

# **Beyond *Laudato Si*: The Challenge of Franciscan Eco-Spirituality in the Age of Pope Francis**

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## **Introduction**

Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical letter *Laudato Si* is unquestionably the most significant magisterial document on the subject of creation and environmental ethics.<sup>2</sup> Building on previous contributions to the subject by his predecessors and an array of regional episcopal and ecumenical statements, Pope Francis not only reiterates standard ethical norms in keeping with a "seamless garment" approach to moral discernment,<sup>3</sup> he also makes some notable contributions to the tradition. For example, the pope directly rejects the so-called "dominion model" of creation. Singling out Genesis 1 in a manner that would have delighted the late historian Lynn White, Jr.,<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis acknowledged that Christians "have at times incorrectly interpreted the Scriptures" and that we must today reject any interpretation of the Bible that justifies "unbridled exploitation of nature" or "absolute domination over other creatures."<sup>5</sup>

And yet, for as important and timely as this document is, *Laudato Si* is far from perfect. While laudably updating the Roman Catholic teaching on humanity's relationship to the rest of creation to a normative status best described as "stewardship," the theology and spirituality articulated in *Laudato Si* falls well short of where the church's magisterial teaching ought to

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<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, "On Care for our Common Home" (2015). Available online at: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)

<sup>3</sup> For more on the "consistent ethic of life," see Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, *Consistent Ethic of Life* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> See the now-classic essay, Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (1968):1203-1207.

<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, no. 67.

stand in light of scripture, the tradition, and contemporary scientific discoveries. At times Pope Francis gestures toward this forward motion, invoking the fraternal discursive frame of Francis of Assisi and stating plainly that nonhuman creatures bear an intrinsic value independent of human valuation. However, in almost every instance of such recognition, a qualification follows to reinforce human exceptionalism. Despite the pope's best efforts to call out the dangers of anthropocentrism, he ironically reinscribes the same problematic precisely by asserting a stewardship model of creation.<sup>6</sup> What is needed is a kinship or community of creation paradigm that upholds both human animality and nonhuman creaturely agency, and which clearly affirms our inextricable interrelatedness and interdependence with the entire family of God's creation.

I believe that *Laudato Si* is a liminal text. In this way, *Laudato Si* may be seen as analogous to the Chalcedonian Christological formula in Karl Rahner's analysis;<sup>7</sup> that is, it should be understood as the *beginning* rather than the *end* of our Christian theology of creation and eco-spirituality. Pope Francis has left it to the church to carry forward the work of ecological justice with *Laudato Si* as its starting point. I believe the Franciscan tradition is the best situated to assist us in this process.<sup>8</sup> This paper is organized into three sections with a short conclusion, each part offering one illustration from among the Franciscan resources able to aid us in moving beyond *Laudato Si*.

First, we look at Francis of Assisi's own eco-spirituality. Next, we consider Bonaventure's understanding of the virtue of *pietas*. Finally, I suggest that Peter of John Olivi's principle of *usus pauper* may provide us with a heuristic in navigating the practical space between the intrinsic value of nonhuman creatures and instrumental usage of them.

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<sup>6</sup> See Daniel P. Horan, *All God's Creatures: A Theology of Creation* (Lexington/Fortress, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Karl Rahner, "Current Problems in Christology," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 1, trans. Cornelius Ernst (New York: Seabury Press, 1961): 149-200.

<sup>8</sup> For a fuller exploration of this, see Horan, *All God's Creatures*, esp. Chapter 6.

## **Francis of Assisi and the Birth of Franciscan “Eco-Spirituality”**

Though admittedly not a trained theologian, Francis of Assisi’s vision of God’s community of creation and humanity’s place within it is more sophisticated and nuanced than the typical reduction of his legacy to the birdbath might suggest. Two of the key elements in his approach to creation are (a) the inherent dignity and value of all creatures, independent of human valuation; and (b) the inextricably interrelated and interdependent nature of the community of creation. While the various writings by and about Francis give witness to the importance of these two themes, it is his *Canticle of the Creatures* that provides perhaps the most direct illustration of them. As Roger Sorrell noted, “Here Francis’s assumptions about the worth of creation, and the complex relationships of interdependence and mutual service among creatures, reach their clearest expression. It is in this area of assumed interrelationships that Francis’s poem attains its greatest significance and complexity.”<sup>9</sup>

The inherent dignity and value of all creatures stems from Francis’s recognition that everything that exists comes from the same, singular, divine source. This bears out in two significant ways. First, as expressed in the *Canticle*, Francis is conscious of the immediate access nonhuman creatures have to the divine in a way that notably departs from Eastern Christian depictions of humanity as creation’s sacerdotal intermediaries or Western Christian understandings of prayer as a uniquely human activity. Precisely when it comes to prayer, it is actually we human creatures that are impeded on account of our sinfulness and hubris in striving to be other than what God has created us to be. Meanwhile, nonhuman creatures have, according to Francis’s cosmic and fraternal vision, no inhibition or problem praising God through the

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<sup>9</sup> Roger Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature: Tradition and Innovation in Western Christian Attitudes Toward the Environment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 137.

actions that most accurately reflect God’s plan for a well-ordered creation. The *Canticle* is, in part, a parable designed to remind humanity of what it means to be truly human.

