



# educatio *catholica*

## The Theology of Risk in *Laudato Si'*: An Ecological Formation

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*The ecological degradation of the earth opens before us a range of complex problems with significant risk and uncertainty. This paper studies Pope Francis' theology of risk in *Laudato Si'*, exploring five distinct risks. A new Franciscan pedagogy of creation is outlined that educators and communities of faith can use for their own ecological formation.*

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The ecological degradation of the planet, the result of climate change, opens up before educators, policy makers, scientists and communities of faith a range of complex problems with significant risks and considerable uncertainties. Despite some progress in ecological repair and remediation, there remains significant confusion about the framing of educational strategies to mitigate the harm done and to manage the actions needed to move forward. Because of this, risk discourse in climate change analysis and ecological formation swirls with “scientific and social complexity, deep forms of uncertainty and ambiguity, debates about incommensurable values, temporal and spatial inequalities, systemic causes, and government dilemmas.”<sup>1</sup>

How does one understand risk? How does one educate for it, without immediately falling into an anthropological reductionism? It is not as easy as one would imagine. The reality is that “risk” is a loaded term, without consensus or agreement as to its precise meaning.<sup>2</sup> The meaning of risk seems to vary from situation to situation and appears to depend on the perceptions and interpretations of those situations. Thus, risk is “a derived category and cannot be addressed directly, without previous investigation into the objectives, contexts, hazards, vulnerability, resilience and interested parties.”<sup>3</sup>

This paper studies the notion of risk in Pope Francis’ social encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si: Care for our Common Home*. It investigates the objectives, vulnerabilities and contexts involved in our ecological crisis. It does so by asking four simultaneous and related questions:

1. What is “risk” in the social encyclical?
2. How does Pope Francis assess and frame the risks involved in climate change?
3. How does he evaluate the consequences regarding the acceptability and tolerability of risks?
4. How does a Franciscan pedagogy educate for a time of increasing global uncertainty?

We recognize that the pope is not a professional or practicing scientist. He is a pastor and theologian. What will be portrayed is the depth and scope of his “theology of risk,” as this emerges from this social encyclical on the environment.

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<sup>1</sup> N. PIDGEON & C. BUTLER, “Risk analysis and climate change,” *Environmental Politics* 18:5, September, 2009, pp. 670-688.

<sup>2</sup> T. AVEN & O. REEN, “On risk defined as an event where the outcome is uncertain,” *Journal of Risk Research* 12, 2009, pp. 1-11.

<sup>3</sup> A. SOTIC & R. RAJIC, “The Review of the Definition of Risk,” *Online Journal of Applied Knowledge Management* 3:3, 2015, pp. 17-26.



### *What is Risk?*

In a recent review of literature on the definition of risk in climate change analysis, Sotic and Ratic provide the typical view of risk “as some quantitative combination (usually the product) of the likelihood and consequences associated with a hazard.”<sup>4</sup> In fact, they locate twelve key but significantly different definitions, of which we provide a small sample here:

1. Risk is the measure of probability and the weight of undesired consequences.
2. Risk equals the product of probability and severity.
3. Risk is a combination of five primitives: outcome, likelihood, significance, causal scenario and population affected.
4. Risk equals expected damage.
5. Risk is the effect of uncertainty on objectives.

In developing his thoughts and recommendations on the risks of ecological degradation, Pope Francis relies on science’s *quantitative* assessment of the hazards, consequences, and damage that climate change poses for the planet, but reaches beyond this typical and expected analysis. The pope aims for a more complete and holistic frame that engages science in a dialogue with other forms of knowing (i.e. theological) so that the hazards being considered, the critical uncertainties being identified, the systems being modelled and the consequences being investigated take in the whole subject under investigation. (14)<sup>5</sup> That is, risk in this social encyclical is studied in its broadest social, cultural, scientific and cosmological senses.

To do this, Pope Francis begins his encyclical on the environment with a stark but clear warning about the condition of the planet, using the imagery of Francis of Assisi, his namesake, to guide him:

This sister now 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. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. (2)

<sup>4</sup> SOTIC & R. RAJIC, p. 672.

<sup>5</sup> Numbers in parentheses throughout this essay refer to the sections of the Pope’s encyclical, *Laudato si: On Caring for our Common Home* (24 May, 2015).

