

Introduction

The Ethical, Legal, and Political Significance of *Laudato Si'*

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Faith offers us many spiritual gifts. One of the greatest of these gifts is a sense of perspective – an appreciation of the smallness of our span of life on earth, and the greatness of eternity. A contemplative life enables us to perceive our surroundings *sub species aeternitatis* – a perspective transcending petty demands or ephemeral desires. Saints like Francis of Assisi and Teresa of Lisieux exemplify this gift of stepping outside of time, outside of human plans, to apprehend in radical simplicity the timeless virtues of self-giving, service, and contemplation of the divine.

Faith has also offered us another set of gifts: a sense of urgency in the face of injustice, and the bedrock principles to help us recognize such injustice. Catholic churches have fought segregation and have aided civil society campaigns against the structural sins of racism, exploitation, and authoritarianism. *The Catholic Worker* identified revolting violations of human rights and dignity, and fought to rectify them. For over a century, the Catholic Church's social encyclicals have applied biblical teaching and theological insight to critique dominant political and economic arrangements. Catholic social teaching has sparked moral concern and political action to make corporal acts of mercy at least in part a responsibility of the state.

One of the greatest tasks of spiritual discernment is the ability to shift constructively between the moods of contemplation and urgency, reflection and action. When is the time to pray, and when is the time to organize and fight? When are social arrangements minimally acceptable, and when does complicity with governing powers and principalities compromise one's own identity as a moral person? What are the proper bounds of the political and the spiritual life? Over the long history of the Church, both saints and laymen have struggled with these questions.

Finding the correct answer in any given scenario illuminates what Martha Nussbaum calls the fragility of goodness – the degree to which our ability to choose wisely and morally all too often depends on a supportive context of peers and influential institutions. Nor has the institutional church always chosen wisely. Its deeply troubling alliance with fascists in the Spanish Civil War, and its recurring failure to address the problem of child abuse, are only two examples of an all too

human church failing to exemplify the moral authority of its founder. Still, the recent history of the Church does offer some beacons of moral guidance for reconciling the spiritual moods of political urgency and transcendental patience. Catholic Social Thought (CST) is a particularly rich resource here.

POLICY, PHILOSOPHY, AND THEOLOGY

Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* was one of the most important intellectual and spiritual interventions in environmental policy and politics in 2015. The Pope offered a compelling moral vision for personal and ecological renewal, as well as a sweeping critique of dominant forms of consumerism (at the personal level) and cost-benefit analysis (at the level of firms and governments). The encyclical calls on all persons of good will to turn away from a selfish anthropocentrism, and toward an "integral ecology." Such an integral ecology resolutely situates human purpose and destiny in nature, refusing both dominionist doctrines of mastery over the environment, and transhumanist aspirations to transcend it. The encyclical also addresses states and policymakers directly, commending conservation and demanding a forceful response to the twin crises of anthropogenic global warming and inequality. This global vision for political economy seamlessly transitions into concluding reflections on Catholic theology and personal conversion, culminating in a "prayer for our earth" and a "Christian prayer in union with creation."

Like *Laudato Si'* itself, the essays in this volume take a dialectical approach to the concrete and the abstract, the particular and the universal, the immediate and the long term, the material and the spiritual. Neither is graspable without its opposite (or partner), just as the very concept of satisfaction or joy depends on some experience of deprivation or sadness. Theologians and philosophers have already grappled with the religious and theoretical contributions of the encyclical, and will continue to do so. This volume both draws on and complements their thought, and focuses the academic conversation on *Laudato Si'* on two clusters of questions.

First, on the level of policy: how does the explicit program for conservation of land, air, and water in *Laudato Si'* fit with existing environmental programs and ideologies? Several essays in this volume compare the vision of *Laudato Si'* with those of more secular approaches to addressing environmental degradation and global poverty. They clarify what is Pope Francis's original contribution to environmental policy discourse, and what in the encyclical is drawn from extant political manifestos, scientific observations, and moral and religious ideals. These authors help us appreciate how and why the Vatican decisively "takes a side" in some contemporary struggles over labor rights and environmental degradation, while eschewing a clear position on others.

