

Concept of Nature from *Rerum novarum* to *Laudato si'*

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This chapter, from a philosopher, explores the treatment of the nature of the physical world in Catholic social teaching (CST) from *Rerum novarum* (RN) to *Laudato si'* (LS). The concept of nature is not easy to understand. It is often identified with the physical world, which is ever changing. With regard to CST, the use of “nature,” or *physis*, refers to the physical world. In Plato’s *Timaeus*, we find that a craftsman creates the world according to the ideas, or universal forms,¹ which is a kind of internal organizational principle that one might refer to as “the structure of things.”

Aristotle’s view of nature and natural law provided a foundation for RN’s retrieval of a Thomistic philosophical foundation for restoring order in the tumultuous, if not chaotic, social world of the late nineteenth century.² The language of CST uses the term “nature” to refer to the physical world—a world that has a relationship to God. However, it does not use the language of “creation” to speak of this world until the CST documents of the late twentieth century.³ Since

¹ Plato, *Timaeus* 31b.

² For treatment of the Neo-Thomistic influences on the early formation of natural law ethics, which provided a conceptual vehicle for exploring the moral guidance for understanding “natural law” as a mandate for the common good, see Stephen J. Pope, “Natural Law in Catholic Social Teachings,” and Thomas A. Shannon, “Rerum Novarum,” in *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations*, ed. Kenneth Himes and Lisa Sowle Cahill (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005), 41–71, 127–50.

³ Cahill provides an important insight: “Since the Enlightenment, however, the rising ideal of human equality has helped theologians challenge received hierarchies. A salient example is patriarchy, supposedly licensed by the fact that woman was taken from man’s rib (Gen. 2:22), implying that she is inferior and subordinate.... Similarly, the rights of humanity over the natural environment have been moderated in recent decades by theologies of reciprocity, if not equality, between humanity and non-human creation.” “Creation in Ethics,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics*, ed. Gilbert Meilaender and William Werpehowski (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 13.

Vatican II, CST has placed greater emphasis on the role of the Christian in the world. The Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes* (hereafter, *GS*), invited engagement in the world as co-creators of God's continued presence and life in the church.⁴

The next part deals with the relationship of the natural world to the treatment of women in CST. Several elements are interrelated in this analysis: the common good; the treatment of women as identified solely by her biological role in childbearing and child rearing, which can be perceived as a form of biological essentialism;⁵ the relationship of Catholic social teaching to the world of nature; and the role of the Church in the formation of all citizens, men and women, to act justly and promote the common good.

The treatment of women in CST follows the Greek philosophical understanding that women are inferior males and identified by their bodies as child bearers and nurturers. Throughout Western philosophical tradition, women have been viewed consistently with their bodies, whereas men are viewed more consistently with their minds.

⁴ "The document makes a major new contribution to modern Catholic social teaching by presenting more explicitly developed theological grounds for the Church's social engagement than are found in the earlier social encyclicals.... These earlier social teachings were almost exclusively framed in concepts and language of the natural law ethic of Scholastic philosophy. One researches in vain the writings of the popes during the hundred years before the Council for careful consideration of the biblical, Christological, eschatological, or ecclesiological basis of the Church's social role." David Hollenbach, SJ, "Commentary on *Gaudium et spes*," in Himes and Cahill, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching*, 226, 273.

⁵ In *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), Nancy Chodorow provides a feminist sociological argument for "biology is destiny" and challenges the prevailing theories of defining women by a sexual division of labor in which "mothering" is important for reproduction. See particularly "The Argument from Nature," 13–30. In "The Theological Study of Gender," a chapter in *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender*, ed. Adrian Thatcher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), Tina Beattie analyzes the influence of modern gender studies on Christian theology: "In its engagement with gender theory, theology must ask what is needed to repair the ruptured relationship between language and materiality, and between self and neighbour, without reinscribing bodies within the exhausted sexual essentialisms of modernity. Such questions must also be asked of our relationships with the non-human aspects of creation, for we are becoming aware of how interwoven our lives are with those of the rest of creation.... The quest for an incarnational, Trinitarian theology, deeply rooted in the goodness of creation, must attend to the significance of gender if it is to be faithful to the wisdom of its own tradition. Gender theory dissolves the moral certainties and sexual binaries of bourgeois Christian modernity and ushers in a new and as yet unknowable future" (46–47).

Women's identification with biological reproduction identifies them with the physical world solely based on biology. Such associations are reinforced by a sexual division of labor. In CST, women's "nature" is frequently referred to, if at all, as being different from that of men because of their social roles and biological differences. "Women, again, are not suited to certain trades, for a woman is by nature fitted for home work."⁶ And women are identified by their roles of childbearing and child rearing. Hence, there is a similarity in the treatment of the world of nature and women as identified with the physical world and biological determinism, which places both in a subordinate status.

