

Finding our Place in *Laudato Si'* 10 Years on

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Christian anthropology – that is, our understandings of what human beings are and should be – is often characterised by a fundamental tension: on the one hand, as creatures, human beings are an integral part of the physical creation; on the other hand, it has been said that we are also “pilgrims” or “sojourners” on this earth, destined for a more permanent, spiritual home. Ten years ago, in his encyclical *Laudato Si'* (“On Care for Our Common Home”) (2015), Pope Francis understood the need to address this tension when he stated, with characteristic directness, that “[t]here can be no ecology without an adequate anthropology” (LS #118).

Our current anthropological confusion, Pope Francis explains, has its roots in the fact that human beings “misunderstand themselves” when they “fail to find their true place in this world” (LS #115). As an example of this, Pope Francis points towards the “technocratic paradigm” of modern society, under which human beings deny their interconnectedness with other creatures and shared vulnerabilities, with the result that they then become “enthralled” with the mistaken possibility of “limitless mastery over everything” (LS #224). Under the spell of this enthrallment, the temptation arises for us to see humanity’s place as one where, to cite Pope Benedict XVI, “we ourselves have the final word”, “everything is simply our property” and “we use it for ourselves alone” (quoted in LS #6). As Francis perceives, the inadequacy of such anthropologies is inextricably connected to our failure to understand our true place within creation. This is why, for Pope Francis, ecology requires anthropology.

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Who or what determines our true “place” as human beings? For *Laudato Si'*, the answer to this question lies in God the Father, who in His loving tenderness “gives [every creature] its place in the world” (LS #77). This is because God’s love constitutes the “fundamental moving force in all created things” (ibid). Drawing on the Book of Wisdom (also known as the Wisdom of Solomon), Pope Francis affirms that every being belongs to God, who loves all things that He has created and endowed with life (Wisdom 11:24-26). This, Pope Francis claims, is “the basis of our conviction that, as part of the universe, *called into being by 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” (LS #89, emphasis added). To be “part of the universe is to have been lovingly “called into being” by God the Father.

While others may contend that humanity’s connectedness to

the rest of the world results from loveless physical processes, Pope Francis cites his previous apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), to stress that God, through His creative love, “has joined us so closely to the world that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement” (EG #215; cited in LS #89). In his encyclic sequel to *Laudato Si'*, *Laudate Deum* (2023), Pope Francis recalls this description of humanity’s place-in-relation to other creatures and insists that our “anthropocentrism” must therefore be “situated” (*locatum*) within the wider “family” of God’s creation (LD #67).

In locating humanity’s place with reference to the divine love which animates all of creation, Pope Francis is not of course unique. As *Laudato Si'* points out, this theological vision was poetically expressed by the medieval theologian Dante Alighieri in his description of “the love which moves the sun and the stars” (Dante, *Paradiso*, Canto XXXIII; quoted in LS #77). What are the implications of this theology for the human being’s “place” in the world? In his concluding prayer of the encyclical, “in union with creation”, Pope Francis petitions God with a potential echo of Saint Francis’ famous Prayer for believers to become “instruments” of God’s peace:

God of love, show us our place in this world
as channels [*instrumenta*] of your love [*affectus*]
for all the creatures of this earth.

Through God’s love, human beings are inextricably connected to the sun and other stars – which are *themselves* moved by the love of God. As creatures made in the image of God (*imago Dei*), moreover, human beings are called to be instruments of God’s will; that is, to be “channels” of God’s love towards themselves and the rest of His creation.

As the contributions to this *Nathaniel Report* commemorating *Laudato Si'*’s 10th year highlight, our environment today faces many challenges – from artificial intelligence, to the undermining of environmental stewardship by politically partisan understandings of personal “property”, “security” and “freedom”. In such contexts, we maintain that Pope Francis’ encyclical, together with the wider teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, continues to provide us with an ecology and anthropology that can itself only be understood with reference to a *theology* of God’s love in creation.

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