

# CREATURES



RADICAL ECOLOGICAL CONVERSION AFTER LAUDATO SI'  
Discovering the intrinsic Value of all Creatures, Human & Non-human

## Embracing and Emboldening Change

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### Introduction

It was a special privilege for me to attend the formal publication of the green encyclical issued by Pope Francis on June 18, 2015. *Laudato Si': On Care for our Common Home* was jointly released in the new synod hall of the Vatican by His Eminence Peter Cardinal Turkson of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and His Eminence Metropolitan John [Zizioulas] of Pergamon, senior bishop and theological spokesman of the Church of Constantinople, the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

From the beginning of their tenures, both Pope Francis and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew revealed their deep concern and compassion for creation. For twenty-five years, then, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has emphasized the spiritual dimension of the ecological crisis and even introduced the revolutionary concept of ecological sin by way of expanding our understanding of repentance from what we have hitherto considered purely as an individual wrongdoing or social transgression to a much broader, communal, generational and even environmental abuse of God's creation. And after his election, the pope assumed the name Francis, after Francis of Assisi, an unmistakable indication of his priority for and sensitivity to the marginalized, as well as to all of God's creatures, human and non-human alike.

Therefore, what I would submit to you, first of all, by way of providing a personal perspective for the Papal Encyclical on Creation Care, is that it was long prepared and long anticipated not only from an ecological perspective, but also in the context of ecumenical openness on the part of these two contemporary religious leaders, who are *profoundly and steadfastly committed to restoring communion* between their churches. I believe that it is providential that these two bishops are leading their respective churches at this critical moment. Their most recent "Joint Message on the World Day of Prayer for Creation" (September 1, 2017) was an "urgent appeal to those in positions of social and economic, as well as political and cultural responsibility to hear the cry of the earth and attend to the needs of the marginalized, but above all to respond to the plea of millions and support the consensus of the world for healing our wounded creation."

## **The Root of the Problem**

However, in order to discover the roots of our ecological crisis, it is helpful to undertake a journey to the sources, back to what theologians call “the beginning.” This would be a natural starting point for any Christian, Jew and Muslim speaking about the natural environment. However, the problem is that, whenever we recall the Genesis story, we traditionally focus on the formation of humankind by a loving God but typically forget the connection of human beings to the rest of creation. Whether this is a natural reaction or a sign of arrogance, the truth is that we tend to overemphasize our creation “in the image and likeness of God” (as recorded Genesis 1.26) and overlook our creation from “the dust of the ground” (as narrated in Genesis 2.7).

But why does our “heavenliness” seem to overshadow our “earthliness”? Most people are in fact unaware that Adam and Eve did not get a day to themselves in the Genesis account. In fact, they shared that “sixth day” with the creeping and crawling things of the world (Genesis 1.24-26). If nothing else, this means that we don’t have to conceive or converse about human beings in exceptionalist or exclusivist terms; our uniqueness or distinction lies simply in the peculiar – albeit profound – relationship that we have with nature.

For me, the creation story is a reminder to us that the redemption of humanity is inseparable from the transfiguration of all living things. When Noah saved the animals two-by-two, he wasn’t just saving species or specimens; he was saving an ecosystem! We betray and break the sacred covenant between our selves and our world when we ignore or impair the integrity of creation. Ecology is more than flora and fauna; it is more than crops and fish, or oceans and trees. It is predominantly – indeed, primordially – about the social nexus around all these, including ourselves. So the root of the problem is our self-importance, our self-centeredness, ultimately our arrogance that lacks any perspective beyond ourselves.

The truth is that we respond to nature with the same delicacy, the very same sensitivity and tenderness, with which we respond to any human person in a relationship. If we have learned (in our ecumenical encounters) that we should not treat people like things, it is time that we learn (in our ecological awareness) not to treat even things like mere things. It is helpful and humble to recall that we enjoy a binding unity with all of God’s creatures and all of God’s creation.

## **A Fresh Worldview**

In order to change, we need a radically different worldview. It is ultimately all about our perception or image – Orthodox Christians speak icons – of creation. The value that we place on creatures, both human and non-human, invariably depends on the vision that we have of creation. The way we regard our planet inevitably reflects how we relate to it. We *treat* our world in a god-forsaken manner precisely because we *see* it in this way. Not too long ago, my elder son and I paid a routine visit to the optometrist. Alexander is not as meticulous as he should be with his eye care. So as he received his new prescription, I overheard his reaction: “Wow!” he exclaimed; “*that’s* what I’m supposed to see?” When *we* look at our world, what do *we* see?

