

Inspiring the Ecological Mission of the American Catholic Church: *Laudato Si'* at a Moment of Crisis and Hope

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IN THE PREPARATORY DOCUMENT for the Synod on the Amazon, I was struck by some of the marvelous, poetic, evocative phrases that express and contextualize the ecological vision of Pope Francis. The document describes how the Amazon's diversity "is a mirror of all humanity which, in defense of life, requires structural and personal changes by all human beings, by nations, and by the Church" (*Amazonia: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology*, Preamble). It calls humanity to cultivate a "culture of encounter" (Preamble, quoting *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 220) in which we "practice the art of listening" (no. 11, quoting *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 171). The text speaks of Creation as a "holy ground" (Exodus 3:5) and a land with "a Mother" (no. 5) but now enslaved like Israel in Egypt (no. 8). From this document, we hear the call to be a holy church, a reverent church, a compassionate church, and an active church that encounters each local ecosystem (no. 15). As the document says, "Through a focus on local realities and on the diversity of the region's experiential microstructures, the Church is strengthened in its opposition to the globalization of indifference" (no. 12).

Since the Church is the people of God (*Lumen Gentium*, esp. Chapter 2), the synod's preparatory document stresses, "'Being Church means being God's people,' incarnate 'in the peoples of the earth' and in their cultures" (no. 12, quoting *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 115). For each of us, our ecological ministry is rooted in our ecological identity. So, it is important for each of us to recognize and attend to our ecological identity. For me, part of my ecological identity is bound up in the knowledge that my great-great aunt Mame was provincial of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in Cincinnati. This is significant to me since, among the great women religious of that community, Sister Dorothy Mae Stang, SND is known as the "Martyr of the Amazon" because she was murdered for her prophetic work in Brazil working to care for creation and the poor.¹ So part of my ecological identity is

¹ Roseanne Murphy, *Martyr of the Amazon: The Life of Sister Dorothy Stang* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007).

informed by a remote but fascinating link to this ecological prophet. Additionally, my ecological identity was shaped by the forests that abutted the houses in which I grew up. I tend to see myself as a “forest creature” and to feel God’s presence most deeply in these spaces. Finally, my ecological identity is connected to the Amazon. My family moved to Brazil when I was four years old, remained until I was eight, and had a memorable trip to Manaus and the Amazon River during our final journey back to the US.

So, in reflecting on the ecological spirituality and conversion for which *Laudato Si’* calls, I invite you to reflect on your ecological identity. What is your ancestral biome? In what landscape does your soul flourish? What is the nature of your local church, where the universal mission to be “a Church with an Amazonian face” will awaken in particular ways (*Amazonia*, Preamble)? What is your biggest vision of what this mission can look like? With these questions in mind, I would like to reflect on the spirituality of *Laudato Si’*, which calls for and inspires our ecological conversion. I would also like to consider some of the barriers to moving forward as a society and a church to address our social and environmental crisis. Finally, I would like to speak to the theological hope in God the Creator.

THE SPIRITUALTY OF *LAUDATO SI’*

The spirituality of *Laudato Si’* is one of unity and intimacy, of relationality and affection. We are in communion with all creation: we share praise and affection with all creatures, all our brothers and sisters—and this affection creates, or should create, a refusal to exploit and dominate other beings (no. 11). In the Judeo-Christian tradition, Francis observes, creaturely kinship embodies three levels of relationship: “with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself” (no. 66). Thus, recognizing that “everything is interconnected,” Francis calls us to integrate our knowledge “into a broader vision of reality” (no. 138). That vision includes God’s way of looking on the world, which affirms “that other living beings have a value of their own in God’s eyes: ‘by their mere existence they bless him and give him glory’” (no. 69, quoting *Catechism*, no. 2416). Conversion to this spirituality yields “passionate concern for the protection of our world” (no. 216). Its interior commitment overcomes the cynicism and apathy of the “internal deserts” that Francis, quoting Pope Benedict XVI, cites as the catalyst of expanded “external deserts” in our world (no. 217).² This spirituality leads us along the obligatory path of Christian action for the earth and helps us recognize that, as Francis prophetically affirms, “Living our vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork is essential to a life of

² Cf. Pope Benedict XVI, “Homily for the Solemn Inauguration of the Petrine Ministry,” April 24, 2005, www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2005/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20050424_inizio-pontificato.html.

virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience” (no. 217). This vocation seeks to build the common good, a task so daunting and complex that lasting change require not only personal conversion and simplicity but a “community conversion” (nos. 218-219).

Unfortunately, these relationships are today ruptured in so many ways. The common good, as we know too clearly, is threatened all over the world by exploitative production, wasteful consumption, and an incredibly dirty and dangerous energy system. As we have known for years, pollution and climate change disproportionately harm the poor. The nexus of Climate-Energy-Inequality divides the world in two: the relatively wealthy Global North with seemingly unlimited access to energy and the relatively impoverished Global South with limited access to energy. Increasingly, global inequality intensifies with climate change since the poor are less able to prevent, adapt to, escape, or recover from disasters. At the same time, lack of access to energy makes the bottom three billion especially vulnerable to extreme events with devastating consequences. This is especially true with respect to human health since the adverse health effects of climate change—particularly “malaria, malnutrition, diarrhea, and inland flooding fatalities”—are often disproportionately experienced in the Global South, which has been relatively least responsible for historic heat-trapping greenhouse gas pollution.³

In addition to these realities, environmental racism burns along the fault lines of colonialism and resource extraction. Countless energy extraction projects cause intense harm to the poor while denying them access to the fuels that are removed from their lands. The Nigerian oil crisis exemplifies this exploitation. Foreign oil companies ignore energy poverty while profiting fabulously. Half a trillion metric cubic feet of gas valued at almost \$2 trillion was wasted in 2016 because oil companies “have calculated that it is cheaper to flare that gas than to invest in the equipment needed to capture and channel the gas for energy use.”⁴ This occurs in a country of more than 180 million people, where over two-thirds are either not connected to the electricity grid or access less than four hours of power from it each day.⁵ Amidst these

³ Jonathan A. Patz, Holly K. Gibbs, Jonathan A. Foley, Jamesine V. Rogers, and Kirk R. Smith, “Climate Change and Global Health: Quantifying a Growing Ethical Crisis,” *EcoHealth* 4, no. 4 (2007): 399.

