Creatio Continua in Missio Dei: Ecological Spirituality and Pedagogy in Pope Francis' *Laudato Si*

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Introduction

It is said that when the famed J.R.R. Tolkien wrote about the mythical world of Middle Earth, he had in mind not only his Catholic faith but also his concern for the environment. Being a hardline Roman Catholic, Tolkien is dubbed as "conservative." Still, a closer look at his immense work reveals a man ahead of his time, a revolutionary and a prophet. Nancy Enright writes, "His views on the environment would be considered progressive in today's terms, more so than those of many politicians who see themselves as environmentalists."[1]

Tolkien's thoughts in his work depicting Middle Earth—a world that existed in a mythical time thousands of years ago, are ideas that reflect much the thoughts that Pope Francis expressed in his environmental encyclical *Laudato Si*.

For Tolkien, nature did not come into existence out of its own but is a creation of God. In Tolkien's mythical universe, Eru – or the One – is the creator of the world in the beginning.[2] Drawing inspiration from the spirituality of Saint Francis of Assisi, the Pope emphasizes the right attitude to nature, which views respect for nature as a concrete expression of our reverence for God. The Poverello of Assisi never lost sight

1 Nancy Enright, "Tolkien, Middle Earth and Laudato Si," *The Way* 57, no. 2 (April 2018): 55.
2 Ibid, 55.

of the majesty of nature and always saw that its very source springs out from God. Drawing strength from the example of the saint, Pope Francis encourages us:

> If we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs. By contrast, if we feel intimately united with all that exists, then sobriety and care will well up spontaneously (LS 11).

The title of Francis' environmental encyclical – *Laudato Si* – is a phrase taken from Saint Francis of Assisi's 13th-century hymn of praise *The Canticle of the Creature* or *the Canticle of Brother Sun and Sister Moon*. It is a lyrical praise of God's wondrous deeds through the creatures in this world. It is said that this Umbrian phrase can be translated both as *Be praised* or as *Praised be*.[3]

Tolkien coincidentally agrees with Pope Francis' criticism against technocratic paradigms that inform the modern world. He has a dislike and distrust against "technology as an externalization of power: 'use of external plans or devices instead of development of inherent inner properties and talents.'"[4] The Pope similarly expresses the same thought: "Science and technology are not neutral; from the beginning to the end of a process, various intentions and possibilities are in play and can take on distinct shapes" (LS 114). These thoughts express the pitfalls of technology when disassociated from the spiritual realities of things.

3 Xue Jiao Zhang, "How St. Francis Influenced Pope Francis' *Laudato Si*," *Crosscurrents* 66, no. 1 (March 2016): 45.
4 Enright, "Tolkien, Middle Earth and *Laudato Si*," 56.

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A response to these pitfalls is a spirituality that must be lived: "the connection between how we treat non-human creatures and the way we treat one another." This is a thesis that Pope Francis explores in *Laudato Si*. The Pope establishes a correlation between the present ecological crises with that of human and social degradation: "The human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation" (LS 48).

Tolkien's imaginative Middle Earth is a fantasy literature often criticized as an escapism from the real world. It is often viewed as irrelevant to our troubled times. And yet, it courageously describes what Pope Francis tries to address in *Laudato Si*. Tolkien raised environmental issues through the lenses of literary fiction, while Pope Francis attempts to address the contemporary world's attention on present ecological issues through ecological spirituality.

Questions on Spirituality and Pedagogy

The mythical Middle Earth is replete with literary symbols that describe how fictional creatures were created by a fictional god and how they relate to one another for good or bad. Pope Francis' *Laudato Si* proposes a similar spirituality that considers one's relationships with God and other creatures.

This paper will delve into a deeper analysis of this spirituality espoused by Pope Francis. Three questions need to be answered: (1) What is Pope Francis' notion of spirituality?; (2) What is Pope Francis' ecological spirituality in *Laudato Si*?; and (3) Why is the Pope's

ecological spirituality important in today's world as viewed by contemporary pedagogy?

In answering the first question, this paper will analyze how the Pope described or defined "spirituality" in his major pontifical documents. The second question will attempt to make a more specific analysis of the ecological spirituality that Francis advocates. The analysis of these questions will be substantiated by how other authors/theologians scrutinized and understood the Pope's works. Finally, a discussion on the Pope's ecological spirituality will be devoted along the lines of education. It should be noted that Pope Francis devoted the last chapter of his environmental encyclical to ecological education and spirituality. Here, the researcher will work along the lines of transformative learning theory as espoused and interpreted by University of Toronto professor of education Mark Hathaway and Liberation theologian Leonardo Boff.

