

# GREENING THE VOWS

## *Laudato si'* and Religious Life

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THE PUBLICATION of Pope Francis's environmental encyclical, *Laudato si'*, has been important news, inside and outside the Church. Reactions have varied from the wildly ecstatic to the defensively patronising. In the first chapter, Pope Francis states:

A very solid scientific consensus indicates that we are presently witnessing a disturbing warming of the climatic system .... It is a global problem with grave implications: environmental, social, economic, political and for the distribution of goods. It represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day. (n.23)

He ends with a call for a new way of life and an 'ecological conversion'.

This call demands that consecrated men and women revisit the ecological dimension of who they are and what they do, of their identity and mission. This dimension has always been there, at the heart of consecration but, with the passing of time, awareness has been dulled and the memory of it forgotten. It has been read and reread as a powerful chapter in the story of religious life, particularly in the Franciscan and the Benedictine traditions. It is part of the biblical framework that encompasses the whole of God's Word, from the first pages that tell the story of creation to the 'new heaven and the new earth' foretold at the end of the Apocalypse. It has its basis both in the writings of the early Fathers of the Church and in the thinking of recent Popes: John Paul II and Benedict XVI, and now Francis.

Finally, it is a dimension that inevitably develops out of the continuing and dynamic dialogue that religious life has always maintained with its historical context: the conversation between the charism of each religious family and the events happening now, both in the international community and the Church. It is a product of the engagement between the following of Jesus Christ and the needs of the wider world, especially the needs of the poor and the demands of ecojustice.

Traditionally the spirituality of consecration for vowed men and women has been built on a dualistic foundation that both fragmented and spiritualised the following of the chaste, poor and obedient Christ. It compartmentalised the three vows, tending to diminish their dynamic integration and complementarity. Theology today is moving towards a much more ecological, holistic approach to reality. It is against this holistic background that we need to reimagine religious life as an organic form of life, and contextualise the consecration of religious women and men, passionately in love with Jesus Christ.

### ***Consecration and Cherishing the Earth***

The consecration of religious women and men is at the intersection between spirituality and environmental sensitivity. In the twelfth century St Hildegard of Bingen, one of our female Benedictine ancestors, already had a profound sense of being related to the earth. For her the earth was something sacred and precious, to be cherished and protected: our home. She speaks of the ‘greening’ (*viriditas*) of the universe, brimming with life, vitality and creativity. She awakens the rhythm of the cosmos in us. For Hildegard, God created humankind so that we might ‘cultivate the earthly and thereby create the heavenly’.<sup>1</sup> God made us to bind the wounds of the earth.

Consecration is the result of the creative action of the Spirit: the Spirit that hovered over the waters of chaos in the beginning and animated God’s creative word; the Spirit who spoke through the prophets; the Spirit who overshadowed Mary and begot God’s Word in her womb; the Spirit who fills the whole of Creation and transforms reality. At the same time, Church documents emphasize the ‘unique’ eschatological sign value of religious life.<sup>2</sup> We are about something much bigger than ourselves, something that reaches out beyond the here and now. We are about the anticipation of the new heaven and the new earth, of the Kingdom: of a universal and cosmic communion where ‘God will be all in all’.

According to Pope Francis, ‘religious follow the Lord in a special way, in a prophetic way’.<sup>3</sup> Today the prophetic nature of religious consecration

<sup>1</sup> *Meditations with Hildegard of Bingen*, edited and translated by Gabriele Uhlein (Rochester, Vt: Bear, 1983), 88.

<sup>2</sup> *Lumen gentium*, n. 44; *Perfectae caritatis*, n.1; *Vita consecrata*.

<sup>3</sup> Antonio Spadaro, “‘Wake up the World!’”. Conversation with Pope Francis’, translated by Donald Maldari, *La Civiltà Cattolica* (4 January 2014), 3–17, here 3, available at [http://www.laciviltacattolica.it/articoli\\_download/extra/Wake\\_up\\_the\\_world.pdf](http://www.laciviltacattolica.it/articoli_download/extra/Wake_up_the_world.pdf).

also commits us to sharing God's concern for the whole of the physical world. Prophecy is about telling the present: lamenting environmental destruction and evoking the memory of God's dream for creation, raising consciousness of the global ecocide that threatens humanity and the entire planet in the here and now.

Religious consecration is penetrated and shaped by an awareness of and commitment to the integrity of creation. An ecological spirituality brings to the vows new significance and meaning. It places itself at the heart of vocation so that every dimension of our being—our loving, having and wanting—can become ecological actions, as we are gradually transformed so as to love, to serve and to reverence creation. Consecrated people are called to open their hearts and minds, their whole being, to a cosmic world-view, to a holistic approach to life. They are called to nurture and savour the sensory and the contemplative approach to Mother Earth—the womb of life. They are called to witness that every part of this earth is sacred and connected; that the creation is the outpouring of God's goodness and beauty; and that it is God's body—a sacrament of God.

