

**POPE FRANCIS' *LAUDATO SI*, ' ON CARE FOR OUR COMMON HOME:
AN ECOFEMINIST RESPONSE**

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Thank you, Mary Hines, for giving me the privilege (or should I say challenge) of examining Pope Francis' ground-breaking encyclical, *Laudato Si*, ' "On Care of our Common Home," through the lens of ecofeminism. My gratitude also goes to Daniel Castillo, who graciously agreed to respond to this presentation and to each of you for choosing to attend this session.

Ecofeminism is a concept first proposed by Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974 to identify patriarchy as the root cause of the pervasive oppression and domination of women and of the exploitation and degradation of earth's ecosystems.¹ Over forty years have passed since the term "ecofeminism" first appeared in print. Is ecofeminism relevant today? I am posing this question in part because there have been few ecofeminist theology publications in the past ten years. However, if one takes into account the United Nations' statistical report titled "The World's Women (in) 2015," one finds that in every nation of the world it is women who are the majority of the poor. These women and their children live primarily in the southern hemisphere,² in locales with ecological fragility attributable to causes addressed in the 2015 United Nations Development Goals.³ Consider, for example, the tenth and fifteenth goals, which call

¹ Françoise d' Eaubonne, *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (Paris: P. Horay, 1974). (The book has not been published in English.) Although the term "ecofeminism" was introduced by D'Eaubonne, ecofeminism developed into a movement in the 1980s in the context of self-identified feminists protesting against environmental destruction, for more on this development see chapter one of Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism* (London: Zed Books, 1993), 1–22.

² *The World's Women 2015, Trends and Statistics*, Chapter 8: "Poverty," at <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/gender/chapter8/chapter8.html> (on 5/8/2017). Heather Eaton associates this fact, first noted in a 1989 United Nations study, as contributing to the importance of the ecofeminist movement in the global south in "Women, Nature, Earth," in Sigurd Bergman and Yong-Bok Kim, eds., *Religion, Ecology, Gender, East—West Perspectives* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2009), 7.

³ One of the seventeen United Nations' Development goals gives attention to women and girls: Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

Thirteen of the goals are related to ecology:

Goal 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture.

Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.

Goal 6: Ensure access to water and sanitation for all.

Goal 7: Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all.

Goal 8: Promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all.

Goal 9: Build resilient infrastructure, promote sustainable industrialization and foster innovation.

Goal 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries.

Goal 11: Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.

Goal 12: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.

Goal 13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.

Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources.

for commitments to reduce inequality within and among countries and for the sustainable management of forests, by combating desertification, halting and reversing land degradation, and ending biodiversity loss. Similar goals have been proposed by ecofeminists. Many of the problems that make these goals necessary are given attention in the first chapter of *Laudato Si'*, in the sections titled, "Global Diversity" (nos. 48-52) and "Loss of Biodiversity" (nos. 32-42).

The context for Pope Francis addressing these and other issues is St. Francis of Assisi's prayer, *Laudato Si'*, which provides a description of earth as "like a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us" (LS, 1). While there is lyrical beauty to this statement, there may also be a shadow side to speaking of earth as "mother"⁴ if viewed with a feminist lens. At the risk of overreaction, I feel obliged to raise an eco-feminist caution regarding speaking of "earth as mother."

The use of "mother-earth" language has often been accompanied by romanticism about nature's endless bounty, which does not match current reality, nor does it fit well with the intent of Pope Francis' encyclical, which is to evoke a commitment to care for the earth, including by "safeguarding species heading towards extinction" (LS, 44) caused by valuing profit more than the preservation of at-risk species (LS, 36), thereby wantonly weakening the biodiversity required for a healthy planet.

The denial of the fundamental truth of global-scale ecological problems by many, including Christians, is a major obstacle to commitment to the integral ecology that Pope Francis calls for.⁵ In the recently published book, *The Theological and Ecological Vision of Laudato Si'*, edited by CTSA member Vincent Miller, the lead article, which Miller authored, focuses on interwoven "Obstacles to integral ecology." He notes two obstacles treated in *Laudato Si'*: an economic system that focuses "on short-term profit through the production of consumer goods and a form of technology that views nature as a set of resources to be exploited."⁶ He then adds a third: "the fact that the full consequences of human environmental damage takes place on spatial and time scales far beyond the perception of ordinary people."

To this list I propose an additional two obstacles to a fully integral ecology. The first is the denial of the findings of environmental scientists whose empirical research substantiates growing problems related to global-scale climate change, including

Goal 15: Sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation, halt biodiversity loss.

Goal 17: Revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.

At <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/> (on 5/10/2017).

⁴ The analysis that follows is influenced in part by Martin Heidegger's proposal: "Language is the House of Being," in his 1947, "Brief über Humanismus" ("Letter on Humanism,"), trans. Edgar Lohner, *Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, Vol. III, eds. William Barrett and Henry D. Aiken (New York: Random House, 1962), pp. 270-301.

⁵ The meaning I am investing in "integral ecology" calls for a holistic approach that gives attention to data related to the environment, eco-systems, and human society. It is also envisioned as encompassing issues related to "deep ecology" associated with ethical and religious perspectives of respect and responsibility for the natural world.