Second, at a higher level of abstraction: does *Laudato Si'* invite us to adopt a new, more capacious normative framework for addressing policy concerns? At this

methodological and philosophical level, the essays illuminate a program more distant from immediate political concerns, but also more encompassing: how we frame and understand profound social and environmental problems. These are questions of methodology, inviting us write and think about climate change and poverty in ways that are not now commonly pursued either in public debates, or in elite white papers, appellate opinions, and policy journals.

These two levels of concern – about policy, and about philosophy (i.e., the types of arguments and methods that are acceptable or convincing in policy contexts) – are reflected in several of the questions that animate essays in this volume. Do papal pronouncements operate primarily at the level of philosophical justification, articulating a robust, substantive alternative to arid and abstract technocracy? Does *Laudato Si'* suggest something more than supererogatory duties for legislators and administrators – and, if so, what are they? Is the Pope's approach more like that of the US National Environmental Policy Act – requiring careful planning before humanity does more to dramatically change the planet? Or does it reflect the aims of laws like the US Endangered Species Act, imposing substantive duties to maintain certain creatures, habitats, and ecosystems? Does it demand an approach even more foundational, raising not just policy questions but fundamental issues of political economy and social justice? These questions challenge readers to consider the tone and intent of the encyclical. For those seeking guidance on critical areas of environmental policy and the economy and culture which enframe it, the essays in *Care for the World* should serve as a vital starting point toward exegesis of Pope Francis's vital work.

SOCIAL CHANGE AND AGENCY IN CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT

Every morally serious thinker has acknowledged the importance of climate change and global poverty. Sadly, though, in many elite circles, a further mark of “seriousness” is a commitment to deploy a narrow set of technology-driven and market-focused “solutions” to these issues. On this view, technology is the proximate cause of humanity's material well-being, and capitalist markets underwrite its advance. States should price carbon emissions to reflect their true cost, and international agreements should articulate a rational framework of incentives to promote greener technology. Meanwhile, more global trade in goods and services will enable workers in the developing world gradually to earn wages comparable to those of workers in developed countries. Those developed-country workers, rather than resisting global competition for jobs, should retrain themselves to learn how to provide higher-value labor. Thus, in neoliberal technocracy, both climate change and deep poverty are problems to be solved by recalibrating legal rules to optimize incentives.

Seismic political change has recently undermined both neoliberal narratives. Voters in many developed countries are challenging free trade and global

institutions. As automation advances, they do not trust that education and hard work will be enough to keep them “competitive” in global markets. The rise of the gig economy and precarious labor arrangements fuels economic anxiety, as more economic gains are funneled to a narrow elite. Trade agreements are increasingly in question, as are regionalist projects like further national integration into the European Union. International cooperation on climate change appears to be unraveling, as the Trump Administration aggressively undermines the Paris Climate Change Agreement. That international tension will likely undermine national initiatives to control emissions, further exacerbating an already difficult collective action problem.

But technocratic neoliberalism is a robust ideology and, just as some of its political elements fade, its technological dimensions are advancing in scope and power. Some hope that markets for clean energy technology will continue to grow, regardless of political headwinds. Climate activists in the United States may despair at recent election results, but many point to cheapening solar and wind power as a market-driven assault on the coal industry. Some even embrace geoengineering methods to undo the effects of excess carbon emissions – including aerosolized chemicals in the atmosphere or whitening clouds to deflect sunlight.¹ Where social engineering has failed, chemical or physical engineering may succeed – but at the price of changing weather, or the chemical composition of a great deal of air and water.² For those versed in the potential unintended consequences of geoengineering, this approach seems about as meritorious as the development of new drugs to address the baleful consequences of geriatric polypharmacy. But for true technophiles, there is an almost religious faith in the power of “geoengineers” to ameliorate or even reverse anthropogenic global warming in a safe way.