Something has happened and continues to happen to the environment, which is global in nature and catastrophic in scope. (4) It is not simply a matter for science to investigate with abstract principles and theorems, although Francis provides the solid underpinnings of scientific research and its undeniable conclusions. The pope frames the situation of climate change as a severe *relational rupture in reality* itself, a deterioration and destruction of the bonds that exist between creatures and with the divine because of the selfishness and greed of humankind over the last several generations. The pope advances that humankind continues an unchecked pattern of abusive and destructive behaviors towards its “sister-mother Earth” that rebounds on humanity’s deterioration, as well. (4) Pope Francis quotes the conclusion of Pope Paul VI in 1971: “Due to an ill-considered exploitation of nature, humanity runs the risk of destroying it and becoming in turn a victim of this degradation.”<sup>6</sup>

The pope is proposing that the great drama of salvation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is no longer (as in times past) the sins of nation against nation, or even those of neighbor against neighbor. It is now humanity set against its own world that must become the issue of redemption: the global and undifferentiated conflict that pits humankind against wind and waves, sea and skies, the birds of the air and the fish of the oceans, the very elements that feed, support and nurture it. In developing his thoughts on the “Gospel of Creation,” Pope Francis reminds us that we are a long way from the Garden drama of the Genesis account, where man and woman settle comfortably in their environment and walk easily with God in the cool of the evening amidst the lush abundance of a provident planet. (62-100) Now in our time the drama is the survival of the planet itself and all its creatures. It is humanity’s very presence on the planet that is in peril and doubt. Humankind has developed economic systems and financial models that are calibrated to destroy the bonds necessary and the ecological systems required for creatures to survive on the planet, the very relationships humanity needs for its own thriving.

Pope Francis highlights five distinct risks: (1) damage and destruction; (2) indifference; (3) exclusion; (4) technology and (5) a misguided anthropocentrism. Pope Francis presents each risk with theological clarity and provides the opportunities available to meet them. We study each now.

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<sup>6</sup> Apostolic Letter, *Octogesima Adveniens* (14 May 1971), 21: AAS 63 (1971), 416-417.



### *The Risk of Damage and Destruction*

The pope speaks starkly of the damage and destruction already underway. It is the very reason for his encyclical and his outreach not just to bishops, priests, religious or Catholics in general, but to every person: “Now, faced as we are with global environmental destruction, I wish to address every living person on the planet.” (3) He repeats the sentiments of Pope Paul VI when he speaks of an “ill-considered exploitation of nature” and an “ecological catastrophe” caused by an “effective explosion of industrial civilization.” (4) He summarizes Pope Benedict XVI’s sentiment that the earth has been “gravely damaged” by humankind’s irresponsible behavior in both the natural and social environment due to one common and dangerous cause: “the notion that there are no indisputable truths to guide our lives, and hence human freedom is limitless.” (6)

The pope specifies the damage and destruction we are facing: “Each year hundreds of millions of tons of waste are generated, much of it non-biodegradable, highly toxic and radioactive, from homes and businesses, from construction and demolition sites, from clinical, electronic and industrial sources.” (21) The problem of pollution and waste accelerates because we have not yet adopted a “circular model of production” that would preserve resources for future generations, while limiting the use of non-renewable resources and accentuating reuse and recycling. (22)

The Holy Father goes on to recount the damage done by the great concentration of greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide, methane, nitrogen oxides, among others, that affects the availability and quality of drinking water, the melting of polar icecaps, the loss of tropical forests, all of which affect the habitats of those who make their living on the natural reserves and ecosystems that allow for farming, fishing, forestry and agriculture. (20-24)

Special note is made of the significant loss of biodiversity at every level of the ecosystem, from mammals and birds whose natural habitats are destroyed to fungi, algae, worms and insects and the vast variety of microorganisms that are displaced and disappear because their natural equilibrium has been irreparably damaged. (32-35) The pope makes clear that even our recent attempts to protect wildlife of all sorts is failing, because, despite the noble efforts of scientists and engineers to intervene, their work has been hampered by a more powerful and public rationale “in the service of business interests and consumerism,” which, in the end, makes “our earth less rich and beautiful.” (34)

