

# What's the Plan? Deciphering the Shifts and Ambiguities in Recent Papal Teachings on Creation's Eschatological Destiny and Its Temporal Care

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*Ethical deliberations about care for creation require more theological clarity about God's eschatological plan for creation than presently found in church teaching. Nonetheless, we can identify in the writings of recent popes a trajectory toward what I describe as a "covenantal communion" approach. This approach holds that God's eschatological plan is to draw all creatures together in Christ and attributes to creation its own form of agential density through which it becomes, with humanity, a genuine participant in the divine economy. I set this view in contrast to two other approaches: creation as "microcosmic referent" and "humanized abode." Though versions of these latter two appear in Vatican II documents and in the writings of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, their claims have been moderated in Francis' move toward a covenantal communion approach. Further developing this approach will help clarify the goods and values at stake in our environmental choices.*

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RECENTLY, the New York Court of Appeals considered a petition by the Nonhuman Rights Project to free "Happy," an elephant held in isolation in the Bronx Zoo.<sup>1</sup> The petition was supported by a group of Catholic theologians who argued that God made the elephant "to flourish in a particular way" that could not be achieved in solitary confinement.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Nonhuman Rights Project, "Client, Happy (Elephant)," <https://www.nonhumanrights.org/client-happy/>.

<sup>2</sup> Religion News Service, "Catholic Theologians Support New York Elephant Rights Case," February 4, 2021, <https://religionnews.com/2021/02/04/catholic-theologians-support-new-york-elfphant-rights-case/>. I joined four others in the brief in support of Happy's release to an animal sanctuary.

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How Christians assess such cases should be guided by God's ultimate intent for nonhuman creatures—that is, God's eschatological “plan” for them. If the Christian task for the present age is to witness to the kingdom that is to come, then the question of whether or how these creatures have a place in that kingdom becomes significant for moral discernment. Judgments about care for creation require theological clarity about God's eschatological intent for nonhuman creation and humanity's role in bringing about that divine goal. On a number of fundamental points, however, the church's theology of creation remains unclear, which limits its capacity to respond, based on theologically sound reasons, not only to the present environmental crisis but also to the techno-ecological scenarios awaiting us in the future.

Nonetheless, the teachings of recent popes have significantly developed the church's view of creation; in the richness offered there, we find the groundwork for advancing our understanding of God's ultimate plan for creation. Their writings highlight aspects of creation that, though not new to the tradition, have become prominent in the church's increasing advocacy for environmental care—for example, creation as a doxological domain, filled with creatures that praise God; creation as a place of sacramental beauty where humanity encounters God; creation as an arena of creatures with which we are in life-giving relationships; and creation as a gift given by a God who loves not only the beneficiary of that gift but the gift itself (and thus the gift should become an object of care for those who receive it). Even more helpful for us, however, is the trajectory that we can discern in these writings, moving from Vatican II to the theology of creation found in *Laudato Si'*. Church teachings have shifted away from associating creation with a primarily supportive role in the divine economy and toward recognizing it as divinely desired for its own sake and a recipient, in its own right, of God's salvific labors.

A natural terminus of this trajectory can be found in what I call a “covenantal communion” approach. The approach integrates themes that appear in recent church teachings into a coherent theology of creation—for example, that God includes all creatures in the divine economy and that relationality has a central role in that economy. More importantly, though, this approach embraces what is one of the most distinctive claims implicit in *Laudato Si'*: creation has its own distinctive forms of agency. Without diminishing humanity's unique place in the divine economy, the covenantal communion approach maintains that creation is a genuine partner with humanity in the divine drama, not simply a backdrop for it. By “covenant,” I mean to signal the eschatological position that nonhuman creatures are to be included in a covenantal relationship with God and thus in the divine plan to renew all creation. I set this approach in contrast to two others,

what I refer to as “microcosmic referent” and “humanized abode.” Though these two approaches are implied in Vatican II’s brief discussions of creation and in the writings of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, their claims have been moderated in Francis’ move toward a covenantal communion approach. The specifics of creation’s final configuration lie outside the epistemic boundaries limiting all eschatological discourse, but we can and, I believe, must develop more clarity about God’s eschatological hope for creation, in all its creaturely forms, in order to discern wisely how to care for creation in the present age. The covenantal communion approach offers a promising way forward in undertaking such a development.

### I. Ambiguities in Recent Catholic Thought on Nonhuman Creation

Before turning to consider the trajectory to be found in papal teaching, a few reflections can serve to help us understand the tensions that now inhabit Catholic thinking about the environment. The tensions are due significantly to the fact that conciliar thought embraced a cosmic eschatology without articulating fully the eschatological and ethical implications that such a commitment has for nonhuman creatures. A key expression of the council’s cosmic eschatology appears in the important chapter 7 of *Lumen Gentium* (“The Eschatological Nature of the Pilgrim Church and Its Union with the Church in Heaven”)—a chapter that was introduced only after an intervention by the council fathers:

The Church ... will attain its full perfection only in the glory of heaven, when there will come the time of the restoration of all things. At that time the human race *as well as the entire world*, which is intimately related to man and attains to its end through him, will be perfectly reestablished in Christ.<sup>3</sup>

This eschatological vision is a significant development in church teaching, one that Peter Phan describes as the council’s “radical reversal.”<sup>4</sup> The passage highlights the eschatological and cosmic horizon of the divine economy *and* of the Christian life that is called to participate in it. Three

<sup>3</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* (November 1, 1964), §48, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html); emphasis added. For an overview of the discussion leading to this text’s inclusion, see Candido Pozo, SJ, *Theology of the Beyond*, trans. Mark A. Pilon, 5th ed. (Staten Island, NY: Society of St. Paul, 2009), 481–86.

<sup>4</sup> Peter C. Phan, “Roman Catholic Theology,” in *Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, ed. Jerry L. Walls, Oxford Handbooks Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 217.

forces encouraged this development: (1) the growing appreciation, in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century, of the proclamation of the kingdom as central to Jesus' teaching; (2) the theological renewal stimulated by preconciliar scholarship, especially that of biblical and patristic studies (*ressourcement*); and (3) the Marxist critique that Christianity was unconcerned about the needs of the present world because of its focus on the next.<sup>5</sup> The result was a new appreciation for the embodied sociality of human existence and the church's responsibility for addressing contemporary needs. The church came to understand its fundamental mission as that of becoming "on earth, the initial budding" of the kingdom,<sup>6</sup> a significant expansion beyond the "saving souls" focus of the preconciliar church.<sup>7</sup> The sociopolitical, cultural, and ecological dimensions of human existence in the present age are not mere temporal features irrelevant for the age to come. Through the Spirit's promptings, these dimensions can be healed, developed, and even transformed so that they begin to align, however proleptically, with the kingdom that is to come. Correspondingly, the Christian vocation came to be understood as a participation in the kingdom's life, deriving its moral vision from an anticipation of it.<sup>8</sup>

The council placed Christian discipleship within the context of the kingdom, and thus the anticipation of that kingdom is to guide our moral deliberations about issues such as justice, nonviolence, the sharing of goods, treatment of the evildoer, among others. As Jürgen Moltmann notes, "Every Christian ethics is determined by a presupposed eschatology."<sup>9</sup> For the post-Vatican II church, that "presupposed eschatology" is the kingdom, already inaugurated in Christ whose fullness will appear in the age to come. The issues, then, for our discussion are whether and how God's plan for the kingdom includes nonhuman creation and, in turn, how Christian discipleship is to participate in furthering God's intent for nonhuman creation in the present age. The divine economy is one, and before we can hope to

<sup>5</sup> Pozo briefly comments on the council's awareness of the Marxist critique. *Theology of the Beyond*, 513.

<sup>6</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, §5.

<sup>7</sup> Pope Pius X, for example, declared that his papacy had as its defining task the work of "restoring all things in Christ" (Eph 1:10), which he interpreted as "leading [human] souls to God." *Il Fermo Proposito*, June 11, 1905, §1, §6, respectively, [http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-x/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-x\\_enc\\_11061905\\_il-fermo-proposito.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-x/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-x_enc_11061905_il-fermo-proposito.html).

<sup>8</sup> I avoid here the complicated question of how Christian labor in the present contributes to the growth of the kingdom. My claim is only that there *is* a connection between life in the present age and that in the age to come.

<sup>9</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Ethics of Hope*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 9.

integrate stewardship of creation with a witness to the kingdom, we need to clarify our theological beliefs about God's ultimate, salvific intent for creation. The clarity required comprises not only the question of creation's eschatological endpoint, what it is to become, but also that of its present woundedness from which it is to be liberated: What good tidings of liberation does Christ bring to creation? Without integrating our theological understanding of creation's present state and future hope, the Christian vocation fractures; the task of caring for creation becomes disconnected from Christian labors for the kingdom.

Unfortunately, though the council embraced a cosmic eschatology, it did not show how that commitment related to concern for the environment. Exhortations for environmental care only began to appear in magisterial documents in the early 1970s, with Pope Paul VI's *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971) and his "Message to the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment" (1972).<sup>10</sup> Because there was no pressing concern at the time for creation and nonhuman creatures, the council did not feel the need to explore the environmental implications of its cosmic eschatology. Indeed, what little the council did say about the eschatological destiny of the cosmos was intentionally left ambiguous in order to avoid contentious issues being debated at the time and the "theological problems" that further exposition would raise.<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, even though the council

<sup>10</sup> "Man is suddenly becoming aware that by an ill-considered exploitation of nature he risks destroying it and becoming in turn the victim of this degradation." *Octogesima Adveniens*, May 14, 1971, §21, [http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost\\_letters/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_apl\\_19710514\\_octogesima-adveniens.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-vi_apl_19710514_octogesima-adveniens.html). "Will our civilization, tempted to increase its marvelous achievements by despotic domination of the human environment, discover in time the way to control its material growth, to use the earth's food with wise moderation, and to cultivate real poverty of spirit in order to carry out urgent and indispensable reconversions?" Paul VI, Message: Stockholm Conference, June 1, 1972, [http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/messages/pont-messages/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_mess\\_19720605\\_conferenza-ambiente.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/messages/pont-messages/documents/hf_p-vi_mess_19720605_conferenza-ambiente.html). The fact that environmental concerns do not even appear in Paul VI's earlier encyclical, *Populorum Progressio*, reflects the rapid change in environmental awareness that took place between the late 1960s and the early 1970s. *Populorum Progressio* focused on how creation could be made to serve humanity well and not on the environmental problems that such endeavors cause. "The whole of creation is for man," and "he has been charged ... to complete and perfect it ... to his own advantage." Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, March 26, 1967, §22, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_enc\\_26031967\\_populorum.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum.html). The task we face is that of "building a human community where men can live truly human lives,... free from servitude to other men or to natural forces which they cannot yet control satisfactorily." *Populorum Progressio*, §47.

