

THE TIME HAS COME!: AN ECO- SPIRITUALITY FOR THE CHINESE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN LIGHT OF CLIMATE CHANGE

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Abstract

In response to climate change's enormous impacts on China's environment and people's livelihood, the Chinese government has taken proactive measures to respond to its ecological crisis through the construction of an ecological civilization. In recent years, the proposal of ecological civilization has increasingly become related to Alfred North Whitehead's process thought, which now serves as its philosophical foundation. To address climate change and ecological crisis facing the world today, Pope Francis released the encyclical *Laudato Si'* and put forward his proposal of integral ecology. There are deep affinities between the proposal of ecological civilization grounded in process thought and that of integral ecology exemplified in *Laudato Si'*, given their common vision in seeking comprehensive approaches to climate crisis and shared emphasis on the interconnectedness of all realities, concreteness of solutions, and the indispensable role of spirituality. This paper considers these commonalities as presenting a novel opening for the development of an eco-spirituality in the Chinese

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Catholic Church. It suggests that this eco-spirituality that features awareness, contemplation, and conversion can serve as the Chinese Church's active response to climate change and ecological crisis and contribute to the work of reconciliation and the common good in China and the world.

Keywords: Chinese Catholic Church; Climate Change; Ecological Civilization; Eco-spirituality; Integral Ecology

Climate change has had a substantial impact on China's national and regional food security and social stability. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change indicates that climate change has adversely impacted food security and terrestrial ecosystems as well as contributed to desertification and land degradation in many regions,¹ while creating additional stresses on land, exacerbating existing risks to livelihoods, biodiversity, human and ecosystem health, infrastructure, and food systems.² Given China's large population, vast territory, and complex natural ecosystem, China is particularly subject to the impacts of climate change.³ According to *China's National Climate Change Program*, the overall national conditions relating to global climate change are: poor weather conditions, severe natural disasters, a fragile ecological environment, a coal-dominated energy structure, a large population, and a low level of economic development.

Recognizing the impacts of climate change on China's environment and people's livelihoods, especially the poor, China has taken proactive measures to respond to its ecological crisis through the construction of an ecological civilization. In this paper, I intent to demonstrate that China's proposal of ecological civilization shares deep affinity with Pope Francis's proposal of an integral ecology called for in the encyclical *Laudato Si'*. This commonality, I argue, can be considered as a novel opening for the development of eco-spirituality in the Chinese Catholic Church. To achieve this end, this paper first presents an overview of the Chinese government's and Pope Francis's response to climate change and ecological crisis confronting the world today, which take the forms of ecological

¹Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, "Climate Change and Land: An IPCC Special Report on Climate Change, Desertification, Land Degradation, Sustainable Land Management, Food Security, and Greenhouse Gas Fluxes in Terrestrial Ecosystems: Summary for Policymakers," 2019, 9, https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2019/08/4.-SPM_Approved_Microsite_FINAL.pdf.

²Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 17.

³Angang Hu and Qingyou Guan, *China: Tackle the Challenge of Global Climate Change*, China Perspectives Series, London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group: Tsinghua University Press, 2017, chap. 4.

civilization and integral ecology. It then traces the development of China's ecological civilization, drawing insights particularly from Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy. After this consideration, this paper makes the connection between ecological civilization grounded in process thought and integral ecology exemplified in *Laudato Si'* and highlights their common vision in seeking comprehensive approaches to climate crisis and shared emphasis on the interconnectedness of all realities, concreteness of solutions, and the indispensable role of spirituality. With these established connections, this paper proposes an eco-spirituality for the Chinese Catholic Church that features awareness, contemplation, and conversion. I contend that the awareness of the interconnectedness and intrinsic value of all creation and the contemplation of them in God's loving embrace orients us to concrete conversions toward love. It suggests that this eco-spirituality can serve as the Chinese Church's active response to participate in both China's proposal of ecological civilization and Pope Francis's call for ecological conversion. In this way, the Chinese Church can contribute to the work of reconciliation and the common good in China and the world.

The Signs of the Time

The Chinese Government's Response to Climate Change and Ecological Crisis

Recognizing that climate change has had an enormous impact on China and that this impact is likely to further intensify in the future, the Chinese government has put a great emphasis on actively responding to climate change and considers research on climate change as imperative to national economy, human livelihoods, and sustainable development.⁴ Increasingly, China has considered climate actions as a major strategy for economic and social development.⁵ Due to its fundamental interests and objective of long-term sustainable development, the Chinese government has taken a more positive political attitude, implemented initiatives, and joined global responses to global warming.⁶ It has expressed that it would work closely with the UN, playing a constructive role, committed to the

⁴Ruishan Chen et al., "Climate Change, Land Degradation and Food Insecurity: Linkages and Potential Solutions," *Acta Ecologia Sinica* 41, 7 (2021) 2918.

