

Ec(o)clesiology: Ecology as Ecclesiology in *Laudato Si'*

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Judith Gruber

Katholieke Universiteit, Leuven, Belgium

Abstract

This article argues that the call in *Laudato Si'* for an integral ecology can also be understood as teaching about the church. It first excavates the theological presuppositions on which the practical teaching of the encyclical rests, that the interrelation between church and context is constitutive of ecclesial tradition. It suggests that *Laudato Si'* provides a metaphor for these interrelations: church–world relations can be conceived as an “ecosystem.” A constructive reading of *Laudato Si'* through this metaphorical lens argues that this encyclical performs a deconstruction of an essentialist, teleological understanding of revelation and ecclesial tradition.

Keywords

ecclesiology, ecology, *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis, Roman Catholic Church

With urgency, Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato Si'* addresses the ecological crisis caused by human-induced global warming.¹ Linking the ecological crisis to a social crisis, Francis stresses that it is the poor who already suffer most from climate change; the ecological destruction of our planet will only lead to

1. Francis, *Laudato Si'* (May 24, 2015), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html (hereafter cited as *LS*).

Corresponding author:

Dr Judith Gruber, Research Unit of Systematic Theology and Religious Studies, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Sint-Michielsstraat 4, Box 3101, 3000 Leuven, Belgium.

Email: judith.gruber@kuleuven.be

further exploitation and dehumanization of those who are considered the disposable of our globalized society: “We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental” (LS 139). Given the scale and complexity of this crisis, the pope calls for comprehensive solutions which require the concerted contributions of “all people of our common home” (LS 3), and, in particular, the expertise of researchers from a wide range of disciplines (LS 140). With this encyclical, Francis explicitly seeks a dialogue which transcends the boundaries of the religious community he leads (LS 14), in order to address a socio-ecological crisis of planetary dimensions. Neither the topic of *Laudato Si’* nor its choice of conversation partners thus seem to zoom in on the Roman Catholic Church, and yet, I will argue, it is an eminently ecclesiological document: it is the crucial argument of this article that the encyclical’s call for an integral ecology is not only an intrinsic part of the teaching of the church (LS 15), but can also be read as teaching about the church. My reading of the encyclical, in other words, assumes that any overtly practical, social ethical teaching of the church rests on specific theological and ecclesiological presuppositions, and my goal is to excavate these theological foundations and to use them constructively and creatively as building blocks for a revision of ecclesiology in view of the contemporary crises with which the church is faced.

The Implicit Ecclesiology of *Laudato Si’*

Since the Second Vatican Council, this correlation between the doctrine of the church and its pastoral practice in concrete contexts has become widely appreciated in Roman Catholic theology, and it has also become a focus of attention in the reception of *Laudato Si’*. How, more specifically, though, we are to understand the nature of this correlation is a much more contested question. The issue, in short, is this: do we conceive of the correlation between the doctrinal and the pastoral teaching of the church as unilinear and unidirectional, or do we think of it in terms of their interdependence?

Laudato Si’, it can be argued, follows patterns of *interdependence* in building its argument for a theologically substantiated integral ecology. Leonardo Boff, among others, asserts that the encyclical’s “structure follows the methodological ritual ... see, judge, act, and celebrate.”² In the wake of the council and informed by liberation theology, the “see–judge–act” methodology has become influential for framing the correlation between the social-ethical and the doctrinal teaching of the church. Crucially, this methodology is described to be performed in a hermeneutical circle/spiral,³ and thus defies a unilinear conception of the relation between ecclesial teaching and pastoral

2. Leonardo Boff, “The Magna Carta of Integral Ecology: Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor,” *LeonardoBoff.com* (blog), June 18, 2015, <https://leonardoboff.wordpress.com/2015/06/18/the-magna-carta-of-integral-ecology-cry-of-the-earth-cry-of-the-poor/>.

3. Fred Kammer, *Doing Faithjustice: An Introduction to Catholic Social Thought* (New York: Paulist, 1991), 73.

practice.⁴ Indeed, a closer look at the structure of the encyclical reveals this non-unilinear procedure of the “see–judge–act” method. As Boff stresses, Francis does not actually start out with the hermeneutics of “seeing”; rather, “he begins [by] revealing his main source of inspiration: St. Francis of Assisi.”⁵ The first (and the last) words of the encyclical are, in fact, words of prayer; it is a theological perspective which frames the encyclical’s scientifically astute and spiritually informed proposal for an “integral ecology”; the lens of faith initiates the four-step process of seeing–judging–acting–celebrating that structures the encyclical. This explicit foundation of the text in the faith of the church, however, does not imply that its author simply reverses the order of seeing, judging, and acting, so that theology would come first, followed by observation of the world, and then by an application of theology to the world. Even if *Laudato Si'* roots its argumentation in a principle of faith, it does not allow for a deductive, essentialist, ahistorical reading of the teaching of the church. Instead, as Felix Wilfred has shown, it engages in an active “reinterpretation of Christian faith.”⁶ In *Laudato Si'*, the theological principles for “judging” are already informed and affected by the ecological perspective the pope advocates for, and the analytical categories for “seeing” are already informed by his theological perspective. There is, thus, a complex theological epistemology at work in *Laudato Si'*, which resists an understanding of the relation between ecclesial doctrine and pastoral practice as unilinear or unidirectional. Instead, there is an inextricable *interrelation* between them.⁷ In their *inseparable*