<sup>11</sup> See Pozo, *Theology of the Beyond*, 488. Pozo explores these debates at 97–130.

embraced a cosmic eschatology, its discussion of creation was comparatively brief. The council's strategic vagueness about the cosmos' eschatological destiny meant that the task of articulating a more comprehensive theology of creation was left to Paul VI's more ecologically concerned successors.

The three popes elected after Vatican II have provided the church with substantial reflections on creation, and each has made a theological case for its care.<sup>12</sup> They all affirm that creation has an eschatological destiny, however vaguely understood, and suggest that humanity, in some way or form, has a special role in creation's movement toward that end.<sup>13</sup> Though

<sup>12</sup> John Paul II discussed creation in a series of audiences in 1986. He had begun a reflection on the Creed in July 1985, and, on January 8, 1986, turned his attention to creation (see in particular, the audiences from April through August 1986). Reflections on creation occur in a number of other audiences, including: January 17, 2001 (where the pope commends an "ecological conversion"); January 31, 2001 (where he discusses the new heavens and new earth); February 14, 2001 (where he describes creation's "recapitulation"); and May 2, 2001 (where he discusses creation's doxological capacity). The English translations of most of his audiences can be found here: <http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en.html>. John Paul's numerous reflections on creation have not received anywhere near the attention that has been given to his "theology of the body" (which was also developed in a series of audiences) or to his socioeconomic critiques. However, see Peter C. Phan, "Pope John Paul II and the Ecological Crisis," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (1994): 59–69. Brief discussions can also be found in D. M. Cowdin, "Toward an Environmental Ethics," in *Preserving the Creation: Environmental Theology and Ethics*, ed. Kevin W. Irwin and Edmund D. Pellegrino (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1994), 112–47; and John Hart, *What Are They Saying About Environmental Theology?* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 11–18. Benedict XVI gained a reputation as the "green pope" because of his sustained critique of environmental abuse and his green practices (e.g., installing solar panels atop the Vatican's Paul VI Hall). See Jame Schaefer and Tobias Winright, eds., *Environmental Justice and Climate Change: Assessing Pope Benedict XVI's Ecological Vision for the Catholic Church in the United States* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013). The volume's essay by Jeremiah Vallery, "Pope Benedict XVI's Cosmic Soteriology and the Advancement of Catechesis on the Environment," is particularly helpful in describing Benedict's long-standing interest in creation; 173–93. For a discussion of Ratzinger/Benedict's eschatology as it relates to nonhuman creation, see "Matter in Ratzinger's Theology of the Resurrection," chapter 6 in Patrick J. Fletcher, *Resurrection Realism: Ratzinger the Augustinian* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 181–246, esp. 215–16. Francis' commitment to the environment is amply evidenced in both his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, May 24, 2015, [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html), and his post-synodal exhortation *Querida Amazonia*, February 2, 2020, [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20200202\\_querida-amazonia.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20200202_querida-amazonia.html).

<sup>13</sup> John Paul II: "Indeed, nature itself, since it was subjected to the senselessness, degradation and devastation caused by sin, thus shares in the joy of the liberation achieved by

their views differ on other points, the three pontiffs share three framing commitments regarding humanity's relationship with the nonhuman world. First, the human person has an incomparable dignity vis-à-vis all other creatures and a privileged place in God's redemptive plans.<sup>14</sup> Second, God has called humanity to the task of stewarding creation. Though not referenced in Vatican II documents or in Paul VI's environmental statements, humanity's stewardship has become a guiding theme in papal discourse about the environment.<sup>15</sup> Postconciliar popes appeal to stewardship as part of a strategy to

Christ in the Holy Spirit," Audience, February 14, 2001, §4, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/2001/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_aud\\_20010214.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/2001/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_20010214.html). "In ordering creation to the authentic well-being of humanity..., [human persons] share in the exercise of the power with which the Risen Christ draws all things to himself," *Christifideles Laici*, December 3, 1988, §14, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_30121988\\_christifideles-laici.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_30121988_christifideles-laici.html). Benedict XVI: Nature "is destined to be 'recapitulated' in Christ at the end of time (cf. Eph 1:9-10; Col 1:19-20)," *Caritas in Veritate*, June 29, 2009, §48, [http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20090629\\_caritas-in-veritate.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html). As we will see, Benedict associates our participation in this process of recapitulation with the Eucharist. Francis: "Human beings, endowed with intelligence and love, and drawn by the fullness of Christ, are called to lead all creatures back to their Creator," *Laudato Si'*, §83.

<sup>14</sup> John Paul II: Humanity is "at the summit of God's creative activity, as its crown ... the most perfect of creatures. Everything in creation is ordered to man and everything is made subject to him," *Evangelium Vitae*, March 25, 1995, §34, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_25031995\\_evangelium-vitae.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html). Benedict XVI: "Human beings, obviously, are of supreme worth vis-à-vis creation as a whole," Message: World Day of Peace, January 1, 2008, §7, [http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20071208\\_xli-world-day-peace.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20071208_xli-world-day-peace.html). Francis: "This is not to put all living beings on the same level nor to deprive human beings of their unique worth.... At times we see an obsession with denying any pre-eminence to the human person," *Laudato Si'*, §90. Vatican II's inflated assertion on this topic reflects the spirit of the time: "According to the almost unanimous opinion of believers and unbelievers alike, all things on earth should be related to man as their center and crown." Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, December 7, 1965, §12, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html).

<sup>15</sup> John Paul II: "Human beings are set at the centre of creation as stewards of the Creator," *Pastores Gregis*, October 16, 2003, §70 [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_20031016\\_pastores-gregis.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_20031016_pastores-gregis.html). Benedict XVI: "We are called, rather, to exercise responsible stewardship of creation, in order to protect it, to enjoy its fruits, and to cultivate it," Audience, August 26, 2009, [http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2009/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_aud\\_20090826.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20090826.html). Francis: "Now is the time to rediscover our vocation as children of God, brothers and sisters, and stewards of creation," Message: World Day of Prayer for Creation, September 1, 2019, <http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/>

eliminate from the ecclesial consciousness any interpretation of Genesis' dominion mandate that provides license for environmental exploitation. In tandem with this, the pontiffs also reframe our responsibilities for creation in terms of a theocentrism that highlights divinely established limits to humanity's stewardship and use of creation.<sup>16</sup> Third and finally, the pontiffs link care for creation with responsibilities to the poor. They remind us repeatedly that the goods of the earth are intended for all and, thus, efforts must be made to ensure that no one is excluded, in this generation or in those to come, from a share in those goods.<sup>17</sup>

Beyond these framing commitments, however, it is difficult to summarize church teachings on creation. The theologies of creation found in the writings of popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis are not only rich, varied, and sometimes in tension with one another, but they are also filled with textual ambiguities and interpretive challenges that resist neat systematization and condensation.<sup>18</sup> As a result, the church's theology of creation, rich as it is, can seem more an incohesive aggregate of ideas than a coherent vision of the creaturely realm and God's salvific intent for it. Instead of fragments, the church's environmental response requires a unified articulation of its eschatological hopes—for humanity and for the cosmos.

[pont-messages/2019/documents/papa-francesco\\_20190901\\_messaggio-giornata-cura-creato.html](http://pont-messages/2019/documents/papa-francesco_20190901_messaggio-giornata-cura-creato.html).

- <sup>16</sup> John Paul II: "But at the same time man must remain subject to the will of God, who imposes limits upon his use and dominion over things (cf. Gen 2:16-17)," *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, December 30, 1987, §29, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_30121987\\_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html). Benedict XVI: "The natural environment is more than raw material to be manipulated at our pleasure; it is a wondrous work of the Creator," *Caritas in Veritate*, §48. Francis: "We are not God," *Laudato Si'*, §67.
- <sup>17</sup> John Paul II: "If in his Providence God had given the earth to humanity, that meant that he had given it to everyone. Therefore *the riches of Creation were to be considered as a common good of the whole of humanity*," *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, November 10, 1994, §13, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/1994/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_19941110\\_tertio-millennio-adveniente.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19941110_tertio-millennio-adveniente.html); emphasis in the original. Benedict XVI: "The goods of creation belong to humanity as a whole," Message: World Day of Peace, January 1, 2010, §7, [http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20091208\\_xliii-world-day-peace.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20091208_xliii-world-day-peace.html). Francis: "The gift of the earth with its fruits belongs to everyone," *Laudato Si'*, §71.
- <sup>18</sup> An added difficulty in interpreting Pope Benedict's writings is the question of what authority to give his writings penned before his elevation to the papacy (or, in the case of some writings, as pope). I appeal to them because they provide a helpful heuristic tool for understanding the theology of creation expressed in his magisterial writings.



To sharpen our sense of the ambiguities troubling Catholicism's theology of creation, we can consider Romans 8:19-22, a text that has become the go-to reference for ecclesial documents on environmental care:

For creation awaits with eager expectation the revelation of the children of God; for creation was made subject to futility, not of its own accord but because of the one who subjected it, in hope that creation itself would be set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that all creation is groaning in labor pains even until now. (NABRE)

In contrast to medieval interpretations and in accord with many patristic commentators, contemporary biblical scholarship sees the text as a general affirmation that the natural world shares in all stages of humanity's salvific journey: creation, fall, redemption, and final transformation.<sup>19</sup> The text was ignored in papal writings for most of the twentieth century but has become a biblical touchstone in light of the environmental crisis, beginning with John Paul II's *Redemptor Hominis* (1979) and continuing in the writings of successive popes and the environment statements of bishops' conferences around the world.<sup>20</sup> The text is tantalizing in that it raises theological questions without clearly answering them. What is the nature of creation's

<sup>19</sup> For a very helpful overview of the interpretive history and contemporary views of this passage, see Cheryl Hunt et al., "An Environmental Mantra? Ecological Interest in Romans 8:19-23 and a Modest Proposal for Its Narrative Interpretation," *Journal of Theological Studies* 59, no. 2 (2008): 546-79.

