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Response to Jonathan Mulrooney

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I am grateful to Jonathan Mulrooney for his beautiful and thoughtful meditation on the paradox of indifference and his call to ontological conversion in light of Creation and Christ's passion, poetry and literature, and *Laudato Si'*. He indicates how our common creation in *imago Dei* invites us to mirror "separation, limitation, longing but also presence, embrace, immersion" with moral implications for our relationship to the created order. Jonathan's focus on indifference underscores how *Laudato Si'* attends to the impact of social sin and encounters with the natural surround on human desire and (in)action, rather than moving from harmful signs of the times to warranted policy changes alone. The encyclical's invitation to an examination of conscience invites reflection upon our own habits and spiritual practices situated in a "high offending" context. Its scriptural and theological foundations help drive home the relational significance of the ways in which we tread daily (how we eat and waste and heat and cool and commute, much less vote and spend). Just as Jonathan attends to how literary scholarship reflects concerns about relationality in the created world, Trinitarian anthropological claims are fundamental to Pope Francis's integral ecology in *Laudato Si'*: If "[a] person grows more, matures more, is sanctified more to the extent he or she enters into relationships—including here with all creatures"—then we are called to penetrate "soap bubbles of indifference" even if we can afford to presume environmental peril not yet "our problem."

In its summons to a far-reaching ecological conversion, *Laudato Si'* highlights entrenched barriers to encountering the poor and the earth with compassion and justice. Throughout his papacy, Francis has attuned our focus to such structures and attitudes that harm people and planet alike. Hence he underscores not just personal choices or policy failures but pervasive mindsets that shape our loyalties—a technocratic

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paradigm that conditions lifestyles and social possibilities, "cheerful recklessness," and an anesthetizing consumerism. Countering unjust environmental practices and the lack of political will to reverse them, the pope insists, entails interrogating these deeper "totalizing worldviews" that legitimate them. Jonathan names the "unhealthy illusions fostered by isolated living" in this vein, which function to perpetuate *and* deny complicity in a web of injustice on ecological and other social issues. This is highly resonant with my own work on migration: isolationist rhetoric and amnesic practices to the contrary, there are increasingly "no frontiers of barriers behind which we can hide."

Yet the encyclical's first and last words are not of sin or doomsday but of hope in humans' capacities to enact positive change. Whereas the pope is unflinching in his prophetic criticism of harmful mindsets and actions, the tone remains one of hope, praise, and humility. When *Laudato Si'* lays out the virtues needed to reverse harmful trends, one cannot help but think of the pope's own embodied examples of lived simplicity, sobriety, and capacities for wonder and care. Yet whereas he admits some of these "were not favorably regarded in the last century," he clearly articulates a sense that an authentic humanity able to contemplate beauty and overcome reductionism and division is dwelling in the midst of this culture almost unnoticed, likening it to "a mist seeping gently beneath a closed door."[1]

I recall that the power of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* lay precisely in how she linked attentiveness to the fragile beauty of the natural world to unmasking the efforts to endanger it (I still vividly remember her warnings 25 years after my first reading to a public "fed little tranquilizing pills of half-truths and sugarcoat[ed] unpalatable facts").[2] She questioned whether any civilization can wage relentless war on life without destroying itself, and without losing the right to be called civilized. She did so not only by exposing the impact of chemical pesticides but by celebrating the place of the "picturesque fiddler crab" in its delicate ecology, heeding the "mute testimony of dead ground squirrels," and lamenting the coming of spring increasingly unheralded by the songs of returning robins, starlings, chickadees, or cardinals. Carson's mode was not unlike Francis's prophetic indictments joined with wonder and perhaps offers insight into how we as educators evince credibility for the urgency and desirability of this parallel summons.

Several years prior to Pope Francis's promulgation of *Laudato Si',* Santa Clara University President Michael Engh, S.J., identified as his signature institutional priority the pursuit of environmental sustainability linked to social justice. The source material I most clearly recall from his inaugural address is Mary Oliver's "Song of the Builders." He noted how Catholic universities engage not only interdisciplinary work to help students "build the universe," as her poem concludes, but how our shared goals require contemplation:

1 Pope Francis, encyclical *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home,* http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html no. 112.

2 Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1962) xxiv.