This chapter explores the development of these concepts from *RN* to *LS*, with an emphasis on retrieval, continuity, and development, with possibilities for future consideration, especially if a more egalitarian understanding of the integrity of women in their own right can be included as a more integral part of the flourishing of the Church and the common good. The importance of Vatican II and its emphasis on an Incarnational relationship to the world offers a new lens that affirms the dignity and integrity of all creation. Hopefully, such a lens will enable all to see beyond centuries-old social and cultural constructions, rooted in biological reductionism, of the nature and role of women, and affirm women as equal partners in the work of the Church. Vatican II still needs further implementation, and this chapter presents how such inclusion is appropriate for a renewed Christian community that is about the promotion of the common good in all its potential.

The Common Good

⁶ David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon, eds., *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 30.

The common good is not a uniquely Christian concept. It is grounded in Greek philosophy and, according to David Hollenbach, “for Aristotle in ancient Greece, the common good was the goal of the whole of public life. He conceived of the human being as a social or political animal (*zoon politikon*) whose good is essentially bound up with the good of the *polis*.”⁷

In *RN*, Leo XIII, defining the end of society, stated, “Civil society exists for the common good and, therefore, is concerned with the interests of all in general, and with the individual interests in their due place and proportion.”⁸ In addition, references to the common good in *Quadragesimo anno* of Pope Pius XI in 1931 articulate the requirements of the common good.⁹

The most often cited text describing the demands of the common good can be found in *GS*: “As a result the common good, that is, the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment, today takes an increasingly universal complexion and consequently involves rights and duties with respect to the whole human race.”¹⁰

⁷ Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 11. Hollenbach explores the Aristotelian concept of the common good in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1169b, and *Politics* 1280b, 6–7, 1281a, 3–4. Jacques Maritain provides a rich analysis of the common good in *The Person and the Common Good* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1947): “There is a correlation between the notion of the *person* as a social unit and the notion of the *common good* as the end of the social whole. They imply one another. The common good is common because it is received in persons, each one of whom is as a mirror of the whole.... Let us note in passing that the common good is not only a system of advantages and utilities but also a rectitude of life, an end, good in itself or, as the Ancients expressed it, a *bonum honestum*.... The common good is something ethically good” (42–43). Maritain also implies that any consideration of the common good is concerned with the future.

⁸ O’Brien and Shannon, *Catholic Social Thought*, 33.

⁹ O’Brien and Shannon, *Catholic Social Thought*, 94. “Each class, then, must receive its due share, and the distribution of created goods must be brought into conformity with the demands of the common good and social justice ... This [common good] embraces the sum total of conditions of social living, whereby men are enabled more fully and more readily to achieve their own perfection.” Could this understanding of the common good provide the kind of inclusion necessary to view women as having the same end?

¹⁰ O’Brien and Shannon, *Catholic Social Thought*, 181. St. Pope John Paul II referred to future generations as a justice concern with regard to the common good of the earth. “Message of His Holiness Pope John Paul II for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace,” January 1, 1990, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19891208_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html, no. 1. Pope Benedict XVI referred to “*inter-generational justice*” (*Caritas in veritate*, encyclical letter, Vatican website, June 29, 2009, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html, no. 48).

As one can see, the teaching of the common good is focused only on people at this stage of development. The more recent *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy* addresses the global common good more specifically, even though the focus is still solely on people. It is understood that the fundamental rights of each person to a life of dignity are the starting point for a new world order, and the common good is the concrete expression of that order. The common good is a moral good.¹¹

On January 1, 1990, in his message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace, John Paul II, reading the signs of the times, addressed the world about the “lack of *due respect for nature*.”¹² He also claimed that “*no peaceful society can afford to neglect either respect for life or the fact that there is an integrity to creation*.”¹³ Quoting the words of GS, he affirmed, “God destined the earth and all it contains for the use of every individual and all peoples.”¹⁴

The understanding of the common good is expanded to include the respectful treatment of the integrity of the earth as a component of the common good for all people. The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales expands the understanding of the common good:

The Church recognizes that care for the environment is part of care for the common good—the environment is one of the “common goods” which are the shared responsibility of the human race.... Those who feel moved to a loving care for the internal balances of nature are responding to a deep religious instinct implanted within them by God.... Our environmental “common goods” are not only available for careful use and enjoyment today, but are held in trust for the use and enjoyment of future generations. Public authorities must never treat them as having no intrinsic worth, nor commercial concerns see them merely as sources of profit or loss.... Because of this environmental mortgage that the future holds over the present, none of this natural wealth

¹¹ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy* (Washington, DC: Office of Publishing and Promotion Services, US Catholic Conference, 1986), 58.