⁵Guo Jiner, "Combating Climate Change: China's Actions," *China Daily*, September 25, 2019, <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201909/25/WS5d8abca8a310cf3e3556d4ea.html>.

⁶Hu and Guan, *China*, chap. 5.

implication of the Paris Agreement.⁷ China has actively participated in intergovernmental negotiation processes on climate change and acknowledged that collective response to climate change is “the calling of our time.”⁸

The Chinese government’s aim to enhance the nation’s ability to adapt to climate change and develop a national strategy can be traced back to the 1990s, when an energy conservation policy was implemented. Beginning in 2000, China’s rapid development of ecological construction was centred upon ecological protection. During the 17th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (NCCCP) in 2007, the concept of building an ecological civilization (生态文明) was first proposed as a key task. In 2012, with the 18th NCCCP, the construction of an ecological civilization was further emphasized and was written into the constitution, adding new requirements to adapt climate change.⁹ This was also the very first time the Chinese government acknowledged that the construction of ecological civilization is equally important to the construction of the economy, politics, culture, and society. Since then, China has entered a new stage of ecological civilization. In 2017, the 19th NCCCP firmly established the concept of harmonious coexistence between human and nature. It located the construction of ecological civilization within the development of the Chinese civilization and emphasized the importance of “a community of life for human and nature.”¹⁰ The focus on ecological civilization has led to its widespread and in-depth studies in the academic community in China.¹¹ It is acknowledged by President Xi Jinping as a responsibility of the Chinese government to future generations and to the natural world.¹²

⁷Ministry of Ecology and Environment of the People’s Republic of China, “中国代表团团长在联合国气候变化马德里大会期间与多方进行会谈_中华人民共和国生态环境部,” accessed May 30, 2021, http://www.mee.gov.cn/ywdt/hjywnews/201912/t20191214_748279.shtml.

⁸Jiner, “Combating Climate Change.”

⁹Zhihe Wang and Huili He, “The Ecological Civilization Debate in China: The Role of Ecological Marxism and Constructive Postmodernism - Beyond the Predicament of Legislation,” *Monthly Review*, November 1, 2014, <https://monthlyreview.org/2014/11/01/the-ecological-civilization-debate-in-china/>.

¹⁰Peng Hou et al., “Development Process and Characteristics of China’s Ecological Protection Policy,” *Acta Ecologica Sinica* 41, 4 (2021) 1660.

¹¹Jiahua Pan, “The Development Paradigm of Ecological Civilization,” in *China’s Environmental Governing and Ecological Civilization*, by Jiahua Pan, China Insights, Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2016, 36, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-662-47429-7_2.

¹²Wang and He, “The Ecological Civilization Debate in China.”

Pope Francis's Response to Climate Change and Ecological Crisis

In the midst of proximate preparation for the Paris climate meeting, Pope Francis released the encyclical *Laudato Si'* in order to add momentum to international and inter-religious efforts to roll back the pace of climate change.¹³ *Laudato Si'* is intended to provoke affective responses toward climate change and ecological crisis, while providing a concrete foundation for Pope Francis's ethical and spiritual itinerary.¹⁴ It is a culminating reflection rooted in and integrated within the Catholic Social Teaching since the encyclical *Mater et Magistra* (1961) to the exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), while elevating the environmental crisis to new heights of theological reflection and makes it into a new social issue.¹⁵ Addressing all people of good will, Pope Francis is convinced that the Catholic Church can offer a teaching on the human relationship to nature that unifies and clarifies concerns shared by all and articulated in part by other communities of discourse.¹⁶

Speaking of the climate, *Laudato Si'* affirms that it is a common good, "belonging to all and meant for all."¹⁷ Acknowledging the impact of global warming, Pope Francis states that "humanity is called to recognize the need for changes in lifestyle, production and consumption."¹⁸ He points out that climate change is a global problem with grave environmental, social, economic, political implications and for the distribution of goods.¹⁹ The encyclical calls attention to the ways in which the poor are particularly affected by climate change.²⁰ It emphasizes that "a true ecological approach always become a social approach; it must integrate questions of

¹³Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Laudato Si': Reframing Catholic Social Ethics," *The Heythrop Journal* 59, 6 (November 2018) 896, <https://doi.org/10.1111/heyj.13010>.

