

**“For All the Earth” (1 Cor 10:26):
Mission and the Reign of God¹**

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A review of the biblical and theological foundations of our call to mission demonstrates that the development of an integral ecology on behalf of our common home is a Christian imperative.

Introduction

A few years ago, the fad was to wear silicone wristbands stamped with a particular issue: pink ones for breast cancer awareness; red for AIDS awareness; yellow ones for LiveStrong. A popular one among teen-agers read: WWJD—What would Jesus do? The purpose of the accessory wasn’t so much to advertise an awareness of the Gospel as it was to remind the wearer that when faced with a difficult situation she or he should ask that question—What would Jesus do?—before responding. As we vowed religious explore our responses to the Laudato Si’ Action Platform, the question is a good one: What would Jesus do? Whether you hold a high Christology or a lower one, as vowed religious we are obliged to ask this question. But considering our growing understanding of cosmology and evolution, another question demands an answer: *Why* would Jesus do what he did? How do we understand Jesus’ motivation for mission in an unfinished and emerging universe? Once we ponder those questions, we are left with yet another: What is ours to do today?

Why Would Jesus Do What He Did?

At his baptism, Jesus has a profound spiritual experience in which he comes to recognize that he is God’s beloved son (Mark 1:9-11). After John’s arrest, something signals to Jesus that now he must act on his sonship, taking up the work of his father, “proclaiming the good news of God” (Mark 1:14-15). As the evangelist Mark presents it, Jesus does not proclaim the gospel of Jesus but the gospel of God. The apostle Paul had made this explicit in his letter to the Romans: “Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God” (Rom 1:1).

What is this gospel, the Good News, of God? Drawing from the Hebrew Scriptures—the Scriptures Jesus knew—the Good News is that God is faithful to God’s promises. But what are those promises? The first occurs in Genesis 9:8-17:

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will

¹ This paper is an excerpt from *The Heavens are Telling the Glory of God: An Emerging Chapter for Religious Life. Science, Theology, Mission* (Liturgical Press, 2022).

remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

God makes a covenant with the created world. Nine times the phrases, “every living creature” (vv. 10, 12, 15, 16) and “all flesh” (v. 11, 15 [twice], 16, 17) are repeated. With the first introduction in verse 10, God makes clear what is included in “every living creature”: “the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you.” The covenant also extends to “the earth” (v. 13). “This is kind of amazing. God makes an everlasting covenant with every living creature of all kinds of flesh, whether furred, feathered, or finned, establishing a covenant ‘between me and all flesh that is on the earth.’”¹ The very first unilateral commitment God makes is with all the creatures of Earth—not only the human ones—and with Earth itself, reaffirming what had been stated at the very dawn of God’s creative acts: “God saw everything that [God] had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Gen 1:31). As Dianne Bergant, CSA, acknowledges, “This connectedness of all natural creation is found in other passages of the Old Testament, suggesting that the theme was not limited to one or two periods of Israelite history.”²

Later, God will make a covenant with a specific family of Abraham and Sarah (Gen 12:1-3), with Moses and the people (Exod 19 and 24) and with King David and his heirs (2 Sam 7:8-17). The prophet Jeremiah will speak of a new covenant that God will write in our hearts:

It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. (Jer 31:32-33)

The Hebrew term, *hesed* captures the breadth and depth of God’s commitment to relationship and stalwart dependability. It appears 249 times in the Old Testament, often translated as “steadfast love” as in this passage from Isaiah.

This is like the days of Noah to me:
 Just as I swore that the waters of Noah
 would never again go over the earth,
 so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you
 and will not rebuke you.
 For the mountains may depart
 and the hills be removed,
 but my *steadfast love* shall not depart from you,
 and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,
 says the Lord, who has compassion on you. (Isa 54:9-10; italics added)

When we come to the New Testament, God’s compassionate love is incarnated in Jesus and God’s faithfulness is everlasting. “What we learn about God from Jesus is not contrary to what had already been revealed about the loving-kindness and fidelity of God through the history and scriptures of Israel.”³ The apostle Paul states directly in 1 Corinthians 1:9: “God is faithful,” *pistos ho theos*. This divine *hesed* and *pistis* when viewed through the lens of eschatology becomes the coming reign of God.