<sup>20</sup> Besides papal teachings in the postconciliar period, references to the Romans 8 passage appear in the statement by the Australian Bishops' Committee for Justice, Development and Peace, "Christians and Their Duties Towards Nature," in *And God Saw That It Was Good: Catholic Theology and the Environment*, ed. Drew Christiansen, SJ, and Walter Grazer (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1996), 246; the Dominican Episcopal Conference's "Pastoral Letter on the Relationship of Human Beings to Nature," in *And God Saw That It Was Good*, 268; the Guatemalan Bishops' Conference statement "The Cry for the Land," in *And God Saw That It Was Good*, 285; the statement by the Commission for Social Affairs of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Our Relationship with the Environment: The Need for Conversion," 4, [https://www.cccb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/enviro\\_eng.pdf](https://www.cccb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/enviro_eng.pdf); the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' letter, "Renewing the Earth," §II.B, <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/environment/renewing-the-earth.cfm>; the declaration sponsored by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, "Towards Responsible Stewardship of Creation: An Asian Christian Approach," 43, <http://www.fabc.org/offices/otc/Towards%20Responsible%20Stewardship%20of%20Creation.pdf>; and the statement by the Conferencia Episcopal Boliviana, "El Universo, Don de Dios para La Vida: Carta Pastoral sobre Medio Ambiente y Desarrollo Humano en Bolivia," §53, <https://www.comboni.org/app-data/files/allegati/756.pdf>.

woundedness (its “futility,” “slavery to corruption,” and “groaning”)? What eschatological hope has been promised to creation (the “glorious freedom” it is to “share with the children of God”)? And how does the Christian community contribute to creation’s liberation (a possibility implied in the allusive reference to “the revelation of the children of God”)?

Neither biblical studies nor theological reflections can provide a precise portrayal of creation’s final, eschatological state, and thus, John Paul II’s repeated recourse to ambiguous qualifications in dealing with these questions is not without merit. Human sin, he tells us, has “in some way” affected creation;<sup>21</sup> creation will “in some sense” share in humanity’s redemption;<sup>22</sup> and, thus, Christian eschatology must “in a certain sense” be cosmic.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, references to the Romans passage in church documents, especially those of the bishops’ conferences, offer little in the way of consistency in regard to (1) “creation” (Nonhuman creatures? A realm ordered to the human? An ambiguous nod toward the universality of Christ’s work?); (2) the nature of creation’s “groaning” (Environmental damage? Creation’s mortality? Its inability to serve humanity well?); (3) the cause of creation’s “futility” (Original sin? Contemporary human abuse?); or (4) the hope for which creation “awaits with eager expectation” (Redeemed humanity treating it with respect? A restored ability to serve humanity well? An eschatological

<sup>21</sup> Human sin “in some way has affected the whole of creation,” *Dominum et Vivificantem*, May 18, 1986, §39, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_18051986\\_dominum-et-vivificantem.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_18051986_dominum-et-vivificantem.html). All of creation waits “in a mysterious way to be set free,” Message: World Day of Peace, January 1, 1990, §3, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_19891208\\_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19891208_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html).

<sup>22</sup> The Incarnation signifies, “in a sense,” God’s unity with “the entire visible and material world,” *Dominum et Vivificantem*, §50. “Redemption includes all humanity and in a certain way all of creation,” *Dominum et Vivificantem*, §64. In the human person, “in a certain sense,” the world is fulfilled; Audience, May 28, 1986, §6, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/audiences/1986/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_aud\\_19860528.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/audiences/1986/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_19860528.html); translation my own. The renewal of the Holy Spirit “will to some extent involve the whole cosmos,” and “the cosmos is also called, in a mysterious but real way, to participate in this newness of life,” Audience, August 19, 1998, §2 and §4, respectively, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1998/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_aud\\_19081998.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1998/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_19081998.html). God’s salvific gift of himself is directed “in some way to all creation,” *Redemptoris Mater*, March 4, 1979, §9, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_25031987\\_redemptoris-mater.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031987_redemptoris-mater.html).

<sup>23</sup> The whole world “in a certain sense has been created anew,” Homily, June 12, 1999, §4, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1999/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_hom\\_19990612\\_zamosc.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19990612_zamosc.html). Eschatology is, “in a certain sense, cosmic,” *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, ed. Vittorio Messori (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 183; emphasis in the original.

transformation?). Magisterial citations of the Romans text are more like ecological ornaments—token indicators of Christianity's environmental virtue—than substantive expositions of the text's claims.

The ambiguity found in magisterial documents regarding creation's woundedness in the present age and its hope for liberation in the age to come, exemplified in their vague and inconsistent appeals to the Romans text, impairs the Catholic environmental response: if the liberative effect of the kingdom is to include creation and if the church's mission is to serve that liberation in the present age, then the theological question of creation's hope—from what and into what is creation to be liberated—should inform Christian care for the environment. As we will see, Francis has contributed greatly to advancing the needed theological prolegomena to environmental care with his affirmation that God's redemptive labor is creature-inclusive. God intends each creature to be transfigured and gives to that creature an ultimate purpose not tied to human need. Nonetheless, if creation's ultimate purpose is not us, then what is it? Or, to return to the article's focal question, what is God's eschatological plan for creation?

## II. The Trajectory of Papal Writings on Creation

In spite of enduring ambiguities, we can identify a trajectory in papal thinking on the natural world over the last several decades that will help us address these questions. For the purposes of this article, my analysis of papal views on creation will focus mainly on their views of creation's eschatological end (i.e., God's ultimate intent for nonhuman creation). With this limiting focus, I believe we can helpfully, even if loosely, cluster their complex discussions in terms of three approaches that I refer to as microcosmic referent, humanized abode, and covenantal communion. The three are not entirely exclusive to one another or neatly delimited. Indeed, we can identify versions of each of them that are more complementary than oppositional. I will, however, appeal to the three models in order to illuminate by way of contrast those aspects of church teaching about creation that have become increasingly prominent in papal teaching since the council. The first two have significant roots in the patristic and medieval traditions, and versions of them are re-embraced by Vatican II, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI, and to a lesser extent by Francis. Aspects of the third approach occur in the writings of patristic thinkers such as Irenaeus and Maximus the Confessor, but the approach is mostly absent from the scholastic tradition. Each of the three approaches can be used to support a distinctive configuration of environmental priorities. Versions of the first two are vulnerable to interpretations that

ignore or marginalize nonhuman creatures in the divine plan. Fortunately, the more problematic forms of them are waning in Catholic thought. The third approach only begins to emerge latently as fragments in the reflections of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, but these fragments facilitate the development undertaken by Francis. There is, then, a continuity between the three pontiffs even as a shift takes place. Though a “covenantal communion” approach is not explicitly embraced in Francis’ writings, its foundational commitments are. I view this third approach as the most promising one to emerge in postconciliar thought because it seeks to address the climate crisis in a dynamically evolutionary world.

### *A. Creation as Microcosmic Referent*

The microcosmic referent approach has its roots in the microcosmic tradition that was influential in early Christian thought, especially in Eastern Christianity. The tradition builds on what had been the widely accepted cosmology found in Plato’s *Timaeus*. In that view, human persons occupy a unique place among creatures—they are neither entirely spiritual nor merely material. Early Christian thought attributed a distinctive soteriological role to this unique status and believed that role to be fulfilled in Christ. Although humans are thus distinct from animals, all creation is raised together with the resurrection of the God-man because the materiality of Christ incorporates all embodied reality into his saving work.<sup>24</sup> This microcosmic soteriology provided early Christians with a way of understanding the divine plan depicted in Ephesians 1:10, “to sum up all things in Christ, in heaven and on earth.” Maximus the Confessor is among those who argued for such a creature-inclusive microcosmic approach. He believed that because humanity had failed in the role that God had assigned it, establishing “the convergence of the entire creation toward unity,” Christ assumed the task, recapitulating “*in Himself*, in a manner appropriate to God, *all things*, showing that the whole creation is one, as it were completed by another human being, completed by the mutual coming together of its members.”<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> For a history of the influence of the microcosm tradition, see Rudolf Allers, “Microcosmus: From Anaximandros to Paracelsus,” *Traditio: Studies in Ancient and Medieval History, Thought, and Religion* 2 (1944): 319–407.

<sup>25</sup> Maximus the Confessor, *On the Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua*, ed. and trans. Nicholas Constas, vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 113–15; emphasis in original. Paul Blower describes Maximus’ view of redemption: it “is a cosmic process because ... *all* creatures, through the generous radiation of divine illumination, are being ‘recalled’ and ‘uplifted’ proportionately to an archetypal perfection that is nonetheless eschatological and only partially realized here below.” Paul M. Blower, *Maximus the Confessor: Jesus Christ and the Transfiguration of the World* (Oxford:

In creature-inclusive versions of a microcosmic soteriology, Christ recapitulates “all things” without erasing their individuality or creaturely identities. However, I want to consider the less explicitly inclusive interpretations intimated in some conciliar and postconciliar texts. I do so, ultimately, in order to identify by way of contrast a position that must now, I believe, be considered at odds with magisterial teaching in light of *Laudato Si'*—that is, the view that creation is saved merely as a *collective* reality through the spiritual-material person. In this problematic form, microcosmic soteriology treats creation as an abstraction, focusing on its collective identity not on its biotic granularity. I call this view “microcosmic referent” because creation is affirmed but only insofar as it is symbolically expressed by or taken up into the spiritual creature (i.e., creation is made to “refer” to the person). Material creation acts as the corporeal substrate for the divine goal to bring into being the unique, matter-spiritual creature, the human person. Because of its dual spiritual/material nature, humanity is able to represent the entirety of creation in the salvific drama. Thus, nonhuman creatures are subsumed within this grand narrative of anthropocentric redemption and, ultimately, there erased.

In his effort to develop an evolutionary Christology that understands Christ as the culmination of evolutionary and salvific history, Karl Rahner portrays creation in microcosmic referent terms. This *peritus* of Vatican II formulated a Christology in which nonhuman creatures provide the material, instrumental, and expendable backdrop for what is the real goal of salvation history, the incarnation of the Second Person and the redemption of spiritual persons. “The total, created reality of the world grows in and through persons having body and spirit,” and thus “the world is, in a certain sense, the body of those persons.”<sup>26</sup> God’s plan for all eternity is not to create a biotically diverse world but rather to create a particular type of creature: the embodied, spiritual being. This anthropocentric contraction of the divine economy excludes

Oxford University Press, 2016), 180; emphasis in the original. See also Kris Hiuser, “Maximizing Animal Theology: Maximus the Confessor on the Value of Non-Human Animals and the Human Calling,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 30, no. 2 (2014): 247–55. Convergences exist between what I am calling a “microcosmic referent” approach and what is known as “deep incarnationism.” Space does not permit me to explore these connections, but see Niels Henrik Gregersen, ed., *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015).

