

# Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

---

Volume 49 *Jesuit Higher Education in a Global Context*

Article 29

---

September 2016

## On Care for Our Common Home: A Conversation among Creatures

Elizabeth Groppe

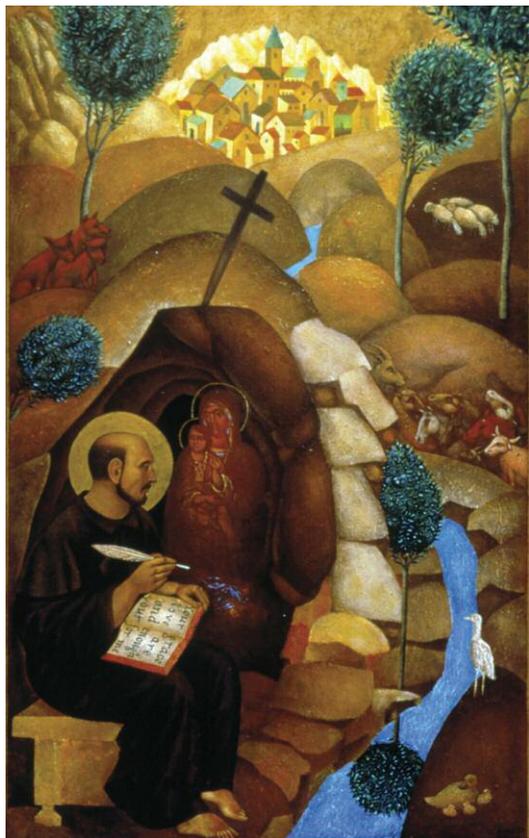
Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations>

---

### Recommended Citation

Groppe, Elizabeth (2016) "On Care for Our Common Home: A Conversation among Creatures," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 49 , Article 29.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol49/iss1/29>



# On Care for Our Common Home

*A Conversation among Creatures*

By Elizabeth Groppe

The springs of Solsonès press up from under the range of Catalonia’s Busa mountains. Seasonally, their flow is so strong that they generate magnificent waterfalls that cascade over rocks cloaked in emerald green moss, moistening the air with their mist. These are the headwaters of the Cardoner River that cuts its path through the Spanish village of Manresa on its way to join its waters to those of the Llobregat.

Ignatius of Loyola spent almost a year in Manresa in 1522. He entered the village on foot after relinquishing his nobleman’s garments and warrior sword in a night-long vigil before the Black Madonna at the Benedictine Monastery at Montserrat. It was in Manresa that he spent long hours of prayer and penance in a cave, opening himself to a wisdom that would guide the remainder of his remarkable life and inspire the composition of the Spiritual Exercises. One day, as he was walking to a church a mile’s distance from Manresa along a road that followed the Cardoner, he sat upon the ground and faced the swiftly flowing water.

“While he was seated there,” Ignatius recounted, telling the story of his own pilgrimage to a fellow Jesuit as if he were narrating the life of a different person, “the eyes of his understanding began to be

opened; though he did not see any vision, he understood and knew many things, both spiritual things and matters of faith and learning, and this was with so great an enlightenment that everything seemed new to him. It was as if he were a new man with a new intellect.” The Social Justice and Ecology Secretariat of the Society of Jesus’ 2011 special report on ecology, *Healing a Broken World*, relates Ignatius’ experience at the Cardoner to his theological conviction that the love of the triune God permeates all of creation and that we are to “find God in all things” (No. 49).

In 1965, centuries after Ignatius’ transformative experience, studies of the Cardoner found no trace of the life forms common in healthy river waters. Test samples revealed only organisms whose presence is indicative of high levels of water pollution. The contamination of the river, explains Josep Lluís Iriberrí, S.J., a professor at Barcelona’s Universitat Ramon Llull, originates in the region’s salt and potassium mines and the discharges of the cities through which the river passes. Across the globe today, the rivers that are the aqueous arteries and veins of the planet are suffering not only from industrial and agricultural pollution but also from drought, deluge, and the diversion of their waters for human purposes.

And today, the first Jesuit pope in the history of the Catholic Church has issued the first expressly ecological encyclical, “Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home.” Like Pope John XXIII’s “Pacem in Terris,” which was promulgated in the midst of the Cold War, Pope Francis’ historic letter is addressed not only to Roman Catholics but to all women and men of good will. Unique among papal encyclicals, it gives expression not only to human voices but also to Brother Sun, Sister Water, and all creatures of the cosmos. In continuity with the teaching of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI as well as regional episcopal conferences from across the globe, the encyclical invites us to an ecological conversion. It begins with words of praise (“*Laudato Si’, mi’ Signore*”) and is composed of six care-

fully crafted chapters. Chapter One is entitled “What Is Happening to Our Common Home” and opens the encyclical with a summary of the travail of creation (Rom 8:22).

