

Pope Francis' Affirmative Ecology for Pacific Islands Indigenous Community

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Abstract: Pope Francis' Encyclical Letter "Laudato Si': Encyclical on Climate Change and Inequality, On Care for Our Common Home" revives the Catholic Church social justice tradition to unite the concern for environmental degradation, with the attention to society, especially the poor. With a narrative of remarkable humaneness, Pope Francis' ecology discourse focuses on environmental emergency and misuse of resources, social and economic consumerism, notions of responsibility and exclusion of marginal communities. Based on an analysis of Pope Francis' encyclical letter, this article elaborates a framework for rethinking ecology in the context of the Pacific Islands Indigenous cultures who are suffering directly as a result of climate change. I suggest that Pope Francis' affirmative ecology promotes an "integral and shared development," the intimately interdependent relationship between humankind and nature, which echoes the Pacific Indigenous intersubjective dimensions of environment. Environmental care and attention rely both on a moral individual and collective responsibility, rather than regulatory adjustments that underestimate traditional cultural and social practices. For Pacific Indigenous communities, Pope Francis' analysis is provocative, for it not only offers new hope for the future but also because it calls into question basic assumptions about global consumption and common ways of living that have negatively affected the environment of this region.

Keywords: *Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter, Ecology, Environment, Indigenous, Pacific Islands, Development, Sustainability, Consumerism, Creation*

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Pacific Islands Indigenous Multi Cultures

Based on an analysis of Pope Francis' encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* in the context of the Pacific Islands Indigenous cultures, this article discusses the extent to which Pope Francis challenges the articulations and practices of modern ecology, moving the subject of ecospirituality and ecological concern to the fore of the mainstream contemporary culture. My argument proceeds in three sections. First, I will describe the Pacific Island concepts of nature and creation. In the second section, I will examine the ecological issues of the region and the current political discourse that has failed to effectively address these problems. In the third section, I will analyze the impossibility of sustaining an ethical ecology in our society dominated by consumerism and by the imperative of market and self-interest. In this article, I suggest that *Laudato Si'* presents an emancipatory discourse of ecospirituality that molds ecology into a social and theological context and brings moral responsibility to the centre of the contemporary debate. This sense of nature as a living creature created for the well-being humanity is compatible with Indigenous culture awareness of nature's intrinsic value.

Pacific Island Indigenous live in three major groups of islands: Melanesia (New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, the Solomons Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji); Micronesia (Islands of Marshall, Kiribati, Mariana, Caroline); and Polynesia (New Zealand, Norfolk Island, Tonga, Hawai'i, Samoa, Cook, Easter Island, Tuvalu). Throughout the Pacific, Christianity is the dominant religion, from the Roman Catholic Church to the different Protestant denominations, including mainline churches such as Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist churches, as well as various Pentecostal groups.¹ Several studies contend that almost every Pacific community has at least one church, and that Christian faith has been "the most transformative globalizing force in the region,"² quintessential to the Pacific cultural identity.³ Living directly from nature and dependent on the resources of land and sea in a limited and fragile environment, rituals and practicing ancestral wisdom in using natural resources have been a vital moment for the conservation of nature and wildlife. Land is a spirit-filled reality with forces that include spirits, and *'aumakua* (ancestors) through a set of symbols. Even

¹ Pacific Islands Christian Churches include the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian Churches. Evangelical Churches such as Pentecostal-oriented Assemblies of God, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints and the Seventh-day Adventist Church are also present and rapidly expanding in the region.

² Austin, Linda. "Faith-Based Community Radio in the South Pacific Islands," *Media International Australia*, No. 150 — February 2014, 114-121.

³ Hackett, C. and Grim, B.J. 2011. "Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population," *Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*, Washington, DC; Ernst, Michael. 2006. *Globalization and the Re-Shaping of Christianity in the Pacific Islands*, Pacific Theological College, Suva.

these days, Christianity is blended with an animist or eco-cosmological substratum, a traditional religious expression that mixes mythology and archaic knowledge and understanding with cosmologic ideas.

Traditional Indigenous cosmology in the Pacific area arises from believing that all living things have a “life” or “soul.” Nature is the mark of God, the caring mother, filled with spiritual forces, in a vibrant ecology intertwined with human activity. The value of a high-spirited environment implies “a resonance”⁴ among the diverse components of the creation—to borrow Clifford Geertz’s terminology—a correspondence,⁵ in other words, between man and all the other species and between man and the land. The humanized and yet mythical landscape gives a sense of identity and dignity to the native people according to the rhythm of a circularly cosmovision. The earth is sacred and revered, blessed by an intimate relationship with God, radiant with abundance and infused with sense of goodness for every creature. Consider, for example, the Tongan term “*tala-e-fonua*,”⁶ which means nature/place as a sacred power “ensouled” or “inspired” with living, bound to humans and saturated with God’s presence. Likewise, the words for nature *Vanua* in Fijian, and *Whenua* in Maori mean both mother and provider, nurturer and place, in a poetic or quasi-poetic language that tries to express the inexpressible value of creation. Other Indigenous communities⁷ use similar imagery to convey the relationship between mankind and environment based on selfhood intrinsically related to a natural context. This relationship satisfies basic needs and yet does not reflect solely a material dependence, but rather a sense of communal good and intrinsic sense of personal and spiritual belonging entrenched on an ethnic and geographical foundation.⁸ “My identity is there in the ground,” *matev nam tivöno vidun* is a traditional Vanuatu Indigenous

⁴ Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic.

⁵ Geertz, *Ibidem*.

