

Beyond Doctrinal Squabbles - Our Birthright and Responsibility

A Call to a Broader, Deeper Path of Hope and Challenge

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Two years ago, Pope Francis electrified the world with his eloquent encyclical, *Laudato Si* - a plea for humans of all faiths and beliefs to unite in protection of the natural world.

And today, as the current tenant of the White House and his cabinet seem ever more intent on destroying the land, water, and air on which we all depend, the message of *Laudato* is even more relevant.

As I [commented](#) on the encyclical upon its release, *Laudato Si* affirms the millennia-old Creation Spirituality tradition, echoing not only Judeo-Christian teaching but also the teachings of every other spiritual tradition.

Borrowed from his namesake Francis of Assisi's famous poem to Brother Sun and Sister Moon, the title "Laudato Si" translates as "Praise Be to You," and the encyclical carries a message and a spirit that echo much of the soul of St. Francis.

As Indigenous peoples would say, these are humanity's "Original Instructions" – our birthright and responsibility – to live in balance with the natural world and the natural patterns of the planet; to treat all living things, and one another, with compassion and respect. To do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with the Divine.

Humans around the world are eager for some moral voices to stand up and be counted, so beset are we by multinational corporations and their lobbyists and their media moguls who, like secular popes, declare infallibly each day what is and is not news while they pad their corporate pockets with dark money raised by an avalanche of consumer goods, most of which feed the world unnecessary goodies. Surely this is one reason the Dalai Lama has the following he does. And it is the reason Pope Francis is being heard by more and more people around the world and

why, borrowing from his idol, Pope John XXIII, he addressed this encyclical on Climate Change and Ecology to all persons of the world, Christian or not, believers or not.

After all, as the waters disappear along with glaciers, as animals go extinct, as farmland turns to dustbowls, as storms grow ever more frequent and violent, as floods occur, as the seas rise, as the air becomes more and more impossible to breathe, does it really matter whether one is atheist or Buddhist, Catholic or Baptist, Hindu or goddess, indigenous or Muslim? As I wrote years ago in my book, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*, there is no such thing as a Roman Catholic rainforest, a Buddhist river, a Hindu ocean, a Baptist moon or Lutheran sun or atheist cornfield.

Ecological realities teach all our religions and all our religious ideologies a bit of humility. Earth is far older than religions. With this encyclical Pope Francis is saying something similar: What unites us is our common need and the Earth's common beneficence—and it is time to put our doctrinal scuffles aside and unite for our and future generations' common good.

Years ago when I was a college sophomore in Dubuque, Iowa, the Mississippi River was overflowing. All sorts of us, college students, seminarians Protestant, Catholic and Jewish, blue collar workers, employed and unemployed, young and old, gathered at the river banks to create sand bags and hold back the rising waters. I recall observing to myself then that it didn't matter how different we were in ideology or religion or backgrounds or age. It was my first real experience in *deep ecumenism* and an awakening that in the context of the deepest issues in life, common survival and nature's force among them, we are one.

This same lesson comes through in this encyclical written for all of us on the planet today who are observing the health and beauty of our precious home disappear before our very eyes. Some are in denial—especially those making big bucks on the current crisis. And some are waking up. This encyclical lights a fire for the latter.

And we know the Pope is being heard because a Fox News commentator declared, on hearing of this encyclical, "Pope Francis is the most dangerous man on the planet." Other conservative voices both within and outside the Church, continue to concur. Congratulations, Pope Francis! Reactionaries are speaking with their usual wisdom...and fear. What a compliment!

It's sort of like creation spirituality being denounced some years ago by Cardinal Ratzinger as "dangerous and deviant." A feather in our cap! A badge of honor we have tried to wear lightly and humbly all these years. When those who set out to destroy liberation theology, silence 106 theologians, dumb the church down deliberately, ignore and cover up pedophile priests, elevating one (Father Maciel) to special trips in the Vatican plane and special ordinations in St Peter's Square, call Protestant churches not Christian, forbid Catholics to practice yoga because it gets you "too much in touch with your body," etc.—when such a person calls your work "dangerous and deviant" you take the compliment with grace.

So it is with Pope Francis' encyclical. When Rush Limbaugh calls the pope "Marxist" --even though the pope has predicted this would happen and has pointed out on several occasions that he is speaking from the values of the gospel and not of Karl Marx as such (though let us never forget Marx comes from the tradition of the Jewish prophets as did Jesus) then the pope finds himself in good company with so many others that poor and ignorant and loud-mouthed and super-rich Rush Limbaugh has diced.