Several essays in this volume confront this strange mixture of technocratic ambition and politico-economic fatalism. Francis’s first encyclical is part of a long-standing effort to move CST beyond a *critique* of social institutions to a more positive and constructive vision of their future direction.³ Anthony Annett engages directly with the encyclical’s positive vision of the future of social institutions while retaining the perspective of spiritual subsidiarity in his chapter, “Our Common Responsibility for Our Common Home: The Activist Vision of *Laudato Si’*.” Annett situates *Laudato Si’* as a continuation of the project begun in *Rerum Novarum* and *Gaudium et Spes*.⁴ In those social encyclicals, the Church puts forward a framework that suggests a role for both institutional and bottom-up, personal corrective actions. For Annett, *Laudato Si’* follows from and expands on that tradition. Francis is addressing the “new things” that have emerged over the past 200 years, as global economic development and a concomitant demographic expansion push humanity against ecological boundaries, just as Pope Leo XIII analyzed the newly emerging global economic order and the urgent social questions raised regarding the relationship between capital and labor.⁵ And in the same way that

Gaudium et Spes urges Catholics to read the “signs of the times,” *Laudato Si’* identifies particular actions each person can take to alleviate the human and social degradation occasioned by climate change.

Annett regards Francis’s discernment of the signs of the times in *Laudato Si’* as substantially in line with contemporary scientific findings about the “planetary boundaries” we are in the process of crossing as we experience Anthropocenic turbulence. *Laudato Si’* analyzes the human and environmental costs of our economic activity and “throwaway culture” in terms that are concrete and demand an immediate moral response. For example, as Annett observes, Francis devotes an entire section of the encyclical to addressing issues of water poverty, and exhibits similar concern when speaking about climate refugees and the loss of biodiversity. By focusing on the long-term costs of short-term economic decision-making, *Laudato Si’* “takes a scientific reality and endows it with moral meaning,” according to Annett, underscoring the heightened need for interdependence in the face of truly global challenges.

That is a bold move for the Church, and one only taken reflectively and prayerfully, given the history of religious interventions in political struggles. Fear of the Church being itself suborned by the political struggles it attempts to comment on or influence, as well as a respect for the autonomy of conscience of voters and politicians, has encouraged a sliding scale of specificity in Church teaching: a declining willingness to mandate specific patterns of behavior or commitments as we move from the personal to the political. The thought of John Courtney Murray, so influential at the Second Vatican Council, crystallized a consensus toward lowering the religious stakes of political contestation. Catholic values can and should inform individuals’ political preferences. But doctrine has been aimed primarily at the right conduct of personal life and church community. A spiritual subsidiarity (prioritizing the personal over the political) refracted and mitigated the political impact of CST (including its recommendations of our more familiar, political sense of subsidiarity).

By reading *Laudato Si’* in conversation with *Rerum Novarum* and *Gaudium et Spes*, Annett identifies potential roles for a diverse group of moral agents (ranging from supranational institutions, states, businesses, and community groups) to complement and build upon individual action. Francis urges all of these actors to participate in building forms of interdependence that will be necessary if we are to reorient our economic activities in a more responsible direction. At a supranational level, Annett suggests that international agreements like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change may be valuable bulwarks against environmental degradation, which states can assist in implementing domestically. He notes that rich nations have a particular obligation to act to pay down their “ecological debt” to poorer nations whose pattern of historical development and present emissions level make them less culpable for the harms associated with climate change. Annett urges the business community to

support good jobs, to direct productive activity towards meeting human needs, and to create sustainable wealth that is distributed justly. He argues that religious communities should exercise leadership in efforts to support our common home and serve as models of responsible stewardship practices. Individuals and community organizations can take a variety of actions to raise awareness of environmental issues and to urge business and political leaders to pursue strategies that will support responsible stewardship, such as boycotts and divestment initiatives.