⁴ Edward Osang Obi, MSP, “Creational Solidarity Strengthens the Weakest Link: Energy Ethics and Climate Change in Sub-Saharan Africa,” in *Light for a New Day: Interfaith Essays on Energy Ethics*, ed. Erin Lothes (Highland Park, NJ: GreenFaith 2016), 19.

⁵ Ayodele Oni, “Mini-grids in Nigeria: The Three-Pronged Approach of Investment Opportunities, Cost Reduction and Temporary Political Gains,” *Bloomfield Law*, December 18, 2018, www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=bd796126-b6ee-420f-8f54-cb817106e17b.

conditions, corruption and patronage worsen ethnic rivalries for resources. Peaceful demonstrations have been suppressed, leaders have been hanged, and all this has erupted into the present conflict in which local gangs blow up oil pipes in protest and siphon off oil they secretly refine. Meanwhile spills, leaks, sickness, underdevelopment, along with the destruction of farming and fishing ecosystems—and thus traditional livelihoods—are weekly occurrences and contribute to the misery of many Nigerians.

Here in the United States, fossil fuel pollution also creates immense health risks. Mercury pollution limits the neurodevelopment of half a million children born each year.⁶ Children exposed to higher rates of air pollution suffer increased risk of developmental disorders like autism, ADHD, other neurobehavioral problems, and lower IQ. This is a life issue. Everyone has the right to bodily health, to full cognitive development and wholeness, and to the spiritual peace of living in green spaces. Future generations have the right to the fullness of life on a stable planet. All life forms, down to the smallest, have the right to offer their praise to God. In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis protests the desecration of the earth and the poor. He stresses that “the Spirit of life dwells in every living creature” (no. 88), that “the rich and the poor have equal dignity” (no. 94), and that “creation is of the order of love” such that “God’s love is the fundamental moving force in all created things” (no. 77).

As the image of God, we share God’s creativity and are called to participate in ongoing creation. We are charged with the responsibility of creatively solving this problem. To this end, we can inquire about what guidance the Catholic tradition can provide. In my opinion, a lot! And this is not just my view; many others, from both the Christian community and other faith traditions, recognize that the Catholic intellectual tradition provides ecological teachings with distinct power and precision. For example, there are papal resources like Pope John Paul II’s 1990 World Day of Peace Message⁷ and Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (esp. nos. 48-52) and 2010 World Day of Peace Message.⁸ Here in the United States, our bishops have published pastoral statements like *Renewing the Earth*⁹ and *Global*

⁶ Francesca Gorini, Filippo Muratori, and Maria Aurora Morales, “The Role of Heavy Metal Pollution in Neurobehavioral Disorders: a Focus on Autism,” *Review Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 1, no. 4 (2014): 354.

⁷ Pope John Paul II, “Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All Creation,” 1990, www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19891208_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html.

⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, “If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation,” 2010, www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20091208_xliii-world-day-peace.html.

⁹ United States Catholic Conference, *Renewing the Earth: An Invitation to Reflection and Action on Environment in Light of Catholic Social Teaching*, 1991,

Climate Change.¹⁰ Globally, Catholic bishops have jointly produced prophetic documents like the 2015 *Statement in Lima on the Road to Paris*¹¹ and 2018 *Joint Statement on Climate Justice by Bishops' Conferences*,¹² in which they assert the radical desire for a world of one hundred percent renewable energy. Beyond the magisterium, theologians have published reams of theological writings that consider ecology spiritually, biblically, systematically, morally, and comparatively.

Collectively, these teach us about Creation as an expression of God's love and plan for salvation. The doctrine of creation views all relationships within a covenant of creation and salvation. The covenant of life is theocentric, oriented to God's plan of creation, salvation and the well-being of creation. The covenant acknowledges all humanity as brothers and sisters, and this kinship extends to all of life. Thus, a Catholic creation ethic is theocentric, social, and ecological. Humanity responds to the gifts of creation with praise and gratitude, and honors God's intent for the universal destination of goods. In short, as Pope Francis writes in *Laudato Si'*, "a Catholic creation ethic is rooted in covenantal spirituality and 'ecological conversion,' whereby the effects of [one's] encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them" (no. 217). Since, as Pope Francis observes, "human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself" (no. 66), we can say that the spirituality of *Laudato Si'* is rooted in encounter with—and love of—God, which can facilitate an "ecological conversion" which calls for an adequate moral response via love of neighbor and all creation. Or, in the words of Richard M. Gula, *Laudato Si'* makes "the moral life spiritual at its source and the spiritual life moral in its manifestations."¹³

SPIRITUALITY AND MORALITY IN *LAUDATO SI'*

How the spirituality and ecological conversion of *Laudato Si'* works out in ethical decisions about how to love amidst our complex

www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/environment/renewing-the-earth.cfm.

¹⁰ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue Prudence and the Common Good*, 2001, www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/environment/global-climate-change-a-plea-for-dialogue-prudence-and-the-common-good.cfm.

¹¹ Coopération Internationale pour le Développement et la Solidarité (CIDSE), *Statement in Lima on the Road to Paris*, 2015, www.cidse.org/catholic-bishops-statement-in-lima-on-the-road-to-paris/.

¹² Caritas Internationalis, *2018 Joint Statement on Climate Justice by Bishops' Conferences*, 2018, www.caritas.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Final-statement_for-signature.pdf.

¹³ Richard M. Gula, "Spirituality and Morality: What Are We Talking About?" in *Ethics and Spirituality: Readings on Moral Theology No. 17*, eds. Charles Curran and Lisa Fullam (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2014), 53.

social life is the topic of Catholic social teaching. In this sense, Catholic social teaching, of which *Laudato Si'* is part,

can thus be understood as a magisterial resource with which persons work to answer the question, 'How can and ought we, who have been loved by God, live?' Or put even more simply, [Catholic social thought] is a resource that helps persons respond to God's love through love of God, self, neighbor, and creation.¹⁴

Historically, Catholic social teaching has been described as existing in three waves: the first focusing on the Industrial Age and the worker, the second on just and integral development, and the third on ecological integrity.¹⁵ On the cusp of this third wave, the Church identifies seven "themes" that together ground Catholic social teaching: Life and Dignity of the Human Person; Call to Family, Community, and Participation; Rights and Responsibilities; Option for the Poor and Vulnerable; The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers; Solidarity; and Care for God's Creation.¹⁶ Informed by this framework, we can reflect on what the principles of Catholic social teaching mean in the context of climate change and how they can inform our choices about energy. Here we might speak of Catholic social teaching as providing "integral ecology principles" that translate the core themes of Catholic social teaching into "the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world" (*Laudato Si'*, no. 12). To this end, I have elsewhere collaborated with theologians to develop seven themes that build upon those in the US Catholic bishops' 1981 statement *Reflections on the Energy Crisis*.¹⁷ They include:¹⁸

1. Cherishing and protecting life, health, and the conditions that support human and ecosystemic well-being in the present and for future generations.

