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"Sublime Communion": The Theology of the Natural World in *Laudato Si'*

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Abstract
Laudato Si' offers a profound and in some respects new theology of the natural world. In the analysis offered here, it is proposed that three threads can be discerned in the theology of nature contained in *Laudato Si'*: first, other creatures have intrinsic value; second, they express and reveal God; third, they form with human beings a sublime communion of creation in God. The article concludes with a brief theological reflection on a theological development of the concept of sublime communion.

Keywords
book of nature, evolution, incarnation, intrinsic value, natural world, revelation

To read, or reread, *Laudato Si'* is to discover fresh insights into the relationship between God and the planetary community of life on Earth, our common home. Those who spend time with this encyclical find themselves renewed in hope, taken by joy at the beauty of Francis's vision, sobered by the challenges he puts before them, and summoned again to see their lives as an ecological vocation, radically committed to Earth and all its creatures.

There is much to be grateful for in this encyclical: that it is grounded so clearly in the major issues we face, global climate change, loss of biodiversity, and our abuse of

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the gift of water; that it reflects on these issues from a profound theology of the communion of creation; that it seeks to go to the human roots of the problems we face in its critique of technocratic and anthropocentric worldviews; that its central vision of integral ecology holds together the protection of God's creation with commitment to our human brothers and sisters, above all the poor and excluded; that it invites dialogue about international and national solutions to the issues we face; and that it calls all of us to a profound ecological conversion. At every point it models a dialogical stance. The whole document is developed under the sign and inspiration of St Francis of Assisi, and his commitment both to poor and needy human beings and to God's other creatures, who are also in their own way our sisters and brothers.

Pope Francis makes explicit his intention that *Laudato Si'* be now "added to the body of the Church's social teaching."[1] As he notes, his work builds on that of Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI (*LS* 4–6). But with this more developed document, Francis makes it clear he now means to bring the protection of God's creation formally, and permanently, into the center of Catholic social teaching, along with its longstanding commitment to inter-human justice and peace.

In the theological world, Catholic social teaching is usually linked to social ethics and moral theology, rather than directly to other areas of theology such as biblical studies, spirituality, or the discipline of this article, systematic theology. But I think it is obvious that *Laudato Si'* sets an agenda for the church and the world that is of such importance that it must also be a dialogue partner for systematic theologians now and into the future. In seeking to engage with *Laudato Si'* from this perspective, I will begin with some reflections on the encyclical in the light of recent contributions to ecological theology by systematic theologians.

It is notable that some priorities evident in the work of ecological theologians are not well represented in the encyclical. One of these priorities is the incarnation. In reaction to the almost exclusive emphasis on the redemption of human beings by Christian churches in recent centuries, some early attempts at ecological theology and spirituality focused almost exclusively on creation theology. One of the ways that this focus on creation has found expression is in the blending of creation spirituality and popular science, as in the "new story" of the universe, or in the emergence of "evolutionary consciousness." Many people have found genuine inspiration in a wide variety of recent creation spiritualities. In some of them, however, there is little connection with Christology and, at times at the popular level, there is no place for Jesus of Nazareth, for the theology of the incarnation, or for salvation in Christ.

In this context it has seemed a priority, at least to some ecological theologians, to work toward a theology that clearly shows the profound connection between God's creative act and God's saving act in Jesus Christ.[2] They have sought to show

1. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (May 24, 2015) 15 (hereafter cited in text as *LS*), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html. This and other URLs herein were accessed February 2, 2016.
2. Ernst Conradie led an international and ecumenical project on this issue, that has found expression in the two volumes he edited, *Creation and Salvation, Volume 1: A Mosaic*

the radical meaning of the incarnation for the whole of creaturely reality, some of them through the concept of "deep incarnation."[3] And they have attempted to see divine action in both creation and in the saving incarnation as a fully trinitarian act of God through the eternal Word and in the Holy Spirit. Perhaps because of its attempt to speak to those who are not Christian, *Laudato Si'*, in its important second chapter, is focused mainly on creation theology, and does not explore in any detail the interconnection between creation and incarnation. There are, however, important brief comments on Jesus Christ at the end of chapter 2, and also throughout the encyclical, and on the Trinity in three paragraphs at its end, which I will highlight in this essay.