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4. Leonardo and Clodovis Boff are explicit in outlining these non-unidirectional interdependencies at the heart of the hermeneutical circle of liberation theology: “The novelty of the theology of liberation also, and especially, resides in its manner of developing this modern thematic. The key to the new approach is the praxis of liberation. In the theology of liberation we have a bond—intimate but not rigid—between theory and practice, between theology and the life of faith. The method practiced by the theology of liberation, we observe, is neither exclusively inductive nor deductive it is both these at once: it is dialectical.” Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Liberation Theology: From Dialogue to Confrontation* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 15.
 5. Boff, “The Magna Carta of Integral Ecology.”
 6. Felix Wilfred, “Theological Significance of *Laudato Si'*: An Asian Reading.” *Vidyajyoti* 79, no. 9 (2015): 645–61 at 652: “In *Laudato Si'* we have not only a reconceptualization of traditional anthropology, but also a revision of the traditional soteriology by expanding its scope to include nature and the earth.”
 7. Outlining the differences between an “ecclesiology from above” and “ecclesiology from below,” Stan Chu Ilo makes a related point, arguing that “Pope Francis overcomes this theological debate with his illuminative ecclesiology.” Stan Ilo Chu, “Die illuminative Ekklesiologie von Papst Franziskus und die Mission der Barmherzigkeit für die Kirche der Armen in Afrika,” in *Barmherzigkeit und Zärtliche Liebe: Das Theologische Programm von Papst Franziskus*, ed. Kurt Appel and Jakob Helmut Deibl (Freiburg: Herder, 2016), 349–65 at 352, translation mine. In his reading of *LS*, Archbishop Emeritus Kevin McDonald, too, has highlighted the inextricable dialectics between the positions of the church *ad intra* and *ad extra*. Cf. Kevin McDonald, “*Laudato Si'*: An Ecclesiological Perspective” (paper presented at “Exploring *Laudato Si'*,” St. Mary’s University Twickenham, 17 November 2015), <https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/news/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Archbish-McDonald-speech.pdf>.

entanglements, neither doctrinal teaching nor pastoral practice have ontological or epistemological primacy. The position of the church *ad extra* and *ad intra* mutually define each other. The overtly practical, social-ethical teaching of *Laudato Si'* thus rests on theological suppositions which consider the interrelation between the church and its contingent historical-cultural contexts as constitutive of ecclesial tradition.

“Ecosystem” as Ecclesiological Metaphor

Laudato Si', I suggest, offers a metaphor which allows us to grasp these silent epistemo-theological presuppositions conceptually: Throughout the encyclical, the pope stresses that the defining characteristic of ecological systems are the interrelations of their elements; ecology, accordingly, “studies the relationship between living organisms and the environment in which they develop,” and in this study, it “cannot be emphasized enough how everything is interconnected” (*LS* 138). This description mirrors natural scientific approaches which define ecosystems as communities of living organisms in conjunction with the nonliving components of their environment, like air, water, and mineral soil, interacting as a system.⁸ These biotic and abiotic components are regarded as linked together through nutrient cycles and energy flows. As ecosystems are defined by the network of interactions among organisms, and between organisms and their environment,⁹ they can be of any size but usually encompass specific, limited spaces, although some scientists say that the entire planet is an ecosystem.¹⁰ Ecosystems are dynamic entities; invariably, they are subject to periodic disturbances and are in the process of recovering from some past disturbance.¹¹ Within ecosystems, the interrelations between elements are constitutive of the characteristics of its elements, as well as their environment: internal factors not only control ecosystem processes but are also controlled by them and are subject to feedback loops.¹²

In his short synopsis of the historical origins of ecology, Sam Mickey not only highlights its focus on the analysis of interrelations as constitutive to ecosystems but also points to the discipline’s foundation in Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution:

In 1866, the German biologist Ernst Haeckel coined the word oecologie (from the Greek *oikos*, meaning “household” or “dwelling”) to develop an inquiry into the household of nature. Haeckel intended for ecology to further the development of the evolutionary theory articulated by Charles Darwin in *The Origin of Species* in 1859. Defining ecology as the scientific study of relations between organisms and their environmental conditions, Haeckel

8. Cf. F. Stuart Chapin, P. A. Matson and Peter Morrison Vitousek, *Principles of Terrestrial Ecosystem Ecology* (New York: Springer, 2011), 3–21; Ernst-Detlef Schulze, Erwin Beck, and Klaus Müller-Hohenstein, *Plant Ecology* (Berlin: Springer, 2005), 1–4; T. M. Smith, Robert Leo Smith, *Elements of Ecology* (Boston, Montréal: Benjamin Cummings, 2012), G–5.

9. Schulze, Beck and Müller-Hohenstein, *Plant Ecology*, 400.

10. Chapin, Matson and Vitousek, *Principles of Terrestrial Ecosystem Ecology*, 5.

11. *Ibid.*, 281–304.

12. *Ibid.*, 11–13.

says that “ecology is the study of all those complex interrelations referred to by Darwin as the conditions of the struggle of existence.” The influence of Darwin on ecology led the environmental historian Donald Worster to describe Darwin as the “single most important figure in the history of ecology over the past two or three centuries.” With roots in evolutionary biology, ecology started as an extension of biological science. Biologists were focusing only on the nutrition and reproduction of organisms whilst ignoring the relations that each organism has with its environment. By focusing on complex interrelations, Haeckel’s ecology extended biology to include more thorough explanations of the conditions of existence for living beings.¹³

I propose that this focus on complex interdependencies between organisms and their environment invites us to appropriate “ecosystem” as an ecclesiological metaphor which allows us to reflect on the inextricable interrelations of doctrinal teaching and pastoral practice by which the encyclical develops its call for an integral ecology. A metaphorical description of the church and its environments as “ecosystem” provides us with an analytical lens to examine these entangled relationships in *Laudato Si'*. Understanding “ecological system” as an ecclesiological metaphor continues the Catholic tradition of using biological metaphors for a reflection of historically and culturally conditioned changes in the theological (self-)understanding of the church,¹⁴

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13. Sam Mickey, *On the Verge of a Planetary Civilization: A Philosophy of Integral Ecology* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2014), 10.
14. Catholic theology frequently draws on biological terms to metaphorically capture these shifts: they describe these shifts in terms of “organic ... development” or as “evolution.” In fact, the documents of the Second Vatican Council, which received the developmental character of dogma into the official teaching of the church, abound with biological images in order to describe change in ecclesial tradition: they speak of “growth” (*Dei Verbum* 8), “evolution” (*Gaudium et Spes* 91), and “adaption” (*Gaudium et Spes* 91); its (christological) foundation of all change in “realities which do not change” (*Gaudium et Spes* 10) evokes the much-used biological image of ‘kernel and husk’. Another prominent metaphor for ecclesi(ologic)al shifts is ‘unfolding’, which also “suggest[s] the analogy of biological evolution or the unfolding of a flower.” Anthony Stephenson, “The Development and Immutability of Christian Doctrine,” *Theological Studies* 9 (1958): 481–532 at 487, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056395801900401>. These established metaphors for ecclesial change, in short, are “organic: they focus on growing and maturing” and hence conceive of theological “development ... as continuity-in-discontinuity.” Franz Wilhelm Jansen, *Von der Menschlichkeit Gottes und der Göttlichkeit des Menschen: Offenbarung und Erfahrung bei Edward Schillebeeckx und Eugen Drewermann*, *Forum Theologie und Psychologie* 8 (Münster: Lit, 2004), 59. These images imagine the history of the church to be rooted in an absolute origin and to unfold along predetermined lines of development, towards an equally predetermined ultimate destination. They thus subject the historically and culturally conditioned shifts in the tradition of the church to a teleological narrative, which, in turn, presupposes the idea of an essentially given foundational framework. Hence, even though these metaphors are used to indicate change, they privilege theological presuppositions which are associated with a deductive, ahistorical approach. Ultimately, therefore, they are inadequate to capture the complex theological epistemology of *Laudato Si'*; they fall short of representing the inextricable interrelation between the position of the church *ad*