Radically correcting our worldview – converting our ways – involves more than merely an intention or decision to think or act differently. Far too often, we are convinced that solving the ecological crisis is a matter of doing things differently, whether living more effectively or managing more sustainably. Resolving climate change in ways that promote consumption and waste will prove as compelling or constructive an approach as asking the iceberg to fix the

Titanic. We must be humble enough to recall, from time to time, that it is our “acting” that got us into this mess in the first place!

Such recognition plainly means that the logic that led us to our critical predicament cannot possibly be the same reasoning that generates its solution. In the words of Christos Yannaras:

This is what the environmental movements unfortunately do: they want to preserve the utilitarian logic of “development,” simply changing its evaluation of what is more useful from an egocentric, human point of view, so that it is no longer a mindless “exploitation,” but a well-reasoned (by rationalist and self-interested principles) “protection.” It is the same logic as that which was taught in [Sunday schools when I was young]: Don’t go to brothels to avoid catching syphilis! Personally, I believe that the destruction of the ecosystem cannot be slowed down or halted unless there is a change of attitude in us toward nature.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps this is why so many of us are in denial about climate change – whether claiming it as a hoax or assuming it can be resolved by more suitable or more sustainable lives. The truth is that we need more than climate action; the solution will not be discovered in climate solutions that slavishly adhere to our insatiable market logic. It is not just a matter of emphasizing geo-engineering or embracing anti-pollution measures, of fracking natural gas or genetically modifying crops, or even of intensifying nuclear or increasing solar power. The issue is not a more moderate and more palatable consumerism, or a more restrained and more controlled development.<sup>2</sup>

A much more radical response is required. We are not searching for ways to return to a comfortable, complacent lifestyle; we cannot simply persist in ways that led us here in the first place. How tragic it would be to conceptualize our future the way Richard Branson boasted to journalists that, if only we could go green for a while, then “we can carry on living our lives in a pretty normal way – we can drive our cars, we can fly our planes, life can carry on as normal.”<sup>3</sup>

Take food as an example. The reason people go hungry today is not the number of people in the world.<sup>4</sup> In fact, food – along with its corollary vices of greed and gluttony, as well as its concomitant sins of ignorance and indifference – comprises the most consequential factor in ecological exploitation and economic inequity. And the problem lies in the way we distribute food through the market as private poverty.

Paradoxically, then, ecological correction – let’s call that “radical conversion” – may not begin with environmental initiative or activity at all. It actually begins with ecological inaction or awareness. It is a matter of contemplation or vision, of *seeing* things differently.

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<sup>1</sup> See Christos Yannaras, *Metaphysics as a Personal Adventure*, Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2017, 120. [Translation modified.]

<sup>2</sup> The Club of Rome emphasized this in *The Limits to Growth*, New York: Universe Books, 1972, on pollution and population, food production and resource depletion.

<sup>3</sup> Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014, 232.

<sup>4</sup> I believe that overpopulation is a serious problem – a problem that religious communities, especially Catholic and Orthodox – are always reluctant to address. Food is essentially a problem of education, especially women’s education, whereby people can learn to be in charge of their nutrition (and, by the way, even their fertility). If there were fewer people on the planet, but the way we distribute food remained the same, the poor would still go hungry. See Raj Patel, *Stuffed and Starved: The Hidden Battle for the World Food System*, Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2012.

First, we must *stop* what we are *doing*. Then we will gain new “in-sight” into the world. And peering through such a radical lens, even foreign policy and economic philosophy genuinely *look* quite different; then, we can eventually abandon the urge for unbridled expansion and instead focus on the sustainability and integrity of all creation that we so desperately yearn.

### **Radical Conversion**

Needless to say, major changes in mindsets and worldviews are no more rapid in human societies than in natural settings. In fact, human beings are sometimes less prone to rapid conversion than geological fault-lines or tectonic plates are to sudden shifts. This is especially true of religious institutions and conservative movements, where acceptance or adjustment is “traditionally” sluggish, if not frustratingly stagnant. This is perhaps part of the reason that so much – sometimes unreasonable, even unrealistic – hope is placed on the shoulders of religious leaders, including Pope Francis and Patriarch Bartholomew. It was possibly the reason why the 2015 papal encyclical *Laudato Si’* was received with such fervor and resisted with such ferocity in religious and secular circles alike.

Yet everyone knows the devil is in the details. The Paris climate conference attendees returned to their home countries to face the reality that the politics and ideology remain deadlocked and convoluted. In the United States, “culture wars” unfortunately brand any seeming opposition to Christianity or association with either science or secularism – including issues related to climate change – in the same vein as evolution and abortion, as well as feminist and gay rights!<sup>5</sup>

I am convinced that part of the problem lies in fashionable, albeit misleading catchphrases. Take, for instance, the phrase “sustainable development,” which religious communities and established corporations today accept unequivocally and perhaps uncritically. Other phrases are still more deceptive, if not categorically dangerous. For example, what exactly does the expression “social entrepreneurship” entail or even mean? Or who wouldn’t flinch at the idiomatic label of “corporate responsibility”? Perhaps the most offensive of all is the tag “green growth,” so conveniently – and convincingly – adopted in commercial and corporate vernacular.