¹⁴ Daniel R. DiLeo, "Catholic Social Teaching, Love and Thomistic Moral Precepts," *Journal of Moral Theology* 8, no. 2 (2018): 71; cf. Edward C. Vacek, *Love, Human and Divine: The Heart of Christian Ethics* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1994), 117.

¹⁵ Kevin Ahern, "The Theologians Respond," *America Media*, YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=EdAJO-anDmY.

¹⁶ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Seven Themes of Catholic Social Teaching," 2019, www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/seven-themes-of-catholic-social-teaching.cfm.

¹⁷ United States Catholic Conference, *Reflections on the Energy Crisis: A Statement by the Committee on Social Development and World Peace*, 1981, www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/environment/upload/reflections-energy-crisis.pdf.

¹⁸ Erin Lothes, David Cloutier, Elaine Padilla, Christiana Z. Peppard, and Jame Schaefer, "Catholic Moral Traditions and Energy Ethics for the Twenty-First Century," *Journal of Moral Theology* 5, no. 1 (2016): 8-10.

2. Accepting an appropriate share of responsibility for climate change, with a strong sense of duty to ameliorate its worst effects as well as to address its root causes.
3. Seeking a common good that lives in solidarity with others to promote genuine, shared flourishing.
4. Promoting distributive justice: in striving for a more just society, Catholics are called to create energy systems that are both fair and sustainable.
5. Orienting justice towards a preferential option for the poor and future generations to ensure universal access to sustainable energy for basic needs.
6. Enabling participation through subsidiarity and ensuring transparency when accounting for the benefits and burdens of energy options.
7. Developing technological prudence.

As we consider how these principles might inform how we respond to God's love in the world, we can draw further insight from *Energy, Justice, and Peace* from the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace.¹⁹ This excellent document on energy relates to solidarity, development, conflict, and peace, emphasizing that our individual and social actions are part of a network of impact, that everything is interconnected. It underscores that energy is not just a political, technological, scientific, or economic issue. It is a development issue, a justice issue, a gender rights issue.

Against this backdrop, Catholic social teaching indicates that counteracting structural harm through our participation in the economy—including energy decisions—is, as Pope Francis writes, “not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience” (*Laudato Si'*, no. 217). Bishop McElroy explains this so clearly in an excellent article from *America* magazine. He writes, “Poverty [and environmental degradation] however, is not a one-time action. It is the result of countless specific human actions with varying degrees of responsibility that give rise to social structures and practices imbued with selfishness and

¹⁹ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Energy, Justice, and Peace: A Reflection on Energy in the Current Context of Development and Environmental Protection* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press 2014).

evil.”²⁰ Often, Catholic social ethics analyzes these varying degrees of responsibility with terms like “remote” and “mediate” to express how levels of cooperation can be diffuse and indirect. But today we must note that instead of being “remote” or “mediate,” our responsibility is “socially intensified” given the constant use of fossil fuels and their implication in almost every act of the top four billion energy consumers in the developed world.

What is our concrete situation today? Our interconnected world faces the onrushing elimination of the 1.5°C carbon budget. As you are no doubt aware, this measure indicates the amount of additional carbon dioxide humanity can pollute before drastically increasing the likelihood that global warming surpasses 1.5°C of post-industrial warming. This threshold is significant because, as the Nobel Prize-winning Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change indicates, its transgression increases the likelihood that positive feedback loops, whereby warming produces additional warming, will cause climate change to rapidly become runaway and irreversible.²¹ According to some calculations, continued carbon pollution along a business-as-usual path will exhaust the 1.5°C carbon budget by 2025.²² In the face of such prospects, huge energy shifts are needed to stabilize the climate, and a massive shift to renewable energy is needed to protect the climate and sustain our common home. This is especially true here in the United States, the world’s second-highest carbon polluting nation responsible for 14 percent of global carbon emissions in 2017 (despite having only roughly 4 percent of the world’s population).²³

Informed by the spirituality of *Laudato Si’*, which calls us to love creation in response to loving union with God, what is the moral mandate for advanced nations? Especially informed by the Catholic social teaching principle of subsidiarity, which calls governments to intervene as little as possible but as much as necessary to protect the common good, *Laudato Si’* states plainly, “There is an urgent need to develop policies to limit emissions and substitute for fossil fuels” (no. 26). In particular, the pope emphasizes, “The use of highly polluting fossil fuels—especially coal, but also oil and, to a lesser degree, gas—needs to be progressively replaced without delay” (no. 165).

²⁰ Robert W. McElroy, “Pope Francis Makes Addressing Poverty Essential,” *America*, October 8, 2013, www.americamagazine.org/church-poor?page=1.

²¹ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, “Global Warming of 1.5°C,” 2019, www.ipcc.ch/sr15/.

²² James Morrissey and Nicolas Maennling, “Leaving Fossil Fuels in the Ground: Who, What and When?” *Columbia Center on Sustainable Investment*, October 14, 2016, www.blogs.ei.columbia.edu/2016/10/14/leaving-fossil-fuels-in-the-ground-who-what-and-when/.

²³ Union of Concerned Scientists, “Each Country’s Share of CO2 Emissions,” 2019, www.ucsusa.org/global-warming/science-and-impacts/science/each-countrys-share-of-co2.html.