⁶ Okusitino Māhina, “The Poetics of Tongan Traditional History, “Tala-ē-fonua:” An Ecology-Centred Concept of Culture and History,” *The Journal of Pacific History*, (January, 6, 1997): 109-121.

⁷ For New Caledonian Indigenous Kanak, a place of birth is both literally and figuratively defined “by his or her clan’s relationships to certain sites.” See Horowitz, Leah Sophie. “Perceptions of Nature and Responses to Environmental Degradation in New Caledonia”, *Ethnology*. 40.3, (July 2001): 237-2.

The idea of “place” is central in the Pacific and is articulated through the use of concepts like *vanua* (Fiji), *whenua* (Aotearoa), *fonua* (Tonga), *fanua* (Samoa), *fenua* (Maohi Nui/Tahitian), *fanoa* (West Kwarā’ae, Malaita), and *te aba* (Kiribati). A 1992 rap song in Maori by Maori hip-hop group Upper Hutt Posse, “Tangata Whenua,” the land of People, translates into English as “Tangata whenua is the persistent genealogy / Tangata whenua is the root and the power / Tangata whenua is the flame of the essence of life / Tangata whenua is the home fire. See Chatwin Allen. “Rere Ke/Moving Differently”, *Studies in American Indian Literature*, Vol. 19, N.4, (Winter 2007), 1-26.

⁸ “Culture involves an integration of both affective and cognitive components” argues sociologist David W. Kidner “expressed through a system of significant symbols,” see Kidner, David W. “Culture and the Unconscious in Environmental Theory”, *Environmental Ethics*, Vol. 20, (Spring 1998), 61-80, 77.

saying. A true indigenous identity, or a “person of the place” is a person connected to the motherland, its landscape, features, and natural resources. Because of this interconnectivity between human and nature, mankind is directly affecting weather, livestock fertility, and other aspects of nature with his actions and morality. As a result, humans have the direct responsibility toward nature through minimal use of resources, maintenance, and preservation for their well-being as much as for the common well-being of their communities.⁹

This original tenet is not in contrast with the Christian faith as it may appear superficially.¹⁰ In the Christian faith, the Bible presents a copious variety of natural phenomena permeated with sacred presence “God creates everything but not everything is his image: only human beings bear God’s image. God has a special purpose for creating human beings in his image” (Ps. 8:5). Creation is in a covenantal relationship with God, inescapably bound to mankind as an instrument of reward and vengeance. In the Indigenous cultures, humans coexist with nature and accept responsibility for both its use and protection as God’s stewards. Likewise, in the Old Testament, behaviors, rituals and morality influence environment positively or adversely and disasters are a means of punishing humans. In the New Testament, Jesus constantly refers to nature and the primal elements in his parables and teachings,

Learn from the way the wild-flowers grow.
They do not work or spin.
But I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor
was clothed like one of them.
If God so clothes the grass of the field,
which grows today and is thrown into the oven tomorrow,
will he not much more provide for you, O you of little faith?¹¹

Further, Indigenous interpretation of nature as God’s theophany harmonizes with the Christian notion of a loving God transcendent and yet immanent, actively present in the midst of creation, continuously working with humanity. According to this sense of connectedness, nature is depicted as the supreme source of love, beauty, and protection, as depicted in this Maori poem,

⁹ Parajuli, Pramod. 2001. “Learning from ecological ethnicities: Towards a plural political ecology of knowledge” in J. Grim (Ed.), *Indigenous traditions and ecology - The interbeing of cosmology and community*, 559-590. Harvard: Harvard University Press.

¹⁰ A scholar argues that Christianity began as animist religion and later evolved in anti-animist faith, “While Christianity evolved into a sky-God religion often opposed to the world and the flesh, it’s genuine roots are deeply grounded in the biblical soil of divine enfleshment. In reality, Christianity is closer to the spiritual animism of first peoples than, say, the *contemptus mundi* worldview of Pauline asceticism and Augustinian Neo-Platonism.” Wallace, Mark. “Green Mimesis. Girard, Nature and the Promise of Christian Animism”. *Journal of Violence, Mimesis and Culture*, Vol. 21, 2014.

¹¹ New Testament, Gospel of Matthew, Mt:6:28.

E tipu, e rea, mō ngā rā o tōu ao;
 ko tōringa ki ngā rākau a te Pākehā hei ara mō tō tinana;
 ko tō ngākau ki ngā taonga a ō tīpuna Māori hei tikitiki mō tō māhuna;
 ā, ko tō wairua ki tō Atua nāna nei ngā mea katoa.

Grow up o tender plant in the days of your age
 Your hands to the implements of the Pakeha
 For your bodily well-being
 Your mind to the treasures of your ancestors
 To adorn your head
 Your spirit to God, Who created all things.

Apirana Ngata¹²

Pacific Islands Environment and Ecology Public Discourse

There are considerable variations in the environment and in the geo-ecological system of the region, but overall, Pacific Island territories have complex ecological conditions and are among the areas of our planet most susceptible to the effects of global warming. Since the 1990s, scientific data have shown an increase in the ocean acidification and sea-level,¹³ combined to an alarming coastal erosion and decrease in soil fertility that may reconfigure the map of the entire region in a close future. The global climate change due to an increment of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere has escalated the risk of opposite weather phenomena from powerful storms and floods to prolonged droughts. Likewise, ocean acidification, caused by the dissolution of microscopic shell-fish calcium for the surge of carbon dioxide in the water, is significantly depleting the level of fish stocks.¹⁴ While there is not a complete

¹² Sir Apirana Ngata, famous Māori leader, first Māori university graduate, and member of New Zealand Parliament. See M. P. K. Sorrenson, "Polynesian Corpuscles and Pacific Anthropology: The Home-Made Anthropology of Sir Apirana Ngata and Sir Peter Buck," *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 91.1, (1982): 7–28.