Whereas originally the prophets had held out a vision of a renewed and restored land and people in this world, over time these ancient prophecies were seen as intimations of a far more radical change, when God would not only restore Israel, but would defeat all the manifestations of chaos and evil that plagued not just Israel but the whole world. These expectations were especially important in times of persecution, when faithful Jews needed assurances that their fidelity and even martyrdom were seen and cherished by God, who would reward them, not in this life but in the next.⁴

The Gospel of Mark is clearly imbued with this sense of eschatology, and the Marcan Jesus is portrayed as the messianic Son of Man (Mark 2:10, 28; 8:31, 38; 9:12, 31; 10:33, 45; 13:26; 14:21, 41, 62; 15:30) who announces the in-breaking moment of the reign of God. The Greek is *kairos* and connotes a rightness of time, the critical moment to act. Everything Jesus does in the Gospel of Mark is designed to affirm his authority as the Son of Man (Mark 2:10) and to confirm the *kairos* of God's reign: the spirit-possessed are freed (Mark 1:23-27; 5:2-19; 9:17-27), the sick and infirm are healed (1:30-31; 3:1-6; 5:25-34; 6:54-56; 7:29-30), the lepers cleansed (1:40-45), the paralyzed walk (2:3-12), tax collectors and sinners are welcomed (2:15), the sea is calmed and mastered (4:37-39; 6:48-51); the dead resuscitated (5:35-42), the hungry are fed (6:35-44 8:2-9), the deaf hear (7:32-35), and the blind see (8:22-26; 10:46-52). Jesus put his actions in context: "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Little wonder, the centurion at the cross declares at Jesus' death: "Truly this man was God's son!" (Mark 15:39).

An Evolutionary Vision of the Reign of God

Reading the gospels through an evolutionary lens, we find that creation itself was a source of inspiration for Jesus. Of the sayings of Jesus most often deemed authentic, Jesus' go-to metaphors are drawn from the natural world. Jesus speaks about seeds and soil (Mark 4:3-8), the birds of the air that don't work and yet are fed (Luke 12:24; Matt 6:26), a misfortunate ox in a well (Luke 14:4), the potential of mustard seeds (Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:18-19; Matt 13:31-32), the sowing of a field of lilies (Luke 12:27; Matt 6:28-30), the value of sparrows (Luke 12:6; Matt 10:29), hungry dogs at dinner time (Mark 7:27-28; Matt 15:26-27), consoling dogs (Luke 16:21), and sheep—lots and lots of sheep. There are sheep without shepherds (Mark 6:34; Matt 9:36), sheep among wolves (Matt 10:16, John 10:12), the value of sheep (Matt 12:12), lost sheep (Matt 15:24, Luke 15:4; Matt 18:12), the difference between sheep and goats (Matt 25:32), scattered sheep (Mark 14:27; Matt 26:31), sacrificial sheep (John 2:14), giving one's life for the sheep (John 10:15), obedient sheep (John 10:27), and feeding sheep (John 21:17).

While these multiple metaphors drawn from nature might have worked well in an agrarian society, Jesus himself was no farmer. Or fisherperson, for that matter. Jesus is described as a carpenter (Mark 6:3) from Nazareth (Mark 1:9), a small Jewish village not far from the city of Sepphoris. And yet, this Jesus "gave ear" to the wider created world around him. He paid attention and saw a direct connection between the work of nature and the providence of God.

The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come. (Mark 4:26-29)

As his parables attest, the reign of God that Jesus preached is both rooted in creation and yet still evolving. Jesus understood and acted on his unique role in stimulating the in-breaking of that reign (Mark 10:45). But Jesus' death doesn't herald the completion of the reign. Rather, Jesus describes his departure

as “preparing a place” for his disciples so that “where I am, there you may be also” (John 14:3). As Acts of the Apostles opens, the disciples desire to know if now—with his resurrection—will Jesus restore the kingdom? “It is not for you to know the times or periods” (Acts 1:7). The biblical canon ends awaiting a vision still unfulfilled of a new heaven and a new earth (Rev 21:1).

The now and not yet of the reign of God is similar to Teilhard de Chardin’s understanding of the process toward Christogenesis and the Omega Point, that point at which humans individually and communally find their end and fulfillment.⁵ As Teilhard de Chardin presented, the Gospel call means “returning to the world with new vision and a deeper conviction to take hold of Christ in the heart of matter and to further Christ in the universality of his incarnation.”⁶ Through a theological lens, “the object of evolution is that God should become manifest in the world and the world should attain its final unification in God.”⁷ Only then is the reign of God complete. In light of God’s covenant in Genesis 9, this final unification will include all of creation. Thus, while addressed to human beings first by the incarnate one and later by his disciples, the Gospel is also Good News for the created world. How else could we understand Romans 8?

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now. (Rom 8:19-22)

The thriving of creatures and creation is the realization of the Good News, since “every creature with its relationships is held in existence by the same vivifying Giver of life; and in the end all will be gathered into the new heavens and the new earth.”⁸ In her book, *Creation and the Cross*, Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ, describes God’s relationship with creation as one of accompaniment.