⁶ Vincent J. Miller, "Integral ecology: Francis' spiritual and moral vision of interconnectedness," ed., Vincent J. Miller, *The Theological and Ecological Vision of Laudato Si': Everything Is Connected* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 21. (Miller gives attention to research provided by the Mauna Loa Observatory regarding CO₂ emissions on p. 25 of *The Theological and Ecological Vision of Laudato Si'*.)

especially the generation of air and water pollution. Regarding this issue Greta Gaard in her 2015 article, “Ecofeminism and climate change,” provides data worthy of consideration. In the early stage of the Industrial Revolution (c. 1840), the density of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere was 280 parts per million (ppm). In May 2013, Hawaii’s Mauna Loa Observatory recorded carbon dioxide levels at 400 ppm, exceeding all previous records.⁷ This trend of growth in CO₂ levels (at least 2 ppm per year), is the major contributor to ecological consequences collectively known as “global climate change: rising sea levels, melting arctic ice sheets and receding glaciers, as well as vanishing coral reefs, extreme weather events (i.e., hurricanes and heat waves), accompanied by accelerated native species extinction and an increase in insect-borne diseases.⁸ Obviously none of these findings is good news for life on our planet!

A second obstacle to integral ecology not treated in *Laudato Si*,⁹ to which Greta Gaard draws attention is the fact that current distribution models for analyzing climate change causes and their impact, ignore the role that societal gender patterns play in the consumption of earth’s resources, including food. If one considers planetary patterns as a whole, it is women, primarily in the global south, who produce the food for the majority the people of the earth. Yet, the majority of the world’s hungry are not men but women and their children.⁹

Gaard also notes that it is women who are disproportionately affected by weather and natural disasters, many of which are directly the result of global warming.¹⁰ These gender-based inequities mean that women and children are fourteen times more likely than men to die due to ecological disasters. For example, in 1991 the powerful tropical cyclone that hit south east Bangladesh caused major flooding resulting in c. 138,000 persons dying. Of the adult victims, 90% were women, most of whom were with children.¹¹

The causes for this disproportionate statistic of female deaths versus males dying in the Bangladesh tragedy are multiple. Warning information was not sent to “home-

⁷ Greta Gaard, “Ecofeminism and climate change,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 49 (2015): 20.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 23. Gaard cites: Lorena Aguilar, Ariana Araujo, Andrea Quesada-Aguilar, “Fact sheet on gender and climate change presented at the UNFCCC COP 13,” the 2007 meeting of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) society; at <http://www.genderandenvironment.org/> (on 7/20/2017). For additional information on Global Climate Change, see James R. Ehleringer, Thure E. Cerling and M. Denise Dearing, *A History of Atmospheric CO₂ and Its Effects on Plants, Animals, and Ecosystems*, vol. 177 of *Ecological Studies* (New York: Springer Science and Business Media, 2007) and the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), “Climate Change Indicators: U.S. Greenhouse Gas Emissions,” (2016), at <https://www.epa.gov/climate-indicators/climate-change-indicators-us-greenhouse-gas-emissions> (on 6/30/2017).

⁹ *Ibid.* For specifics, see “Women and Hunger: 10 Facts,” a compilation of research provided by the “World Food Programme,” at <https://www.wfp.org/our-work/preventing-hunger/...women/women-hunger-facts> (on 6/29/2017).

¹⁰ *Ibid.* Among the sources that Gaard cites are Irene Dankelman, ed., *Gender and Climate Change: An Introduction* (London: Earthscan, 2010) and Nancy Tuana, “Gendering Climate Knowledge for Justice: Catalyzing a New Research Agenda,” in Margaret Alston and Kerri Whittenbury, eds., *Research, Action and Policy: Addressing the Gendered Impacts of Climate Change* (Dordrecht: Springer Media, 2013), 17–31.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Wind gusts were reportedly as high as 155 miles per hour (250 kilometers per hour).

bound” women. In addition, the risk of sexual assaults outside the home reportedly prompted some women to wait longer to leave their endangered home.¹² Unfortunately, such causes are not limited to Bangladesh.

Having reflected on the stereotypical “mother earth” language in *Laudato Si'* in the light of Greta Gaard’s research, I find myself questioning whether “mother earth” symbolism may be too weighed down by the baggage of a legacy of matter/spirit dualism traceable to the ancient Greeks, namely the depiction of nature as feminine and spirit or soul-life, including the intellect, as masculine. While at times Pope Francis’ conception of integral ecology calls for respect for creatures in ways that recognize their inherent value, the apex of creation in *Laudato Si'* is clearly man. I am deliberately refraining from using the gender-inclusive “human” because, although the word “women” appears in *Laudato Si'* eleven times, it occurs only in the context of speaking of both “men and women.”

I am not proposing that “earth-mother” language be avoided entirely, but I do think it wise to monitor its use because dualistic gender discourse can be an obstacle to taking note of ecological problems and to responding to them with appropriate action. Although Pope Francis speaks of earth stereotypically as “mother,” fortunately in his reference to the growing plight of the earth, he speaks of earth as our “sister (which) now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her” (LS, 2).

Emphasizing that environmental issues cannot be separated from the promotion of social justice, especially care for the poor, and the necessity of monitoring global economics, Pope Francis gives substantive attention to the need for a truly integral ecology, describing it as a call for “openness to categories which transcend the language of mathematics and biology, and take us to the heart of what it is to be human” (LS, 11).

It seems to me that if the intent of *Laudato Si'* is to be attuned to all chambers of the heart of humanity, then deeper listening to the heart-felt hopes and desires of women, with accompanying attention both to the problems that leave them vulnerable to devastation and to their contributions that sustain life is needed.