¹³ Brian Fagan. 2013. *The attacking ocean: the past, present, and future of rising sea levels*, New York : Bloomsbury Press; Robert McLeman. 2014. *Climate and human migration: past experiences, future challenges*, New York: Cambridge University Press; Elizabeth Kay Berner; Robert A Berner, 2012. *Global environment : water, air, and geochemical cycles*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press; Judith Weis, 2015. *Marine pollution: What everyone needs to know*, Oxford, New York : Oxford University Press; Louise Gerdes, 2009. *Endangered Oceans*, Detroit: Greenhaven Press; Sandoval Leal, 2016. *Effects of ocean acidification, temperature and copper on the development of early life stages of the native kelp *Macrocystis pyrifera* and the invasive kelp *Undaria pinnatifida* from southern New Zealand*, PhD Dissertation, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand.

¹⁴ Schnoor, Jerald L, "Ocean Acidification," *Environmental science & technology* Vol. 47; no. 21; 11919; Fieguth, Paul, 2017. "Effects of climate change and ocean acidification on living marine organisms : hearing before the Subcommittee on Oceans, Atmosphere, Fisheries, and Coast Guard of the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, United States Senate, One Hundred Tenth Congress, first session, May 10, 2007," in *An Introduction to Complex Systems : Society, Ecology, and Nonlinear Dynamics*, Cham : Springer International Publishing : Imprint: Springer.

agreement among scientists about the direct causes of environmental disasters of the region, they are most possibly related to a combination of reasons, ranging from geomorphology to human impact on fragile marine and terrestrial ecosystems. The causal list includes tectonic movements, earthquakes and tsunamis, cyclones, as well as deforestation, agricultural exploitation, old contamination for nuclear tests, industrial fishing, and sand mining.¹⁵ As a result, flooding, contamination of freshwater, a surge in malaria related diseases, and a reduction in agricultural production are all the effects of a degradation of the islands' environment.

The range of issues that affect Pacific Indigenous groups is broad—from inadequate health care to poor education and economic opportunities, from shifting climatological patterns and accentuated ecological degradation to overuse of natural resources.¹⁶ On the whole, what marks and, for some extent, stigmatizes Indigenous community is the fragility of their ecosystem and the recurrence and severity of natural disasters on a land with limited resources. In summary, lack of sound legislations for the control and management of the environment, loss of land ownership, together with cultural homogenization to consumerism have adversely affected islands indigenous communities.¹⁷

The construction of an ecological platform to respond to the rapidly worsening crisis in the region has relied primarily on a standardized discourse that aggregates environmental problems with political measurements. Under the umbrella of climate change, a heterogeneous ensemble of political coalitions, strategic protocols, scientific studies, and activist groups have worked for making policies and drafting legislations.¹⁸ They have shared certain traits in common: the rallying

¹⁵ This list is not meant to be exhaustive but merely suggestive of the range of environmental issues, See World Bank Report, 2002.

¹⁶ Torres Camprubí, Alejandra, 2016. *Statehood under water: challenges of sea-level rise to the continuity of Pacific island states*; Finley, Carmel, 2017. *All the boats on the ocean: how government subsidies led to global overfishing*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press; Allen, Matthew, Dinnen, Sinclair, 2017. *State-building and state formation in the western Pacific: Solomon Islands in transition?*, London, New York: Routledge; Ee Khor, Hoe; Kronenberg, Roger, Tumbarello, Patrizia 2016. "Resilience and growth in the small states of the Pacific," Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund; Price, Susanna, 2016. *Global implications of development, disasters, and climate change: responses to displacement from Asia Pacific*, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

¹⁷ Larmour, Peter, 2012. *Interpreting Corruption: Culture and Politics in the Pacific Islands*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press; Schuster, Donald "Pacific currents: The Republic of Palau and its compact, 1995-2009," *The Journal of Pacific History*, 12-01-2009; Corbett, Jack, 2015. *Being political: leadership and democracy in the Pacific islands*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press; Corbett, Jack, 2015. *Small fish swimming in the shape of a shark: why politicians join political parties in the Pacific Islands*, New York Routledge.

¹⁸ A limited and not exhaustive list includes, for example, the Paris Climate Summit from 30 November to 12 December 2015, officially known as the 21st Conference of Parties (COP 21) under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), to tackle climate change. COP21 Paris Climate Meeting 2015 led to the Climate Action Agreement in Washington on

cry of conservation and protection; the appeal of global initiative linked to local responsibility; a fierce dissent against exogenous economic activities in the Islands; and a sense of apocalyptic and pessimistic urgency. Many of these positions need to be understood in the context of globalization, a massive expansion of Western style of life, the invasive presence of foreign investments, and the anthropological mutations as resulting from all these challenges.¹⁹ While the environmental discussion has been undoubtedly intense, it has also become considerably shattered, even more so in the last decade, due to a harsh international dissent around the controversial issues of global warming and climate change. Thus far, the public discourse has been marked by heavy obstacles of how to integrate local and global principles and protocols due to the enormity of the challenge and the heavy weight of the obligations to national economies. “It is remarkable how weak international political responses have been”—Pope Francis laments in the *Laudato Si'* encyclical letter—“the failure of global summit on the environment makes it plain that politics are subject to technology and finance.” (§34)