Bring creation into the picture, it is not hard to see how such an accompaniment theology can also embrace the natural world. Today’s science has made abundantly clear that deep relationality runs through the whole cosmos. Thanks to the evolution of life, human beings are genetically related in kinship to all other species on our planet, and this whole living community is composed of chemical materials available from debris left by the death of a previous generation of stars. As John Muir wrote, “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe.” So when an early Christian hymn sings that Christ is “the firstborn of all creation,” and again, “the firstborn of the dead,” (Col 1:15-18), we can see not only the human dead but the dead of all creation, every species, included.⁹

It is precisely because of these relationships and the interconnection among all of creation, that Johnson urges a theology of accompaniment in which we are converted from anthropocentrism to a planetary solidarity.¹⁰

The reign of God viewed through Teilhard de Chardin’s evolutionary Christogenesis and Johnson’s theology of accompaniment provokes a new understanding of mission and therefore ministry in an unfinished universe, an understanding that recognizes the need for a new ethic that supports our evolving sense of mission and a clear statement of direction.

Creating an Evolutionary Ethic

In the evolutionary process, pain, death, and mass extinction are troubling yet necessary companions of innovation, life, and complexity. Nonetheless, these “natural evils”¹¹ leave a wake of

suffering in their path. But not all pain, death, and extinction in creation is actually the result of evolution. Well, not directly. It would seem that human beings, the so-called pinnacle of the evolutionary process, are actively engaging in cosmocide, the wanton destruction of the created world.

Case in point:

- In last 500 years, 322 animals have gone extinct, which scientists attribute to human causes.
- By September 2019, 2.2 million acres of the Amazon basin were burned, nearly all of the 121,000 fires had human origins—farmers setting fires to clear the land.
- After years of climate change-induced drought, in the Fall of 2019 and early 2020, more than 16 million acres, the size of the state of West Virginia, went up in flames in Australia. Lightning strikes on brutally dry land caused most of fires, but at least 24 persons were arrested for having ignited some fires.
- An estimated billion animals lost their lives in the fires that ravaged New South Wales and Victoria.
- The year 2020 saw similar destruction in the United States where more than 4.6 million acres were destroyed by fires in California, Oregon, and Washington State. Meanwhile, the naming of hurricanes exhausted the 26-letter English alphabet. “Delta” became the fourth major storm to pummel Texas, Louisiana, and Alabama. Both the fires and the hurricanes resulted from climate change and human mismanagement.

Indeed, the researchers and scholars are correct in their assessment that we are living in a new geological epoch. For the past 12,000 years, we have been in the Holocene, the period that began after the last ice age. But now, say the scientists, we live in the Anthropocene, which describes the geological epoch in which human actions impact planetary systems. Sam Mickey explains that, “The Anthropocene is named after humans because it is a time when humans have massive, Earth-changing impacts, altering the chemistry of the atmosphere (climate change), changing DNA (genetic modification), and depositing non-biodegradable plastic, Styrofoam, and radioactive materials around the planet.”¹²

As I continue this research on the implications of science and theology, I am shaken out of my academic silo and shamed by my lethargic activism. New theological thinking drawn from new scientific discoveries should lead to new modes of behavior. In other words, theology cannot be divorced from ethics. What we think about God should have implications for how we act as children of God. And evolutionary biologist Julian Huxley argued it is our destiny to act on behalf of the cosmos:

[Humankind] is that part of reality in which and through which the cosmic process has become conscious and has begun to comprehend itself. [Our] supreme task is to increase that conscious comprehension and to apply it as fully as possible to guide the course of events.¹³

In light of this evolutionary consciousness (our advancing awareness of our place in the cosmos and interrelationship with all creation), we need to move beyond simply “thinking globally and acting locally.” Rather, as Mickey proposes, we should engage in “Whole Earth thinking,” which sounds a lot like working toward the reign of God.

[Whole Earth thinking] calls for dangerous dreams of emancipation, dreams of freedom from the destructive refrains of domination and oppression. It calls for a vision of a more peaceful, just, and sustainable Earth community, a vision of participatory ecological democracy.¹⁴

Perhaps the first step to Whole Earth thinking is to pay attention. The fires in the Amazon, the drought in Australia, the floods in the United States, the typhoons in the Philippines, the volcanic eruptions in New

Zealand aren't happening to those people and that land over there. We are "those people" and the interconnectivity of all creation means we share in the suffering. St. Paul's words have never been more true: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now" (Rom 8:22).