***To love, to  
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creation***

### ***Chastity and Celibacy: 'Broken Hearts that Contain the World'*<sup>4</sup>**

Consecrated chastity is a total commitment of a person's affective energy, caring and cherishing, to the Creator God and to Jesus Christ 'in whom', according to St Paul, 'were created all things in heaven and on earth: everything visible and invisible' (Colossians 1: 16). It is a relationship with the God who became incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus was born surrounded by animals and grew up in a rural environment, in familiarity and intimacy with nature. He talked about the Father as 'Lord of Heaven and Earth' and likened the Kingdom to the pageant of created things. Jesus told stories about weeds and wheat, the birds of the air and the flowers of the fields; foxes and fish, trees and shrubs, lambs and wolves, sunrise and the night sky. He prayed in the hills and on mountain tops, in the desert and in the Garden. He walked along the side of the river Jordan and on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Consecrated chastity binds us irresistibly to this Christ, empowering us to love what he loves, to care for what he cares for, and to see everything and everyone through his eyes. It opens us to receive his contemplative attitude towards the natural world, discovering it, with wonder and awe,

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Fiand, *Wrestling with God: Religious Life in Search of Its Soul* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 30.

as ‘charged with the grandeur of God’: a locus where every creature is held lovingly in existence by the Creator.<sup>5</sup> It gives us the gift of authentic caring—for the Church, the world and creation. It reminds us that we are part of everything and that we are most like Christ when we reverence the earth and all its peoples lovingly, when our hearts are broken by what touches and moves the compassion of God, who hears ‘the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor’ (n.49).

Consecrated chastity is also about our bodies: our sexuality, emotions, feelings and vulnerability. It is about the reverence with which we welcome and integrate the whole of our being, including our bodies, into falling passionately and completely in love with Christ. For the way in which we image and treat the human body plays a vital role in how we perceive and treat the world. Celibacy, embodiment and ecology go together. They overcome the traditional spirit–body dualism which used to separate sexuality from theology and spirituality. Our human sexuality is God’s gift, a fundamental dimension of who we are. Returning that gift to God in consecrated chastity makes better lovers of us.

In his chapter on integral ecology, the Pope writes:

The acceptance of our bodies as God’s gift is vital for welcoming and accepting the entire world as a gift from the Father and our common home .... Learning to accept our body, to care for it and to respect its fullest meaning, is an essential element of any genuine human ecology. (n.155)

Before we can care for creation creatively and live our chastity more holistically, we need to embrace a much wider sense of embodiment—everything in nature has a body. We need a more wholesome understanding of and engagement with the body, whether it be our own, that of other creatures or of the earth itself. For it is through the embodied nature of creation—through matter—that we encounter the living presence of God. And it is through consecrated chastity that we rechannel procreative, physical energy into a creative life force that enters into communion with all that is and with the Holy.

Our living of consecrated chastity, then, affects every fibre of our being: the way we see ourselves and others, how we reverence the sacredness of our own embodiment and that of all God’s creatures, what and who we love, and how much we love them, what we eat and drink,

<sup>5</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, ‘God’s Grandeur’, in *Poems and Prose* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 27.

how and where we walk, what we talk about and why, what we mourn and what we celebrate ... everything. It is a compassionate loving. Chastity in an ecological perspective is about intimacy in an honest and interdependent way, about honouring diversity and embracing joy and pain in relationship. It is about living and loving as Jesus Christ lived and loved.

### ***Poverty: Solidarity with the Earth***

Consecrated men and women are disciples of the poor and humble Christ, who was rich but for our sake became poor (2 Corinthians 8:9). The poor Christ invites us to leave everything and follow him. We embrace poverty because Christ was poor and identified himself with the poor. In the Gospels, we read how Jesus talked with men and women, lepers, and Pharisees, rich and poor but, above all, the poor. Consecration expresses a commitment to mirror the life of Jesus of Nazareth, imitating his way of life and his love: a love that empties itself in solidarity with all people, especially the smallest, the least and the forgotten.

Within the Church's many different religious families, solidarity with Christ's poor has for a long time been identified as essential to the living of chosen and vowed poverty for consecrated religious. But today, when we live in a world in ecological crisis, poverty is vowed within the broader context of the fragility of the earth and the oppression of all of creation.

