

All Life is on Our Side:

Thomas Merton's Model of 'Ecological Conversion' in the Age of Pope Francis

Daniel Horan, OFM

Introduction

In the spirit of the theme of the 2016 Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland conference—'Life is on our side'—this paper begins with the question: *Whose life* is on our side? Over the course of his life Thomas Merton developed an ever expanding 'ecological consciousness', an increasing awareness of the interconnection and interdependence of all creation that extends beyond the human family to include *all life*.¹ The shift in his worldview to include the non-human dimensions of the cosmos in his spiritual and theological outlook anticipates the call that Pope Francis has recently expressed in his 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si* (On Care for Our Common Home) for all people to embrace an 'ecological conversion', which seeks to move beyond an anthropocentric view of the world and recognize our place as sisters and brothers to one another and to all creation.²

In this paper I make the argument that Merton's 'ecological consciousness', which, like Pope Francis's encyclical, was deeply informed by the Franciscan spiritual and theological tradition, can help contemporary women and men to imagine and embrace an 'ecological conversion'. This paper is organized into three parts. First, I elucidate what Pope Francis means by 'ecological conversion'. Second, I highlight some of the ways in which Merton's 'ecological consciousness' unfolded over the course of his life and in his writings. Finally, I present a few insights into how Merton provides a prophetic model and guide for enacting the Pope's vision for our common home. I believe this is but one more way that Merton continues to be relevant for our times.

Pope Francis and 'Ecological Conversion'

Pope Francis is hardly original in his advocacy on behalf of the non-human world of creatures put forward in his at once poetic and challenging encyclical letter *Laudato Si*. This is something which he acknowledges in the preface of the text, identifying his pontifical and ecumenical predecessors, each of whom has focused attention on matters pertaining to the natural world and humanity's place within it.³ Directing his teaching to as wide an audience as could be imagined—that is, all who inhabit 'our common home'—Pope Francis recapitulates long-standing Catholic Social Teaching and shows us how we may apply it in timely, relevant ways. We can see this in the way he loosely structures the encyclical after the pattern for reading the 'signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel'⁴ set out by Pope St. John XXIII in his 1961 encyclical letter *Mater et Magistra*. Pope John wrote:

These are three stages which should normally be followed in the reduction of social principles into practice. First, one reviews the concrete situation; secondly, one forms a judgment on it in the light of these same principles; thirdly, one decides what the circumstances can and should be done to implement these principles. These are the three stages that are usually expressed in the three terms: observe, judge, act.⁵

This threefold process of observing, judging, and acting is witnessed in the structure of Francis' text. He opens the document with a frank assessment of 'what is happening to our common home', highlighting many of the ecological tragedies of our anthropocene age.⁶ These 'sins against creation', to use an apt expression from Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and borrowed by Pope Francis,⁷ include pollution, species extinction, issues surrounding water, and the decrease in global biodiversity. In addition he also highlights the 'decline in the quality of human life and the breakdown of society' that concurrently casts its shadow on our times.⁸ Thus Francis opens with a very sobering summation of our current situation.

He moves on to the second stage marked by judging these observed 'signs of the times' always according to 'the light of the Gospel'. For this, he reviews in the second chapter what he calls the 'Gospel of Creation', and offers an insightful recounting of essential Christian principles on creation arising from scripture and tradition. He explicitly rejects

'dominion models' of creation, arising from a misrepresentation of the Genesis narratives where human beings are perceived to have sovereignty over non-human creation. Instead he affirms the inherent value and dignity belonging to each and every creature, human and non-human alike, by virtue of its being lovingly created by God.⁹