What does an ethic of the New Cosmology and evolutionary consciousness look like? Beyond paying attention, how do we engage in "Whole Earth thinking"? While using different vocabulary, this is precisely the challenge presented by Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*:

It is our humble conviction that the divine and the human meet in the slightest detail in the seamless garment of God's creation, in the last speck of dust of our planet. . . . In this universe, shaped by open and intercommunicating systems, we can discern countless forms of relationship and participation. This leads us to think of the whole as open to God's transcendence, within which it develops. Faith allows us to interpret the meaning and the mysterious beauty of what is unfolding. We are free to apply our intelligence towards things evolving positively, or towards adding new ills, new causes of suffering and real setbacks. This is what makes for the excitement and drama of human history, in which freedom, growth, salvation and love can blossom, or lead towards decadence and mutual destruction. The work of the Church seeks not only to remind everyone of the duty to care for nature, but at the same time "she must above all protect [hu]mankind from self-destruction."¹⁵

The encyclical was well-received in ecumenical, interreligious, and scientific communities, though not by all. When the American President and climate change denier, Donald Trump, met with the Pope in 2017, the pontiff gifted the president with his own signed copy. The 192-page work called for a "broad cultural revolution." James Martin, SJ, enumerated ten significant aspects of the document:

1. *The spiritual perspective is now part of the discussion on the environment.* "The encyclical firmly grounds the discussion in a spiritual perspective and invites others to listen to a religious point of view, particularly its understanding of creation as a holy and precious gift from God to be revered by all men and women."
2. *The poor are disproportionately affected by climate change.* "The pope states that focus on the poor is one the central themes of the encyclical, and he provides many baneful examples of the effects of climate change, whose 'worse impacts' are felt by those living in the developing countries."
3. *Less is more.* "*Laudato Si'* also diagnoses a society of 'extreme consumerism' in which people are unable to resist what the market places before them, the earth is despoiled and billions are left impoverished (No. 203)."
4. *Catholic social teaching now includes teaching on the environment.* "Against those who argue that a papal encyclical on the environment has no real authority, Pope Francis explicitly states that *Laudato Si'* 'is now added to the body of the Church's social teaching.' (No. 15)."
5. *Discussions about ecology can be grounded in the Bible and church tradition.* "In a masterful overview, Pope Francis traces the theme of love for creation through both the Old and New Testaments. He reminds us, for example, that God, in Jesus Christ, became not only human, but part of the natural world."
6. *Everything is connected—including the economy.* "Pope Francis links a 'magical conception of the market,' which privileges profit over the impact on the poor, with the abuse of the environment (No. 190)."
7. *Scientific research on the environment is to be praised and used.* "As the other great Catholic social encyclicals analyzed such questions as capitalism, unions and fair wages, *Laudato*

- Si'* draws upon both church teaching and contemporary findings from other fields—particularly science, in this case—to help modern-day people reflect on these questions.”
8. *Widespread indifference and selfishness worsen environmental problems.* “In the world of *Laudato Si'* there is no room for selfishness or indifference. One cannot care for the rest of nature ‘if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human beings’ (No. 91).”
 9. *Global dialogue and solidarity are needed.* “The pope calls into dialogue and debate ‘all people’ about our ‘common home’ (No. 62, 155). A global dialogue is also needed because there are ‘no uniform recipes.’”
 10. *A change of heart is required.* “We can awaken our hearts and move towards an ‘ecological conversion’ in which we see the intimate connection between God and all beings, and more readily listen to the ‘cry of the earth and the cry of the poor’ (No. 49).”¹⁶

As Amy Hereford, CSJ, notes in *Beyond the Crossroads: Religious Life in the 21st Century, Laudato Si'* frequently uses “Our Common Home” as both a metaphor and a reality. The term “points to the deep unity of all creation, and the important connection that we all share as part of the natural community.”¹⁷ Drawing on the work of scientists and environmentalists, Pope Francis writes:

We need only take a frank look at the facts to see that our common home is falling into serious disrepair. Hope would have us recognize that there is always a way out, that we can always redirect our steps, that we can always do something to solve our problems. Still, we can see signs that things are now reaching a breaking point, due to the rapid pace of change and degradation; these are evident in large-scale natural disasters as well as social and even financial crises, for the world’s problems cannot be analyzed or explained in isolation. There are regions now at high risk and, aside from all doomsday predictions, the present world system is certainly unsustainable from a number of points of view, for we have stopped thinking about the goals of human activity. “If we scan the regions of our planet, we immediately see that humanity has disappointed God’s expectations” [Citing Pope John Paul II, “General Audience,” January 17, 2001.].¹⁸

Whether we call it, “Whole Earth thinking” or “care for our common home,” the natural evil that accompanies evolution and creation is being accelerated and amplified by rampaging social and moral evil. It is not only Pope Francis who urges action. Earth itself cries out.