A second priority in the recent work of at least some ecological theologians has been the attempt to deal responsibly with a century and a half of evolutionary science. Two things in particular confront theology. The first is that the evolution of life on Earth has been determined in part by contingent events, such as a meteorite hitting Earth, and that it depends upon the randomness of genetic mutations as well as on the ordering process of natural selection. Our theology of the natural world has to be robust enough to deal with randomness and contingency. Far more demanding for theology, however, is a second issue, that of the costs of evolution, costs built into the process: the loss, the pain, the predation, the deaths, the extinctions of most species that ever lived over the 3.8 billion year history of life.[4] *Laudato Si'* has some acknowledgment of evolution (*LS* 79–81), and speaks of God's self-limitation in creating a world that develops with its own proper autonomy (*LS* 80), but in my judgment it too often portrays God's creation as a harmonious ordered cosmos without acknowledging the violence, pain, and death of the natural world. In my view, a theology of the cross, a theology of God with suffering creation, is needed to speak in some way to this

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of Selected Classic Christian Theologies (Zurich: LIT, 2012), *Creation and Salvation, Volume 2: A Companion on Recent Theological Movements* (Zurich: LIT, 2012), and also in *Christian Faith and the Earth: Current Paths and Emerging Horizons in Ecotheology*, ed. Ernst M. Conradie, Sigurd Bergmann, Celia Deane-Drummond and Denis Edwards (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

3. See Neils Henrik Gregersen, ed., *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2015); Celia Deane-Drummond, *Christ and Evolution: Wonder and Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009); Denis Edwards, *Partaking of God, Trinity, Evolution and Ecology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2014); Elizabeth Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).
4. On these costs see particularly Nancy Murphy, Robert John Russell, and William R. Stoeger, eds., *Physics and Cosmology: Scientific Perspectives on the Problem of Natural Evil* (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory, 2007); Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution, and the Problem of Evil* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008). For examples of recent responses from ecological theologians see Deane-Drummond, *Christ and Evolution* 159–93; Denis Edwards, *How God Acts: Creation, Redemption and Special Divine Action* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2010); and Johnson, *Ask the Beasts* 181–235.

violence. *Laudato Si'* is already a large document, and it is entirely understandable that it could not do everything. But I think it is important to note that it does not deal with the dark side of nature or with the theology of the cross.[5]

While the encyclical does not contribute greatly to the development of ecological theology on the issues of the incarnation and evolution and its costs, it provides a major stimulus and inspiration to contemporary theology with its vision of the natural world in relation to God. It offers an illuminating, inspiring, and, at least in Catholic Church teaching, new theological view of the natural world, of animals, plants, mountains, rivers, seas, and of human beings interconnected with nature and part of nature. In what follows I offer an analysis of *Laudato Si'*'s theology of nature according to three threads that can be found running through the encyclical: the value of nonhuman creatures in themselves before God, the concept of other creatures as revelatory of God, and the theology of the sublime communion of creation.

The Value of Nonhuman Creatures in Themselves

One of the crucial questions for any ecological theology concerns the meaning and value of nonhuman creatures. Do they receive their meaning and value only from their usefulness to human beings? Or do they have meaning and value in themselves? The Catholic tradition has tended to see the rest of the creation as ordered to the human and as existing simply for human use. Even the Second Vatican Council, in its *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, strikes a clearly anthropocentric note.[6] But does not more need to be said, above all in the age of the Anthropocene?[7] *Laudato Si'* does say far more, and in doing so offers a new development in Catholic teaching in the clarity of its claim that nonhuman creatures have value in themselves. This teaching, of course, is not new to ecological theology, but its incorporation into Catholic social teaching is an important new development.

This new position makes its first appearance in the opening chapter of *Laudato Si'*, where Pope Francis discusses the loss of biodiversity. He points out that the current

5. Something else that *Laudato Si'* does not take up is recent work in biology that shows the extent to which our fellow creatures share capacities that we had thought of as exclusively human, such as intelligence and emotions, including empathy. See Celia Deane-Drummond, *The Wisdom of the Liminal: Evolution and Other Animals in Human Becoming* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014).
6. *Gaudium et Spes* 12, 24.
7. According to the International Union of Geological Sciences, our geological period is the Holocene, which began after the last major ice age, 11,700 years ago. Atmospheric chemist and Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen has been a leading advocate for naming our current time period the Anthropocene, in recognition of the way human activity is changing Earth's atmosphere, geology, hydrology, and biology. The term has been taken up by other scientists, although not by all, and by the Pontifical Council of Sciences, of which Paul Crutzen is a member, in for example, its publication "Sustainable Humanity, Sustainable Nature, Our Responsibility," (May 2–6, 2014), http://www.pas.va/content/accademia/en/publications/extraseries/sustainable.html.