Why is “deeper listening” needed? The need is illustrated by the sources Pope Francis draws on as he develops his proposed integral ecology: medieval male saints, including Francis of Assisi (LS, 10, *passim*) and Thomas Aquinas (86), former Popes, including John XXIII (175), Paul VI (231), John Paul II (124), and Benedict XVI (236). In addition, he also cites noteworthy non-Catholic men, the Eastern Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew (7–9), the French Protestant philosopher, Paul Ricoeur (83) and the 9th century Muslim mystic ‘Ali al Khawas (233).¹³ In contrast, only two women, both revered saints who died long before the term “ecology” had been coined, receive attention, Mary, the Mother of Jesus (98, *passim*) and Thérèse of Lisieux (230).

¹² *Ibid.* The sources that Gaard cites are Lorena Aguilar, “Women and climate change: Women as agents of change,” International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), December 2007 at http://cmsdata.iucn.org/downloads/climate_change_gender.pdf (on 6/19/2017); and Lorena Aguilar, Ariana Araujo and Andrea Quesada-Aguilar, “Fact sheet on gender and climate change,” presented at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, “Conference of the Parties” (COP) 13, held in Bali in December 2007. at <http://www.genderandenvironment.org/> on 5/29/2017.

¹³ Ali al Khawas is cited in LS, footnote 159.

Given the strong emphasis on “integral ecology” in *Laudato Si’*, I find myself questioning what existential meaning does Pope Francis invest in the term “integral” and why are contemporary women’s concerns about and contributions to earth care not given at least some attention, especially since, as I have already noted, the encyclical invites its readers to become open to categories that take one “to the heart of what it is to be human” (LS, 11). Surely women are “integral” to that heart!

In his thought provoking article in the March issue of *Theological Studies* titled, “Integral Ecology as a Liberationist Concept,” Daniel Castillo draws attention to the lack of a precise definition of integral ecology in *Laudato Si’*, noting that Pope Francis has broadened the concept of ecology, as a scientific study, to encompass the eco-social relationships that order society. Drawing attention to Gustavo Gutiérrez’s important contributions to “integral liberation,”¹⁴ especially his critical social analysis in the service of eliminating the injustices that cause poverty, Castillo proposes that Pope Francis’ emphasis on integral ecology is a call for *metanoia* in the sense of a total and radical conversion that hears and responds to all cries of the earth.¹⁵

A Latin American theologian who sounded a broadly similar call twenty years prior to *Laudato Si’* is Leonardo Boff, who made “integral ecology” a central focus in the “Editorial” introduction to a 1995 *Concilium* volume, which Boff co-edited with Virgilio Elizondo, titled *Ecology and Poverty*.¹⁶ Why give this attention? Not only was this editorial the first time I can recall encountering the term “integral ecology,” but also because Pope Francis insists in *Laudato Si’* that today “we have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” (LS, 49). This statement strongly echoes Boff’s and Elizondo’s presentation of *integral ecology* as an alliance between societies and nature that broadens the “common good” (of humans) to encompass “the common environmental good” of Earth.¹⁷ Boff and Elizondo then proceed to stress: “This is the great challenge raised by the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth.”¹⁸ Granted the order adopted for the two cries in *Laudato Si’* and *Ecology and Poverty* differ, but the substance of both statements strikes me as the same or at least similar.

I recognize that I may have just subjected you to an exercise in eisegesis, so I will unveil my motive. Boff in *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, published in 1997 two

¹⁴ Daniel P. Castillo draws attention to Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, 15th anniversary edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988) in his article, “Integral Ecology as a Liberationist Concept,” *Theological Studies* 77 (2016): 354 and *passim*.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 363.

¹⁶ Leonardo Boff and Virgil Elizondo, eds., “Editorial: Ecology and Poverty: Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor,” *Ecology and Poverty* (*Concilium*, 1995/5, London: SCM Press, 1995), ix. The editorial introduction closes with an urgent plea for conversion in the sense of reinforcing “the conviction that. . . politics be subject to ethics and ethics to a mysticism or spirituality. . . that “binds everything upwards (to) God” (p. xii). A major influence on Boff regarding ecology was Thomas Berry, C.P., with whom he studied. Berry reportedly coined the term “integral ecology” to describe his own work. For more on this point, see Sean Esbjorn-Hargens and Michael E. Zimmerman, *Integral Ecology, Uniting Multiple Perspectives on the Natural World* (Boston and London: Integral Books, 2009), 539.

¹⁷ Leonardo Boff and Virgil Elizondo, eds. “Ecology and Poverty,” ix-xi.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, xi.

years after the *Concilium* volume, *Ecology and Poverty*, associates integral ecology with “women and ecofeminist thinking.” He states in the book’s first chapter: “If we seek to work out a new covenant with nature, one of integration and harmony, we can find sources of inspiration in women and the feminine (in both man and woman).”¹⁹

Taking this statement as a segue, I will now focus on the contributions of two women from the so-called “developing world” of the global south to integral ecology: Ivone Gebara of Brazil and Wangari Muta Maathai of Kenya. My choices are related to the fact that deforestation in both Brazil and Kenya not only contributes to carbon dioxide increasing in earth’s atmosphere, but also alters planetary rainfall patterns.²⁰

I have also chosen to focus on Gebara and Maathai because each woman exemplifies a commitment to earth healing and social justice for the oppressed, especially for poor women, in ways that differ yet are complementary. I will begin with the self-identified ecofeminist Ivone Gebara, a Sister of Notre Dame, who earned doctorates in philosophy and religious studies at the Catholic University of Louvain. For close to eighteen years (1971–89), after she earned her first doctorate, she taught at the Catholic Theological Institute in northeastern Brazil during the period in which Dom Hélder Câmara was the Archbishop of Olinda and Recife.