These situations have caused sister earth, along with all the abandoned of our world, to cry out, pleading that we take another course. Never have we so hurt and mistreated our common home as we have in the last two hundred years. Yet we are called to be instruments of God our Father, so that our planet might be what he desired when he created it and correspond with his plan for peace, beauty and fullness.¹⁹

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the emergence of apostolic women’s religious congregations was a direct response to the crises of the industrial revolution, immigration, illnesses, and wars, a response filtered through a particular theology of religious life. Some two hundred years later, our theological understandings have changed, the needs diversified, but the manner of meeting those needs still calls for commitment, flexibility, and creativity. As Pope John Paul II encouraged, “You have not only a glorious history to remember and to recount, but also *a great history still to be accomplished!* Look to the future, where the Spirit is sending you in order to do even greater things.”²⁰ We are no longer building institutions; we are cleaning up our common home. Not to save our souls, but to save our planet.

Mission for an Unfinished Universe

Religious life ought to promote growth in the Church by way of attraction. The Church must be attractive. Wake up the world! Be witnesses of a different way of doing things, of acting, of living! It is possible to live differently in this world.²¹

Within two years of his meeting at the Union of Superiors General (USG), Pope Francis would initiate the Year of Consecrated Life (November 30, 2014 – February 2, 2016) and promulgate his encyclical on the environment (May 24, 2015). The timing is not coincidental.

The encyclical constitutes an invitation for vowed religious to respectfully and courageously enter into a dialogue with other persons of good will. The fruits of scientific research and contributions from varied faith traditions can move our pluralistic society toward a consensus on the urgent need for action. The common good will be enhanced as religious give voice to the poor and marginalized. Finally, by their actions, they will offer a prophetic witness on the value of interpersonal communion and an ecologically sensitive relationship with all creation.²²

With *Laudato Si'*, the mission of God, the mission of the church, and the mission of religious are now consciously tied to the care of our common home. Whereas under Pope Benedict XVI mission had focused on conversion and transmission of the faith, under Pope Francis the purpose, motivation, and goal of mission has been revised.²³

Mission clarification requires knowing the God of all creation. Mission motivation originates in humans knowing their true identity as ones loved by God *within and through* creation. Mission correction consists in heeding revelation from the “Book of Creation.”²⁴

As Dawn Nothwehr, OSF, writes, “The point is that Gospel salvation includes human well-being and the well-being of all of creation.”²⁵ What does a mission of accompaniment look like in an evolutionary, unfinished universe? Whom or what do we accompany? Our growing awareness of our place within the larger created world has broadened our concerns beyond human society. We are compelled to do “Whole Earth thinking” and to see how the devastation of Earth has direct effect on those who are marginalized and impoverished. In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis makes the point that those who are poor most often suffer from the degradation of our common home:

In the present condition of global society, where injustices abound and growing numbers of people are deprived of basic human rights and considered expendable, the principle of the common good immediately becomes, logically and inevitably, a summons to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters. This option entails recognizing the implications of the universal destination of the world’s goods, but, as I mentioned in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, it demands before all else an appreciation of the immense dignity of the poor in the light of our deepest convictions as believers. We need only look around us to see that, today, this option is in fact an ethical imperative essential for effectively attaining the common good. (158)

As apostolic congregations, our ministries are often on behalf of those in need. Reflecting on the challenges of *Laudato Si'*, Timothy Scott, CSB, recognized that

religious often live and serve on the periphery; in places where the environment is often degraded; in urban slums and places lacking safe drinking water or public spaces. The international character of many of our communities means that we have an awareness of the

particular challenges of life in the developing world, where economic exploitation is often rampant. In the first instance, we need to bring that awareness of life at the margins to the forefront within our own communities and then to the broader society.²⁶

The Good News of God is that Earth and all of its creatures have an advocate. It is us.

Charism and Ministry for our Common Home

The word “charism” comes the Greek *charis*, which is often translated as “grace” or “favor.” We learn from St. Paul that at baptism we receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit. They are a down payment on the fullness of the reign of God. Paul also calls these “fruits” and they include love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness (Gal 5:22). Though these gifts differ, they are all from the same spirit (1 Cor 12:14). By virtue of our baptism, we, too, have a particular grace or charism given to us by the Spirit. Now lest we go the way of the Corinthians who argued over who had the “best” charismatic gifts, Paul reminds us that spiritual gifts are for the good of the whole (1 Cor 12:1-11–14:14-25).