What disturbs the Holy Father with special intensity is the destruction of the biodiversity of the planet by human agency. It is not simply the quantity of species that are being lost that is troublesome but the deep interconnectivity and mutually-influential bonds that creatures lose with one another. Whether it be the rainforests of the Amazon that we cut down, the glaciers in Antarctica that we allow to melt or the tropical or subtropical seas that we pollute, we are compromising the diverse but interconnected food chains and support systems that nature has developed to maintain creation in a thriving equilibrium. (32-47) We do so unaware or indifferent as to how our short-term private interests obscure our long term and common good. The pope laments the loss: “Because of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God by their very existence, nor convey their message to us. We have no such right.” (33)

#### *The Risk of Indifference*

Pope Francis advances the serious risk of human intervention in the ecological degradation of the planet. Humankind has chosen to be “lords and masters” rather than brothers and sisters in kinship with all of creation. The damage and destruction caused by this active interference with the natural rhythms and deep purposes of creation are significant, serious, dangerous and quickly becoming irreversible. The pope proposes a second risk that we face in our ecological conversion: the problem of indifference.

The Holy Father affirms the progress that the ecological movement has made over the last several decades. Those efforts have been noble and in some cases effective. And yet, he reminds us that significant progress has not been achieved because of “powerful opposition,” largely because of the business and commercial interests of large corporations in alliance with inefficient governments. He adds that progress has been stymied by “a more general lack of interest” and obstructionist attitudes on the part of citizens (and even Christian faithful) which manifest in four ways: a denial of the problem of ecological degradation, a nonchalant resignation to it, a blind confidence in only technical solutions and an attitude of global indifference. (14)

The risk of indifference is both general and specific. On the one hand, it is a general indifference to the scope, range and depth of the problem we are facing. It is the willful denial of what science teaches as to the intensity and immediacy of ecological degradation. It is a refusal to believe what science now teaches with confidence. It also manifests itself in a tactical indifference that resigns itself to the problem of ecological deterioration, but without offering any sacrifice with which to solve or



mitigate the desperate state we are in. On the other hand, it is a specific indifference that shows itself when we fail to recognize or take responsibility for the consequences that our ecological sins create. Pope Francis points to forced migration as an example. This is the situation of those who are forced to flee from an escalating poverty caused by environmental degradation and the world's refusal to admit that millions of individuals have been severely displaced by global warming or flooding. (25) Forced migration is no longer just the plight of those displaced by civil wars, regional conflicts, or religious and tribal tensions. Increasingly, it is the reality of those who must flee because of unprecedented changes in temperature and climate, to which animals and plants and thus humans cannot adapt. (25)

This new complexity of migration is often met with indifference, which tolerates this migration as some kind of acceptable collateral damage for the sake of profit. The pope laments "the loss of that sense of responsibility for our fellow men and women upon which all civil society is founded." (25)

The pope addresses the economic implications of our indifference. He maintains that developed or so-called first world countries are largely indifferent to the financial debt they have imposed on the poorer developing countries of the world. The pope sadly admits that maintaining the longstanding foreign debt imposed on poor countries has "become a way of controlling them" and keeping the poor and vulnerable obedient to the prevailing economic fortunes and formulae of the first world. (25)

At the same time, the pope adds a further risk of indifference that emerges when developed countries refuse to recognize and remain indifferent to the "ecological debt" that rich countries owe to poor countries for the service that their geographical ecosystems provide the rest of the world. First world countries forget that the poorer developing countries of the world have the most important reserves of the biosphere anywhere on the planet. They fail to recognize that these poor countries fuel the development of the richer countries, oftentimes at the risk of their own future. (52) In this way, the pope accuses first world countries of a kind of "ecological amnesia" and reminds them of the "ecological debt" they owe to the developing regions of the world.