In his encyclical, Pope Francis ties together the growing ecological crisis with the global social crisis. The ecological crisis hits the poor



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*Slums in Manila after floods caused by Typhoon Ketsana*

harder than anyone else. Often the oppression of the poor is the *result* of ecological oppression. The system that enslaves the earth and the poor seems to be one and the same. The cry of the earth and the cry of the poor are fused. In this context social justice and ecojustice come together: 'Today', writes the Pope, '... we have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment' (n.49).

Pope Francis confirms the conclusions of an international report showing that it is the weak and the poor who feel the brunt of climate change and suffer its effects more than others: the same hazards cause much bigger disasters in poorer countries, making them even poorer. At the same time, rising inequality, itself made worse by climate change, is also slowing poverty reduction, making it harder for developing countries to climb out of poverty:

Nine out of every ten disasters are now climate-related. Recorded disasters have doubled in number from 200 a year to more than 400 over the past two decades ....

Climate change may well exacerbate chronic hunger and malnutrition across much of the developing world. And it will almost certainly precipitate battles over resources.

No nation, rich or poor, is exempt from nature's destructive potential. But nature is not the real problem. We are. Be it through dangerously high emissions of greenhouse gases, depletion of essential resources or reckless urbanisation, we are creating a house of cards that could mean humanitarian catastrophe for millions.<sup>6</sup>

The vow of poverty posits a respectful dialogue with the earth and offers a radical response to the prevalent mentality and culture of acquisitiveness. It calls us actively to refrain from using up the finite resources of the earth, and to be gentle, much gentler, in our use of the resources that are scarce. Poverty brings and bears witness to freedom from consumerism, waste and a 'grab and snatch' mentality, prevalent in our enslaved culture and society. While it has always been about a certain austerity, in an ecological perspective our poverty is an alternative to luxury and excess—a sign of communion and harmony with the natural world and all that it contains.

<sup>6</sup> John Holmes, 'More Help Now, Please', *The Economist*, 'The World in 2009' (19 November 2008), available at <http://www.economist.com/node/12494621>.

Consecrated poverty reminds us that everything is gift and places us in a relationship of cosmic reciprocity with the whole web of ecosystems and its recycling of resources that continually transforms death into new life. It encourages us to be more humble, as befits consecrated people intent on following the Christ ‘who emptied himself’ (Philippians 2:7) and who recommended ‘poverty of spirit’ (Matthew 5:3) to those who long to be citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, in the awareness that this involves being citizens of the earth first. Arrogance only causes pain and suffering for both people and planet. Poverty challenges us to discover a new, counter-cultural way of life, shaped by new patterns of ecologically sustainable living that honour the earth. Our consecration is a call and a commitment to give freely and radically all that we have and are in a passionate self-emptying for God and for humanity. Consecration is about always being ready to be bread in the hands of the poor, to be shared and to be at the side of the ‘have nots’. It commits us to new forms of solidarity, to ‘a new lifestyle and an ecological conversion’.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Obedience in an Ecological Perspective***

The paradigm for understanding obedience from an ecological perspective is found in the Genesis creation story. According to Walter Brueggemann, God calls creation into being and creation’s special vocation is to answer that call: to say ‘yes’.<sup>8</sup> It is to say a delighted, willing ‘yes’ to the plan of the Creator, to being what God calls it to be. Between the Creator and creation, including us, there is a special relationship. This is a relationship both of closeness and of distance: the closeness of God’s gentle, empowering embrace and the distance that allows creation its freedom of action. ‘The creation is not overpowered by the creator. The creator not only cherishes his creation but honors and respects it.’<sup>9</sup> The creation call is told in narrative form, taken from an older liturgical doxology. It is a story meant for a believing, worshipping community, a listening community seriously engaged with the story, a community that hears the story with passion.

<sup>7</sup> Joshua J. McElwee, ‘Francis’ Encyclical an Urgent Call to Prevent World of “Debris, Desolation and Filth”’, *National Catholic Reporter* (18 June 2015), available at <http://ncronline.org/news/theology/pope-francis-encyclical-urgent-call-prevent-world-debris-desolation-and-filth>.

<sup>8</sup> See Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1982), 18 and elsewhere.

<sup>9</sup> Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 28.

In a modern retelling by Margaret Silf:

It was the garden of original wholeness, and in that wholeness all living beings were in bedrock union with the source of their being, whom they called God. They walked with God in the garden of creation. They experienced constant blessing. They knew how deeply they were interconnected with each other, being formed of the same elements as the earth itself and animated by the energies of creation.<sup>10</sup>

But this harmony and interconnectedness were shattered by our individualistic and anthropocentric world-view, focused on ourselves, 'tuned only to the narrow frequency of [our] own music' instead of the all-embracing song of the universe.