At profession, our particular gifts are joined with the corporate charism of our congregations, a charism that is not exclusive to our community but one that we recognize is deeply a part of our identity. It is to this charism that we commit ourselves, not to specific ministerial manifestations of that charism. As Pope Francis advised, we need “to strengthen . . . the charism of the Congregation, without mistaking it for the apostolic work which is carried out. The first remains, the second will pass. The charism . . . is creative, always looking for new paths.”²⁷ Despite diminishment from age and a reduction in numbers, the closing of institutional ministries, and the societal upheaval that questions whether religion is even necessary, apostolic religious life continues. Reflecting on the Year of Consecrated Life, the Bishop Emeritus of Limerick, Donal Murray, noted:

That underlying charism continues even when particular ministries can no longer be carried on as strongly as they were or when they are no longer necessary, or no longer possible. When that happens we need to look again to our beginnings to understand what our charism may be asking of us today.²⁸

As Murray suggests, our challenge is to live our legacy in the present with passion.

It means believing that the same Christ, the same Spirit, the same vocation, that inspired our predecessors is calling us now to be awake and watchful. The gifts and charisms that marked the beginnings of your institutes of consecrated life are alive today by the same power of the same Spirit who awakened them in the first place.²⁹

Indeed, the Spirit is active and, just as Paul encouraged the Corinthians that their individual gifts were for the good of the whole, so, too, the charisms of individual congregations must be brought together for the good of our common home.

Crossing Congregational Boundaries

Even imbued with our charisms, how could we vowed religious hope to contribute to the realization of the reign of God when the challenges are so daunting, the costs too high, and our numbers so small? Jesus seems to have anticipated our question with an insightful parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened” (Matt 13:33; Luke 13:20-21). We are no longer the foot soldiers of the church, an army of sisters and brothers marshalling students in parochial classrooms. Nor do we need to be. Rather, as Jesus

argued, we are to be leaven. And as the leaven is mixed with flour, we are to join our efforts with others. Speaking about the Year of Consecrated Life, Pope Francis stated:

I also hope for a growth in communion between the members of different Institutes. Might this Year be an occasion for us to step out more courageously from the confines of our respective Institutes and to work together, at the local and global levels, on projects involving formation, evangelization, and social action? This would make for a more effective prophetic witness. Communion and the encounter between different charisms and vocations can open up a path of hope. No one contributes to the future in isolation, by his or her efforts alone, but by seeing himself or herself as part of a true communion which is constantly open to encounter, dialogue, attentive listening and mutual assistance. Such a communion inoculates us from the disease of self-absorption.³⁰

Collaboration among religious institutions is not new. The Sister Formation Conference, the forerunner of the Religious Formation Conference, was founded in 1954 to assure that sisters were appropriately prepared for their ministries. Following Vatican II, a remarkable collaboration among religious communities of men led to the creation of Catholic Theological Union in Chicago and Washington Theological Union in DC, both schools of theology and ministry that served multiple congregations. In the 1980s, collaborative novitiates and novitiate programs brought newer members together across the divide of congregational boundaries. And in the 1990s, a grassroots organization of sisters under the age of fifty formed Giving Voice. As their purpose statement describes:

We seek to live our vocations rooted in our congregational charisms and grounded in God's hope for the future of religious life. We seek to connect with one another to strengthen our commitment, deepen our fidelity to religious life, foster connections that sustain our vocations, and create ways to live religious life in the present and into the future.³¹

Joining efforts and combining resources has led to justice initiatives to address endemic and global issues such as human trafficking, immigration, and environmental degradation. And most of these efforts began as grassroots responses to the emerging needs.

In 2009, an international network of religious congregations in 70 countries formed Talitha Kum, to facilitate collaboration and activities against trafficking in persons. Similarly, Sister Margaret Nacke, CSJ, was moved by "the millions whose lives have been relegated to commodity status, to slavery, and live in a world darkened by the selfishness and greed of those whose own lives are without light."³² In 2013, she advocated for and helped to start US Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking (USCSAHT), a collaborative, faith-based national network that offers education, supports access to survivor services, and engages in advocacy to eradicate modern-day slavery.³³

Similarly, the thousands of displaced persons seeking asylum across the globe are themselves searching for a life raft of human respect. When Pope Francis participated in a virtual papal audience in 2015, he was introduced to Missionary of Jesus Sister Norma Pimentel, who operates a welcome center at Sacred Heart Church in McAllen, Texas, USA, and serves as the Executive Director of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley. After listening to the stories of the mothers and children in the center, Pope Francis asked to speak with Sister Norma. "I want to thank you," Francis said. "And through you to thank all the sisters of religious orders in the US for the work that you have done and that you do in the United States. It's great. I congratulate you. Be courageous. Move forward."³⁴

That one moment of papal affirmation came during an overwhelming wave of unaccompanied minors from Central America, which began in 2014. Sister Norma and others who work along the border

sent out urgent requests for volunteers, a call heard and amplified by Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR). Since it began sending out requests for funds and volunteers to serve at respite centers on the US/Mexico border, more than one thousand religious have responded.