¹⁴ Francis, *Laudato Si'* [LS] Vatican Press, 2015, 15, http://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si_en.pdf.

¹⁵Pablo A. Blanco, "Laudato Si': Care for Creation at the Center of a New Social Issue," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 46, 3 (September 2018) 425, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jore.12225>.

¹⁶Mark Shiffman, "The Other Seamless Garment: *Laudato Si'* on the Human Relationship to Created Nature," in *Care for the World: Laudato Si' and Catholic Social Thought in An Era of Climate Crisis*, ed. Frank Pasquale, Cambridge University Press, 2019, 91-92. 2

¹⁷Francis, LS, 23.

¹⁸Francis, LS, 23.

¹⁹Francis, LS, 25.

²⁰Francis, LS, 25.

justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.”²¹

While addressing climate change, *Laudato Si'* is about care of creation and proper relationships within the web of creation understood through the lens of integral ecology.²² Grounded on the conviction that everything is connected, Pope Francis's proposal of an integral ecology is inseparable from the notion of the common good and respects the human and social dimensions of the current global crisis.²³ It entails taking the time “to recover a serene harmony with creation, reflecting on our lifestyle and our ideals, and contemplating the Creator who lives among us and surrounds us.”²⁴ As the organizing and integrating principle of *Laudato Si'*, integral ecology calls for a new way of thinking and acting and establishes both an epistemological and moral hermeneutic for climate change and ecological crisis.²⁵ It turns away from anthropocentrism and considers environmental problems from multiple dimensions and contributions.²⁶ As an epistemological turn, integral ecology includes political-social, mental, cultural, educational, ethical and spiritual ecology, while emphasizing the interconnectedness of everything.²⁷

Making Connections: Ecological Civilization and Integral Ecology

In recent years, ecological civilization in China has become increasingly related to the thought of Alfred North Whitehead.²⁸ What characterizes Whitehead's philosophy is the process worldview that perceives reality as a complex series of interrelated processes. For Whitehead, the world is alive—a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects—and all living entities have intrinsic value.²⁹ With his “philosophy of organism,” Whitehead emphasized

²¹Francis, LS, 35.

²²Christopher Hrynkow, “The Pope, The Planet, and Politics: A Mapping of How Francis Is Calling for More Than the *Paris Agreement*,” *Journal of Church and State*, July 8, 2016, 382, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcs/csw030>.

²³Francis, LS, 137, 156.

²⁴Francis, LS, 225.

²⁵James Hanvey, “*Laudato Si'* and the Renewal of Theologies of Creation,” *The Heythrop Journal* 59, 6 (November 2018): 1022, <https://doi.org/10.1111/heyj.13042>.

²⁶Blanco, “*Laudato Si'*,” 435–36.

²⁷Blanco, “*Laudato Si'*,” 435.

²⁸Philip Clayton and Wm. Andrew Schwartz, *What Is Ecological Civilization?: Crisis, Hope, and the Future of the Planet*, Anoka, MN: Process Century Press, 2019, 7.

²⁹Wm. Andrew Schwartz, “Philosophical Roots of the Ecological Crisis: The Process-Relational Worldview and Integral Ecology,” accessed May 29, 2021, <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/philosophical-roots-of-the-ecological-crisis-the-process-relational-worldview-and-integral-ecology>.

becoming, interrelatedness, and inherent value in all things.³⁰ Zhihe Wang and Huili He point out that the Chinese turn to ecological civilization is undoubtedly affected by Whitehead's process philosophy. In China, process thought plays an important role in providing a philosophical foundation for ecological civilization and environment law.³¹ As the staunch advocate for ecological civilization, the Institute for Postmodern Development of China, along with the China Project of the Center for Process Studies and its other Chinese and foreign partners, has organized more than seventy international conferences in China and the United States. The most successful of those efforts is the Claremont Forum on Ecological Civilization, resulting in seven forums since 2006 with hundreds of Chinese scholars and officials participating in the events.³²

