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*The
Radical
Call of Laudato Si'*



Laudato si'
REVOLUTION

In 1990, a group of distinguished scientists, including the late Carl Sagan and physicist Freeman Dyson, wrote a letter appealing to the world's spiritual leaders, stating, "We are close to committing "crimes against creation." Unless we undergo significant changes, the scientists wrote, we are headed for a significant crisis. Pope Francis's encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, on Care for Our Common Home, is an effort to articulate a theological praxis on environmental concerns. Global warming, water scarcity, loss of biodiversity and other declining factors, according to the Pope, indicate that we cannot sustain a first-world lifestyle without succumbing to severe losses. Our planet is in danger of irreparable damage and the poor bear the brunt of the declining biosphere. Our North American ecological footprint is about twenty-three percent larger than the earth's capacity to support life. To continue our consumer lifestyles will comprise planetary life for future generations.

The Pope describes an integral ecology, one in which human personhood is contextualized within the overall biological sphere of relationships. The inspiration for his ecological vision is his namesake, Saint Francis of Assisi, who composed *Canticle of the Creatures*, which forms the framework of *Laudato Si'*, a year before his death.

Franciscan theology permeates the *Laudato Si'*. Bonaventure is given ample recognition with his doctrine of exemplary creation, the deep relationship between Trinity and Incarnation, and the resurrection as the transfiguration of all creaturely life. Creation flows from the heart of God in which every creature expresses God in some way. God's love is the "fundamental moving force in all created things" (para. 77). The world is created as a means of God's self-revelation so that, like a mirror or footprint, it might lead us to love and praise the Creator. Pope Francis posits a metaphysics of relationship grounded in divine love. We are not simply



human beings; we are interbeings and share in the interrelatedness of all cosmic life. He writes: “Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of his creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth” (para. 92).

Reading *Laudato Si'* is inspirational; yet, theologically, it is problematic. The crises that Pope Francis highlights are not due to recent events; rather they are about five hundred years in the making, beginning with the unraveling of science from religion and the inability of religion to accept evolution as the fundamental narrative of human life. Theology has been stifled by the Church's critical distance from modern science. In a 1925 essay, Alfred North Whitehead, the founder of Process theology, wrote, “religion will not regain its power unless it can face change in the same spirit as does science.”

Since the death of Francis of Assisi in 1226, science has undergone three major paradigm shifts. Beginning in the fifteenth century, the ancient Ptolemaic cosmos of Bonaventure and Scotus was challenged by Nicholas Copernicus, Tycho Brahe and others, culminating in the Galileo trial. Galileo supported the Copernican universe in which the sun and not the earth was identified as center of the cosmos. The Church repudiated Galileo in 1633 for supporting heliocentrism and placed him under house arrest, placing his great work “*Dialogue On The Two Chief World Systems*” on the index of forbidden books; the ban was lifted in 1835. The Galileo affair marked a watershed for the Church in relation to science. After the Galileo affair, the Church turned inward and favored a supernatural, Neoplatonic spirituality that mirrored the hierarchy of the Church. In 1879 Pope Leo XIII reaffirmed a medieval theological worldview in his encyclical, *Aeterni*



Patris, where he identified Thomas Aquinas as the official theologian of the Church. The affirmation of an official Catholic theology followed on the heels of Charles Darwin and his groundbreaking work, *On the Origin of Species* in which he described mechanisms of evolution, including natural selection and adaptation. The theory of evolution as the description of biological life challenged the role of God in creation.

While the Church held on tightly to a medieval theological synthesis, modern science disclosed a world of change and complexity. In the early twentieth century, Albert Einstein published his theory of special relativity and later his theory of general relativity which revolutionized our understanding of space, time and gravity and thus the structure of the universe. Today the accepted cosmic paradigm is the Big Bang universe, approximately 13.8 billion years old and stretching infinitely into the future. The two main pillars of modern science are evolution and quantum physics. Darwinian evolution has been advanced by studies in biological systems, emergence and complexity, features of open systems that were unknown in the Middle Ages. Culturally, we adapted to a world of science and technology and the benefits afforded by progress; however religion remained medieval in theology and worship. Vatican II sought to open the windows of the Church to the world but left the official theology of Thomas Aquinas in tact.