This second stage of judgment continues into the third chapter of *Laudato Si*, bluntly titled 'The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis'. Here Francis does not temper his critique of the human family's responsibility for the ecological crises facing the world. Unlike the climate change deniers, Francis does not even consider that the overwhelming scientific data is up for debate. On the contrary, he echoes the clear consensus of climatologists and other professionals that attests to the detrimental effects humanity has wrought on *both* the non-human world *and* within the human family itself. This latter part of the judgment process is particularly important given the pope's insistence that this encyclical is not simply 'about the environment', but rather stands properly among the rest of the church's social teaching. Rampant anthropocentrism, uncritical reliance on technology, disregard for the common good, and other human-centered concerns have developed alongside, and have contributed to, environmental degradation. Furthermore, Francis notes that the poor are also the ones most directly affected by global climate change, which only increases the ethical imperative to respond to these troubling signs of our times.

The second half of *Laudato Si*, composed of chapters four to six, is almost exclusively concerned with the third stage of the process, that of action. Arguing for an 'integral ecology' that would recognize the dual-focus of human and non-human justice and concern, Francis outlines several 'lines of approach and action' including dialogue and political engagement.¹⁰ It is within this context that we encounter the Pope's call for 'ecological conversion'. In fact, although Francis alludes to the need for our repentance, conversion, and corrective action throughout the text, it isn't until the middle of the last chapter that he focuses an entire short section on 'ecological conversion'.¹¹ In a sense this concept underwrites every other part of the encyclical, without which no authentic observation, judgment, and action could take place. I believe that Thomas Merton's own life and writings can help to guide contemporary Christian women and men towards accepting the call and engaging in the experience of 'ecological conversion' as outlined by Pope Francis.

'Ecological conversion'

Ecological conversion is a turning toward the world, a moving outside of one's self, a rejection of solipsism and self-centeredness, and a fundamental 'renewal of humanity' rooted in the 'rich heritage of Christian spirituality'.¹² Francis believes that the ecological crises we witness in the world today, and for which we are all in part responsible, should lead us to have a change of heart and a 'profound interior conversion', one that would lead to the sort of action outlined in *Laudato Si*. Though some members of humanity are certainly in need of a radical change of outlook away from destructive practices such as overt pollution and damage to the natural world, most people are not expressly engaged in activities or decision-making processes that directly impact on creation in such explicit ways. Instead, Francis observes that most people in economically developed parts of the world are 'passive' or rely on the 'excuse of realism or pragmatism' when it comes to making the necessary changes required of humanity's relationship with the rest of creation.¹³ In this sense, the globally affluent are guilty of sins of omission, the failure to act or to be concerned about the widespread damage to our planet. Thus many of the human family are but *guilty bystanders*.

Among the many striking dimensions of 'ecological conversion' that Francis describes is his insistence that its necessity arises from our foundational vocation as followers of Christ. He states that, in effect, if we claim to be Christian then our relationship with Jesus Christ should have a direct, positive, and pragmatic influence on our relationship with the world around us.¹⁴ This aspect of our faith is, as Francis puts it, 'not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience'.¹⁵ The Pope recalls his namesake in summarizing what this means for Christians everywhere.

In calling to mind the figure of St. Francis of Assisi, we come to realize that a healthy relationship with creation is one dimension of overall personal conversion, which entails recognition of our errors, sins, faults and failures, and leads to heartfelt repentance and desire to change. The Australian bishops spoke of the importance of such conversion for achieving reconciliation with creation: 'To achieve such reconciliation, we must examine our lives and acknowledge the ways in which we have harmed God's creation through our actions and our failure to act. We need to experience a conversion, or change of heart.'¹⁶

Indeed we should all embrace an awareness and change of heart that leads us from complacency, self-centeredness, and anthropocentrism towards being open to observing the world around us, judging what must be done, and acting in constructive and penitential ways.