Launched on the occasion of the Jubilee of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG; 1965-2015), the Migrant Project in Sicily established three intercongregational, international and intercultural community houses, in which the sisters become “a bridge between the migrants who come ashore in Sicily and the people of the area, in order to build a true integration.” The project’s coordinator, Sr. Elisabetta Flick comments,

We go on tip-toe, respecting the richness of listening to the needs in order to then build, together with our local partners, an ad-hoc project that respects the rights and dignity of those arriving in our country. We wish to be a credible witness that it is possible for different cultures, nationalities and languages to live together, if we are united by a common mission and moved by the one Spirit who acts and is present in each of us and in the world.

While the collaborative work of sisters on behalf of those who are impoverished and marginalized meets immediate and pressing needs, other joint ventures take the long view. On June 18, 2020, the fifth anniversary of *Laudato Si'*, a new initiative to promote sustainable development was announced—not by the movers and shakers of some Fortune 500 company. Rather, sixteen US congregations of Dominican sisters joined with the firm of Morgan Stanley to establish a new investment funds initiative aimed at financing solutions to address climate change and assist communities worldwide most at risk. “The sisters provided initial seeding of \$46.6 million in 2018 for the funds, which with additional capital investments have grown to \$130 million. The money will be directed toward global projects pursuing solutions to climate change as well as achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.”³⁵

The climate funds initiative is a “fundamental response” to Pope Francis’ call in *Laudato Si'*. As Adrian Dominican Sister Elise Garcia, OP, noted, Pope Francis’ “sense of wanting to have an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the underprivileged, and at the same time protecting nature . . . is precisely what the Climate Solutions Fund aims to address.”³⁶

Pope John Paul II stated, we have “a great history still to be accomplished.”³⁷ Initiatives like US Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking and UISG’s Talitha Kum, collaborative efforts on behalf of migrants and immigrants, and the Climate Solutions Fund demonstrate that through our collaborative ministerial efforts, we creatively contribute to the reign of God and thus live into that “great history” together.

Conclusion

As Dominican Sisters of Sinsinawa, we are fond of quoting our founder, Venerable Fr. Samuel Mazzuchelli, OP, who urged, “Let us set out for any place where the work is great and difficult, but where also with the help of the one who sends us, we shall open the way for the Gospel!” But in the twenty-first century, as an apostolic congregation, we, like many of you, aren’t always sure to which of the numerous “places” we should go.

Some five decades ago, a novice had a pretty good idea of what ministry she or he would do upon her profession of vows. Enter Vatican II, the Civil Rights Movements, and widespread global cultural changes. A congregation’s founding ministry had set its identity and was often confused with its charism. As fewer members continued serving in sponsored institutions, many religious wondered, “Who are we if we aren’t in teaching anymore?” Reflecting on her post Vatican II vocation, Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister offered a helpful reminder: “The new vision says that religious are not called to be a labor force

but a leaven, a caring, calling presence that moves quickly into new needs.”³⁸ The congregation’s mission is larger than its ministerial expression of that mission.

And that mission—as proclaimed by Jesus of Nazareth and continued by the church—is to work toward the realization of the reign of God. Precisely because we live in an unfinished universe, the reign of God remains the horizon event for which we yearn. The slow work of evolution confirms that we are moving toward the Omega Point, the unification of all of creation with the Creator. An emergent vision of mission and ministry for an unfinished universe follows its own timeline. But the reality of death and suffering as an effect of evolution and as a result of human sin reminds us that there is work to be done. Today.

Our understanding of cosmology, evolution, and theology should affect why, how, and what we do in ministry, which Maldari defines as “human work energized by the Holy Spirit.”³⁹ No longer is the “why” limited to only human concerns. Pope Francis’ call to preserve our “common home” challenges us to see the dawning of the reign of God with new eyes. *Laudato Si’* becomes a charter that redirects our efforts, so that mission moves from a solely anthropocentric concern for evangelization and conversion to an inclusive cosmic accompaniment, care, and advocacy for all of creation. The “how” of our ministry is directly related to the particular charism gifted to our congregation by the Holy Spirit, a charism most readily seen in our founders and foundresses, but no less evident in our members today—if we look. We should ask “How can our charism be put to the service of all of creation?” And with that answer we should measure our ministerial activities.