extinction of species which is due to human actions may mean the loss of valuable resources for human beings in food and medicines, now and far into the future. But he goes on to say that it is not enough to think of these species as resources for human beings, "while overlooking the fact that they have value in themselves" (*LS* 33). Clearly Francis recognizes that species of plants and animals, and also reptiles, insects, and microorganisms, may have enormous value to humans, but he insists that we must also recognize that they have intrinsic value. They have value before God their Creator, and they give glory to God by being what they are. Francis laments that because of human actions, "thousands of species will no longer give glory to God by their very existence, nor convey their message to us" (*LS* 33).

In his reflection on the biblical accounts of creation, Francis completely opposes the interpretation of the "dominion" text (Gen 1:28) as supporting unbridled exploitation. He recognizes that Christians may have contributed to such a false view by incorrectly interpreting the Scriptures, and he insists that "nowadays we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God's image and being given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures" (*LS* 67). The dominion text needs to be read, he says, in its context and with an appropriate hermeneutic, which includes reading it in the context of Gen 2:15, where we are told to "till" and "keep" (RSV) the garden of the world. Francis proposes that tilling and keeping can be understood as involving a mutual relationship between human beings and other creatures, where humans receive from other creatures what they need for their sustenance, and humans in turn protect and care for their fellow creatures. Francis points to biblical texts that speak of our responsibilities to a donkey, an ox, or a bird's nest (Exod 23:13; Deut 22:4–6), and insists that "the Bible has no place for a tyrannical anthropocentrism unconcerned for other creatures" (*LS* 68).

In this biblical context, Francis returns to the notion of intrinsic value: "we are called to recognize that other living beings have a value of their own in God's eyes" (*LS* 69). He goes on immediately to quote the *Catholic Catechism*, which says of other creatures that "by their existence they bless him and give him glory,"[8] and Psalm 104 which sings, "the Lord rejoices in all his works" (Ps 104:31). Building on the Scriptures and on the *Catechism*, Francis seems to acknowledge that he is saying something new with his emphasis on creatures having value in themselves:

> In our time, the Church does not simply state that other creatures are completely subordinate to the good of human beings as if they had no worth in themselves and can be treated as we wish. The German bishops have taught that, where other creatures are concerned, "we can speak of the priority of being over being useful." (*LS* 69)

Other creatures have value, then, because they are God's creatures and give praise to God by their very existence. Francis comes back to the idea of creatures having value

8. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2416, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/__P8C.HTM.

in themselves and, in this instance, speaks explicitly of their "intrinsic value," when he considers the way we are called to respect and protect ecosystems:

> We take these systems into account not only to determine how best to use them, but also because they have an intrinsic value independent of their usefulness. Each organism, as a creature of God, is good and admirable in itself; the same is true of the harmonious ensemble of organisms existing in a defined space and functioning as a system. (*LS* 140)

The traditional idea of human use of other creatures is not denied in *Laudato Si'* but embraced within a theology that sees them as having their own God-given meaning and value, and so as demanding respect, protection, and, as I will show below, love, from human beings.

What is the basis for this claim that other creatures have intrinsic value? A careful reading reveals that Francis sees three reasons as supporting this claim. The first is the traditional theological concept that other creatures are "the locus" of divine presence (*LS* 88). In these creatures, Francis points out, we encounter God's Holy Spirit. He says that "the Spirit of life dwells in them," and in our encounter with them we are invited into relationship with this indwelling and life-giving Spirit of God (*LS* 88). Later in the encyclical Francis writes, "The universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely. Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person's face" (*LS* 233). This means, Francis says, that we are called to find God in all things, to be open to discover the divine presence in all the creatures we encounter. At this point Francis quotes from Bonaventure, who says that "contemplation deepens the more we feel the working of God's grace within our hearts, and the better we learn to encounter God in creatures outside ourselves" (*LS* 233).