However, he makes it clear that this is not simply a matter of individual decisions to act or personal efforts to correct private ecological sins. While those things are important, we must also confront the structural, systemic, and social problems of our age. For Pope Francis, 'the ecological conversion needed to bring about lasting change is also a community conversion.'¹⁷ The result of this twofold individual and corporate 'ecological conversion' should include an awareness, and thus our heartfelt gratitude, that the world in which we live reflects God as Creator and provides all of us with life and sustenance. Furthermore, this conversion should widen our eyes to see 'that we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures, but joined in a splendid universal communion'.¹⁸ We are not merely interlopers from some outside system of higher and greater value, but kin to the rest of creation and members of a community of which humankind is but a small part.

Merton's 'Ecological Consciousness'

The map of Merton's life is dotted with conversions, epiphanic experiences and changes of heart; he seems forever open to the creative novelty of the Spirit's work in his life, no more so than during his so-called 'turning towards the world' which began in the late 1950s and continued throughout the 1960s until his unexpected death in 1968. There is perhaps no better summary of the seeming shift in attention away from a near-exclusive focus on the interior life of the contemplative monk towards a radical openness to the world than the remarks he wrote to Dorothy Day on August 23, 1961:

I feel obligated to take very seriously what is going on, and to say whatever my conscience seems to dictate, provided of course it is not contrary to the faith and to the teaching authority of the Church ... I don't feel that I can in conscience, at a time like this, go on writing just about things like meditation, though that has its point. I cannot just bury my head in a lot of rather tiny and secondary monastic studies either. I think I have to face the big issues, the life-and-death issues.¹⁹

This general movement and awakening to the social justice concerns in the world of his time anticipated by four years the clarion call of the Second Vatican Council's *Gaudium et Spes's* opening lines, according to which all Christians are called to celebrate the 'joys and hopes' as well as acknowledge and respond to the 'griefs and anxieties' of all people, whether or not they be followers of Christ.²⁰

It was around this same time that Merton's 'ecological consciousness' blossomed into an acute awareness of the environmental crises of the time. As Kathleen Deignan and Monica Weis, among others, have noted, Merton's reading of Rachel Carson's important book *Silent Spring* in the early 1960s and his subsequent correspondence with the author reflect an explicit awakening to the ecological 'signs of the times'.²¹ And yet, while the experience of 'turning towards the world' included non-human creation in addition to the strife Merton witnessed among the human family at that time, the late 1950s and early 1960s were not the first time that he was aware of humanity's relatedness to the rest of creation or of God's presence within it.

Like Pope Francis, whose own vision of creation is expressly influenced by the Franciscan tradition, Merton's understanding of the natural world and humanity's place within always bore a certain Franciscan sensibility. Deignan put this succinctly when she wrote: 'In true Franciscan spirit, Merton could sense the "angelic transparency of everything, of pure, simple and total light".'²² This sensibility or spirit is seen in Merton's life and writings explicitly in two ways.²³

The first way is in his understanding of all creation as a 'vestige' of God. In theological parlance, 'vestige' is tied to the original Latin root, *vestigium*, which means 'footprint'. It was the medieval Franciscan theologian Bonaventure whose theological reflection on creation emphasized that everything that God created was, in a sense, a vestige of the Creator. In other words, everything that exists reflects or points back to the Creator, who lovingly brought all creation into existence and whose very presence is capable of being recognized in that same creation. Merton writes about this in a letter of March 1967 responding to a young student, stating:

My idea of the world: first of all the world as God's good creation. I have the good fortune to live in close contact with nature, how should I not love this world, and love it with passion? I understand the joy of St. Francis amid the creatures! God manifests himself in his creation, and everything that he has made speaks of him.²⁴

The second way is in Merton's understanding of the kinship of all creation. Like Francis of Assisi, and in a way anticipating Pope Francis's admonition for humanity to recall its familial ties to other creatures, Merton had a deeply intuitive sense of his own ingrained relationship with the rest of the created order. This understanding of the world finds its roots in both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures and is expressed most directly in the texts of nature mystics such as St. Francis in his famous *Canticle of the Creatures*, in which all non-human aspects of the created order are recognized and celebrated as the saint's sisters and brothers. We can see this in Merton's journal reflections, such as the one written on November 4, 1964 in which he writes:

In the afternoon, lots of pretty myrtle warblers were playing and diving for insects in the low pine branches over my head, so close I could almost touch them. I was awed at their loveliness, their quick flight, of their hissings and chirpings, the yellow spot on the back revealed in flight, etc. Sense of total kinship with them as if they and I were of the same nature, and as if that nature were nothing but love. And what else but love keeps us all together in being?²⁵

This sense of kinship with the rest of creation doesn't just appear at the end of his life but can be traced back to at least his time as a young monk, with many illustrative examples to be found in his writings from this time, not least in *The Sign of Jonas*. Monica Weis has even suggested that Merton's awareness of the kinship of all creation goes all the way back to his early childhood as recorded by his mother, Ruth Jenkins Merton.²⁶ What this suggests is that Merton's 'ecological consciousness' did not appear out of nowhere, but was an intuition located in his heart and mind from his earliest years and which gradually developed throughout his life. The process of becoming increasingly open to all creatures as vestiges of the Creator and his growing awareness of the kinship of all creation is what we might rightly name a lifelong 'ecological conversion'.

Furthermore, these two aspects of Merton's ecological consciousness informed his ethical outlook as much as his mere appreciation of the world around him. This is something that grew from a seed of his spiritual environment in the early years into a large tree that shaded his social justice concerns near the end of his life. In one journal entry from 1956, Merton wrote: 'We do not realize that the fields and the trees have

fought and still fight for their respective place on this map—which, by natural right, belong entirely to the trees.'²⁷ Here Merton seems to recognize in the trees a sense of moral agency and subjectivity. They—the trees—have a *natural right* to exist and to be recognized as inherently valuable. This is something that Pope Francis emphasizes in *Laudato Si*, that the inherent dignity and value of all God's creation exists independently of human utility or consideration.

Conclusion

In a way presciently anticipating the modern encyclical letter *Laudato Si*, Merton writes in a little-known essay from 1968 titled 'The Wild Places' of Aldo Leopold's concept of 'ecological conscience'. Merton writes:

Aldo Leopold brought into clear focus one of the most important moral discoveries of our time. This can be called the *ecological conscience*. The ecological conscience is centered in the awareness of *man's true place as a dependent member of the biotic community*. Man must become fully aware of his *dependence* on a balance which he is not only free to destroy but which he has already begun to destroy. He must recognize his obligations toward the other members of that vital community. And incidentally, since he tends to destroy nature in his frantic efforts to exterminate other members of his own species, it would not hurt if he had a little more respect for human life too. The respect for life, the affirmation of *all life*, is basic to the ecological conscience.²⁸

This notion of the 'ecological conscience' strikes me as an apt description of where Pope Francis's call to 'ecological conversion' should lead us. Like the modern pope, the late monk recognized the connection between justice within the human family and justice for the larger family of creation. What Merton's journey reveals to us in the age of Pope Francis is a model for what ecological conversion looks like in a time of environmental and human crisis. Like Merton, each of us has the capacity to return to that deep creational intuition that affirms our shared kinship with the rest of creation and to recognize the presence of God in all creatures. Additionally, like Merton, we too can form our 'ecological conscience', to recognize the interdependence and deep intersection between the injustice perpetuated against non-human aspects of creation and the injustices that affect human beings. In the words of Pope Francis,

as well as the Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff before him, Merton helps us to attend to both 'the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor'.²⁹ The question is, however, whether we will respond to that cry or not? I believe that reading the writings of Thomas Merton, particularly those reflections on the natural world, may help to inspire us along the way of our own journey of ecological conversion.

