Laudato Si’: A Call for Franciscan-Hearted Political Action
Laudato si, mi Signore, per sora nostra matre Terra,
la quale ne sustenta et gouerna . . .

The encyclical, Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home, has a special resonance for Franciscans. The title of the encyclical, Laudato Si’ – Praise be to you – are words St. Francis prayed over and over again in his poignant Canticle of the Creatures, praising the Creator through Sister Moon, Brother Wind, Sister Water, and Mother Earth. In that same resonance, Franciscan-hearted people will also discern in the encyclical a call not just for personal transformation but equally a call for Franciscan action.

Theologically, Laudato Si’ offers a sweeping assessment of how the contemporary world’s understanding of human life in relation to creation and its Creator has been horribly corrupted by the logics of technology, economics, and solipsistic individualism, and the consequences of that corruption for the soul and life human person. The encyclical discloses a moral imperative for limits to growth, for the responsibilities of government, and for close regulation of the economy in light of our covenant with God to care for creation.

At the same time, the encyclical also retells the ancient, biblical account of creation as God’s garden and of Adam’s original covenant, reaffirmed in Christ, that still obliges us to be caretakers of the garden. It centerstages longstanding Church teachings that present creation as luminous with the promise of salvation and with the law of its Creator. So, while the encyclical can be breathtaking in its frankness and the pontiff’s prophetic voice may be unsettling to some contemporary ears, Laudato Si’ is not new theology and its

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1 Be praised, my Lord, through our sister Mother Earth, who feeds us and rules us . . . St. Francis of Assisi, “Canticle of the Creatures” (1241).
provenance in ancient scripture and Catholic tradition lends powerfully to the message’s gravity and importance.

The Broken Covenant and The Call for Justice

Our civilization’s failure to care for Creation is everywhere apparent. “The earth, our home,” Pope Francis writes, “is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth.” The availability of fresh water is threatened on every continent. Extinctions of plant and animal species are accelerating and “[b]ecause of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God…. ” The ravaging of our planet’s seas and reefs, the clear-cutting of tropical forests (“the lungs of the planet”), corporate and industrialized monocultural agriculture, spiking atmospheric and ocean water temperatures, and rising worldwide pollution, are gutting the divinely-ordained diversity of flora and fauna. Moreover, the encyclical warns that a “disturbing warming of the climatic system,” “mainly as a result of human activity,” has become crisis like no other. “Climate change,” the pope continues, “is a global problem with grave implications” for sustaining the planet’s life, for the continuance of our civilization, and poses its greatest threat to world’s most vulnerable and impoverished peoples.

The devastation wreaked on Creation takes a tremendous human toll, as well. The toll taken falls most horribly on populations in poverty and on the vulnerable, powerless, and oppressed. It falls disproportionately, too, on the peoples of the developing world. The changing climate ushers in never before

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3 *Laudato Si’*, supra note 1, at P 33
4 *Laudato Si’* at P 23.
5 *Laudato Si’* at P 25.
seen droughts, powerful storms, and rising sea levels. These catastrophes are experienced by every class and all nations, yet it is poor and powerless who most lack resources to mitigate the impacts. This is sharply evident in the global north’s overweening hunger for resources, combined with its economic and military power, vis-à-vis the relatively powerless global south. In *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis warns that a “true ‘ecological debt’ exists …between the global north and south” that demands moral recompense and justice.\(^6\)

To reiterate: *Laudato Si’* is the church’s instruction to us, as a matter of faith and morals, that we are morally obligated to enforce justice to address the corruption of Creation. “Today,” Pope Francis preaches, “a true ecological approach . . . must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.”\(^7\) Unmistakably, in calling for justice, the encyclical is calling for action in public life.

**How Has This Happened?**

How is it that we have come to fail so miserably in our responsibility to tend the garden left to our care by the Creator? *Laudato Si’* makes clear that the failure is not simply a matter of failed individual responsibilities.

While we as individuals are not innocent, our individual failures need also to be seen as reflecting a systemic failure of personal formation in the contemporary world. Potent structural elements of our civilization – the material conditions driven by market economics and technology, have twisted the formation of the human person to instill a distorted self-understanding that is contrary to the divine image. That distorted self-understanding is a solipsistic individualism, which sees the human person as a solitary, independent, and

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\(^6\) *Laudato Si’* at P 51.