Having also lived among and ministered to the poor in a slum district outside Recife, Gebara is critical of what she perceives to be a Christian missionary triumphalism. She has embraced what for her is liberation theology’s core question: “How do we speak of God in the face of hunger, injustice, misery, dictatorship, [and] the destruction of entire peoples?”²¹ While her statement does not include destruction of ecosystems, Gebara’s positions are clearly influenced by the fact that in her lifetime more than one-fifth of the Amazon rainforest in Brazil has been destroyed.

The Amazon region, 80% of which is located in Brazil, had been approximately 5.4 million square kilometers in size, which is 87% of the Amazon’s rain forest’s original state.²² If current trends in deforestation continue, an estimated one-quarter of the 382 mammal species in the Amazon region will lose 40% of their natural habitats.²³ The effects of this deforestation are expected to be further exacerbated by the climate change that results.

¹⁹ Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth and Cry of the Poor*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 26.

²⁰The identification of the negative effects of water pollution and land degradation related to deforestation, as the major ecological problems in the global south are noted in “Brazil’s Environmental Issues,” at <http://www.brazil.org.za/environmental-issues.html> (on 5/10/2017); and in “Environmental Problems in Kenya,” at <https://softkenya.com/kenya/environmental-problems/> (on 5/10/2017). Deforestation in the Amazon can contribute to reduction of rain in the mid and far west of the U.S. While deforestation in east Africa can result in less rainfall in Eastern Europe.

²¹ Ivone Gebara, “Ecofeminism and Panentheism,” in *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology*, eds. Mary Heather MacKinnon and Moni McIntyre (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1995), 209.

²² Y. Malhi, J. Timmons Roberts, Richard A. Betts, Timothy J. Killeen, Wenhong Li, Carlos A. Nobre, “Climate Change, Deforestation, and the Fate of the Amazon,” *Science* 319, Issue 5860 (2009): 169. The authors noted that since 1970, over 600,000 square kilometers (230,000 square miles) of Amazon rainforests had been cut.

²³Liudmila Osipova and Florencia Sangermano, “Surrogate species protection in Bolivia under climate and land cover change scenarios,” *Journal for Nature Conservation* 34 (December 2016): 107.

The impact of negative developments affecting the environment on the people of Brazil, prompted Ivone Gebara to be instrumental in founding the “*Con-spirando* collective”²⁴ in 1991, with a focus on ecofeminist theology, spirituality, and ethics. Since then Gebara has written two monographs, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (1999) and *Out of the Depths: Women’s Experience of Evil and Salvation* (2003). In these books she brings together concerns about the plight of the poor, especially of women, and of the degradation of ecosystems, while proposing a holistic feminism.

In regard to the *Con-spirando* collective—that it even exists is extraordinary. This is made clear in a 2002 presentation that Ivone Gabara gave titled “Theology, Ecology, and Feminism,” in which she pointed out that, because the culture of Brazil is strongly patriarchal, it is difficult for a woman to be a feminist and even more difficult to self-identify as an ecofeminist.²⁵ Patriarchy also extends to persons of African descent whose ancestors were slaves. Put simply sexism and racism in Brazil are common place. Moreover where the Roman Catholic Church of Brazil is concerned, on the whole it subscribes to a tradition that endorses the dependence of women on men and rarely questions the anthropological superiority of human beings over earth’s other species, thereby ignoring their inherent value as creatures of God.

It is therefore remarkable that Gebara chose to become not only a feminist but also an ecofeminist. She traces the start of her journey to feminism to a memorable encounter with a woman in a Bible study group in a favela in Recife.²⁶ When Gebara inquired why this woman consistently said nothing, she replied that in Sr. Ivone’s study sessions most questions about the application of biblical passages focused on political issues that involved only men.

For Gebara this encounter was a conversion moment that prompted her to focus on “the special suffering of (her fellow) women” and to come to grips with the fact that poor women and their daily realities are rarely given attention,²⁷ including by women not economically poor. Deep reflection led her to a phenomenological analysis of the concrete experiences of women in the service of a holistic ecofeminism responsive to life in Brazil’s favela communities, comprised largely of descendants of African slaves.

Although neighbors in the favelas tend to help one another in a spirit of “*comunidade*,” the garbage in the streets, inadequate health care, and other survival-related issues poor women face daily, add to their burdens as they struggle to provide clean water and nurturing sustenance for their families, and safe areas for their children to play. Why these issues are of paramount importance is illustrated by Gebara’s account of the lives of people living along the border of a canal in a poor Recife favela. The canal’s water is regularly polluted with garbage. People living near the canal never clean it, rather they wait for the officials of the city to collect the garbage periodically.²⁸

²⁴ For more on the “*Con-spirando* collective,” access <http://conspirando.cl/que-hacemos/> (on 8/2/17).

²⁵ Ivone Gebara, “Theology, Ecology, and Feminism,” A presentation she delivered at a conference honoring Rosemary Radford Ruether at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, April 3–4, 2002, at <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Ecofeminism%3a+a+Latin+American+perspective.-a0102979447> (on 5/12/2017).

