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THE SAINT PAUL SEMINARY SCHOOL OF DIVINITY
UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

Laudato si' and the call to ecological conversion: implications for Christian spirituality in a
technocratic age

A THESIS

Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Divinity

Of the University of St. Thomas

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree

Master of Arts in Theology

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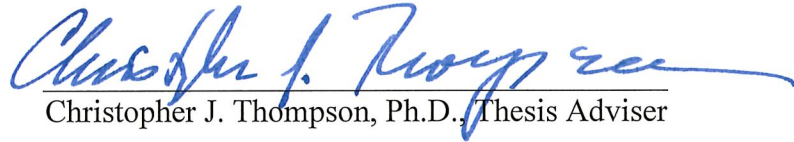
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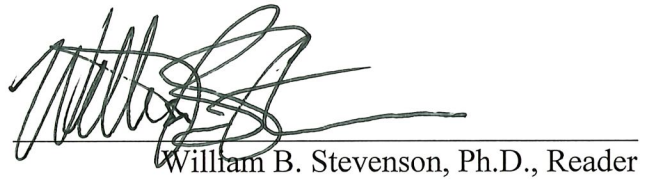
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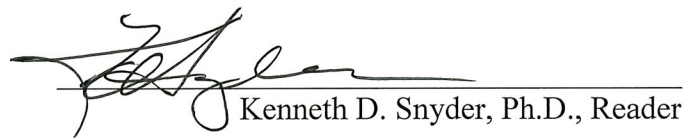
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This thesis by Sarah Spangenberg fulfills the thesis requirement for the Master of Arts degree in Theology approved by Christopher J. Thompson, Ph.D. as Thesis Adviser, and by William B. Stevenson, Ph.D., and by Kenneth D. Snyder, Ph.D. as Readers.


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Introduction: The “climate change encyclical?”

Laudato si’: On Care for Our Common Home has been largely received and is often referred to as “the environmental encyclical,” “the climate change encyclical,” and such. Headlines from the months immediately following the letter’s release provide a sense of the secular media’s first impressions: “The 5 Most Important Points of Pope Francis’ Climate Change Encyclical”¹; “Scientists say pope may be the key player on climate change”²; “Release of encyclical reveals pope’s deep dive into climate science”³; and so on. Similarly, voices from within the Church interpreted *Laudato si’* as primarily about global climate change. In *America Magazine*, Gerard O’Connell in his July 2015 article titled “Encyclical from Pope Francis welcomed as a global call to arms,” wrote, “His encyclical leaves little doubt: climate change is happening; it is mainly the result of human activity; and it is up to all people of good will to do something about it.”⁴ It seems that there was a strong tendency both within the Catholic community and outside of it to read *Laudato si’* in terms of its meaning for the climate change question. This was part of both its appeal and its controversy.

One reason that the encyclical has been celebrated as a significant step in the Church’s social teaching is the perceived opportunity it has created for dialogue and engagement with the modern scientific community. The Pope comments in *Laudato si’* that “a very solid scientific

¹ Christopher J. Hale, “The 5 Most Important Points of Pope Francis’ Climate Change Encyclical,” at *Time* (18 June 2015), at <http://time.com/3925520/pope-francis-climate-change-encyclical/>. Accessed January 2019.

² Gregg Zoroya, “Scientists say pope may be the key player on climate change,” at *USA Today* (14 June 2015), at <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2015/06/14/climate-pope-scientists-encyclical-paris-negotiations-environment/71056004/>. Accessed January 2019.

³ Anthony Faiola, Michelle Boorstein and Chris Mooney, “Release of encyclical reveals pope’s deep dive into climate science,” at *The Washington Post* (18 June 2015), at https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/how-pope-franciss-not-yet-official-document-on-climate-change-is-already-stirring-controversy/2015/06/17/ef4d46be-14fe-11e5-9518-f9e0a8959f32_story.html?utm_term=.45bb5cce42b8. Accessed January 2019

⁴ Gerard O’Connell, “Encyclical from Pope Francis welcomed as a global call to arms,” at *America Magazine* (6 July 2015), at http://link.galegroup.com.ezproxy.stthomas.edu/apps/doc/A436232048/ITOF?u=clic_stthomas&sid=ITOF&xid=7e88a2ba. Accessed January 2019.

consensus indicates that we are presently witnessing a disturbing warming of the climatic system ... Humanity is called to recognize the need for changes of lifestyle, production and consumption, in order to combat this warming or at least the human causes which produce or aggravate it”⁵—a comment that is seen by some as breaking papal silence on one of the most urgent social questions of our time.⁶ *Laudato si’* is, therefore, understood by a number of scholars as “an act of advocacy that brought the moral authority of the Catholic Church to bear on the climate crisis”⁷ and that put Catholic teaching in fruitful conversation with modern secular scientists.⁸

None of these necessarily represent a misreading of the encyclical—clearly an increased awareness of environmental issues and better earth stewardship were part of what Pope Francis was after in writing it. Neither does it seem as if the Pope was trying to avoid the issue of climate change, since he discusses it explicitly in *Laudato si’*. But it would be a gross overstatement to say that climate change was the main topic of the encyclical, or even that it features prominently. In other words, political, economic, and individual responses to the ecological crisis are just one small part of what the Church has handed down to the faithful in *Laudato si’*. They do not touch the core of its theological message, which has much less to do with global destruction and much more to do with the damage visited upon the human soul by modernity, and how Christians can

⁵ Pope Francis, *Laudato si’* (24 May 2015), §§23, 26 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015), 24, 26.

⁶ The apparent novelty of Pope Francis’ discussion of the environment should be held in balance with the extensive writings of his predecessors on this topic. See, for example, Pope Benedict XVI, *The Environment* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 2012); Pope John Paul II, General Audience (17 January 2001), at http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/2001/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_20010117.html. Accessed April 2019.

⁷ Miller, “Introduction,” in *The Theological and Ecological Vision of Laudato si’*, 3.

⁸ See, for example, Christina Z. Peppard, “Pope Francis and the Fourth Era of the Catholic Church’s Engagement with Science.” In *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 71, no. 5 (September 2015), pp. 31–39.

undo *this* harm in their own hearts and experience profound interior renewal, a process Pope Francis calls “ecological conversion.”

Laudato si' has inspired no end of conversations about what should be done on a large scale to combat ecological degradation, but less attention has been given to the heart of the environmental crisis: the human person’s disordered sense of self, her lack of awareness of her place within an ordered cosmos, her forgetfulness of the Creator, and thus her excessive reliance on technology to control the forces of nature. These, too, are key themes in *Laudato si'*. While the future of our planet is a real concern, Pope Francis is claiming that much more is at stake in the ecological crisis. The key issue for Francis is that “a certain way of understanding human life and activity has gone awry, to the serious detriment of the world around us.”⁹ Human greed, waste, and carelessness have indeed scarred and polluted the earth, but Francis is clear that it is not enough to change lifestyles and habits of consumption; the human community must first and foremost reevaluate its core beliefs about what it means to be human and what humanity’s relationship to the natural world ought to be. In a word, environmental destruction is a symptom, not the disease.

Laudato si' engages deep questions about humanity’s relationship to the earth as technology rapidly changes and grows more powerful, particularly how overdependence on technology damages the person’s ability to be in proper relationship to God. In the interest of focusing on the letter’s foundational questions and concerns, this paper will devote no time to environmental solutions, to specific consumption or lifestyle changes, or to how the encyclical ought to be incorporated into the Church’s body of social teaching. Rather, the goal of these

⁹ Pope Francis, *Laudato si'* §101, 73.

pages is to examine Pope Francis' notion of "ecological conversion" and how it represents a development in Catholic spirituality for the modern world.