There is much in *Laudato Si* to celebrate, but what I would like to address is a question put to me by a very wise priest/psychiatrist I know: He said to me: "Surely this encyclical is about the coming of age of creation spirituality, isn't it?" That is the question I wish to address in this essay. We will consider the Four Paths that make up the very skeleton and backbone of creation spirituality and further concepts that are explicit both in the creation spirituality tradition and the pope's encyclical.

The Via Positiva

Let us first look at the language and concepts utilized in the encyclical. I was very pleased to see the pope appeal to Beauty on twenty-seven different occasions! I have often said that the idea of Beauty as a name for God has been sorrowfully missing in modern discourse and theology (Descartes has a whole philosophy with no philosophy of aesthetics). In pre-modern times Beauty was indeed a significant category for the Divine. In my *Original Blessing* book, subtitled *A Primer in Creation Spirituality* I have a whole category on Beauty.

In the encyclical we read phrases like the following:

"Nature is a magnificent book in which God speaks to us and grants us a glimpse of his infinite beauty and goodness." (12)¹

After speaking of the disappearance of ecosystems and creatures, we are told to beware of substituting "an irreplaceable and irretrievable beauty with something which we have created ourselves." (34)

God's plan is "for peace, beauty and fullness." (53)

The entire universe holds a "mysterious beauty of what is unfolding" that we can come to know. (79)

Jesus himself invited "others to be attentive to the beauty that there is in the world because he himself was in constant touch with nature, lending it an attention full of fondness and wonder. As he made his way through out the land, he often stopped to contemplate the beauty sown by his Father, and invited his disciples to perceive a divine

¹ The numbers here refer to the numbered sections within the encyclical.

message in things: ‘Lift up your eyes, and see how the fields are already white for harvest.’ (97)

Humans bring about a “quantum leap” in beauty with our art including aircraft and skyscrapers and music and more. (103)

“A kind of salvation... occurs in beauty and to those who behold it.” (112) This very much parallels what Meister Eckhart taught when he wrote: “This, then, is salvation, when we marvel at the beauty of created things and praise the beautiful providence of their Creator or when we purchase heavenly goods by our compassion for works of creation.”²

“In the spirituality of the Christian East beauty ‘is one of the best loved names [for God] expressing the divine harmony and the model of humanity transfigured....’” (235)

“At the end we will find ourselves face to face with the infinite Beauty of God.” (243)

Pope Francis offers a prayer at the conclusion of his encyclical “for all who believe” in a God who is a Creator God. In it he moves beyond theism as he begins the prayer this way: “You are present in the whole universe and in the smallest of your creatures.” And he asks God to “pour out upon us the power of your love, that we may protect life and beauty.” He asks that “we may protect the world and not prey on it, that we may sow beauty, not pollution and destruction.” (246)

A final prayer asks God to “Teach us to contemplate you in the beauty of the universe, for all things speak of you.” (246) This too rings with Meister Eckhart who says every creature is a word of God and a book about God and that all creatures are “words of God.”

The Via Positiva plays a rich role in this encyclical. The word “goodness” (another word for this is “blessing” as in “original blessing”) is used at least eleven occasions including the following:

“Saint Francis, faithful to Scripture, invites us to see nature as a magnificent book in which God speaks to us and grants us a glimpse of his infinite beauty and goodness.” The result? “Rather than a problem to be solved the world is a joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and praise.” (12)

He cites Saint Basil who called God “goodness without measure” and we are encouraged to recognize creation as being more than a “system which can be studied, understood and controlled” but rather is “a gift from the outstretched hand of the Father of all” which came about “not from chaos or change” but from love. (77, 76)

² See Matthew Fox, *Passion for Creation: The Earth-Honoring Spirituality of Meister Eckhart* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2000), sermon 30.

Pope Francis invokes the mystical experience of being struck by the awe and wonders of nature: “The mystic experiences the intimate connection between God and all beings, and thus feels that ‘all things are God’. (a citation from St John of the Cross) Standing awestruck before a mountain, he or she cannot separate this experience from God, and perceives that the interior awe being lived has to be entrusted to the Lord.” (234)

Indeed, the words “awe” and “wonder” are employed at least fourteen times in the encyclical. Echoing the teaching of Rabbi Heschel that without awe the universe becomes a marketplace, the pope teaches that “if we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and wonder, . . . our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs.” He invokes Saint Francis who refused “to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled.” (11) Surely this object-fetish gets at the heart of the modern world’s abuse of nature. So long as we are in touch with “wonder and awe” we recognize a “continuing revelation of the divine” in the smallest and largest forms within nature. Thus we are called to “contemplation of nature.” (85) Our wonder “takes us to a deeper understanding of life.” (225)