²⁶ “Deliver Us from Evil,” an Interview with Ivone Gebara, *U.S. Catholic* 68/1 (2003): 18.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Gebara cites this example to illustrate the fact that daily life for uneducated poor persons, locked into a patriarchal political and economic system, results in diminished initiative. People thoughtlessly pollute the canal without pursuing alternatives. She proposes that emancipation from such patterns must be central to a holistic ecofeminist liberation theology.²⁹ Her “snap-shot” view of the water problem reality for Recife’s poor and her proposal for their emancipation resonates with themes given attention in *Laudato Si'*, such as “the intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet [and] the accompanying conviction that everything in the world is connected...” (LS, 16), with one note-worthy exception.

On the basis of her commitment to a holistic ecofeminism, Gebara casts a critical eye on the theology usually presented to Brazil’s poor, which depicts God as above all things as “their (heavenly) Father.” She notes when God is presented to the poor, in order to placate them, they are told that God is “in essence always good,” while God’s creatures (meaning them) are “always in need.” She stresses: surely this is “the wrong message for the poor.”³⁰

Arguing that this common presentation of God stems from patriarchy, Gebara proposes a panentheism that does not conceive of God as a being unto himself above humans.³¹ Surely God and the world are closely interrelated, with the world being in God and God being in the world. One of the reasons she reportedly rejects conceiving of God as analogous to a human person, is that the traditional presentation of the one God of Christianity is not only masculine, but also is presented in ways that make him “an entirely political God, a God whose main job is to *dominate* and *control*”³² his creatures. In her opinion this conception of God not only reflects a radical divide that separates the greatness of God, the smallness of humanity and the unimportance of non-human creatures, but it also provides no challenge to the patriarchal status quo in which women are second rate and the goods of the earth are at the disposal of the male-controlled market place.

Yet there may be elements of *Laudato Si'*'s presentation of God that are not antithetical to Gebara’s eco-feminist panentheism, especially where God as Creator is concerned. While it is true that early in the encyclical a directive is given to “the faithful not to forget that there is an infinite distance between God and the things of this world, which do not possess his fullness” (LS, 88), it is also true that later in a section titled “Sacramental Signs and the Celebration of Rest,” the distance between God and

²⁹ Gebara, *Longing for Running Water, Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 2.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 126.

³¹ Ivone Gebara, “Ecofeminism and Panentheism,” in *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology*, 212.

³² *Ibid.*, The italics are in her text, “Ecofeminism and Panentheism,” 212. Elsewhere in *Longing for Running Water*, Gebara criticizes the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* for depicting “humanity as marked by absolute *discontinuity* between the Creator God and all of creation.” Although she does not cite the source, she is obviously referring to #356 and the section titled “In the Image of God,” which states: “Of all visible creatures only man is ‘able to know and love his creator.’ He is ‘the only creature on earth that God has willed for its own sake,’ and he alone is called to share, by knowledge and love, in God’s own life. It was for this end that he was created, and this is the fundamental reason for his dignity.” See *Longing for Running Water*, 81.

creation does not seem to be even remotely “infinite,” for the universe is said to unfold in God, “who fills it completely” (233). “Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person’s face” (233). This statement is followed by a reminder, “the ideal is not only to pass from the exterior to the interior to discover the action of God in the soul, but also to discover God in all things” (233).

The theme of discovering God within creation in *Laudato Si’* is continued by providing a contribution from St. Bonaventure: “contemplation deepens the more we feel the working of God’s grace within our hearts, and the better we learn to encounter God in creatures outside ourselves” (LS, 233). This line of thinking is further developed by drawing on St. John of the Cross and his affirmation that “all the goodness present in the realities and experiences of this world is present in God eminently and infinitely, or more properly, (for) in each of these sublime realities is God” (234). While these statements are from male saints and God is consistently referred to using male pronouns, they are not antithetical to pantheism. *Laudato Si’* affirms that not only is God necessary for the universe to come into existence, but also God’s presence actively holds all of creation in existence. This belief is fundamental to the Roman Catholic belief in the sacramentality of creation, which envisions creatures as manifestations of God’s glory and power (cf. Psalms 8, 19).

In addition, none of the passages I have cited conveys the sense that the male Creator God is “an entirely political God, a God whose main job is to *dominate* and *control*.”³³ Yet, the pattern of a Creator—Father does exemplify what Gebara refers to as “limited and partial... exclusionary knowledge that begs for a remedy.”³⁴ That said, I find it unfortunate that *Laudato Si’*, and the Catholic Church tradition as a whole, has ignored the role of the female wisdom figure “Sophia” in biblical passages that speak of creation, such as Wisdom 7:22–24, which praises “Wisdom [*Sophia*], (as) the fashioner of all things” (v. 22) and affirms that “Wisdom [*Sophia*] is more mobile than any motion; (sic) because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things” (v. 24).³⁵ This trajectory of thought is found also in the Gospel of John 1:1–4a, 14, which presents “Wisdom” (*Sophia*) as existing before the creation that She had a role in creating. As Elizabeth Johnson proposed twenty-five years ago in her ground-breaking work, *She Who Is, Wisdom*—“Sophia’s activity is (surely) none other than the activity of God.”³⁶

While it is not possible to determine whether giving attention to Sophia creation related passages can remedy the problems of domination and control that Gebara associates with a creator God, a Sophia creation focus could hopefully challenge the patriarchal mind-set that has not only influenced but also has reigned in Christian theology and practice, thereby making space for an ecological spirituality, which in the words of *Laudato Si’*, “can motivate us to a more passionate concern for the protection

³³ Ibid., The italics are in Gebara’s text, “Ecofeminism and Panentheism,” 212.