Pope Francis's call to embrace an integral ecology resonates deeply with the vision of an ecological civilization.³³ Ecological civilization founded in process thought seeks real solutions that are systemic, comprehensive, and holistic.³⁴ It not only requires a fundamental transformation of modes of production and development, but also of worldview, values, and lifestyle.³⁵ Similarly, Pope Francis's integral ecology draws together a web of interrelated factors that are societal, political, cultural, psychological, epistemological, ethical, and spiritual.³⁶ He acknowledges in *Laudato Si'* that "it is essential to seek comprehensive solutions which consider the interactions within natural systems themselves and social systems...Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature."³⁷ Joshtrom Kureethadam points out that the real roots of the ecological crisis emerge from a certain vision of the physical world and humanity's relationship with it.³⁸ They are philosophical and so are the solutions. In order to overcome the ecological crisis, what we need is a new and over-arching philosophical vision of reality that can radically reorient human dwelling in our common planetary

³⁰ Clayton and Schwartz, *What Is Ecological Civilization?*, 63.

³¹ Wang and He, "The Ecological Civilization Debate in China."

³² Wang and He, Wang and He, "The Ecological Civilization Debate in China."

³³ Clayton and Schwartz, *What Is Ecological Civilization?*, 74.

³⁴ Schwartz, "Philosophical Roots of the Ecological Crisis."

³⁵ Clayton and Schwartz, *What Is Ecological Civilization?*, 60.

³⁶ Clayton and Schwartz, Clayton and Schwartz, *What Is Ecological Civilization?*, 74.

³⁷ Francis, LS, 139.

³⁸ Joshtrom Isaac Kureethadam, *The Philosophical Roots of the Ecological Crisis: Descartes and the Modern Worldview*, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017, 4.

home.³⁹ Both ecological civilization grounded in process thought and integral ecology exemplified in *Laudato Si'* seek to present this new vision of reality and refer to a systematic approach that works to name the underlying causes of the ecological crisis in all its dimensions.⁴⁰ The interconnectedness of all realities, concreteness of solutions, and the indispensable role of spirituality are among the commonalities shared by both proposals in terms of their philosophical foundations.

Interconnectedness

The interconnectedness of our complex social-environmental challenges and the solutions they demand is central to the proposals of both ecological civilization and integral ecology. Philip Clayton and Wm. Andrew Schwartz mentioned in their book *What is Ecological Civilization? Crisis, Hope, and the Future of the Planet* that "an ecological civilization is one in which human beings are fully aware of themselves as part of the natural world, and aware of their close kinship to other creatures who constitute that world."⁴¹ The member organisms of ecosystems are both externally and internally related to each other. This interdependence renders visible the wonder of life. It teaches us that "we are not separately existing creatures at all. We are from the bottom up, beings in community."⁴² *Laudato Si'* repeatedly returns to the theme that "everything in the world is connected."⁴³ It offers an illuminating, inspiring, and new theological view of the natural world and of human beings interconnected with nature and part of nature.⁴⁴ This interconnections of all realities are grounded for Francis in a theological reality,⁴⁵ in a sense that nature is "a reality illuminated by the love that calls us together into universal communion."⁴⁶ Francis's theology of the communion of creation is exemplified in integral ecology.⁴⁷

Concreteness

The recognition of all realities' interconnectedness drives us towards concrete solutions. This is true for both ecological civilization

³⁹Kureethadam, *The Philosophical Roots of the Ecological Crisis*, 337–39.

⁴⁰Clayton and Schwartz, *What Is Ecological Civilization?*, 60.

⁴¹Clayton and Schwartz, *What Is Ecological Civilization?*, 64.

⁴²Clayton and Schwartz, *What Is Ecological Civilization?*, 29.

⁴³Francis, LS, 16. See also 42, 91, 139, LS 16, 22, 42, 70, 92, 138, 190, 220, 240

⁴⁴Denis Edwards, "'Sublime Communion': The Theology of the Natural World in *Laudato Si'*," *Theological Studies* 77, 2 (June 2016) 380, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563916635119>.

⁴⁵Edwards, "'Sublime Communion,'" 386.

⁴⁶Francis, LS, 76.