¹² John Paul II, “World Day of Peace,” no. 1.

¹³ John Paul II, “World Day of Peace,” no. 7.

¹⁴ John Paul II, “World Day of Peace,” no. 8.

can be owned outright, as if nobody but the owner had any say in its disposal. Each generation takes the natural environment on loan, and must return it after use in as good or better condition as when it was first borrowed.

In recent years one of the prime duties of public authorities has become the careful conservation of this environmental dimension of the “common good.” Damage to the environment is no respecter of frontiers, and damage done by one generation has the capacity to damage future generations: these are among the most powerful reasons for desiring the creation of effective global authorities responsible for the common good at international level.¹⁵

It is important to recognize the transformation of the concept of the common good in CST in the 1990s. However, the focus of the common good and the concern for the “common goods” is still rather anthropocentric in terms of the goods of the earth exist to serve humans. There is little recognition of the integrity of the physical world until *Laudato si'*. There are similarities with regard to the treatment of women in the tradition. In Greek philosophy, the treatment of the nature of women was one that assumed the inferiority of women, and it is not unrelated to our concerns about the created world and the ways we have been socialized to think about the feminine relationship of this concept to the physical world. A patriarchal world reflects systemic relationships in which men are dominant and rule over subordinate women.¹⁶

¹⁵ Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, *The Common Good and the Catholic Church's Social Teaching* (London: Catholic Bishops' Conference of England Wales, 1996), 25.

¹⁶ Sarah Coakley provides an interesting distinction between hierarchy and patriarchy. “‘Hierarchy,’ like ‘power,’ is a word much in need of nuanced and analytical reflection.... Where hierarchy simply means *order*, then, it is not at all clear that feminism should oppose it.... Patriarchy reflects a hierarchical world in which values and judgments are applied to establish relationships of superiority/inferiority.” *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'on the Trinity'* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 319–20. Elizabeth Johnson provides a definition of patriarchy as well: “Women’s theology uses technical terms to single out oppressive patterns of social and mental behavior. *Patriarchy*, or rule of the father, refers to social structures where power is always in the hands of the dominant man or men. Under patriarchy women never have equal access to power in the social sphere. *Androcentrism*, or male-centeredness, refers to ways of thinking that privilege men; it makes men’s way of being human normative for all human beings. In androcentric thinking women are always derivative, off-center, less than human.” *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: Continuum International, 2007), 95.

Women and Nature

When we explore the meaning of nature and creation, we need to understand the ways we have been socialized to think of the material world and the concomitant identification of women with the physical world. Much of Western philosophy and Christian thought relies on the dominance of Platonic and Aristotelian thought. The physical world was bound by contingency and, often, seen as a world of chaos and change; hence, it was somewhat deceptive and unreliable with regard to the higher realms of value and knowing.

The focus of this part is the following: first, the conception of the nature of woman in the ancient world, which was a historical and social creation in which the basic unit was the patriarchal family; second, the views of Plato and Aristotle on the nature of women as inferior males; third, the medieval and Renaissance views of the nature of women and the physical world as a benevolent female occupying a subordinate position in a patriarchal relationship. Such patriarchal relationships of dominance and control were evidenced in how the earth could be plowed, cultivated, used as a commodity, and manipulated as a resource.¹⁷ Such cultural constructs contributed to the establishment of hierarchical and patriarchal relationships that emphasized the superiority of men vis-à-vis women and the justification for a relationship of dominance and subordination of women, as well as the subordination of the physical world, nature, to domination by humans.

Within the Christian tradition, there are the roots of a Greek conception of the nature of woman as inferior male, identified with the world of particular, physical existence and the realm

¹⁷ Celia E. Deane-Drummond, commenting on Aquinas's *Summa theologiae*, q. 92.1–q. 92.4, notes that Aquinas's position on the ontological status of women reflected the patriarchal culture of his time, "affording women a lower status than men" and that "Aquinas held that women were deficient in their reasoning powers." *The Ethics of Nature* (New York: Blackwell, 2004), 186–87, 208. See also Jean Porter, *The Recovery of Virtue* (London: SPCK, 1994), 138–40.

of matter, whereas men are associated with the realm of ideas, or the forms, culture and the creators of history. The role of women is in the domestic realm, whereas the role of men is in the public world outside the home; hence, women in this worldview, along with the physical world of nature, were perceived as inferior and in need of being controlled.