\(^7\) *Laudato Si’* at P 49 (emphasis omitted).
autonomous ego engaged in a zero-sum competition with all other individuals for the resources in the natural world. The natural world and even other individuals in this un-Christian philosophical anthropology are reduced to mere things to be owned and used for the ego’s utility, necessity, or pleasure.

_Laudato Si’_ confronts the contemporary world’s flawed anthropology directly. Truly recognizing creation as creation by God, we discern that we too have been created by God. We discern, further, that we are not above creation or outside it or alienated from it. We are part of it. Think here of St. Francis naming the moon as sister, the wind as brother, and mother earth. Our relation to the rest of creation is familial. So, the natural world is not a collection of things at our feet for us to use as we please. And, creation ultimately belongs to the Creator; its intrinsic meaning is divine. The flawed anthropology behind so much of the contemporary world’s failure in regard to creation begins with forgetting to whom creation belongs and with the solipsistic imagining that each individual human person is its master. “The harmony between the Creator, humanity, and creation as a whole,” Pope Francis explains, “was disrupted by our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations.” Hence, “we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God’s image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures.” To grasp the Genesis story correctly, according to _Laudato Si’_, we must understand that we are charged by God to “‘till and keep’ the garden of the world,” where “‘keeping’ means caring, protecting, overseeing, and preserving.”

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8 _Laudato Si’_ at P 66.
9 _Laudato Si’_ at P 67.
10 Ibid.
When we see the relationship between the Creator, the human person, and creation in this way, many features of our present age are revealed as problems. *Laudato Si’* highlights problematics in the processes of the market economy, libertarian ideologies of government, and technological progress. For example, if all creation truly belongs to God, then the labor theory of private property and the corresponding theory of unhindered competitive trade must be viewed with suspicion.

*Laudato Si’,* referencing Psalms, insists that…

‘The earth is the Lord’s’ (Ps 24:1); to him belongs ‘the earth with all that is within it’ (Dt 10:14). Thus, God rejects every claim to absolute ownership.\(^{11}\)

Accordingly, property relations are better understood as a kind of stewardship wherein our duties as stewards are to “till and keep” for the Creator’s purposes rather than exploit for our own. Meaning that, property and the exchange of property should be subject to divine purpose and the divinely ordained common good. They should be regulated. The encyclical calls for laws, governments, and international bodies to effectively regulate institutions and individuals that endanger creation.\(^{12}\)

Unfettered technological change is similarly a concern. Much like the invisible hands of the marketplace, technology “progresses” without consideration of the divine plan for creation or the divine purpose for human life. Moreover, there is something worrisome about the technological attitude

\(^{11}\) *Laudato Si’,* *supra* note 1 at P 21.

\(^{12}\) *Laudato Si’* at P 175.
itself in the way it gazes at the natural world and human life as if they were only 
bugs under a microscope for study, utility, and technological tinkering. The 
technological attitude is in stark contrast with the Franciscan way of seeing the 
natural world as a family to which we belong. Pope Francis quotes from the 
mid-century theologian, Romano Guardini.

…[T]he technological mind sees nature as an insensate order, as a cold 
body of facts, as a mere ‘given’, as an object of utility, as raw material to 
be hammered into useful shape; it views the cosmos similarly as a mere 
‘space’ into which objects can be thrown with complete indifference.¹³

Laudato Si’ also notes another side of this – the human consequences. 
Because, both the technological blinders and the economic blinders not only 
distort the way in which we see creation but also the way in which we see others 
and ourselves. In the workplace, workers become mere capital. Materialist 
consumerism manipulates the consumer as if she were simply a thing that buys 
and consumes. The technological attitude that objectifies the world into an 
assemblage of mere things lends itself toward an attitude that also objectifies 
others before its gaze. Wearing these blinders, individuals separate themselves 
from each other, and divinely ordained solidarity is replaced with alienation. 
The hyper-individualism of so much of contemporary life is the result. And, the 
relativist morality of our society that recent popes have criticized is intimately 
connected with this individualism. We begin to think of ourselves and our 
interests as the measure of all things, including what is right and wrong – and 
perception of the common good we share in our life with others and the final 
good that is salvation is compromised. In some of the most strident passages of

¹³ Laudato Si’, supra note 1, P 115 (quoting Romano Guardini, The End of the Modern World: A Search for Orientation, p. 63 
(Frederick D. Wilhmsen ed., Joseph Theman trans., London: Sheed and Ward 1956). This is a great book, by the way.
Laudato Si’, Pope Francis criticizes this “rampant individualism,” insisting that “many problems of society are connected with today’s self-centered culture of instant gratification.”

