

***Laudato Si'* Through the Lens of Positive Psychology: Reflections and Implications for Formators and Spiritual Counselling**

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Abstract

Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'* (2015) has been widely recognised as a landmark contribution to ecological ethics, social justice, and contemporary spirituality. While much scholarly attention has focused on its environmental and socio-political dimensions, the document also offers profound insights into human flourishing, meaning, relationships, and spiritual well-being. These themes resonate strongly with contemporary positive psychology, particularly its emphasis on virtues, character strengths, meaning, gratitude, connectedness, and holistic well-being. This reflective article explores *Laudato Si'* through a positive psychology framework and examines its relevance for formators, and spiritual counsellors. The paper argues that Pope Francis' vision of "integral ecology" provides a comprehensive model of human flourishing that transcends individualistic notions of well-being and emphasises interconnectedness with God, self, others, and creation. The article concludes by highlighting practical implications for formation and counselling contexts.

Keywords: *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis, positive psychology, integral ecology

Introduction

Contemporary society finds itself facing multiple crises simultaneously: environmental degradation, mental health challenges, social fragmentation, loneliness, and a growing sense of existential uncertainty. While these concerns are often treated separately, Pope Francis (2015)

presents them as interconnected dimensions of a deeper spiritual and anthropological crisis. The encyclical calls humanity to recognise mutual dependence and to invite a transformation in attitudes, lifestyles, and relationships.

At first glance, an environmental encyclical may seem distant from the concerns of psychology. However, many of the themes emphasised by Pope Francis align closely with the goals of positive psychology. Positive psychology has shifted attention from pathology and dysfunction toward strengths, resilience, meaning, gratitude, hope, virtue, and well-being. Increasingly, scholars within positive psychology acknowledge that flourishing cannot be reduced to individual happiness alone but must include relationships, purpose, community, and transcendence. Many of these concerns reflect strongly with contemporary positive psychology, a field devoted to understanding and promoting human flourishing (Seligman, 2011). Though Seligman (2011) refers to Flourish, which indeed emphasises well-being theory, it expands beyond happiness to PERMA (Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishment).

Positive psychology has increasingly emphasized meaning, virtue, resilience, gratitude, and relationships as essential components of well-being (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Although Ryff and Keyes' (1995) model was developed before positive psychology became an established field, it offers a complementary approach for understanding well-being. Its focus on purpose, personal growth, self-acceptance, environmental mastery, and positive relationships reflects strongly with Pope Francis' view of integral human development in *Laudato Si'*, where flourishing is understood as the harmonious integration of relationships with self, others, God, and creation. This broader understanding of flourishing echoes the central vision of *Laudato Si'*. Pope Francis proposes an "integral ecology" that recognizes the inseparable relationship between human beings, society, spirituality, and the natural world. Such a vision has implications for those involved in the formation of future priests, religious, and pastoral ministers, as well as for spiritual counsellors and counselling educators in seminary settings.

Integral Ecology as a Model of Human Flourishing

One of the most significant contributions of *Laudato Si'* is the concept of integral ecology. Pope Francis (2015) argues that environmental concerns cannot be separated from human concerns because everything is interconnected. Ecological degradation, social injustice, poverty, and loss

of meaning often emerge from fragmented ways of understanding reality. Positive psychology similarly recognizes that flourishing is multidimensional. Seligman (2011) proposed the PERMA model, identifying positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment as important areas of well-being. While PERMA does not explicitly include ecological or spiritual dimensions, *Laudato Si'* offers a broader outlook of flourishing by integrating these concerns into the human quest for wholeness.

From the perspective of the encyclical, flourishing involves harmony in four interconnected relationships:

- Relationship with God.
- Relationship with oneself.
- Relationship with others.
- Relationship with creation.

This perspective offers an understanding of well-being than approaches focused solely on personal satisfaction or achievement. Human beings flourish not in isolation but through participation in a network of relationships. Such an understanding is particularly relevant for seminary formation, where the goal extends beyond professional competence to holistic human and spiritual development. For formators, the encyclical serves as a reminder that authentic formation must nurture intellectual, emotional, relational, spiritual, and ecological awareness. Future priests and religious are called not only to minister to individuals but also to contribute to the healing of fractured relationships within society and creation.

Gratitude and Wonder

Positive psychology consistently identifies gratitude as a strong predictor of psychological well-being. Gratitude fosters positive emotions, strengthens relationships, enhances resilience, and contributes to life satisfaction (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010). Pope Francis (2015), in *Laudato Si'*, similarly encourages gratitude and wonder toward creation, presenting the natural world not as a resource to exploit but as a gift that reveals God's presence and generosity. Such an attitude reframes the human-environment relationship in terms of stewardship.