> She sat down to think about God, and her attention focused on an insect, a cricket...time for reflection can lead us to closer observation of our world. In... Catholic universities...we commit ourselves to notice all living beings, whether an insect or an individual person. We ponder what we see and the Creator we cannot see. We commit ourselves to create a space where we can take seriously the questions of ultimate meaning, transcendence,...holiness.[3]

Jonathan's focus on indifference brings into relief the steep challenge educators face in modeling Ignatian availability and fostering it in students who face not only isolating social currents but familial or financial pressures. I am convinced by the role of literary study and the arts more broadly in shaping the moral imagination and the practices his essay commends. Across disciplines we might seek additional ways in which our encounters with students offer opportunities to serve as "spiritual guides," thinking broadly in terms of a range of practices that help counteract dominant cultural currents (whether technocracy and consumerism; prioritizing frantic activity or hooking up; or idolizing efficiency, status, power). We have opportunities through assignments, immersions, and even class policies (e.g., fasting from electronic stimuli) to habituate countercurrents. *Laudato Si'* itself invites not only ascetic practices but also pursuit of actual rather than virtual relationships and Sabbath rest.

In closing I wish to raise two caveats regarding this vocation of forming for "uncertainty" and rightly ordered longing. First, Robinson's setting evoked for me clichéd but genuine shifts in childhood play and formative experiences in the lives of today's students. Take Ruth's description of the lake in that text: "We were often the last to leave, so absorbed we were in our skating and in the silence and numbing sweetness of the air...." What does it mean to form a generation who is less likely to have been absorbed in oneness with the natural surround—whether on frozen lakes or in other "endangered species of unstructured play" in creeks in the woods, in surf, on boulders—and far *more* likely to have been "absorbed by" technology? Nir Eyal, author of *Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products*, reflects on the way an app succeeds when it meets the user's emotional needs even before she has become consciously aware of them:

> When you're feeling uncertain, before you ask why you're uncertain, you Google. When you're lonely, before you're even conscious of feeling it, you go to Facebook. Before you know you're bored, you're on YouTube. Nothing tells you to do these things. The users trigger themselves.[4]

Hence for today's generation of students beholden to such behavioral design marketing, which habituates retreat from the environmental surround into alternate realities by "unthinking choices," we face not only indifference, but in some important sense,

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3 Michael E. Engh, S.J., "Inaugural Speech," April 14, 2009, https://www.scu.edu/president/selected-writings/public-addresses/inaugural-speech/.

4 Nir Eyal, author of *Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2014) as cited in Ian Leslie, "The Scientists Who Make Apps Addictive," *The Economist,* October/November 2016, https://www.1843magazine.com/features/the-scientists-who-make-apps-addictive.

captivity. How might we facilitate journeys of conversion amid these influential forces running counter to the currents of detachment and mystery?

Finally, this invitation to indifference via dwelling in unknowing and encounters with the "vast natural surround" remains a powerful one for us and for students we form. Yet for some student populations, operative barriers may not primarily entail callous indifference or unhealthy worldly attachments as much as highly unstable senses of self-in-relation. In such instances, how should our formation efforts differ? How do we reach those students who are less at risk of trivializing or domesticating sin than becoming overwhelmed by its effects? In some settings this tension has polarized by pitting uncomfortable exposure to demanding and diverse perspectives against increasingly expansive "trigger warning" practices. Yet where students have failed to develop a meaningful sense of self or responsibility whether due to harmful socialization or trauma, the formational task may require distinct approaches. As one example, the authors of *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed: Uncovering Liberating Possibilities for Women* trace ways in which standard approaches and language may hinder rather than foster a relationship with God, others, and creation. For example, they identify a focus on the "corruption and foulness of my body"[5] or neglect of the need to reject self-hatred rather than just self-interest as key to authentic conversion in the First Week. In other words, helping retreatants or students to know themselves not only as sinners but as loved by God given the significant (social, cultural, psychological) obstacles they may face remains pivotal to drawing participants more deeply to conversion and interior freedom.

Wherever we find ourselves or our students, however, attending anew to the multifaceted nature of our own creation and that of the natural surround offers enduring reminders of God's presence and distance alike. May our collective efforts to cultivate spiritual practices in our university and ecclesial settings expand the "mist seeping gently beneath [the] closed door."

5 Elizabeth Liebert, S.N.J.M., Katherine Marie Dyckman, S.N.J.M., and Mary Garvin, S.N.J.M., *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed: Uncovering Liberating Possibilities for Women* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2001) 157-8.