Spirituality as an Interior Impulse: An Excursus

To grasp the ecological spirituality that Pope Francis promotes in *Laudato Si*, it is important to understand his notion of spirituality initially. In the encyclical, the Pope offers us a glimpse of how he understands spirituality. In fact, in expressing his mind on the matter, he quotes from his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium:* spirituality is an *"interior impulse which encourages, motivates, nourishes and gives meaning to our individual and community activity"* (EG 261).[5] The source of this interior impulse is no other than the Holy Spirit, whose fire burns in our hearts. A precondition to the workings of the Spirit is an attitude that

5 Ibid., 216.

welcomes Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, and drives us forward in faith, hope, and love as we advance towards full communion with God (cf. LF 7).

In his first encyclical *Lumen Fidei*, Francis succinctly describes how this "interior impulse" occurs (cf. LF 21). When one opens up and accepts Jesus Christ in his heart, the Pope tells us that the believer's self-awareness expands. It begins to thrive in the "presence" of this Other, and "in love, life takes on a whole new breadth." The believer does not see with his own eyes anymore but sees and interprets things as Jesus sees them. "In the love of Jesus, we receive in a certain way his vision," Francis says.

The locus where this "interior impulse" takes place is the heart, but it should be understood in its Hebraic sense and not in its contemporary meaning, i.e., affective dimension. Scripture is very clear about this. Aside from being the seat of emotions, the heart is the repository of memories, ideas, plans, and decisions. As the Book of Sirach says, the Lord "imparts to [men] an understanding of the heart. With wisdom and knowledge, he fills them; good and evil he shows them." [6]

An openness to the interior impulse has a transformative value since it opens up one's heart to an encounter with Christ and an acceptance of how he views the daily realities of life. Openness entails one to learn "to share in Christ's own spiritual experience and to see all things through his eyes" (LF 46). But, what kind of spirituality do we learn from Jesus?

An analysis of Pope Francis major writings always points to "a spirituality of drawing nearer to others" (EG 272). This

6 Cf. Sirach 17:5-6 NAB

is in response to the prevailing notion that suggests an introspective spirituality, a spirituality defined and measured with how it builds the self. The spirituality that the Pope underlines is a spirituality that goes beyond the confines of the self, and is measured not by how it defines the self but by how it relates with others. For him, a spirituality that is ego-centered does not lead to holiness: "Anything done out of anxiety, pride, or the need to impress others will not lead to holiness." Pope Francis' vision of spirituality is two-fold: one that connects the person with God and another that moves us to the mission. In short, the Pope dismisses a spirituality directed to the individual but always leads the individual to the other.

First, a *spirituality of drawing nearer to others* necessitates a connection with God. Popular piety is a concrete example of this connection. He claims that "it is truly a spirituality incarnated in the culture of the lowly" and "expresses that content more by way of symbols than by discursive reasoning." Reflecting on the family, Francis calls popular piety "a treasure of spirituality for many families" because the "family's communal journey of prayer culminates by sharing together in the Eucharist, especially in the context of the Sunday rest" (AL 318).

In contrast, the Pope criticizes two extremes of spirituality. On one end, he condemns Gnosticism as a "disembodied spirituality" and "one of the most sinister ideologies" that "considers its own vision of reality to be perfect" and "domesticates the mystery… of God and his grace, or the mystery of others' lives" (cf. GE 40). And on the other end, he blasts all forms of ersatz spirituality that "dominate the current religious marketplace" but has nothing to do with God (cf. GE 111). For Pope Francis, prayer is not purely a contemplation of God but is also "intercessory" in character,

i.e., as "an expression of our fraternal concern for others" (cf. GE 154).

This brings us to the second point. A *spirituality of drawing nearer to others* involves "the need to respond adequately to many people's thirst for God" (EG 89). In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis says that "we must reject the temptation to offer a privatized and individualistic spirituality which ill accords with the demands of charity" (EG 262).

In spelling out his definition of spirituality, the Pope dismisses a spirituality that is purely centered on one's thirst for God or "a disembodied Jesus who demands nothing of us with regard to others." Instead, he desires "a spirituality which can offer healing and liberation, and fill them with life and peace, while at the same time summoning them to fraternal communion and missionary fruitfulness…" (EG 89). It is a spirituality that considers the good and welfare of others, a spirituality that sees the individual relating with God through others, through his neighbors.

Finally, Pope Francis recognizes that spirituality results in something concrete in us. In *Lumen fidei*, the Pope says that the fruit of a spirit-filled life is joy, "which is the clearest sign of faith's grandeur" (LF 58).

Ecological Spirituality: *Creatio Continua in Missio Dei*

In the preceding section, it was mentioned that Pope Francis seems to propose a *spirituality of drawing nearer to others*. Such a spirituality dictates a connection with God and a need to respond adequately to people's thirst for God. These two concepts are keys to understanding the ecological spirituality of Pope Francis.