but it also opens up new perspectives on the relation between the church and its contexts. First, the metaphor of “ecosystem” highlights the *foundational* character of interrelations between organisms and their environment; the elements of an ecosystem shape and are shaped by each other in a constant feedback loop. Thus, when we view the church and its contexts through the metaphorical lens of “ecosystem,” inside and outside of the church can no longer be neatly separated, but are seen to mutually define each other; the (relation of the church to its) ecclesial “*extra*” becomes constitutive of ecclesial tradition. Second, the close relation of ecology and evolutionary theory prevents us from framing the changes in ecclesial tradition, which result from these entanglements, only in terms of a teleological development, rooted in an absolute origin; instead, the contingency and creativity¹⁵ of these shifts come into view.

The shift to a metaphor that imagines the church as part of an “ecological system” thus has profound theological ramifications. It no longer silences the foundational entanglements of the church into its shifting surroundings and, consequently, makes it impossible to subject its history to a teleological, essentialist narrative. This unsettles the epistemological presuppositions of ecclesial theology and triggers a reconfiguration of the church’s understanding of tradition and revelation. Once we consider the contingent and creative interrelations between the church and its contexts as constitutive of ecclesial tradition, we cannot, for example, understand the eco-theological reading of “Catholic theology” in *Laudato Si’* as an application of the deposit of Catholic tradition to the contemporary socio-ecological crisis. Instead, we must consider it as an instance in the genesis of this tradition, which is taking shape in on-going hermeneutical interrelations with shifting contexts. Through the metaphorical lens of

intra and *ad extra*. Instead, the unilinear logic and essentialist imagery of these metaphors rely on an epistemological suppression of the inextricable entanglement of church teaching into its contingent contexts. If we understand metaphors as “tools of reflection,” this deficiency of established theological metaphors in grasping the complexity of ecclesi(ologic)al change leaves us with a lack of analytical instruments to capture the intricate theological epistemology of *Laudato Si’*. This lacuna, I argue, can be addressed by reading the encyclical ecclesialogically: with the image of “ecosystem” *Laudato Si’* offers us a metaphor to grasp these entanglements conceptually.

15. Since the publication of *The Origin of Species*, there has been a strong controversy about the relation between Darwin’s theory of evolution and philosophical concepts of teleology, a discussion of which would go beyond the limits of this article. Thomas Posch argues that Ernst Haeckel, the founder of ecology, was a strong proponent of a non-teleological understanding of evolution. Thomas Posch, “Hegel und Haeckel über Evolution und Gradualismus,” in *Hegels Naturphilosophie in der Dritten Moderne: Bestimmungen, Probleme und Perspektiven*, ed. Olaf Breidbach and Wolfgang Neuser, Ernst-Haeckel-Haus-Studien, Monographien zur Geschichte der Biowissenschaften und Medizin 13 (Berlin: Verlag für Wissenschaft und Bildung, 2010), 101–18. Anthony Stephenson, in an article which predates Vatican II, points to the hesitancy of Catholic theology to adopt evolution as a metaphor for ecclesial change which results from the difficulties to reconcile it with a teleological understanding of tradition. See Stephenson, “The Development and Immutability of Christian Doctrine,” 487.

the church as an element in a wider ecosystem, Catholic tradition can no longer be imagined to exist complete and independent from these contextual formulations; instead, it appears contingent upon its particular surroundings. Further, when we acknowledge the *constitutive* role of these interrelations and, hence, the irretrievable dependence of Catholic tradition on its respective surroundings, the essentialist idea of an absolute and pure origin becomes unattainable. We can (only) trace the contingent “routes” these shifts have taken in the on-going feedback loop between the church and its environments, but can no longer “root”¹⁶ the shifts in tradition in an essentially given, absolute foundation, imagined to exist outside the theological “ecosystem,” independent of the contingent traditions of the church. This, of course, has a profound impact on a theological understanding of revelation. Revelation can then not be imagined to be fully and completely “there” for the church to further unfold. Instead, it is understood to have always already been inextricably entangled into the contingent ecosystem of theology. Revelation, as the epistemological foundation of ecclesial theology, does not provide the church with a deposit of clearly definable content; rather, as we will see in my reading of the encyclical below, it can be grasped (solely) by way of a particular form.

As an ecclesiological metaphor, “ecosystem” can thus produce fresh insights for our reading of *Laudato Si'*. Through an understanding of the relation between the church and its environments as an ecological system, the ecclesiological relevance of Francis’s encyclical on the environment can come to the fore. At the same time, this ec(clesi)ological reading of *Laudato Si'* will give substance to the metaphorical understanding of the church as a component of a wider ‘ecological system’, and demonstrate its analytical capacity.

Ec(o)clesiology in *Laudato Si'*

Using the metaphor of church–world relations as an ecosystem as an analytical lens, I will now engage in a close reading of *Laudato Si'*. This approach will bring the silent theological presuppositions of the encyclical into sharper relief, and the metaphor of ecosystem will allow us to read the church in *Laudato Si'* as inextricably entangled into its contingent contexts. At the same time, this reading will probe for the far-reaching and unsettling theological ramifications which this shift in ecclesiological metaphors entails. This creative-constructive reading of *Laudato Si'* thus aims at highlighting the encyclical’s implicit ecclesiological presuppositions and at taking them radically seriously for a reconceptualization of the church; it does not, however, claim that the ecclesiological outcome of this reading has been explicitly intended by the encyclical’s text or its author. Rather, my reading is an exploration of the unsettling ecclesiological perspectives that can come to the fore once we free ourselves from the

16. For “routes” and “roots” as metaphors for (non-)foundational epistemology see James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1997).

established metaphors for Catholic tradition which subject its contingencies to a master narrative of unilinear, teleological development. Based on a shift in metaphor to church–world relations as an ecosystem, my reading of *Laudato Si'* will instead search for a renewed understanding of the church which can consider its irrevocable entanglements into the world as formative for *and constitutive to* its existence.