It is no surprise that we have become radically disconnected from the earth and from one another because we have become radically disconnected from the cosmos. Nancy Abrams and Joel Primack state that we need a renewed shared cosmology to help transform our fragmented world into a new unity. They write: “There is a profound connection between our lack of a shared cosmology and our increasing global problems. We have no sense how we and our fellow humans fit into the big picture. . .without a big picture



we are very small people.” Raimon Panikkar in his Guifford lectures, *The Rhythm of Being*, writes that if cosmology has changed, so too must theology and anthropology accordingly. These three realities, cosmology, theology and anthropology, are so deeply intertwined that one cannot change one without affecting the other.

The Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin devoted his life to bridging science and faith. He said that the human person “is nothing else than evolution become conscious of itself.” To this idea he added, “the consciousness of each of us is evolution looking at itself and reflecting upon itself.” The human person is integral to evolution; s/he is “the point of emergence in nature, at which this deep cosmic evolution culminates and declares itself.” He indicated that dialogue alone between science and religion is insufficient to move us to a new level of consciousness and new action in the world. What is needed is a new synthesis that emerges from the insights of science and religion. Evolution, he maintained, is neither theory nor particular fact but a “dimension” to which all thinking in whatever area must conform. The human person emerges out of billions of years of evolution, beginning with cosmogenesis and the billions of years that led to biogenesis. To realize that humans are part of larger process that involves long spans of developmental time brings a massive change to all of our knowledge and beliefs.

Pope Francis points to a theology of evolution in his encyclical in a way that promises a new vision for the world; however, he reverts to an old theology when he states: “The best way to restore men and women to their rightful place, putting an end to their claim to absolute dominion over the earth, is to speak once more of the figure of a Father who creates and who alone owns the world” (para. 75). When it comes to the human person, evolution is dismissed for special creation and divine intervention. The Pope



writes: “Human beings, even if we postulate a process of evolution, also possess a uniqueness which cannot be fully explained by the evolution of other open systems. . . . Our capacity to reason, to develop arguments, to be inventive . . . are signs of a uniqueness which transcends the spheres of physics and biology. The sheer novelty involved in the emergence of a personal being within a material universe presupposes a direct action of God and a particular call to life” (para. 81, emphasis added). Evolution is a term that describes the complexities of change in biological life. For the Church to fully accept evolution, it would have to revise or jettison the doctrine of original sin as the consequence of a single couple (monogenism), and it is unwilling to do so. Hence there is an insuperable gap between Catholic theology and modern science.

Teilhard was keenly aware of the Church’s theological problem. In the past, Christianity had been a religion of order, he said. The fundamental question Christians asked themselves had always been the same: What is the significance of Christ in a world which was created in a perfect order but upset by original sin? The answer was unambiguous: Christ had come to restore the order destroyed by sin and to lead the world back to its original perfection. Now what we must ask is: What is the significance of Christ in an evolving world, at the heart of humankind seeking its future? This is a fundamentally Franciscan question, for both Bonaventure and Scotus saw that original sin was not the primary reason for Christ; rather the incarnation is first in God’s intention to love and to create.