A second reason offered to support the claim that other creatures have value in themselves, a reason that seems characteristic of Francis, and one that is not often expressed in theology or church teaching, is that God loves each of them. Francis speaks of creation as springing from "God's loving plan in which every creature has its own value and significance" and as "a reality illuminated by the love which calls us together into universal communion" (*LS* 76). In a particularly rich section of the encyclical, Francis points out that the creation springs not from arbitrary omnipotence or self-assertion but from the divine freedom, as an act of love:

> Creation is in the order of love. God's love is the fundamental moving force in all created things: "For you love all things that exist, and detest none of the things that you have made; for you would not have made anything if you had hated it" (Wis 11:24). Every creature is thus the object of the Father's tenderness, who gives it its place in the world. Even the fleeting life of the least of beings is the object of his love, and in its few seconds of existence, God enfolds it with his affection. (*LS* 77)

Every sparrow, every frog, the members of every threatened species—each is "the object of the Father's tenderness," and each is enfolded with God's affection. It is this divine love for each creature that teaches our hearts to be open to love these same

creatures, to be moved by their plight, to feel for them, and where needed to act on their behalf. In the "prayer for our earth" at the end of encyclical Francis brings together these two themes, the presence of God and God's tender love for all creatures, which can be seen as foundational for the theology of intrinsic value that appears throughout the encyclical:

> All powerful God,
> you are present in the whole universe,
> and in the smallest of your creatures.
> You embrace with tenderness all that exists.
> Pour out upon us the power of your love,
> that we might protect life and beauty. (*LS* 246)

Francis presents a third argument for this intrinsic value in the Christian vision of the risen Christ. He sees the whole creation as destined to participate in the fullness of God already attained by the risen Jesus. This means that "the ultimate purpose of other creatures is not to be found in us." Rather, Francis writes, "all other creatures are moving forward with us and through us towards a common point of arrival, which is God, in that transcendent fullness where the risen Christ embraces and illumines all things" (*LS* 83). Francis's eschatology involves the idea that all other creatures will, in their own way, participate in the transformation of all things in Christ. This theology of hope for other creatures takes us beyond the medieval picture that could embrace the resurrection of humans and the transformation of the universe, but which saw no real future for animal and plant life. Of course, we have no adequate imaginative picture or conceptual understanding of our own future in God, let alone that of the wider creation. What we have is the promise of God in the resurrection. Francis argues from the idea that all creatures have a future in God to their value in themselves. Both of these ideas involve a change from positions that have long been taken for granted in much general Catholic theology.

Other Creatures as Revelatory of God

The unambiguous clarity of Francis's teaching on the intrinsic value of other creatures, while based on insights found in the Scriptures, the Christian tradition, and at times in the *Catholic Catechism*, and in agreement with aspects of recent ecological theology, is to be seen, in my view, as a real development in church teaching. What I take up now, the idea that other creatures can be revelatory of God, that they can be said to constitute a book of nature alongside the book of the Bible, is not so much a development, as a return to a traditional view, one that has often been ignored. It is a view found, among others, in Augustine, Aquinas, and particularly in Bonaventure. In this second theological thread of *Laudato Si'*, the emphasis is no longer on the meaning of creatures in themselves, but on their revelatory meaning for human beings. Francis sees the whole universe of creatures as speaking words of love to us:

> The entire material universe speaks of God's love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God. The history of our friendship with God is always linked to particular places which take on an intensely personal meaning; we all remember places, and revisiting those memories does us much good. Anyone who has grown up in the hills or used to sit by the spring to drink, or played outdoors in the neighbourhood square; going back to these places is a chance to recover something of their true selves. (*LS* 84)

Francis insists that each creature has its own particular word to speak. None is superfluous. Each can become a caress of God for us. Taking up words of Pope John Paul II, Francis says of the book of creation, "God has written a precious book, 'whose letters are the multitude of created things present in the universe'" (*LS* 85). He then turns to the Canadian bishops who, he says, rightly point out that "no creature is excluded from this manifestation of God." He quotes their words, "From panoramic visions to the tiniest living form, nature is a constant source of wonder and awe. It is also a continuing revelation of the divine" (*LS* 85).

Building on this picture of creation as a book of God, Francis says that the contemplation of creation allows us to discover in each thing "a teaching" which God wishes to give to us. Again he refers to words of John Paul II, with two separate quotations: "for the believer, to contemplate creation is to hear a message, to listen to a paradoxical, silent voice"; "alongside revelation properly so-called, contained in Scripture, there is a divine manifestation in the blaze of the sun and the fall of night" (*LS* 85).