The reason for women's inferiority lies in defect. Aristotle deduced the inferiority of women by referencing their biological differences. Since men are identified with the forms, women are identified with matter. "Women do not go bald because their nature is similar to that of children: both are incapable of producing seminal secretion." This is a deformity in the nature of the female.¹⁸ According to Aristotle, "It is best for all tame animals to be ruled by human beings. For this is how they are kept alive. In the same way, the relationship between the male and the female is by nature such that the male is higher, the female lower, that the male rules and the female is ruled."¹⁹ Aristotle and people like St. Thomas Aquinas contributed to an understanding of rights as a reflection of the nature of things but lacked our understanding of the sacredness, integrity, and equality of women.²⁰

The Greek identity of nature is understood as the physical world, the earth, and women. Women were perceived as identified with the physical world—not the rational world, as men were. Such images of women are of the nurturing, homebound mother. The identity of the earth as female also was central to many of the ancients. Women were seen as wholesome and life-giving. Ancient peoples viewed the earth as nurturing: "The female earth was central to the organic cosmology that was undermined by the Scientific Revolution and the rise of a market-

¹⁸ Aristotle, *On the Generation of Animals* 784a5–12, quoted in Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, *Women in Greece and Rome* (Toronto: Samuel-Stevens, 1977), 6.

¹⁹ Aristotle, *Politics* 1254b10–14.

²⁰ See Matthew Scully, "Nature and Nature's God," in *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002), 287–350.

oriented culture in early modern Europe. The ecology movement has reawakened interest in the values and concepts associated historically with the premodern organic world.”²¹

Carolyn Merchant describes the transformation brought about by the Scientific Revolution. Francis Bacon, considered the “father of modern science,” is perhaps a model of the kind of scientific and technological interests to expound on a world that was constituted, in his view, as patriarchal and hierarchical. He claimed that the highest form of human ambition was “to renew and increase the empire of humanity itself over the whole universe of things.”²²

Merchant highlights the “Baconian fashion” of the Scientific Revolution’s new method of interrogating nature:

Scientific method, combined with mechanical technology, would create a “new organon,” a new system of investigation, that unified knowledge with material power. The technological discoveries of printing, gunpowder, and the magnet in the fields of learning, warfare and navigation “help us to think about the secrets still locked in nature’s bosom.” “They do not, like the old, merely exert a gentle guidance over nature’s course; they have the power to conquer and subdue her, to shake her to her foundations.” Under the mechanical arts, “nature betrays her secrets more fully...than when in enjoyment of her natural liberty.”²³

These excerpts from Bacon reflect a philosophical worldview of dominance that affects women and the earth. The use of sexual language employed under the protection and control of

²¹ Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), xx–xxi. This book is an excellent treatment of dominion over nature from a philosophical and feminist perspective. Merchant continues, “In investigating the roots of our current environmental dilemma and its connections to science, technology, and the economy, we must reexamine the formation of a world view and a science that, by reconceptualizing reality as a machine rather than a living organism, sanctioned the domination of both nature and women. The contributions of such founding ‘fathers’ of modern science as Francis Bacon, William Harvey, René Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, and Isaac Newton must be reevaluated.”

²² *The Oxford Francis Bacon*, ed. Graham Rees, vol. 11, *The “Instauratio magna” Part II: “Novum organum” and Associated Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 195.

²³ Francis Bacon, “Thoughts and Conclusions on the Interpretation of Nature, or A science of Productive Works,” in *The Philosophy of Francis Bacon*, ed. Benjamin Farrington (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1964), 96, 93, 99, quoted in Merchant, *Death of Nature*, 172.

men is a paternalistic protection that keeps women in a childlike state of subordination and in need of protection. The use of the feminine references to the earth and the language of conquering and subduing earth/women are not atypical of the sixteenth century and still perdure today. Historically, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there was an absence of a tradition that affirmed the independence and autonomy of women, as well as any exploration of the integrity of nature and earth. The hegemony of men's control of women and nature decisively disadvantaged both. The androcentric fallacy that is built into all the mental constructs of Western civilization cannot be changed simply by "adding women." What is necessary is a restructuring of thought and analysis that accepts, once and for all, the fact that humanity consists in equal parts of men and women and that the experiences, thoughts, and insights of both sexes must be represented in every analysis that is made about human beings. Hence, if this could be achieved, then maybe we would be able to bring the common good to greater fruition for all creation.