Teilhard discovered Scotus’ doctrine of the primacy of Christ late in his career but it gave form to the entirety of his thought. The reason for Christ, and hence creation, is love. For Teilhard the mystery of creation and the mystery of incarnation are a single mystery of divine love. This world is not merely a plurality of unrelated things but a true unity, a cosmos, centered in



Christ who is the purpose of this universe and the model of what is intended for this universe, union and transformation in God. He used the term Christogenesis to indicate that the biological and cosmological genesis of creation – cosmogenesis – is from the point of faith, Christogenesis. The whole cosmos is incarnational. Christ is organically immersed with all of creation, in the heart of matter, unifying the world. Teilhard introduced a new understanding of Christ as the “evolver,” the power of divine love incarnate in physical creation. He posited a dynamic view of God and the world in the process of becoming something more than what it is because the universe is grounded in the personal center of Christ.

A Religion of the Earth

Teilhard felt that traditional Christianity is too aloof from the world, a closed system of routinized sameness. He wrote: “No longer is it simply a religion of individual and of heaven, but a religion of mankind and of the earth--that is what we are looking for at this moment, as the oxygen without which we cannot breathe.” Religion, in his view, is primarily on the level of human consciousness and human action rather than in institutions or belief systems, except insofar as these manifest and give direction to the former. In his final essay *The Christic* he wrote: “In a system of cosmo-noogenesis, the comparative value of religious creeds may be measured by their respective power of evolutive activation.”

Consciousness is key to Teilhard’s vision and it is fundamental to the vision of Francis of Assisi as well. Today we know from quantum physics that consciousness plays a fundamental role in matter. Teilhard posited consciousness as the “inside” of matter while attraction is the “outside” of matter. Hence, the attraction of matter to matter is also the rise of consciousness. This two-fold movement of consciousness and attraction undergirds the evolutionary movement toward complexity. As relationships

increase, consciousness rises and more unified being emerges. Teilhard spoke of love as the core energy of evolution, since love both attracts and transcends. Hence he wrote, the physical structure of the universe is love. He realized there is a ground of creative love at the heart of change, a Trinity of love that empowers change and transformation toward greater unity. God is the power of love within this process of change and the future toward which evolution is directed. The incarnation is the arrival of the future in the present.

One could speak of an evolution of consciousness in the life of Francis of Assisi, as he progressed from a cloth merchant to a devoted follower of the crucified Christ. His Christogenic universe unfolded through a life of conversion and transformation of consciousness, beginning with his experience of God's love, his awareness of the sacramentality of creation, and his passionate desire to return love for love. Francis was driven by a single-hearted love of Christ. The stages of his life are stages of individuation toward an integral consciousness, from self-consciousness to world-consciousness to cosmic consciousness. As divine love expanded within him, Christ began to take the form of his life; he became an incarnate presence, a second Christ, in the world. The life of Francis was on fire with the love of God; saw the world with new eyes and loved from a new center. When the level of our awareness changes, we start attracting a new reality. His journey into Christ consciousness, however, was not easy; it was a life of hardship, poverty, rejection, sickness, misunderstanding, misfortune and exile. The type of incarnational vision that changes the world requires a radicalization of the heart. It requires choices to be made, an establishment of priorities. God's ways are not our ways and the logic of God's love is not analytical logic but a logic of the heart. Only when we live from the inner

spacious of the heart, a life sine proprio, can we love the world as brother and sister.

Francis's Christogenic spirituality, like Teilhard's, is organically ecclesial. Everyone and everything belongs to the Body of Christ. Teilhard spoke of the Church as a new phylum of Christian amorization (from the Latin amor or "love") in the universe. He imagined a new Christified humanity, bonded by love, one that would enkindle love energy in the cosmos, igniting bonds of solidarity, compassion, mutual charity, forgiveness and peace. The mission of the Church is the personalization of divine love at the heart of cosmic life. The Church does not exist for itself; it exists for the life of the world. Interestingly, the tiny Church of the Portiuncula, where Francis first began, exists within the large Basilica of St. Mary of the Angels; similarly, the institutional Church exists with the expansive cathedral of the universe. Francis's beautiful Umbrian hymn, The Canticle of the Creatures, captures this reality. It is a Christic hymn, a doxology of praise where God is glorified in all creatures and all dimensions of cosmic life, although the name of Jesus is never mentioned; for the name points to the mystery and only when we live in the mystery of God's incarnate love is Christ a living reality at the heart of the cosmos.