<sup>26</sup> Karl Rahner, *On the Theology of Death* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1961), 37. The “history of the cosmos as a whole will find its real consummation despite, in and through the freedom of man.” Rahner, “Christology within an Evolutionary View of the World,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5, *Later Writings*, trans. Karl Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), 157–92, 168.

particular, nonhuman creatures from a share in the economy's ultimate, liberative goal.<sup>27</sup>

Though the conciliar texts are, as noted above, intentionally ambiguous on the issue, they seem to support a similar eschatological coalescing of redeemed materiality in and through the embodied spiritual person. We see this, for example, in *Gaudium et Spes'* assertion that "through his bodily composition [the human person] gathers to himself the elements of the material world; [and] thus they reach their crown through him, and through him raise their voice in free praise of the Creator."<sup>28</sup> Likewise, *Lumen Gentium* states that "the human race as well as the entire world, which is intimately related to man and attains to its end through him, will be perfectly reestablished in Christ."<sup>29</sup> In a similar vein, John Paul II states that the fulfillment of "the whole of creation" occurs "through man."<sup>30</sup> "Under the action of the same Spirit, man, and through him the created world, which has been redeemed by Christ, draw near to their ultimate destinies in God."<sup>31</sup>

Many of Benedict XVI's statements about creation's eschatology share two aspects with a microcosmic referent approach. First, they tend to portray creation and its eschatological state in abstract terms. The divine economy includes the "world," collectively understood, but not—or at least not explicitly—the diverse, nonhuman creatures that compose it. Second, nonhuman creation gains its final meaning exclusively in and through spiritual persons and their actions.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>27</sup> For a more sympathetic reading of Rahner on this point, see Hyun-Chul Cho, SJ, "Interconnectedness and Intrinsic Value as Ecological Principles: An Appropriation of Karl Rahner's Evolutionary Christology," *Theological Studies* 70, no. 3 (2009): 622–37.

<sup>28</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, §14.

<sup>29</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, §48, referencing Ephesians 1:10. For a more detailed analysis of Vatican II's texts on creation and eschatology, see Nathan W. O'Halloran, "Each Creature, Resplendently Transfigured': Development of Teaching in *Laudato Si'*," *Theological Studies* 79, no. 2 (2018): 379–91.

<sup>30</sup> John Paul II, *Redemptionis Donum*, March 25, 1984, §14, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_25031984\\_redemptionis-donum.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031984_redemptionis-donum.html).

<sup>31</sup> John Paul, II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, §50.

<sup>32</sup> Consider, for example, this passage from his book on eschatology: "The *anima*, as we have seen, belongs completely to the material world, yet also goes beyond this world in going beyond itself. It is in that movement that the material world, indeed, comes into its own, by stretching forth towards God in man." Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, ed. Adrian Nichols, OP, trans. Michael Waldstein, 2nd ed. with Preface by Peter Casarella (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 1988), 153. The concept of the material world coming into its own through the "stretching" of the human soul is fundamental to a microcosmic referent approach.

For Benedict, creation's movement toward its realization is symbolized in the Eucharist, and thus his most pointed support for creation's eschatological destiny can be found in his reflections on the liturgy. As Cardinal Ratzinger, he wrote that worship "not only saves mankind but is also meant to draw the whole of reality into communion with God."<sup>33</sup> We must, he tells us, "recapture this cosmic vision if we want once again to understand and live Christianity in its full breadth."<sup>34</sup> Christian worship "is always a cosmic liturgy."<sup>35</sup> Indeed, Benedict states that creation's redemption is effected in the Eucharist. In it, "creation is projected toward divinization, toward the holy wedding feast, toward unification with the Creator himself."<sup>36</sup> Appealing to Maximus the Confessor, he encourages us to understand the goal of creation in terms of a "cosmic liturgy" in which humanity fulfills its task of "unifying the cosmos"<sup>37</sup> and accordingly praises Teilhard de Chardin's vision of such a liturgy.<sup>38</sup> In the glorious age of the eschaton, "the whole creation will become a song."<sup>39</sup>

Benedict does not make clear whether this eucharistic divinization of creation includes the material and biotic diversity of the present age. His depiction of the cosmic liturgy, however, suggests that the answer is no; its ultimate object seems, at least primarily, to be the glorified materiality of redeemed humanity—a view that aligns with a microcosmic referent approach.<sup>40</sup> And, in contrast to Maximus, Benedict's discussion of the

<sup>33</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 27.

<sup>34</sup> Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 101.

<sup>35</sup> Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 70.

<sup>36</sup> Benedict XVI, Homily, June 15, 2006, [http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2006/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_hom\\_20060615\\_corpus-christi.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2006/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20060615_corpus-christi.html).

<sup>37</sup> Benedict XVI, Audience, June 25, 2008, [http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2008/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_aud\\_20080625.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2008/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20080625.html).

<sup>38</sup> Benedict XVI, Homily, Friday, July 24, 2009, [http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2009/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_hom\\_20090724-vespri-aosta.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20090724-vespri-aosta.html).

<sup>39</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, 237–38. Though it is not a dominant theme in their thoughts, John Paul II and Francis also connect creation's fulfillment and the liturgy. The Eucharist has a "cosmic character"; it "unites heaven and earth" and "embraces and permeates all creation." John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, April 17, 2003, §8, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/special\\_features/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_20030417\\_ecclesia\\_eucharistia\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/special_features/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_20030417_ecclesia_eucharistia_en.html). "In the Eucharist, ... the whole cosmos gives thanks to God. Indeed, the Eucharist is itself an act of cosmic love." Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §236. Francis goes on to cite the preceding passage from John Paul II's *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*.

<sup>40</sup> For a contrasting view, however, see Fletcher, *Resurrection Realism*, 215–16. He cites a number of texts from untranslated writings showing Ratzinger's support for the view that the world would be saved. However, the salvific hope expressed in these texts does not, at least not explicitly, include individual creatures, but only the world considered in its entirety.

cosmic liturgy does not include any reference to nonhuman voices. Furthermore, his use of the term “cosmic” must, it would seem, refer merely to the materiality of redeemed humanity (and not to individual, nonhuman creatures) if we are to reconcile his claim that the liturgy is “cosmic” with the almost complete lack of attention given to (or prayers offered for) nonhuman creatures in the eucharistic texts.<sup>41</sup> Eucharistic prayers are ill-suited as a ritualization of *living*, nonhuman creatures’ incorporation into Christ’s redemption. Other statements by Benedict concerning the destiny of living creatures are similarly inconclusive.<sup>42</sup> Cardinal Ratzinger was right to caution us that “the new world cannot be imagined,”<sup>43</sup> and thus we must avoid speculation as to the particular forms that nonhuman lives might take in the eschaton. However, as demonstrated by the teachings of Irenaeus (whom Benedict describes as “the real founder of systematic theology in its Catholic form”)<sup>44</sup> and of Maximus (whom he describes as “the great Greek Doctor of the Church”),<sup>45</sup> this epistemic limit does not preclude us from proposing that nonhuman creatures will be included, precisely as *individual* creatures, in God’s redemption of the cosmos.

### ***B. Creation as Humanized Abode***

The humanized abode approach views creation primarily as the material context for human flourishing (e.g., serving human needs in this life and providing the material composition for our bodies in this life and the next).

<sup>41</sup> The one possible exception to this is Eucharistic Prayer IV, which is based on Eastern patristic sources.

<sup>42</sup> Benedict XVI was interpreted as rejecting the possibility of animal restoration when, in a homily, he contrasted the eternal destiny of the human person with the destiny of non-human creatures for whom “death means solely the end of existence on earth.” See Benedict XVI, Homily, January 13, 2008, [http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2008/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_hom\\_20080113\\_battesimo.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2008/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20080113_battesimo.html). However, support for a more nonhuman-inclusive soteriology, even if anthropocentric, is suggested in a set of reflections published in 1985: “To man belongs not only his fellow-man; to man belongs also the ‘world.’ Hence, if man as such and as a whole is to be brought into salvation, then the delightful mystery of things must also be preserved for him; all the instruments that God has created must join in, as it were, to the symphony of joy if there is to be full harmony.” Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), *Dogma and Preaching: Applying Christian Doctrine to Daily Life*, ed. Michael J. Miller, trans. Michael J. Miller and Matthew J. O’Connell (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), 269.

<sup>43</sup> Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, 194.

<sup>44</sup> Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 182.

<sup>45</sup> Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, November 30, 2007, §28, [http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20071130\\_spe-salvi.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi.html).



Until Vatican II, Catholic theology generally assumed as correct Aquinas' view that basic matter would suffice for the material needs of our glorified existence.<sup>46</sup> However, a renewed commitment to the embodied sociality of human existence has led contemporary theology to see the divine economy as directed not only to the bodily resurrection of individual persons but also to the transformation of the creaturely structures that make the communal life of humanity possible. Because the human person is an embodied and social being, those structures that contribute to humanity's comprehensive flourishing will be incorporated into the eschaton's new heavens and new earth. Thus, the creation that is to be redeemed in Christ comprises both humanity and all those transformed realities that will provide the eschatological stage for the glorified lives of the redeemed community.

Attending to the communal dimensions of the eschaton impels us toward a corresponding concern for our communal lives in the present age. As we saw above, the eschatology of Vatican II, informed by Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God, eschewed views that disconnect the historical, economic, political, and cultural context of our lives in the present era from our glorified existence in the next. Instead, Christians are invited to see their endeavors to improve the structures of human life as a participation in the labor for the kingdom. *Gaudium et Spes* frames such endeavors in the context of the Genesis mandate that humanity "subdue" the earth (Gen 1:28):

When man develops the earth by the work of his hands or with the aid of technology, in order that it might bear fruit and become *a dwelling worthy of the whole human family* and when he consciously takes part in the life of social groups, he carries out the design of God manifested at the beginning of time, that he should subdue the earth, perfect creation and develop himself.<sup>47</sup>

Similarly, John Paul II states that God has called humanity to develop the world so that it may "increasingly respond to the integral demands of man."<sup>48</sup> The importance of this task is due in part to the fact that the cosmos, in the pope's understanding, is not simply "the dwelling place of

<sup>46</sup> Aquinas believed that our glorified bodies would be composed of the four elements (earth, air, water, and fire). Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans*, ed. Fabian R. Larcher, John Mortensen, and Enrique Alarcón (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012), 221.

<sup>47</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, §57; emphasis added.

<sup>48</sup> John Paul II, Audience, June 18, 1986, §4, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/audiences/1986/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_aud\\_19860618.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/audiences/1986/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_19860618.html); translation my own.

man,” but also—and here he echoes Vatican II—“the theatre of his adventure of freedom.”<sup>49</sup>

Benedict also encourages us to cultivate the natural world so that it can be a place for human flourishing.<sup>50</sup> However, whereas John Paul understands labors that humanize creation to share in Christ’s redemptive work,<sup>51</sup> Benedict generally avoids such characterizations, perhaps in part out of concern for what he sees as the naïve optimism about human progress present in approaches like that of liberation theology.<sup>52</sup> When he does attribute eschatological significance to human action for creation, it is typically in connection with the liturgy, as we saw above. Thus, in Benedict’s appeals to stewardship, environmental practices are effectively de-eschatologized; such actions do not contribute to or participate in God’s ultimate plan for creation. Creation’s service to human flourishing is temporal, and thus human care for that same creation is likewise temporal.<sup>53</sup>

### C. *Creation as Covenantal Communion*

These brief sketches of the first two approaches capture some of the diversity found in recent teachings regarding creation and its eschatological destiny. Based on a reading of select texts (i.e., those that provide support

<sup>49</sup> John Paul II, Audience, August 19, 1998, §1, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1998/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_aud\\_19081998.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1998/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_19081998.html). See Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, §2.