It is worth noting the words used by Francis of our encounters with other creatures, and the words of others whom he quotes with approval: Other creatures "speak" to us of God's love, are "a caress" of God, a "precious book" whose letters are the multitude of created things, a "manifestation" of God, a "continuing revelation" of the divine, a "teaching" that God wishes to give us, a "message" from God, and a "divine manifestation." No doubt Francis agrees with Pope John Paul II, in the quotation above, in making a distinction between revelation properly so-called, in the Scriptures, and the manifestation of God in the natural world around us. Holding to this distinction, however, does not compromise the clear teaching that there is a fundamental revelation of God at work in creation itself.

The encyclical turns to an important text in Thomas Aquinas to point out that the manifestation of God in the natural world requires a multitude of diverse creatures (*LS* 86). Aquinas sees the diversity of creatures as springing directly from the divine intention, because divine goodness necessarily transcends the limits of any one creature. For this reason "what was wanting to one in the representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another."[9] It is the diversity of creatures, including great soaring trees, eagles, kangaroos, ants, and humans, that represent the abundance of divine goodness better than any one kind of creature might.

Francis returns to the theme of the book of creation in his brief treatment of the Trinity. He refers to Bonaventure's conviction that originally the reflection of God the

9. *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 47, a. 1.

Trinity was easily recognizable in the creation, "when that book was open" to us human beings and our eyes had not yet been darkened. Bonaventure, Francis points out, teaches that "each creature bears in itself a specifically Trinitarian structure."[10] We would readily be able to contemplate the Trinity in the creatures around us if our human gaze was not so partial, dark, and fragile (*LS* 239). We would find reflected in each of them the power, the wisdom and the goodness of God.

The teaching of *Laudato Si'* on the book of creation is summed up succinctly by Francis when he writes that "nature is filled with words of love" (*LS* 225). But he insists, if we are to hear the words of love addressed to us, in birds, trees, flowers, mountains, beaches, and deserts, we need to cultivate a contemplative stance before God's creation. He asks, how can we listen to the words spoken in the creatures around us if our lives are dominated by "constant noise, interminable and nerve-wracking distractions, and the cult of appearances?" (*LS* 225). We need to free ourselves from constant busyness, from always being in a hurry, we need to slow down and take time, if we are to find our Creator speaking a word of love in the creature before us.

The Sublime Communion of Creation

In this analysis it has been proposed that two threads of the theology of nature are developed in *Laudato Si'*: first, that nonhuman creatures have value in themselves and, second, that they can reveal something of God to us. Important as these two threads are, they do not yet represent what I see as the integrating center of the encyclical, Francis's theology of the communion of creation.

This theme appears in various ways throughout the encyclical, and is developed explicitly in chapter 2. Even without the theological language of communion, it appears in the constant emphasis on relationships with other human beings, with other creatures, and with God. An example is when Francis says of the biblical creation texts, "They suggest that human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour, and with the earth itself" (*LS* 66). This stance is already a challenge to much Christian literature and preaching which speaks only of relating to God and our fellow human beings.

Over and over again in *Laudato Si'* we are told that everything is connected. I will highlight just two examples. Francis writes of our relationship with other living creatures, "Because all creatures are connected, each must be cherished with love and respect, for all of us as living creatures are dependent on one another" (*LS* 42). Here the interconnection of creatures leads to an ecological stance. In the second example, Francis is concerned to show that care for creation and care for our fellow human beings belong together in a stance that he calls integral ecology: "Everything is connected. Concern for the environment thus needs to be joined to a sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society" (*LS* 91).

10. Bonaventure, *Quaest. Disp. de Myst. Trinitatis*, 1, 2 concl.

At one point in the encyclical, Francis makes the fundamental point that we humans ought not think of ourselves as relating to nature as if we were separate from it. We interrelate with other creatures in the natural world because we ourselves are a part of nature: "Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it" (*LS* 139). From the scientific point of view, of course, we know that we are completely dependent on the 13.8 billion-year history of the universe, since all the atoms that make up our bodies have been produced in the stars, and on the 3.7 billion-year history of evolution on Earth. For our continued existence, we depend not only on the climate, the atmosphere, the seas, the rivers, and the land itself, but also on the birds, the bees, the insects, the worms, and the millions of microbes that are at work in each of our bodies.

