain a better understanding of how members of the congregation involved in social justice work perceive the impact of Laudato Si's publication.*

tion wide, *Spiritan* is a missionary animation magazine of the Trans-Canada Spiritan Province, so the magazine is more limited in scope. Furthermore, any social justice activities that were not included in these publications would not be reflected in the study.

Future studies would benefit from gaining more information on social justice trends in Spiritan activities. One way to do this would be to perform a similar content analysis on *Spiritan* from 2015 up until its most recent publication. In addition, interviewing individual Spiritans would be beneficial to gain a better understanding of how members of the congregation involved in social justice work perceive the impact of *Laudato Si's* publication. Overall, while the analysis of articles in *Spiritan* and *JPIC Newsletter* provides only a singular glimpse into Spiritan social justice activities, they provide information that allows us to monitor the changes in social justice trends over time; a similar style of research via content analysis could be used by those who wish to continue to gain more insight into Spiritan justice work in the future.

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