SPIRITUAL SUBSIDIARITY AND ITS LIMITS

Some critics of CST argue that religious leaders should stay out of political matters, asserting that the social is far more complex than the personal. However, even relatively straightforward moral guidance for individuals can be surprisingly complicated. Consider, for instance, the brief comment in *Laudato Si'* on air conditioning. “People may well have a growing ecological sensitivity but it has not succeeded in changing their harmful habits of consumption which, rather than decreasing, appear to be growing all the more. A simple example is the increasing use and power of air conditioning,” the Pope observes, with a tantalizing indirectness (LS 55). Like the rich man in the Gospel, who slunk away, dispirited, when Jesus told him to give all he had to the poor, today’s bourgeoisie might be troubled by the Pope’s comments. But should they be?

There is a great deal of overuse of air conditioning in developed countries. Air conditioning also creates what G. A. Cohen calls expensive tastes and even needs: those who grow up without it are often less bothered by heat than those who have become dependent from an early age.⁶ On the other hand, thousands of persons have died in heat waves over the past decade. Such extreme weather will predictably affect more vulnerable individuals in the future. A truly Catholic and communitarian response to such disasters probably would require a mass effort by families (and neighbors) to reach out to their loved ones (and those with no available family) to get them to cooling stations or hospitals.⁷ But there is also a justifiable concern that such an ethic of care may overwhelm families and communities, or, failing that, that the much simpler remedy of assuring near-universal air conditioning could have saved many lives. Of course, to generate the electricity necessary for such air conditioning, countries may need to build more nuclear power plants – and if a Chernobyl-like incident occurs (or if we simply continue to struggle with the proper disposal of nuclear waste), the balance of considerations here could favor a more communitarian, rather than technological, approach. Thus a scenario analysis of the clash of ecological and humanitarian duties here may be very difficult, or inconclusive.

When it comes to right use of technology and resources, moral questions abound, and persist. Should the wealthy world reduce its carbon footprint by letting its

apartments and homes grow colder in winter and warmer in summer? Was the immediate experience of post-Fukushima Tokyo, which raised thermostats in offices to make up for a temporary shutdown of nuclear power, normative? Is it hypocritical for individuals who presently enjoy air conditioning, to prescribe policies which may make it less accessible to those who do not?

Policymakers and planners will need to grapple with these problems, and many more. However, very specific questions like these may misunderstand the rhetorical approach of the encyclical. The idea is less to commend technological regression – turning back to an era with less or no air conditioning – than to caution technocrats of the wealthy world to ask themselves about what they might learn from cultures without air conditioning (or with much less of it than is common in, say, the United States). Are there ways in which an accommodation of weather – an expectation of less work, or more vacation time – may be a better “attunement” to nature, rather than an effort to master it? Can excess air conditioning deplete reservoirs of resilience that a person might naturally develop in its absence?⁸

These questions are not meant to discredit efforts to bring comforts of the most developed countries to the developing world. However, they undermine any premature certainty that simple efforts to maximize gross domestic product (GDP) will “maximize” human well-being, or whether such “maximization” is even a coherent project, given plural values and aims. Such questioning also undermines the self-image of technocrats as applying scientific calculi to maximize the costs and minimize the benefits of any particular policy intervention.

A longer-term vision of what makes a human life worthwhile is at the core of any coherent moral system. The practice of compassion, kindness, generosity, humility, and gratitude must be part of such a vision, even though wise policymakers should also be humble about the state’s capacity directly to inculcate any of these patterns of thought, emotion, and conduct.

CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT, ECOMODERNISM, AND DEVELOPMENT GOALS

But how humble should policymakers be? In 1993, William J. Byron, S.J. observed that:

Whatever the question ... [CST’s] answer is usually framed in a few general principles accompanied by several general guidelines for programs consistent with the principles. For a universal teaching church, this is the way it has to be, I suppose. When it comes, however, to the future of Catholic social teaching, I cannot help but wonder whether the times might not require more precision of the Church and its teachers, if Catholic social thought is to have greater, even decisive impact.⁹

In their essays, Vincent Ialenti, Massimiliano Montini, and Francesca Volpe all consider the benefits and burdens of a more specifically Catholic response to the problems of climate change.

Ialenti takes up the implicit invitation in *Laudato Si'* to contrast Catholic environmentalism with a “technocratic paradigm.” Ialenti engages with a subtle and well-articulated vision of technocracy, the Ecomodernist Manifesto, drafted by a global team of thought leaders in environmental science, economics, design, and other fields. Despite critiques of *Laudato Si'* by some of the Manifesto’s authors, Ialenti sees not only conflict, but also continuity, between the ethical perspectives developed in each document. It is helpful to start with a reflection on this convergence – on a common sense of urgency and crisis in terms of climate challenges and underdevelopment – before reflecting on their diverging policy preferences and methodological approaches.

As Ialenti observes, both CST and Ecomodernism recognize climate change as a grave reality and a potentially catastrophic eventuality, deserving responses that feature “collaboration, interdisciplinarity, and big-picture thinking about the future.” The two documents “provide alternate starting points for thinking about the future of the planet and humanity writ large.” Both recognize that our personal and collective choices for future paths for energy development entail judgments about values. Adherents to both CST and Ecomodernism recognize extreme poverty as a scandal in a rich world – a burden that both causes suffering and vulnerability directly, and prevents human beings from reaching their full potential. And each recognizes the importance of aesthetic and spiritual responses to nature.

From this common base of concern, Ecomodernists and Francis pursue very different paths to social justice. Ialenti expertly traces these tensions, rooted in conflicting theories of history and visions of the future. For the Ecomodernists, human history is fundamentally a tale of *progress* directly attributable to *markets and technology*. Government’s role is to structure law and policy so as to best incentivize technological development that simultaneously meets human needs and (secondarily) reduces human impact on nature. The core of the Ecomodernist approach is to take the present trajectory of human needs and wants as a given, and to manage the risk of various approaches to satisfying them. So, for instance, the Ecomodernist Manifesto strongly endorses the use of nuclear power, as a powerfully scalable way of meeting energy needs while decarbonizing both advanced and emerging economies.

As Ialenti observes, *Laudato Si'* has a very different perspective on both the *longue durée* of human history and the merits of accelerating technological advance. Human history seems at least as plausibly cyclical as linearly progressing. Empires rise and fall, violent periods follow peaceful ones; the great comforts of our age have shadow sides of addiction, anomie, and isolation. Whatever merits the “end of history” thesis may have once had, have now ended. Not even material technological advance is an unmingled blessing. As William Baumol observed in *The Cost*

Disease, the economic miracle of increased manufacturing productivity has a shadow side: weapons of mass destruction are easier to generate than ever.¹⁰ This shadow side is, of course, also evident in nuclear power. Such an energy source, at present, trades the slow-but-certainly-deleterious effects of fossil fuels for a very small possibility of rapid and disastrous meltdown or toxic release. As Ialenti observes here and in other works, nuclear disposal technology has not been perfected, and the moral calculus of rapid development of such power is by no means self-evident.

Debates among Ecomodernists and adherents to CST could easily bog down into pitched battles over metaphysical commitments and the proper time frame for policy considerations. For many Ecomodernists, religious thought in the style of Pope Francis is hopelessly romantic and reactionary.¹¹ Meanwhile, for Catholics who dream of a “small church,” or just one retreating from the sinful extravagances of modernity, it can be easy to cocoon into the satisfaction of a wisdom tradition unsullied by political compromise. Ialenti will not let either side off the hook. Instead, he gently but convincingly structures opportunities for adherents to each vision to complement and correct one another. He challenges the Ecomodernist worldview by bringing up the importance of intergenerational equity and recent disasters like Fukushima. Is Ecomodernism compatible with any version of the precautionary principle? By contrast, is the CST developed in *Laudato Si'* capable of providing guidance as to particular projects that may be undertaken in the near-term future? For example, if a less developed country announced plans to build a nuclear plant, what would be the response from those devoted to the alter-ecology articulated by *Laudato Si'*? The answer can't simply be: wait for a bit longer until better energy sources reach you. There must be some duties of developed countries to help. But what risks are acceptable to take on as such duties are fulfilled? Both Ecomodernists and Catholics can learn from one another as we struggle to answer such difficult questions.