The practice of gratitude carries important implications for formation and counselling. Seminary students often face academic pressure, vocational uncertainty, and concerns about future ministry. Cultivating gratitude can

counter tendencies toward anxiety, discouragement, and perfectionism. Regular reflection on blessings, experiences of grace, and encounters with beauty can nurture resilience and spiritual maturity. Spiritual counsellors, likewise, can integrate gratitude practices into their work, encouraging attention to moments of grace, beauty, and connection. These practices align with both positive psychology interventions and Christian spiritual traditions, fostering psychological and spiritual well-being.

Meaning, Purpose, and Vocation

The search for meaning has emerged as a central theme in positive psychology. Research suggests that individuals experience greater resilience and well-being when they perceive their lives as purposeful and significant (Seligman, 2011; Wong, 2012). *Laudato Si'* similarly invites people to embrace a vocation of care, stewardship, and responsibility toward creation and one another (Francis, 2015).

Pope Francis challenges modern definitions of success rooted in consumption, productivity, and economic growth, calling instead for a rediscovery of meaning through solidarity and ecological responsibility. This vocational perspective is particularly important for formation, where seminarians and religious formees discern identity and purpose within broader ecclesial and societal contexts. The encyclical broadens vocational understanding beyond ecclesiastical duties to include care for creation and the vulnerable.

A vocation-centred approach helps formees understand ministry as participation in God's ongoing work of reconciliation and healing. Such a perspective strengthens meaning and protects against burnout by connecting daily responsibilities with a larger transcendent purpose. For counsellors, the encyclical underscores the importance of exploring existential questions of purpose, responsibility, and contribution. Clients often seek not merely symptom reduction but a sense of significance and direction. Integrating meaning-centred approaches with spiritual reflection can facilitate deeper healing and growth.

Connectedness and Relational Well-Being

Healthy relationships are among the strongest predictors of psychological flourishing (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Seligman, 2011). *Laudato Si'* similarly emphasises that human beings are relational and that ecological degradation reflects a breakdown in relationships with God, others, and creation. Loneliness, isolation, and social disconnection are consistently associated with poorer mental and physical health outcomes.

Pope Francis underscores interconnectedness as a defining feature of reality. Human well-being depends upon relationships with God, others, and creation, making the ecological crisis also a relational crisis. For seminary educators, this insight challenges overly individualistic approaches to formation. Programs must intentionally foster community life, emotional intelligence, empathy, collaboration, and mutual support, recognising that intellectual excellence alone is insufficient for effective ministry.

Counselling educators can likewise draw upon the relational vision of *Laudato Si'*. Counsellors-in-training require not only technical competence but also authentic presence, compassion, and relational attunement. These qualities emerge through relationships characterised by trust, openness, and mutual respect. The encyclical reminds us that flourishing occurs within communities. Consequently, counselling and formation should aim not merely at personal growth but at cultivating healthy communities and relationships.

Hope and Resilience

Hope is an important psychological resource that enables individuals to pursue goals despite adversity (Snyder, 2002). Although *Laudato Si'* addresses serious ecological and social challenges, Pope Francis (2015) frames these realities within a message of hope, responsibility, and collective action.

Although *Laudato Si'* addresses serious ecological and social challenges, it is fundamentally a hopeful document. Pope Francis does not deny the severity of global crises; rather, he calls for collective responsibility and transformative action. This balance between realism and hope offers valuable lessons for formation and counselling. Future pastoral ministers will encounter suffering, injustice, conflict, and loss. They require not only theological knowledge but also psychological resilience. The encyclical demonstrates that hope emerges through action, solidarity, and faith. Individuals become resilient when they recognise their capacity to contribute meaningfully to the common good. Spiritual counsellors can draw upon this perspective when accompanying individuals experiencing despair or discouragement. Hope can be nurtured through helping people identify strengths, resources, relationships, and opportunities for meaningful engagement.

Implications

Several practical implications emerge from *Laudato Si'*. First, formation should embrace a holistic understanding of human development that

includes psychological, spiritual, relational, and ecological components. Second, programs should intentionally develop gratitude, wonder, and appreciation for creation through reflection, retreats, and experiential learning. Third, seminarians should be encouraged to integrate ecological responsibility into their understanding of priestly and religious vocation, and prioritise relational skills, emotional maturity, empathy, and collaborative leadership. Finally, practices that foster simplicity, contemplation, and mindful living should become integral components of formation. Such initiatives can help develop ministers who embody both psychological well-being and spiritual depth.

Conclusion

The vision articulated in *Laudato Si'* aligns with several key themes in positive psychology, including gratitude, meaning, relationships, hope, and human flourishing (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Seligman, 2011; Snyder, 2002). At the same time, Pope Francis (2015) broadens contemporary understandings of well-being by emphasising spiritual and ecological interconnectedness. For formation, spiritual counselling, and seminary education, this vision offers a valuable framework for promoting holistic human development.

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