Here, and especially since some detractors have tried to frame Pope Francis's comments on energy and climate change as radical and thus dismissible, it is important to emphasize his continuity with his papal predecessors. In his 1990 World Day of Peace Message, Pope John Paul II lamented, "The gradual depletion of the ozone layer and the related 'greenhouse effect' has now reached crisis proportions as a consequence of industrial growth, massive urban concentrations and *vastly increased energy needs*" (no. 6). In response, John Paul II emphasized the need for "States and the international community" to help the world care for creation (no. 15). Similarly, Pope Benedict XVI identified climate change as a pressing issue throughout his pontificate and supported United Nations' efforts to secure an international climate change agreement.²⁴

In addition to calling for such collective action, Pope Francis emphasizes that such activity "requires honesty, courage and responsibility" (no. 169). This insight is, I think, absolutely critical. We know what needs to be done. We have the technologies needed to avoid climate catastrophe. What is sorely lacking is the requisite character to act sufficiently in the face of our knowledge and capabilities. This is especially—and uncomfortably true—for those of us in the United States since, as Francis asserts, these attributes are required "above all on the part of those countries which are more powerful and pollute the most" (no. 169). This is consistent with his claim earlier in the encyclical that "the developed countries ought to help pay this [ecological] debt by significantly limiting their consumption of non-renewable energy and by assisting poorer countries to support policies and programmes of sustainable development" (no. 52). And it is significant because, in this same section, the pope cites the US Conference of Catholic Bishops' own document, *Global Climate Change*, in which the bishops themselves acknowledge, "All nations share the responsibility to address the problem of global climate change. But historically the industrial economies have been responsible for the highest emissions of greenhouse gases that scientists suggest are causing the warming trend." Thus, as Pope Francis concludes, "We must continue to be

²⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, "Address to the Diplomatic Corps," January 9, 2012, www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2010/january/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20100111_diplomatic-corps.html; Pope Benedict XVI, "Address to the Diplomatic Corps," January 11, 2010, www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2010/january/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20100111_diplomatic-corps.html; Pope Benedict XVI, "Statement," 2009, www.un.org/webcast/pdfs/climatechangesummit/holysee.pdf; Pope Benedict, XVI "Angelus," December 6, 2009, www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/angelus/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_ang_20091206.html; Pope Benedict XVI, "General Audience," August 26, 2009, www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20090826.html.

aware that, regarding climate change, there are *differentiated responsibilities*” (no. 52, emphasis in original).

Although Francis’s words should stand on their own, I think it is here again important to emphasize papal precedent on this matter. In *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI wrote:

On this front too, there is a *pressing moral need for renewed solidarity*, especially in relationships between developing countries and those that are highly industrialized. The technologically advanced societies can and must lower their domestic energy consumption, either through an evolution in manufacturing methods or through greater ecological sensitivity among their citizens. It should be added that at present it is possible to achieve improved energy efficiency while at the same time encouraging research into alternative forms of energy. What is also needed, though, is a worldwide redistribution of energy resources, so that countries lacking those resources can have access to them.... [T]he protection of the environment, of resources and of the climate obliges all international leaders to act jointly and to show a readiness to work in good faith, respecting the law and promoting solidarity with the weakest regions of the planet. (nos. 49, 50)

In his 2010 World Day of Peace Message, Benedict cited *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 49 and continued:

[T]here is also an urgent moral need for a renewed sense of *intragenerational solidarity*, especially in relationships between developing countries and highly industrialized countries: “the international community has an urgent duty to find institutional means of regulating the exploitation of non-renewable resources, involving poor countries in the process, in order to plan together for the future.” *The ecological crisis shows the urgency of a solidarity which embraces time and space*. It is important to acknowledge that among the causes of the present ecological crisis is the historical responsibility of the industrialized countries. (no. 8)

In short, as the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace summarizes in *Energy, Justice, and Peace*, advanced countries have “the moral duty of developing the use of the most complex and capital-intensive energy technologies, in order to allow poor countries to feed their development, resorting to simpler and less expensive energy technologies.”²⁵ So in the United States, it is our job as an advanced nation to develop, deploy, and share the expensive, new renewable technologies while giving priority of liquid fossil fuel use to developing nations which have the right to maximize development using the remainder of the world’s carbon budget.

²⁵ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Energy, Justice, and Peace*, 77.

HOPE AND ACTION

In the face of what Pope Francis rightly calls the “climate emergency,”²⁶ there are signs of hope that the human family will commit itself to solidarity and mitigate climate catastrophe. Greta Thunberg went from standing alone outside the Swedish parliament to excoriating world leaders at the United Nations as the face of the world’s youth climate movement. Climate strikes have happened across the country and around the world. In January 2019, young Catholics produced the World Youth Day Manifesto in response to cataclysmic ecological challenges.²⁷ The Pan-Amazon Synod will pay attention to ecological concerns. Catholic Climate Covenant, Creighton University, and all those partners involved with “*Laudato Si*” and the US Catholic Church: A Conference Series on Our Common Home” are working to more deeply integrate the encyclical into US Catholic life.

Still, despite the wealth of magisterial teaching and theological writing on religion and ecology, we find that far less is being done that we would like. We have shelves of Catholic reflections on ecology and climate change, and yet we have not seen a burning grassfire of social and political action to address climate change in society—or in the Church, among laity, theologians, or clergy. Why is that? Why does it seem that the Catholic Church, especially in the United States, has thought so much about ecology in response to God’s love but done so little to adequately care for our common home—especially when, in the words of St. Ignatius of Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises*, “Love ought to manifest itself more by deeds than by words”?²⁸ This question was the focus of my book *Inspired Sustainability: Planting Seeds for Action*.²⁹ Therein, I interviewed over one hundred thirty active faith-based environmentalists from all religious traditions across the United States and listened to what they reported as the barriers to action and the sources of inspiration. Informed by these encounters, I first noted seven common features of their green spirituality: scientific literacy or at least scientific affirmation; a feeling of global interdependence; a commitment to social justice; an opening of their spirituality to recognizing a “bigger God”—a God who cared about the cosmos and all the

²⁶ Pope Francis, “Address to Participants at the Meeting Promoted by the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development on the Theme: *The Energy Transition & Care of Our Common Home*,” June 14, 2019, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/june/documents/papa-francesco_20190614_compagnie-pe-trolifere.html.

²⁷ Catholic News Service, “A ‘Manifesto’ at World Youth Day Calls Attention to Environment,” January 22, 2019, www.catholicnews.com/services/englishnews/2019/a-manifesto-at-world-youth-day-calls-attention-to-environment.cfm.

²⁸ Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, trans. George Ganss (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1992), 94.

²⁹ Erin Lothes Biviano, *Inspired Sustainability: Planting Seeds for Action* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016).

living creatures, not just humankind; a reverence for creation; many interfaith connections in their thinking and in their advocacy; and a common sense of being independent thinkers, who were encouraged by their faith to wonder about the changing world, and in turn, to see how the changing world made them rethink the relevance of their faith.