³⁴ Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women’s Experience of Evil and Salvation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2002), 73.

³⁵ Additional Old Testament passages that give attention to wisdom “Sophia” include Proverbs 8:22–31, Sirach 1:4 and 9–11, Wisdom 8: 1–21 and 9:9, especially “With you is wisdom, she who knows your works and was present when you made the world. . .”

³⁶ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is, The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 91.

of our world” (LS, 216). Surely such “passionate concern” will prompt people to abandon passivism that assumes that our ecological problems will solve themselves with the application of new technology without “ethical consideration or deep change” (60).

To effect this “deep change” ethically, Pope Francis calls for a new and universal solidarity (LS, 14, *passim*) with people actively working together to restore damage caused by human abuse of God’s creation. Gebara also calls for solidarity, using the term ten times in a variety of nuanced ways in a presentation she delivered at the 2002 “Theology, Ecology, and Feminism” conference, including solidarity described as a growing communion between human beings and all living things.³⁷

In *Laudato Si'* Pope Francis speaks of solidarity in general terms, describing it as a call for “people to cooperate with one another as instruments of God for the care of creation, each according to his or her own culture, experience, involvements and talents” (LS, 14). He envisions solidarity with emphasis on one world committed to a common plan, marked by awareness that we live in a common home, which God has entrusted to us (232). This awareness is expressed in self-giving love for the benefit of all.

A person who strongly exemplifies a self-giving commitment to solidarity in service of the common good is Wangari Muta Maathai, the founder of the Green Belt Movement and a 2004 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate. I am giving attention to Maathai, although she died in 2011, not only because she is a Nobel Peace Prize winner, but also because *Laudato Si'* addresses African related realities, especially water shortages resulting in large sectors of the population having no reliable access to safe drinking water, while also being plagued by global warming induced drought, which impedes agricultural production (LS, 28, 53).

Born of Kikuyu parents in 1940 in Nyeri, a rural area of Kenya, as a child Wangari Maathai attended Catholic grammar and high schools sponsored by women religious from Italy and Ireland.³⁸ Upon graduation from high school, the African student “Kennedy Air Lift” program provided her with a scholarship to attend Mount St. Scholastica (later Benedictine) College in Atchison, Kansas, where she earned a degree in Biological Sciences and German in 1964. She then pursued a Master of Science degree in Biology at the University of Pittsburgh. In 1966 she began doctoral studies in Munich, Germany and completed her studies at the University of Nairobi in 1971, becoming the first Kenyan woman to earn a Ph.D. in science.³⁹

Commenting on her return trip from the United States after she completed her Master’s degree, Maathai recalls: “When I left the United States, I was taking back to

³⁷Ivone Gebara, “Ecofeminism: A Latin American Perspective,” *Cross Currents* 53/2, (2003), at [https://www.questia.com/library/p4746/cross-currents/i2655584/vol-53-no-2-summer-on\(5/13/2017\)](https://www.questia.com/library/p4746/cross-currents/i2655584/vol-53-no-2-summer-on(5/13/2017)).

³⁸Wangari Maathai’s primary school education was provided by the Consolata Missionary Sisters (from Italy), and her high school education was provided by the Sisters of Loreto (from Ireland) at the Loreto–Limuru Girls High School, Namulundah Florence, *Wangari Maathai, Visionary, Environmental Leader, Political Activist* (New York: Lantern Books, 2014), 55–58. From the religious women who taught her, she reportedly learned “a sense of service and the importance of voluntarism” (56) and in addition to awakening a love of science, “the sisters instilled in her a sense of God’s goodness and the call to service for the common good, the very qualities that infused her commitment to social transformation” (57).

³⁹Wangari Maathai, *Unbowed: a Memoir* (New York: Anchor Books, 2006), 66–94.

Kenya five and a half years of higher education, as well as the belief that I should work with the poor, and watch out for the weak and vulnerable.”⁴⁰ Apparently this thought stayed with her, and a decade later, on “World Environment Day,” she illustrated her commitment to the poor and to the vulnerable by publicly launching the “Green Belt Movement.”

On June 5, 1977, Maathai and a small group of women planted seven native trees in a Nairobi park to honor seven persons from different ethnic groups who made positive contributions to Kenya’s history.⁴¹ These trees were the first of an estimated fifty plus million that the “Green Belt Movement” has planted since then.⁴²

The 1977 public tree planting ceremony signaled two major goals of the Green Belt Movement: to reclaim the productivity of the land and to conserve water by planting trees. The emphasis of the movement also calls for linking environmental conservation to the development of women’s leadership skills. For the thousands of women who participated in the Green Belt Movement, the indigenous trees they planted, such as native fig trees with root systems that release clean underground water, are symbols of hope centered on the recovery of traditional communal values and farming practices that their ancestors followed long before European colonizers replaced native foliage with non-native cash crops, such as coffee and tea.