<sup>50</sup> “Duties toward the environment derive from those toward the person considered in itself and in relation to others,” Benedict XVI, Message: World Day of Peace, January 1, 2010, [http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20091208\\_xliii-world-day-peace.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20091208_xliii-world-day-peace.html).

<sup>51</sup> Human persons “are meant to be ‘co-creators’ with God, using their knowledge and skill to shape a cosmos in which the divine plan constantly moves towards fulfilment.” See John Paul II, Speech: Pontifical Academy of Sciences, November 8, 2004, §2, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2004/november/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_20041108\\_academy-sciences.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2004/november/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20041108_academy-sciences.html). God “desires to guide the world—not only the world of nature but also the world of human persons—through man himself.” See John Paul, II, *Veritatis Splendor*, August 6, 1993, §43, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_06081993\\_veritatis-splendor.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html).

<sup>52</sup> His critique of liberation theology, penned while he was head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, reflects this concern. See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Instruction on Certain Aspects of the ‘Theology of Liberation,’” August 6, 1984, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19840806\\_theology-liberation\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19840806_theology-liberation_en.html).

<sup>53</sup> We can see this temporal and anthropocentric reading of stewardship in his praise of monastic agriculture as a model of stewardship: “Creation prospered around monasteries.” See Benedict XVI, Homily, June 3, 2006, [http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2006/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_hom\\_20060603\\_veglia-pentecoste.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2006/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20060603_veglia-pentecoste.html).

for a microcosmic referent or humanized abode approach), one could conclude that God's eschatological plan includes creation, but only as a secondary consideration somehow linked to God's principal concern, humanity's redemption. However, the writings of John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis have attributed to creation other goods and values that cannot be easily encompassed within a microcosmic referent or humanized abode approach. These goods and values draw our attention to an important aspect of creation disregarded in the other two approaches: creation is not an undifferentiated whole or an arena for human action, but is composed of non-human "others" that are, by divine intent, actors in the divine drama. Taken together, these goods and values imbue nonhuman creation and the creatures within it with an "agential density." By the term I mean to signal that creation, as a whole and through its individual creatures, has the capacity to affect us, give something concretely of itself to us, respond to us, and act apart from us, and has a divinely given purpose and destiny that transcends our needs and uses of it.<sup>54</sup> It is no surprise, then, that Francis follows his namesake in describing creation in personalist language: "Our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us."<sup>55</sup>

Attending to the diversity of creaturely agency is central to our third approach: creation as a covenantal communion. In its most realized form, a covenantal communion approach builds on the view that all creatures—human and nonhuman—exist as active participants in relationships with God and with one another. These relationships are covenantal in that through them all creatures are drawn into the salvific drama and are oriented toward an eschatological fulfillment in the age to come. Ultimately, these relationships are to be transformed into a true communion of all creatures in Christ. The goal of environmental labors, then, is to nurture this communion whenever and however feasible in the present age and, in so doing, act in anticipation of the kingdom, now understood as an eschatological harmony of all God's creatures. We find a prolepsis of such a view in three themes developed in *Laudato Si'*: creation's sacramental/doxological capacity, its orientation toward relationality, and God's providential care and eschatological hope for the creature in its individual particularity. The first two themes appear in the writings of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, but only in Francis'

<sup>54</sup> Willis Jenkins believes that giving creation a "voice" has implications for human dignity and environmental rights. See his "The Mysterious Silence of Mother Earth in *Laudato Si'*," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 46, no. 3 (2018): 441–62.

<sup>55</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §1.

thought are all three assembled in a way that underscores creation's participation in the divine economy.

The first theme posits that creation is a reality at once concretely beautiful and expressive of God. For John Paul II, "The silence of the mountain and the whiteness of the snow speak to us of God."<sup>56</sup> Francis similarly finds "mystical meaning ... in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person's face."<sup>57</sup> All creatures have been providentially instilled with a sacramentality in order to fulfill the purpose for which they were created: to glorify God. Francis follows the *poverello* in calling our attention to the praise that all creatures give to God.<sup>58</sup> Benedict XVI similarly maintains that, ultimately, creation must become a sacrament revealing "the glory of God."<sup>59</sup> The whole universe, John Paul II states, is a multiform "call to proclaim the glory of the Creator."<sup>60</sup>

At two points, Francis brings a different nuance to his understanding of creation's doxological capacity compared to his predecessors. John Paul II and Benedict XVI underscore the unique and preeminent role of the human person in creation's doxology. We see this in Benedict's focus on eucharistic worship. While approaching creation's praise in a different way, John Paul's view is similarly anthropocentric: "All created life should be a hymn of praise to the Creator, [but] it is more correct to maintain that the human creature has the primary role in this chorus of praise."<sup>61</sup> Francis does not so much disagree with this priority, but his discussion of creaturely praise highlights its inter-relational and communal nature, not its human leadership.<sup>62</sup> Second, John Paul and Benedict identify both service to humanity and praise of God as the dual purposes of nonhuman creation. With Francis' pointed statement that "the ultimate purpose of other creatures is not to be found in us,"<sup>63</sup> he shifts the balance, giving clear precedence to the good of creation's doxological response over that of its human service. The identities of nonhuman creatures must ultimately be understood in

<sup>56</sup> John Paul II, *Angelus*, June 20, 1993, §1, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/angelus/1993/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_ang\\_19930620.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/angelus/1993/documents/hf_jp-ii_ang_19930620.html).

<sup>57</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §233.

<sup>58</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §11.

<sup>59</sup> Benedict XVI, *Audience: Maximus the Confessor*, June 25, 2008, [http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2008/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_aud\\_20080625.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2008/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20080625.html).

<sup>60</sup> John Paul II, *Audience*, March 12, 1986, §5, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/audiences/1986/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_aud\\_19860312.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/audiences/1986/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_19860312.html); translation my own.

<sup>61</sup> John Paul II, *Audience*, January 9, 2002, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/2002/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_aud\\_20020109.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/2002/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_20020109.html).

<sup>62</sup> "If we enter into communion with the forest, our voices will easily blend with its own and become a prayer," Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, §56.

<sup>63</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §83.

terms of their lived, *agential* responses to God, and not as objects at our disposal.

The second theme is that all creatures are fundamentally relational. One of the most emphatic teachings we find in *Laudato Si'* is its repeated claim that we are in relationship with nonhuman creatures. The teaching is not entirely new, as cognate themes were proposed by Francis' predecessors. For John Paul II, harmony with our "fellow beings, God, and all of creation is the plan followed by the Creator."<sup>64</sup> He describes the "central task" of the church as that of "reconciling people: with God, with themselves, with the neighbor, with the whole of creation."<sup>65</sup> Benedict XVI views the covenant as the "inner ground of creation"<sup>66</sup> and encourages us to strengthen the "covenant between human beings and the environment," an appeal he repeats on multiple occasions.<sup>67</sup>

On this theme, too, Francis develops the views of his predecessors. Not only does he give greater prominence to the good of relationality, but more significantly, he underscores the vital importance of the many ways that we relate to *individual* nonhuman creatures, and not just to creation collectively. Throughout *Laudato Si'*, Francis repeatedly states that *every* creature—human and nonhuman—is "connected," "in communion," "interrelated," and "interconnected" with other creatures.<sup>68</sup> Whereas John Paul and Benedict tend to depict our interrelationship with creation in terms of a systemic interdependence, Francis highlights the rich and varied relationships we have with particular, nonhuman creatures. These relationships are not merely ecological or volitional but ontological (and thus eschatological).<sup>69</sup>

<sup>64</sup> John Paul II, Audience, January 17, 2001, §1, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/2001/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_aud\\_20010117.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/2001/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_20010117.html).

<sup>65</sup> John Paul II, *Reconciliation and Penance*, December, 2, 1984, §8, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_02121984\\_reconciliatio-et-paenitentia.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_02121984_reconciliatio-et-paenitentia.html).

<sup>66</sup> Benedict XVI, Homily, April 23, 2011, [http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2011/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_hom\\_20110423\\_veglia-pasquale.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2011/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20110423_veglia-pasquale.html).

<sup>67</sup> Benedict XVI, Message: World Day of Peace, January 1, 2008, §7, [http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20071208\\_xli-world-day-peace.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20071208_xli-world-day-peace.html). Other places where Benedict appeals to a covenant between humanity and the environment include: Audience, August 26, 2009, [http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2009/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_aud\\_20090826.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20090826.html); Message: World Day of Peace, January 1, 2010, at §1 and §10; and *Caritas in Veritate*, at §50 and §69.

<sup>68</sup> See, for example, Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §16, §42, §70, §76, §91, §117, §120, §137, and §138.

<sup>69</sup> On the theme of relationality, see Celia Deane-Drummond, "A New Anthropology? *Laudato Si'* and the Question of Interconnectedness," in *Laudato Si' and the*

The fact that we naturally “tend toward other things” is, for Francis, a fundamental dimension of creation reflecting the “subsistent relations” of our triune Creator.<sup>70</sup> We are “creatures of this world,”<sup>71</sup> and as such we are linked through “unseen bonds” to other creatures, with which we exist in “sublime communion.”<sup>72</sup> Francis unites the relational and sacramental qualities of creation in *Querida Amazonia*, where he states that in and through nature we encounter the transcendent God as “a ‘Thou’ who knows us and loves us.”<sup>73</sup>

Finally, addressing the third theme, we note that Pope Francis’ reflections attend not only to the integral whole of creation but also to the particularity of the world’s creatures. I believe this is the most revolutionary aspect of Francis’ theology of creation. God has a loving plan for “every creature,”<sup>74</sup> and even creatures with a “few seconds of existence” are enfolded within his affection.<sup>75</sup> No creature “is superfluous”;<sup>76</sup> each has “importance and meaning ... within the entirety of God’s plan.”<sup>77</sup> God intends that each creature will be “resplendently transfigured.”<sup>78</sup> This focus on the goodness of *each* individual nonhuman creature and God’s cherishing of that *individual* creature is starkly different from more traditional approaches that value the individual human person but only the collective good of creation. In light of *Laudato Si’*, any understanding of God’s eschatological plan for creation that focuses on creation merely in collective terms, thus obscuring God’s providential solicitude for the individual creature, should be seen as theologically inadequate.