In this paper, I will examine *Laudato si'* and a few of its key themes as they pertain to Christian spirituality and self-awareness. In particular, I will focus on the notion of "ecological conversion," by which, Pope Francis writes, the person's encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in her relationship with the world. It is, as already mentioned, an extension of the Catholic moral principle of solidarity to include not just other human beings, but also all of God's creatures, who belong to one ontological family. But more than just a new development in the Church's body of social teaching, ecological conversion has profound implications for Christian spirituality because it proposes a re-fashioning of the person's most deeply held convictions about God, creation, and herself. Its particular relevance is the present "technocratic paradigm," which Pope Francis names as one of the root causes of the ecological crisis. Ecological conversion is, for men and women who have been instructed by technocracy, a path of conversion and deep interior renewal.

In the first section of the paper, "The problem of technocracy," I will look at what Pope Francis says in *Laudato si'* about the technocratic paradigm, comparing his commentary on humanity's relationship to technology to Romano Guardini's *Letters from Lake Como*, which were written as a kind of social critique in the 1920s. Jorge Bergoglio was himself a reader of Guardini, so there is good reason to believe that the *Letters* influenced his own thought about technocracy. This section of the paper will be primarily expository, describing the dynamics at work in a technocratic world and how technocracy influences the human person. Unequivocal trust in the promise of technological progress, rather than in Divine Providence, is the hallmark

of the technocrat, who becomes, as John Cuddeback puts it, the “anti-steward.”¹⁰ Technocracy not only alters the way that human beings interact with nature, but it alters the way that technology works on the human mind and heart; it subverts the human person’s ability to live her call to stewardship and thus undermines her pursuit of the transcendent and holy.

The second section, “Ecological conversion and contemplation,” will take up the theme of a transformed *gaze*, which is given significant attention in *Laudato si’*. Deeper examination of the way in which Pope Francis employs the *gaze* motif suggests that it is through the contemplation of God’s beauty in the natural order that ecological healing can begin and the person can transform from a technocratic gaze to a joyful, contemplative one. I will begin this section with a look at an excerpt from Erazim Kohák’s book, *The Embers and the Stars: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Moral Sense of Nature*,¹¹ in which he offers a reflection on the relationship between human beings and the natural world in which they find themselves, employing day and night as allegories to the different postures that the person can have towards nature. Kohák argues that the “light” of technical or scientific knowledge is a much truer guide for humanity when it exists in healthy relationship to “darkness”—that is, when human beings are sober about technology’s limitations; when reverence for mystery prevents the pursuit of progress from becoming tyrannical. Just as Kohák argues in favor of a kind of “night vision,” one which enables the human person to see clearly her place within the cosmos and to discern her moral duties, so too in *Laudato si’* Pope Francis exhorts the Church to renew its gaze upon creation.

¹⁰ John Cuddeback, “Reflections of a Green Thomist on Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si’*.” In *Nova et vetera*, vol. 14, no. 3 (Summer 2016), pp. 735-44. 742.

¹¹ Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars*, 32.

Lastly, I will draw from the thought of Thomas Aquinas to further illuminate the discussion of ecological conversion. In particular I will look at his writings on beauty and on the effect of delight on the human subject. According to Aquinas, an encounter with beauty is not a quaint vignette in a person's life; it changes her. When she beholds beauty, she is given over to a sort of ecstatic surrender to it; she experiences an increased desire for it; her powers of reason are sharpened; she becomes more excellent. The Angelic Doctor's theology of beauty and delight can shine even more light into the present discussion of *Laudato si'* by articulating just *how* it is that beauty—in this case, the beauty of the natural world—leaves its mark upon the human heart. Aquinas gives us a glimpse into just what is going on in ecological conversion, particularly when that conversion occurs in the context of contemplation of God's beauty in creation. Learning to see again, cultivating a contemplative gaze on God's creation, thus involves for each person a sustained habit of intentional exposure to the natural world.

The main thrust of my thesis, then, is that ecological conversion is *not* first and foremost about changing external behaviors or about solving the problem of climate change. Rather, it is a work of healing that must begin in the heart; it is all about retrieving a contemplative gaze upon the created world, so that what has appeared as a dreary, problematic, and frightening world becomes once more “a joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and praise.”¹²

Chapter I: The problem of technocracy

Lessons from Lake Como

¹² Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, §12, 16.

In the first of nine short writings, written in the 1920's, which would later be compiled under the title *Letters from Lake Como*, the great twentieth-century theologian Romano Guardini reflected,

Look how in a landscape in which all the risings and fallings and measure and proportions came together in one clear melody, along with the loft bell tower there was suddenly a smokestack, and everything fell apart.¹³

Guardini lived in Germany but loved to travel to Italy to vacation in the lake region surrounding Milan and so became familiar with and enchanted by the landscape of Lake Como and the simple, unassuming way of life that he observed there.¹⁴ But over time, he noticed that that simplicity was giving way because human interaction with nature was changing. Where before, the rooftops blended effortlessly into the hillside and the bell-tower rested like a crown on its summit, now there appeared more aggressive structures. Factory smokestacks loomed over and against the natural beauty of the landscape, no longer accommodating to its contour and character. On the lake where he was fond of watching sailboats, which worked in harmony with the wind and sea, he now saw new motor-driven boats that cut sharply and indifferently through the waves.

These developments disturbed Guardini. He perceived that they were not mere changes in landscape or in external artifacts; they were also omens of a deeper, more radical transformation—and even destruction—of culture. Something as seemingly benign as a motorboat was in fact a matter of transition from a natural mode of human life to an artificially contrived one: “In the sailing ship we had a natural existence, for all the presence of mind and spirit in the situation. We had our being in a natural culture. In the modern steamer, however, we

¹³ Romano Guardini. *Letters from Lake Como: Explorations on Technology and the Human Race* (Ressourcement: Retrieval & Renewal in Catholic Thought), Kindle edition, pp. 121-23.

¹⁴ Bishop Robert Barron, “Laudato Si’ and Romano Guardini.” At Northwest Catholic (29 June 2015), at <https://www.nwcatholic.org/voices/commentary/laudato-si-and-romano-guardini.html>. Accessed May 2018.

are in an artificial situation; measured by the vital elastic human limits, nature has been decisively eliminated.”¹⁵ Human beings, in other words, were beginning to conquer nature rather than cooperate with it.

Guardini was moved, as he considered the contrast between what had previously been and what was appearing on the horizons of human history, to ponder and reflect on the implications that increasingly sophisticated technology might have on human life and culture. He sought to provide a constructive approach to the dramatic changes he saw taking place around him. This reflection became the occasion for the *Letters*, which are written in meandering, yet deliberate, prose. The letter entitled “The Question” is profoundly nostalgic, tinged with the sense of grief and loss. Guardini writes,

I saw machines invading the land that had previously been the home of culture. I saw death overtaking a life of infinite beauty, and I felt that this was not just an external loss that we could accept and remain who we were. Instead, a life, a life of supreme value that can arise only in the world that we have long since lost, was beginning to perish here.¹⁶

Clearly, as Guardini surveys the technological age in which he suddenly finds himself, his first instinct is to feel the loss of something very good, that “life of supreme value” that was only possible in a world now gone. He calls this life *Urbanitas*, “a city atmosphere, yet one in which a nobly shaped humanity can flourish.”¹⁷ It is the peaceful intersection between the laws of nature and human creativity, the society in which mankind overcomes the limitations of nature, but always respecting nature itself as something firm and immovable, “breast to breast” with its force.¹⁸ It is *Urbanitas* that passes away as human beings learn and exercise an ability not only to build on nature but also to circumvent it, substituting animal-driven vehicles for

¹⁵ Guardini, *Letters*, 175-77.