How, then, can we read *Laudato Si'* as such a promotion of an “ecological” reformulation of the church and of ecclesiology? First, as indicated above, the encyclical provides ample evidence that ecclesial teaching develops in a feedback loop with its changing contexts: Francis outlines his ecological reading of the theological foundations of the church in response to the socio-ecological crisis which he considers the defining characteristic of our contemporary world, demanding a clear response of the church (*LS* 1–16). The pope is explicit that the theological route taken in *Laudato Si'* deviates from previous church teaching: while he reappropriates the Jewish–Christian scriptures as resources for the consolidation of an emerging integral ecology,¹⁷ he acknowledges that in the past, they have been used to justify human dominion over creation (cf. *LS* 67).¹⁸ Contrary to Dominic Vechoor’s assessment, therefore, the theological point made in *Laudato Si'* is not that “[e]cological concern has always been an integral part of Catholic faith and moral teachings”;¹⁹ rather, what we can glean from the encyclical is that the teaching of the church takes its shape in interdependence with the shifting contexts to which it responds: the socio-ecological crisis triggers a re-inscription of “Catholic theology” as eco-theology. *Laudato Si'* can be read as an exemplary performance of ecclesial theology in “ecosystemic” relations with its contexts.

Further, the ecclesiological metaphor of church–context relations as an “ecosystem” invites us to see how *Laudato Si'* highlights the constitutive role of these interrelations for the formation of ecclesial theology and, therefore, how it advances the deconstruction of an essentialist, teleological understanding of Catholic tradition and of revelation as its epistemological foundation. The encyclical does not do this expressly, in explicit methodological reflections. Rather, these profound theological reconfigurations emerge from the intricate architecture of the theological argument which Francis develops throughout the document. *Laudato Si'* 85 is one of the few paragraphs that explicitly talks about

17. Cf. *LS* 70: “These ancient stories, full of symbolism, bear witness to a conviction which we today share, that everything is interconnected, and that genuine care for our own lives and our relationships with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice and faithfulness to others.”

18. Paul VI’s encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, for example, still subscribes to a domination theology: “In the very first pages of Scripture we read these words: ‘Fill the earth and subdue it.’ (19). This teaches us that the whole of creation is for man, that he has been charged to give it meaning by his intelligent activity, to complete and perfect it by his own efforts and to his own advantage.” Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* (March 26, 1967), 22, http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum.html.

19. Dominic Vechoor, “The Created World as Sacrament: Patristic Moral Thinking and *Laudato Si'* Converge,” *Christian Orient* 36, no. 3 (2015): 122–28 at 122.

revelation and therefore it offers a segue into this theologically complex argumentative construction. Quoting John Paul II, Francis reiterates the normative and foundational Catholic belief that “revelation properly so-called, [is] contained in sacred scripture.” Chapter 2, “The Gospel of Creation,” then, is dedicated to a reading of Scripture and can thus help us to shed further light on the pope’s understanding of their revelatory quality. How, according to *LS*, does Scripture contain and manifest revelation? Francis follows the established Catholic approach to biblical hermeneutics when he refers to the biblical texts as “ancient stories, full of symbolism” (*LS* 70, cf. *LS* 66), which “are to be read in their context, with an appropriate hermeneutic” (*LS* 67). What emerges from his recounting of these stories is, first, that they are thoroughly immersed in the symbolic universe of the cultural surroundings in which they were created and, secondly, that they, in their diversity, all take a common stance towards their respective environments. With reference to other passages of the document, we can describe this stance as a change of perspective towards a “more integral and integrating vision” (*LS* 141) – a perspective which critiques and resists the “myopia of power politics” (*LS* 178) and paves the way for a “bold cultural revolution” (*LS* 113). “Put simply [and in direct response to the socio-ecological crisis], it is a matter of redefining our notion of progress” (*LS* 194). The pope, in other words, understands the biblical texts as particular interpretations of their specific contexts which promote a shift to a “countercultural” (cf. *LS* 108) perspective within that context.

This understanding of Scripture comes to the fore in Francis’s reiteration of the biblical insistence that the “earth is the Lord’s” (e.g. Ps 24:1), which “rejects every claim to absolute ownership” (*LS* 67).²⁰ It is reflected in his description of the Sabbath as a “law [that] came about as an attempt to ensure balance and fairness in [Israel’s] relationships with others and with the land on which they lived and worked” (*LS* 71). It finds an expression in the encyclical’s argument that the biblical interpretation of nature as creation “has a broader meaning than nature ... Nature is usually seen as a system which can be studied, understood and controlled, whereas creation can only be understood as a gift from the outstretched hand of the Father of all, and as a reality illuminated by the love which calls us together into universal communion” (*LS* 76); and it allows the pope to summarize the message of Jesus as proclaimed in New Testament texts as a critique of hegemonic discourses, whose

vision of “might is right” has engendered immense inequality, injustice and acts of violence against the majority of humanity, since resources end up in the hands of the first comer or the most powerful: the winner takes all. Completely at odds with this model are the ideals of harmony, justice, fraternity and peace as proposed by Jesus (*LS* 82).

The christological passage of *Laudato Si'*, then, explicitly imbues this shift in perspective, this power-critical stance, with revelatory quality: captioned “The Gaze of Jesus,” it culminates in a call to an *imitatio Christi* which “invite[s] disciples to perceive a divine message in [all] things” (*LS* 97). It is this particular gaze, it is this

20. Cf. also the “subordination of private property to the universal destination of goods, and thus the right of everyone to their use” in *LS* 93.

change of perspective which “sanctifie[s the world] and endow[s] it with a special significance” (LS 98); it is this “integral vision” promoting “harmony with all creation” (LS 98) which has revelatory quality. *Laudato Si*, in short, locates the revelatory truth of biblical texts not in their content, which is contingent upon their diverse environments, but in the particular, critical perspective they take on their respective environments. Revelation does not manifest itself in Scripture as a deposit of clearly definable content; instead, it takes a specific form.