Montini and Volpe also pursue a project of dialogue, comparing the vision in *Laudato Si'* with that embodied in the United Nations' SDGs. As they observe, the United Nations articulates seventeen broad goals for ecological protection and economic renewal, promoting 169 targets for access to clean water and renewable energy, preservation of ecosystems, and promotion of economic and social inclusion (and a time frame: they are to be met by 2030). While the Ecomodernist Manifesto's long-term vision can rightly be contrasted with that of *Laudato Si'*, most of the targets of the UN's SDGs may be framed as concrete ways of measuring whether the Vatican's concerns about matters like biodiversity, access to water, and inequality are actually being heeded by policymakers. They also provide some concrete numerical foundations for measuring our commitment to an avowed “preferential option for the poor.”

Montini and Volpe situate both the SDGs and *Laudato Si'* in their respective traditions of arguments and discursive communities. They focus on the sweep and long-term perspective of *Laudato Si'* – a welcome corrective to purely economic

approaches to human and planetary well-being. As they explain, the SDGs and the recommendations in *Laudato Si'* are not merely complementary, but deeply enrich one another: “The Encyclical Letter alone . . . has not the political power of the UN 2030 Agenda to trace an enforceable sustainable development path, while the SDGs and the related UN 2030 Agenda lack the ethical afflatus and the break-through vision that permeates the Encyclical Letter.”

RECOGNIZING URGENT THREATS TO HUMAN WELL-BEING

Francis’s imaginative reconstruction of Mary’s grieving for “the sufferings of the crucified poor and for the creatures of this world laid waste by human power” (LS 241) is not an invitation to technocratic policy analysis of the discount rate for biodiversity valuation, or how many generations of low-wage workers in Bangladesh, India, or Uganda should expect to live in squalor while the magic of the market lifts living standards. And this insistence cashes out in real recommendations for change, as in Chapter 2 of the encyclical, when the Pope approvingly quotes the bishops of Paraguay:

Every *campesino* has a natural right to possess a reasonable allotment of land where he can establish his home, work for subsistence of his family and a secure life. This right must be guaranteed so that its exercise is not illusory but real. That means that apart from the ownership of property, rural people must have access to means of technical education, credit, insurance, and markets. (LS 94)

While *Laudato Si'* eloquently addresses what Rob Nixon calls “slow violence,” it also offers important insights on more immediate threats to basic human rights. The recent rise of authoritarianism globally has endangered the lives of many vulnerable persons. For example, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte drew international condemnation for killing at least 3,000 of his own citizens in a brutal campaign to control drug sales and trafficking. Rather than being chastised, Duterte reveled in the ensuing criticism with an incredibly offensive statement: “Hitler massacred three million Jews . . . there’s three million drug addicts. I’d be happy to slaughter them.” Aside from the obvious immorality of the statement, Duterte could not even get his figures right: 6 million Jews were killed in the Holocaust. His cavalier treatment of the facts reflects a depraved indifference to human suffering that is becoming all too common in today’s political climate. His comrade in authoritarianism, Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro, also exemplifies the elective affinities between cruelty toward vulnerable minorities (including Brazil’s indigenous and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community) and a destructive attitude toward vulnerable nature. Some of Bolsonaro’s first actions upon taking office included an assault on extant rainforest protections, an attack on indigenous rights,