**Laudato Si' and Vatican III**

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Nov. 30, 2015 in *Global Sisters Report*

* [Speaking of God](http://globalsistersreport.org/columns/speaking-of-god)

The recent encyclical of Pope Francis, [*Laudato Si'*](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html), continues to draw attention in both academic and non-academic circles — and rightly so. It is a beautiful document, evoking a sense of interconnectedness between humans and the natural world in a way unprecedented by any other modern papal encyclical. It describes a spirituality of belonging and expresses the urgent need to renew the contemplative dimension of life.

As I read and reflect on this work, I am drawn to its language of beauty, harmony and goodness; language that Bonaventure and other Franciscan theologians used in the Middle Ages. And maybe that is why I like this work, because its language and structure reflects the best of medieval Franciscan theology and, in particular, the theology of St. Bonaventure.

On one hand I can appreciate drawing on the rich theological tradition of Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas because these brilliant theologians were cosmological thinkers in their own day. But once we realize that their theologies are imbued with Aristotelian and Neoplatonic philosophical principles, we must ask, what aspects of these theologies are helpful today and what aspects are no longer relevant?

***Laudato Si'* and Franciscan theology**

It is clear that Pope Francis is inspired by the spirituality of Francis of Assisi and his nature mysticism, described by his biographers Thomas of Celano and Bonaventure. Who could not admire the little saint of Assisi who spoke to birds, preached to flowers and called all creatures "brother" and "sister"?

As Minister General of the Franciscan Order (1257-1274), Bonaventure aimed to consolidate the order by constructing a theology based on the spirituality of Francis. *Laudato Si'*is consonant with Bonaventure's vision. Since I spent a number of years teaching and writing on Bonaventure, I would like to share some highlights from his theology in order to assess the theology of *Laudato Si'.*

Bonaventure described creation as essentially good, flowing out of the Trinity of divine love. Because the material world is created by the triune God, it is dynamic and relational. God grants freedom to creation without disrupting the divine intention to which creation is ordered. Creation, he writes, is like a beautiful *song* that flows in the most excellent of harmonies. It is a song that God *freely* desires to sing into the vast spaces of the universe. There is nothing that compels God to create. Rather, creation is simply the finite loving outflow of an infinitely loving God. The world exists by virtue of the free creative power of divine love.

The beauty of creation for Bonaventure is evident in the order and harmony of the things of creation. Creation is not simply a stage for human activity or a backdrop to human longings; rather, the whole of creation has meaning and purpose. It comes from God, reflects the glory of God, and is intended to return to God. Every creature is an aspect of God's self-expression; since every creature has its foundation in the Word, each is equally close to God (although the mode of relationship differs). Bonaventure views the world as sacramental. It is a symbolic world and one full of signs of God's presence. The world is created as a means of God's self-revelation so that, like a mirror or footprint, it might lead us to love and praise the Creator

God calls forth within this universe human persons who are endowed with the freedom to participate in this divine artistic splendor. Bonaventure sees the human person as the crown of God's created order. Matter has a drive toward spirit, but only one who is matter and spirit can unite the material world to God. It is for this reason, Bonaventure states, that the role of the human person is to lead creation back to God.

*Laudato Si'* echoes many of these themes. Creation is on the order of love and expresses divine freedom in love (77). The humility of God is shown in the Kabbalistic notion of divine withdrawal by which God "in some way limits himself" making space in the divine life for creation to emerge. God is Creator, the primary cause of all that exists but intimately present to each being, allowing each being its own freedom to creatively become itself. Pope Francis holds a panentheistic view of creation when he writes, "We should think of the whole as open to God's transcendence within which it develops" (79). Although he employs here language of developmental time and unfolding beauty, it is clear that the emphasis is on divine transcendence and the absolute power of God to create. The divine decision to create and to impart freedom to creation should not underestimate the power of the Father "who alone owns the world" (75).

Pope Francis brings together creation and incarnation in a way that is consonant with Bonaventure's thought. For Bonaventure the incarnation expresses God's excess love and mercy. Franciscan theologian Duns Scotus (1266-1308) spoke of the incarnation as the primacy of love. Christ is first in God's intention to love and to create. Creation and incarnation are entwined and there is a perfect fit between Christ and creation; the universe is oriented toward the fullness of Christ. Similarly, Pope Francis writes, "The destiny of all creation is bound up with the mystery of Christ, present from the beginning: 'All things have been created through him and for him'" (Col 1:16) (99). Like Bonaventure, Pope Francis states that all creation is transfigured and transformed by the risen Christ: "Thus, the creatures of this world no longer appear to us under merely natural guise because the risen One is mysteriously holding them to himself and directing them towards fullness as their end. The very flowers of the field and the birds which his human eyes contemplated and admired are now imbued with his radiant presence." (100) Similarly Bonaventure wrote in a sermon (IX), "Christ shares existence with each and every thing: with the stones he shares existence, with the plants he shares life; with the animals sensation . . . all things are said to be transformed in Christ since in his human nature he embraces something of every creature in himself when he was transfigured." Bonaventure's theological vision with Christ as center is consonant with the vision of *Laudato Si'*: "the destiny of creation is tied up with the destiny of Christ" (LS 99).