Not only can we identify, with Francis, this power-critical shift of perspective as the revelatory characteristic of the Jewish–Christian Bible. The pope also finds traces of it in our contemporary world, which is dominated by the “globalization of the technocratic paradigm” (LS 106–14), but in which, still, an “authentic humanity, calling for a new synthesis, seems to dwell in the midst of our technological culture, almost unnoticed, like a mist seeping gently beneath a closed door” (LS 112). *Laudato Si*, as a whole, is candid and outspoken in its critique of the hegemony of globalized technocracy, because “our immense technological development has not been accompanied by a development in human responsibility, values and conscience ... [and, therefore,] we stand naked and exposed in the face of our ever-increasing power, lacking the wherewithal to control it” (LS 105). Yet, still, the pope sees evidence emerging of “a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies, an educational programme, a lifestyle and a spirituality which together generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm” (LS 111).

Francis is quite explicit in granting these “promising” vestiges of “stubborn resistance” (cf. LS 112) theological, and more specifically revelatory, significance. They point us to “another kind of progress” (LS 112), which manifests itself, for example, in the “desire to create and contemplate beauty [and thus] manages to overcome reductionism through a kind of salvation which occurs in beauty and in those who behold it” (LS 112). There is soteriological relevance in the subversive aesthetics of a power-critical change in perspective, and there is revelatory significance in resisting the sovereignty of interpretation granted to the technocratic paradigm. Similarly, in the section “The Ecology of Daily Life” (LS 147–55), the pope lists creative responses that emerge in communities to the socio-ecological crisis and which liberate from the stifling constraints of its death-dealing consequences. For example, a

wholesome social life can light up a seemingly undesirable environment. At times, a commendable human ecology is practiced by the poor despite numerous hardships. The feeling of asphyxiation brought on by densely populated residential areas is countered if close and warm relationships develop, if communities are created, if the limitations of the environment are compensated for in the interior of each person who feels held within a network of solidarity and belonging ... Many people in these conditions are able to weave bonds of belonging and togetherness which convert overcrowding into an experience of community in which the walls of the ego are torn down and the barriers of selfishness overcome. This experience of communitarian salvation often generates creative ideas for the improvement of a building or a neighbourhood (LS 148).

Creative ecological practices go hand in hand with liberating shifts in perspective, and are of profound theological quality. Earlier in the document, creating and

liberating have been qualified as the “two divine ways of acting” (*LS* 73). Through them, accordingly, “any place can turn from being a hell on earth into the setting for a dignified life” (*LS* 148); any place can become, as it were, a *locus theologicus*.

Laudato Si' thus traces creative and liberative practices of “seeing the world differently” in both the normative texts of ecclesial tradition and in the midst of the contemporary socio-ecological crisis, and it inscribes this subversive aesthetics with profound theological significance. The encyclical facilitates a reading of these shifts to a power-critical perspective as manifestations of divine presence, both in the past and present. Further, it establishes a complex relation between these particular theological instances in past and present: theologizing in view of the complexity of the contemporary crisis, the pope proposes that “the rich heritage of Christian spirituality [and, more broadly speaking, of Christian “faith convictions” (*LS* 63)] has a precious contribution to make to the renewal of humanity” (*LS* 216); “the religious classics,” he is convinced, “have an enduring power to open new horizons” (*LS* 199). The ancient stories of the Jewish–Christian Scriptures, which give witness to God’s creative and liberative presence in their concrete historical and cultural contexts, offer a resource to inspire and initiate further critiques of the “myopia of power politics” (*LS* 178) in the changing environments of the church.²¹ It is through the promotion of such a subversive aesthetics, through the practice of a more integral vision, that the church can live up to its *raison d’être* of representing God’s revelation to the world:

Christians ... need ... an “ecological conversion,” whereby the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them. Living our vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary part of our Christian experience. (*LS* 217)

Through the lens of faith, in a process of discernment and interpretation, in turn, the church recognizes such traces of “stubborn resistance” against the dominance of hegemonic discourses as manifestations of God’s continuing liberative and creative presence:

In this universe, shaped by open and inter-communicating systems, we can discern countless forms of relationship and participation. This leads us to think of the whole as open to God’s transcendence, within which it develops. Faith allows us to interpret the meaning and mysterious beauty of what is unfolding ... This contemplation of creation allows us to discover in each thing a teaching which God wishes to hand on to us, since “for the believer, to contemplate creation is to hear a message, to listen to a paradoxical and silent voice.” (*LS* 79, 85)

Ecclesial tradition, in short, offers a hermeneutical lens for encouraging power-critical shifts towards a more integral vision, which, in turn, become *loci theologici* for the church.

21. Cf. also *LS* 70: “These ancient stories, full of symbolism, bear witness to a conviction which we today share, that everything is interconnected, and that genuine care for our own lives and our relationships with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice and faithfulness to others.”

These hermeneutical entanglements interrupt a unilinear and unidirectional understanding of the relationship between revelation and tradition. Instead, inextricable interrelations between revelation and tradition, between God-talk in *genetivus subjectivus* and God-talk in *genetivus objectivus*, come to the fore: the church does not have revelation as its absolute, complete, and clearly definable origin at its disposal; rather, revelation manifests itself as ecclesial interpretation. Once we have exposed these theological-hermeneutical entanglements at the heart of the encyclical's argument for an ecological conversion, we can also argue that it outlines this deconstruction of a teleological and essentialist understanding of revelation and tradition with surprising clarity: "Christianity, in fidelity to its own identity and the rich deposit of truth which it has received from Jesus Christ, continues to reflect on these issues in fruitful dialogue with changing historical situations. *In doing so, it reveals its eternal newness*" (LS 121, italics added).²²