These themes—creation’s sacramental and doxological capacity, the essential relationality of all creatures, and God’s care for the particular creature—together disclose a form of agency given to nonhuman creatures within the divine drama. My intent here is not to attribute to nonhuman creatures the type of agency we find in human persons (e.g., that of moral agency), but rather to indicate that neither here nor in the eschaton is creation merely an amorphous substrate to be somehow incorporated into the lives

*Environment: Pope Francis’ Green Encyclical*, ed. Robert McKim (New York: Routledge, 2020), 189–201.

<sup>70</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si’*, §240.

<sup>71</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si’*, §43.

<sup>72</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si’*, §89.

<sup>73</sup> Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, §73.

<sup>74</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si’*, §76.

<sup>75</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si’*, §77.

<sup>76</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si’*, §84.

<sup>77</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si’*, §86.

<sup>78</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si’*, §243.

of the redeemed or a terrestrial stage for human freedom.<sup>79</sup> In and through its *individual* creatures, creation is alive and active in the divine plan. Nonhuman creatures stand before God and, in being what they are, reflect the divine glory of their Creator; they speak to us about God in their beauty and in the drama of their lives; they are in relationship with us, in wounded ways that express their groaning hopes for liberation, and in harmonious ways that anticipate the eschatological life of the kingdom. Humanity is no outsider to this integral communion but fully embedded within it. As *Laudato Si'* shows, re-embedding the human person within the web of creaturely lives does not diminish humanity's stature among the world's creatures. Rather, doing so reaffirms a basic creaturely truth: humanity is not a biotic island unto itself but exists interdependently in a world of divinely cherished creatures, a "universal family."<sup>80</sup>

### III. Assessing the Covenantal Communion Model

#### A. Integral Ecology: An Alternative Model?

Arguments can be made for other readings of the recent papal tradition. Such disagreements are to be expected given the ambiguity that I believe marks papal writings. One of the more common, alternate readings of the recent tradition centers on Francis' idea of an integral ecology. Integral ecology, one could argue, provides a more adequate approach because of its continuity with a Thomistic view of creation (where each creature is providentially directed to its own temporal end within an ordered, ecological whole) and because versions of the term appear regularly in recent papal writings. John Paul II tied care for the environment to what he called a "human ecology," while also arguing that the destruction of "the *human environment*" is "more serious" than "the irrational destruction of the natural environment."<sup>81</sup> Benedict XVI similarly reminded Catholics that the human and nonhuman ecology are interdependent, and thus if humanity "truly desires peace, [it] must be increasingly conscious of the links

<sup>79</sup> Nonetheless, some scholars argue that we *can* attribute a form of moral agency to some animals. See, for example, Celia Deane-Drummond, "Are Animals Moral? Taking Soundings through Vice, Virtue, Conscience, and *Imago Dei*," in *Creaturely Theology: On God, Humans, and Other Animals*, ed. David Clough and Celia Deane-Drummond (London: SCM Press, 2009), 190–210.

<sup>80</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §89.

<sup>81</sup> John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, May 1, 1991, §38, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_01051991\\_centesimus-annus.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html); emphasis in the original.

between natural ecology, or respect for nature, and human ecology.<sup>82</sup> Francis devotes the fourth chapter of *Laudato Si'* to defending an “integral ecology,” which he ties to the need to preserve the ecosystems we inhabit: “We depend on these larger systems for our own existence.”<sup>83</sup> The common theme in these appeals is that environmental destruction follows whenever we fail to respect the divinely established, natural order—human and nonhuman.

My resistance to using the term is that it is too often understood and wielded in a way that is epistemically naïve and eschatologically flattened. Regarding the former problem, papal appeals to creation’s integrity imply that the norms for environmental care can simply be read off nature. Thus, Benedict XVI states in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* that nature expresses “a design of love and truth” and “is a wondrous work of the Creator containing a ‘grammar’ which sets forth ends and criteria for its wise use.”<sup>84</sup> Similarly, Francis writes that in creating the world, God wrote “into it an order and a dynamism that human beings have no right to ignore.”<sup>85</sup> Thus, it suffices for moral guidance in environmental care that we simply respect nature as is and submit to its innate and divinely bestowed truth.

The book of nature, however, offers little guidance until we interpret it within some philosophical or theological framework. Viewing nature as a “humanized abode,” for example, encourages a set of norms for nature’s treatment that prioritize its service to humanity,<sup>86</sup> while viewing it as a place of sacramental encounter leads to norms that argue for preserving creation in its present state.<sup>87</sup> Instead, as Francis himself reminds us, creation

<sup>82</sup> Benedict XVI, World Day of Peace, January 1, 2007, §8. He goes on to say: “Experience shows that disregard for the environment always harms human coexistence, and vice versa. It becomes more and more evident that there is an inseparable link between peace with creation and peace among men.”

<sup>83</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §140.

<sup>84</sup> Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, §48; emphasis in the original.

<sup>85</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §221.

<sup>86</sup> See, for example, the anthropocentric approach of Peter F. Ryan, SJ. He argues that one should first take into account concerns like how development might impact the entire system, whether or how it is sustainable, and how it will “affect the quality of people’s lives.” After taking these steps, however, if “one rightly judges that nature should be disturbed to meet human needs, then far from violating the inherent value of subpersonal reality, such use fulfills nature by humanizing and personalizing it, while also fulfilling human persons.” Peter F. Ryan, SJ, “Secularist and Christian Views of Human Nature and Its Fulfillment: Implications for Bioethics and Environmentalism,” in *Human Nature in Its Wholeness: A Roman Catholic Perspective*, ed. Daniel N. Robinson, Gladys M. Sweeney, and Richard Gill, LC (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 57–79, 75.

<sup>87</sup> Willis Jenkins makes a Thomistic argument for environmental care based on the idea that “creation is a gift to us not because of its use-value for our projects, but because



must be *interpreted*, and done so in light of creation's eschatological end, not merely in regard to its temporal, natural order: "The creatures of this world no longer appear to us under merely natural guise because the risen One is mysteriously holding them to himself and directing them towards fullness as their end."<sup>88</sup>

An additional problem with the idea of nature's interpretability is that evolutionary development has made us aware of the fluidity of creaturely categories; species designations are not the static, divinely determined forms portrayed in the Genesis text. Thus, it is not clear how creation as it exists now offers normative guidance for our care of creation. And if the contemporary forms of plants and animals—or even the fact that they exist at all—are not expressions of some timeless, divine norm for those creatures, then we face an open question as to what ethical limits there are, if any, to modifying the physiology of nonhuman creatures. In line with the ideas of Teilhard de Chardin and some contemporary ecotheologians, one could even argue that developmental change is not only allowed but actually desired by God. Understanding the ultimate end toward which God's providential ordering of creation is being directed—the eschatological plan—is critical for judging those possibilities and their limits.

We confront nature's interpretive ambiguity not only in regard to the normative status of the individual and species forms that nonhuman creatures take at present but also in regard to the form that our relationship with them is to take. Vatican II's hope that our labors will help us become "less subjected to material things" so that we "can be more easily drawn to the worship and contemplation of the Creator" suggests one normative understanding of our relationship with creation and how it is to progress,<sup>89</sup> while Francis' hope for a "deep communion with the rest of nature" suggests another.<sup>90</sup> The two can be reconciled but only through an adequate understanding of creation's final destiny, how we are to relate to it, and how our labors further that relationship.

In tandem with a naïve assumption about the ease of our access to nature's wisdom, discussions appealing to the ideas of integral and human ecology often focus almost exclusively on the *present* earthly ecosystem, of which humans are a part, without reference to its eschatological horizon;

it reveals God." Willis Jenkins, "Biodiversity and Salvation: Thomistic Roots for Environmental Ethics," *Journal of Religion* 83 (July 2003): 401–420, 408.

<sup>88</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §100. Alister E. McGrath examines the essential role that the "Christian *imaginarium*" has for a theology of nature in his *Re-Imagining Nature: The Promise of Christian Natural Theology* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2017).

<sup>89</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, §57.

<sup>90</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §91.

their approach to the natural world is eschatologically flattened. My claim has been that the fact that nonhuman creatures are, with and through humanity, being drawn into a saving union with Christ has significance for our environmental care, and thus God's salvific intent for those creatures cannot be bracketed in our judgments about Christian environmental care. Bracketing such concerns leads to a temporal bias: seeing nature as it is in this present era, along with the form that human relationships with it take, as a general norm for environmental practices. "The beauty and integrity of the creatures in the cosmos, their pristine conditions of original justice, remain intact," Christopher Thompson argues.<sup>91</sup> In such a present-centric and eschatologically flattened approach to creation, the priority for environmental intervention is preserving and sustaining the present organic whole. The importance of pursuing practices precisely because they align with the values of the approaching kingdom (e.g., ending animal suffering) correspondingly diminishes in the face of such a focus on the present integral order.

The temporal privileging that integral ecology gives to the present order is also evidenced in the connection drawn between environmental care and sexual ethics (the latter will not, presumably, be a concern in the marriage-free kingdom of the eschaton): our abuse of creation is of the same sinful form as our disregard for traditional sexual norms in that both, it is argued, reflect a disregard for the present natural order. Thus, Benedict maintains that "the book of nature is one and indivisible: it takes in not only the environment but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, social relations: in a word, integral human development."<sup>92</sup> Benedict and others are right to link human

<sup>91</sup> Christopher J. Thompson, *The Joyful Mystery* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2017), 93.

<sup>92</sup> Benedict, *Caritas in Veritate*, §51. Francis refers to Benedict's views here, arguing for the need "to accept our body ... and to respect its fullest meaning." *Laudato Si'*, §155. Similarly, see in Thompson, *Joyful Mystery*, page 137: "The defense of the organic ordering of things, whether in the human body or other bodies, provides the extraordinary occasion to unite in common cause ... those who promote organic practices in the garden bed, [and] those who promote organic practices in the marriage bed." Nathan O'Halloran argues that "without such a fundamental sexual ecology there can be no adequate anthropology, and without an adequate anthropology there can be no true environmental ecology." Nathan W. O'Halloran, "The Scotus Ruling and the Integral Ecology of *Laudato Si'*," *First Things*, July 14, 2015, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2015/07/the-scotus-ruling-and-the-integral-ecology-of-laudato-si>. David L. Schindler also draws together sexual and environmental ethics in *The Generosity of Creation* (Washington, DC: Humanum Academic Press, 2018). Maura Ryan, in contrast, critically examines Benedict's "pro-life environmentalism" in "A New Shade of Green? Nature, Freedom, and Sexual Difference in *Caritas in Veritate*," *Theological Studies* 71, no. 2 (2010): 335-49.

and nonhuman ecology, but it is important to understand that link not only temporally but eschatologically—that is, how fostering the integral good of human *and* nonhuman creation can serve the kingdom.