The Greek philosophy that formed our social construction of gender and affirms that women are marginal to the creation of history and civilization has profoundly affected the relationships of mutuality and solidarity between men and women and the natural world. Catholic social teaching should be concerned about this issue at its core. This view has given some people in power a rather erroneous view of their place in civil society—a civil society that is ordained to the common good. The domination of nature is linked to the domination of women. The treatment of the earth in the Baconian view is challenged by many today with regard to recognizing a world of sentient beings such as trees and their relational life.²⁴ Research

²⁴ Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate—Discoveries from a Secret World*, trans. Jane Billingham (Vancouver: Random House, 2015), 37–55. Wohlleben considers the forest a social network based on scientific evidence. Celia E. Deane-Drummond provides a helpful and cogent analysis of the

on the life of the nonhuman world has called for consideration of our current use of language to describe the natural world. We can learn a great deal from our American Indian communities.

Robin Wall Kimmerer provides insights from her Potawatonic tradition:

I remember paging through the Ojibwe dictionary...trying to decipher the tiles.... The threads in my brain knotted and the harder I tried, the tighter they became. Pages blurred and my eyes settled on a word—a verb, of course: “to be a Saturday.”... Since when is *Saturday* a verb? Everyone knows it’s a noun.... And then I swear I heard the zap of synapses firing.... In that moment I could smell the water of the bay, watch it rock against the shore and hear it sift onto the sand. A bay is a noun only if water is *dead*. When *bay* is a noun, it is defined by humans, trapped between its shores and contained by the word. But the verb *wiikwegamaa*—to *be* a bay—releases the water from bondage and lets it live. “To be a bay” holds the wonder that, for this moment, the living water has decided to shelter itself between these shores, conversing with cedar roots.... To be a hill, to be a sandy beach, to be a Saturday, all are possible verbs in a world where everything is alive. Water, land, and even a day, the language a mirror for seeing the animacy of the world, the life that pulses through all things, through pines and nuthatches and mushrooms.... This is the grammar of animacy.²⁵

Perhaps we need to explore the possibility of moving beyond the language of a world of objects to be studied to a world of subjects that are all interconnected. The need to release our imaginations to see the world and wonder new possibilities and experiences. This is the call we hear in *LS*.

Looking at the Catholic social teaching of the nineteenth century and the wisdom it offers on the gifts and nature of women provides a context for understanding the social construction of

relationship between women and nature. “Feminism and the Ethics of Nature,” in *The Ethics of Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 186–213. See also Deane-Drummond’s “Pope Francis: Prophet and Priest in the Anthropocene,” *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 14, no. 2 (2017): 275–89. “While Charles Taylor confined his definition of social imaginary to the human sphere, the Anthropocene, in bringing the human into the biospheric and geological models of the earth, in effect creates a *bio*-social and *bio*-political imaginary where once held distinctions between humanity and the natural world no longer apply. This has crucial implications for defining moral action,” 279.

²⁵ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 54–55.

gender, the similarity of the treatment of women and nature, and the subsequent transformation of women in the twenty-first century. Catholic social teaching's most essential affirmation of human dignity is threatened by a dualistic anthropology and lack of access in the decision-making of Church policies and traditions that affect all members of the Church.²⁶ We need a new lens and language with which to view the world, and CST could provide this by its commitment to human dignity, solidarity, the common good, and the sacredness of all creation.

An Incarnational Approach

In the late nineteenth century, the world's workers struggled with poor wages, working conditions that were harmful to the workers, and a worldview that accepted wealth and inequality as natural in society. *RN* was a response to the desperate plight of many workers and the fear that workers might be lost to socialist institutions.

RN addressed many important social issues, such as a just wage, distributive justice, and the common good. However, when it comes to relating to the created world, a hierarchy of being is reflected in such language that men rule over the earth "since he sees that things necessary for the future are furnished him out of the produce of the earth.... The soul bears the express image and likeness of God, and there resides in it that sovereignty through the medium of which man has been bidden to rule all created nature below him and to make all lands and all seas serve his

²⁶ In responding to CST's understanding of women's nature, Donal Dorr writes in *Option for the Poor and for the Earth: From Leo XIII to Pope Francis* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016): "The objection to the position put forward in the various documents I have cited is twofold. First, it is seen as a priori rather than an approach that begins from a study of 'the facts on the ground.'" Second, it is claimed that, despite his insistence on equality, [John Paul II's] approach is still shaped by a patriarchal and androcentric mentality. Those who are dissatisfied with the pope's approach hold that the issue of complementarity should be approached not in an a priori way with an assumption that one already knows what the "ontological nature" of women is. It should rather be addressed in an a posteriori way by taking account of both what anthropology and sociology tell us about gender roles in different human cultures and what modern neuroscience has revealed about the development of sexual and gender differentiation" (300–301). This recommendation is consistent with the methodology of CST and the legitimacy of research from the disciplines cited above.