## Broken Boundaries and Relationships

A domestic household maintains its health in part through the establishment of boundaries and limits. A financial budget sets a limit on expenditures on monthly rent or mortgage with the intention of reserving funds for food, clothing, medicine, and other necessities. A fence around a back yard sets the boundaries of a protected play area for children. Limits on the social



Left: The Spiritual Journey of St. Ignatius Loyola: Image 2 of 5: “Ignatius composing Spiritual Exercises at Manresa, overlooking River Cardoner.” Dora Niklov Bittau. Copyright Seattle University. Above: River Cardoner today, photo courtesy of the Jesuit Curia in Rome.

## ITEMS FROM ROME

### A Major Jesuit Meeting

**Beginning on October 2**, Jesuit representatives from all over the world will meet in Rome for General Congregation 36. Their major agenda item will be to accept the resignation of Fr. Adolfo Nicolás, the Superior General, and then to elect his successor. Father Nicolás officially convoked this meeting on Dec. 8, 2014.

A general congregation is rare in the Society of Jesus. If the superior general dies in office, one must be convoked to elect his successor. If the superior general wants to retire, the congregation must give its approval.

After the election of a new general, the delegates consider “matters of greater moment” in the life of the order. A committee will have met to compose a document describing



The view of the dome of St. Peter's from the Jesuit Curia's roof.

the state of the Society of Jesus today. Other groups will propose topics for consideration.

Throughout its history, the order has considered education to be a crucial ministry, and the schools have drawn attention from general congregations. They would

be more concerned with global issues rather than with specifics. And they would generally support the great work being done in so many academic settings.

More information is available at [www.jesuits.org](http://www.jesuits.org).

### An Invitation to Make a Difference

**Fr. Adolfo Nicolás**, the Superior General of the Jesuits, wrote a letter in April introducing a new document prepared by a group of economists and theologians from all over the world; overseeing the work were Michael Garanzini, S.J., and Patxi Álvarez, S.J., the Jesuit secretaries for higher education and for social justice and ecology respectively.

The document reflects the close connection between ecological concerns and other issues of economic and social justice. The purpose is meant to spur discus-

sion, research, and advocacy. It is meant not only for Jesuits but also for individual colleagues in ministry, concerned groups, and institutions as a whole.

Father Nicolás's letter invites Jesuit institutions to develop a methodology to work on the document with a special focus on local situations, bringing intellectual and spiritual light to these concerns. He urges all to examine closely the personal, communal, and institutional responses we are capable of and to avoid the temptation to believe that

this is beyond us, that we are insignificant players, “too small or weak to make a difference.”

As this issue of *Conversations* shows, colleges and universities are capable of finding solutions to problems that beset our world; working together we can do much more.

The full text of the document is available at <http://www.sjweb.info/sjs/PJ/index.cfm?PubTextId=15696>. Or a search using the terms “promotio iustitiae 121” will also access the document.

activities of adolescents are instituted by parents with the intention of supporting youth in gradually developing a mature freedom.

The boundaries of our familial households exist within a vast web of planetary relationships to which we denizens of industrial western civilization have been largely unattentive. We have taken for granted the weather patterns of the last 10,000 years that have been so hospitable to the development of settled agricultural civilizations, the stability of the polar ice caps, the shorelines of the oceans, the fertility of the soil, and the fecundity of the seas. These dimensions of our biosphere, however, are contingent not only on the creative providence of God, but also on the complex interplay of a multiplicity of biogeochemical relationships.

A helpful synthesis of the scientific research that shapes the context of "Laudato Si'" can be found in the publications of an international team of 18 scientists who have collaborated to identify and monitor the life systems that have made the Earth's biosphere so hospitable to our species. In the article "Planetary Boundaries: A Safe Operating Space for Humanity" published in the journal *Science* in 2009 and then updated in 2015, Will Steffen and colleagues explain that our activity is pressing against or transgressing the limits to a planet hospitable to our species in nine ways: (1) destabilization of the climate; (2) loss of biodiversity and biospheric integrity; (3) depletion of stratospheric ozone; (4) acidification of the ocean; (5) disruption of the phosphorus and nitrogen cycles; (6) deforestation and other forms of land system degradation; (7) freshwater depletion; (8) the release into the atmosphere of aerosols, i.e. microscopic particles such as soot that affect the climate and living organisms; and (9) the introduction into the biosphere of novel entities, including organic pollutants, radioactive materials, nanomaterials, and micro-plastics.

Just as overspending a household's financial budget or failing to limit the activity of a toddler can lead to homelessness or harm, so too overstepping or ignoring the boundaries of the systems that have made the Earth habitable for *Homo sapiens*

will have adverse consequences. According to the authors of "Planetary Boundaries," humanity has already overstepped four of the nine boundaries of the life systems that make the planet a place that humans can call home.