In addition to these common spiritual aspects, I noticed that respondents generally reported three critical gaps that challenged people in their congregations to respond to environmental issues: a knowledge gap, a caring gap, and an action gap. The knowledge gap is a function of not knowing critical information or not consistently thinking about its implications. It is perpetuated by limitations in scientific literacy and cognitive capacities, personal inclinations that may decrease one's encounter with the rest of creation (e.g., proclivity for indoor as opposed to outdoor recreation), willful ignorance that produces moral blindness, and a desire to avoid the pain that comes from sober acknowledgement of our present ecological crises. The caring gap arises from a disconnect between cognitive apprehension of facts and interior empathetic solidarity. The action gap stems from unwillingness or inability on the part of a person or community to concretely respond to ecological information and/or corresponding interior empathy.

Although it is often difficult to traverse these gaps, their diagnoses provide potential prescriptions for how to best fill in the knowledge gap. First, and since persons respond differently to various frames, we should use neutral language when speaking about complex or potentially upsetting ecological challenges like climate change. Next, we should appeal to core values that can transcend partisan "filters" through which persons often receive and that can skew their response to objective scientific information. Since religion can serve as a deep repository of values-based language, public theology and faith-based social action can and must continue to play essential roles in shaping public discourse and policy deliberation about climate change. Additionally, religion can also supply the theological virtue of hope and an eschatological perspective in ways that might sustain action and guard against a sense of helplessness. Furthermore, and relatedly, we should inform people without overwhelming them and acknowledge that each person has a finite pool of worry. Finally, we should offer nuanced acknowledgement of personal uncertainty about climate science but affirm the consensus of experts. To this end, I have found it helpful to point out that just as we consult and trust the authority of mechanics, dentists, tax preparers, and other professionals with expertise not our own, so too we should consult and trust the vast majority of climate

scientists and scientific bodies that affirm the reality of anthropogenic climate change.³⁰

As material beings, our spirituality and ethics are inevitably incarnate; we each necessarily experience relationship with God (spirituality) and discern adequate responses (ethics) as “a subject in corporeality.”³¹ We must therefore recognize and attend to the fact that psychology plays a mediating role vis-à-vis spirituality and ethics—generally as well as with respect to climate change. As a result, we need to seriously consider what social psychology tells us about how persons hear, process, and respond to climate change information and messages.³² For example, some people seem not to like the word “justice,” especially within the context of climate change.³³ This may strike us as strange, but the term—especially in the context of “climate justice”—can make people feel blamed for a global issue that transcends their personal action. Conversely, the word “fair” is often more palatable to the ears of persons within the context of climate change and can help avoid triggering a shutdown response that precludes authentic encounter and dialogue. So, depending on one’s audience, it might be more prudent to speak about how climate change unfairly harms the poor rather than bemoan the injustice of climate change.

With respect to bridging the caring gap, much of the work begins with Pope Francis’s challenge—which builds on those of Pope John Paul II (e.g., *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 28) and Pope Benedict XVI (e.g., *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 51)—to “break out of the indifference induced by consumerism” (*Laudato Si’*, no. 184). For Pope Francis, the “culture of indifference” (no. 184) is related to the absence of a “culture of encounter” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 220) in which persons are transformed by authenticity in “the three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships” for which persons are made: “with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself” (*Laudato Si’*, no. 66). To

³⁰ E.g., National Aeronautic and Space Administration, “Scientific Consensus,” 2019, www.climate.nasa.gov/scientific-consensus/.

³¹ Louis Janssens, “Personalism in Moral Theology” in *Moral Theology: Challenges for the Future*, eds. Charles Curran and Lisa Fullam (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 94.

³² E.g., Matthew C. Nisbet, Shirley S. Ho, Ezra Markowitz, Saffron O’Neill, and Mike S. Schäfer, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Climate Change Communication* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, “Audiences,” 2019, www.climatecommunication.yale.edu/topic/audiences/; Climate Outreach, “Guide: Faith and Climate Change—Talking with People of 5 Major Faiths,” February 16, 2016, www.climateoutreach.org/resources/climate-change-faith/.

³³ Ezra Markowitz, Caroline Hodge, and Gabriel Harp, *Connecting on Climate: A Guide to Effective Climate Change Communication* (New York: ecoAmerica and the Center for Research on Environmental Decisions—Earth Institute at Columbia University, 2014), 13–14, www.ecoamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/ecoAmerica-CRED-2014-Connecting-on-Climate.pdf.

reduce the caring gap with respect to climate action, we must therefore, as Francis writes, “become painfully aware, ... dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus ... discover what each of us can do about it” (*Laudato Si'*, no. 19). Additionally, we must examine in ourselves and challenge in others the degree to which our professed faith commitments are really the operative values that inform our lives—especially the carbon-intensive aspects. This can be difficult, but we must courageously face and identify hypocritical inconsistencies between our beliefs and our actions. Spiritually, we might utilize the Ecological Examen that adapts the traditional Ignatian Examen and “asks you to reflect on your personal relationship with creation, to acknowledge and amend your ways and to promote ecological justice by standing in solidarity with those most impacted by environmental harm.”³⁴ Catechetically, we must help persons and communities identify often latent connections between core values, actions, and consequences with reference to climate change and ecological degradation.

One of the most powerful ways to begin these processes is through discussions. Discussions in parishes and other local faith contexts are especially ideal loci for several reasons. First, they provide a safe space within which to raise uncomfortable questions, explore new ideas, and have values-based conversations that link climate change and faith. They also provide communities for prayer, discernment, and action. This is critical since persons are innately social and require others to flourish spiritually and morally (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 12). Such is especially the case in the face of climate catastrophe since change is difficult and must occur beyond simply the individual level. As Pope Francis rightly observes, “The ecological conversion needed to bring about lasting change is also a community conversion” (*Laudato Si'*, no. 219). Individuals need the support of a community to confront the difficult realizations about what is happening to our common home—and adequate responses require collective action. The pastoral nature of parishes can enable knowledge of climate change to fit into and transform people’s narratives with minimal trauma. Since parishes celebrate the sacraments, operate facilities, purchase products, catechize, often run schools, and are part of a larger diocesan faith community, parishes are also ideally located to catalyze multifaceted changes the effects of which can spread across ministries and beyond the immediate community.

In addition to the knowledge and caring gaps, Catholics must diminish the action gap that hinders adequate responses to the climate crisis. This involves challenging pervasive busyness that often “drives

³⁴ Office of Justice and Ecology of the Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States and Ignatian Solidarity Network, “Ecological Examen,” 2019, www.ecologicalexamen.org/.

