

# Who are We Before God and in Creation?

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## Integral ecology in the spirituality of Catholic Social Teaching

Many people expected that *Laudato Si'* would be an encyclical about climate change. The COP 21 conference of parties to the *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change* and the *Kyoto Protocol* was coming up and there was a real sense of urgency about setting stronger carbon emission targets. *Laudato Si'* responds powerfully to these signs of the times, but its primary focus is not climate change.

Theological ethicists anticipated that the encyclical might systematise and consolidate the existing teachings on ecological issues. Many expected it to reflect a duty ethics of stewardship, like the teaching of previous Popes. *Laudato Si'* affirms our responsibility to care for creation, but is not an encyclical about stewardship. The

word 'stewardship' only appears once in the whole encyclical and the expression 'stewards of creation' also only appears once.

I note these expectations because often people project onto the encyclical what they expect it to say. Maybe in this anniversary year we are ready to receive and to grapple with what *Laudato Si'* actually says?

Rather than being about climate change, it is an encyclical about the need for human change. It goes deeper than the presenting issue, addressing the roots of climate change in human behaviour. And it goes deeper still by addressing how this human behaviour reflects a misunderstanding – or worse a rejection – of who and what we humans are. It calls for a renewed anthropology.

The encyclical doesn't just systematise and consolidate the existing teachings on ecology, it develops them further. It goes beyond a duty ethic of stewardship to propose a virtue ethics of care and kinship. It calls for a renewed understanding of the world and our place in it – a renewed cosmology.

*Laudato Si'* challenges us to consider the truth of who we are before God, and in creation. If we want real and lasting change, we cannot avoid these deep-down questions that go to the heart of our spirituality.

The word 'spirituality' is used in so many ways that it can mean just about anything. Here is how I understand spirituality:

**A spirituality is a person or group's way of understanding God (or the Transcendent if you prefer), the world, and one's place in it, expressed in values, attitudes, motivations or dispositions, commitments and practices.**

This probably isn't what comes to mind for most people when they think about Catholic Social Teaching. Many seem to understand these teachings as universal principles to be applied to particular situations. That is actually a pre-Vatican II approach to moral theology. If you reduce Catholic Social Teaching to a collection of essential principles, it is easy to miss the fact that it expresses and encourages a socially engaged spirituality. It is about the praxis of Christian living in society. It places faith sources and other sources of human wisdom in dialogue with reality for the sake of generating wisdom to guide Christian living. In the process it also

generates insight into the meaning of faith sources. That's how the teachings develop.

*Laudato Si'* presents an understanding of God, the world, and our place in it, and encourages us in certain values, attitudes, motivations or dispositions, commitments and practices. It promotes a spirituality.

One of the foundations of this spirituality is the understanding that all that is has been loved into being by God – including us. God is the Creator and we are creatures. The universe is not random and chaotic, it is a cosmos imbued with meaning and order.

Previous teachings emphasized human beings as the pinnacle of creation, endowed with intelligence and free will and therefore responsible for the stewardship of the rest of creation, but Francis puts us firmly in our place. He reminds us that we are creatures among other creatures. Each creature, whether human or otherwise, has an inherent worth. Each one speaks of its Creator. We are part of God's creation, in a relationship of kinship to the rest of creation. The Canticum of the Creatures with its family relationships – Brother Sun, Sister Moon – continually reinforces this point running like a leitmotif throughout the encyclical.

Francis explains that the Genesis mandate to have dominion over the earth has at times been incorrectly interpreted by Christians and that this text has to be read in its context and with an appropriate hermeneutic. Tilling and keeping, he says "implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature" (LS n 67). Mutual responsibility. We have a responsibility to care for God's creation but the things of creation also care for us and sustain us. We are not overseers or managers of our sisters and brothers. Kinship is much more mutual and reciprocal than stewardship. Other creatures too have a right to what they need from the bounty of the earth. They too are willed by God, have a purpose, reflect something of their Creator, and have an intrinsic value that must be respected. They too give praise to God and are moving towards the fullness of God.

Catholic Social Teaching is often criticised as being excessively anthropocentric or human-centred. *Laudato Si'* goes a long way towards resetting our understanding of who we are before God – we are God's creatures – and in relation to the rest of creation – we are kin to all other creatures sharing the same Source and Destination. Francis sums this up:

"A spirituality which forgets God as all-powerful and Creator is not acceptable. That is how we end up worshipping earthly powers, or ourselves usurping the place of God, even to the point of claiming an unlimited right to trample his creation underfoot."  
(LS n 75)

We do not stand outside of and above creation. We are not God.

Ideas like these have in the past been greeted with howls of pantheism! Francis however stresses that all creatures – including us – are part of a universal family or ‘sublime communion’ (LS n 89) joined together by God and owned by God. This is not the same thing as attributing divinity to nature.

Francis is inviting us to a renewed Christian anthropology in which our understanding of what it is to be human is much humbler and much more connected with the rest of the web of being. While John Paul II emphasised the interdependence of all human beings and human communities, Francis stresses the interdependence of the whole earth community.

Ecology is about relationships between living organisms and the environment in which they develop. Francis reminds us that everything is connected (LS n 137) and this means that our approach to ecology must be holistic. Integral ecology requires “an integrated approach to combatting poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature” (LS n 139). *Laudato Si’* speaks of environmental, economic and social ecology, of cultural ecology and of human ecology. Integral ecology brings all of these dimensions of ecology together seeking the common good of the whole earth community through time and space.

Integral ecology asks much more than being critical consumers. Of course we must all take personal responsibility for our impact on the rest of creation, but the deeper causes of ecological problems usually lie beyond personal behaviour alone. They are connected to models of development, production and consumption that reflect a sense of entitlement to dominion over the rest of creation.

The spirituality of *Laudato Si’* understands every part of God’s Creation as our kin. It encourages a disposition of respect for God’s creation. It motivates us to live in communion with the whole of creation. It encourages practices of social inclusion and economic sustainability. It leads us to a commitment to relationships of mutuality and reciprocity with the whole of creation.

The spirituality of *Laudato Si’* reminds us that while we have responsibilities, we are not in charge. We are God’s creatures, called to live in communion with the rest of God’s creation, without which we cannot survive, let alone thrive.

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