A close reading of *Laudato Si* leads us to a recognition that our human response to the various ecological crises must necessarily spring forth from our conviction that we are all connected to God: "The doctrine of God must be our driving motivation and controlling concern, even as we turn to this most urgent of human crises."[7]

It is important to note at the onset that some criticize *Laudato Si* for lacking persuasion due to a deficiency of rational objections against the Christian understanding of creation and eschatology and for giving too much emphasis on personified language to describe the world.[8] Critics argue that value and care for the natural world can stand without God's relationship to the world. Their arguments denigrate on two points. First, *Laudato Si*'s synthesis of faith and reason seems to lack persuasiveness because it ignores what is contrary to reason with respect to the fate of the cosmos. Second, *Laudato Si* fails to respond to the problem of *natural evil.* This spirals from the objection that there are features of the natural order, forms of cruelty, waste, or purposelessness that appear to be inconsistent with the ascription of power, goodness, and beauty to the divine Creator of the universe.

But such criticism is a misreading of Pope Francis' great innovative social encyclical. The encyclical does not overlook questions on the destiny of the world. On the contrary, it incorporates the entire creation with that of the destiny of man. It is not a discourse that attempts to give a lengthy theological response against the problem of evil. Rather, it is

7 Eugene R. Schlesinger, "A Trinitarian Basis for a 'Theological Ecology' in Light of *Laudato Si*," *Theological Studies* 79, no. 2 (2018): 342.

8 Here I rely on the arguments discussed in Stephen N. Williams, "Laudato Si and the Environmental Imperative: a Compelling Theology for Our Times?," *European Journal of Theology* 28, no. 2 (2019): 148-149.

an attempt to give a human –not just a Christian – response to the evils that beset the world today. To understand these points, it is necessary to look at the strong foundation of the Pope's ecological spirituality: a theology of creation.

A *spirituality of drawing nearer to others* is grounded on the relational ontology that Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar propounded.

Barth developed an *analogia relationis* both in God's Trinitarian relationality and in His relationship with the world. His theology of creation is both Christological and pneumatological in character. For him, "creation is the outward expression of God's eternal election of humanity in Christ and, as such, it has a 'telos' not only in history but also in its own inner reality and dynamism."[9] Here, Barth offers the idea that creation is a Trinitarian act and not accidental and whimsical. It is a rebuttal against what the medieval Dante Alighieri suggested regarding the cosmos; that it is an "overflowing of God's eternal love" and an impulsive act of God's Divine Will likened to the blossoming of a flower that opens into new loves.[10]

The most profound transformative event for our understanding of ourselves and the world, even if it stands outside the structures of causality that define our finite world, is the event of Jesus' Resurrection, the "first day of the new creation." "If the resurrection is indeed God's act, it not only transforms our understanding of the Triune God in relation to human finitude… it must also transform the whole of

9 James Hanvey, "*Laudato Si* and the Renewal of Theologies of Creation," *Heythrop Journal* 59, no. 6 (November 2018): 1023.

10 Anthony Oldcorn, Daniel Feldham, and Giuseppe Di Scipio, "Notes" in *Dante Alighieri, The Divine Comedy*: *Paradiso*, trans. by Allen Mandelbaum, (New York: Bantam Books, 1984), 416.

the material and non-human life of creation."[11] All creation participates in God's own life not as extension or emanation, as if it could make some claim by its own power or right, but as the grace that comes through Jesus, the Resurrected Lord.

Creation for Barth, too, is pneumatological in that "it is in the Spirit, as the point of convergence for the will of the Father and the obedience of the Son, that creation… finds both its beginning and the possibility of the human person as a covenant partner."[12] Barth's theology of creation implies that through Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit's act of sanctifying and inspiring humanity to goodness, God's free personal act of Love for humanity is fulfilled. Also, the relational and dynamic nature of creation (*creatio continua*) is established.

Interestingly, this *creatio continua* resounds clearly in the conversion experience of Saint Francis of Assisi, from whom the Pope draws inspiration. Thomas de Celano, one of the first to write about Saint Francis and the history of Franciscan Order, wrote in his biography of the saint:

> The first work that blessed Francis set his hands to as soon as he had been freed from the yoke of his blood father was to rebuild one of the Lord's temples. He did not attempt to build Him a new one but repaired an old and dilapidated church instead. He did not undermine the foundations but built over them, thus reserving his privilege with Christ without even knowing it. In fact, no one can lay any other foundation than the one that has already been laid, namely Jesus Christ. Thus, returning to the place

11 Hanvey, "*Laudato Si* and the Renewal of Theologies of Creation," 1028.
12 Ibid, 1023.

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> where, as we have said, the Church of St. Damian had been constructed long before, with the grace of the Most High, he carefully restored it in a short time.[13]