Implications for an Understanding of the Church

These hermeneutical interdependencies between revelation and ecclesial tradition also have profound ramifications for an understanding of the church. In the last step of my creative-constructive reading of *Laudato Si'*, I will unearth the ecclesiological implications of the deconstruction of an essentialist, teleological conception of revelation and tradition which I have argued to be at the heart of the encyclical's social ethical teaching. It is a crucial argument of *Laudato Si'* that the revelatory and salvific manifestations of resistance to "destructive power" (cf. LS 66) do not coincide with the boundaries of the established church: on the one hand, as we have seen above, the encyclical invites us to recognize contemporary realizations of integral ecology as genuine *loci theologici*, and, therefore, as authentic sites of ecclesiogenesis. These can be as concrete as beautification projects of neighborhoods, which the pope describes, without referring to them as "religious," "Christian," or "ecclesial," as potentially "intense spiritual experiences" (LS 232). On the other hand, *Laudato Si'* repeatedly critiques (members of) the Catholic church, past and present, for falling short of "their responsibility within creation, and their duty towards nature and the Creator, [which] are an essential part of their faith" (LS 64): "Obstructionist attitudes, even on part of believers, can range from denial of the problem to indifference, nonchalant resignation or blind confidence in technical solutions" (LS 14). Even though the encyclical has credited the emerging approaches towards an integral ecology with profound theological pertinence, it clearly does not consider them the sole *proprium* of the existing Catholic community, nor does it see these traces of resistance to the technocratic paradigm fully realized within the established church. *Laudato Si'* thus diagnoses an

22. This revelatory character of ecclesial interpretation is expressed explicitly in the English version of the encyclical. Other versions use the metaphor of "flowering", which is more easily subjected to a unilinear, essentialist understanding of revelation and tradition (Latin: *floreat*; German: *zum Erblühen bringen*; Italian: *lasciando sbocciare*; Spanish: *dejando brotar*).

“incongruence” between salvific, revelatory practices emerging in response to the socio-ecological crisis on the one hand and the established boundaries of the church on the other, even though it is crucial to the church’s theological self-understanding that it is the representation of God’s revelation.

This appraisal is neither to be construed as an attempt at a “colonial appropriation” of extra-ecclesial ecological projects as “anonymously Catholic,”²³ nor is it simply to be understood as a critique of the existing ecclesial institution, geared towards an improvement of its current shortcomings so that it can more fully live up to its own theological telos. Rather, we can read it as an eminently ecclesiological statement which results from the de-essentialization of revelation and tradition performed in *Laudato Si'*. Once we interpret the encyclical as a shift away from an understanding of revelation as a deposit of clearly definable content, towards a formal understanding of revelation as local critiques of hegemonic discourses, we begin to see that this shift has profound ecclesiological reverberations which unsettle and displace the church. On the one hand, it leads to a very “strong” ecclesiology: the God-talk of the church, indeed, becomes indispensable for the (re)presentation of God’s revelation, *extra ecclesiam nulla revelatio*. At the same time, however, it ties revelatory events to the interpretory work of the church and thus de-absolutizes revelation; in their hermeneutical interrelations, *both tradition and revelation* are inextricably entangled into the discursive ecosystems in which theology (God-talk in *Genetivus subjectivus* and *Genetivus objectivus*) takes its shape. Just like tradition, so revelation, too, is inseparably interwoven into “the excitement and drama of human history, in which freedom,

23. Cf. Catherine Keller’s commentary on *Laudato Si'*: “The pope is calling for a new sense of planetary consciousness, dependent upon his radical ecumenism—that is, his call to all human beings, in their endless diversities. It is not a matter of reducing the difference, which means ultimately indifference. It is about gathering differences into alliance ... Early in the encyclical, after just two paragraphs, the human gets a magisterial clue as to our widest context. It comes with a single italicized sentence: ‘*Nothing in the world is indifferent to us*’ (2). This is neither traditional Catholic teaching nor natural science. It sounds more like process thought or the new materialism, with a vibrant materiality composed of responsive interdependencies that entangle any observer and anything observed. But not indifferent? ... In particular moments the vibrant interplay of our differences shines through—a stranger’s grin, an owl’s glare, a glacier’s sparkle. And then we recognize difference as the precise opposite of indifference. Difference does not separate but relates. If indifference occludes difference itself—it is because the world is wrought of entangled differences. And these differences matter—in their interdependencies across every stratum of geology, chemistry, biology. Indifference is the opposite of difference. It conveys a world of separables and exploitables and expendables, blind and wasteful of the ways, willy, nilly, we recycle each other endlessly. But there is no room for the ‘globalization of indifference’ (52) in this house of many mansions, this complex homeostatic system, Gaia, sister-mother, our body of bodies, this momentarily encycloped earth home. *Laudato Si'*.” Catherine Keller, “Encyclying: One Feminist Response,” in *For Our Common Home: Process-Relational Responses to Laudato Si'*, ed. John B. Cobb, Ignacio Castuera and Bill McKibben, *Toward Ecological Civilization* (Claremont, CA: Process Century, 2015), 175–86 at 178, 184–85.

growth, salvation and love can blossom, or lead towards decadence and mutual destruction” (*LS* 79).

These inextricable entanglements of all theology into the contingencies of its respective environment have profound ramifications for an understanding of the church: it is therefore of crucial importance that *Laudato Si*’ 79, after having outlined the potentially violent ambiguities into which God-talk is entangled, immediately turns to defining the role of the church. “The work of the Church seeks not only to remind everyone of the duty to care for nature, but at the same time ‘she must above all protect [hu]mankind from self-destruction’.” As shown above, the encyclical does not encourage us to read this sentence as a description of the existing institutions and communities of the Catholic Church. Rather, I suggest to read it as a *criteriological* statement which indicates where authentic sites of ecclesio-genesis can be found. Its very indispensability in the (re)presentation of revelation deprives the church of an absolute, unmistakably pre-given origin which could guarantee an unambiguous development of ecclesial tradition; the boundaries of the church are no longer available in any clear, unmistakable and self-evident way. For Pope Francis, “Where is the church?”²⁴ becomes the crucial ecclesiological question, and *Laudato Si*’ provides ample evidence that loci which manifest God’s salutary revelation can be discerned both inside and outside the established boundaries of the church.

