

## Groaning with Creation: ecological spirituality in *Laudato Si'*

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*In this sequel to his overview of Pope Francis' second encyclical in the August issue of Open House, an environmental engineer reflects on the spirituality it advocates.*

Pope Francis reportedly produced the first encyclical of his papacy, *Lumen Fidei*, by completing a draft that had been initiated by his immediate predecessor. *Lumen Fidei* was a conventional encyclical, addressed to the faithful, exhorting them to “recover the light of faith” (n. 4) as an indispensable tool for the “common good” (nn. 50-51), to bring hope to families (nn. 52-53) and to wider society (nn. 54-55). Amongst the many seeds for contemplation in *Lumen Fidei* we find the following (n.55): “... by revealing the love of God the Creator, [faith] enables us to respect Nature all the more, and to discern in it a grammar written by the hand of God and a dwelling place entrusted to our protection and care. Faith also helps us to devise models of development which are based not simply on utility and profit, but consider creation as a gift for which we are all indebted ...”

In many ways, *Laudato Si'* is an expansion of, and detailed reflection on, this fundamental insight. In contrast to *Lumen Fidei*, however, *Laudato Si'* is addressed not only to the faithful, but to “every person living on this planet” (n. 3). As Pope Francis himself notes, he is not the first pope to address an encyclical to the world beyond the church walls – Pope St John XXIII did just that in *Pacem in Terris* (1963), when the world was teetering on the brink of nuclear holocaust. Similarly in *Dives in Misericordia* (n. 15), Pope St John Paul II asked that those who did not share his faith might at least accept that his analysis was motivated by love for humanity. Yet Francis goes further: in what is surely a ‘first’ for papal humility (n. 62), he craves the indulgence of non-believing readers for including an explicitly theological chapter (*The Gospel of Creation*, chapter 2). We who count ourselves amongst the faithful should be very grateful for it, as it is a veritable treasury of biblical and theological resources for prayer and reflection. Another ‘first’ in the encyclical is the inclusion of a closing prayer (n. 246) formulated specifically for inter-faith use (followed by a final, explicitly Christian prayer). Given the global scale of the challenges confronted by *Laudato Si'*, the inclusion of prayer that any monotheist might use is a particularly appropriate and timely innovation.

To gain an overview of the ecological spirituality advocated in *Laudato Si'*, these two prayers are a very good place to start. They combine praise – evoked by wonder and gratitude – with pleas for healing and a change of heart, so that we come to “recognise that we are profoundly united with every creature” and hence act so as to “protect the world and not prey on it”. At the heart of the call to “protect life and beauty” is a commitment to the poor, “to rescue the abandoned and forgotten of this earth” who are so precious in God’s eyes. In the explicitly Christian prayer, the phrase ‘*laudato si'*’, which originated with St Francis of Assisi, is re-used as an antiphon at the end of each verse. The prayer addresses each person of the Trinity in turn, praising the Father as creator and loving indweller of all

creatures; the Son as both medium of divine creativity and partaker of earthly life, diffusing all creatures with his risen glory; and the Spirit, both as guide and accompanier for creation “groaning in travail” (Rom 8:22) and as the source of good will in human hearts. Then the distinctive insight of Christian revelation is highlighted: that the Triune God is a “wondrous community of infinite love”. It is this communitarian love which enables us to recognise God’s presence in all of his creatures, and to “feel profoundly joined to all that is”. This then, is the basis for an activism of love, directed not only towards the poor – long the focus of Catholic social teaching – but also “for all the creatures on this earth”. We are called “to protect all life, to prepare for a better future, for the coming of [God’s] Kingdom, of justice, peace, love and beauty”.

The word “beauty” is new to the lexicon of Catholic social teaching. Clearly, the concept of “beauty” has a distinguished devotional pedigree, from the psalmist’s exclamation that “the heavens proclaim the glory of God and the firmament shows forth the work of God’s hands” (Ps 19:1) to Gerard Manley Hopkins’ breathless assertion that “The world is charged with the grandeur of God. It will flame out, like shining from shook foil”. Yet nearly a century was to pass since Hopkins, moved by the scenic beauty of Loch Lomond, pleaded:

What would the world be, once bereft  
Of wet and of wildness? Let them be left,  
O let them be left, wildness and wet;  
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.

(*Inversnaid*, 1918)

At last, with this encyclical, Hopkins’ anguished plea has morphed from pious wish to formal teaching: Pope Francis is saying that God’s love should impel us to protect the beauty of creation. This is a striking avocation. Indeed, George Monbiot – not normally a great flag-waver for the Vatican – highlights this as the most important contribution of the encyclical: “Pope Francis reminds us that our relationship to the natural world is about love, not just goods and services”. There is a challenge here for environmental scientists and engineers, who have often felt obliged to venture out onto the slippery slope of defending nature on the grounds of the “ecosystem services” it offers to humans. In a battle over incommensurable values, money usually wins in the end. Yet as Pope Francis states, citing the German Bishops’ Conference, “where other creatures are concerned, we can speak of the priority of *being* over that of *being useful*” (n. 69).

Such love for creation is not to be mere sentiment. Rather “the ultimate destiny of the universe is in the fullness of God, which has already been attained by the risen Christ, the measure of the maturity of all things” (n. 83). Hence to profoundly respect all created things is to respect Christ. In a move that will be a catharsis for many, Pope Francis cites the contribution of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin SJ in support of this statement. He goes on to contend that “the complexity of the ecological crisis [is such that] solutions will not emerge

from just one way of interpreting and transforming reality. Respect must also be shown for the various cultural riches of different peoples, their art and poetry, their interior life and spirituality” (n. 63). Thus amongst an impressive array of quotations from doctors of the Church, as well as from conciliar, papal and episcopal sources worldwide , Pope Francis cites the Sufi spiritual writer Ali al-Khawwas (n. 233) – another first for an encyclical. Here in Scotland we can draw from the wellsprings of creation spirituality exemplified in the prayers and traditions of our Gaelic forebears:

<i>Nì bheil lus an làr</i>	There’s not a plant in the ground
<i>Nach eil làn d’ a thoradh</i>	That’s not full of his fruitfulness
<i>Nì bheil cruth an tràigh</i>	Nor a pattern on the beach
<i>Nach eil làn d’ a shonas</i>	That isn’t full of his joy
<i>Nì bheil eun air sgèith</i>	There’s not a bird on the wing
<i>Nì bheil reul an adhar</i>	Nor a star in the sky
<i>Nì bheil sìon fo’n’ ghrèin’</i>	Nor anything beneath the sun
<i>Nach tog sgeul d’a mhaitheas</i>	That does not praise his goodness
<i>Ìosa! Ìosa! Ìosa!</i>	Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!
<i>Ìosa! Bu chòir a mholadh</i>	Jesus! Let’s praise him!

(*Carmina Gadelica*, 14).

If we are to live up to our responsibilities and aspirations for a fairer and greener Scotland, we will need to make such prayers truly our own.

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