Besides this, the social encyclical goes on to note that, while the lands of the southern poor are rich and mostly unpolluted, the poor of those regions are deprived of access to ownership of the goods and resources of that land because commercial relationships and ownership have already been contrived to advantage the few over the many in ways that the encyclical calls "structurally perverse." (52)

The Holy Father reminds us that the southern poor are even further disadvantaged because the models now adopted to reduce the impact of ecological degradation have been scripted in such a way as to make them too burdensome (financially and technically) for poor countries to adopt this far down the unequal road of development. The risk of indifference is manifested in an obstinate and willful disregard for and a failure to acknowledge the “differentiated responsibilities” of countries that have benefitted from what we might call the ‘ecological humility’ of developing countries. Pope Francis recommends that all countries need to surmount this indifference by strengthening the bonds that exist between us: “We need to strengthen the conviction that we are one single human family. There are no frontiers or barriers, political or social, behind which we can hide, still less is there room for the globalization of indifference.” (52)

With these words, Pope Francis has laid the groundwork for his deeper intention, the development of a universal communion, “the sense of fraternity, excluding nothing and no one.” (91-92) The pope argues for the recognition of the rights of all creatures and for the removal of all unjust inequalities among God’s creatures. The pope quotes the Conference of Dominican Bishops, as he lays out the three principles for this universal communion:

Peace, justice and the preservation of creation are three absolutely interconnected themes, which cannot be separated or treated individually without once again falling into reductionism.<sup>7</sup>

Once again, the pope is solidifying the image of creation as a single fraternity of sisters and brothers made up of all the creatures of the earth under one good and gracious God: “all of us are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family.” (89) At the same time, the pope admits the perverse reality of an influential mindset of inequality that obscures and injures our sense and experience of this universal fraternity. This failure to abide by a universal communion is dangerous, since it serves up the cause of our own destruction.

The Holy Father reasons that our modern logic of a justifiable and structured economic inequality where some deserve privileges in the economic sphere while others are deprived of necessities is now migrating into the biological sphere, affecting all God’s creatures. The unequal forms of abandonment and exclusion that we have

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<sup>7</sup> Conference of Dominican Bishops, Pastoral Letter, *Sobre la relación del hombre con la naturaleza* (21 January 1987).





used against the poor are now the same ones that we use against all God's creatures. We now feel justified in depriving even the smallest and humblest of God's creatures of their right to life and their right to praise God in their unique and specific ways. To protect the rights of all creatures, human and non-human, The pope aims at dismantling all dominative and depriving definitions of power.

He recognizes the difficult situation we have created: "In practice, we continue to tolerate that some consider themselves more human than others, as if they had been born with greater rights." (85) But, creation is jeopardized and the future of the planet remains in peril if we retain this arcane and failed theory of dominating power, whether towards human beings or over any of God's creatures. the pope reasons: "A sense of deep communion with the rest of nature cannot be real if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion, and concern for our fellow human beings." (91) Indifference to one is indifference to the other, as the pope suggests: "It follows that our indifference or cruelty towards fellow creatures of this world sooner or later affects the treatment we mete out to other human beings." (92)

### *The Risk of Exclusion*

At the beginning of this social encyclical, Pope Francis uses a stark image of the earth's condition. She is the sister crying out because of the harm inflicted upon her by humanity's irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has given her. (2) Ecological degradation is an act of violence by those who have translated their status into "lords and masters" of creation from that of brothers and sisters as originally intended by God. Thus, the condition of the earth now becomes deplorable and pitiable. The pope's diagnosis is critical: "This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she 'groans in travail' (Rom 8:22)." (2)

Here Pope Francis is using one of his most unique lenses on the social condition of the earth, that of exclusion. As I have indicated in a previous article on the social teaching of Pope Francis:

The concept of exclusion (especially of youth and the elderly in the world of work) is not simply a new emphasis in the social teachings of the Church. Pope Francis has made it a new lens by which to understand our current global situation. As Robert McElroy recently wrote:

*The concept of exclusion that Pope Francis deploys is broader than marginalization; it is reflective of the interwoven deprivations that do not merely banish entire populations to the margins of society but exclude them entirely. In Pope Francis' memorable terminology, such people are victims of a "throwaway culture," discarded from any meaningful participation in society.<sup>8</sup>*

The Holy Father indicates a new moral seriousness to the condition of the poor: they are not merely marginalized, sidelined, forgotten and disregarded. The situation of the poor in Pope Francis' experience is more dangerous. The poor are excluded, structurally dismissed and demoted in dignity and respect. They are systematically abandoned, neglected and discarded by those with power and privilege in this world.