***Laudato Si'* and cosmology**

While *Laudato Si'* incorporates language of modern science, the cosmology of the text is geocentric, consonant with the medieval cosmos of Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas. The most telling sign of medieval cosmology is the role of the human person in creation. Although Pope Francis concedes that "there can be no ecology without an adequate anthropology," he clearly indicates that the human person, "endowed with intelligence and love" is unique and central to creation; our task is to "lead all creatures back to their Creator" (83), although the earth was here before us (67), and we cannot regard ourselves separate from nature (139) still, we possess a dignity above other creatures (119).

Pope Francis' position on evolution is not unlike that of his predecessors. God creates a world in need of development (80), and human beings may be explained in part by evolution, but "the uniqueness of humans cannot be fully explained by evolution" and "presupposes a direct action of God and a particular call to life" (81). Here we find an echo of Pope Pius XII who wrote in*Humani generis* that evolution may explain how the physical body of the human person is formed but the church maintains that *the soul is created immediately by God* (HG 36). We are the lodestar of creation and "all creatures are moving forward with us and through us towards the common point of arrival, which is God" (LS 83). By framing the human person as integral to but distinct from creation, however, *Laudato Si'* thwarts a true evolutionary discourse on human becoming. For we are not simply *in*evolution; we *are* evolution becoming conscious of itself.

**Mind and matter**

One of the key distinctions between a medieval and post-Einsteinian cosmology is the role of the mind in relation to the material universe. Indeed, Pope Francis clearly sees the human mind/intelligence as *sui generis* to humans; anything else diminishes human dignity and is contrary to truth. He follows on the heels of St. John Paul II who said in his 1996 address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences: "Theories of evolution which, in accordance with the philosophies inspiring them, consider the mind as emerging from the forces of living matter, or as a mere epiphenomenon of this matter, are incompatible with the truth about man. Nor are they able to ground the dignity of the person." While Pope Francis gleans ideas from cosmology and evolution (beyond John Paul II) he neglects to include the role of consciousness in matter and the implications of quantum physics for a new metaphysical understanding of reality. Instead we are left with the same static, metaphysical structure that has spawned our modern problems to some extent.

Quantum physics has altered our understanding of the universe in radical ways. The revolution in physics in the early 20th century led to, among many things, the radical discovery that matter and energy are two aspects of the same stuff. Solid matter is now understood as invisible waves existing in a field of mathematical probabilities. In the quantum world, "matter" is not very "material." Instead of atoms in the shape of billiard balls we have patterns of active relationships, electrons and photons, mesons and nucleons, that tease us with their elusive double lives as their position, momentum, particle, wave, mass, energy, all change in response to each other and to the environment.

Quantum physics has given rise to a whole new understanding of reality, including consciousness. Nature is not composed of material substances but deeply entangled fields of energy. Scientists are beginning to realize that the universe is brimming with consciousness all the way from the most elementary particles to vast galaxies; from the Big Bang to Einstein. The universe emerged from this plenum of quantum foam at the time of the Big Bang and has been evolving ever since, for some 13.8 billion years. Because human consciousness has emerged from a cosmic whole and continues to be part of it, then what accounts for the human mind is active in the universe.

Teilhard de Chardin held that evolution is not merely the mechanism by which diverse species emerge; evolution, broadly conceived, is the rise of consciousness. Evolution, through all its stages, seems to be an immense complexification of consciousness or psychic energy by which mind eventually becomes more aware of itself. The human person is integrally part of evolution in that we rise from the process, but in reflecting on the process we stand apart from it. He defines reflection as "the power acquired by consciousness to turn in upon itself, to take possession of itself *as an object* . . . no longer merely to know, but to know that one knows." The human person is "the point of emergence in nature, at which this deep cosmic evolution culminates and declares itself."

If indeed evolution undergirds the emergence of human life, then we must concede that the human person does not "have" a soul or acquire a soul through special divine intervention; rather the human person is ensouled in the same way that every aspect of conscious life is ensouled. As Thomas Berry reminded us, the earth is primary and we are children of the earth. This means, of course, that our understanding of the "soul" must be reconsidered in light of quantum physics and evolution. Quantum physics may not only shed light on the meaning of the "soul" in terms of consciousness but it impels us to consider personality in view of the deep entangled energy fields that comprise the fundamental framework of reality.

David Bohm, a contemporary of Einstein, spoke of the quantum world in terms of deeply entangled interactive fields governed by a principle of quantum wholeness. Bohm started with a notion of undivided wholeness and derived the parts as abstractions from the whole. Whereas classical physics is based on parts making up wholes, Bohm took relationships between parts as primary. Each part is connected with every other part at the quantum level. The notion of implicate order led Bohm to say that as human beings and societies we seem separate, but in our roots we are part of an indivisible whole and share in the same cosmic process.