This narrative is significant because the theme of *repairing* and *restoring* is a key concept to Saint Francis' mission. Obedient to the will of the Divine Majesty, he regarded and adhered to what the Lord has instructed him to do: "He repaired and restored [the Church of San Damiano's] structure because he believed that Christ called him to build His Church upon the foundation where Christ had laid for him."[14]

Following the footsteps of his saintly namesake, Pope Francis makes use of the language of *repairing* and *restoring* in his environmental encyclical. He says that as a Church, "we need only take a frank look at the facts to see that our common home is falling into serious disrepair. Hope would have us recognize that there is always a way out, that we can always redirect our steps, that we can always do something to solve our problems" (LS 61). He also insists that "the best way to restore men and women to their rightful place, putting an end to their claim to absolute dominion over the earth, is to speak once more of the figure of a Father who creates and who alone owns the world."[15]

Hans Urs Von Balthasar picks up where Barth ends. Von Balthasar holds that Christians, as "guardians of being" who encounter and recognize the ontological difference between God and the world, must give defense or witness against

13 Thomas de Celano, *The Life of St. Francis of Assisi and the Treatise of Miracles*, trans. Catherine Bolton (Assisi: Editrice Minerva, 2007) 27-28.
14 Zhang, "How St. Francis Influenced Pope Francis' Laudato Si," 43.
15 Ibid, 75.

technological instrumentalization and reductionism.[16] Pope Francis highlighted the incapacity of technology to see the vast network of relations and the need to look for solutions not only through technology but through "a change of humanity."[17] Here, the Pope seems to surmise that a theology of creation presupposes a theological anthropology that determines humanity's moral relationship with the natural and the biological life.

Indeed, the solution to the ecological problems that the world is facing rests on humanity. As Pope Francis points out in *Laudato Si* 101-36*,* the various ecological problems that the world is facing today are the result of human activity, especially of our misuse of our natural resources and of the non-human lives that have been entrusted to our care. As Eugene Schlesinger writes, "It can only be through a change in human activity that this crisis can be addressed and, by the grace of God, corrected."[18] Yet, to address the ecological problems that the world is facing, as the Pope also points out in *Laudato Si* 137-62, there is also a need to address the needs of our fellow human beings.

A spirituality that responds to the people's thirst for God is a spirituality that considers the welfare and common good. In presenting a detailed analysis of the global problems and issues that the world is facing today, ranging from climate change to social injustices, Pope Francis' environmental encyclical suggests that these ranging issues are not isolated problems that need to be resolved. Rather, these issues are interconnected and are required to be viewed holistically. As

16 Hanvey, "Laudato Si and the Renewal of Theologies of Creation," 1024.

17 cf. Francis, *Laudato Si* 9 and 20.

18 Schlesinger, "A Trinitarian Basis for a 'Theological Ecology' in Light of *Laudato Si*," 343.

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he says, "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. 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."[19]

The Pope is eloquently establishing a powerful connection between how we treat non-human creatures and how we treat one another. Misuse of the Earth and its creatures leads to the exploitation of fellow human beings. Pope Francis never suggests that humans are *not* more important than other creatures. Rather, he suggests that attached to our being an *imago Dei* is the greater responsibility of taking care and nurturing the Earth and its creatures.

In the language of *Laudato Si,* the connection between the varied issues facing the world and the connection that non-human creatures have with humans is called *integral ecology.* True to the spirit of Saint Francis, the Pope names our common home both as *sister* and *mother.*[20] The Earth is our sister because, like us humans, she too is a creature of God, and so, therefore, we belong to one family and that we both have God as our Father. And yet, the Earth is also our mother because she gives us shelter and provides nourishment to us. The Pope's analogy about the Earth as mother and sister points to the truth that everything is connected. Sadly, today's society fails to grasp the imbalance that wanton exploitation of creation causes in the connectedness that is shared by everyone. "With the loss and extinction of some species, we will no longer see God's wondrous deeds and praise Him through them on Earth. This loss causes a disconnection between the

19 Francis, *Laudato Si* 92.
20 cf. Ibid, 1.

Creator and the human beings because we know that Saint Francis found God's existence and experienced God's beauty in every creature."[21]

The urgent need for a radical transformation of humanity with how it conducts itself with the rest of creation is an essential element of the Church's environmental mission. Pope Francis, in *Laudato Si* 3, underscores that part of the ongoing missionary renewal called for in *Evangelii gaudium* is the dialogue about our common home.

To partake in the *creatio continua,* an emphasis on humanity's need to always participate in the *missio Dei* is crucial: "The concept of mission as *missio Dei* is meant to highlight that mission is first of all and fundamentally a divine activity, rather than a human one. We are recruited into and invited to participate in God's mission, but our place in that mission is not at the center."[22] Two facts emphasize the importance of this.