He calls for our expressing “gratitude for the gifts of creation” (227) and the first “community conversion” ought to entail “gratitude and gratuitousness” and “a loving awareness that we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures but joined in a splendid universal communion.” (220) This awareness of our interconnectivity with the rest of creation is spoken of numerous times in this letter. We live in an “interdependent” world (164) wherein “God wills the interdependence of creatures” and since “no creature is self-sufficient” creatures exist “in the service of each other.” (86) Interdependence characterizes human society as well and the entire species. (164)

A cosmic awareness and a sense of the Cosmic Christ (though not by name) are invoked frequently in this document as well. In the Eucharist “the whole cosmos gives thanks to God” and “the Eucharist is itself an act of cosmic love.” (236) The term “universe” is invoked twenty-three times and “universal” eighteen times. We are told that “the universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely. Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person’s face. It is not enough “to discover the action of God in the soul, but also to discover God in all things.” (233) In his prayer that concludes the encyclical, the pope prays to God saying “you are present in the whole universe and in the smallest of your creatures.” (246) Notice the word *in*; not just “above and beyond.” God is in all things macro and micro. This too is Cosmic Christ or Buddha Nature or Image of God theology.³

³ See David Mevorach Seidenberg, *Kabbalah and Ecology: God’s Image in the More-Than-Human World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015). Rabbi David establishes an eco-theology on the basis of the “image of God” theology concluding that all beings are an image of God. How like the Cosmic Christ or Buddha Nature archetypes this is!

We humans all belong to a kind of “universal family” which is to say to the universe at large. (89) Part III is entitled: “The Mystery of the Universe.”

He criticizes the “unhealthy dualisms” that “left a mark on certain Christian thinkers in the course of history and disfigured the Gospel.” In contrast, Jesus himself “is far removed from philosophies which despised the body, matter and the things of this world.” For he lived “in full harmony with creation” and “his appearance was not that of an ascetic set apart from the world, or of an enemy to the pleasant things of life.” (98) He invokes the Scriptural passages that are famous as texts of the Cosmic Christ when he cites Colossians 1: “All things have been created through him and for him” and the prologue to the Gospel of John (1:1-18) that “reveals Christ’s creative work as the Divine Word (Logos).” In this way “the mystery of Christ is at work in a hidden manner in the natural world as a whole, without hereby impinging on its autonomy.” (99) He is present in all beings, “the very flowers of the field and the birds which his human eyes contemplated and admired are now imbued with his radiant presence.” (100) He invokes his Jesuit brother, Teilhard de Chardin, when he speaks of how “the ultimate destiny of the universe is in the fullness of God, which has already been attained by the risen Christ.” (83 and note)

Via Negativa

We have seen that the *Via Positiva* is dealt with in considerable depth and breadth in this encyclical. How about the *Via Negativa*? Well, that is plenty in evidence also as the Pope reports the demise of the planet as we know it. His list is familiar to all who have been watching the planet suffering for decades. He speaks to the “pollution produced by residue, including dangerous waste, much of it non-biodegradable, highly toxic and radioactive.” He decries a “throwaway culture” where “the earth, our home is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth.” (21, 22) He invokes “a very solid scientific consensus” around the issue of climate warming and a “constant rise in the sea level, an increase of extreme weather events,” a concentration of greenhouse gases and more. (23) Deforestation, the extinction of the planet’s biodiversity, shortage of drinking water, the loss of tropical forests and more. (23, 24) Animals, plants and humans are migrating as a result and there has been “a tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation.” (25) The extinction of mammal and birds, fungi, algae, worms, insects, reptiles, contributes to the destruction of entire ecosystems. (34) Had he a better grasp of the Cosmic Christ theology he would have invoked the archetype I offered twenty-eight years ago, that the Christ is being crucified all over again as we despoil the Earth and her good creatures.

We undergo debasement as we feel the debasement of the Earth and “God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement.” (89) Yes, the Cosmic Christ is being crucified on the cross all over again.