Here in this social encyclical, Pope Francis applies the same dynamic of exclusion to the plight of the planet, as he has to the condition of the poor. The earth is not simply being marginalized and disregarded. The earth is not simply an afterthought in the political and social calculations of leaders and their communities. The situation is more dire and dangerous. The earth is "among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor." (2)

Pope Francis aligns the "cry of the poor," so central to the task of liberation, to the "cry of the earth." The earth and the poor now share the same fate, suffer the same indignities, and face the same dire straits together. The pope calls upon the Bishops of Canada who point out that no creature, however small or seemingly insignificant, should be excluded from the glory of God: "From panoramic vistas to the tiniest living form, nature is a constant source of wonder and awe. It is also a continuing revelation of the divine." (85) This recognition that each and every creature, however small or grand, proclaims the glory of God simply in its existence, reminds humanity of what it seeks presently to forget – that our own identity is only truly understood in relation to all other creatures. (85)

What blinds us to our true identity within the entirety of God's plan is an ideology of self-sufficiency and the brazen refusal of mutual dependence: "As the Catechism teaches: 'God wills the interdependence of creatures. The sun and the moon, the cedar and the little flower, the eagle and the sparrow: the spectacle of their countless diversities and inequalities tells us that no creature is self-sufficient. Creatures exist only in dependence on each other, to complete each other, in the service of each other.'" (88)

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<sup>8</sup> D. COUTURIER, "The education of business leaders and the centrality of the poor in the social teachings of Pope Francis," *Educatio Catholica*, 1- 2019, p. 199.



We are paralyzed by our obsession with immediate needs. The failure to care for our common home traces back to this refusal of our deep communion with the rest of nature and our lack of tenderness, compassion and concern not only for the poor, but also for the earth. Our dismissal of both stem from the same disease: “our inability to broaden the scope of our present interests and to give consideration to those who remain excluded from development.” (162) For Pope Francis, this means not only being attentive to today’s poor and to the poor of the future, but also being aware and just to all our fellow creatures of the world. “We have only one heart, and the same wretchedness which leads us to mistreat an animal will not be long in showing itself in our relationships with other people.” (92)

### *The Risk of Technology*

To speak of a moral, spiritual or social risk to technology might suggest that the Church is reverting to a primitive and magical mode of thinking that denies all the progress humanity has experienced in modern forms of medicine, social communication, and social development. There is no doubt and the pope affirms that nuclear energy, biotechnology, information technology and DNA sciences have given us tremendous power to cure diseases, solve social problems, and mitigate the harmful effects of natural disasters with a precision unknown to generations before us. At the same time, the Holy Father reminds us of the devastating uses of technology by Nazism, Communism and other totalitarian regimes in the twentieth century that killed millions of people with technical precision. He reminds us that we still remain under the threat of nuclear annihilation because of the shocking arsenal of weapons developed just a generation or two ago. (104)

Pope Francis speaks of the risk of a technocratic paradigm that neither works or is in tune with nature, nor respects her principles or objective ends. The technocratic logic moves us from cooperation *with the other* to the relentless search for domination and absolute control *over the other*. We seek mastery over and not partnership with the other, whether that “other” is another human being or “the earth” itself. The encyclical explains it this way:

... 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. Human beings and material objects no longer extend a friendly hand to one another; the relationship has become confrontational. This has made it easy to accept the idea of infinite or unlimited growth, which proves so attractive to economists, financiers, and experts in technology. It is based on the lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth’s goods, and this leads to the planet being squeezed dry beyond every limit. (106)

This failure to accept limits and parameters and to see the objective reality of those subjects in front of us is the epistemological starting point, the contemporary dogma and first principle that goes unquestioned in business and finance today. It stands behind our scientific methods, as well. This fierce sense of a real or potential dominion over all is the iron clad logic of our time and it dominates economic and political life. It is the uncontested belief that every advance in technology is by definition “progress,” because the advance can be immediately advertised and monetized. (78-85)

There are economists who are unflinching in their devotion to the dogma that the sole purpose of business is profit. Anything and everything (as long as it legal) that advances profit is fair game and a legitimate pursuit.<sup>9</sup> This encyclical, however, stands in the lineage of thought that challenges this paradigm, holding that business must generate both profit and purpose and seek not only “good wealth,” but also “good goods” and “good work,” so that business is not simply a job or a career, it is also a vocation.<sup>10</sup>