¹⁶ Guardini, *Letters*, 106-108.

¹⁷ Guardini, *Letters*, 118.

¹⁸ Guardini, *Letters*, 162.

automobiles and central heating for wood-burning stoves. Such technologies, Guardini notes, definitively alter the relationship of human beings to nature, and the change is so subtle that by the time it makes itself known, it is too late to go back. He writes, “A fluid line has been crossed that we cannot fix precisely but can only detect when we have long since passed over it – a line on the far side of which living closeness to nature has been lost.”¹⁹ Guardini thus reflects on *Urbanitas* as on cut flowers, which still hold the appearance of vitality but whose beauty is doomed to fade and expire. “I felt,” he reminisces about his arrival in Italy, “as though a great process of dying had set in around me.”²⁰

From *Urbanitas* to technocracy

Guardini’s hesitations about technology were not motivated by a desire to live in a state of raw, “untouched” nature. He was captivated by the way in which human creativity could complement nature and even elevate it; this elevated state of nature is where *urbanitas* happens. When human culture is permeated by a sense of relationship to the natural world—when “the human being and her projects are in vibrant, integrated relation with the world that surrounds her”²¹—that is *urbanitas*, and for Guardini, it is also the true meaning of culture. He describes *urbanitas* as human mastery over nature that is both strong and gentle, mastery that results in abundance and an overflow of new life:

How nature has been possessed and seen and understood here! How it obeys the hand that unconsciously knows it! How the trees grow up in most noble shapes without artificial means! How the landscape follows the will that forms it and commands that more and more of it become a dwelling place, a more vitally flourishing and responsive space for human life! The mastery is gentle. It is irresistibly strong, for it courses through the filled nerves of nature, but it is gentle.²²

¹⁹ Guardini, *Letters*, 172-73.

²⁰ Guardini, *Letters*, 105.

²¹ Barron, “*Laudato Si’* and Romano Guardini”

²² Guardini, *Letters*, 141-43.

Urbanitas is thus a fecund state of human stewardship over nature in which man inhabits the earth as a soul inhabits the body, a sort of *ars cooperativa* creating the conditions in which both humanity and creation can flourish. The goal of human culture, therefore, is not to separate from nature but rather to “indwell” it. Authentic human culture, while in one sense remote from nature, is also “so close to it, tied to it so elastically, that it remains natural, and natural juices may flow within it.”²³ For Guardini, culture and *urbanitas* are human realities woven into the fabric of nature, held taut between nature’s fixed laws and man’s creative power.

Nature is not something arbitrary, to be thrown off, but rather a guide in the task of building authentic culture. Authentic human life, therefore, is profoundly cooperative, a dynamic interaction between the finitude of the natural world and the upward call of the human person, whose magnanimity is continually tempered by deference to the rhythms and laws of the natural world. When human beings begin to disregard these laws, something vital is lost. Erazim Kohák uses the example of a starry night sky to describe this dynamic. He writes, “the stars do not insist: even the glare of a white gas lantern or the reflected glow of neon will drown them out. Only where humans respect the night can they see the wonder of the starry heaven as the Psalmist saw it.”²⁴ Kohák’s readers, like Guardini’s will quickly become accustomed to the language of cooperation and respect, the response to nature that these two thinkers see as fitting to mankind. “Culture,” Kohák writes, “is a matter of cultivation ... the yielding of respect, honoring the sacredness of all that is. The man of culture is one who cultivates, who honors the nobility of being.”²⁵

²³ Guardini, *Letters*, 152-53.

²⁴ Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars*, 31.

²⁵ Erazim Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Moral Sense of Nature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 91.

Letters from Lake Como was something of Guardini's prophetic warning to the human community that technology would have a strong influence on human culture. But what might be the impact of rapidly changing technology, of ever-increasing power to manipulate the laws of nature, on the human heart itself? Would it change the way that men and women think about the world around them, about their own nature, and about God Himself? Would it make Christianity less intelligible for them, more difficult to integrate into their daily lives? How might it impact their spiritual habits, their ability to engage in contemplation and prayer?

In 2015, nearly a century after Guardini penned his *Letters*, Pope Francis issued the groundbreaking encyclical *Laudato si': On Care for Our Common Home*. It seems that the world-to-come that Guardini envisaged looking out on Lake Como is the one Pope Francis saw looking out his window in St. Peter's Square. Those dramatic and even tragic alterations to human society portended by Guardini's reflections by the lakeshore have, according to the encyclical, now more or less become commonplace and are so familiar to the modern man or woman that they go practically unnoticed.

Even beyond *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis has devoted much of his papal teaching to a rather "Guardinian" cultural critique, working to correct the underlying miscalculations that direct modern thought and culture. The Pope has consistently referred to two ancient heresies—Gnosticism and Pelagianism—that he sees reemerging in modern thought. He connects Pelagianism with the radical individualism that "tends to see the human person as a being whose sole fulfilment [sic] depends only on his or her own strength,"²⁶ and Gnosticism he links to a relativism so subtle that it even cultivates "a model of salvation that is merely interior, closed off

²⁶ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), Letter *Placuit Deo* To the Bishops of the Catholic Church On Certain Aspects of Christian Salvation (22 February 2018), §2, at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20180222_placuit-deo_en.html.

in its own subjectivism.”²⁷ These two threads merge into a worldview distinct to modernity, one with dramatically different notions about the relationship of human beings to God, one another, and the earth. For one, this modern worldview “presumes to liberate the human person from the body and from the material universe, in which traces of the provident hand of the Creator are no longer found, but only a reality deprived of meaning, foreign to the fundamental identity of the person, and easily manipulated by the interests of man.”²⁸ The human person thus experiences a profound alienation from her own “embodiedness”—from the material universe in which she lives, and even her very body—and is therefore unable to perceive God’s presence in those realities. She loses a sense of her own interconnectedness with nature, which in Guardini’s time had been so intuitive.

Furthermore, modernity places a heavy premium on “progress,” understood as the ongoing march toward a utopian future. Its gospel is an autonomous and self-determining humanity, now able to eliminate suffering, poverty, illness, injustice, war, and even death. Progress in this sense is almost synonymous with advances in science and technology, which in recent decades have empowered mankind to control the forces of nature in ways no human society before could have imagined. And with more and more knowledge and power at its disposal every day, it seems there is no limit to what humanity can achieve, no obstacle we cannot eventually overcome.²⁹

This modern worldview, while seductive in its own way, is fundamentally opposed to Christian faith. Modernity has developed a practical presumption of the non-existence of God,

²⁷ CDF, *Placuit Deo*, §3.

²⁸ CDF, *Placuit Deo*, §3.

²⁹ It was out of this unshakeable confidence in the progress of humanity that the atheist humanist philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche developed his concept of the *Übermensch* (“Superman”), the race of select men and women who would carry humanity forward towards ever-widening horizons of possibility. See Henri de Lubac, *The Drama of Athiest Humanism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 11-12.

setting up humanity in His place as a radically autonomous, Promethean figure. A technological worldview—a worldview in which humanity’s ability to overcome through scientific progress takes on a salvific function—thus presents a tremendous obstacle for human beings to develop an understanding of their own identity as creatures; they will tend rather to believe themselves to be lords of creation and to cling to the idea that human initiative and creativity alone can bring about human perfection, establish peace on earth, and eliminate all the unpleasantness that accompanies the Fall. Inevitably, such a society, with this kind of reckless self-assurance, will place its hope not in God but in the future—that place where “progress” is realized—and crush anything or anyone who stands between it and its glorious future. Progress becomes its own religion “with a simple premise: except for the random detour, civilization instinctively changes for the better. And it’s up to us to get on board or get out of the way; to be part of the change or to get run over by history if we try to obstruct it.”³⁰ The person who operates out of these modern premises will have no scruples about discarding or even trampling anyone who stands in the way of progress—whether by dissent, by being deemed unfit for the new humanity, or simply by being a waste of resources. They see the people, principles, and institutions that obstruct progress as the true enemies, tragically forgetting that “the evil that is most damaging to the human person is that which comes from his or her heart.”³¹

The technocratic paradigm

The core of the technocratic paradigm is an attitude towards the world that is primarily technological, one that seeks to take hold of and dominate the forces of nature, even flying in the

³⁰ Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. *Strangers in a Strange Land: Living the Catholic Faith in a Post-Christian World* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2017), 157.