When she received the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, Wangari Maathai repeated a saying that she often stressed with Green Belt volunteers: “The tree is a symbol for peace, as well as for hope, democracy, and human rights.”⁴³ To help keep hope alive, Wangari Maathai wrote four books, each of which was related to her eco-justice efforts, including *Unbowed*, an informative memoir about her work (2006),⁴⁴ and *Replenishing the Earth: Spiritual Values for Healing Ourselves and the World* (2010). Both are especially relevant for a Christian ecofeminist response to *Laudato Si*.⁴⁵

In *Unbowed*, Maathai recalls that early in the process of launching the Green Belt Movement, government authorities questioned whether women, lacking the requisite education and credentials, should be planting trees. Maathai’s response was direct and to the point:

Education, if it means anything, should not take people away from the land but instill in them even more respect for it, because educated

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 131–32. The Green Belt Movement (GBM), under the auspices of the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK), was formed to respond to the needs of rural Kenyan women who reported that their water sources were drying up, their food supply was less secure, and they had to walk farther and farther to get firewood for fuel for cooking and for the fencing needed to protect their animals from predators.

⁴² “The Green Belt’s Annual Report, 2015,” pp 6–7, at <http://www.greenbeltmovement.org/who-we-are/annual-report>. See also “Aid for Africa,” at <https://www.aidforafrica.org/member-charities/green-belt-movement-international/> (on 5/19/2017).

⁴³ Hicks Stiehm, “Wangari Muta Maathai: Kenya’s ‘Green’ Doctor,” *Champions for Peace, Women Winners of the Noble Peace Prize*, 2nd edition (Lanham, MD: Roman & Littlefield, 2014), 214.

⁴⁴ *Unbowed, a Memoir* (cf., note 34).

⁴⁵ Wangari Maathai, *Replenishing the Earth, Spiritual Values for Healing Ourselves and the World* (New York: Double Day Religion, 2010). Her other two books are *The Green Belt Movement* (2003) and *The Challenge for Africa* (2009).

people are in a position to understand what is being lost. The future of the planet concerns all of us, and all of us should do what we can to protect it.⁴⁶

She then turned to the women and added, “women, you don’t need a diploma to plant a tree.”

This incident and Maathai’s statement resonate with *Laudato Si'*’s recognition that a vision of human beings, stemming from the mechanisms of today’s globalized economy, can have an unnecessary “levelling effect on cultures, diminishing the immense variety which is the heritage of all humanity” (LS, 144). Attempts to interfere in local developments promoting earth-healing on the grounds of a legal technicality—no diploma—can overlook common sense realities associated with these developments. Put simply, responses to resolving ecological problems need to be based in the developing local culture. To cite *Laudato Si'*:

As life and the world are dynamic realities, so our care for the world must also be flexible and dynamic.... There is a need to respect the rights of peoples and cultures, and to appreciate that the development of a social group presupposes an historical process which takes place within a cultural context and demands the constant and active involvement of local people from within their proper culture (144).

Maathai recognized in 1977 that stopping a new movement with a solution to an environmental problem based on a legal technicality (“no diploma”) was wrong. Many of the ecological problems of Kenya are traceable to British initiated practices of using the most fertile land for growing “cash crops,” such as coffee and tea, and of replacing native trees with pine and water guzzling eucalyptus trees, the wood-pulp from which is used to produce writing paper and other paper products that are sold on the international market. The pattern of planting non-native trees contributed to the lack of water for growing nutritious food for people and their domesticated animals. Women, who were long silent about their struggles to feed their families, were inspired by Maathai to take the initiative to promote communal planting of native trees, thereby drawing attention to problems related to Kenya’s fragile ecosystems and the importance of their resolution.

For the Green Belt Movement, planting native trees was about far more than resisting unnecessary law regarding who may plant trees. The Green Belt Movement provided Maathai with a way to help her fellow women to recognize the cause-effect relationship between the lack of trees and environmental degradation, freeing them to become “unbowed” in order to “Rise Up and Walk”⁴⁷ into a better future. Practically speaking, women “rising up and walking” results not only from members of the Green Belt Movement being paid a modest amount for planting trees, but also the movement sponsored sessions, which often included reflection on Bible readings and incorporated a “see, judge, act” method for responding to major social problems negatively impacting their local communities.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ *Unbowed, a Memoir*, 138.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 277, 295; “Rise Up and Walk” is the title of the thirteenth chapter of *Unbowed*.

⁴⁸ For more on the dynamics of the Green Belt Movement, see Kathleen P. Hunt. “It’s More Than Planting Trees, It’s Planting Ideas’: Ecofeminist Praxis in the Green Belt Movement,” *Southern Communication Journal* 79/3 (2014): 235–49. For more on the “See,

In *Replenishing the Earth* Maathai notes that a favorite biblical selection treated in the communal Green Belt Movement's sessions was the "Parable of Talents" (Matt. 25:2–30; Luke 19:12–28). She applied this parable's message as a reminder that "one can have few possessions and still maintain one's self-respect"⁴⁹ and also find joy in one's work. Such sessions resulted in people working together not only to plant trees but also to cultivate traditional foods that provide better nutrition than the imported plants that often fail to thrive in Kenya.⁵⁰ Depending on the educational level of the group, some also addressed local and national problems with attention to their root causes and worked to dismantle patriarchal hierarchies by valuing women and their contributions.⁵¹

Like Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* (especially nos. 65–67), in *Replenishing the Earth*, Maathai focuses on the Genesis creation accounts. Regarding Genesis 1, she draws attention to the wisdom of God's order for creation and its logic:

God could (only) form humans once there were trees to remove the carbon dioxide from the air and replace it with oxygen and then balance the composition of the air so that the whole planet did not burst into flame. . . . It is a sobering thought if the human species were to become extinct, no (other) species . . . would die out. Yet if some of them were to become extinct, human beings would also.⁵²

In *Replenishing the Earth* Maathai gives attention to Genesis 2 as well and the directive God gave to Adam to serve and protect the Garden of Eden and to live in harmony with the natural world. Noting that the first humans chose to eat the forbidden fruit in the midst of the garden's bounty, she stresses the importance of being mindful that where the health of our planet is concerned we have "the free will to destroy or tend, protect or subdue, act as dominators or as conservers and custodians."⁵³ Whatever we choose, the consequences will be ours to address.