[us] to frenetic activity and makes [us] feel busy, in a constant hurry which in turn leads [us] to ride rough-shod over everything around [us]" (*Laudato Si'*, no. 225). Rather, we must take "time to recover a serene harmony with creation, reflecting on our lifestyle and our ideals, and contemplating the Creator who lives among us and surrounds us, whose presence 'must not be contrived but found, uncovered'" (*Laudato Si'*, no. 225). We must also resist the temptation to embrace material comfort that anesthetize us to "the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor" (*Laudato Si'*, no. 49). As Francis observes, ecological degradation is often perpetuated by those who "live and reason from the comfortable position of a high level of development and a quality of life well beyond the reach of the majority of the world's population. This lack of physical contact and encounter, encouraged at times by the disintegration of our cities, can lead to a numbing of conscience and to tendentious analyses which neglect parts of reality" (*Laudato Si'*, no. 49). We must furthermore break free from powerful habits—vices—that condition us to sin which, as Francis describes, constitutes a "rupture" in one or more of the "three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself" (*Laudato Si'*, no. 66). To do so, we must cultivate "ecological virtues" (*Laudato Si'*, no. 88) like those identified by the National Conference of the Bishops of Brazil as well as Catholic scholars.³⁵

This reference to virtues accents the emphasis in Catholic moral theology on the relationship between the "ethics of being" that focuses on interior disposition and the "ethics of doing" which attends to external action.³⁶ Although the Catholic intellectual tradition emphasizes that actions are animated by and serve to further shape character, we must remember that this relationship also bears upon spirituality in terms of one's interior affect. This is something to which Pope Francis attends when he writes, "Inner peace is closely related to care for ecology and for the common good because, lived out authentically, it is reflected in a balanced lifestyle together with a capacity for wonder which takes us to a deeper understanding of life" (*Laudato Si'*, no. 225). In other words, acting can help overcome the "green blues" and associated feelings of despair about the state of creation. Action can

³⁵ National Conference of the Bishops of Brazil, *A Igreja e a Questão Ecológica*, 1992, nos. 53-54; cf. Jame Schaefer, *Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics: Reconstructing Patristic and Medieval Concepts* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2009), 231-254 (esp. Chapter 4: "Living Virtuously within the Earth Community"); Nancy M. Rourke, "Calling Forth the Invisible, Spreading Goodness: Virtue Ethics in *Laudato Si'*" in *All Creation Is Connected: Voices in Response to Pope Francis's Encyclical on Ecology*, ed. Daniel R. DiLeo (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2018), 154-167.

³⁶ Richard M. Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith: Foundations of Catholic Morality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), 7-8.

be empowering and uplifting, and spirituality is empowered as we seize onto a more radical hope with more audacious goals and bigger strategies. And it is precisely such collective action that is needed to address issues like global climate change. As Pope Francis emphasizes, “Social problems must be addressed by community networks and not simply by the sum of individual good deeds” (*Laudato Si’*, no. 219). In short, collective action moved by “social love moves us to devise larger strategies to halt environmental degradation and to encourage a ‘culture of care’ which permeates all of society. This too is part of our spirituality” (*Laudato Si’*, no. 231).

Alongside the knowledge, caring, and action gaps, our present circumstances require that we overcome the chasm of partisanship. In their 2001 statement *Global Climate Change*, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) asserts,

At its core, global climate change is not about economic theory or political platforms, nor about partisan advantage or interest group pressures. It is about the future of God’s creation and the one human family. It is about protecting both ‘the human environment’ and the natural environment. It is about our human stewardship of God’s creation and our responsibility to those who come after us.

Unfortunately, partisan division often defines contemporary approaches to climate change—even within our church. In fact, research shows not only the familiar conservative/liberal divide, but a striking ecologically-particularized mistrust. The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate in 2017 confirmed that regular Mass-goers are the most likely to see little conflict between their faith and science.³⁷ Yet they also found that it is precisely weekly Mass-goers who are least likely to say that climate change is a very important or the most important problem for the world today. This is also the group least likely to agree they have a moral responsibility to respond to climate change. This targeted mistrust exists against a background of very strong general support for Pope Francis as an environmental communicator. According to a before-and-after *Laudato Si’* study, 72% of Catholics trust Francis as a source of information on global warming.³⁸ Thus, despite generally robust support for Pope Francis, and a very strong tendency

³⁷ Mark M. Gray and Jonathon L. Wiggins, “Catholics’ Opinions about Faith and Science,” Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, Fall 2017, www.cara.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/CARA_Fall2017_Special-Report_FaithScience-FINAL.pdf.

³⁸ Edward Maibach, Anthony Leiserowitz, Connie Roser-Renouf, Teresa Myers, Seth Rosenthal, and Geoff Feinberg, *The Francis Effect How Pope Francis Changed the Conversation about Global Warming* (New Haven: Yale Program on Climate Change Communication and the George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication, November 2015), 8, www.climatecommunication.yale.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/The_Francis_Effect.pdf.

to see faith and science as compatible by regular Mass-goers, a small portion of these Mass-goers diverge specifically on the topic of climate change and fail to see climate change as a very important problem for which they have moral responsibility. This reversal of trust seemingly illustrates a felt sense of freedom to dissent from Pope Francis's ecological teaching, an individualist dynamic in the environmental sphere specifically among otherwise "traditional" Catholics (defined here as such by regular Mass-going habits).

CatholicEcology.net blogger William L. Patenaude rightly emphasizes that half the church cannot carry the ecological mission of the whole church. Starting within our own church, then, how might we begin to overcome our ecclesial ideological chasm? To begin, Patenaude identifies four strategies by which those from the "left" might more authentically engage those on the "right" around ecological issues: "1. Don't invite. Just show up. 2. Listen. 3. Communicate calmly and accurately—and be open to hearing the other's understanding of the problem, and their solutions. 4. Forgive."³⁹ Similarly, he discerns four insights that the "right" can learn from the "left" regarding ecology: "1. How to organize and act. 2. Begin with what is right and just. 3. Realizing that the left is right sometimes, too. 4. Learning from their mistakes."⁴⁰ In conjunction with the foregoing discussion and resources from climate psychologists, this seems to be an excellent way to begin healing ecologically (and spiritually) disastrous divisions within the church.

Additionally, those who seek to connect with more conservative Catholics on the issue of climate change should pay attention to their rhetorical tone. Research indicates that the "scientists say" story, the "crisis" story, and the "local impact" story can fail to communicate, fail to inspire participation and even backfire if they overwhelm people with negativity and despair. Others perceive the "crisis" story as deliberately and dishonestly overstated in order to manipulate them. They feel manipulated and resentful, and then resort to stereotypes and polarization: "That terrible story is what green wackos always say." This "naysayer response" is even more statistically significant than the correlation of political affiliation with environmental attitudes. Such intense rejection of climate apocalypticism may be at work to increase the phenomenon of particularized, ecclesial environmental distrust. So, I do not believe we should threaten people with doom—it does not work. This is not to say that we should downplay the gravity of climate

³⁹ William L. Patenaude, "Conversations With Conservatives: Reaching Across the Aisle May be Easier Than We Think," *CatholicEcology.net*, May 6, 2017, www.catholicecology.net/blog/conversations-conservatives.