These interconnections are grounded for Francis in theological reality. When we think of nature as God's creation, he says, we can see it as "a reality illuminated by the love that calls us together into universal communion" (*LS* 76). In theological discussions, the word communion usually points, first, to the divine life of the Trinity and, second, to what the Spirit brings about in the life of the church. Francis extends its use to embrace the whole creation drawn by divine love. The networks of relationships that science discovers at every level, from that of the atom, to molecules, cells, organisms, ecosystems, the planetary community, the Milky Way galaxy, and the universe, can now be seen in a new light, as creaturely participation in the divine communion that is the life of the triune God. *Laudato Si'* links this concept of universal communion with Francis's of Assisi's theological conviction that we form one family with other creatures, that they are our kin, as common creatures before their Creator:

> This is the basis for our conviction that, as part of the universe, called into being by the one Father, all of us are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family, a sublime communion which fills us with a sacred, affectionate and humble respect. Here I would reiterate that "God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of species almost as a painful disfigurement." (*LS* 89)

Before continuing to explore Francis's theology of sublime communion, it is worth noting the place of human feelings in the above quotation. Here, and elsewhere in his writing, Francis gives a priority to feelings that is far from common in church teaching, and in theology, no doubt reflecting something of his own Ignatian tradition. The sense that we belong to one universal family, to one sublime communion, he says, fills us with a "sacred, affectionate, and humble respect." Francis is clearly aware that such feelings can inspire an ecological lifestyle. The last sentence of the above quotation, taken from *Evangelii Gaudium* (*LS* 215), makes a profound link between our bond with other creatures, and the strong feelings that can be invoked in us by their destruction and loss, feelings that can lead to a renewed ecological praxis.

Francis goes on to insist that authentic communion with the natural world also necessarily involves us in feeling with suffering human beings: "A deep communion with

the rest of nature cannot be real if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human beings" (*LS* 91). As he says again, in this context, "everything is connected" (*LS* 91). Or, as he said earlier in *Laudato Si'*, we need to realize that "an ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach" (*LS* 49).[11] In words that were used earlier by Leonardo Boff, Francis insists on the integration of the issues of justice and the environment "so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*" (*LS* 49).[12] This integration is a central idea of the encyclical that is taken up explicitly in its fourth chapter on "Integral Ecology."[13]

When our hearts are open to universal communion, Francis says, the sense of family "excludes nothing and no one" (*LS* 92). We "have only one heart" that feels for our fellow human beings and for other creatures who are brother and sister to us: "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" (*LS* 92).

The concept of universal communion appears again in the final chapter of *Laudato Si'* when Francis discusses the ecological conversion to which we are called. He sees this conversion as including a number of attitudes which together foster a "spirit of generous care, full of tenderness" (*LS* 220). Ecological conversion involves, he says, "a loving awareness that we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures, but joined in a splendid universal communion" (*LS* 220). He calls upon all Christians to make the grace they have received evident in their relationships with other creatures: "In this way, we will help nurture that sublime fraternity with all creation which Saint Francis of Assisi so radiantly embodied" (*LS* 221). It is clear that the "sublime fraternity" of this text, to which we might add "divine sorority," echoes and reinforces the "sublime communion" of *LS* 89, discussed above.

I have been proposing that the theology of the natural world that Francis offers us involves three threads: other creatures have intrinsic value, they are revelatory of God, and we and they form a sublime communion in God. What is it, theologically, that makes the interrelated creation a *sublime* communion? Clearly, fundamental to the answer of *Laudato Si'* is the creation theology already discussed, that God loves each of God's creatures in themselves, that each creature and the whole creation manifests the Creator, and that the love of the Creator draws all creatures into a communion of

11. Italics in the original.
12. Italics in the original. See Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997).
13. While I am not focusing on the concept of integral ecology in this article, it may be worth noticing that this term may not appeal to all scientists. I see it not as a scientific term, but as an ethical one, as an important attempt by Pope Francis to communicate, to both the Church and the general public, the idea that commitment to other human beings, above all the poor, and commitment to the wider natural world, are not to be played off against each other, but belong together as aspects of the one moral and spiritual stance before God.

love. But Francis also points, briefly, to the christological and trinitarian depths of this communion.