God's Dream, which had once been the Deep Dream of every living creature, had become fragmented into a million little hopes and fears. God's Desire, expressed in the original Wholeness, had been broken into a million little personalised wants and wishes.<sup>11</sup>

But God's will is that our 'brokenness should not go on forever'.<sup>12</sup> The obedience of the Son, Jesus Christ has the power to reconnect us, to reconcile people with God, with each other and with creation. The New Testament abounds with references to Christ's disposition of obedience and the redemptive, transforming power of his identification with God's dream:

I seek not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.  
(John 5:30)

For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners,  
so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.  
(Romans 5:19)

The obedience of religious men and women is a sharing in that of Christ, who made his own will one with the Father's will, 'and became obedient to the point of death' (Philippians 2:8). It involves environmental reconciliation in Christ, offering a restored, God-centred theological vision that reintegrates God, humanity and the natural world. Obedience

<sup>10</sup> Margaret Silf, *Sacred Spaces: Stations on a Celtic Way* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2014), 25.

<sup>11</sup> Silf, *Sacred Spaces*, 26.

<sup>12</sup> Silf, *Sacred Spaces*, 27.





*Adam Naming the Animals, by John Miles of Northleach, 1820–1840*

in Christ mends, heals, brings back into wholeness and harmony the disconnected and scattered fragments of the original creation.

At Creation God entrusted all created things to our care. But in our flawed, anthropocentric, dualistic perception of the natural world, care became control, control gave way to conquest, and conquest imperceptibly slipped into domination. Responsibility for our home became a power struggle, and solidarity was stifled by competition. The will to power refuses to let God be God in creation, imposing our own interests instead, in defiance of our origins and of who we really are. Obedience, understood as an attentive listening that is open to divine creativity, restores the holistic paradigm. It offers an alternative will that recentres and regrounds us as part of everything, with a responsibility to engage with the lived reality of each moment in an intimate love relationship.

Obedience, in an ecological context, is directly concerned with God's dream, with caring for and protecting the world entrusted to us. It is about process: a living and creative energy rather than passive adherence to a static, preordained plan. It is an ongoing response to God, here and now. Within vowed religious life such obedience is necessarily relational. It is about mutuality and interdependence between individuals, the community and designated authority. It involves a shared listening, with excitement, to the God who is continually holding creation in its unfolding. God's

will, God's plan for us and for the whole of creation is happening in every moment. It is in the here and now that God's will is discerned and discovered in a spirit of mutuality.

### ***Making the Earth's Story Our Own***

The title *Laudato si'* is taken from St Francis's 'Canticle of the Creatures': 'Praised be You [*laudato si'*], my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces varied fruit with coloured flowers and herbs'.<sup>13</sup> For St Francis, nature showed the footprints of God's passing. A flower reflected God's beauty; the sun was a shadow of God's brightness; the mountains were the strength of God's arm. The sunrise reminded him of the rising of Christ. Nature lifted its unthinking prayer to God just by being what it was.

In 1979, John Paul II named St Francis as the patron of ecology. Carlo Carretto's fictionalised biography, *I, Francis*, has the saint responding:

It is a terrible sin you have committed all around you, and I do not know whether or not you can still be saved. You have violated the forests, defiled the seas, plundered everything like a bunch of bandits. And now that you have destroyed nearly everything, you have appointed me patron saint of ecology. You have to admit, it is a little late ....<sup>14</sup>

In 2015 Pope Francis I evokes the memory of his namesake to talk to the world about our 'sister earth ... who cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her' (n.2). His initiative is completely in harmony with the recent movement in the Church towards ecology. Benedict XVI made being 'green' a central part of his teachings and policy-making.

The awareness of consecrated people within the Church has also broadened to embrace the cosmic and planetary context where the story of all life unfolds. The traditional vows of consecrated life are now made in the wider context of earth, cosmos and creation. Consecration is to be lived in ecologically sensitive ways, out of a deepened awareness of the sacredness of creation. The vows of poverty, chastity and obedience

<sup>13</sup> *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, translated by Regis J. Armstrong and Ignatius C. Brady (New York: Paulist, 1982), 39.

<sup>14</sup> Carlo Carretto, *I, Francis*, translated by Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1982), 76.

take on new meaning. Religious men and women the world over are rediscovering a holistic ecological spirituality as the basis for living our consecration in contemporary times. They are committed to 'sustainable living, earth renewal and ecosystem repair'.<sup>15</sup> They are challenged to learn how to live graciously with all creation, and to help others do so with courtesy, respect and reverence. They are called to relationship with the earth, to a deepening consciousness of all life communities as being part of our own life and of the interdependence of all. They are vowed to making earth's story their own.

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<sup>15</sup> Sarah McFarland Taylor, *Green Sisters: A Spiritual Ecology* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard UP, 2009), 61.