⁴⁰ William L. Patenaude, "Learning From the Left: Overcoming Division Helps Everyone Build Their Better World," *CatholicEcology.net*, May 16, 2017, www.catholicecology.net/blog/learning-left.

change or avoid the sobering facts. Richard W. Miller, a theologian at Creighton University who works passionately on the issue of climate change, often says that if justice is indeed “a habit whereby a [person] renders to each one [her or] his due by a constant and perpetual will” (ST I-II, q. 58, a. 1), then informing people about the sobering urgency of climate change is a matter of intellectual justice. In this vein, and as referenced above, Pope Francis said to oil and gas executives and investors in June 2019, “Faced with a climate emergency, we must take action accordingly, in order to avoid perpetrating a brutal act of injustice towards the poor and future generations.”⁴¹ Clearly, the Holy Father is not pulling rhetorical punches in the face of climate change. The key, I think, is that he balances this prophetic witness with hope rooted in the Christian tradition. As he went on to say in that address,

There is still hope and there remains time to avoid the worst impacts of climate change, provided there is prompt and resolute action, for we know that ‘human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new start’ (*Laudato Si’*, no. 205).

Building on the concept of *Prophecy without Contempt*, we might therefore say that adequate emphasis on the urgency of climate change must involve prophecy with hope.⁴² Additionally, we need to emphasize trust and unity, and work to bridge differences to make care for creation the work of the whole church (not just the “liberal left”).

Informed by these reflections, and returning to the “big vision,” Pope Francis invites us to imagine what else we might do in the face of climate change. First, we must remember that change is the law of the world and that change is always possible. As Pope Francis writes, “The Spirit of God has filled the universe with possibilities and therefore, from the very heart of things, something new can always emerge” (*Laudato Si’*, no. 51). Fortified in our faith, we can expect that an amazing new future is possible and even likely. That telecommuting and walking lifestyles can replace sprawl. That concrete can be replaced by permeable plantings. That city streets can be planted with orchards and roofs with urban farms. That electric vehicles can take over in the blink of an eye. This might seem naïve, but the accelerating low cost and practicality of renewables has helped put the United States on track to meet the goals of the Clean Power Plan inaugurated

⁴¹ Pope Francis, “Address to Participants at the Meeting Promoted by the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development on the Theme: The Energy Transition and Care of Our Common Home.”

⁴² Cathleen Kaveny, *Prophecy without Contempt: Religious Discourse in the Public Square* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

by President Obama and supported by the USCCB, despite the policy's repeal by President Trump.⁴³ The move towards carbon neutrality is gaining momentum in key places.

As persons and communities of faith, we can draw on the renewable energy of belief and our Church's moral authority to catalyze this shift. Indeed, this kind of work offers vital hope for re-evangelizing many and restoring the moral credibility of the Church—especially among young people who are often deeply concerned about the climate but concurrently relatively skeptical about organized religion. Drawing on the Church's wisdom in this way is consistent with many people's expectations of what the Church is or should be: communities with sound moral orientation to which persons often go with an openness to examine their moral habits and a willingness to change their behaviors. Additionally, churches are communities in which norms spread and new practices can pass from one person and family to another. This is so because churches can provide companionship and encouragement of friends who share the same deepest core values and with whom one can have the sort of honest conversations previously discussed that can cultivate inspiration from home and the virtue of persistence. Moreover, congregational action can create relevance and awareness of issues among persons who might not otherwise encounter ecological topics. To this end, leadership is critical—believers must hear ecological reflections from the pulpit and read them in diocesan and parish publications to counter assumptions that environmentalism is superfluous, if not irrelevant to, faith. Furthermore, liturgy and celebrations centered on creation unify people and can help overcome the divisive nature of a perceived political basis to creation care. We also need to talk about morality without moralizing—the “green zealot” will, simply, turn people off. We must recognize that people do things differently; they have different personalities, different economic philosophies, different levels of scientific literacy. The most effective way to communicate is to emphasize solutions with some of the hopefulness from Jesus rather than the gloom and doom of John the Baptist.

As citizens, consumers, and Catholics, we need to participate in social and public life and bring our religious values into these spaces—both systemically and individually. We must support the Paris Agreement and the Green Climate Fund that finances clean energy technologies in developing nations, and we must put a price on carbon. We can drive and fly less. Eat local. Avoid a culture of waste. In doing all these things and more, we must be visible! We must put our light on top of, rather than under, a bushel basket, elevating models

⁴³ Yessenia Funes, “US on Track to Meet Obama's Climate Targets Despite Trump Killing Them,” *Gizmodo*, October 29, 2018, www.earthier.gizmodo.com/us-on-track-to-meet-obamas-climate-targets-despite-trum-1830080106.

of prophetic witness that can inspire others. From the perspective of climate change, though, the single most important thing we can do is buy renewable energy—for our homes, parishes, schools, chanceries, universities, medical centers, businesses, and everywhere else we live, pray, study, and work. Here again, the Catholic Church is in a unique position because we own and operate buildings in and across each of these social sectors. What a difference the United States Catholic community could make if, using Thomistic language, we actualized our potential to catalyze a structural shift away from fossil fuels toward renewable energy by collectively committing to enact Catholic energy ethics on and across all our campuses, hospitals, chanceries, monasteries, and more! If our energy decisions were guided by faith-based, long-term thinking rather than “the pursuit of myopic economic interests” and immediate, self-interested cost-benefit analyses that Pope Benedict XVI identifies as perpetuating environmental degradation—how I wish it were so!