Via Creativa

But the pope's message is not exclusively of doom and gloom—though it does urge us to throw off denial and to pay attention to the pain of Mother Earth. This is evident of course in the first part of this essay where I have collected his many invocations of the *Via Positiva*. But he turns to the *Via Creativa* as well—our vast potential as a species to make a difference and to create new ways of living on the earth. He invokes the word “creativity” at least sixteen times in this encyclical in passages such as the following:

The Holy Spirit possesses an “infinite creativity” he assures us and we share in that creativity. (80) “Human creativity cannot be suppressed” but it needs to be put to the use “of the service of others” since “it is “a form of power involved in considerable risks.” (131) It is this “admirable creativity” that inspires people to make a difference in combatting the forces of industrialization and more that are destroying the planet and in building cities that are respectful of humans and environment alike. (148, 152) He calls on institutions to “stimulate creativity” (I hope he has the church in mind as well when he says this) (177) and criticizes those who would “stifle creativity.” (191) To live more mindfully of the needs of the Earth and commit to lifestyles of greater simplicity will result in a “generous and worthy creativity which brings out the best in human beings.” (211) Indeed, the very crisis of our times requires an “ecological conversion [that] can inspire us to greater creativity and enthusiasm in resolving” the world's problems. (220)

Via Transformativa

The *Via Transformativa* is everywhere in this encyclical since it is a call to action and not just to analysis. The basics of the encyclical are pretty well known now and essentially they are as follows: The ecological crisis of our times, the despoiling of Mother Earth, parallels the despoiling of the poor on the planet. It derives from both a perverted view of the world and economic and political structures that carry on this perversion which is evident in the unsustainable income extremes of the superrich and the poor as well as indifference to the greed, waste, and materialism that a consumer society generates. We live in an interconnected world and it is high time we started acting like it, seeking a common good and not just a private hoarding.

There is no “room for the globalization of indifference” for the current state of affairs “have caused sister earth, along with all the abandoned of our world, to cry out, pleading that we take another course.” (52, 53) The problems lie in the structures themselves and “we still lack the culture needed to confront this crisis” Pope Francis points out since the “techno-economic paradigm” is capable of overwhelming “not only our politics but also freedom and justice.” (53)

He is explicit about the ineffective and indeed destructive economic system that dominates our planet. “Economic powers continue to justify the current global system where priority tends to be given to speculation and the pursuit of financial gain, which fail to take the context into account, let alone the effects on human dignity and the natural environment.” (56) The

avalanche of denial arises because “distractions constantly dull our consciousness of just how limited and finite our world really is.” The market is in fact an idol, a “deified market,” which we are taught to worship and not question as if it were the only economic option humanity has. (56)

He identifies “sin” with the rupture we have from creation (as well as the Creator and one another) (66) He repeats a summons to solidarity “and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters” while recognizing in them “an appreciation of their immense dignity.” 158) And he wisely speaks to the topic of “Justice between the Generations” and how future generations are depending on us and are in every way related to us, calling for an “intergenerational solidarity” which is “not optional, but rather a basic question of justice, since the world we have received also belongs to those who will follow us.” The environment is ours “on loan to each generation, which must then hand it on to the next,” he says, citing a statement from the bishops of Portugal. (159)

Hope

Pope Francis believes that our generation is very much involved in “the pains of childbirth” as we try to learn anew how to cooperate with the Creator, that “God can bring good out of the evil we have done” since the Holy Spirit is so powerfully creative. (80) There lies his hope and ours, that we can change our ways, that we are endowed with immense intelligence and creativity, that if we pull out of denial and away from destructive economic systems and relationships and beyond a dulled consciousness anything is possible. Or, I might add, citing eco philosopher David Orr, “Hope is a verb with the sleeves rolled up.” We can go to work; and we must.

It is clear from this walk-through of *Laudato Si* that creation spirituality is alive and well in today’s Vatican. How would it be otherwise with St Francis of Assisi the patron saint of the hour? The Four Paths are clearly expressed in much depth and clarity in this encyclical. So too the concepts of Original Blessing and the Cosmic Christ and Interdependence which are pillars to creation spirituality along with a deep sense of Deep Ecumenism or Interfaith.

Regarding the latter, there are explicit references to respecting the culture and wisdom of indigenous peoples (See 145, 146, 158). Unfortunately, and in opposition to the Pope’s own words, the Vatican canonized the great Colonizer-in-chief and Racist par excellence, Friar Junipero Serra who set up the mission system in California that enslaved thousands of Native Americans in the nineteenth century. The pope must walk his talk and listen more deeply to his own preaching when it comes to Native Americans—and *to listen to them* and not religious sycophants if his credibility is to be maintained.⁴

⁴ See my article, “Canonize Junipero Serra? Really?” on my website, www.matthewfox.org.

The fact that creation spirituality has moved from being labeled “dangerous and deviant” by one papal administration to being front and center in this important encyclical on eco-theology and the survival of the planet within one generation is surely a sign of hope as well.