According to Philip Shabecoff, environmental groups have also played a narrow and politically timid role due the failure to “recognize and acknowledge that the decline of the environment is not²⁰ an issue distinct from other flaws in our society.”²¹ As a result, international organisms and nations have not been capable of effectively changing the individual behaviors of their citizens, nor able to lead, in a significant way, global collective actions for an ecological renewal of the Pacific region.²² The attempt to reach a balance between external constraints²³ and local lack

April 22, 2016. According to a research from Bath University, United Kingdom, “small island states submitted contributions (INDCs) towards reducing emissions as a precursor to the creation of a post-Kyoto global emissions framework,” in *Climate Change; New Data from Bath Spa University Illuminate Findings in Climate Change [Reflections on small island states and the international climate change negotiations (COP21, Paris, 2015) in Global Warming Focus; Atlanta (Jan 11, 2016): 131*. Prior conventions include UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the 1997 Kyoto Protocol to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, Japanese 21st Century COE Program “to establish global research and education centers to study the dynamics and evolution of biodiversity in the Pacific; the GUMP, CRILOBE eco-stations in French Polynesia; the Coral Reef Initiative for the South Pacific (CRISP), Moorea Dolphin Center; the “Future Earth Coalition;” United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), Kiribati Adaptation Programme (kap).

¹⁹ For instance, a focal point of the political debate has been the opposition to the foreign economic exploitation of land and the denunciation of this abuse of the environment.

²⁰ Emphasis in the original.

²¹ Shabecoff, Philip. 2000. *Earth Rising: American Environmentalism in the 21st Century*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, xii.

²² For instance, an report in Kiribati, Taberannang Korauaba says that “most of the president’s views about climate change as published by the local, regional, and international media have little connection to any climate-change adaptation strategies” in Taberannang Korauaba, “Contemporary Pacific,” *Honolulu* 27.1 (2015): 232-238, 234.

²³ Such as disagreement was for instance over the definition of carbon sinks, the rules for counting emissions reductions, the rate of carbon the extent to which countries could use these to offset their greenhouse-gas emissions.

of public knowledge has fallen into the logic of quite empty discussion. The problem is partly scientific, but primarily social and political, as Pope Francis suggests, “technological products are not neutral, for they create a framework which ends up conditioning lifestyles and shaping social possibilities along the lines dictated by the interests of certain powerful groups” (§107). Overall, the reforms have been piecemeal, usually small scale adjustments. Procedures and legislations have been put in place to overcome unilateralism and local interests and to legitimize new concepts through the rule of law.²⁴

However, in spite of a universal consensus on the debilitating effects of environmental degradation on local populations,²⁵ the discussion has scarcely shown attention to the social and economical issues of the Indigenous communities. They are the most vulnerable to impoverishment and forced relocation as a result of the natural disasters.²⁶ A further challenge has been the inadequate political recognition of the meaning and sacredness of nature for the Indigenous culture, incorporating long-established “ideas, customs, traditions, even good sense,”²⁷ into the debate and the drafting of the official documents. For example, Indigenous communities have been using autochthonous methods for fishing, hunting, agricultural practices, and a selection of useful plants the fruit of generations of adjustment to their ecosystem. Many relevant aspects of the Pacific Islands Indigenous culture such as the social heterogeneity of these communities, the different local traditions, the strong sense of identity and ownership to the land, and the ancestral cosmology have been notably missing from the debate. Eventually these traditions will be condemned to oblivion by the new exogenous technocratic practices imposed by international funds.

Viewing this phenomenon from the Pacific Island’s angle, Taberannang Korauaba, a journalist from Kiribati, comments how confusing the reforms have been for his community:

Leaders and activists are busy casting blame on others for destroying nature. Overwhelmed by the gravity of the debate, the Kiribati government has rushed through a few projects and made irrelevant and inconsistent messages to the world. Purchasing land in Fiji lacks proper planning, and proposing a floating island may confuse and frighten people. Training and preparing people to migrate is problematic. (...) In general, some of the

²⁴ An international symposium in 2006 stated “a sustainable development can only be achieved through a much deeper understanding of how physical, biological, and social processes interact in tropical systems” (Tropical Island Ecosystems and Sustainable Development, December 2006).

²⁵ Love, Glen A. 2003. “Why Ecocriticism?” in *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology, and the Environment* 13-36, G.A. Love, ed. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.

²⁶ Warne, Kennedy. 2014. “A World Apart: The Southern Line Islands,” *National Geographic*, September. <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/print/2014/09/southern-line-islands/warne-text>

²⁷ De Benoist, Alain. 1983. *Le idee a posto*. Napoli: Akropolis, 61.

government's activities to address climate change are too broad and hard to put together.²⁸

In summary, there have been tensions between environmental policy, civic activism or environmentalism, and traditional ecology of Indigenous local communities, a disjuncture between the meaning and experience generated in local places on the one hand, and universalizing notions of what should be promoted globally, on the other.²⁹ Overall, there is a bi-fold predicament in the current ecology framework of the region. First, environmental policies have not been constructed around local experience and knowledge but rather the decision-making process has been insulated from native inputs. Second, it has also become increasingly difficult to sustain authentic local mobilization to support effective changes. Indigenous communities have generally shown diffidence for unfamiliar strategies that seem hegemonic. As a result, these reforms do not appeal to them as persuasive and imperative. A Fijian scholar, Suliana Siwatibau describes the challenge in this way:

Cheaper products produced by efficient technologies usurp local products produced by simple local technologies. So it becomes easier to buy rice grown through heavily irrigated and mechanised commercial farming methods in Australia than to buy root vegetables grown locally with the simple digging stick and very little disturbance to the land.³⁰

The greatest problem for the Pacific region has been not only conservation but specifically local sustainability, according to “three pillars of sustainability”—social, ecological and economical.³¹ These three aspects include community land ownership, political participation and dialogue, and long-term economic reforms, as major measures to sustain structural environmental reforms. Pope Francis, in his letter *Laudato Si'*, calls for local involvement and for a return to native traditions, in accordance to the Indigenous cultures,

There is a need to respect the rights of people and cultures, and to appreciate that the development of a social group presupposes an historical process (...) from within their proper culture. Nor can the notion of the quality of life be imposed from without, for quality of life must be understood within the world of symbols and customs proper to each human group. (§144)

²⁸ Taberannang Korauaba. “Kiribati,” *The Contemporary Pacific*, Vol. 27, Number 1, 2015, 232-238.

²⁹ Dolezal, Joshua. 2008. “Literary Activism, Social Justice, and the Future of Bioregionalism,” *Ethics & the Environment*, Vol. 13, Number 1, Spring 2008, 1-22.

³⁰ Siwatibau, Suliana. “Ethical Dimension to Sustain our Environment: A Pacific Island Perspective,” *Asia-Pacific Perspectives on Environmental Ethics*. Bangkok: UNESCO Bangkok, 2008, 1.

³¹ Kabutaulaka, Tarcisius Tara. “Solomon Islands,” *The Contemporary Pacific*, Vol. 16, N.2, Fall 2004, 393-401.

Encyclical Letter

Laudato Si' (2015) is a comprehensive vision of an ordered creation utterly dependent upon a generous and merciful God. This “Green Thomism”³² significantly influenced the changing debate on Climate Change that led to the UN Climate Change Summit in Paris in 2015, in recognizing that climate change is no longer a political or economic issue alone but a moral concern which should reunite mankind on a common agenda.³³ The encyclical letter is addressed not only to Catholics but goes beyond faith and religion in his call to a universal dialogue and responsible actions, “we urgently need a humanism capable of bringing together the different fields of knowledge, including economics, in the service of a more integral and integrating vision.” (§141) Whether environmental studies investigate ecosystems from a particular point of view, Pope Francis suggests a unique approach to guide consciences in terms of a responsible use of nature as social justice “we have to realize that a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.” (§49) Pope Francis has no definite answers or easy solutions,

on many concrete questions, the Church has no reason to offer a definite opinion: she knows that honest debate must be encouraged among experts, while respecting divergent views. (§61)

Laudato Si' draws its spiritual dimensions and influence directly from the Catholic tradition, especially from Saint Francis of Assisi’s poems, mixed with the more indirect traditional cosmological ecology, in the endeavor to “enter into dialogue with all people about our common home.” (§3)

In 2000, the Earth Charter stated the human obligation to create an environment in which we are all but one integral part — “we are one human family,”

[w]e stand at a critical moment in Earth’s history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny.”³⁴ (2000)

³² Thompson, Christopher “*Laudato Si'* and the Rise of Green Thomism”, *Nova and Vetera*, Vol. 14, N.3, Summer 2016.

³³ UN Climate Change Summit in Paris 2015 (COP 21) called for Climate Action on the goal of reducing global temperatures by 2 degrees Celsius.

³⁴ Earth Charter, available online.

It is from the same understanding and appreciation of the unity between humanity and environment that Pope Francis admonishes the need to care for nature for the benefit of future generations, “the entire human family and, within it, a particular home of each particular family.”³⁵ What makes Pope Francis’ statement distinctive in relation to existing ecological tenets, is that this integral ecology is meant to replace the paradigm of a nature in adversal position to humanity, with a nature in symbiosis with humanity. Pope Francis restates the holistic harmonious relationship of nature/ mankind with respect to every human being in a way that is typical of Saint Francis: to engage directly with issues of social injustices in society,

Many intensive forms of environmental exploitation and degradation not only exhaust the resources which provide local communities with their livelihood, but also the social structures which, for a long time, shaped cultural identity and their sense of the meaning of life and community.
(§145)

I suggest that two elements of the encyclical are particularly relevant for the Pacific Indigenous communities: the Catholic theological structure as methodology and interpretative source, and the socio-reality of our world as element of analysis and reference. First, Pope Francis establishes the dynamics between biblical exegesis, theological discourse and the environment in direct reference to Saint Francis of Assisi and the Franciscan lineage. Then, he applies theological reflection to social and economical problems, linking the phenomenon of poverty to appalling environmental abuses. Saint Francis of Assisi, in his continuous praise of the magnificence of God, indicated the way to develop a renewed love for nature and a disposition to compassion and gentleness embracing every creature, inclusive of the poor and the outcasts in the society. For Saint Francis, nature expresses the presence of God in life, likewise God is mirrored by nature, in the awareness of the beauty and abundance giving to humanity as a complete gift. What Pope Francis calls Saint Francis’ sensitivity to nature driven by love and praise to all creation³⁶ is echoed in the Indigenous culture by a language of praise that transcends the language of economics and science, and emphasize the relational aspect of Indigenous’ land, built around community relations and relational reciprocity.

This integral ecology is based on two central formulations. I define the first as an “ethic theological consciousness,” a liberating praxis of understanding nature as a

³⁵ Cardinal Turkson, Peter. “Family and Environment - Caring for Our Common Home: The Holistic View of Pope Francis,” *Journal of Catholic Social Thought*, 13:2, 2016, 167-174, 167.