⁴⁷Edwards, "'Sublime Communion,'" 385.

and integral ecology. Differing from utopian ideals, ecological civilization is a vision for a better world, while recognizing that it will not be a perfect one. It serves as a realistic framework for selecting among current responses to the crisis and offers hope.⁴⁸ It offers guidance for lifestyle choices and policy formation in the present.⁴⁹ To achieve an ecological civilization is to learn to modify nature in ways that we can learn from nature and from its success in creating ecosystems that over time increase in complexity and richness.⁵⁰ The central features of ecological civilization studies include the intersections of theory and practice, global and local, environmental and social, scholarship and activism.⁵¹

Similarly, Pope Francis urges us to recognize the interdependence of the world and the need to propose solutions from a global perspective.⁵² *Laudato Si'* calls for an ecological conversion, a term first coined in Catholic circles by Pope John Paul II, referring to a significantly changed relationship to our natural environment.⁵³ Response to environmental crisis requires conversion that is at the same time personal, social, cultural, political and economic.⁵⁴ Ecological conversion is an important component of integral ecology. The conversion it advocates is at the same time epistemological, affective, spiritual and moral.⁵⁵ Ecological conversion is necessary for an effective transformation of the existential realities of all humankind. In order for this conversion to become realized, the conversion of the human heart has to become concrete.⁵⁶

Spirituality

The role of spirituality has been emphasized in realizing both the proposal of ecological civilization grounded in process thought and that of integral ecology. Philip Clayton and Wm. Andrew Schwartz point out that religion and spirituality play a crucial role in creating an ecological civilization. They contribute to ecological civilization in a sense that they remind us that we live together within a larger community of life on Earth, which is our common home. They have

⁴⁸Clayton and Schwartz, *What Is Ecological Civilization?*, 50–51.

⁴⁹Clayton and Schwartz, Clayton and Schwartz, *What Is Ecological Civilization?*, i.

⁵⁰Clayton and Schwartz, Clayton and Schwartz, *What Is Ecological Civilization?*, 2.

⁵¹Clayton and Schwartz, Clayton and Schwartz, *What Is Ecological Civilization?*, 67.

⁵²Francis, LS, 164.

⁵³A commonly referenced source is Pope John Paul II, General Audience Address, (January 17, 2001), http://conservation.catholic.org/john_paul_ii.htm.

⁵⁴Blanco, "*Laudato Si'*," 437.

⁵⁵Harvey, "*Laudato Si'* and the Renewal of Theologies of Creation," 1022.

⁵⁶Blanco, "*Laudato Si'*," 437.

the capacity to inspire people to live with respect and care for the whole community of life and to build “local communities that are creative, compassionate, participatory, ecologically wise, and spiritually satisfying, with no one left behind.”⁵⁷ Spirituality is a critical component of Pope Francis’s integral ecology. *Laudato Si* states that “[g]iven the complexity of the ecological crisis and its multiple causes, we need to realize that the solutions will not emerge from just one way of interpreting and transforming reality. Respect must also be shown for the various cultural riches of different peoples, their art and poetry, their interior life and spirituality.”⁵⁸ The ecological spirituality Pope Francis proposes has the ability to provide motivation for a more passionate concern for the protection of our world. It will be what inspires us. It is the “interior impulse which encourages, motivates, nourishes, and gives meaning to our individual and communal activities.”⁵⁹ Ecological spirituality, together with ecological education, is what realizes integral ecology. The deep affinity between China’s ecological civilization and Pope Francis’s integral ecology presents a novel opportunity for the Chinese Catholic Church to develop an eco-spirituality.

Eco-Spirituality for the Chinese Catholic Church

Awareness

Interconnectedness as a fundamental reality of all creation is a central conviction shared by ecological civilization and integral ecology. The awareness of this reality and the realization of our responsibility are essential parts of Christian faith.⁶⁰ *Laudato Si* mentions that our three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself is the ground of human life. In various forms of violence and abuse, the abandonment of the most vulnerable, and attacks on nature, sin ruptures these vital relationships.⁶¹ Chinese Catholics, like all Christians, are called to reprimand the destructive power of sin and to recognize the fundamental reality of life. Relatedness is a fundamental reality that is shared by all living beings, “it is the underlying fabric that is continually brought forth within the vital process in which we are immersed.”⁶² Ivone Gebara mentions that

⁵⁷Clayton and Schwartz, *What Is Ecological Civilization?*, 129.

⁵⁸Francis, LS, 63.

⁵⁹Francis, LS, 216.

⁶⁰See Francis, LS, 64.

⁶¹Francis, LS, 66.