What this encyclical seeks is not the devaluation of technology, but its proper direction, one “at the service of another type of progress, one which is healthier, more human, more social, more integral.” (112) What Pope Francis underlines is the fact that neither science nor technology is a neutral reality. They, too, are “derived categories” with “objectives, contexts, hazards, vulnerability, resilience and interested parties.”<sup>11</sup> Pope Francis is calling for a “positive and sustainable progress” that is rooted in social values and ecological virtues that will not be swept away by what we might call our unrestrained and unrealizable “delusions of grandeur.” (114)

### *The Risk of a Misguided Anthropocentrism*

The last great risk and hazard facing humanity during our time of ecological degradation is our own view of ourselves, the way we see ourselves and act upon this identity in every facet of our life. Quoting theologian Romano Guardini, Pope Francis teases out the implications of the technocratic paradigm for our identity:

... the technological mind sees nature as an insensate order, as a cold body of facts, as a mere ‘given,’ as an object of utility, as raw material to be hammered into useful shape; it views the cosmos similarly as mere ‘space’ into which objects can be thrown with complete indifference.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> COUTURIER, p. 108.

<sup>10</sup> COUTURIER, pp. 198-208.

<sup>11</sup> See footnote 3.

<sup>12</sup> R. GUARDINI, *Das Ende der Neuzeit*, 63 (The End of The Modern World, 55), at number 115 in this encyclical.



Pope Francis strongly suggests that we have gotten used to our dominative status, exaggerating our superiority and centrality over all creatures to the point that we disregard and dismiss creation with impunity. We accept no limits to our desires, no boundaries to our wishes, and no parameters to our passions. Thus, we show no respect for an original goodness in others or in creation itself that we must honor. This excessive anthropocentrism is delusional and dangerous. It fails to understand and honor the social bonds that exist with the rest of creation. Our obsession with “dominion” over the universe blinds us to the harm our ecological neglect has done to creation.

The pope is calling for an “ecological humility” that is attentive to the worth of the poor: the poor person and now the poor earth. We must cede our unilateral declaration of independence from reality as it is. We must give up the behaviors of absolute dominion and take up a correct relationship with the world, strengthening our openness to others as a ‘thou’ relationship “capable of knowing, loving and entering into dialogue.” (119)

The risk that an exaggerated anthropocentrism poses is that we are so concerned and obsessed with our superior status that everything else is diminished in stature. Everything and everyone else – God, neighbor and creation, becomes irrelevant unless it can serve one’s immediate interests. (122) Nothing and no one else matters except in the degree that it affects me and mine immediately. Others become mere objects, open to exploitation, abuse, abandonment, and every other disordered desire. The earth, once conceived as God’s good creation and gift, becomes “nature,” an abstract with laws and first principles and then devolves into “stuff” to be bought and sold without regard or respect for our social bonds to the whole and integral development of humankind.

### *A Franciscan Pedagogy of Creation*

Our final reflection is devoted to the education for risk in a time of increasing global uncertainty. We realize that we live in an age of accelerations, where the volume and velocity of change impacts every sector of our lives (personal, social, psychological, economic, and spiritual) simultaneously and with unprecedented consequences that are not easy to assimilate or accommodate. Our ongoing experience with a global pandemic verifies the reality of what the encyclical defines as the “rapidification” of all social and cultural forces. (18) In turn, we realize that the very experience of crisis is not exempt from the realities of acceleration, making decision-making and education for the future even more complex. Pope Francis offers a Franciscan pedagogy of creation as a model for educators to strive toward. It be-

gins with an absolute confidence in the goodness of God and travels the journey of a greater appreciation and respect for creation by way of humility and poverty.

Pope Francis frames his theology of risk in the hopeful lyrics of Francis of Assisi's *Canticle of the Creatures*, a song of praise to God in which all the creatures of the world join together in a choral unity. (1-2, 10-12, 202-246) Pope Francis is urging humanity to return to an education in covenant fidelity, the recognition that we are all creatures under one good and gracious God. He is asking humanity to give up its hubris and dominating power, to relax its grip on the throat of creation, and care for our common home now with a fraternal love that respects and honors all creatures, even the smallest and most insignificant of them.