Notes

1. This is my adaptation of Kathleen Deignan's attention to what she calls Merton's 'ecological consciousness' and increasing 'love of the paradise mystery'. See her article, "Love For the Paradise Mystery": Thomas Merton Contemplative Ecologist,' *CrossCurrents* 58 (2008), pp. 545-569.
2. All citations of *Laudato Si* are references to the Vatican edition of the English Translation published by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. See Pope Francis, *Laudato Si* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015). Also available online: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html
3. See *Laudato Si*, nos. 3-6.
4. Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 4. Available online: http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html
5. John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, no. 236. Available online: http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html
6. By anthropocene I mean that geo-temporal epoch that refers to the period of global history when human activities begin to have noticeable and, at times, irreversible effects on the Earth's geology and ecological systems. The coinage of this term dates back to at least the year 2000 when Nobel-prize laureate Paul Crutzen and his co-author Eugene Stoermer published the article, 'Anthropocene', *Global Change Newsletter* 41 (May 2000), pp. 17-18.
7. See John Chryssavgis, ed., *Cosmic Grace and Humble Prayer: The Ecological Vision of the Green Patriarch Bartholomew*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009). Pope Francis quotes him in *Laudato Si*, nos. 8-9.
8. *Laudato Si*, no. 20.
9. *Laudato Si*, nos. 62-100.
10. *Laudato Si*, nos. 137-201.
11. *Laudato Si*, nos. 216-221.
12. *Laudato Si*, no. 216.
13. *Laudato Si*, no. 217.
14. *Laudato Si*, no. 217.
15. *Laudato Si*, no. 217.
16. *Laudato Si*, no. 218.
17. *Laudato Si*, no. 219.
18. *Laudato Si*, no. 220.

19. Thomas Merton, 'Letter to Dorothy Day on August 23, 1961' in *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), pp. 139-140.
20. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 1.
21. See Deignan, 'Love for the Paradise Mystery', pp. 560-566; and Monica Weis, *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), esp. pp. 9-21.
22. Kathleen Deignan, 'Introduction: "The Forest is my Bride"' in *When the Trees Say Nothing: Writings on Nature*, by Thomas Merton, ed. Kathleen Deignan (Notre Dame: Sorin Books, 2003), p. 27. *Silent Spring* by environmental scientist Rachel Carson was published in 1962. The book documents the detrimental effects on the environment of the indiscriminate use of pesticides, and the complacent attitude by the chemical industry and public officials to the damage caused.
23. For a fuller accounting of these two ways, see Daniel P. Horan, *The Franciscan Heart of Thomas Merton: A New Look at the Spiritual Inspiration of His Life, Thought, and Writing* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2014), pp. 142-155.
24. Thomas Merton, 'Letter to Mario Falsina on March 25, 1967' in *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert Daggy (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1989), pp. 347-348.
25. Thomas Merton, 'November 4, 1964' in *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage*, ed. Robert Daggy, Journals of Thomas Merton vol. 5, 1963-1965 (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 162.
26. Weis, *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton*, p. 29. The author points towards passages in *Tom's Book*, the brief diary kept by Merton's mother at Prades during the first two years of his life.
27. Thomas Merton, 'July 22, 1956', in *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham, Journals of Thomas Merton vol. 3, 1952-1960 (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 51.
28. Thomas Merton, 'The Wild Places' in *Thomas Merton: Selected Essays*, ed. Patrick O'Connell (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2013), p. 450. The essay may also be found in Thomas Merton, *Preview of the Asian Journey* (ed. Walter Capps) and *The Merton Annual* - vol. 24 (2011).
29. See *Laudato Si*, no. 49; and Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997).

Daniel P. Horan, OFM is a Franciscan friar who teaches systematic theology at the Catholic Theological Union (Chicago), is a columnist for *America* magazine, and currently serves on the Board of Directors of ITMS. Dan is both a former ITMS Daggy Scholar and William H. Shannon Fellow. He is the author of several books, including *The Franciscan Heart of Thomas Merton*, and is currently editing the correspondence of Thomas Merton and Naomi Burton Stone for publication.