⁶² Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation*,

relatedness reflects the perception regarding “the complex and extraordinary web of relationships that is called life.”⁶³ As pointed out by *Laudato Si'*, this web of relationships constitutive to the world is an expression of the subsistent relationships found in the divine Persons.⁶⁴

To become aware of the interconnectedness of all reality created according to the Trinity is to recognize their intrinsic value as enveloped in love. All of creation is the locus of divine presence and the dwelling place of God.⁶⁵ Creatures have revelatory meaning for human beings.⁶⁶ The whole universe of creatures is speaking words of love to us, and each in its own way.⁶⁷ The divine love for each creature enfolds everything with God's affection and teaches our heart to be open to love these same creatures, to be moved by their plight, and where needed to act on their behalf.⁶⁸ The interwoven fibres of all that exist in perfect reciprocity with one another in space and time, in origin and into the future.⁶⁹ Speaking of this future and the final destination of all creation, *Laudato Si'* reads

all creatures are moving forward with us and through us towards a common point of arrival, which is God, in that transcendent fullness where the risen Christ embraces and illumines all things. Human beings, endowed with intelligence and love, and drawn by the fullness of Christ, are called to lead all creatures back to their Creator.⁷⁰

The truth of human identity cannot be found apart from the things of creation.⁷¹ The identity and self-understanding of the Chinese Church are also intimately related to the awareness of the intrinsic value of all creation and its interconnectedness. Judith Gruber points out that the encyclical's call for an integral ecology is not only an intrinsic part of the teaching of the church, but also a teaching about the church.⁷² *Laudato Si* lays the foundation for a re-imagining of the

Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999, 83.

⁶³Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 83.

⁶⁴Francis, LS, 240.

⁶⁵Francis, LS, 88.

⁶⁶Francis, LS, 84–85.

⁶⁷Edwards, “‘Sublime Communion,’” 383–84.

⁶⁸Edwards, “‘Sublime Communion,’” 382–83.

⁶⁹Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 83.

⁷⁰Francis, LS, 83.

⁷¹Ilia Delio, *A Franciscan View of Creation: Learning to Live in A Sacramental World*, Franciscan Heritage Series, v. 2, St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure University, 2003, 15.

⁷²Judith Gruber, “Ec(o)Clesiology: Ecology as Ecclesiology in *Laudato Si'*,” *Theological Studies* 78, no. 4 (December 2017): 808, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563917731747>.

church as an inseparable part of our common global home.⁷³ Gruber suggests that Francis's proposal of integral ecology serves as a call to a redefinition of the boundaries of the church, a reconceptualization of traditional ecclesiology, and rethinking and reframing of the traditional theological self-understanding of the church, while recognizing its interwovenness into its contexts and its contingency.⁷⁴ This observation provides invaluable insights for the articulation of the Chinese Church's self-understanding and its mission in Chinese society and the world.

Contemplation

Our true identity and authentic self-understanding can only be found by contemplating the divine life. This is especially true for the Chinese Church as it strives to grow both in faith and service. *Laudato Si'* points out that the Christian tradition "invites us to find renewed strength in times of trial by contemplating the all-powerful God who created the universe."⁷⁵ This contemplation forms the foundation of a sound eco-spirituality for the Chinese Church as it welcomes divine love and adoration and births confidence in the love of God. As the locus of divine presence, creation is of the order of love, for God's love is the fundamental moving force in all created things, "even the fleeting life of the least of beings is the object of his love, and in its few seconds of existence, God enfolds it with his affection."⁷⁶ Everything that exists, soil, water, mountains, is a caress of God.

Regarding the meaning of place, Pope Francis says,

the history of our friendship with God is always linked to particular places which take on an intensely personal meaning; we all remember places, and revisiting those memories does us much good. Anyone who has grown up in the hills or used to sit by the spring to drink, or played outdoors in the neighbourhood square; going back to these places is a chance to recover something of their true selves.⁷⁷

The land of China is the home for the Chinese Church. The Chinese Church's identity is intimately bound with this place, its natural landscape and all its creatures. For Chinese Catholics, the familiar beauty of mountains, rivers, hills, and springs, along which we were born and raised, all reminds us of the beauty and grace of God. The discovery of Chinese Catholic identity spontaneously includes a contemplation of the place in which we live and its unique beauty.

⁷³Gruber, "Ec(o)Clesiology," 824.

⁷⁴Gruber, "Ec(o)Clesiology," 821-22.

⁷⁵Francis, LS, 73.

⁷⁶Francis, LS, 77.

⁷⁷Francis, LS, 84.

