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# A Theologian Looks at “Laudato Si”

*An Interview with  
Elizabeth Johnson, C.S.J.,  
by James P. McCartin*

*So much has been said about Pope Francis’ “Laudato Si’.” But is there some aspect of the encyclical that you think is overlooked or undercovered in all the attention it has attracted?*

The religious value of plants and animals in their own right has not received sufficient attention. I think this is at the root of the encyclical’s spiritual vision and ethical challenge. For centuries Catholic teaching placed humans at the pinnacle of creation with the God-given right to have dominion over other creatures who were made for our use. Utilizing the classical idea of the great chain of being, this teaching took the world to be hierarchically ordered from inanimate matter at the base, then upward to plants, to animals, to human beings at the peak. In the Enlightenment era of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, when European nations began to colonize other continents, their aggressive entrepreneurial culture turned especially destructive to the natural world. The classical view

allowed imperial cultures to interpret dominion as domination without ecclesial protest.

In very strong language, “Laudato Si’” criticizes the traditional view as “inadequate” and frankly “wrong.” Why? Because it passes on a Promethean vision of human mastery over the world. Today, however, we need to envision a new way of being human that will enhance rather than diminish the life of other creatures with whom we share a common home. Instead of dominating nature, we need to see that all creatures share life together on this planet in “one splendid universal communion” - “*una stupenda comunione universale*” (No. 220).

*In light of this old paradigm of human dominion over creation, what would you say is the most noteworthy theological contribution of the encyclical?*

In view of the church’s long acceptance of matter-spirit dualism and the paradigm of dominion, Pope Francis recognizes that he

is contributing something new to Catholic teaching by emphasizing the community of creation. “Laudato Si’” states that even if “we Christians have at times incorrectly interpreted the Scriptures, nowadays we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God’s image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures” (No.67). Instead, he writes, “we are called to recognize that other living beings have a value of their own in God’s eyes” (No. 69). He continues, “In our time the Church does not simply state that other creatures are completely subordinate to the good of human beings, as if they had no worth in themselves and can be treated as we wish” (No. 69). Rather, “They have an intrinsic value independent of their usefulness” (No. 140). And why? Because God loves them. “Even the fleeting life of the least of beings is the object of God’s love, and in its few seconds of existence, God enfolds it with affection” (No. 77).

Other species, furthermore, are bearers of revelation. Each one “reflects in its own way a ray of God’s infinite wisdom and goodness” (No. 69). Each is a place where we can encounter God; since the Spirit of life dwells in them, they are a “locus of divine presence,” calling us into relationship with God (No. 88). Ultimately, we human beings have the responsibility to care for all other species because “the final purpose

of other creatures is not to be found in us. Rather, all creatures are moving forward, with us and through us, towards a common point of arrival, which is God” (No. 83). “Laudato Si” carries the community motif all the way to the eschaton: “At the end we will find ourselves face to face with the infinite beauty of God”; “resplendently transfigured,” other creatures “will share with us in unending plenitude” (No. 243).

*If taken seriously by scholars, the paradigm shift Pope Francis proposes would have profound consequences, wouldn't it?*

Absolutely. Shifting the model of human-nature relationship from pyramid to circle, from a human-dominated hierarchy to creation as a community, has radical, far-reaching consequences. “Other living beings have a value of their own in God’s eyes”:

## Santa Clara University Discusses the Planet



Above left: Cardinal Turkson addresses guests as the keynote speaker of the “Our Future on a Shared Planet Conference,” at Santa Clara University in November 2015.

Above: Rev. Sally Bingham, Rabbi Allan Berkowitz, Ameena Jandali, Linda Cutts and Cardinal Peter Turkson enter into dialogue around the ways in which diverse communities can and are mobilizing around issues of climate justice.

Left: Michael E. Engh, S.J., president of Santa Clara University, addresses public policy and the environmental teachings of Pope Francis at the conference.

Photo credit: Joanne Lee

philosophers and theologians have much work to do here, to reconceive anthropology, ethics, and spirituality in this more inclusive vein.

*Critics have accused the pope of wading into scientific debates that lie outside his realm of spiritual authority. What does this kind of criticism tell us about how people currently understand the relationship between science and faith? And what's your own view on how the encyclical integrates science?*

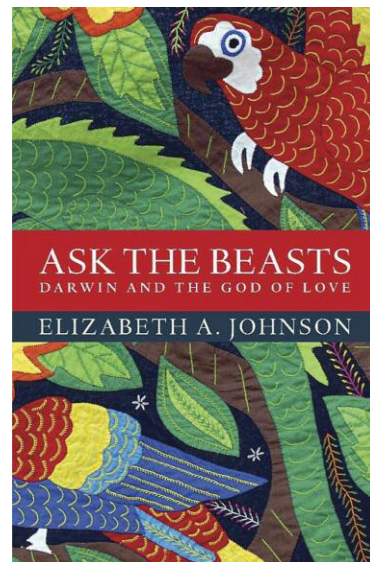
This criticism reveals a mentality that separates faith from reason, or religion from science, setting them in watertight compartments that have little to do with each other. But the Jewish-Christian understanding of God as Creator resists such division. If the whole world is God's creation, then everything under the sun (and beyond) is matter for theological reflection for everything has its origin, history, and goal within

the embrace of divine love. This theocentric perspective calls for mutually respectful dialogue between religion and science, the latter figuring out how the world works and the former affirming its deep meaning as a whole.