And, in this vein, from the perspective of the Christian gospel, I would attach similar caution to the phrase “environmental stewardship.” I have long been uncomfortable with the “managerial” undertones of the term “steward” – the conventional description of a more scriptural or sustainable lifestyle implied by the original Greek *oikonomos* or Hebrew *ben bieth*, both of which in fact imply more the state of “son-ship” and “servant-hood” than the act of ownership or control. Whenever we adopt the terms “steward” and “stewardship,” we should recall that they retain many of the controlling, conceited elements that lie at the very core of our problem. Speaking of ourselves as “stewards” or “custodians” may be as misleading as mistaken. Perhaps there are better alternatives that communicate and advance a worldview wherein all things are in God’s service, not ours – a culture where the intrinsic value of all things is appreciated and applied.

### **From Contemplation to Compassion**

So before we act, we should first refrain from any and all action. We should contemplate and meditate – on the way we see other people and other creatures, on the way we are living and

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<sup>5</sup> See Mark Stoll, “The Historical Roots of Evangelical Anti-Environmentalism,” *The Christian Century*, June 17, 2015.

what we are doing. If we are going to reverse the environmental crisis and change our lifestyle, we are called to radical conversion and transformation, a genuine change of mind and heart – the literal meaning of the Greek word for “conversion” (*metanoia*).

This stillness – at once ascetical and mystical – provides the sacred space for what Olivier Clément calls a “wondering and respectful distance” between our world and ourselves.<sup>6</sup> Human beings can keep nature “at a distance, at arms length, so to speak, in order to reflect on and transform it.”<sup>7</sup> Such a “distance” does not imply any separation, but rather the capacity for all creation to exist in itself and for its Creator, beyond and before any valuable or wasted services in our ecosystem. It is a “distance” that involves compassion and dependence, rather than consumption and depletion. It entails “sharing the same space” with all of God’s creation – the literal meaning of the Greek word for “reconciliation” or “forgiveness” (*synchoresis*).

There is a “cosmic liturgy” – to adopt the phrase of St Maximus the Confessor in the seventh-century – that includes all creation. This worldview inspires a new perception, where mosquito-infested salt marshes and sand dunes that block our view of the sea serve an invaluable purpose when storms approach. There is a radical asceticism involved in suspending our pre-conceived notion of how the world should be and a revolutionary mysticism involved in acknowledging that mother nature sometimes knows best. So we should learn to work with natural systems rather than seek to manipulate them.

This kind of radical conversion – understood as asceticism and mysticism – is neither a romantic option nor an easy way out. Our society needs critics and dissidents – it needs visionaries and prophets – because people “look but do not see! They hear but do not heed.” (Isaiah 6.9 and Matthew 13.14)<sup>8</sup>

In my understanding of the principle of radical conversion, the imperative of asceticism and mysticism implies more than simply living or living simply. It issues into compassion and concern for all people and all creation, to the last speck of dust. Ascetics and mystics lived frugally; but, above all, they cared about the way that they lived and about their impact on others. Radical conversion is not merely a matter of consuming less, although this too is an important part of creation care. Mind you, everyone in this room is guilty of consuming far more than we should, far more than we deserve, far more than so many of our brothers and sisters. Cosmic compassion involves listening to the needs of people and the planet; it includes caring enough to notice changes and consequences. It has more to do with breaking with convention and making right choices – in our personal lives and in our everyday interactions – rather than following a rigid script fabricated by the market economy. Or, to close with the Joint Statement by Pope Francis and Patriarch Bartholomew last September: “An objective of our prayer is to change the way we perceive the world in order to change the way we relate to the world. The goal of our promise is to be courageous in embracing greater simplicity and solidarity in our lives.”

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<sup>6</sup> Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*, London: New City, 1993, 141.

<sup>7</sup> Terry Eagleton, “Nature, Marx, and Badgers,” at Halki Summit II (Ecumenical Patriarchate, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> It is as if they have been smitten with Anton’s blindness, a disease named after an Australian neurologist, Gabriel Anton (1858-1933), a rare medical condition that results from stroke or trauma and brings blindness to its sufferers, who nonetheless are convinced they can see. The clinical diagnosis is called “anosognosia” – named by French neurologist Joseph Babinsky (1857-1932) – derived from the Greek word for “lacking knowledge about the disease.”