³¹ CDF, *Placuit Deo*, §7.

face of the natural order when it becomes inconvenient or disadvantageous to submit to it. The human person gripped by this paradigm sees in the natural world not something fundamentally good or intrinsically ordered—and certainly not something to which she owes any deference. For, as the twenty-first century phenomenologist Erazim Kohák observes, “if there is no God, then nature is not a creation, lovingly crafted and endowed with purpose and value by its Creator. It can be only a cosmic accident, dead matter contingently propelled by blind force, ordered by efficient causality.”³² Rather, she will see the world at best as little more than the raw material at hand for the realization of her goals and ambitions, at worst as an impediment to self-expression and an enemy of freedom. This represents a profound shift in the way human beings relate to their surroundings, as Pope Francis remarks:

Men and women have constantly intervened in nature, but for a long time this meant being in tune with and respecting the possibilities offered by the things themselves. It was a matter of receiving what nature itself allowed, as if from its own hand. Now, by contrast, we are the ones to lay our hands on things, attempting to extract everything possible from them while frequently ignoring or forgetting the reality in front of us.³³

Francis, in step with Benedict XVI before him, both point to this false sense of dominion—the idea that nature is raw material that we can manipulate at will—as the underlying cause of environmental degradation.³⁴ Both pontiffs contrast the modern tendency to have a “confrontational relationship” with nature³⁵ with a relationship marked by respect and

³² Erazim Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Moral Sense of Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 5.

³³ Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, §106, 76.

³⁴ Here *Laudato si'* is in strong continuity with Pope Benedict XVI, who wrote in his encyclical *Caritas in veritate*, “it is ... necessary to reject the ... position, which aims at total technical dominion over nature, because the natural environment is more than raw material to be manipulated at our pleasure; it is a wondrous work of the Creator containing a “grammar” which sets forth ends and criteria for its wise use, not its reckless exploitation. Today much harm is done to development precisely as a result of these distorted notions.” See Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical on Integral Human Development in Charity and Truth *Caritas in veritate* (29 June 2009), §48, at http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html. Accessed January 2019.

³⁵ Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, §106, 76.

cooperation. In an age ever more enamored with the seemingly unlimited promise of technology, Benedict and Francis warn that this cooperative relationship can quickly and easily wither out of existence, leaving in its place something remarkably non-human—something not intended for the human heart at all, which would be destructive not only to the externals of culture but also to the interior life of communion with the Creator.

The Catholic Church has never condemned, and never will condemn, scientific and technological progress *per se*. In fact, the Tradition is clear that God blesses technological advances because men and women can use technology to more perfectly bring about His will in the world, as the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church states:

The results of science and technology are, in themselves, positive. ‘Far from thinking that works produced by man's own talent and energy are in opposition to God's power, and that the rational creature exists as a kind of rival to the Creator, Christians are convinced that the triumphs of the human race are a sign of God's grace and the flowering of His own mysterious design.’³⁶

It is therefore clear that humans are called to use technology to exercise dominion over the forces of nature and leave behind an integrally higher quality of life.³⁷ Such creativity and resourcefulness, especially in the face of challenges and limitations, are a necessary part of human identity. They are a legitimate use of human intelligence that expresses the dignity of the human person and her being made in God’s image. Furthermore, the logic of domination is inherent to technology and therefore not intrinsically disordered, since an appropriate exercise of dominion is “in tune with” nature, with an implicit awareness of both nature’s potential and its limitations.

³⁶ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church*. (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2004), 457.

³⁷ Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, §194, 130.

But, as Pope Francis notes in *Laudato si'*, technology is not morally neutral, either. It necessarily carries forward a moral vision because it determines what kind of society human beings will create, through both individual and collective choices.³⁸ On the one hand stands the possibility that human beings can use technology to unfold the Creator's plan, seek the advantage of other men and women, and contribute to the realization in history of the divine plan.³⁹ On the other hand is the frightful prospect that, if "we fail to set limits on ourselves in order to avoid the sufferings of others or the deterioration of our surroundings,"⁴⁰ humanity will become slaves of technology, rather than its stewards. Disorder occurs, then, when the logic of domination also becomes the logic that governs *use* of technology, when domination over the forces of nature—rather than a more human way of life—become the principle that directs human activity. This state of bondage to technology, the loss of *urbanitas* that Guardini foretold, is what Pope Francis calls the "technocratic paradigm."⁴¹

Without a stable ethical framework to shape the use of technology, it is hard to set responsible limits; it is all too easy to forget that while better science and technology can facilitate authentic human development, it can never guarantee it.⁴² The logic of technology is seductive and, if unchecked, easily starts to dominate everything. As humanity finds itself with more and more power at its disposal, human beings can easily start to think that technology can solve all society's problems—not just material problems, but social and spiritual problems as well. Any increase in power is now unquestioned as "progress,"⁴³ since the new doctrine teaches

³⁸ Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, §107, 77-78.

³⁹ Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* (7 December 1967), §34, at http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html. Accessed June 2018.

⁴⁰ Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, §208, 140.

⁴¹ Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, §106-14, 76-82.

⁴² Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, §36.

⁴³ Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, §105, 75.

that technological solutions not only can but will—and must—cure all disease, put an end to all war and poverty, defeat all suffering and even eliminate death. This kind of misplaced trust in the promise of technological progress rather than in Divine Providence, the tendency “to take rather than to receive, to assert power rather than to receive and steward a gift,” is the hallmark of the technocrat. Technocracy is, as John Cuddeback puts it, “anti-stewardship.”⁴⁴ It not only has to do with the ways in which humans operate on the natural world, but also and more importantly with the ways in which technology begins to operate on the human person in harmful ways, the ability that technology has to disfigure the human mind and heart, subverting her ability to live her call to stewardship and thus undermining her pursuit of the transcendent and holy.

***Laudato si'*: a call to renewal**

Pope Francis states unequivocally in *Laudato si'* that neither he nor anyone else in the Church is suggesting we go back to the Stone Age. Again, technology and Christian faith are not inherently at odds. Rather, Francis exhorts the human community to “slow down and look at reality in a different way, to appropriate the positive and sustainable progress which has been made, but also to recover the values and the great goals swept away by our unrestrained delusions of grandeur.”⁴⁵ It does not require much thought to recognize that our newfound command over the forces of nature can be used “either for man’s progress or for his degradation.” Power of such unprecedented magnitude cannot be wielded thoughtlessly; its introduction into society must be accompanied—and even preceded—by serious, sustained

⁴⁴ John Cuddeback, “Reflections of a Green Thomist on Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si*.” In *Nova et vetera*, vol. 14, no. 3 (Summer 2016), pp. 735-44. 742.

⁴⁵ Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, §114, 82.

reflection on its proper use. Just because something is possible does not always mean that it is good.