First, it veers away from the anthropocentrism that has led the world to the environmental crisis that it is facing: "The Creator's agenda is the center of our concerns, and this Creator has not made an isolated humanity, but placed us within a vast whole, all of which he values."[23] To overcome the ecological crisis, human beings must learn to accept their position and connection with the overarching structure of nature and creation. Boundaries must be accepted in dealing with nature by not regarding them simply as objects that must be exploited. Addressing humanity's self-conception and identifying its place in the world is an important part of

21 Zhang, "How St. Francis Influenced Pope Francis' Laudato Si," 49.
22 Schlesinger, "A Trinitarian Basis for a 'Theological Ecology' in Light of *Laudato Si*," 345.
23 Ibid.

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this process: "Human beings… are and always remain part of nature. The mandate to humankind to be God's caretaker on Earth changes nothing fundamentally."[24]

Second, the centrality of divine action in our redemption and the redemption of the world is placed in the foreground. The ultimate purpose why each creature will have to be saved – *repaired* or *restored* – is not for our end, but so that "God may be everything to everyone." As Nathan O'Halloran writes, "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."[25]

This is particularly and sincerely made possible through the Eucharist. Pope Francis laconically and dramatically describes this mystery: "The Lord, in the culmination of the mystery of the Incarnation, chose to reach our intimate depths through a fragment of matter. He comes not from above but from within; he comes that we might find him in this world of ours. In the Eucharist, fullness is already achieved; it is the living center of the universe, the overflowing core of love and of inexhaustible life" (LS 236).

Ecological Spirituality of *Laudato Si* Viewed along with the Lenses of Pedagogy

Pope Francis admits in Laudato Si 15 that he is convinced that change is impossible without a process of education

24 Reinhard Marx, "'Everything Is Connected': On the Relevance of an Integral Understanding of Reality in Laudato Si," *Theological Studies* 77, no. 2 (2016): 298.

25 Nathan W. O'Halloran, "'Each Creature, Resplendently Transfigured': Development of Teaching in Laudato Si," *Theological Studies*79, no. 2 (2018): 397.

and that human development can draw lessons from the rich spiritual heritage of the Church to achieve this.

This paper has labored to cull from Pope Francis's major pronouncements regarding his understanding of spirituality. And his writings have shown that he views spirituality as an interior impulse that encourages, motivates, nourishes, and gives meaning to our individual and community activity. He spoke of a spirituality of drawing nearer to others. And by speaking of others, it has been identified that Francis is referring to two realities in the spiritual life. It is a spirituality that necessitates one to go out of himself and find a connection with God. It also means responding adequately to many people's thirst for God.

It has also been established that the same is true when Pope Francis speaks about ecological spirituality. The Pope's environmental encyclical insists that an ecological spirituality must always necessarily spring forth from one's conviction that all creatures – both non-human and human lives – are connected to God. And the same document suggests that an ecological spirituality requires a *creatio continua* by means of sharing in the *missio Dei*.

The Pope firmly believes that there is a need for a "distinctive way of looking at things," an educational program, and a spirituality that will "generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm."[26] In *Laudato Si* no. 211, he expresses his confidence that a formation in ecological responsibility can embolden different ways of action that will usher change in the world for the better. And in *Laudato Si* 216, he expressed interest in exploring how spirituality can motivate concern for the care of our common home.

26 Ibid, 111.

This section will devote a considerable discussion on ecological spirituality as viewed along with the lenses of a pedagogical theory dubbed as a transformative learning theory. The way Pope Francis lays down his ecological vision in his encyclical suggests a pattern along the lines of transformative learning theory, specifically of University of Toronto professor Mark Hathaway and Liberation theologian Leonardo Boff's take on this celebrated concept.

The main proponent of transformative learning theory is Jack Mezirow, who, in 1978, was commissioned by the United States of America's Department of Education to conduct a nationwide action research project study that would analyze why so many women were returning to study and how their studies affected them afterward.[27]

Transformative learning is defined "as a process in which the *meaning perspective*, including thought, feeling and will, fundamentally changes."[28] This means that every individual has a particular view of the world. This may or may not be well expressed in words, but it is usually based on a set of paradigmatic assumptions that is built on the individual's upbringing, experience, culture, faith, and education. The main proponent of transformative learning theory, Jack Mezirow, holds that people find it hard to work for change because their worldviews have become unconscious frames of reference constructed by the habits of the mind.[29] Particular

27 Michael Christie et al., "Putting Transformative Learning Theory Into Practice," *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* 55, no. 1 (April 2015): 11.

28 Arnd-Michael Nohl, "Typical Phases of Transformative Learning: A Practice-Based Model," *Adult Education Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (2015): 35.

