

WE ARE WHAT WE RECEIVE: *LAUDATO SI'* AND  
DEPOLARIZING DIALOGUE—SELECTED SESSION

Topic: Ecclesiology and reception  
Convener: Amanda Osheim, Loras College  
Moderator: Amanda Osheim, Loras College  
Presenters: Stephen Okey, Saint Leo University  
Annie Selak, Boston College  
Gregory Hillis, Bellarmine University

In “Reception of Magisterial Teaching in the Ecology of Twitter,” Stephen Okey argued social media platforms are used both in the promulgation and in the reception of magisterial teaching. Anthony Godzieba asserts that social media’s immediacy necessarily creates a decontextualized authority which interrupts the reception process and may hinder authoritative interpretation. Okey countered Godzieba’s claim by agreeing with Vincent Miller that digital media has a contextual ecology and turning to Neil Postman’s view of media ecology as having both beneficial and detrimental impacts, and as irretrievably shaping the cultures in which the process of reception occurs. In this view, *Laudato Si’*’s promulgation and the early stages of its reception illustrate the strategic, and perhaps beneficial, use of the particular media ecology of Twitter. For example, regular tweets from the @Pontifex account in the twenty hours following the encyclical’s release communicated key ideas to a large audience, many of whom may never read the encyclical itself, and the hashtag #laudatosi was used not only in promulgating the encyclical, but also continues to provide a means for public engagement with the document.

Annie Selak’s “Inheriting Climate Controversies: Reception in a Polarized Church” began by examining political polarization in the United States, where polling numbers suggest belief in global warming is primarily correlated with political affiliation rather than religious commitment. Selak argued ecclesial polarization results from prioritizing adherence to one’s ideological views over entering into communion with the church, a denial of relationship which threatens the church as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. The twin impacts of political polarization and failure to link religious belief with care for creation complicate *Laudato Si’*’s reception in the US Catholic church and may lead to ecclesial polarization. Returning to polling data, Selak posits that a foundational level of *Laudato Si’*’s reception may be indicated if Catholics who have engaged with the encyclical accept its basic premise. For instance, 13–15% of these Catholics disagree with Pope Francis on climate change, 30–35% agree, and a large middle ground of respondents did not know or refused to answer. While a sizable portion of US Catholic respondents has not received the premise of *Laudato Si’*, further data indicates the encyclical influenced 15% of Catholic respondents to be more convinced of climate change, which may be a positive marker of its reception.

Gregory Hillis’s “A Dialogical Church: The Ecclesiology of *Laudato Si’*” considered Pope Francis’ understanding of dialogue. Rather than a mode of accommodating modern Western culture, as averred by some of Francis’ critics, Francis’ use of dialogue is countercultural. In *Laudato Si’*, dialogue is urged in the midst of trenchant criticisms of modern culture, particularly selfish individualism and fragmentation which Francis indicates are root causes of the environmental crisis. These forms of isolation from God, one another, and creation militate against the

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interconnection of creation. In contrast, dialogue helps to recognize and restore interdependence and mutual reception. Further, Francis does not only advocate dialogue among people, but with all of creation, as he indicates each aspect of creation a message communicates as well. Hillis argued dialogue among people, as well as listening to the message of creation, is essential for a conversion at once moral and spiritual, which leads to a transformational relationality reflective of the trinitarian life.

Several questions were raised in the ensuing fruitful discussion. These included the limits of the current polls relating to the environment and *Laudato Si'*, which do not offer further demographic insights into racial or class differences; how and the degree to which reception may be measured; the role of theologians in reception, particularly as they interpret and share encyclicals such as *Laudato Si'* on the parish level and for popular audiences; and the role of local church in facilitating the reception process through dialogue, homilies, discussions, and application.

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