The Pope, therefore, has issued an invitation in *Laudato si'* to the entire human family to a sustained examination of its fundamental beliefs about God, creation, and the human person, and how those beliefs translate into conviction about the human person's basic identity and her call to serve as a steward of creation. He makes a clear connection between awareness and renewal, suggesting that as awareness sharpens, convictions will follow, and in turn choices and lifestyles will change accordingly:

Many things have to change course, but it is we human beings above all who need to change. We lack an awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone. This basic awareness would enable the development of new convictions, attitudes and forms of life. A great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge stands before us, and it will demand that we set out on the long path of renewal.⁴⁶

It is no coincidence, then, that the language of gaze and contemplation appears throughout the text of *Laudato si'*. Interior renewal, for Pope Francis, goes hand-in-hand with a renewal of the human person's gaze, that is, her ability to see reality as God sees it.

Chapter II: Contemplation and ecological conversion

The call to a renewed gaze

Gaze is an important theme in *Laudato si'*,⁴⁷ appearing in four distinct contexts: first, the dark and fragile gaze of fallen men and women⁴⁸; second, the serene and attentive gaze of

⁴⁶ Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, §202, 137.

⁴⁷ Here the use of *gaze* is not intended to evoke other contemporary theories of *the gaze*, (e.g. the male gaze, the feminine gaze, the gaze within power structures, etc.) For the purposes of this discussion, these theories should be bracketed; *gaze* for Pope Francis in *Laudato si'* will instead be discussed in terms of its significance within the dynamics of contemplation, self-awareness, and personal conversion.

⁴⁸ Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, §239, 158.

Jesus⁴⁹; third, the renewed, eschatologically-focused gaze of transformed humanity⁵⁰; fourth, the gaze of Francis of Assisi, permeated with awe and wonder.⁵¹ Deeper examination of the way in which Pope Francis employs this theme suggests that it is through the contemplation of God's beauty in the natural order that ecological healing can begin and the person can transform from a technocratic gaze to a joyful, contemplative one. Again, the environmental crisis is first of all a human crisis—one that must be solved from the inside, out.

Living under the influence of sin, the human person's gaze on the world is so partial, dark, and fragile, that she cannot readily contemplate the mystery enfolded in each being. She is unable to perceive the interconnectedness of creation or her own proper place within it, tending to judge only by the standards of efficiency, outcome, and personal gain. Held captive by the technocratic imperative, she is blind to the fact that “the world is a joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and praise.”⁵² She gropes blindly through a world of wonders, as Christopher Thompson reflects in his book *The Joyful Mystery*: “I am the steward of the Divine jeweler's shop that is the world, and were I left to my own devices amidst my chronic glaucoma, I would despair at the futility of my effort.”⁵³

By contrast, the gaze of Christ is clear, sharply attuned to the beauty and worth of each created thing. He is “in constant touch with nature, lending it an attention full of fondness and wonder,”⁵⁴ and He continually invites His followers to grow in that same contemplative watchfulness. As Christians become more closely conformed to the Lord, they quite literally

⁴⁹ Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, §96-100, 69-71.

⁵⁰ Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, §100, 71.

⁵¹ Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, §11, 15.

⁵² Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, §12, 16.

⁵³ Christopher Thompson, *The Joyful Mystery: Field Notes toward a Green Thomism* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2017), 93.

⁵⁴ Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, §97, 69.

begin to see differently, with the eyes of Christ. Moreover, they also learn to see Christ, the *Logos*, permeating all of creation with His own presence and action. The Christian is thus granted a supernatural vision, a divine gaze. In the light of the mystery of Christ, she can now see how “the very flowers of the field and the birds which his human eyes contemplated and admired are now imbued with his radiant presence.”⁵⁵

Again, Pope Francis insists that this new way of seeing is not sentimentalism or “naïve romanticism.” Rather, ecological conversion is a paradigm shift that touches the person on every level, not least of all in the choices that she makes, because it involves a new self-awareness as a being-in-relationship with creation, neighbor, and God. As she becomes ever more alive to the true state of affairs— God’s cosmic sovereignty and her creaturely status, her utter dependence on God and others, her interconnectedness with the earth and all dwelling on it—, she will no longer be held captive to the modern gospel of human progress and autonomy. Her life, including her lifestyle, will change. This, the bursting-forth of a new way of life from a transformed heart, changed forever because it has—at last!—received its sight, is the heart of ecological conversion. Only a person with eyes open to the mystery of being and, at the same time, to the wise design of creation, can live a transfigured life of stewardship, which is above all else a life of response to having received a precious gift from the Creator. An open, awe-struck gaze upon the created world is thus a vigorous antidote to the technocratic paradigm; it conforms the human being to Christ Himself and becomes for her a path of holiness. She cares for the earth, not out of a guilt imposed by political agenda or fear of catastrophe, but out of love and

⁵⁵ Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, §100, 71.

gratitude for having been entrusted with something so good. “If we feel intimately united with all that exists,” Pope Francis writes, “then sobriety and care will well up spontaneously.”⁵⁶

Furthermore, this renewal is even more potent when grounded in a biblical vision of the cosmos and the convictions rooted in Christian faith: that God created this world with “an intrinsic order and dynamism that human beings have no right to ignore”; that every creature reveals an aspect of God and speaks a message of God’s creativity and generosity; that Christ the *Logos* has gathered all of creation in Himself and “is intimately present to each being, surrounding it with his affection and penetrating it with his light.”⁵⁷ Added to this are all the parables and teachings of Jesus recorded in the Gospels in which He used comparisons to the natural world, a treasury from which every Christian who is even marginally familiar with grapevines or sparrows or mustard seeds can continuously draw inspiration and spiritual strength.

Night vision: Erazim Kohák on nature and *techne*

Pope Francis writes in *Laudato si'*, “rather than a problem to be solved, the world is a joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and praise.”⁵⁸ He, too, sees an urgent need to recover a sense of mystery about the world, lest the impulse to abolish all darkness rob the human heart of the all-too-necessary vulnerability of darkness, the gift of the night. Erazim Kohák’s insight about the relationship between knowledge and wonder in his book, *The Embers and the Stars: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Moral Sense of Nature*,⁵⁹ can illuminate Pope Francis’ call to a more “Franciscan” way of seeing the world in *Laudato si.'*

⁵⁶ Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, §11, 16.

⁵⁷ Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, §221, 147.

⁵⁸ Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, §12, 16.

⁵⁹ Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars*, 32.

“Dusk is the time of philosophy,” Kohák remarks in the book’s chapter called *The Gifts of the Night*, in which he offers a reflection on the relationship between human beings and the natural world in which they find themselves, meditating on how the rhythms of day and night arouse different postures in the person towards nature. Daylight, he says, correlates with the attitudes of *techne*—work, technology, scientific inquiry, knowledge—while he assigns *poiesis*—poetry, wonder, radical vulnerability to Being—to the night.

For Kohák, the brightness of day disposes the human soul for *doing*. It is the time to seek specific knowledge of each thing and differentiate it from everything else. In the light of day, it is the individual character of each creature that stands out. In daylight, objects appear in their “insistent individuality” and can thus be studied in isolation from its relationships to other things. The light of day thus enables the kind of knowledge that makes technological progress not only possible but also very desirable, shedding light on both challenges and their potential solutions.

When night falls, on the other hand, differences blend and the gathering darkness blankets the earth, enfolding all things into a still, silent unity. “Explaining, making, those are the priorities of the day which conceal the world around us. In the dusk of a forest clearing, other things matter—to respect first, then to understand, only then, perhaps, to explain.”⁶⁰ Night, for Kohák, does not just put an end to the day’s work. It heals. It reconciles. It is profoundly relational; night’s liquid darkness reveals “a stilled world of hidden kinships.”⁶¹ Elsewhere he observes the relationship between darkness and contemplation, when he writes: “The insistent multiplicity of daylight fades to triviality before the overwhelming vastness of the One. Nothing

⁶⁰ Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars*, 31.