³⁶ Zhang, Xue Jiao. “How Saint Francis Influenced Pope Francis *Laudato Si*,” *Cross Currents*, 66 no 1 Mar 2016, 42-56.; Orioli, Lorenzo. “*Laudato Si*’ and the New Paradigm of Catholic Environmental Ethics: Reflections on Environmentalist Movements in Italy,” *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 29.6 (2016): 931-943.

gift from God, and the second as a “theological reflection,” an act of a moral thinking that arises from the encounter with the suffering of the others and leads to compassion and increases individual responsibility. Pope Francis posits with absolute clarity that environmental problems are inextricably linked to human issues. His letter illustrates how the traditional discussion of controversial environmental problems tends to forget the powerless who are politically and economically the most vulnerable. He urges for a renovated environmental sensitivity that challenges the normative values that regulate our society and acknowledges society’s most neglected members. As with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council stating “God intended the earth and all it contains for the use of every human being and people,”³⁷ a critical and conscious use and appreciation of natural resources is an act of solidarity and commitment to the poor. Nature has to be “lived out joyfully and authentically,” (§10) with all openness to the “infirmity and tribulation” of the human condition.

Therefore, the paradigm the encyclical letter refers to is quite simple: what is right for the ecosystem and its creatures is good for humanity; the contrary, however, may not necessarily occur. Questions about ways to mitigate and solve environmental problems cannot be adequately understood in isolation from the simple and spontaneous appreciation of nature. This renovated love for God’s creation should lead mankind to “the core value of what it is to be human” and a moral commitment to the well-being of both mankind and our planet. When applied in the Pacific context, the autochthonous understanding of nature proves a conception of nature without dichotomy: the above and the below, the natural and the sacred, the spiritual and physical; the individual and the community; the rich and the poor. These norms of ecology, mutuality, and solidarity are spontaneously originated through both cognitive and spiritual processes (experience, tradition, and sacrality), and appear interdisciplinary and cross-sectional in content and form. This innate process evaluates what is good or bad for environment and fosters mutual support by cultivating a dynamic alliance in the community.

In Western capitalist culture, mankind (or the human sphere) and nature are often perceived as different entities. Therefore, environmental ethics’ challenge consists in reconciling the opposite principle of individual human interest and ecological collective identity.³⁸ Furthermore, the increasing inequalities brought by economic globalization, the dominance of technology, consumerism, and easy access to food and commodities have created an artificial sense of leisure environment rather than environmental ethics. The dominant materialism is part of a larger, global

³⁷ Council, Second Vatican. “*Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World).” Vatican. 1965.

³⁸ Rosenzweig, Michael, 2003. *Win-win ecology: How the Earth’s species can survive in the midst of human enterprise*. London: Oxford University Press.

process driven by economic gain which involves all sorts of exploitation, genetic manipulation, corruption, and materialism. Implanted in this attitude is a logic of continuous and unstoppable acquisition of goods based on an essentialist conception of a self acting to be gratified. As a result, the dependence of individuals on their demands translates in a universal plurality of insatiable desire. They are directly responsible to the detriment of the planet, the erosion of social equality and blind people to the reality of a suffering world. The concept of “profitable and unprofitable” translates to economic growth, high industrial production, full employment, soaring consumerism, and surplus. They are all key players in environmental degradation and human dominance on nature.³⁹ What is important to acknowledge is that the very reason for producing and consuming is the same condition for treating the ecosystem according to utilitarian profits and egoistic interests. This rationality ultimately reduces nature to the objectification of a non-being. It also dismisses the significance of the past for the immediate satisfaction of the present without concern for the future.

The current lifestyle based on a consumerist culture and the achievement of mass leisure can only be sustained by assuming that there are infinite opportunities to create, use, and discard products in ways that satisfy consumers.⁴⁰ Pope Francis reminds humanity, in every part of our planet, that we must reduce our consumption to subsistence level, if that be necessary, in order to bring the rest of humanity to reach our level and guarantee a life of dignity for all. In other words, a sense of ecological moderation moved by moral and compassionate reasons consists in balancing our different needs (and waste) so that there will be a responsible example of “environmental improvement, (...), for all our limitations, gestures of generosity, solidarity and care cannot but well up within us, since we were made for love.” (§58) This ecological prudential temperance, a habit of minds should become the ethical imperative of a global functioning ecology,

Humanity is called to recognize the need for change of lifestyle, production and consumption, in order to combat this warming or at least the human causes which produce or aggravate it. (§23) When people become self-

³⁹ On one hand liberal approach stresses the virtues of unrestrained market capitalism based on prosperity, profit and social stability. Often, however, the accumulation of profit creates the conditions for discrimination, human rights abuses and global inequality and works in contrast with ecological soundness. On the other hand, socialist economy rejects accumulation of capital and challenges the wealth and power of the corporate elite advocating changes yet seems unable to regulate industrial expansion and limit the environmental costs and damages of production. See Hobsbawm, Eric. 2011. *How to Change the World: Reflections on Marx and Marxism*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.