interests.”²⁷ This is an anthropocentric focus. In addition, the world of the domination of nature is the realm of men. Women are mentioned in the section on child labor. Women “are intended by nature for work of the home—work indeed which especially protects modesty in women and accords by nature with the education of children and the well-being of the family.”²⁸

This is a form of dualistic anthropology. In the nineteenth century, *RN* is reflective of the norm—workers are men, and women are not—which reflects the centuries-old dualism between the public and private sectors of society. This ancient dualism is in large part a product of biology. Women give birth to children; therefore, it is assumed that women are the *natural* caregivers or child rearers. Such acceptance is a product of a philosophical anthropology that relegates wage labor as dignified work, which has rights associated with it.

GS did not emphasize that “women’s place is in the home” and recognized the role of women in the workplace. However, there is still a lingering dualistic understanding of the nature of women as primarily mothers and responsible for the harmony of family life. “Women are now employed in almost every area of life. It is appropriate that they should be able to assume their full proper role in accordance with their nature. Everyone should acknowledge and favor the proper and necessary participation of women in cultural life.”²⁹

Lisa Cahill addresses the issue of gender roles in her commentary on John Paul II’s *Familiaris consortio* and points to an ambiguity in his treatment of trying to provide recognition of the greater independence of women in the world, while continuing to espouse a role for women that is predicated on their biology, which reflects a biological reductionism when it comes to understanding advancement of women:

²⁷ Leo XIII, *On the Condition of the Working Classes* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1942), 10, 35.

²⁸ Leo XIII, *On the Condition of the Working Classes*, 37.

²⁹ O’Brien and Shannon, *Catholic Social Thought*, 206. See also Dorr, *Option for the Poor*, 287–308.

Proceeding to the implications for women and society, the pope observes that historically “a widespread social and cultural tradition has considered women’s role to be exclusively that of wife and mother, without adequate access to public functions which have generally been reserved for men.” The pope seems to want it both ways, however, when he continues. “On the other hand the true advancement of women requires that clear recognition be given to the value of their maternal and family role, by comparison with all other public roles and all other professions.” The pope cautions that women must not renounce their femininity to imitate the male role.³⁰

The tradition of CST tends to identify the nature of woman with the activity of child-rearing and homemaking. Even in *Laborem exercens*, a document dedicated to human work, John Paul II states, “It will redound to the credit of society to make it possible for a mother—without inhibiting her freedom, without psychological or practical discrimination, and without penalizing her as compared with other women—to devote herself to taking care of her children and educating them.... Having to abandon these tasks in order to take up paid work outside the home is wrong from the point of view of the good of society and of the family when it contradicts or hinders these primary goals of the mission of a mother.”³¹

Today, the prevailing gender norm that recognizes men as “breadwinners” and women as “homemaker-wife” finds many challenges with the economic realities facing families and the need for both parents to share child-rearing tasks. This is not to diminish those women who choose to care for children and work in the home, as well as those men who take on these roles out of choice or necessity. The point here is a dualistic anthropology that identifies the work of

³⁰ Cahill, “Familiaris Consortio,” in Himes and Cahill, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching*, 374.

³¹ O’Brien and Shannon, *Catholic Social Thought*, 379. Christine Firer Hinze’s “Women, Families, and the Legacy of *Laborem Exercens*: An Unfinished Agenda” in the *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 6, no. 1 (2009): 63–92, brings much-needed attention to filling the gender gap in CST, which tends to identify the identity of woman with the activity of childrearing and homemaking. Hinze claims that “pragmatic-reconstructionist and liberationist ... feminisms ... offer resources for crafting an agenda in support of family and household work that is true to the impulses of Catholic social teaching and capable of upholding so-called ‘feminine values,’ but which steer around debates about gender,”⁶⁶.

the home, “particularly jobs that involve the sustenance of vulnerable life, the pope [John Paul II] writes, women exhibit a kind of *affective, cultural and spiritual motherhood* which has inestimable value for the development of individuals and the future of society.”³²

There is a major concern, here, if women are the repositories of the *affective life*. The affective life is an important ingredient in the spiritual life, especially enabling one to see things differently and enter into the experience of a world of wonder and beauty. The cultivation of the affective life is a human calling—not just a calling for women. The spiritual life is rooted in our affective ability to be open to the experience of God in our lives and to be affected by beauty in all its forms in such a way that enables us to be *touched* by them and respond. It can be a moment of profound transformation.