The covenantal community model differs from these appeals to integral ecology in that it situates Christian care for creation explicitly within an eschatological horizon, and thus encourages us to interpret environmental practices in light of the kingdom's inauguration and creation's future liberation. God's redemptive labor in the present order includes nonhuman creation, and thus as Christians participate in that labor for a more just and peaceful human world, it will lead them to consider the flourishing of nonhuman creatures and how human persons might further their harmonious relations with those creatures. Such efforts cannot hope to transform the natural world into a tranquil Eden—we are not gods—but a focus on the values of the kingdom should at the very least heighten Christian aversion to any form of environmental abuse and anthropogenic animal suffering.

I believe the covenantal communion model is consistent with Francis' idea of an integral ecology when the term is interpreted in light of his theological commitments regarding nonhuman creation. The interpretive challenge for understanding Francis' comprehensive approach to creation, however, is that his discussion of environmental care often proceeds separately from his soteriology of nonhuman creation, leaving his appeal to an integral ecology open to divergent interpretations depending on which theological (or temporal) note is emphasized. His soteriological reflections speak of nonhuman creation and humanity becoming transfigured in the age to come, but his explicitly ethical discussion is guided by more temporal values like sustainability and preservation. Thus, James Hanvey is right to suggest that “the theological foundation for an integral ecology presented by *Laudato Si'* remains underdeveloped.” The church's environmental mission must be grounded in “soteriology” so that it becomes more than “a social catalyst for ecological ethics.”<sup>93</sup> Compounding the problem is the fact that Francis argues, as Celia Deane-Drummond and Denis Edwards both note, from a romanticized view of creation, which leads him to disregard the suffering and cruelty endured by animals—both in the long march of

<sup>93</sup> James Hanvey, “*Laudato Si'* and the Renewal of Theologies of Creation,” *Heythrop Journal* 59 (2018): 1022–35, 1022 and 1027, respectively. In contrast, see the argument by Steven C. van den Heuvel, who holds that the inclusion of nonhuman creation in the salvific narrative diminishes the tradition's commitment to anthropocentrism. “The Theocentric Perspective of *Laudato Si'*: A Critical Discussion,” *Philosophia Reformata* 83 (2018): 51–67, esp. 56–58.

evolutionary history and in the present day.<sup>94</sup> With creation sanitized of its brutal ugliness, Francis does not need to consider how his soteriology of non-human creatures—the fact that Christ is directing such creatures “towards fullness as their end”<sup>95</sup>—should inform treatment of nonhuman creatures by Christians anticipating the approach of the kingdom.

By giving Francis’ theology of nonhuman creation—its soteriology and eschatology—a greater heuristic role for understanding our ethical responsibilities to creation, the covenantal communion model seeks to stress how Christian endeavors for the kingdom will incorporate a witness to God’s liberative hopes for creation, in whatever way grace and circumstance allow. “Covenantal” underscores that God includes creation in Christ’s redemptive work; “communion” signals that the ultimate form of God’s eschatological work for creation can be imagined in terms of a communion of all God’s creatures.

### ***B. Building on the Christian Tradition***

Space constraints do not allow for a full defense of a covenantal community model, but we can indicate briefly how some of the theological themes associated with the model have significant and deep roots in the Christian tradition.<sup>96</sup> That God’s redemptive plan is cosmic in scope can be seen, for example, in Genesis 9:10-16, where God’s covenantal offer is directed toward individual nonhuman creatures. The passage repeatedly uses the phrase “every living creature” in order to show that “God binds himself unilaterally and without reservation” to nonhuman creation.<sup>97</sup> The eschatological inclusion of nonhuman creatures is also signaled in the cosmic Christ theme of Colossians and Ephesians: the “mystery of [God’s] will” for creation is “to sum up [anakephalaiōsthai, to gather into one, under one head] all things in Christ, in heaven and on earth” (Eph 1:10, NABRE).<sup>98</sup> This *mysterion* of Ephesians led early Christian thinkers like

<sup>94</sup> Celia Deane-Drummond, “*Laudato Si’* and the Natural Sciences: An Assessment of Possibilities and Limits,” *Theological Studies* 77, no. 2 (June 2016): 392–415; and Denis Edwards, “Sublime Communion’: The Theology of the Natural World in *Laudato Si’*,” *Theological Studies* 77, no. 2 (June 2016): 377–91.

<sup>95</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si’*, §100.

<sup>96</sup> I have argued elsewhere that Scripture and the early Christian tradition provide ample support for the hope that animals will be included in God’s redemptive plan. See Christopher Steck, SJ, *All God’s Animals: A Catholic Theological Framework for Animal Ethics* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019), 95–132.

<sup>97</sup> Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1984), 473.

<sup>98</sup> On the importance of the covenant in Paul’s writings, see Thomas D. Stegman, “Run That You May Obtain the Prize’: Using St. Paul as a Resource for the Spiritual

Irenaeus to include creation in God's redemptive plans: from the beginning, God planned to bring all of creation to its fulfillment in Christ.<sup>99</sup>

Furthermore, these same biblical and early Christian sources suggest not only *that* nonhuman creatures are included in the divine plan, but they also indicate the form that inclusion will take: it is a communion, a relational and organic whole—"the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb" (Isaiah 11:6, NABRE). Vatican II resituated the idea of Christian communion within an eschatological context, viewing the church as both a visible *and* eschatological community living in anticipation of the kingdom. *Lumen Gentium* described the church as "the kingdom of Christ now present in mystery";<sup>100</sup> as the people of God who, though scattered "throughout the world,... are in communion with each other in the Holy Spirit";<sup>101</sup> and as the "universal sacrament of salvation."<sup>102</sup> Francis expands this communion to include nonhuman creatures, reminding us that "the created things of this world" are "called into being by one Father," and thus "all of us are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family, a sublime communion," one that "excludes nothing and no one."<sup>103</sup>

Exercises," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 44, no. 4 (Winter 2012): 1–43. For a more extensive review of the biblical support for the inclusion of nonhuman creatures, see Steck, *All God's Animals*, 78–81 and 101–04.

<sup>99</sup> Irenaeus, *St. Irenaeus of Lyons against Heresies: The Complete English Translation from the First Volume of the Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (South Bend, IN: Ex Fontibus, 2010), 443. Similarly, Ephrem the Syrian describes God's renewal of creation as one of "liberating all creatures, / granting them paschal joy, along with us." See Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Paradise*, trans. Sebastian P. Brock (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990), 136. John Chrysostom argues that creation will share in humanity's glorification in Christ just as it shared in humanity's corruption. See John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 11, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd ed., ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 445.

<sup>100</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, §3.

<sup>101</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, §13.

<sup>102</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, §48. Based on biblical and early Christian testimony, the ecclesiolgologist Jean-Marie Tillard argues that the "two aspects" of the church—the kingdom and the people of God—"are inseparable": "the People are marching towards a Kingdom, and the Kingdom is the good of a People." See Jean-Marie Tillard, *Church of Churches: The Ecclesiology of Communion*, trans. R. C. De Peaux (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 83. See also Dennis Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology: Visions and Versions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 72–75.

<sup>103</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, §89 and §92, respectively. A number of ecologists also appeal to the importance of communion for understanding God's ultimate plan for creation. Consider, for example, the "kinship" model in Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014);

In order for the church to be, in this world, the sacramental sign of the kingdom, it must strive to embody the harmony of the kingdom and to reflect the mystery of its origin in the life of the Trinity. It does this in and through its relationships with God, human persons, and nonhuman creatures—respecting, of course, the distinctive mode of relating that is possible for and appropriate to each particular creature. Here, we come to a point on which Francis' views can be further developed in line with the proposed covenantal communion model, and in a way that highlights the subject-agency of nonhuman creatures. For the church to fulfill its role as a sacramental sign of creaturely unity and of God's plan to draw all things to Christ, it must recognize that it does so within a world that is both reflective of divine beauty and yet cruciform in its suffering, both natural and anthropogenic.<sup>104</sup> To anticipate the covenantal communion of the eschaton requires that the church gives witness to, becomes a sign for, not only the world in its reflection of divine beauty but also the cries of its individual creatures for liberation. Yet Francis, along with much of recent church teaching, does not adequately attend to this aspect of creation's sacramentality—that is, the groaning of its nonhuman subjects for liberation. The Orthodox theologian John Chryssavgis rightly decries Christianity's neglect of creation's wounds—its “refusal to engage with the fallenness of the world—the pain and suffering, pollution and ugliness.”<sup>105</sup> “Everything is innately fallen,” and thus, “everything—natural and animals, as well as all inanimate and material—requires transformation.”<sup>106</sup> If the church is to be a sacramental sign, it must ponder seriously the question of how it might reflect God's desire to heal the world's woundedness and end creaturely suffering.

and Daniel P. Horan, *All God's Creatures: A Theology of Creation* (Lanham, MD: Fortress Academic, 2018). Kohlhaas and McLaughlin argue that “relatiocentrism,” rather than anthropocentrism, better describes the focus of divine concern as Francis understands it in *Laudato Si'*. See Jacob M. Kohlhaas and Ryan Patrick McLaughlin, “Loving the World We Are: Anthropology and Relationality in *Laudato Si'*,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 47, no. 3 (2019): 501–24, esp. 502.

<sup>104</sup> “Sin, sorrow, and injustice mar the world's well-being. Therefore, the *kabod YHWH*, never directly perceived, is also manifest in and through historical events of peace-making and liberation.” See Elizabeth Johnson, “Heaven and Earth Are Filled with Your Glory,” in *Finding God in All Things: Essays in Honor of Michael J. Buckley, SJ*, ed. Michael J. Himes and Stephen Pope (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1996), 89. “The vision of the natural world as a sacrament of the glory of God motivates contemplative persons to extend this justice model to embrace the whole earth.” See Johnson, *Finding God in All Things*, 94.

<sup>105</sup> John Chryssavgis, *Creation as Sacrament: Reflections on Ecology and Spirituality* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2019), 97.

<sup>106</sup> Chryssavgis, *Creation as Sacrament*, 96.

Nonetheless, because of humanity's innate, creaturely limitations, the church cannot presume godlike abilities. And thus the church's response to the call that it be a sign of God's redemptive plan will often be limited to a profession of hope for God's eschatological transformation of nonhuman creation.

My argument has been that recent papal teachings on nonhuman creatures do not evidence the level of coherence and precision we need in order to discern the appropriate Christian response to the environmental crisis. Though we should not seek a futurist clarity about creation's future transfiguration, creating some guideposts about how creation participates in Christ's salvific gift is necessary and possible. Francis' theology has effectively moved us away from theological views that align with less creation-friendly versions of the microcosmic referent and humanized abode models and toward an approach that intimates hope for a covenantal communion of all creatures. But given the issues we face and the vestigial theologies of creation that persist in Catholic discourse,<sup>107</sup> we have not attained the sort of ecclesial clarity needed. A brief consideration of two issues can help us understand the type of guidance that a covenantal communion approach might bring.