The encyclical sees all creatures as bound up with the mystery of Christ—"All things have been created through him and for him" (Col 1:16). It speaks of the Word of God who became flesh, who "entered into the created cosmos, throwing in his lot with it, even to the cross" (*LS* 99). From the beginning, but above all in the incarnation, the mystery of Christ is at work in a hidden manner in the natural world. Several times, *Laudato Si'* focuses on the risen Christ at work in the whole creation. In one example, after referring to Col 1:19–20 and 1 Cor 15:28, Francis writes,

> Thus the creatures of this world no longer appear to us under merely natural guise because the risen One is mysteriously holding them to himself and directing them towards fullness as their end. The very flowers of the field and the birds which his human eyes contemplated and admired are now imbued with his radiant presence. (*LS* 100)

As I have noted earlier, Francis understands the whole creation as being drawn to its fulfilment through the risen Christ, and he sees Christ as already present to all things, holding them in love, and in some mysterious way already filling them with his light. Later in the encyclical we read that "Christ has taken unto himself this material world and now, risen, is intimately present to each being, surrounding it with his affection and penetrating it with his light" (*LS* 221).

In discussing the sacraments, Francis offers a brief theology of incarnation in relation to ecology: "For Christians, all the creatures of the material universe find their true meaning in the incarnate Word, for the Son of God has incorporated in his person part of the material world, planting in it a seed of definitive transformation" (*LS* 235). In discussing the Eucharist, Francis writes that, when we gather to celebrate, this definitive transformation is already present in anticipation: "fullness is already achieved . . . Joined to the incarnate Son, present in the Eucharist, the whole cosmos gives thanks to God" (*LS* 236). In reflecting on the Sabbath, Francis points to Sunday as a time of rest, a time to be mindful of resurrection and new creation, when we are led to recognize that the risen humanity of Christ is already "the pledge of the final transfiguration of all created reality" (*LS* 237).

Francis takes the notion of universal communion to its most sublime level in his brief words on the Trinity. Building on Aquinas's theology of the divine persons as subsistent relations, he sees the world of creatures as "a web of relationships" which is "created according to the divine model" (*LS* 240). He notes that here we human beings can see a key to our fulfilment: "The human person grows more, matures more and is sanctified more to the extent that he or she enters into relationships, going out from themselves to live in communion with God, with others, and with all creatures" (*LS* 240). In relating to God, to other humans, and with God's other creatures, we live the trinitarian dynamism imprinted on us in our creation—we are created to be relational beings in a universe of creatures in which everything is interconnected.

In his paragraph on Mary, Francis sees her as profoundly connected to the communion of creation. As she once mourned the death of Jesus, "so now she grieves for

the sufferings of the crucified poor and for the creatures of this world laid waste by human power" (*LS* 241). But she is completely transfigured, living with Jesus, as a sign of the promise to all creatures: "In her glorified body, together with the Risen Christ, part of creation has reached the fullness of its beauty" (*LS* 241). At the end of the encyclical Francis says that we can hope we will come to share in this transfigured existence with the risen Christ, with Mary, and with the all of God's other creatures. Then we will be able to "read the mystery of the universe" which will be brought to its fullness in God (*LS* 243). He tells us that "eternal life will be a shared experience of awe, in which each creature, resplendently transfigured, will take its rightful place and will have something to give those poor men and women who will have been liberated once and for all" (*LS* 243).

This vision of the communion of creation, immensely deepened by a theology of incarnation and resurrection, impels us to give ourselves to the care of our common home. God has taken Earth and its creatures to God's self irrevocably in the incarnation. In words that echo Karl Rahner, Francis writes, "In the heart of this world, the Lord of life who loves us so much, is always present. He does not abandon us, he does not leave us alone, for he has united himself definitively to our earth, and his love constantly impels us to find new ways forward" (245).[14]

Conclusion

I have pointed out how Francis uses the word sublime of the communion of creation, and of the fraternity of all creatures. He uses it a third time in the encyclical and I think this usage gives a clue to the way he understands the word. It appears in a quotation from John of the Cross's commentary on his poem *The Spiritual Canticle*. The verse on which John of the Cross is commenting is part of his description of the profound union of the human person with the Word of God, the Beloved. John of the Cross writes of this Beloved,

> My Beloved is the mountains,
> And lonely wooded valley,
> Strange islands,
> And resounding rivers,
> The whistling of love-stirring breezes.[15]

Francis does not quote the verse, but simply refers to the commentary on these lines, where John of the Cross says of the mountain, valleys, islands, rivers, and breezes that

14. See Karl Rahner, "A Faith that Loves the Earth," in *The Mystical Way in Everyday Life*, trans. Annemarie Kidder (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010) 55.
15. John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle* 14, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1979) 462.