The encyclical makes good, intelligent use of current science. I find especially powerful its presentation of biological diversity and the disaster of the extinction of species.

*Your 2014 book, Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love, has been recognized as a milestone in bringing Christian theology into a deep and sustained dialog with ecology and environmental science. How have colleagues speaking from the scientific side of the dialog responded to your book?*

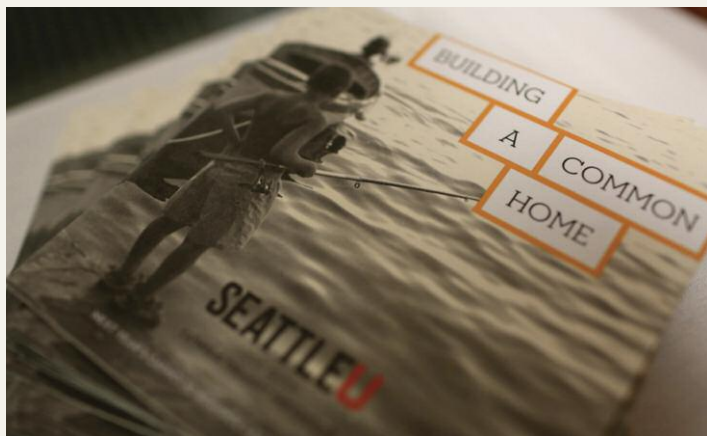
Not too many scientists have engaged the book, but those who have are quite positive, to date. Case in point: one science professor at the University of



Kansas who reviewed the book said he was going to use it in a course, since students would benefit from its clear account of Darwin's theory of evolution as well as its demonstration that far from being opposed to religion, evolutionary theory can spur religion to ethical action.

*Do you have a sense of how students are reacting to "Laudato Si" or to your own writing on ecology and theology?*

Graduate theology students seem to be taking to this subject like fish to water; ecological themes are working their way into a diverse array of papers and dissertations. Undergraduate business majors have a hard time with the economic sections of "Laudato Si'," finding it hard to imagine how a successful business or the global economy can be run without profit as the main goal. Many other undergraduates resonate with the encyclical's spirituality. They simply take for granted that everything is connected, and enjoy the beauty of the vision as a whole.



### Seattle U Winter Catholic Heritage Lecture

Photographer: Chris Kalinko. Copyright Seattle University.



*Beyond ecology, what area of scientific inquiry do you think is most crucial for theology – and the humanities more broadly, for that matter – to engage in the years ahead?*

Genetic research into the brain has tremendous potential to shift the meaning of what it means to be a human person with memory, understanding, and will. Every discipline in the humanities, theology not least of all, has a stake in making meaning of the outcomes of this research.

*What are you yourself working on right now? What's your current project?*

Diving deeper into one chapter of *Ask the Beasts*, I am currently researching the biblical idea of cosmic redemption for a monograph tentatively entitled "Creation and the Cross." The hope would be to develop further ecological theology's understanding of how the whole natural world will find its ultimate future in God, and "will share with us in unending plenitude."

*Elizabeth Johnson, C.S.J., is Distinguished Professor of theology at Fordham University and former president of both the Catholic Theological Society of America and the American Theological Society. She is the author or editor of 10 books, including Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love (Bloomsbury, 2014).*

*James P. McCartin is associate professor of theology at Fordham University, director of the Fordham Center on Religion and Culture, and a former member of the National Seminar on Jesuit Higher Education.*

## Dear Conversationalists,

You will notice that we have launched a new era for *Conversations*. We now have access to full color for all of our pages, and we have significantly updated the layout. We calculate that the last time this was done was about 15 years ago. The new look and full color mean that we will be seeking more high quality photos for this and future issues. The *Conversations* board is very grateful to Pauline Heaney, valiant layout editor, for providing this new design which the board had a chance to review and to suggest alternatives at our April meeting at Rockhurst University.

The new printing process, still with Peacock Communications, is web-based so that our printing costs are actually reduced. Seems ironic, but it's true. The slight downside is that the trim of the magazine is about 1/4" less than it was before.

In addition, to the hard-copy changes, we now have a fresh new website up and running. Mounting this new site has been a considerable challenge since most of us on the board are "low tech." In addition, we had to change servers midstream from Adventure Studios to Square Space, which we believe will be much more user friendly and allow for frequent updates.

Currently, I am in dialogue with a Jesuit scholastic doing his

theology studies to see whether he can regularly monitor and update our website and keep it fresh. The website will allow us to "continue the conversation" between issues and to publish certain features, such as Youtube takes, in a timely manner.

Thank you for your generous support and readership, and we always appreciate hearing about how *Conversations* is being used and which articles or issues you have found most useful for advancing the Jesuit Catholic mission at your university or college.

Best wishes and blessings for this forthcoming academic year.

*Patrick Howell, S.J., chair  
National Seminar on Jesuit Higher Education*



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