The Green Belt Movement's emphasis on planting indigenous trees (e.g., acacia, cedar, baobab) has not only contributed to the restoration of local ecosystems, but also has been instrumental in creating opportunities for Kenyan women and men to generate income, value tribal identities and virtues, and restore their damaged homeland.⁵⁴ Put simply, many have become "unbowed," ready to face a more promising future.

Unlike Yvone Gebara, Wangari Maathai did not publicly self-identify as an ecofeminist, but like Gebara she recognized the connection between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women. Even more so than Gebara, Maathai actively affirmed the fundamental dignity of women, the majority of whom were much poorer and far less educated than she, by engaging whole-heartedly in efforts to remedy the interwoven social and ecological problems of Kenya and of Africa as a whole.

Judge, Act" method of responding to injustice in Catholic Social Thought, see Pope John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, "On Christianity and Social Progress" (1961), esp. no. 236.

⁴⁹ *Replenishing the Earth*, 139.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Unbowed*, 123–24.

⁵² *Replenishing the Earth*, 70–71.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 72–73.

⁵⁴ Lynne Duke, "From the Ground Up: Wangari Maathai's Plan for Cultivating Peace Is Taking Root in Africa," *Washington Post* (12/26/2004), at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A24008-2004Dec24.html> (on 5/17/2017).

Maathai's efforts exemplify *Laudato Si'*'s positive examples of environmental improvement: "rivers, polluted for decades, have been cleaned up; native woodlands have been restored; landscapes have been beautified" (LS, 58). As Pope Francis points out, "these achievements do not solve global-scale problems, but they do show that men and women are still capable of intervening positively." *Laudato Si'* attributes such gestures of "generosity, solidarity and care" to God creating us "for love" (58).

Although the first international "Earth Day" was celebrated on April 22, 1970 to garner support for environmental protection, the Roman Catholic Church said relatively little about ecology as an important global social justice concern until *Laudato Si'* was released in 2015. Yes, there were some papal statements⁵⁵ and laudable regional episcopal documents released in the US, the first of which was in 1975 by Catholic Bishops of Appalachia, titled "This Land Is Home to Me."⁵⁶ But considering the magnitude of the current planetary environmental problems addressed in *Laudato Si'*, none of the local bishops' conferences' ecologically related documents can compare to the encyclical's treatment of human induced climate change as a global moral issue. Gratefully, the ecological health of the planet is now an official paramount concern of the universal church.

This fact, as well as the likelihood—as of June 1st—that President Donald Trump is withdrawing the United States from the Paris Climate Accord,⁵⁷ despite the international consensus about human-caused global warming, prompted me to limit my ecofeminist response to *Laudato Si'* to the "global south," in order to draw attention to the impact of global warming on some of the economically poorest people living in Latin America and Africa and in the process, in the spirit of 1 Peter 3:15, to "awaken a reason to account for the hope that is in me" still regarding the ecological health of our planet.

Against great odds two women with very different backgrounds, educations and life experiences from Latin America and Africa, Ivone Gebara and Wangari Muta Matthai, became effective ecofeminist change agents. Fellow theologians, I invite you to join me in considering Ivone Gebara's powerful guiding question: "How do we speak of God in the face of hunger, injustice, misery, dictatorship, [and] destruction" especially of *earth's fragile ecosystems*?

Regarding Wangari Maathai, whom I met in 1965 as "Mary Jo Muta," in a predominately African-American Catholic parish in Pittsburgh, I invite you to join me in reflecting on the thought provoking message of her Green Belt Movement related books, *Unbowed* and *Replenishing the Earth* and the admonition they pose: Advocate

⁵⁵ Pope John Paul II, "Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation," World Day of Peace Declaration (1/1/1990) and Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, "Charity in Truth," (2009), esp. ch. 4.

⁵⁶ Catholic Bishops of Appalachia, "This Land Is Home to Me," 1975 (Martin, KY: Catholic Committee of Appalachia, 2007), 7–37; see also the Appalachian Bishops' Pastoral Letter "At Home in the Web of Life: 1995; both are available at <http://ccappal.org/publications/pastoral-letters> (on 8/2/17). The Catholic Committee of Appalachia 2015 People's Pastoral, "The Telling Takes Us Home: Taking our Place in the Stories that Shape Us," at <http://ccappal.org/peoplespastoral/the-document> (on 5/17/2017).

⁵⁷ Michael D. Shear, "Trump Will Withdraw U.S. From Paris Climate Agreement," *New York Times*, June 1, 2017, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/01/climate/trump-paris-climate-agreement.html?r=0> on 6/2/2017.

for the oppressed people of our world (especially women and children) to become unbowed. Actively engage in replenishing the earth!

Finally, since the topic of this conference is *Laudato Si'*, I want to invite you to join me in “incarnating” Pope Francis’ hopeful reminder: “All of us can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation; each according to his (*or her*) own culture, experience, involvements and talents” (LS, 14), and in the process bring healing to our own lives and to our earthly home. For surely, the wisdom of hope is found when we dare to hope together.