Integral Ecology and the Moral Imperative of Franciscan Action

The organization of the encyclical, Laudato Si’, follows the now well-known Catholic formula of See—Judge—Act. The first part of the encyclical surveys the problem; the second analyzes the problem for Church teachings and theology; and, the last part is a call for action, which might be particularly understood as Franciscan-hearted action. That action, however, hinges on the encyclical’s central proposal for what is called “integral ecology.”

Integral ecology is not a science. It can best be described as a way of living that is oriented toward care for creation that depends on the recovery of a truly Christian understanding of the human person. As Pope Francis puts it, “[t]here needs to be a distinctive way of looking at things, policies, an educational programme, a lifestyle, and a spirituality” which together implement a process of formation for human conscience and consciousness. What Pope Francis hopes is that we lead our lives in relation with God, our relation with the natural world, and our relations with each other with something like the harmony that one finds among elements of a healthy ecosystem.

The call for integral ecology is arguably the most misunderstood aspect of the encyclical. It remains a stumbling block for many who otherwise are compelled by the moral and theological message of Laudato Si’. Yet, note the

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14 Laudato Si’ at P 162.
15 Laudato Si’ at P 111 (emphasis mine).
Holy Father’s description of how integral ecology works. It works as a process of formation. In this is invoked what should inspire Franciscans to action.

One of the charisms of Franciscans is community. Franciscans realize that formation cannot be achieved as an isolated individual precisely because the human person is ordained toward solidarity with others. So, formation happens in community, and that such formation can be good or bad, moral or immoral, depending on the realities of the formation in which we are formed. The encyclical, *Laudato Si’*, is perhaps most poignant in its analysis of the distortions of the formation of the human person in our contemporary world owing to structural forces at work that are at odds with a genuinely Christian anthropology. Integral ecology as a way of life for the human community is the pontiff’s answer to the failed formation of the human person that continues unabated in the world today.

The political character of action becomes evident when integral ecology is recognized as a process of formation. Politics, in its simplest definition, is about changing the realities of our community, changing its institutions, processes, and material character. Political action, when it achieves change in the community, changes the community’s process of formation. To overcome the corruption of current formation and to progress toward the Christian anthropology envisioned by *Laudato Si’*’s integral ecology, will depend not only on virtue, but also on political action.

It is difficult for most of us to think about politics in this fashion. In practice it looks too often like bare-knuckled partisanship and competing material interests. No doubt what passes for politics in the current world also reflects the same distorted anthropology that *Laudato Si’* indicts. Yet, political
action is utterly necessary to address the structural forces behind our current mess.

Understanding the reality of structural sin is another way to see this. *Laudato Si’* alludes to the idea structural sin at several points. If, as *Laudato Si’* insists, the deep structures of our contemporary world are corrupting both how we perceive creation and how the human person is formed in conscience and consciousness, then these are matters of structural sin. This is a sinfulness embedded in our formation, in our consciences and consciousness. It is embedded in our institutions, in our art, and in the processes of our lives. It is embedded in everything from our urban planning and school systems to our criminal laws. Yet, because it is embedded in our institutions, norms, and even laws, this structural sin cannot be overcome with merely an individual’s personal transformation. Personal virtue is not enough. Our individual efforts to rise above these distortions, while laudatory and necessary, will do little to change the embedded distortions in the structures of the community around us and do little to change how those structures continue to distort the formation of human beings who live with us in community.

To address structural sin requires changing the structures of our community, its laws, policies, institutions, and processes – which is another way of saying that political action is required. In the spirit of *Laudato Si’*, it must be Franciscan-hearted political action.

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