

LAUDATE DEUM AND THE FUTURE OF CATHOLIC TEACHING ON
ECOLOGY – SELECTED SESSION

Topic: *Laudate Deum* and the Future of Catholic Teaching on Ecology
 Conveners: Daniel P. Scheid, Duquesne University
 Moderator: Daniel Castillo, Loyola University Maryland
 Presenters: Sara Bernard-Hoverstad, Gonzaga University
 Meghan Clark, St. John’s University
 Daniel Scheid, Duquesne University

This selected session discussed Pope Francis’s Apostolic Exhortation, *Laudate Deum* (Praise God), directed to all people of good will to inspire action to address the climate crisis. The exhortation was released just nine years following the promulgation of his encyclical on ecology, *Laudato Si’*.

Meghan Clark began the panel with her paper, “*Laudate Deum* within Francis’s Social Magisterium.” Clark outlined the key issues that frame Francis’s social magisterium, which explain the exasperated tone of *Laudate Deum*, highlighting inequality, the ecological crisis, and the fractured vision of a global common good. For Francis, the inequality of our global economic system, rooted in lingering theories of “trickle down” approaches to growth, indicates that the economy is sick. The economy impoverishes the poor and threatens the health of the planet and our ability to pursue the global common good. Next, Clark discussed the position of the United States, arguing that the US is rarely the primary focus of papal social teaching, but in this case, it is. For example, trickle-down economics has its origin and greatest strength in American economic policies. In addition, the US is the only site for climate denialism, while also remaining one of the world’s greatest emitters. On the positive side, *Laudate Deum* approvingly cites the US Bishops, and Francis praises human ingenuity as vital to addressing climate change, a message that resonates with American culture.

Sara Bernard-Hoverstad’s paper, “*Laudate Deum* and the Vatican’s Global Climate Action,” situated *Laudate Deum* in the context of the Vatican’s various political efforts to address climate change. Bernard-Hoverstad argued that Pope Francis uses pragmatic action and diplomacy to bolster the moral message of his environmental contributions to Catholic social teaching. For example, the release of *Laudato Si’* in 2015 was timed six months prior to the Paris climate meeting and meant to help influence discussions. While it was addressed to all people of good will, Francis clearly intended to sway political leaders, as evidenced by his giving a copy of *Laudato Si’* to President Donald Trump in 2017. In 2022, the Vatican city state joined the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, which required them to create a Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC), a climate action plan to meet emissions standards and prepare for climate impacts. The Vatican was able to join COP 27 in Egypt in 2022 and help coordinate with other Catholic NGOs. Finally, *Laudate Deum* was issued just prior to COP 28 in Dubai, and Pope Francis had intended to appear there in person. *Laudate Deum*’s focus on the failure of international politics and its emphasis on the need for structural solutions and decisive action remain a Vatican priority.

Daniel Scheid's paper, "*Laudate Deum* and Hearing the Cry of Indigenous and Nonhuman Creation," examined Pope Francis's focus on two communities vital to understanding integral ecology: the poor, and in particular indigenous communities, and nonhuman creation. *Laudate Deum* reiterates and extends the critique of the technocratic paradigm articulated in *Laudato Si'*, and Scheid drew on Francis's post-Synodal Amazonian document, *Querida Amazonia*, to amplify how the plight of the poor and of nonhuman creation represent the greatest rebuttal of the technocratic paradigm. Francis centers concern on the poor, for example by juxtaposing the blame placed on the poor having too many children with consumption by the rich as the true cause of ecological harm. The technocratic paradigm inculcates the illusion of limitless progress and economic gain, and in the Amazon for example, this mindset views the indigenous as usurpers or obstacles to be eliminated. Similarly, nonhuman creation is not simply a background for humans or a thing for our unbridled use, and we should feel its destruction as a physical ailment. Following *Querida Amazonia*, the interdependent communion of creation experiences an attack or abuse on nonhumans and ecosystems as an attack on all communities: humans, the Creator, and future generations. To defend the Earth is to defend humanity because we are water.

A robust discussion with a plethora of questions followed, for example inquiring into the degree of the US Catholic Bishops' commitment to the message of *Laudato Si'*; how the theological message of *Laudato Si'* might finally move into greater action at the parish and diocesan levels; and how dialogue with indigenous could pose both opportunities but also challenges to greater coordinated climate action.

Many thanks to Daniel Castillo for convening the session, and to the many who came and asked questions.

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