29 Christie et al., "Putting Transformative Learning Theory Into Practice," 11.

worldviews, Mezirow insists, have become so deep-seated that it would need a powerful argument, which he called *disorienting dilemma*, to unseat them all.

Mezirow identified ten phases of transformative learning: (1) a disorienting dilemma; (2) self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame; (3) a critical assessment of assumptions; (4) recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared; (5) exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions; (6) planning a course of action; (7) acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans; (8) provisional trying of new roles; (9) building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationship; (10) a reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective.[30]

But change, for Mezirow, is always provisional.[31] When specific paradigms begin to dominate an individual, group, or institution, Mezirow claims that it is time to begin to question the paradigm and, if not, subvert them.

Since Mezirow conducted his first study in 1978, he has frequently revised his transformative learning theory after engaging in dialogue and debates with fellow educational theorists: "During the last 20 years, over hundreds of studies have been carried out using the theory, increasing expansion in research, repeatedly needed to point out Mezirow's theorization, synthesizing the salient concepts and the evolution of his theory."[32] In today's field of adult education, Mezirow's theory is considered a harmonious, reliable, and efficient model.

30 Nohl, "Typical Phases of Transformative Learning: A Practice-Based Model," 36.

31 Christie et al., "Putting Transformative Learning Theory Into Practice," 22.

32 Chiara Biasin, "Transformative Learning: Evolutions of the Adult Learning Theory, "*Revue Phronesis* 7, no. 3 (2018): 12.

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However, in 2014, a study concluded that Mezirow's phases varied from case to case, and the same study proposed a more general phase model.[33] A five-phased general model, based on different learning situations, was proposed as a revision to Mezirow's ten-phased model, and Mezirow's concept of disorienting dilemma was replaced.[34] The five phases are: (1) non-determining start; (2) experimental and undirected inquiry; (3) social testing and mirroring; (4) shifting of relevance; and (5) social consolidation and reinterpretation.

A non-determining start begins the process of transformative learning. The process begins when novelty, neither anticipated nor planned, abruptly breaks into life. It is called a non-determining start because the "first experiences do not in any way predetermine the (transformative) character of the subsequent process."[35]

Pope Francis' *Laudato Si* is a novelty in that no pope in history has devoted a social encyclical that confronts the ecological problems that the contemporary world faces. In fairness to his predecessors, the previous popes have spoken about environmental issues but never has a pope devoted a systematic and comprehensive analysis of the environmental problems and their correlated social issues until this pontificate. The Pope's global prowess and influence have started a worldwide dialogue on the issue of ecological degradation, and the fruit of this dialogue has yet to be reaped: "*Laudato Si* will be remembered long beyond the current age because

33 Nohl, "Typical Phases of Transformative Learning: A Practice-Based Model," 37.

34 Here I will be relying on Nohl, "Typical Phases of Transformative Learning: A Practice-Based Model," 39.

35 Nohl, "Typical Phases of Transformative Learning: A Practice-Based Model," 40.

Pope Francis is writing about a timeless view of nature, rooted in the spirit of Saint Francis."[36]

When the non-determining start has commenced, the main actors begin to experiment with the new practices and take into account the results of their efforts, and readjusts them.[37]

Pope Francis' environmental encyclical is not simply based on previous papal pronouncements and ecclesiastical teachings. Its novelty lies in the fact that it relies on scientific facts, communal experiences, dialogue and rests on the long history of the institutional Church. For instance, Pope Francis said that "A very solid scientific consensus indicates that we are presently witnessing a disturbing warming of the climatic system" (LS 23). In another instance, Francis humbly admits that "there are certain environmental issues where it is not easy to achieve a broad consensus" and that "the Church does not presume to settle scientific questions or to replace politics;" instead he encourages "an honest and open debate so that particular interests or ideologies will not prejudice the common good" (LS 188).

Arnd-Michael Nohl writes, "In the third phase, the actors exposed their new practices to the appraisal of other people and had the opportunity to reflect on them in light of the reactions of their interaction partners."[38] Swapping between reinforcing one's newly found practices in a group of like-minded people and baring them to the assessment of the bigger community help actors fathom the importance of what has newly been integrated into their lives. This is to oblige them to appropriate their new knowledge and skills within a group.

36 Enright, "Tolkien, Middle Earth and *Laudato Si*," 61.
37 Nohl, "Typical Phases of Transformative Learning: A Practice-Based Model," 41.
38 Ibid.