Finally, “what are we to do” might be better phrased as “what we ought not to do.” No longer can individual congregations afford to act alone. Perhaps the demographics and institutional diminishment are simply reminders that ministry in an emerging universe must be collaborative. The integrity of all of creation surely reminds us that we are most effective when we are most connected. Thus, when we consider where the mission of God, our congregational charisms, and the needs of our common home intersect, we find our answer to the question, “Why, how and what is ours to do?” in an emerging universe.

¹ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), 165.

² Dianne Bergant, *A New Heaven, A New Earth: The Bible and Catholicity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), 10.

³ Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 182.

⁴ Barbara E. Bowe, *Biblical Foundations of Spirituality: Touching a Finger to the Flame* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 132, 142.

⁵ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 262.

⁶ Ilia Delio, *Making All Things New: Catholicity, Cosmology, Consciousness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 94.

⁷ Delio, 96.

⁸ Dawn M. Nothwehr, “For the Salvation of the Cosmos: The Church’s Mission of Ecojustice,” *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 43 (2019): 75.

⁹ Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 159.

¹⁰ Johnson, xiii.

¹¹ While “natural evil” is a category in theology, it should not be interpreted as if nature itself is actively seeking to do evil, but that death and destruction can have natural causes.

¹² Sam Mickey, *Whole Earth Thinking and Planetary Coexistence* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 6.

¹³ Julian Huxley, *Religion without Revelation* (London: Max Parrish, 1959), 236.

¹⁴ Mickey, *Whole Earth Thinking*, 147.

¹⁵ Pope Francis, *On Care for our Common Home (Laudato Si’)*, 9, 79.

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- ¹⁶ James Martin, SJ, “Top Ten Takeaways from ‘Laudato Si,’” *America* (June 18, 2015), <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2015/06/18/top-ten-takeaways-laudato-si>.
- ¹⁷ Amy Hereford, CSJ, *Beyond the Crossroads: Religious Life in the 21st Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019), 2.
- ¹⁸ *Laudato Si*, 61.
- ¹⁹ *Laudato Si*, 53.
- ²⁰ Pope John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, 110.
- ²¹ Pope Francis, Papal meeting with USG, November 29, 2013.
- ²² Timothy Scott, CSB, “*Laudato Si*’ and Vowed Religious,” *Canadian Religious Conference Bulletin* (Fall 2015): 4.
- ²³ William P. Gregory, “Pope Francis’ Effort to Revitalize Catholic Mission,” *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 43 (2019): 7–19.
- ²⁴ Nothwehr, “For the Salvation of the Cosmos,” 68.
- ²⁵ Nothwehr, 70.
- ²⁶ Scott, “*Laudato Si*’ and Vowed Religious.”
- ²⁷ Pope Francis, Meeting with the USG, November 29, 2013.
- ²⁸ Donal Murray, “Glorious and Unfinished—the Year of Consecrated Life,” *The Furrow* 66 (2015): 316.
- ²⁹ Murray, 314.
- ³⁰ Pope Francis, “Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life,” II.3.
- ³¹ For more information see <https://giving-voice.org/mission-vision>.
- ³² *Peace and Earth Blog*, “A Call to Be Light-Bearers,” blog entry by Sister Margaret Nacke, CSJ, December 16, 2016, <http://saccvi.blogspot.com/2016/12/a-call-to-be-light-bearers.html>.
- ³³ For more information see <https://sistersagainstrafficking.org>.
- ³⁴ Teri Whitcraft, “Pope Francis to Texas Nun Norma Pimentel: ‘I Love You All Very Much,’” ABC News (September 4, 2015), <https://abcnews.go.com/US/pope-francis-texas-nun-norma-pimentel-love/story?id=33517481>.
- ³⁵ Brian Roewe, “Dominican Sisters Commit \$46 Million to Seed New Climate Solutions Funds,” *National Catholic Reporter* (June 18, 2020), <https://www.ncronline.org/news/earthbeat/dominican-sisters-commit-46-million-seed-new-climate-solutions-funds>.
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- ³⁷ Pope John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, 110.
- ³⁸ Joan D. Chittister, “No Time for Tying Cats,” in *Midwives of the Future: American Sisters Tell Their Story*, ed. Ann Patrick Ward (Kansas City, MO: Leaven, 1985), 19.
- ³⁹ Donald C. Maldari, SJ, *Christian Ministry in the Divine Milieu: Catholicity, Evolution, and the Reign of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2019), 46.