Second, Francis expresses an intuitive sense of nonhuman creaturely agency and subjectivity that was certainly exceptional in his time (and, sadly, ours too). That nonhuman creatures can relate to their creator and even give praise in their own particular way testifies to their agency while their intrinsic relationality—with their Creator and with other creatures—reflects subjectivity.<sup>10</sup> As Timothy Johnson notes, for Francis, nonhuman creatures “are not objects but subjects in a wide-ranging network of relationships, marked by gendered equality and a shared, mutual source of vitality and life.”<sup>11</sup>

This observation brings us to the second major theme in Francis’s theology of creation useful in moving beyond *Laudato Si’*; namely, the interrelated and interdependent nature of the community of creation, of which humanity is but one part. Oftentimes Francis’s invocation of fraternal and sororal language is viewed as naïve or merely cute. Yet, the discursive choice Francis made is grounded in a profoundly theological insight about the cosmic and functional dynamism of creation, which is supported by both scripture and evolutionary science. We are related to one another at the macro level over the course of billions of years of evolution and development, but we are also connected together at the microcosmic level all the way down to the shared sub-particle reality of our material existence. We, like all that exists in this world, are *creatures* with one divine source. We are also, as one species among others, deeply interdependent, requiring other creatures—living and dead—for food, oxygen, clothing, shelter, and so on. We humans, while distinct from other species, are not apart from other species and

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<sup>10</sup> For more on the implications of this in the Franciscan tradition, see Daniel P. Horan, *Catholicity and Emerging Personhood: A Contemporary Theological Anthropology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2019), esp. Chapter 3 “*Imago Dei* and the Community of Creation.”

<sup>11</sup> Timothy Johnson, “Francis and Creation,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Francis of Assisi*, ed. Michael Robson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 145.

forms of creaturely existence. We are part of a family, whether we *want* to acknowledge that or not. The question isn't: *are we related* to the rest of the family of creation? The question is: *what kind of sister or brother am I to my creaturely siblings?* This is part of Francis's spiritual genius—he understood that what others would dismiss as romantic was in fact reality as it actually is. This is what is missing in its full force from *Laudato Si*, but is present there in partial and inchoate ways and therefore worthy of greater development and application.

### **Bonaventure: One Divine Source and the Virtue of *Pietas***

Bonaventure is one of the more notable developers of Francis's nascent and vernacular theology of creation, offering a scholastic theological reflection inspired by the *poverello's* eco-spiritual outlook. He, like Francis, affirmed that all creatures have an intrinsic relationship to God as *principium creativum* and are therefore also inherently related to one another within the singular family of creation. While much can be said about how Bonaventure develops this line of creational thinking, I want to look at his engagement with and application of the virtue *pietas* to the theme of creation. Bonaventure does not mean piety (*pietas*) in the same way it is popularly used in contemporary parlance as that quality of being “reverent” or “religious” or “devout.” Instead, Bonaventure's explication of *pietas* is at once etymological and historical. He returns to the Roman civil understanding of *pietas* as a key virtue of the citizen. In the Roman context, *pietas* was understood primarily in filial terms relating to the care of one's parents and, secondarily, to other family members, the dead, and deities.<sup>12</sup>

Bonaventure's theology of *pietas* is most developed in his *Collationes de Septem Donis Spiritus Sancti*. Here he points to Christ as the exemplar of the virtue *pietas*, and therefore the

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<sup>12</sup> See Stefan Heid, “The Romanness of Roman Christianity,” in *A Companion to Roman Religion*, ed. Jörg Rüpke (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 406-426.

model for all human relationships. He also points to Francis as the one who was most closely aligned with this sense of duty or familial care for others arising from one's inherent fraternal and sororal relationality. But, for Bonaventure, Francis is not simply illustrating what *pietas* looks like among human relationships, he also discloses in word and deed what it means to be “pious” among nonhuman creatures.

It is in Chapter 8 of the *Legenda Maior* that Bonaventure explicitly ties the virtue of *pietas* with nonhuman creatures in discussing Francis's relationship to the entire community of creation. Bonaventure attributes Francis's creational outlook and recognition of the inherent kinship of creation to Francis's *pietas*. For example, Bonaventure writes: “From a reflection on the primary source of all things, filled with even more abundant *piety*, he would call creatures, no matter how small, by the name of ‘brother’ or ‘sister,’ because he knew they shared with him the same beginning.”<sup>13</sup> Bonaventure also noted the reciprocity of this *pietas* between Francis and nonhuman creatures, stating: “Let also the devotion of the faithful weigh how the piety in God's servant [Francis] was of such marvelous power and of such abundant sweetness that even the nature of animals acknowledged it in their own way.”<sup>14</sup> He illustrates this point with a striking story about a sheep given to Francis and the manner in which the sheep exhibited subjectivity and exercised moral agency in a tangible way. Bonaventure closes this section of the *Major Legend* with a reflection on the centrality of *pietas* in the establishment and maintenance of right relationship among all of creation, noting that *pietas* is the virtue that “binds all creatures together” when all creatures—human and nonhuman alike—embrace it.