⁴⁰ Leach, William. 1993. *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture*, New York: Vintage Books.

centred and self-enclosed, their greed increases. The emptier a person's heart is, the more he or she needs things to buy, own and consume. (...) In this horizon, a genuine sense of the common good also disappears. (§204)

Suliana Siwatibau asserts that it will not be an easy process to revert, "something is wrong with our cost structure that does not take into account the environmental costs of production."⁴¹ The encyclical letter rejects the modern acceptance that economic growth and normative measures, such as population control or merely technologic solutions, are pivotal elements to promote sustainable development and avoid environmental crisis. On the opposite, economy and technology continually reinforce the dominant optimism that there are boundless opportunities to meet human desires and correct environmental damages without imposing the burden of political, social, or economical sacrifices. This attitude of worshipping progress, Siwatibau reiterates, causes even Indigenous people to forget how maternal nature is,

highly efficient and impressive achievements of modern science and technology which treat nature not as a mother to be respected, but as something separate to be conquered, subdued and exploited.(...) As long as the integrity of the environment is maintained, traditional knowledge and technology for utilising it remain valid and potentially useful. It is through the use of natural resources and their interdependence with elements of the environment that our societies developed an appreciation of the sanctity of nature and recognised its spirituality.⁴²

Pope Francis further criticizes the false optimism that ultimately encourages apathy in the face of suffering and cultivates amnesia about past hardships, "merely technical solutions run the risk of addressing symptoms and not the more serious underlying problems." (§144)

Not surprisingly, by assuming the complete separation of benefits from everlasting environmental damages, the current culture tends to impose drastic transformation to nature to maintain economic profits instead of adapting societies to environmental needs. As a result, any form of relation, be it economical, political, or sociological becomes the locus of an antagonism to ecology, the contradiction or aporia implicit in the very idea of an ethical ecology. Seen from that angle, a rationale of self-interest annihilates the possibility of achieving permanently common values of equality and social justice. They are the only criteria that guarantee solidarity and cooperation as normal rights guaranteed to every human being. This raises the question of whether it is possible to overcome an instrumental notion of nature

⁴¹ Siwatibau, Suliana. 2008, 4.

⁴² Siwatibau, Suliana. 2008, 5.

independent to profit and empirical facts, without endangering the well-being of our society and its economic progress.

The conundrum lays in the incapacity of environmental ethics to translate intellectualistic principles into models of activism that have a strong sense of communal meaning while promoting a harmonious relationship between humans and life and between humans themselves.⁴³ Many of the environmental positions comprise of more or less unsuccessful attempts to unify theory and activism (praxis) in a social justice framework that infuses ethical pragmatism⁴⁴ into environmentalism⁴⁵—from environmental ethics, ecotheology, deep ecology, environmental phenomenology, and environment ontology.⁴⁶ However, as a scholar comments, the main problem both with social and political practices and with environmental theory is that they are originated by the same lack of moral sense that generates environmental problems.⁴⁷ That is, in simple terms, the result of utilitarian pragmatism that appreciate nature in the context of experience and utility and not from supra-natural reasons (God) and, as such, is secular, temporal, and susceptible to alteration. Insofar as the use of nature would continue to be based on principles of anthropocentric self-interest rather than in the relationship God/creation deprived of any critical confrontation with universal suffering, the ideal attitude to pursuit ecological commonwealth seems to be destined to fail.⁴⁸

The protection of our common home cannot occur, Pope Francis states, simply through a deontological approach that focuses on duties and rules, and imposes a system of laws. Rather, it demands a fundamental reorientation of worldwide commitments and personal responsibilities, fruit of an instinctive sensitivity for Creation. Pope Francis argues that the very task of ecology is the old and yet renovated mission of focusing on the poor while preserving the natural resources. These are the absolute priorities of our planet, “an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature.” (§69)

⁴³ Not surprising, theory-oriented environmental ethicists have found themselves uneasy in the larger debate around utilitarianism, progress, economic interests and communal well-being.

⁴⁴ John Dewey's aesthetic philosophy. Dewey, John. 1958. *Experience and Nature*, New York: Dover. Dewey named his philosophy “naturalistic metaphysics or naturalism.”

⁴⁵ Cfr. Weston, Anthony. 1997. “Beyond Intrinsic Value: Pragmatism in Environmental Ethics” *Environmental Pragmatism*, New York: Routledge; David, Abram. 1997. *The Spell of the Sensuous*; Dewey, John. 2004. *Environmental Philosophy*, Albany: State. University of New York Press.

⁴⁶ Whitney, Elspeth. 1993. “Lynn White, Ecotheology, and History.” *Environmental Ethics* 15(2):151–69; Jenkins, Willis. 2009. “After Lynn White: Religious Ethics and Environmental Problems.” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 37(2):283–309.

⁴⁷ Midgley, Mary. “Humanity, Environment and God.” *The Tablet*, (Jan 21), 1995, 81.

⁴⁸ Dewey asserts that “Morality depends upon events, not upon commands and ideals alien to nature” Dewey, John. 1957. *Human Nature and Conduct*, Random House / Modern Library, 286.

How can this be done? While the Earth Charter announces “all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings,” (§1)⁴⁹ it seems that people have lost the capacity to enter in an intimate dialogue with nature. The response to this challenge hinges on the capacity to move ecology beyond the adversarial interpretations of the main scientific or political argument towards a renovated Indigenous spirituality and Franciscan contemplative mysticism.

As a corrective, Pope Francis argues that the strengthening of a global ecology consists in conceiving self and Creation (human or non-human) as inherently valuable, interconnected and dependent on each other in stewarding the common good. This unitarian conscience of being in a “common home” settles the paralyzing dualisms of Western modernity that vitiates any collective engagement, for example the antagonism between individual/world, nature/culture, and environment/economy. Such a non-dualistic understanding of self/other/Creation is central to a moral ecology that takes the Indigenous understanding of nature as model. This renovated appreciation of nature will value environment as complementary to God’s work, immune to the growth of a global capitalism, and free from materialism and selfishness.