This humility requires that we admit the full extent of our present troubled relationship with creation. We must learn how even now we are violent and abusive toward the weakest and most vulnerable of creatures. We are "homewreckers" who have abandoned, neglected, dismissed and disregarded the sisters and brothers, God's creatures, whom we need the most for our shared survival and thriving. We are distant from the true worth and honor that creation deserves. Our ecological survival depends on a Franciscan *conversion of distance* that is emotional as well as cognitive. Francis of Assisi's life provides the model.

Francis of Assisi takes up this problem of distance throughout the many years of his conversion in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. His context is the social, cultural and ecclesial ruptures caused by the endless spasms of greed and violence that rocked his corner of Italy during his adolescence. His father, part of a new class of merchants, wants fame and fortune. Beyond that, his father and his business associates want a new level of power and influence, one that was reserved for those who inherited money, from riches handed down from one generation to the next. Both Francis and his father want the power and influence that comes from making money in a new-fashioned way, by earning it.

As a young man disillusioned by the economic and social wars of his youth, Francis wants a new kind of relationship in society. His society knows only a relationship that protects inherited wealth and power and leaves the masses in perpetual poverty. The leper becomes Francis' case in point. In the prevailing models of social relationship in Francis' time, there is literally no place for lepers, the symbols of the "crisis of bodies" in the Middle Ages. There is only room for the climb for fame and fortune. However, as part of his long conversion process, Francis comes to the realization that the relationships of his time are set within the framework of a social,



political, psychological and religious “distance” from those disabled and disfigured. The early sources of Francis’ life tell the story that Francis could not go within two miles of a leper hospice without demonstrating his disgust and disdain of the lepers.<sup>13</sup> We learn that the distance between Francis and the lepers of his day was not simply in meters or miles. Lepers were made and maintained as politically, culturally, socially, psychologically and religiously distant and abandoned figures.

Francis’ religious conversion, his own ecological conversion toward a “universal communion,” changed this very dynamic of distance. As he stood in the Chapel of San Damiano, he prayed before its iconic Cross. He must have noticed the imagery of the Centurion and his servant on one of the panels of the Cross, which would have reminded him of the story of healing in the Gospel of Luke (7: 1-10), in which Jesus is asked by the Jewish elders to go to the house of a Roman centurion and cure his servant who was sick and near death. As Jesus approaches the town, the Centurion sends a message that he is “not worthy that you should come under my roof, but only say the word and my servant will be healed.”

The centurion reminds Jesus that he can cure from a distance, that distance is not and cannot be an obstacle to the divine intimacy and deep love that God has for his creatures. Jesus, deeply impressed by the centurion’s faith, cures his servant from a distance. Francis must have been so impressed by this story, with its message of distance resolved, that he immediately goes among the lepers from whom he has been distant and estranged, and, as he says, “had mercy upon them.” Francis moves to the caves and forests below Assisi not only to serve the lepers, but, more importantly, to live among them. Like Jesus, Francis removes the distance between himself and those who are disfigured and disabled.

In a similar way, the pedagogy of the Gospel of creation must now recognize and resolve the distance we have developed toward all God’s creatures. We must peer deep within ourselves and recognize the social and psychological biases we have created and the systems we have engineered to maintain and prop up our delusions of grandeur. We must develop an ‘ecological humility’ that allows us to dismantle the structures we have put in place to sustain our superiority and learn to replace them with systems that show the honor, respect and love that God’s creation deserves. We must manifest our true dignity and identity as collaborators with God in the ongoing work of creation. It is a work that requires tenderness, compassion and mercy. It requires stewardship and kinship with creation.

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<sup>13</sup> E. LECLERC, *Francis of Assisi: Return to the Gospel*, Franciscan Herald Press, 1983, p. 31.

In placing this social encyclical within the lyrical narrative of Francis of Assisi's *Canticle of the Creatures*, Pope Francis has set before us a liberating pedagogical paradigm that replaces dominating and destructive power with a collaborative choral act of praise. That is the intent of this social encyclical: to release creation from the commercial interests and economic controls that have kept it in bondage, so that all God's creatures, human and non-human, can return to their primary work, which is to praise God and build God's kingdom "on earth as it is in heaven."