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At the onset of his encyclical, Pope Francis invited all people – Catholics and non-Catholics alike – to dialogue about our common home. The traditional title page of the encyclical letter omits the receiver of the papal letter, which caught the attention of many commentators. Since the publication of this encyclical, a lot has been said by many scholars who wish to interpret and appropriate the message of this encyclical to the particular situations of life, notwithstanding the number of criticisms and praises that this encyclical has garnered. Since the encyclical has only been recently published, we may surmise that the world is still in this phase of receiving the intent and message of *Laudato Si.* Its proposals have yet to be tested; its vision has yet to be fully realized.

The fourth phase, which is shifting relevance, means that the new practice becomes the focused experience from being in the margins. It must be noted that there are many transformation processes where new practices commence, and yet older habits persist. In such cases, the new practices gradually expand.[39]

Although, as this paper holds, we are still in the third phase, Pope Francis' new approach to the ecosystem has also paved the way for its practice. Parishes are beginning to tap their own ecology committees, and churches are beginning to implement eco-friendly measures to save the environment from further destruction. This involves harnessing electricity through solar panel systems, conservation of water resources, recycling, observance of "seasons of creation," and catechesis and education.

Finally, "the transformation process ends in a phase in which the actors find social relations that stabilize their new

39 Ibid, 43.

practices."[40] As Pope Francis envisions towards the end of his encyclical, "The human person grows more, matures more and is sanctified more to the extent that he or she enters into relationships, going out from themselves to live in communion with God, with others and with all creatures" (LS 240).

Still, Pope Francis' ecological spirituality can be viewed along with the lenses of transformative learning theory, particularly according to its theoretical perspective, which is cultural-spiritual. Here, Mark Hathaway and Leonardo Boff's take on the theory of transformative learning comes to play. sThey have dubbed Hathaway and Boff's take on this theory as *The Tao of Liberation*.

Hathaway and Boff define *the Tao of Liberation* as "a search for wisdom, the wisdom needed to effect profound transformations in the world."[41] They adapted the ancient Chinese word *tao* to describe their take of the theory of transformative learning as a principled way or path that leads to harmony, peace, and right relationship. This is very apt for Pope Francis' encyclical since Francis shares in the same direction. He wishes to rectify the misuses and abuses that our common home has suffered and eventually achieve a harmonious communion in creation.

In a separate paper that Hathaway presented at an education conference in Canada, he identifies five important elements to their take on transformative learning.

The first of these elements is *invocation*. Invocation is "remembering our communion with other beings and the

40 Ibid, 44.

41 Hathaway, Mark and Leonardo Boff, *The Tao of Liberation: Exploring the Ecology of Transformation* (New York: Orbis Books, 2009) xxiii.

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cosmos, and finding inspirational energy through beauty and awe."[42]

In his encyclical, Francis points out that we need "to accept the world as a sacrament of communion, as a way of sharing with God and our neighbors on a global scale" (LS 9). In this paper, it was earlier mentioned that Francis picks up from Von Balthasar, who viewed Christians as *guardians of being.* In highlighting this, he emphasized the importance of *wonder* as a fundamental value for the guardians of being: "Wonder is not only the epistemological response to the presence of Being, it is ultimately our encounter and recognition of the ontological difference between God and the world."[43]

Wonder is important to remind us that as much as we are called to participate in the *creatio continua*, we humans are still ontologically different from God. We are not creators who can exploit and abuse creation but must constantly be aware of a higher Being who is beyond our finite comprehension. The same wonder helps us appreciate the beauty around us and lead to glorifying the One who made us all. Hathaway identifies *mindfulness* as a key concept to invocation. It empowers us to "cultivate our awareness of the emerging story of the universe and foster an apprehension of the interconnection of all beings."[44]

Another key element in *the Tao of Liberation* is *letting go*. This concerns "embracing the void and clearing away the cobwebs of delusion that ensnare and disempower us."[45]

42 Mark Hathaway, "Transformative Learning and the Ecological Crisis: Insights from The Tao of Liberation" (Canada: New Prairie Press, 2011), 286.
43 Hanvey, "Laudato Si and the Renewal of Theologies of Creation," 1024.
44 Hathaway, "Transformative Learning and the Ecological Crisis: Insights from The Tao of Liberation" 286.
45 Ibid, 286.

Francis has mentioned a lot of environmental issues and problems. He emphasizes that part of the solution is to face reality courageously. It is a process of letting go to work for a better future. He says, "In the concrete situation confronting us, there are a number of symptoms which point to what is wrong, such as environmental degradation, anxiety, a loss of the purpose of life and of community living. Once more, we see that realities are more important than idea" (LS 110). He is insisting that action is better than the enunciation of ideas.

A key concept to letting go, Hathaway says, is *meditation*. It is "the process of emptying ourselves of preconceptions and predisposition allowing a radical openness to new perspectives." Is this not what Francis said about contemplation of creation, which "allows us to discover in each thing a teaching which God wishes to hand on to us"?[46] In *Laudato Si* no. 161, he invites us even to reflect on our accountability before those who will suffer the consequences of our abuse.