Bonaventure's emphasis on *pietas* is a call for “care for creation” stemming not from an external obligation or responsibility as with a steward, but from an internal or even intrinsic

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<sup>13</sup> Bonaventure, *Legenda Maior*, VIII:6 in *FAED* 2:590 (*Opera Omnia* VIII:527b).

<sup>14</sup> Bonaventure, *Legenda Maior*, VIII:6 in *FAED* 2:591 (*Opera Omnia* VIII:528a).

familial duty, as one would care for a family member. The tenor of *pietas* as the operative paradigm in caring for nonhuman creation is one that respects the agency and particularity of each creature, regardless of how like or unlike it may be to humanity. The virtue of *pietas*, as Bonaventure presents it, is exercised in a spirit of mutuality and respect that celebrates the diversity of creatures, recognizes each creature's inherent and *a priori* relationship to the Creator independent of human mediation, and directs our action in care for all creatures as fellow members in the one community of creation.

### **Olivi and *Usus Pauper*: Between the Intrinsic and Instrumental Value of Creation**

Finally, we turn to Peter of John Olivi who is best known for his involvement in the mendicant poverty controversies of the thirteenth century. It is his distinctive notion of *usus pauper* (“poor” or “restricted use”), which arose within that intellectual context, that I believe might offer us a means for moving beyond the ostensible impasse of at once maintaining the intrinsic dignity and value of nonhuman creatures while also accounting for the necessary “use” of other living and nonliving creatures in the unavoidable cycle of processes that include eating, respiration, shelter, and the like.

Sadly, I will have to be brief in summarizing the original and otherwise complex argument. In short, Olivi and his followers believed it was not simply enough for Franciscans, having taken a vow of evangelical poverty, to renounce ownership of property and goods in name only, which is all it seemed the church expected of those who professed to live *sine proprio*. He believed that the vow also obligated the friars to exercise *usus pauper* of those goods and property for which they had legitimate use and to use them only insofar as such use was truly necessary.

So by what measure should Franciscans, according to Olivi, judge a thing's usefulness? The most succinct indication he offers for the meaning of *usus pauper* appears in Question XV of *Quaestiones de Perfectione Evangelica*, in which we read that the criterion is "that use which, all circumstances considered, is more consonant with the poverty and condition of Christ than with the condition of the rich."<sup>15</sup> With ultimate reference to the Gospel and the model provided by Christ, Olivi's invocation of *usus pauper* actually calls for the mandatory and persistent discernment of the friars in their use of any goods or property; one shouldn't simply presume that because he does not own the thing *de jure* that its use is acceptable as a matter of course. To relate authentically to things according to *usus pauper* is to view goods or property through the lens of what is needed now and in the relative short-term future according to prudential and evangelical judgment, and not simply according to the licentious standards of worldly wisdom.

While he never connected creation to *usus pauper*, I believe Olivi's insight is especially helpful in the context of eco-spirituality in thinking about normative attitudes or habits the human species forms around this necessary instrumental utilization of other creatures. As the friars were in relationship to goods and property, so also are humans in relationship to the rest of creation: we do not "own" other creatures.

Drawing on the familial or interrelational framework of kinship or the community of creation, "care for creation" arises as a mandate for its own sake and for the sake of reciprocity (a conceptual landscape that follows from Bonaventure's *pietas*). An adapted *usus pauper* principle offers us a general disposition that might aid in our discernment about what is or is not necessary in terms of ecological justice and care-for-creation praxis. As a principle, *usus pauper* in this context always requires the individual and community to reflect intentionally on the practices surrounding and instrumental usage of nonhuman creatures. [In this way, the Christian

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<sup>15</sup> Olivi, *Quaestiones de Perfectione Evangelica*, q. 15, 98vb (MS Florence, Bibl. Laur. 448).

community might also learn a great deal from the ancient wisdom of indigenous peoples around the world who have in many cases safeguarded spiritual practices and the importance of active discernment when it comes to the taking of nonhuman creaturely life or the instrumental usage of other aspects of creation.<sup>16]</sup> As Christians following the example of Jesus Christ in the Gospel, we can imagine a way of being-in-the-world that emphasizes our own creatureliness and poverty, which, in its own way, can bolster our embracing a discerning spirit of *usus pauper*.

## Conclusion

Like the structure of *Laudato Sí* itself, the threefold structure of my paper can actually be interpreted according to the **see, judge, act** process. I have suggested that the Franciscan tradition aids us in moving beyond *Laudato Sí*, recognizing it as our shared starting point, **by**: First **seeing** the world as it actually is, the one interdependent and interrelated family of creation of which we are one part; Second **judging** our place within this family as in need of ongoing conversion according to the virtue of *pietas* as outlined by Bonaventure and modeled by Francis; and, Third **acting** in accord with the discernment principle of *usus pauper* in navigating the practical demands arising from the simultaneity of the intrinsic dignity and value of nonhuman creatures and our necessary instrumental use of some.

*Thank you.*

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<sup>16</sup> For a phenomenological engagement with several indigenous traditions, see David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).