To this end, the Catholic Energies program from Catholic Climate Covenant “provides turnkey project management expertise to identify, implement and *finance* renewable energy and energy efficiency projects” that can *save money* for Catholic organizations. As you have hopefully seen, Catholic Energies’ five thousand solar panel project with Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington is the largest solar project in D.C. and “will save the agency several hundred thousand dollars per year.”⁴⁴ Similarly, Catholic Energies completely financed the 440 panel, \$350,000 solar project at Immaculate Conception in Hampton, VA that will save the parish “14% on its monthly electric bill and is projected to cut parish energy costs by \$125,000 over 15 years”—all while mitigating 230 tons of annual carbon pollution.⁴⁵ And even if the Catholic Energies program did not provide complete financing for all projects, I have no doubt that Catholic communities could find ways to pay the up-front cost of projects that would mitigate climate change, care for creation and the poor, and save money over the long term—if they really wanted to. Community members could fast from expensive, carbon intensive meat and pool their savings to fund energy projects. This step would help raise project capital and itself help mitigate climate catastrophe by tapping into

⁴⁴ Hannah Natanson, “A Field in D.C. Will Soon be Home to 5,000 Solar Panels. It’s All Because of Local Catholic Groups—and a Message From the Pope,” *The Washington Post*, July 21, 2019, www.washingtonpost.com/local/social-issues/a-field-in-dc-will-soon-be-home-to-5000-solar-panels-its-all-because-of-local-catholic-groups-and-a-message-from-the-pope/2019/07/21/6b82223a-a7ff-11e9-a3a6-ab670962db05_story.html.

⁴⁵ Brian Roewe, “A Virginia Parish Switched to 100% Solar Power—and Paid Nothing,” *National Catholic Reporter*, July 1, 2019, www.ncronline.org/news/environment/virginia-parish-switched-100-solar-power-and-paid-nothing.

the reservoir of Christian spiritual practices and embracing an activity that Jesus himself practiced (cf. Matthew 4:2).

On an even more structural level, I believe we need to consider what we can do as investors—this is the lever that moves the world. The United States bishops insist that “investment and management decisions have crucial moral dimensions,” and these are lived out by persons and institutions through choices about pensions, church holdings, and organizational investments (*Economic Justice for All*, no. 92). Catholic individuals and organizations are called to invest and divest in accord with the teachings of our faith and so need fossil-free options congruent with the Church’s recognition that “climate change is a global problem with grave implications” and its call to support “developing renewable and less polluting forms of energy” (*Laudato Si’*, nos. 25, 164). This is unfamiliar territory for many, but we need to affirm the responsibility to and sophistication of values-based investing. We also need to recognize that Catholics have resources like the Catholic Impact Investing Collaborative to help soundly divest from fossil fuels and invest in a sustainable climate. And in my view, this action has important pragmatic and symbolic dimensions. Practically, wind and solar need institutional investors to launch new projects and do not always have access to the same capital as fossil fuel corporations. Divestment/reinvestment is therefore an important way to provide resources to those who are committed to the pursuit of societal carbon neutrality. This process can also be fiscally responsible: as the financial institution MSCI, Inc., has shown, fossil free funds can outperform those that include coal, oil, and gas.⁴⁶ So divestment/reinvestment can be understood as an exercise of fiduciary stewardship and strategic risk management. This is especially true as the world moves closer to carbon neutrality and bursting the so-called “carbon bubble” after which fossil fuel companies will likely be significantly devalued and existing investments will be viewed as stranded assets. Additionally, divestment/reinvestment is profoundly symbolic in a sacramental sense. Through this activity, the invisible reality of our love for the neighbor is made visible in the financial choices of Catholic persons and institutions. From a Rahnerian perspective, divestment/ reinvestment is a sacramental “real symbol.”⁴⁷

Most of all, we must find the time to attack these choices—and this may be the most profound test of our spirituality. This is where the rubber meets the road. We are the images of God, the imitators of the

⁴⁶ Patrick Collinson, “Fossil Fuel-free Funds Outperformed Conventional Ones, Analysis Shows,” *The Guardian*, April 10, 2015, www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/apr/10/fossil-fuel-free-funds-out-performed-conventional-ones-analysis-shows.

⁴⁷ Karl Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” *Theological Investigations*, Volume 4 (New York: Crossroad, 1973), 224–228.

self-giving love of Jesus Christ through creative sacrifice. And what is creative sacrifice? It must involve a reconciliation with finitude. We do not have unlimited time or energy to do everything we would like. Our freedom has moral and material limits, and these limits extend to the earth. There are moral and material limits to our use of the earth, to the function of the market, to the dominion of technology. Because of these limits, we must all sacrifice to bring about a new carbon neutral economy—not just coal workers. And, as a theological point, these limits are not new or a result of the ecological crisis. They are intrinsic to living rightly by the natural order of creation because human creatures have always been oriented to God's plan of salvation, to God's will for all to participate in the good things of life.

Pope Francis speaks about creative sacrifice in *Laudato Si'* when he says that conversion is rooted in "gratitude and gratuitousness, a recognition that the world is God's loving gift, and that we are called quietly to imitate his generosity in self-sacrifice and good works" (no. 220). We can and must choose how we use our time in order to engage in advocacy and participate in transformation. We must dare to sacrifice some things and some existing time commitments because we cannot do it all. We must collaborate, prioritize, and strategize to discern how we might act most fruitfully given our gifts, limits, and local realities. Still, the size of the crisis means we must always have scale in mind. For me, this means working to realize the dream that West Side Catholic New York will be 100% powered by renewable energy and that this energy will literally be a light on a bushel. Realization of a dream this big will require persons and communities to strategically and collectively sacrifice time, talent, and treasure. However, with this sacrifice comes the opportunity to cultivate friendships in solidarity, to do good for others, and to build a culture of life through each energy decision.

As Creator, even in ecological crisis, God is leading us forward. God's way of love calls us ahead, even through the overwhelming pain of knowing the suffering that exists around the world. We are being called to live a renewed faith in creativity and in God's eternal will as our loving and saving creator. We are being called to live a deeper hope in God's creativity and act through our social structures. We are called to live a deeper love that struggles to untangle ourselves from the structures that bind us to fossil fuels. To these ends, I believe the Holy Spirit is calling each of us to be a leader in this moment and in the multitude of our communities. Such leadership, though, must be grounded in and emanate from a rich spirituality which affirms Pope Francis's optimism that holds, despite the climate crisis, "All is not lost. Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new start ... to embark on new paths to authentic freedom ... to respond to [God's] grace at work deep in our hearts" (*Laudato Si'*, no. 205).

The great spiritual message of *Laudato Si'* is that while we do so, we can trust in God's closeness. So, as we go forth, we must be grateful for God's loving gifts—of creation and ourselves—and comforted that Christ is present to every being, surrounding and blessing it (cf. *Laudato Si'*, no. 221). As Francis concludes the encyclical, "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. *Praise be to him!*" (no. 245, emphasis in original). 

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