This contemplation of sublime communion impels us to give ourselves to the care of our common home.⁷⁸

By contemplating the divine love manifested in the interconnectedness of all creation, we “discover in each thing a teaching which God wishes to hand on to us, since ‘for the believer, to contemplate creation is to hear a message, to listen to a paradoxical and silent voice.’”⁷⁹ In seeing ourselves in relation to all other creatures, and in our effort to “decipher the sacredness of the world,” we explore our own.⁸⁰ Thus, Chinese Catholics’ common journey of self-discovery as a church seeks “not only to pass from the exterior to the interior to discover the action of God in the soul, but also to discover God in all things.”⁸¹ Turning to the teaching of St John of the Cross, Pope Francis writes, “all the goodness present in the realities and experiences of this world ‘is present in God eminently and infinitely, or more properly, in each of these sublime realities is God.’”⁸² For the Chinese Church, to contemplate on God’s love is to see God everywhere in China and to see everything in China ultimately in God.

Conversion

By contemplating God’s unbounded love in all creation, the Chinese Church grows in union with God. This growth enveloped in love is the ecological conversion called for in Pope Francis’s integral ecology. Ecological conversion involves “a loving awareness” of the sublime communion of all creation.⁸³ The notion that conversion is a process that frees one from radical lovelessness to being in love is significant in understanding the meaning of ecological conversion. Being in love with God entails loving all that God loves, and loving as God loves, with a love that encompasses the whole universe.⁸⁴

One’s awareness and contemplation of this love flow directly into one’s conversion towards love. It lends to the ethical claim regarding our responsibility for others and our planet.⁸⁵ To perceive that God is

⁷⁸Edwards, “‘Sublime Communion,’” 389.

⁷⁹Francis, LS, 85.

⁸⁰Francis, LS, 85.

⁸¹Francis, LS, 233.

⁸²Francis, LS, 234.

⁸³Edwards, “‘Sublime Communion,’” 387.

⁸⁴Neil Ormerod and Cristina Vanin, “Ecological Conversion: What Does It Mean?,” *Theological Studies* 77, 2 (June 2016) 334, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563916640694>.

⁸⁵William Schweiker, “The Destiny of Creation: Theological Ethical Reflections on *Laudato Si’: The Destiny of Creation*,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 46, 3 (September 2018): 481, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jore.12228>.

the living reality within which the whole of creation finds its origin and destiny is to be motivated to care for the earth and its peoples.⁸⁶ The ethical dimension of this interconnectedness in God leads peoples to seek justice and freedom, value long-suffering and patience, mercy and prophecy, awakens us today to the ecological crisis, and prompts us to seek eco-justice in the name of our entire Sacred Body.⁸⁷

This eco-spirituality that sees God in all things and all things in God is a profound affirmation of the common good.⁸⁸ The sense that we belong to one universal family connected through one sublime communion fills us with “a sacred, affectionate, and humble respect” that inspires an ecological lifestyle and leads to a renewed ecological praxis.⁸⁹ Pope Francis contends that similar to St Thérèse of Lisieux’s little way of love, “an integral ecology is also made up of simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness.”⁹⁰ It is also St Thérèse who exclaimed in her final days that “... the Church had a Heart and that this Heart was burning with Love. I understood it was Love alone that made the Church’s members act...”⁹¹ This is true for the Chinese Church in a sense that its true identity can only be found by entering into its heart, which is Love. In its essence, the Chinese Church is characterized by love and servanthood. This love permeates the life of the Chinese Church, it awakens us to the interconnectedness of all realities enveloped in God’s loving embrace, draws us into contemplation of the sublime communion, and moves us forward on the path of unceasing conversion. Through this eco-spirituality oriented towards love, the Chinese Church can realize the call to become a concrete sign of charity and reconciliation in China and the world.⁹² It can serve as the Chinese Church’s active response to participate in both China’s proposal of ecological civilization and Pope Francis’s call for ecological conversion. In this way, the Chinese Church can fulfil its mission in contributing to the common good in China and the world.

⁸⁶ Schweiker, “The Destiny of Creation,” 491.

⁸⁷ Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 91.

⁸⁸ Schweiker, “The Destiny of Creation,” 492.

⁸⁹ Edwards, “Sublime Communion,” 386.

⁹⁰ Francis, LS, 230.

⁹¹ Thérèse, *Story of A Soul: The Autobiography of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux*, trans. John Clarke, Study edition (Washington, D.C: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 2005), 302.

⁹² See Francis, “Angelus,” May 22, 2016, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2016/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20160522.html.