⁶¹ Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars*, 31-32.

is left to do, to say: a human can only stand in silent awe and thanking devotion before the immense wonder of it all.”⁶²

Kohák never objects to man’s technical approach to the day. Yet he proposes that the fading twilight that follows, and which melts into night, ought to inspire a different posture in the human heart, the posture of “silent awe and thanking devotion.” There is—or should be—a space carved out in the life of each human person into which a *doing* attitude is forbidden passage, a sanctuary reserved only for *being*, for acceptance and docility to *what is*. It is the presence or absence of daylight, in Kohák’s allegory, that defines the contours of man’s situation before nature and the mystery of Being. The necessary balance between *techne* and *poiesis*, furthermore, is not some looming task of the individual but is providentially built into the rhythms of day descending into night, night giving way to day. Both are necessary. Kohák writes,

We are not only creatures of the light. We are creatures of the rhythm of day and night, and the night, too, is our dwelling place. Darkness enriches even our days. Pure light would blind us: our perception depends on discerning contrasts, the interplay of light and darkness. Without the rhythm of day and night, of going forth and resting, our lives would flatten out in unchanging monotony and our philosophy in an undifferentiated *techne*. It is good, deeply good, to kindle a light in the darkness, though not against it. There must be also night. Philosophy needs to recover the darkness that comes not as a menacing stranger but as a gift of the night ...⁶³

A few points are worth considering here. First, Kohák suggests that the light of technical or scientific knowledge is a much truer guide for humanity when it exists in healthy relationship to darkness—that is, when human beings are sober about *techne*’s limitations; when reverence for mystery prevents the pursuit of progress from becoming tyrannical. Darkness is not here equated with ignorance, but with a higher register of knowing, one that enables the person to lie down in

⁶² Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars*, 32.

⁶³ Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars*, 34.

peace at the end of a day's labor, no matter how incomplete or imperfect. Technology then takes its proper place, held in check by the humility to recognize that not everything can be grasped by the human intellect. There are aspects of reality that can be contemplated, but never fully comprehended.

In light of Kohák's work, it is clear that a correct response to Francis' call to contemplate the world as a joyful mystery must be more than naïve sentimentalism about "nature." Rather, the human person must learn to soberly accept limitations, dependency, and vulnerability when faced with the world around her. Kohák wisely names those very things about night that frighten us and appear to us as enemies—darkness, solitude, pain—the "paradoxical gifts" of the night.⁶⁴ Rejecting the modern paradigm that insists on control and comfort and paradoxically embracing the limits of human nature "not as a menacing stranger but as a gift" is essential to overcoming the tyranny of technocracy.

Second, it is significant that dusk, the time of interplay between light and darkness, is for Kohák the place where philosophy and moral discernment take place. It is neither in the harsh light of day nor in the thick silence of night that evaluation of right and wrong, of "ought" and "ought not," take place, but in the brief admixture of light and darkness that happens at nightfall. As daylight fades and the stars begin to appear against the darkening sky and the landscape begins to blur into a single silhouette, the true relationship between things begins to appear in the penumbra. Stark contrast begins to blend, but has not yet eliminated distinctions. Dusk, then, is a privileged glimpse into the interconnectedness of the created order, and it is then most of all that the *oughts* of human life and society can be discerned. Amid the gathering darkness, man is able

⁶⁴ Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars*, 40.

to perceive “the moral sense of life suspended between the poles of the speechless wonder of Being and the empirical datum of beings.”⁶⁵

It is another crucial insight into the message of *Laudato si'*, an enchanting image that conveys a profound truth: that science and technology cannot be their own guide for moral action. The principles that guide moral decision-making emerge from a sense of wonder and intellectual “darkness” before the mystery. Pope Francis describes in the encyclical how purely technological thinking is too narrow in scope to address ethical questions, saying that it leads to the fragmentation of knowledge and impartial solutions to complex problems, which involve philosophical and social dimensions that go unaddressed under *techne*'s microscope lens.

The specialization which belongs to technology makes it difficult to see the larger picture. The fragmentation of knowledge proves helpful for concrete applications, and yet it often leads to a loss of appreciation for the whole, for the relationships between things, and for the broader horizon, which then becomes irrelevant ... A science which would offer solutions to the great issues would necessarily have to take into account the data generated by other fields of knowledge, including philosophy and social ethics; but this is a difficult habit to acquire today. Nor are there genuine ethical horizons to which one can appeal. Life gradually becomes a surrender to situations conditioned by technology, itself viewed as the principal key to the meaning of existence.⁶⁶

Interestingly, he notes that modern thought and culture is such that the necessary moral attitude towards nature is difficult to cultivate. Yet, to do exactly that—to unravel the modern technocratic paradigm, to foster a transformative encounter with creation, to restore true sight to the human person even in the midst of a technology-saturated world—is precisely that renewal that Pope Francis names “ecological conversion,” and that which he is calling forth from within the Church in *Laudato si'*. Just as Kohák argues in favor of a kind of “night vision,” one which enables the human person to see clearly her place within the cosmos and to discern her moral duties, so too in *Laudato si'* Pope Francis exhorts the Church to renew its gaze upon creation.

⁶⁵ Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars*, 33.

⁶⁶ Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, §110, 79-80.

Learning to see again

Technological saturation tends to atrophy the human capacity for awe and appreciation. The human person, immersed as she is in a world of “visual noise,” is unable to see clearly, as Josef Pieper notes: “the average person of our time loses the ability to see because *there is too much to see!*”⁶⁷ No longer fine-tuned to the upward call of beauty all around her, she is blind to the hand of the Creator outstretched to her. She therefore has to learn to look again, to re-open herself to the beauty and goodness of creation, so that what has become ordinary and even mundane might once again become a source of wonder.

Ecological conversion thus involves a re-awakening of the senses to God’s beauty in the natural world; it is the transformation of the human gaze to be more like that of Saint Francis of Assisi, who fell ever more in love with God through a continual encounter with creation. In *Laudato si’*, Pope Francis notes how “whenever he would gaze at the sun, the moon or the smallest of animals, he burst into song, drawing all other creatures into his praise. He communed with all creation . . .”⁶⁸ This sort of transformed gaze is at the heart of *Laudato si’*—indeed, the Pope is clear that learning to see the beauty and goodness of the earth, to wonder at God’s design etched into its contours, to honor and cooperate with that design, is a prerequisite for any lasting change to happen. Pieper again:

The capacity to perceive the visible world “with our own eyes” is indeed an essential constituent of human nature. We are talking here about man’s essential inner richness—or, should the threat prevail, man’s most abject inner poverty. And why so? To *see* things is the first step toward that primordial and basic mental grasping of reality, which constitutes the essence of man as a spiritual being.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Josef Pieper, *Only the Lover Sings: Art and Contemplation* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 32.

⁶⁸ Pope Francis, *Laudato si’*, §11, 15.

⁶⁹ Pieper, *Only the Lover Sings*, 34.

The threat of technocracy and the “visual noise” that accompanies its excessive analysis and data-collection is a threat to the essence of the human person. It decays her ability to be what she is, namely a spiritual being, a being that can contemplate reality with her own eyes.