When *RN* was written, nature’s resources were seen as unlimited. They were there solely to serve humankind, which can nurture a one-dimensional response. Reading *Quadragesimo anno*, we find a first-time reference to social justice in the context of one class of humans excluding others in benefits (and the call to examine the issue of exclusion in social structures that benefit those in power). There is no specific reference to the world of nature; however, women are understood to be primarily mothers in this encyclical.³³

GS still reflects a world of unlimited resources and the call to subdue the earth. “For when, by the work of his hands or with the aid of technology, man develops the earth so that it can bear fruit and become a dwelling worthy of the whole human family, and he consciously takes part in the life of social groups, he carries out the design of God. Manifested at the beginning of time, the divine plan is that man should subdue the earth, bring creation to

³² Hinze, “Women, Families, and the Legacy of *Laborem Exercens*,” 76.

³³ O’Brien and Shannon, *Catholic Social Thought*, 58.

perfection, and develop himself.”³⁴

These earlier documents reflect a view of the world that in large measure no longer prevails with regard to the earth.³⁵ Francis’s attempt to read the signs of the times is reflected in his pastoral and spiritual guidance to all. Everything in the world is connected, and he offers a vision that reflects a view of creation as gift. We are merely tenants on the land rather than owners.

As we read the signs of the times today, there are many crises that could be raised. Let’s just take one that has been significant in our liturgical life: water. Currently, the issue of clean, potable water exists on every continent in varying degrees. In the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the sixth goal is “clean water and sanitation.” The seriousness of this goal is related to the lack of clean, potable water as a result of the growing salination of fresh water due to climate change, and wasteful and questionable uses of fresh water from streams, lakes, and ponds, which are routinely polluted by industrial dumping and fertilizers used on farms, which are washed away by storm water into local bodies of water.

Since water is a building block of all life, Christina Peppard writes, “our blue planet certainly seems watery, but of all the water in the world, 97.5 percent is saltwater, while only 2.5 percent is fresh water. Of the tiny proportion of fresh water, 70 percent is locked in ice caps and the polar regions. Nearly 30 percent is groundwater...and a mere 0.3 percent of all fresh water is

³⁴ O’Brien and Shannon, *Catholic Social Thought*, 203.

³⁵ Marie I. George, “Aquinas and the General Precepts for Environmental Ethics,” *The Thomist* 7, no. 1 (January 2012): 73–123, points out in a lengthy article that Aquinas had no idea of modern science; however, “by caring for the integrity of earthly creation, we help insure that the earth serves its ultimate God-given purpose which is to bear witness to the goodness of God: thriving ecosystems and a greater number of species constitutes a more magnificent representation of God’s goodness. By seeking to preserve creation’s order and beauty we also help ensure that it serves its purposes of sustaining the human family and of leading the minds of human individuals to God,” 123.

surface water, or what we tend to think of as the ‘renewable’ water supply.”³⁶

Surely global population continues to grow. However, John Paul II and Pope Francis frequently remind us of our consumerist way of life and the proliferation of plastic water bottles and wasteful models of consumption. Peppard points out that “affluence drives up consumption; leading the way ‘with the largest water footprint’...is the United States.... Consider meat.... To produce a pound of beef requires approximately 1,799 gallons of water.”³⁷ Clearly, there is a crisis here.

The relationship between humans and the environment is indisputable. This crisis affects all people and the planet. What recommendations can we find in Catholic social teaching to guide us to become co-creators of God’s justice and peace in the world?

LS addresses the issue of water as one of primary importance. “Water poverty especially affects Africa, where large sectors of the population have no access to safe drinking water or experience droughts which imperil agricultural production.... Even as the quality of water is constantly diminishing, in some places there is a growing tendency, despite its scarcity, to prioritize this resource, turning it into a commodity subject to the laws of the market. Yet *access to safe drinkable water is a basic and universal human right, since it is essential to human survival and, as such, is a condition for the exercise of other human rights.*”³⁸

³⁶ Christiana Peppard, *Just Water Theology, Ethics, and the Global Water Crisis* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014), 21–22. See also Gary L. Chamberlain’s *Because Water Is Life: Catholic Social Teaching Confronts Earth’s Water Crisis* (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2018), where Chamberlain addresses six contemporary water crises. Also Ronald L. Sandler, *Character and Environment: A Virtue-Oriented Approach to Environmental Ethics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007) notes: “At present, people are using and polluting the accessible fresh water faster than it can be replenished or cleansed. Over one billion people lack access to safe drinking water, and over two billion people lack access to basic sanitation. The choices people make about consumption affect the availability of usable water.... For example, the Ogallala Aquifer, the largest in North America at around 190,000 square miles stretching from Texas to south Dakota and the source of irrigation for one-fifth of the farmland in the United States, is being depleted at 15 times the rate it is replenished. It has been dropping an average of 3 feet per year since 1991” (59–60).