"in each of these sublime realities is God" (*LS* 234). The word "sublime" here indicates the experience of the natural world as suffused with the presence of God. In the poem John of the Cross says that the Beloved *is* the mountain while in the commentary he says that *in* each of these sublime realities, such as the mountain, is God. Francis comments, "This is not because the finite things of this world are really divine, but because the mystic experiences the intimate connection between God and all beings, and thus feels that 'all things are God'" (*LS* 234). He goes on to say that when a person stands awestruck before a mountain, he or she cannot separate this experience from God, and comes to see that the interior awe being lived is to be entrusted to God. Francis points to the words of John of the Cross on lonely wooded valleys:

> Lonely valleys are quiet, pleasant, cool, shady and flowing with fresh water; in the variety of their groves and in the sweet song of the birds, they afford abundant recreation and delight to the senses, and in their solitude and silence, they refresh and give rest. These valleys are what my Beloved is to me. (*LS* 234)

Mountains, valleys, islands, flowing streams, breezes, are sublime realities, because in them we can encounter the Beloved, because they give expression to the Beloved, and because they are, meaning they symbolize and express, what the Beloved is to the human lover.

In *Laudato Si'*, then, there is a rich concept of sublime communion that points to the mystical experience of finding God in all creatures. But there is a further resonance to this word that I find important in this context. In philosophical aesthetics, the word "sublime" is often understood in relation to the word "beautiful." Often the word beautiful is used of something that fits with our notions of what is reasonable, what is rightly ordered, and what is pleasingly proportioned. Something can be spoken of as sublime when it throws our notions of reason, order, and proportion into utter confusion, when it points to what is totally beyond us, to the incomprehensible. The sublime can be shocking and disorienting.

This line of thought suggests that "sublime communion" could be developed to embrace what is not taken up in *Laudato Si'*, the pain, the deaths, the chaos, the randomness, the ugliness of so much of the natural world. It could include what cosmology tells us of the 13.8 billion-year history of the observable universe, the more than a hundred billion galaxies that make it up, and the possibility of multiverses. A theology of the sublime communion of creation could engage with the strange otherness and counterintuitive nature of what we have discovered about our world at the quantum level of reality. And it could embrace the costs of evolution as well as the beauty and rich diversity of life around us.

A theology of the natural world as sublime communion could recognize and accept aspects of our world that are not pleasant or beautiful to human eyes. It could recognize that without faith the world might seem highly ambiguous to us, as both beautiful and violent. A theology of the sublime communion of creation would be based not simply on observation of the natural world, but on the revelation given in Christ that, in spite of appearances, in spite of what can seem like the violent and dark side of

nature, the emergent and evolving creation is the work of unthinkable and incomprehensible love.

A theology of the natural world as sublime communion necessarily involves, then, the recognition of our finitude and incomprehension. It would need to take seriously the words of God to Job from the whirlwind that begin, "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?" (Job 38:2). Above all, it would need to ponder the incarnation and the cross as God's radical and deep identification with creation in its groaning. With Paul it would see Christ crucified as the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Cor 1: 24). But it would also recognize, with him, that God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength (1 Cor 1: 25). And so, along with proclaiming the incarnation and the cross as God's identification with suffering creation, it would proclaim the resurrection of the crucified Jesus as the unbreakable promise of God to the whole creation.

This analysis of *Laudato Si'* has proposed that the encyclical offers us the basis for a systematic theology of the natural world, in which other creatures have value in themselves, in which they can be seen as revealing God, and in which they, with us, form a sublime communion of creation in God. While the theology builds on the Scriptures and earlier Church teaching, it offers us something new, a Church teaching that demands of us a radically different way of thinking, feeling, and acting with regard to other creatures. It is a summons to ecological conversion for each person, for the Church, and for theology.

Author biography

Denis Edwards received his STD from the Catholic University of America and is a professorial fellow of the Australian Catholic University, at the Adelaide campus. His research has been in the areas of Christology, Pneumatology, trinitarian theology, the dialogue between science and theology, and ecological theology. His recent publications include *Partaking of God: Trinity, Evolution, and Ecology* (2014); *Jesus and the Natural World: Exploring a Christian Approach to Ecology* (2012); *How God Acts: Creation, Redemption, and Special Divine Action* (2010); and *Ecology at the Heart of Faith* (2006). In progress is a monograph on a historical approach to the doctrine of creation.