The third element is *creative empowerment*. This is "reconnecting with the intrinsic power that enables us to see clearly and act decisively in the right way, at the right place, and at the right time."[47] Its key concepts are *intuition* and *compassion*.

Reflecting on the Pope's encyclical, Eli McCarthy mentions the creative empowerment that mercy teaches us. He says that "mercy enters into the chaos of the troubled relationships and sin, finds nonviolent ways to illuminate the truth of the conflict, and to heal the harm done to the relationships."[48] Although Pope Francis mentions the word,

46 Hathaway, "Transformative Learning and the Ecological Crisis: Insights from The Tao of Liberation" 286.
47 Ibid.
48 Eli McCarthy, "Breaking Out: The Expansiveness of Restorative

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"mercy" only once in his environmental encyclical, it is much present in the words and spaces between them; that the care for creation is a practice of mercy.

Hathaway's last element in his take on the transformative learning theory is *incarnating the vision:* "We move," he says, "from vision to embodiment to action."[49] Important to this element are traditional praxis-oriented processes with more spiritual and intuitive approaches.

The vision of the care for creation is embodied in our sacraments. "The Sacraments," Pope Francis says, "are a privileged way in which nature is taken up by God to become a means of mediating supernatural life" (LS 235). Indeed, one would notice that many of the *matter* used in the sacraments are creatures of God: the water that is blessed, the wine produced from the sweetest grapes, the bread baked from wheat, and the oil yielded from olive. These are material reminders that humanity, too, must incarnate God's vision for all creation: to raise it up to the glory and holiness of God.

The elements of *Tao of Liberation* indeed is a pedagogy that leads us to a greater appreciation of ecological spirituality. They are indeed *tao* – paths – of liberation in the sense that *liberation* "entails repairing the terrible damage that we have inflicted both upon each other and upon our planet."[50]

Conclusion

The celebrated Jesuit priest and poet Gerard Manley Hopkins once said: "All things are… charged with love, are

Justice in *Laudato Si*," *Journal of Moral Theology* 5, no. 2 (2016): 68.

49 Hathaway, "Transformative Learning and the Ecological Crisis: Insights from The Tao of Liberation" 286.

50 Hathaway and Boff, The Tao of Liberation: Exploring the Ecology of Transformation, xxv.

charged with God and if we know how to touch them give off sparks and take fire, yield drops and flow, ring and tell of Him."[51]

True to his Jesuit heritage, Hopkins' poetry triggers the imagination and invites us to examine what is right and wrong with our lives: "He saw humanity's assaults on nature as a kind of sin but retained a deep hope that, despite the destruction unleashed by humans, God and the redemptive power of God's love at work in nature could and would change things."[52]

Like his fellow Jesuit, Pope Francis does the same in his landmark encyclical Laudato Si. If Tolkien and Hopkins used literature to rouse humanity's slumbering spirits, Francis' encyclical too is a wake-up call for everyone.

The Pope envisions not only concrete responses to the ecological problems that the world is facing. He proposes an ecological spirituality that must be lived not only by Catholics but by non-Christians as well. Spirituality, after all, is an interior impulse that encourages, motivates, nourishes, and gives meaning to our individual and community activity. And so, an ecological spirituality is something that moves all of us to continue our participation (creatio continua) in God's act of creation (missio Dei). This participation is borne out of our gratitude and connection with God, and our extreme desire to lead others to God. As our participation in this ongoing Divine act of creation, care for creation is a concrete step in living out gloria Deo et pax hominibus.

Pope Francis' ecological spirituality is an invitation for

51 *The Note-Books and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins,* edited by Humphrey House (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1937), 342.

52 Nancy Enright, "Hopkins, Nature and *Laudato Si*," *The Way* 58, no. 2 (April 2019): 85.

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us to re-educate and re-orient ourselves to a lifestyle that promotes care for creation. We have seen that the Pope's ecological spirituality is plausible, gauging it from the lenses of transformative learning theory as a sound pedagogy for change. Perhaps Pope Francis has shown us a disorienting dilemma by giving us a comprehensive analysis of the perils that beset Mother Earth today. Yet, it is not too late to learn from our mistakes and take the path of changing our mindsets and attitude for the love of God in creation. As James Hanvey writes, "The imago Dei must lead to the imitatio Christi if the human being is to realize his or her own created life and purpose."[53] A humanity that basks in the salvation wrought by Jesus Christ must always participate in God's salvific activity and must educate himself by engaging in moral, spiritual, and intellectual tasks.

Pope Francis says, "Everything is interconnected," and "this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity" (LS 240).

53 Hanvey, "*Laudato Si* and the Renewal of Theologies of Creation," 1031.