

READING *LAUDATO SI'* FROM AN  
AFRICANIST BACKGROUND—SELECTED SESSION

Topic: Reading *Laudato Si'* from an Africanist Background  
Convener: Emmanuel Katongole, University of Notre Dame  
Moderator: Emmanuel Katongole, University of Notre Dame  
Presenters: LaReine-Marie Mosely, Notre Dame of Maryland University  
Paulinus Odozor, University of Notre Dame  
Andrew Prevot, Boston College

Three central convictions make *Laudato Si'* a particularly relevant message for African/African American communities: first, the intrinsic connection between poverty and the ecological crisis—“We are not faced with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental” (LS, 139); secondly, the spiritual roots of the ecological crisis, which has to do with our inability to acknowledge our deep connection with the land (LS, 2); and thirdly, the values and wisdom of indigenous cultural approaches and ecological sensitivity which can “instill a greater sense of responsibility, a strong sense of community, a readiness to protect others, a spirit of creativity and a deep love for the land” (LS, 179).

The panel on “Reading *Laudato Si'* from an Africanist Background explored the three convictions with three distinct objectives: (1) to highlight the nature, shape, and extent of the ecological crisis in Africa/African American communities; (2) identify distinctive African/African American cultural and spiritual values and resources that could serve as a starting point in realizing an integral ecology; and (3) point to theologically informed practical models within African/African-American communities that offer an alternative to the technocratic paradigm.

In her paper, “Womanist Ways of Engaging the Wilderness,” LaReine-Marie Mosely started by noting that, in *Sisters in the Wilderness*, Delores S. Williams identifies the link between Hagar and African American women (and children) to their religious experiences in the wilderness. Wilderness, LaReine-Marie Mosely argued is literally and symbolically an important site where past and present black women have strived and continue to strive for “survival and quality of life.” The experience and literary contributions of African American women illustrate these realities which *Laudato Si'* understands as the inextricable link between humanity’s healing of “relationship[s] with nature and the environment” and the “healing [of] all fundamental human relationships.” Making reference to bell hooks’ essay, “Touching the Earth,” and to Alice Walker’s *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, she pointed to some examples in which African American women, in the “wilderness” of Northern industrialized cities, continue to connect to mother earth, motivated by the conviction (bell hooks) that “when we love the earth, we learn to love ourselves fully.”

In his paper, “*Laudato Si'* and Africa’s Environmental Challenges, Fr. Paulinus Odozor cited a recent global report on the environment, where several cities in Nigeria were voted the most polluted cities on earth. Although one can contest the accuracy of this report, he noted the reality it points to is incontestable: there is a disastrous abuse of the environment going on in Africa today. In the paper, he surveyed three cities: Onitsha, the historically and religiously significant (“Nigeria’s worst polluted city”), Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo (one of the fastest growing cities in

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Africa, 12 million people), and Durban in South Africa as representative of a combination of factors—population growth, lack of government planning and economic growth—that contribute to Africa’s deepening environmental crisis.

In his paper, “Ecological Blackness: Overcoming the Urban-Primitive Dialectic,” Andrew Prevot argued that a positive concept of ecological blackness, illustrated by various African and African American examples, can help us overcome the dehumanizing effects of the urban-primitive dialectic, which seems to define blackness for modern anti-black social imaginaries. Contemporary culture’s oscillation between stereotypes of urban and primitive blackness conceals the fully human (i.e., both natural and rational) activities of black persons and communities in relation to their environments and in defense of their lives. Catholic ecological theology, inspired by Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si’*, would do well not only to confront problems of environmental racism directly, but also to draw on such traditions of ecological blackness.

The conversation that followed the presentations focused on two major issues: one, on the theme of migration and displacement that is evident both in the migration to the industrial North by African Americans following the Civil Rights Movement, and growing urbanization in Africa where slums (growing three times faster than the cities) represent the face of Africa’s ecological wilderness. Conversation also revolved around the notion of “primitive” as an ideological level that was (is) used to negatively characterize the African outlook characterized by an innate relation to the earth. There was a widespread recognition that it is in these “primitive” attachments to creation, earth and land and the attendant spiritualities of care, community and belonging that hold the key to the integral ecology of Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si’*.

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