## Exclamations of Wonder

In the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius meditates on his own sinfulness and voices "exclamations of wonder, with intense feeling, as I reflect on the whole range of created beings ... the heavens, the sun, the moon, the stars and the elements, the fruits, the birds, the fishes, and the animals ... how ever have they let me live and kept me alive!" The earth's flora and fauna have long endured our ecological transgressions. Today, however, we are pushing them across their limits of resilience. With power equivalent to that of an asteroid crashing into the earth's surface, humanity is precipitating the sixth mass extinction of species in Earth's history, and climate change is driving earth systems into a state fundamentally different than that which our own species has enjoyed in all of our 200,000 years of existence.

"Doomsday predictions," Pope Francis writes in "Laudato Si'," "can no longer be met with irony or disdain" (No. 161). The science that informs the encyclical supports this dire prognosis. Yet the work of the church is not simply to reiterate the science but to "protect mankind from self-destruction" (No. 79). To this end, the encyclical's second chapter, "The Gospel of Creation," offers a species that has transgressed planetary limits with Promethean presumption a vision of the Earth as the work of a Creator who loves and cares for every single creature. "The best way to restore men and women to their rightful place, putting an end to their claim to absolute dominion over the earth, is to speak once more of the figure of a Father who creates and who alone owns the world" (No. 75). This is a loving God who grants creatures their own autonomy and yet simultaneously remains present to us, such that cosmic history is a drama of the interplay of divine grace and creaturely freedom. Francis invites us to see creation "with the

gaze of Jesus” as a realm of laws and equilibriums that must be respected, a world that manifests divine wisdom and inspires awe and praise.

“The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis,” the encyclical’s third chapter, identifies the heart of the crisis as our pursuit of an ideal of progress that is lacking an ultimate purpose, direction, or meaning. Francis appreciates the tremendous contribution of modern science and technology to the improvement of the quality of human life. Our technological power, however, has grown at a pace that has exceeded our growth in wisdom and responsibility. In this context, technoscience has often become a one-dimensional instrument of control serving a narrow understanding of self-interest. In the void of meaning that results, those of us who are privileged fill the emptiness of our lives with consumer goods and digital virtual reality, while the impoverished struggle to survive amidst the wastelands and rubble of a globalized industrial economy.

Chapter Four’s reflections on “Integral Ecology” highlight humanity’s unique place in God’s creation but emphasize that humanity is a part of nature, not its master. The natural and social spheres are inseparable, and ecological degradation and social disintegration have a common root. Francis invites us to commit ourselves to the common good of the human family and all creatures, to realize our interconnectedness, to overcome the inequities of our world, and to “feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement” (No. 89). Chapter Five, “Lines of Approach and Action,” calls for local initiatives, the articulation of global norms and strengthening of international institutions, and the practice of a healthy politics and true statecraft characterized by nobility, generosity, and courage. A final chapter on “Ecological Education and Spirituality” invites us to the contemplation of beauty, the practices of care and tenderness, the cultivation of ecological habits and virtues, and the joyful celebration of life in sublime communion with the triune God and all creatures. “God of love, show us our place in this world as channels of your love for all the creatures of this earth ... Praise be to you!” (No. 246)

## A New Conversation

“Laudato Si’” invites Jesuit universities to an urgent and potentially transformative conversation. Pope Francis traces the roots of our social and ecological crisis to a cultural void of ultimate purpose that has left us to manage our common home with a one-dimensional technoscience. This technoscience is incapable on its own of setting us on a new course. Surely, we need more than ever the knowledge that science generates and new forms of technology that can support new forms of human civilization. But technoscience alone cannot produce a noble and courageous political culture. On its own, it cannot overcome the reductive epistemologies of modernity and the fragmentation of the disciplines of the academy. It cannot generate the ecological economics that Francis envisions nor serve the same ends as theology and spirituality. The surge in our technological power enabled by modern science, Francis laments, has not been accompanied by a growth in wisdom, culture, and ethics.

The Jesuit university is a place of conversation where the integration of science, economics, ethics, philosophy, history, anthropology, art, literature, music, and theology that Francis envisions might actually occur. Within a community engaged in such a collaborative search for wisdom, we can potentially become, like Ignatius on the banks of the Cardoner, new men and women with “a new intellect.” The exercise of this Ignatian intellect is inseparable from action on behalf of the suffering members of the human family and all creatures in our common home, for, the Exercises instruct us, “Love ought to find expression in deeds more than in words.” These deeds include the work of those who installed purification stations along the course of the Cardoner River in 1985. Now, Professor Iriberry testifies, one who stands on the old bridge in Manresa beholds ducks and other birds feeding in their waters, a sign of a healthy river ecosystem. *Laudato Si’, mi Signore, per sor’Acqua, la quale è multo utile et humile et pretiosa et casta.*

*Elizabeth T. Groppe is an associate professor of theology at Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio.*