And so the transformation must occur. She must learn to see again by forcing herself to pause before the beauty of creation, by revolting against her modern impulse to use, consume, and dominate. In C.S. Lewis’ *Out of the Silent Planet*, the protagonist experiences such a pause, albeit an involuntary one. The book chronicles the adventures of Dr. Elwin Ransom, a mendicant philologist, who through a series of events is drugged and kidnapped by two ambitious scientists, awaking to find himself on a spaceship *en route* to the planet *Malacandra* (Mars, as we later discover). As he is plunged deeper and deeper into space, a helpless prisoner, Ransom does not encounter the chasm of dark nothingness he suspected might await him there; rather, he is dazzled and enchanted to find himself swimming in an ocean of light:

Ransom, as time wore on, became aware of another and more spiritual cause for his progressive lightening and exultation of heart. A nightmare, long engendered in the modern mind by the mythology that follows in the wake of science, was falling off him. He had read of ‘Space’: at the back of his thinking for years had lurked the dismal fancy of the black, cold vacuity, the utter deadness, which was supposed to separate the worlds. He had not known how much it affected him till now—now that the very name ‘Space’ seemed a blasphemous libel for this empyrean ocean of radiance in which they swam. He could not call it ‘dead’; he felt life pouring into him from it every moment. How indeed should it be otherwise, since out of this ocean the worlds and all their life had come? He had thought it barren: he saw now that it was the womb of worlds, whose blazing and innumerable offspring looked down nightly even upon the earth with so many eyes—and here, with how many more! No: Space was the wrong name. Older thinkers had been wiser when they named it simply the heavens.

It is a moment of re-discovery for Ransom, a favored glimpse into reality itself. In this case, it is not that space has changed—not that it ever *was* an “utter deadness”—but rather that Ransom has now drawn near to the mystery and in that nearness he is rendered vulnerable to the beauty and majesty of the heavens, for which he no longer finds “space” an adequate descriptor, as Lewis so beautifully explains. In his forced retreat of captivity, Ransom regains his sight.

Lewis thus joins Kohák in articulating the limits of science and *techne*. Kohák accomplishes the task through philosophical inquiry, Lewis through imaginative storytelling, but the main thrust is the same: technical understanding can only take the human heart so far on the journey into communion with the mystery of Being, God Himself. There is a higher register, into which the person must embark: it is quickened by the person's openness to the unity and mystery of all things, her posture of vulnerability before Being, wonder and awe. This transfigured, ecological spirituality demands the cultivation of a contemplative gaze, a gaze that "... includes man's willing acceptance of the ultimate truth, in spite of the world's riddles, even when this truth is beheld through the veil of our own tears; it includes man's awareness of being in harmony with these fundamental realities and surrounded by them."⁷⁰

Technocracy blinds. It courts a false sense of entitlement to dispose of other creatures at will and makes the soul numb to both the wonder of creation and the devastation wrought on earth and neighbor by her own greedy caprice. But there is hope that she can receive her sight once more from the Lord, provided she disposes herself to Christ's healing touch—provided that she allows Him to transform her gaze. But how does she dispose herself? How does she make herself docile to this transformation?

Vincent Miller, in an essay on the spiritual and moral vision of *Laudato si*, argues that human effort is needed to cultivate a contemplative gaze. He writes, "[o]penness requires developing concrete skills of attention and perception. A 'serene gaze' is literally a way of seeing—open, engaged, attentive to creatures with whom we share the world."⁷¹ Ecological conversion, while fundamentally a work of God within the person's interior life, also relies on a

⁷⁰ Pieper, *Only the Lover Sings*, 24.

⁷¹ Vincent J. Miller, "Integral ecology: Francis's spiritual and moral vision of interconnectedness," in *The Theological and Ecological Vision of Laudato Si': Everything is Connected*, ed. Vincent J. Miller (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark), 17.

person's chosen habits of thought and action, on repeated behaviors that make her open and vulnerable to the in-break of being, to rapture and enchantment before the beauty of God.

Chapter III: Beauty, delight, and conversion in Aquinas

The notion that creation's beauty has the power to stir the human heart to conversion is not new to the Christian tradition. Nature images abound throughout the pages of Scripture; the Psalmist writes, "the heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork," continuing on to speak of the silent but ever-present declaration of God's glory, written in the book of creation (Ps. 19:1). Saint Augustine of Hippo famously reflected on the way in which creation, in its own way, evangelizes the person who encounters its beauty:

Question the beauty of the earth, question the beauty of the sea, question the beauty of the air, amply spread around everywhere, question the beauty of the sky, question the serried ranks of the stars, question the sun making the day glorious with its bright beams, question the moon tempering the darkness of the following night with its shining rays, question the animals that move in the waters, that amble about on dry land, that fly in the air ... They all answer you, 'Here we are, look; we're beautiful.' Their beauty is their confession. Who made these beautiful changeable things, if not one who is beautiful and unchangeable?⁷²

Augustine points out the dynamic at work between a person who "questions" the beauty of the earth and the earth itself, confessing God's unchanging beauty, pointing the human soul beyond created things towards the One who created them. Creation's confession "we are beautiful" thus becomes a point of departure for the person to encounter God. The beauty of the earth, therefore, plays an important role in the process of becoming open to the divine; the human instinct to "question" what is beautiful—to be moved by beauty—becomes the vulnerability in her defenses that allows the beautiful Lord to invade. Put differently by contemporary scholar David Cloutier, "authentic religious experience is not of *control*, but of *reception* and connection, of tapping into

⁷² Augustine, *Sermons*, 241, Easter, c. 411 A.D.

something larger and wiser. Such receptivity to God can be found through receptivity to nature's bewitching and beguiling beauty."⁷³

Saint Thomas Aquinas, too, wrote about the invading power of beauty. Some have discerned in the Angelic Doctor's writings a very close identification between Beauty and Goodness as Transcendentals.⁷⁴ But that identification carries with it a qualification: Goodness has to do with human appetite, Beauty with knowledge. This is an important distinction. The Good is the object of desire in the human person, and desire necessarily implies incompleteness, a "not-yet." The Beautiful, on the other hand, is not the object of *desire* according to Thomas, but rather the object of *knowledge* and *delight*. Thus while the human person can perceive the Good without having apprehended it, with Beauty it is somewhat different. Beauty, for Thomas, can only be perceived once the Good is possessed.

To behold what is beautiful, then, is not just a fleeting emotional rapture but rather a kind of profound knowledge of reality and the mysteries it contains, as Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI said in his address to Communion and Liberation: "to disdain or to reject the impact produced by the response of the heart in the encounter with beauty as a true form of knowledge would impoverish us and dry up our faith and our theology. We must rediscover this form of knowledge; it is a pressing need of our time."⁷⁵

⁷³ David Coultier, *Walking God's Earth: The Environment and Catholic Faith* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2014), 3.

⁷⁴ See, for example, Christopher Scott Sevier, *Aquinas on Beauty* (Lexington Books: London, 2015).

⁷⁵ Jacques Maritain draws out this idea in his book *Art and Scholasticism*: "The beautiful is what gives joy, not all joy, but *joy in knowledge*; not the joy particular to the act of knowing, but a joy superabounding and overflowing from such an act *because of the object known*. If a thing exalts and delights the soul by the bare fact of its being given to the intuition of the soul it is good to apprehend, it is beautiful."

Thomas calls beauty “that which pleases when it is seen.”⁷⁶ In his book, *Aquinas on Beauty*, Christopher Sevier summarizes the causes of this pleasure—the pleasure of beholding beauty—on the soul: “Every pleasure [according to Thomas] is the result of a two-fold *operatio*, namely: (a) attaining the suitable good, and (b) knowledge of the attainment of the good.”⁷⁷ That is, pleasure occurs when the person consciously lays hold of some good that has been the object of her desire. It is caused by a certain kind of “rest” in the good.⁷⁸ Beauty, having to do with the possession of some good (i.e. knowledge), *pleases*.