This unsettling dispersal of the church shifts our understanding of its defining task: the established church loses sovereignty over the presence of God; the representational work of the church becomes a hermeneutical endeavor of discernment. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, the pope has declared that a “believer is essentially ‘one who remembers’.”²⁵ Traditionally, this task of remembering has been conceived as the unmistakable tradition of an unchangeable deposit of clearly definable content along predetermined lines within the visible community of the Catholic church. The ecclesiology of *Laudato Si*’, however, challenges us to understand this task more literally as a “re-membering,” a “re-collecting” of traces of stubborn resistance to hegemonic discourses, in order to weave them into the text of an ongoing story which gives witness to the continuing, life-giving presence of God in the midst of the (often deadly) ambiguities of our worlds.²⁶

24. Hans-Joachim Sander, the shift from the question “Who is the church?” to the question “Where is the church?” is the defining characteristic and achievement of the Second Vatican Council and crucial to its reconfiguration of the church as a pastoral community. Hans-Joachim Sander, “Von den Utopien der Kirche zu den Heterotopien der heutigen Welt. Wege des Konzils aus dem seelsorglichen Notstand der Kirche,” in *Zweites Vatikanisches Konzil: Programmatik, Rezeption, Vision*, ed. Christoph Böttigheimer, *Quaestiones Disputatae* 261 (Freiburg: Herder, 2014), 157–79.

25. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (November 24, 2013), 13, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

26. The lens of faith, nourished and sharpened through prayer and ritual, is the indispensable tool for the politically power-critical shift in perspective which allows for a discernment of subversive aesthetics as a revelatory manifestation of God’s presence. Tina Beattie highlights the importance of a mystical, spiritual dimension for this reconfiguration of

It is at this point that the unsettling ecclesiological ramifications of the encyclical's silent theological presuppositions can begin to come to the fore. Once we consider the church's entanglements into its contexts as constitutive of ecclesial tradition (as *Laudato Si'* implicitly suggests), and once we resist the temptation to mitigate the contingency and pluriformity of the church that result from these formative interdependencies by subjecting it to a narrative of organic, teleological development (as the metaphorical shift of church–world relations as an ecosystem allows us to do), then the established ecclesiological language of the Roman Catholic Church loses its traditional explanatory power and its theological self-evidence. Once we take the contingencies of the church seriously in a radical way (i.e. down to its very “roots”), categories such as visibility or fullness, which have become formative for Catholic ecclesial self-understanding, are in need of recalibration and reconceptualization. The implicit ecclesiology of *Laudato Si'* thus presents us with an unsettling challenge, a challenge which the Roman Catholic church is only slowly starting to address: how do we rethink and reframe the traditional self-understanding of the Roman Catholic Church without silencing its interwovenness into its contexts, without suppressing its contingency?²⁷

ecclesiology: “Francis emphasises the importance of a mystical dimension to his contextualised vision of church in time. This suffuses what might otherwise be simply another political/liberationist ecclesiology with a profound awareness of the timeless otherness and mystery of God glistening darkly through and beyond all our time-bound endeavours, doctrines and theologies, most sublimely encountered in the theophany of the Mass. This is why we need to weave together the two metaphors of pilgrimage and motherhood, journeying and gestation, which shape his vision of the church.” Tina Beattie, “Transforming Time—the Maternal Church and the Pilgrimage of Faith,” *Ecclesiology* 12 (2016): 54–72 at 55, <https://doi.org/10.1163/17455316-01201003>. Gerard Moore addresses the importance of recovering the mutually constitutive relationship between ecclesial worship and the pursuit of justice: Moore, “Let Justice Find a Voice: Reflections on the Relationship between Worship and Justice,” *Worship* 90, no. 3 (2016): 206–24. Christoph Theobald, too, highlights the importance of the inseparable relationship between “a prophetic and a contemplative style” for Francis’s theological approach: “In the encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Francis describes Christian spirituality as a ‘prophetic and contemplative lifestyle’ (*LS* 222), which, I believe, does or could already determine our theology: Theology—critical and contemplative!” Christoph Theobald, “Mystik der Fraternité. Kirche und Theologie in neuem Stil,” in *Barmherzigkeit und Zärtliche Liebe: Das Theologische Programm von Papst Franziskus*, ed. Kurt Appel and Jakob Helmut (Freiburg: Herder, 2016), 21–38 at 36, translation mine.

27. By way of example, cf. Archbishop Emeritus McDonald, who in his reading of *LS* as an ecclesiological document painstakingly outlines the ecclesiological shifts which the Roman Catholic Church has performed since Vatican II in response to ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, and then concludes, somewhat abruptly: “My point, then, is that we need to situate *Laudato Si'* in the context of a growth and an evolution in the way we think about the church and about what it means to be in communion. The developments are irreversible. It is important to say, however, that in no way do they compromise the claims of the Catholic Church to be the repository of the fullness of God’s gift for life, for salvation and for mission.” Kevin McDonald, “*Laudato Si'*: An Ecclesiological Perspective,” 13.

Conclusion: Remapping the Catholic Church

Based on my creative-constructive re-reading of *Laudato Si'*, I have argued that in his encyclical, the pope engages in a profound remapping of the Catholic Church. By proposing an ecclesiology which highlights the inextricable entanglements of the church into its respective environments, and by reconceiving of it as an element within a wider discursive ecosystem, Francis, I have suggested, calls us to a redefinition of the boundaries of the church. Again, it has to be stressed that what is at stake in these dispersals of the church is a reconceptualization of traditional ecclesiology. Once a non-essentialist concept of revelation and a non-teleological understanding of ecclesial tradition allows the church to discern that concrete, material, communitized, even institutionalized, instances of ecclesio-genesis do not coincide with its established boundaries, the significance and meaning of received ecclesiological categories have to be renegotiated. It no longer suffices, for instance, to ask, "Which community then, precisely, is Pope Francis a spokesman for?" Rather, the encyclical's blurring of its spatial boundaries confronts the church with a major *conceptual* task: it calls for a recalibration of established ecclesiological language, so that it becomes more adept at taking the constitutive contingency of the church into consideration in its theological self-understanding.