A New Consciousness

Laudato Si' is calling for new action but this cannot be effective without sinking its roots into a new consciousness of Church and Christian life in evolution. Pope Francis wants real change but to effect change, new structures of consciousness must be allowed to take root. Unless we change the way we think and pray, we will not change the way we act.

Conversion is essential, as the Pope indicates, but it cannot be spiritual conversion alone; conversion must take place on every level of ecclesial life,



including theological, structural, organizational and interreligious levels, if the world is to feel the spiritual impulse of love at the heart of all life. To live with an evolutionary spirit is to let go when the right time comes and to engage new structures of relationship.

Laudato Si' challenges a selfish world of disconnectedness by calling all people to a new world of interrelatedness. Can the Church model the very principles it promotes: mutual relatedness, inclusivity, interdependence, dignity of all peoples, shared resources and responsibilities where all creatures, male and female, are united together as brothers and sisters, woven together in the love of God? Teilhard thought that if we are to influence the world it is essential that we share in its drive, in its anxieties and its hopes. We are not only to recognize evolution but we are to continue it in ourselves. We are to "christify" the world by our actions, immersing ourselves in the world, plunging our hands into the soil of the earth and touching the roots of life. His deep secular humanism is a "mysticism of action," involvement in the world entangled with God. He held that union with God is not withdrawal or separation from the activity of the world but a dedicated, integrated and sublimated absorption into it. One cannot be saved except through the universe and as a continuation of the universe. "We must make our way to heaven through earth."

A New Franciscan Moment?

Incarnational realism is one of making our way to heaven through earth. It is how Francis of Assisi lived and it is how we too must live. Francis radicalized the presence of God. He was a trouble-making troubadour. He did not follow the Church; he dared the Church to see the world with new eyes. The love of God set him on fire and forged his heart into a sacred temple of the divine Word. We too must be courageous in love. The way of Saint Francis is costly love and only this type of love can rebuild the broken



relationships of our world. We cannot afford a sanitized spirituality of conversion; we must aim for an evolution of consciousness, an integral wholeness of God, self and creation in the unity of love. Evolution moves by a power from within, a power that sustains us through death into new life. Are we willing to die for new life to emerge, not just personally but collectively, as Church? Can we as Church really embrace evolution? At the end of his Canticum of Creatures Francis wrote to the effect, blessed are those who die the first death, for the second death will do them no harm. The movement to integral wholeness means a death to the separate self in order to be released into greater wholeness.

Francis knew that to die for the love of God is to live forever. Ultimately, *Laudato Si'* evokes a question of desire. What do we really want and what are we willing to sacrifice? As members of the Body of Christ, we must make every effort to bring the Church into the 21st century. The Church cannot be the great exception to the world; it must be both mirror and example to others, a sign of hope in a world of change.



Notes

¹ Alfred North Whitehead, “Religion and Science,” *The Atlantic* (August 1925).

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1925/08/religion-and-science/304220/>

² Nancy Ellen Abrams and Joel R. Primack, *The New Universe and the Human Future: How a Shared Cosmology Could Transform the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011) xi – xii.

³ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, trans. Bernard Wall (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 221.

⁴ Teilhard de Chardin, *Phenomenon of Man*, 221.

⁵ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Human Energy*, trans. J. M. Cohen (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969), 23.

⁶ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Activation of Energy*, trans. René Hague (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1970),

⁷ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Christic*

<http://www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~alfar2/Christic.htm>

⁸ *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: Writings*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 124.

⁹ Ursula King, *Christ in All Things*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 93.

¹⁰ Ursula King, *Christ in All Things*(New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 93.

¹¹ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Christianity and Evolution*, trans. Bernard Wall (New York: Harper, 2002, reprint), 93.