Teilhard de Chardin realized the implications of the new physics for evolution and spoke in terms of a metaphysics of becoming, introducing a novel term "hyperphysics" to indicate that the fundamental principle of life is more life. If consciousness is, indeed, a principal aspect of nature, as quantum biology and quantum physics suggest, then the mind pervades cosmological and biological evolution. In this respect, returning to God as Bonaventure thought would not be the basic impulse of life; rather, self-transcendence and becoming defines life, an undivided whole becoming more whole through greater consciousness. What kind of theology would emerge if we realized that we are always in the process of becoming, even in eternal life, and that God is always in the process of becoming God? This is the type of new theology needed for the universe that is our home.

**Challenges and questions**

The good news is that *Laudato Si'* raises more questions than any other encyclical on the relationship between evolution and Christianity. It does what Vatican II failed to do and that is, raise to consciousness the importance of cosmology and cosmic vision. But we must take a good, honest look at the theology of *Laudato Si'*and ask, does this theology empower us for a new world of ecological wholeness and sustainability? There are many theological questions this work raises for me, some of which I offer here:

* If Christ is present from the beginning of creation (99) and if the Spirit is the power of God to do new things (80), then is Christ in evolution? Can the church embrace Teilhard's notion of Christogenesis?
* If creation time is developmental time (79) and we are involved in a cosmic drama, then is the human person in evolution? Can we become something different up ahead? Or are we the final achievement of creation?
* Does the direct action of God and the human uniqueness of the soul (81) contradict a spirit-filled creation? Where is mind in relation to matter? Can we reconceive the soul in terms of consciousness and personality?

Finally, as an unfinished process open to the future, evolution raises theological questions:

* What is God doing in an unfinished universe?
* What are we doing in an unfinished universe?
* What is Christ doing in an unfinished universe?
* What is the future of evolution in a universe that will continue for billions of years?

Vatican II recognized the disconnection between the church and the world and sought to open the windows of the church to the historicity of the world. The church found itself in a sea of massive changes and tried to update its theology to meet the needs of the world. Did it accomplish its aim? Yes, in part. But the church did not consider bridging the worlds of science and religion and thus the work of Vatican II remains incomplete.

Pope Francis, in a sense, picks up where Vatican II left off. He provides the missing piece to the Gospel of transforming life, namely, openness to modern science. His encyclical begins with the looming problems of climate change but it seeks to offer a new vision by appropriating scientific insights as the starting point for rethinking Christian life today. Language of open systems, systems thinking, evolution and emergence point to the need for a new theological synthesis based on dialogue with modern science. In this respect, Pope Francis is doing what would have made Vatican II more effective, bringing together science and religion.

That being said, *Laudato Si'* is overly ambitious in trying to address the major problems of our world, including economic, technological and environmental problems. By offering glimpses of a new theology without revisiting the doctrines of the church in light of the new science, the document falls short of providing a reasonable theological ground for change. It winds up with exhortations on technology, economics and ecology that are laudable but not feasible without a theology that is able to navigate the work of God amidst the complexities of our age, as we seek wholeness, being and life. The church might best contribute to a new world by resolving its own internal theological tensions, including metaphysics, concepts of being and becoming, sin, salvation, human personhood and final destiny. For a theology deaf to the yearnings of the cosmos and the cries of humanity is incapable of uttering a transforming Word of God.

Modern science has undergone major paradigm changes and the church is in need of doing so as well. Every aspect of theology and ecclesial life needs rethinking in light of Big Bang cosmology, biological evolution and quantum physics. Teilhard recognized long ago that evolution requires a new method of worship and a new form of action. Are we willing to adjust the doctrines of the church to meet the needs of an evolving universe? Can worship and liturgy change in a way consonant with evolution and emergence? Can the church itself evolve into a church for a Christogenic universe?

A medieval theology trying to address major world problems is bereft of transforming power; it is inspirational but not gravitational. It is my belief that the unmaking of the Western world is not only the disconnect of the human mind from the material universe, it is the intransigence of world religions to change internally. Science has accepted structural revolutions over the last 500 years; however, Christianity (and other world religions for that matter) has remained ontologically fixed in its metaphysical structure. The church is telling the world what needs to change, but if we listen carefully the world is begging the church to change.

We are on the cusp of a renewed Gospel life for the world. Will Pope Francis have the courage to renew the inner household of the church? This is the only way forward for our unfinished world seeking a new soul. Pope Francis stands at a pivotal moment in cosmic history and his vision of the whole is truly catholic. To bring together science and religion in a new theological vision will require a concerted effort of theologians, scientists, psychologists, environmentalists, economists and key players from Google, Apple and Facebook. It is time for Vatican III.

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