These conceptual dispersals of the church into the ambivalences of its historical-cultural surroundings might appear venturesome to some; yet, they actually find strong reverberations in the shifting sociological realities of the contemporary Catholic Church. The German pastoral theologian Rainer Bucher, for example, has shown in numerous case studies that the established models of ecclesial institutionalization no longer match the circumstances of life in contemporary society in Austria and Germany. Discussing the Tridentine model of the church as *societas perfecta*, the postconciliar model of the church organized in "parish families," and the model of Basic Christian Communities inspired by liberation theology, he summarizes:

All three [models] avoid the problems of plurality, contrast and development which the church is faced with in late modernity. They all envision—with different focal points and by way of different structures—spaces of unity and dreams of unity [*Einmütigkeitsträume* und *Einmütigkeitsräume*], which have virtually never existed within the church(es), and which exist even less now, in postmodern times; if these spaces and dreams of unity were

This conclusion remains ambivalent. On the one hand, its abrupt introduction without any further argumentative substantiation gives the impression that McDonald's ecclesiological reflections entail more far-reaching ramifications for our understanding of the church than he is ready to acknowledge, and that therefore, he retreats into established ecclesiological language without addressing how we can understand the church as "repository of the fullness of God's gift," once the instability of ecclesial teaching has been exposed. On the other hand, of course, we can read McDonald's conclusion as an invitation to rethink and reframe the traditional self-understanding of the Roman Catholic Church without silencing its entanglements into its contexts.

to be realized at all, it can be done only with the] immense expenditure which exclusion requires.²⁸

In the church today, Bucher concludes, “socialization/collectivization no longer occurs normatively, but situatively,”²⁹ and sites of ecclesio-genesis are no longer bound to predetermined definitions of the church. Bucher’s empirical analysis of the liquidation³⁰ of established ecclesial borders in the German-speaking Roman Catholic Church is matched by similar sociological evidence in other contexts of the global church.³¹ Both theologically and sociologically, the church is thus undergoing a

28. Rainer Bucher, “Nicht in Idyllen flüchten. Nochmals zur ‘Kurskorrektur’ von Pfarrer Frings,” *Feinschwarz.net*, June 2, 2016, <http://www.feinschwarz.net/nicht-in-idyllen-fluechten-nochmals-zur-kurskorrektur-von-pfarrer-frings/>. Cf. also Rainer Bucher, *An Neuen Orten: Studien zu den aktuellen Konstitutionsproblemen der deutschen und österreichischen Katholischen Kirche* (Würzburg: Echter, 2014).

29. Rainer Bucher, “Nicht in Idyllen flüchten.”

30. Cf. also Michael Schübler, “Liquid church als Ereignis-Ekklesologie. Über Verflüssigungsprozesse in Leben, Lehre und Kirche.” *Pastoraltheologische Informationen* 34 (2014): 25–43, <https://www.uni-muenster.de/Ejournals/index.php/pthi/article/view/1381>.

31. Based on well-established social science findings that the Catholic Church in the United States is undergoing a crisis of credibility, relevance, adherence, and affiliation, Tom Beaudoin and Patrick Hornbeck use the concept of “deconversion” as a potential way of making theological sense of the tens of millions of baptized Catholics who have left Catholicism or who have substantially rejected or reworked “normative” Catholicism in the reworking of their Catholic identity. They argue that “deconversion” provides a useful way of comprehending emerging non-normative Catholicisms or post-Catholicisms in a way that remains curious about what they might communicate of theological substance. Tom Beaudoin and J. Patrick Hornbeck, “Deconversion and Ordinary Theology: A Catholic Study,” in *Exploring Ordinary Theology: Everyday Christian Believing and the Church*, ed. Jeff Astley and Leslie J. Francis (London: Routledge, 2016), 33–44. Agbonkhanmeghe Orobator, SJ, highlights that the established boundaries of the Catholic church are also under scrutiny in non-Western contexts. Taking the gender equality of one controversial point of contention for Catholic identity in Africa, he points out: “The Church of the global South is asking questions. These are not only the questions of the Church of the global North.” Clerical abuse of power, including sexual abuse, he states, are often depicted as a ‘European’ or ‘American’ problem, which does not exist in local churches in Africa. However, Orobator does not mince words in exposing the patriarchal hegemony dominating African churches; their synods, he holds, might find appreciative words for the role of women in the church, yet, efforts for structural changes towards the inclusion of women in discernment and decision-making processes are absent: “For how long will the church remain a bastion of male-dominated leadership and patriarchal privileges?” Agbonkhanmeghe Orobator, “Die Kirche der Zukunft oder die Zukunft der Kirche in Afrika,” in *Christlicher Glaube im heutigen Afrika: Beiträge zu einer theologischen Standortbestimmung*, ed. Franz Gmainer-Pranzl and Rodrigue M. Naortangar, *Salzburger Theologische Studien interkulturell* 13 (Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 2013), 219–33 at 233, translation mine.

blurring of its established boundaries; however, as Bucher has also shown, it is still slow in developing ecclesiological visions and organizational models that can equip it for a creative and resilient response to its dispersal. Finding ways of institutionalizing the church as an integral element of a wider discursive “ecosystem” will be *the* ecclesiological challenge of Francis’s pontificate, and beyond.³² When read as an ecclesiological tract, *Laudato Si’* lays the foundation for such a re-imagining of the church as an inseparable part of our common global home.

Author biography

Judith Gruber is Research Professor of Systematic Theology at the Katholieke Universiteit, Leuven, Belgium. Research interests include critical theory in theology and ecclesiology. Her recent publications include *Intercultural Theology: Exploring World Christianity after the Cultural Turn* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017).

32. Wilfred, for example, asks: “If everything is interconnected and interdependent as the pope does not cease to tell us, how does it square with the practice of Church governance following a hierarchical model of relationships? The ecological paradigm of relationships suggested in the encyclical does not seem to square with the ecological hierarchical paradigm that is practiced.” Wilfred, “Theological Significance of *Laudato Si’*: An Asian Reading,” 660. Tina Beattie pushes this critical point further, pointing to a disconnect between Francis’s integral worldview and the status of women in a *male*-dominated hierarchy and theology of the church: “Francis’ account of historical becoming [*LS* 240] is not a dialectical struggle between the one and the many, but a reconciling movement through time towards the communion of all created beings in the mystery of the Trinity. This brings me to the last part of my argument, where I am more critical of Francis’s thought. How far does his preference for maternal ecclesiology cohere with his understanding of revelation as history, and what does this say with regard to the place of women in Francis’s church? Beattie, “Transforming Time—the Maternal Church and the Pilgrimage of Faith,” 66.