Of course, the conclusion that beauty is pleasing to behold is nothing particularly novel. What *is* of particular interest for the purpose of this discussion is what Thomas then has to say in his *Summa theologiae* about the *effects* of pleasure, which he discusses in the thirty-third question of the *prima secundae*. Thomas describes four such effects:

- (1) First of all, delight causes an expansion of the soul. This expansion can be expressed in terms of emotional response: the experience of an acquired good can cause the heart to swell. Here Thomas quotes the prophet Isaiah: “Then you shall see and be radiant, your heart shall thrill and rejoice” (Isaiah 60:5). Expansion also has to do with surrender, with yielding to the good that has been apprehended; and this surrender is even greater in the possession of a good than it is in the pursuit of it.⁷⁹ What Thomas is describing here is a sort of spontaneous, joyful, and magnanimous response to the acquired good.

⁷⁶ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II 27.1. Citations of the *Summa Theologiae* will be taken from Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, second and revised edition (1920), at <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/index.html>, hereafter *ST*. Accessed April 2019.

⁷⁷ Sevier, *Aquinas on Beauty*, 54.

⁷⁸ *ST*, I-II 32. 8.

⁷⁹ *ST* I-II 32.8.2.

(2) Secondly, pleasure gives birth to a desire for more pleasure. According to Thomas, this is ultimately because all pleasures in this life are incomplete; they point to a fullness to which we do not yet have access. He writes,

Pleasure is an emotion of the appetite in respect of something actually present. But it may happen that what is actually present is not perfectly possessed ... while taking pleasure in what one has, one desires to possess the remainder ... thus in this life, a faint perception of Divine knowledge affords us delight, and delight sets up a thirst or desire for perfect knowledge; in which sense we may understand the words of Sirach 24:29: "They that drink me shall yet thirst."⁸⁰

(3) The third effect of pleasure on the soul is a strengthening of his use of reason. Thomas, it should be noted, is quick to clarify that pleasure resulting from sinful behavior hinders man's rational powers; sin distracts reason, contradicts it, and holds it captive. However, pleasure in accord with reason (here Thomas gives the examples of study and contemplation) actually increase our rational activity, "because we are more attentive in doing that which gives us pleasure, and attention fosters activity."⁸¹

(4) Finally, pleasure perfects man's activities. This happens first of all directly, as an end, since delight is the end of man's activity. But pleasure also perfects man's operations "indirectly; inasmuch as the agent, through taking pleasure in his action, is more eagerly intent on it, and carries it out with greater care."⁸² In other words, that which is done with pleasure is normally done well.

Though these four effects of pleasure are discussed quite separately in the *Summa* from any of Thomas' aesthetic principles, it must be the case that the ideas are connected. If beauty gives rise to delight in the knowing (and thus apprehending) subject, and delight brings about these four

⁸⁰ *ST I-II* 33.2.

⁸¹ *ST I-II* 33.3.

⁸² *ST I-II* 33.4.

effects, then it follows that an encounter with beauty is not a quaint vignette in a person's life; it changes her. When she beholds beauty, she is given over to a sort of ecstatic surrender to it; she experiences an increased desire for an encounter with its source; her powers of reason are sharpened; she becomes more excellent. Aquinas' theology of beauty and his understanding of delight therefore echo Augustine's exhortation to "question the beauty of the earth" when applied to nature.

God was not satisfied to leave Beauty floating in abstraction; he has brought it down to the level of rivers and lakes, of sandpipers and walleye, of a sunset as its golden light kisses the tree line. There is, therefore, good reason to be confident in the power of natural beauty to have that fourfold transforming effect on the human person: expansion, increased desire, sharpened reason, and perfection of action. And how can these effects fail to lead a soul onward toward its Creator? How can a person be touched by the beauty of creation and not become more docile to the presence of the Creator, more solicitous for Beauty Himself, more able to conclude that all good things find their source in Him, more eager and attentive in seeking Him?

The Angelic Doctor's theology of beauty and delight can shine even more light into the present discussion of *Laudato si'* by providing an articulation of just *how* it is that beauty—in this case, the beauty of the natural world—leaves its mark upon the human heart. But it remains for each person to avail him-or-herself of that beauty, to soak in creation's transcendent brilliance. Learning to see again, cultivating a contemplative gaze on God's creation, thus involves for each person a sustained habit of intentional exposure to the natural world. It requires slowing down, taking in reality in a new way; it is like the mindful exercise of taking long, deep breaths, which relieves restlessness and anxiety by restoring the agitated person to a sense of

self-awareness and awareness of the present moment.⁸³ The cleansing “breaths” of silent appreciation of nature’s beauty can be seeds of spiritual renewal for the frantic, modern soul. In other words, the simple act of getting outside can become a step along the path to that deep transformation that Pope Francis writes about in *Laudato si’* when he calls the human community to an ecological conversion.

Conclusion: The heart of *Laudato si’*

The deformation of the human person is a far greater tragedy than environmental damage. The injunction to “till and keep” the garden is no mere command; it is inseparable from God’s intention to mark Adam and Eve with an identity: beloved children and stewards of His own household. This is the heart of Christian creation stewardship and the heart of *Laudato si’*. Where the person is no longer able to be *what she is*, destruction will inevitably follow because the call to care for creation flows out of a deep sense of one’s own identity as a steward. The greatest wound to both the earth and to the Heart of God remains the crippling force that technocracy has on the image of God imprinted on each human soul.

Modern men and women are starved of beauty and of that contemplation which puts them in touch with the truest things about themselves, creation, and God. This is the dark side of the technocratic paradigm; it offers *more* knowledge about reality, but it only delivers a sterile, mechanical outlook on the world, treating God’s wonders with all their vitality and dynamism as if they were cadavers to be dissected. The result for the human person is that she gradually loses her ability to see through any other lens; implicit to technocracy is the false premise that there is

⁸³ For a discussion of how the practice of mindfulness, typically native to Eastern religion, can be incorporated faithfully into Catholic spirituality, see Dr. Gregory Bottaro, *The Mindful Catholic: Finding God One Moment at a Time* (North Palm Beach, FL: Beacon Publishing, 2018).

no room for mystery or faith in scientific knowledge, and so the human person's view becomes "one-dimensional" and shallow. She is like the cynic, who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.

That is why it is so critical that we understand *Laudato si'* in its spiritual principles sooner rather than later, that we interpret it faithfully and do not give in to shallow or ideological readings of the text. Changing policies and programs to alleviate the harm done to our planet may be one aspect of the necessary response to this encyclical, but if the human community ignores the pervasive and often hidden influence of the technocratic paradigm, the destruction will not end; it will merely evolve into another form, wreaking new havoc and taking new casualties. Shrinking the growing deserts on the earth will not be enough—indeed, it will be a great failure—if we do not also allow rain to fall upon the deserts within the human heart.⁸⁴

That is why this paper focused primarily on the restoration of Christian vision and the cultivation of ecological spirituality, particularly through the simple act of pausing before the beauty of nature. Healing must begin at the site of the wound—a technological gaze on creation can only be undone by looking again, this time with a contemplative posture. Ecological conversion is all about retrieving a contemplative gaze upon the created world, so that what has appeared as a dreary and problematic world becomes once more "a joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and praise."⁸⁵ It occurs when the human person begins to wonder at the marvels of creation, when childlike curiosity and delight, all-too-easily forgotten under the yoke of anxious responsibility, is re-awakened and set free. Then, the person is able to see herself in profound communion with her entire ontological family, woven into the fabric of

⁸⁴ Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, §217, 145.

⁸⁵ Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, §12, 16.

creation by invisible—though no less real—threads. Her self-awareness is imbued with creaturely acceptance, for she knows that sovereignty rests on Another's brow, and is all the gladder for it.

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