³⁷ Peppard, *Just Water Theology*, 22.

³⁸ Pope Francis, *Laudato si’: On Care for Our Common Home* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2015), 15.

Francis is calling all people to wake up from their focus on and infatuation with self to see the world relationally. He suggests that there is an intimate relationship with creation and that the redemption of the person and the universe are inextricably linked. All things are connected in a web of life. For the Lakota people, all things are related in a way that the individual has a kinship relationship to all creatures. Such humble recognition might diminish the widespread feeling of loneliness in the world. It is a spirituality of relationship that calls us to real human development.

GS provided a major paradigm shift in seeing the world as the *locus* for the discovery of God. Vatican II called for an engagement with the world, not a retreat from it. The call for systemic justice was equally important, and we continue to retrieve that commitment in *LS*. Vatican II reminded all Christians that they have an obligation to work for the transformation of the world, and at the same time, they have a destiny that transcends the political and social world. Such an obligation of justice can only be achieved in securing the common good, which includes all creation. This recognition of such inclusion is the work of *LS*.

LS grounds its environmental analysis in a critique of the soul, beginning with a recognition that the earth is suffering. Francis calls for a change in “lifestyles,” which previous popes have also called for. He also calls for changes in “the established structures of power which today govern societies.”³⁹

Reading the signs of the times, Francis raises “global environmental deterioration” as a moral issue and an important ethical priority. He provides the example of St. Francis of Assisi as someone who “shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace.... If we approach nature and the

³⁹ Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, no. 2.

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.”⁴⁰

Vatican II called us to engage the world. *LS* calls us to boldly love the world. To be open to wonder is an ancient call to allow the beauty of the world to enter not just our minds but our hearts as well. It is difficult for many of us to free up the capacity to see the beauty of the natural world, the beauty of the other, as we live harried lives, and our vision is often one-dimensional. We see, but really don’t see. Even the conception of stewardship is a rather one-dimensional approach to the world.

In terms of a spirituality that is more Incarnational, we need time for reflection and discernment of the ways we are caught up in a “throwaway culture.”⁴¹ Because we have so little time to reflect, we become numb, even to ourselves, and indifferent to the suffering of others.⁴²

Four years ago, I was teaching ethics in a maximum-security state penitentiary. The men had all read *LS*, and I asked which part of it they found personal. A young man immediately answered, “When Pope Francis wrote about a disposable society, because I feel that is what I have become—someone disposable in the criminal justice system.” There are many ways people are collateral damage in a society that Francis claims has deified the market. He calls us to see the world differently, which is a challenge, and echoes the words of Patriarch Bartholomew:

He asks us to replace consumption with sacrifice, greed with generosity, wastefulness with a spirit of sharing, an asceticism which “entails learning to give, and not simply to give up. It is a way of

⁴⁰ Pope Francis, *Laudato si’*, nos. 5–6.

⁴¹ Pope Francis, *Laudato si’*, no. 16.

⁴² Pope Francis, *Laudato si’*, no. 25.

loving, of moving gradually away from what I want to what God's world needs. It is liberation from fear, greed and compulsion." As Christians, we are also called "to accept the world as a sacrament of communion, as a way of sharing with God and our neighbors on a global scale. It is our humble conviction that the divine and the human meet in the slightest detail in the seamless garment of God's creation, in the last speck of dust of our planet."⁴³

In this one paragraph, we can find the vision for the completion of the call of Vatican II to engage with the world and be about the work of transforming the world in justice and love. It is a vision of hope—and the daily practice of the virtue of hope.

Conclusion

This chapter emphasizes the connectedness of everything, and the vision for a sacramental world must include a way of seeing women and the created world as having a sacredness and integrity that is part of the vision of integral human ecology and the further growth in our understanding of the common good. There is a vacancy if women are not included in the decision-making policies, along with the opportunity to share their experiences of living in a Church that is slowly beginning to "see" them. So much more can happen if we take *LS* to heart and begin living it. The common good of all creation is dependent on our engagement and hope in a future for all creation.

The continued retrieval and renewal of Vatican II are implicitly and inextricably linked to the revision of the conceptualization of the earth and women as full participants in an Incarnational world. We lost a sense of the earth as sacred with the introduction of dualistic thinking and a dualistic anthropology. Can we move beyond this divide? Do we have the imagination to connect these two realities, the earth and women, in the future of Catholic social

⁴³ Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, no. 9.

teaching?