First, we lack an adequate theological understanding of animal suffering. Among the most scandalous forms that such suffering takes is the horrific abuse endured by factory-farmed animals. No attention, however, is given to the issue in the extensive reflections found in *Laudato Si'*.<sup>108</sup> On first glance, that is surprising given the encyclical's attention to the individual creature. In its ethical exhortations (as opposed to its more theological passages), however, the encyclical's focus tends to be on entire environmental systems and their impact on the human poor, not on the plight of individual creatures. Francis does address, theologically, the issue of creaturely suffering, offering an explanation similar to that proposed by many ecotheologians:

<sup>107</sup> For example, in an interpretation of Romans 8 that aligns more with the eschatology of Pius X than that of Francis, the priest blogger Monsignor Charles Pope states that the liberation for which creation yearns will occur when "the work of summoning souls is completed." See Charles Pope, "Don't Be Tempted by False Gardens—We Preach Christ Crucified," *National Catholic Register*, July 30, 2019, <https://www.ncregister.com/blog/msgr-pope/shangri-la>.

<sup>108</sup> Charles Camosy identifies an inconsistency here. "The tradition has been quite clear in giving specific moral guidance with respect to actions which clearly contradict the fundamental dignity of human beings. It is high time similar guidance is given with respect to actions which clearly contradict the fundamental dignity of nonhuman animals." See Charles Camosy, "Locating *Laudato Si'* along a Trajectory of Concern for Nonhuman Animals," in *Integral Ecology for a More Sustainable World: Dialogues with Laudato Si'*, ed. Dennis O'Hara, Matthew Eaton, and Michael T. Ross (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019), 171.

“Creating a world in need of development, God in some way sought to limit himself in such a way that many of the things we think of as evils, dangers, or sources of suffering are in reality part of the pains of childbirth that he uses to draw us into the act of cooperation with the Creator.”<sup>109</sup> He does not, however, show how exactly God’s goal in creating—here understood as bringing about the free “cooperation” of the human community—relates to the suffering of nonhuman creatures. To do so would require more theological clarity about creation’s protology (specifically whether or why God intended creaturely suffering and the violence of predation) in tandem with its eschatology (whether God’s salvific plan includes some form of response to the temporal suffering of nonhuman creatures). Only a further, theological probing of creaturely cries can allow us to begin to understand our moral responsibilities in addressing them.

A covenantal communion approach interprets animal suffering in light of God’s eschatological hope for *all* creatures, the harmonious communion of the kingdom. Nonhuman suffering is not directly willed by God, and its existence in the realm of nonhuman animals is a sign of the world’s fallenness. Because suffering is antithetical to the kingdom, working to reduce it, in the limited ways feasible for humanity, is a form of Christian witness to the kingdom. John Paul II, as we noted above, saw human labor for creation as a participation in the divine plan. In a rare application of that view to the plight of individual creatures, he suggested that “the diminution of experimentation on animals corresponds to the plan and well-being of all creation.”<sup>110</sup> It was an ad hoc response to a particular situation, but in a covenantal communion approach, it becomes the normative aspiration for all our dealings with nonhuman animal suffering. The elimination of such suffering is in accord with the divine hope for creation, and God calls the Christian to embody and further that hope.

A second issue concerns the prospect of radical interventions that “transform” creation (whether for purposes of repair, improvement, experimentation, or even fundamentally altering terrain, species, and ecosystems). Cloning, genetic engineering of new animal lifeforms, and transhumanist projects are just some of the unsettling possibilities that are now within our technological reach. Are such developments an arrogation of human power? An appropriate application of human ingenuity in the cause of the

<sup>109</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §80.

<sup>110</sup> John Paul II, Address, October 23, 1982, §4, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1982/october/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_19821023\\_pont-accademia-scienze.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1982/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19821023_pont-accademia-scienze.html).



world's betterment?<sup>111</sup> Though papal writings have endorsed the prospect of our “transforming” creation, they do not offer much in the way of guidance on concrete possibilities. John Paul II, for example, encourages us to take an “*eschatological perspective*” in our “daily commitment to transform reality in order to make it correspond to God’s plan,”<sup>112</sup> but he does so without identifying what exactly that eschatological plan is. Similarly, Francis tells us that the “ability to transform reality must proceed in line with God’s original gift of all that is.”<sup>113</sup> Even though keenly cognizant of the dangers of what he calls the “technocratic paradigm,” he maintains that “human creativity cannot be suppressed,” and thus, scientists cannot “be prevented from using their God-given talents.” Scientific creativity faces normative limits, of course, and thus Francis cautions that we must constantly “rethink the goals, effects, overall context and ethical limits” of such endeavors.<sup>114</sup> He also argues, citing John Paul II, that “legitimate intervention will act on nature only in order ‘to favour its development according to its essence ... [as] intended by God.’”<sup>115</sup> However, all these guideposts provided by Francis—“in line with God’s original gift,” within “ethical limits,” and in keeping with the world as “intended by God”—provide little in the way of concrete guidance because applying them depends on the prior and as-yet-unanswered question, What is God’s ultimate plan for nonhuman creation?

A commitment to the belief that creation is even now journeying toward its fulfillment in a covenantal communion offers a general answer to that

<sup>111</sup> For a discussion of some of the ethical concerns posed by interventions in human physiology, see Andrea Vicini, SJ, and Agnes M. Brazal, “Longing for Transcendence: Cyborgs and Trans- and Posthumans,” *Theological Studies* 76, no. 1 (2015): 148–65.

<sup>112</sup> John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Aveniente*, §46; emphasis in the original. A form of environmental interventionism, based on patristic sources, is defended in Ryan Patrick McLaughlin, “Evidencing the Eschaton: Progressive-Transformative Animal Welfare in the Church Fathers,” *Modern Theology* 27, no. 1 (2011): 121–46.

<sup>113</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si’*, §5.

<sup>114</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si’*, §131.

<sup>115</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si’*, §132. He cites John Paul II, Address: World Medical Association, October 29, 1983, §6, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1983/october/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_19831029\\_ass-medica-mondiale.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1983/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19831029_ass-medica-mondiale.html). There is a discrepancy on the Vatican website between the English translation of John Paul II’s address and the citing of it in *Laudato Si’*. The Italian version of the cited text as it appears in the original address reads: “per aiutarla a svilupparsi secondo la sua essenza, quella della creazione, quella voluta da Dio.” The text is translated into English as, “to favour its development in its own *life*, that of the creation, that intended by God,” whereas in *Laudato Si’*, it is translated as, “to favour its development in its own *line*, that of creation, as intended by God”; emphasis added to both texts. I use the phrase “according to its essence” to circumvent the discrepancy and follow closely the original text.

question in a way that can, in turn, provide some normative guidance. For example, it discourages endeavors that would make creation less relational and harmonious, favor a more mono-anthropocentric biosphere, or objectify the nonhuman world as raw material for instrumental use. The idea of covenantal communion instead encourages those endeavors that would, as John Haught expresses it, “sustain or intensify *subjectivity*.”<sup>116</sup> By considering attempts to transform creation in light of whether or how their anticipated results embody the values of the eschatological kingdom, we can begin to form judgments about the moral soundness of such endeavors.

### Conclusion

Though Francis has expanded our theological imagination about the divine economy and creation’s participation in it, that very expansiveness has created a new challenge for Catholic environmental ethics. By toppling the traditional framework for understanding creation—one that was narrowly anthropocentric and primarily temporal—the pope has also upended the norms that it provided. As long as the purpose and role of creation in the divine economy was primarily to serve humanity in the present age, then humanity—its needs, desires, joys, aspirations, and so forth, both those of the present generation and those that will follow—provided a broadly sufficient guide for the ethical treatment of creation. We did not need to go beyond the human and the goods and values associated with it to answer the question: How should we treat creation? Now we do. John Paul II’s suggestion that “placing human well-being at the centre of concern for the environment is actually the surest way of safeguarding creation” is now doubtful, not only because of a healthy skepticism about human prudential reasoning but also on moral-theological grounds.<sup>117</sup> The needs and interests of humanity remain morally relevant considerations, of course, but our deliberation about them is now complicated by the need to attend to other moral concerns (e.g., the suffering of nonhuman creatures). Negotiating the range of creaturely and human values at stake in our environmental efforts

<sup>116</sup> John Haught, *Resting on the Future: Catholic Theology for an Unfinished Universe* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 169. He offers this as one of three norms for transhumanist projects. The other two are “the intensification of *vitality*” and the endeavor “to sustain or increase the world’s capacity for *creativity*.” See Haught, *Resting on the Future*, 166 and 170, respectively; emphasis in the original.

<sup>117</sup> John Paul II, Message: World Day of Peace, January 1, 1999, §10, [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_14121998\\_xxxii-world-day-for-peace.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_14121998_xxxii-world-day-for-peace.html).

requires that we develop a cohesive eschatology that links together care for creation and labor for the kingdom.

*Lumen Gentium* stated that creation attains its destiny “through” humanity,<sup>118</sup> whereas *Laudato Si’* says it is attained both “through” and “with” humanity.<sup>119</sup> The encyclical preserves the distinctive soteriological role that the tradition has attributed to the human person: creation attains its end “through” humanity. However, the additional preposition “with” emblemizes an important development that Catholic theology has undergone in its eschatology of creation. With the preposition’s inclusion, a dimension of non-human creation, obscured in the microcosmic referent and humanized abode models, is now restored: creation has its own integral agency within the divine drama and is a partner “with” us in it. Creation is not simply a substrate for human materiality or an arena for our action. It is a domain divinely willed for itself and for itself redeemed, teeming with diverse creatures existing in fundamental communion with God, with one another, and with us. A covenantal communion approach to creation as sketched above has the virtue of building up traditional Catholic teaching on creation while also providing it with further definition and clarity. And that vision—of a vitally interconnected, created order yearning in hope for the harmony and communion of the kingdom—can guide in turn our choices for creation.

At the conclusion of *Laudato Si’*, Francis offers a stirring prayer that joins together care for creation and labor for the kingdom. He laments that “the poor and the earth are crying out” and asks that God “help us to protect all life, to prepare for a better future, for the coming of [God’s] Kingdom.”<sup>120</sup> The prayer seeks divine assistance for a task that is, like all Christian labors, eschatological—at once temporal *and* anticipatory of the kingdom that is to come. For that labor to be fruitful, however, the people of God require not only divine assistance but also a shared understanding of the eschatological goal toward which their labor is directed. Further developing a covenantal communion approach to creation would be a fruitful step toward establishing such a common ecclesial commitment.

<sup>118</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, §48.

<sup>119</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si’*, §83.

<sup>120</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si’*, §246.