Environment—or in the Pope’s words, Creation—is significantly relational in character, an organic living world that expands, mutates, evolves. Because man is envisaged with nature as an essential part of Creation, nature and mankind are united inextricably. To recognize this dynamic interplay is to recognize the complexity of life. But it is also to recognize that the rapidly worsening ecological crisis compels one to think of environment as part of a complex and interconnected Creation, a vast system encompassing all living and nonliving things.

Affirmative Ecology

The *Laudato Si’* enriches the dominant environmental perspective with a comprehensive and accessible analysis that brings overlooked issues to a larger audience as well to the forefront of the public debate.⁵⁰ Pope Francis does not suggest a radical ethic but, rather, a deep reconciliation between mankind and “the patrimony of nature” (§89) to discover the real love of God in the midst of creation. The encyclical letter also incites the need of dialogue between Western and Indigenous culture, and

⁴⁹ Earth Charter (Earth Charter International), 2000, available online.

⁵⁰ Noda Mozes writes that with this encyclical letter religion has returned to the forefront of public debates. Mozes, Noda. 2017 “Religion, Liturgy and Ethics, at the intersection between theory and practice. The Revolution of Pope Francis” *Journal for the Studies of Religions and Ideologies*, 16 (46):17-33, 2017.

between people, “ecology calls for greater attention to local cultures when studying environmental problems, favouring a dialogue between scientific-technical language and the language of people.” (§89)

The health of “our common home” is an essential factor or parameter in any evaluation of environmental action, to redirect our society to rediscover the inherent value of nature as well as all human individuals. So long as human action is taken without primary consideration to the global effect on environment, the results of such action will invariably be disastrous. In concrete terms, unless mankind would respect all forms of the living from conception to death and appreciate the unity of life, our society will not be able to solve the world-wide problems of exploitation, injustice, climate change, and lack of food.

One cannot prescind from humanity. There can be no renewal of our relationship with nature without a renewal of humanity itself. There can be no ecology without an adequate anthropology. When the human person is considered as simply one being among others, the product of chance or physical determinism, then our overall sense of responsibility wanes. (...) Human beings cannot be expected to feel responsibility for the world unless, at the same time, their unique capacities of knowledge, will, freedom and responsibility are recognized and valued. (§74)

In summary, the significance of this affirmative ecology stems from the fact that it involves an active engagement and promotes a comprehensive responsibility of God's creation, inclusive of the needs and the rights fundamental to persons on this planet. The encyclical is written to correct the foundational error of a lack of ethical standpoints and self-restrictions in our society that lead to the problem of suffering; “our ‘dominion’ over the universe should be understood more properly in the sense of responsible stewardship.” (§116) On the one hand, Pope Francis condemns the anthropocentric self-interests of our culture motivated by personal gain rather than the common good, largely inattentive to the suffering of those who are marginalized because it is completely entranced in its own egocentric concerns. These desires subvert God's gift of life as much as God's love and justice, “the entire material universe speaks of God's love; ... the universe as a whole, in all its manifold relationships, shows forth the inexhaustible riches of God” (§86). Globalization, low wage policies and high profits, a “throwing away” style of life, global warming, extinction, and overfishing are all tied to one other. On the other hand, Pope Francis reminds us of the inner dignity of human beings as God's beloved children and signals the need to change hearts to honor this relationship with the Father. As a result, the Pope urges readers to view the world “with the eyes of others, particularly the suffering and threatened other.”⁵¹

⁵¹ Metz, Johann Baptist. 1981. *The Emergent Church*, Crossroad, New York, New York, 61.

It is not matter of tearing down and building new cities, supposedly more respectful of the environment yet not always more attractive to live in. Rather, there is a need to incorporate the history, culture and architecture of each place, thus preserving its original identity. (§74)

Pope Francis' vision is both theologically grounded and interdisciplinary in its inspiration and in its holistic integration of theology, ethics, and social justice into all aspects of ecology. But above all, the encyclical letter requires a simple and more self-disciplined prescription of life to restrain the powers of commodification — prohibition against unlimited accumulation, temperance, and moderation. If the point of departure in our culture is a multiplicity of persons who want to enjoy nature solely on the basis of self-fulfilment, then no principle of conservation, protection and environmental sustainability will ever be able to defend the ecosystem. Rather than rules that underestimate traditional social practices, Pope Francis' affirmative ecology aims at advancing social and environmental justice. It promotes an "integral and shared development," the intimately interdependent relationship between humankind and nature, or in Pope Francis' words "as part of the universe, called into being by one Father, all of us are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family, a sublime communion which fills us with a sacred, affectionate and humble respect" (§89). For Pacific Indigenous communities, Pope Francis' analysis is provocative, for it not only offers new hope for the future, but also calls into question basic assumptions about global consumption and common ways of living that have negatively affected the environment of this region. The encyclical letter rejects the modern acceptance that economic growth, regulations, and population control are pivotal elements to promote sustainable development and avoid environmental crisis. Environmental care and attention rely both on individual and collective responsibility and authentic care and love for every human being, especially the most vulnerable communities. The Pacific Islands' awareness of humans' respectful stewardship toward the environment witnesses the enduring significance of egalitarian principles of solidarity and comradeship for the best of their communities and for the whole Creation to which they belong. This ontological meaning of environment — that is, interpretation of nature both as God's entity and gift, and individual and collective resource—stresses the ethical character and moral dimension of the human use of nature, "our common home," holding together, with respect, both Indigenous and Christian identity and values.^{PS}

