
Contemplative Life amidst Mass Extinction: Catholic Revisions of Spirituality, Law, and Multispecies Justice

Willis Jenkins, University of Virginia

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Abstract: *Contemplative ecologies seem to face two liabilities of injustice. First, they may appear to seek spiritual satisfaction in multispecies relations without connection to political work to protect them from extinction. Yet addressing that liability may compound the second: that in a time of radically unequal exposure to Anthropocene stresses, extending protections of justice to nonhuman creatures may further erode aspirations for equal protection of human dignity. This essay examines how Contemplative Ecology may matter for multispecies justice by following Pope Francis’s attempt to redefine human dominion in contemplative terms for the sake of response to climate and extinction crises. That theological shift is accompanied by elevations of Indigenous governance rights and of rights for nature, although neither is endorsed fully or consistently. Ambiguities in this case can illuminate overarching questions about the relation of contemplative practice to ecological justice. Specifically, examining the uncertainties and liabilities in this case can aid inquiry into the role of contemplative practices within social and political transformations needed to repair relations with ecological systems.*

INTRODUCTION

Concerns that spiritual practice may distance one from political justice, which are perennial in many traditions, exert acute pressure in a time of connected climate, biodiversity, and human inequality crises. If Contemplative Ecology is “an understanding of spiritual practice that places the well-being of the natural world at the center of its concerns, and an approach to ecology that understands the work of cultivating contemplative awareness as critical and necessary to its full meaning,” how does the coming apart of worlds shape its practice?¹ Contemplative ecologies seem to face two liabilities of injustice. First, they may appear to seek spiritual satisfaction in multispecies relations without connection to political work to protect them from extinction. Yet addressing that liability may compound the second: that in a time of radically unequal exposure to Anthropocene stresses, extending protections of justice to nonhuman creatures may further erode aspirations for equal protection of human dignity.

This essay examines how Contemplative Ecology may matter for multispecies justice by following Pope Francis’s attempt to redefine human dominion in contemplative terms for the sake of response to climate and extinction crises. That theological shift is accompanied by elevations of Indigenous governance rights and of rights for nature, although neither is endorsed fully or consistently. Beyond curiosity about tensions inside the Catholic world, ambiguities in this case



can illuminate overarching questions about the relation of contemplative practice to ecological justice.

Specifically, examining the uncertainties and liabilities in this case can aid inquiry into the role of contemplative practices within social and political transformations needed to repair relations with ecological systems. Rising mental health attention to climate anxiety is one signal that many people struggle to make sense of themselves amidst ecological unraveling and intensified human inequality.² Various practices of mindfulness, meditation, and prayer are being developed specifically to address related experiences of despair, grief, guilt, confusion, moral trauma, cognitive dissonance, and other forms of diminished moral agency related to ecological disruptions.³ Beyond coping or personal resilience, can those practices contribute to multispecies justice?⁴

1. RIGHTS OF NATURE

Consider the proposal for a Lake Erie Bill of Rights. Lake Erie has for 10 thousand years offered habitat to Lake Sturgeon, a fish with a genetic line older than the Great Lakes themselves—tracing back to before the last mass extinction event, 66 million years ago. Lake Sturgeon are now endangered by the flash of settler violence that exploded across their habitat in a period not much longer than the full lifetime of an individual sturgeon. After wanton destructiveness (sturgeon were initially seen by settler Mississippi fishermen as a pest) gave way to market interest, a frenzy of overfishing in the late 19th century collapsed the Great Lakes population. This happened concurrently with and as part of a period of drastic political violence against Indigenous societies of the Great Lakes region. For the several Anishinaabe peoples who sustain subsistence and cultural relations with Lake Sturgeon, extinction pressure on sturgeon has been an instance of what Audra Mitchell describes as “violence that systematically destroys particular beings, worlds, life forms and the relations that enable them to flourish.”⁵ As Kyle Powys Whyte observes, extinguishing Lake Sturgeon not only removes a key food source for Anishinaabe societies but also sunders kin-making and governance relations central to their worlds.⁶ While United States jurisprudence admits Native American persons to its courts, one indicator of the persistent prejudice by which it does so is that its justice cannot recognize their nonhuman kin.⁷

The multispecies political arrangements in the Great Lakes that preexisted and remain alongside settler societies attest to the historically contingent character of the dominant legal regime. It was not utterly novel, therefore, when in 2019 a majority of the (mostly settler) citizens of Toledo voted for a Lake Erie Bill of Rights. Frustrated by years of inadequate responses to declining lake health and especially after several seasons of cyanobacteria algae blooms that killed fish, closed beaches, and threatened drinking water intakes, the residents of Toledo voted to extend protections of personhood for the lake. A major driver of the toxic algae is excess nitrogen, which is applied in geologically unprecedented quantities to the lands that drain into Lake Erie. The bill of rights would make massive pollution a violation of Lake Erie’s “right to exist, flourish, and naturally evolve” and create a process for Lake Erie to directly petition agencies and courts for relief.⁸ As it is, the pollution can be contested in court only by human (or corporate) persons who can show injury to their interests, with potential remedies responsive to those interests—and thus only indirectly to Lake Erie. Legal rights for the lake would create direct standing, direct

consideration of interest, and material remedies for the lake rather than other people's interest in its resources.

The Lake Erie Bill of Rights effort was one expression of rights for nature movements that have appeared around the world in recent decades.⁹ Once source for those movements are proposals in North Atlantic legal thought that trace to Christopher Stone's 1972 article "Should Trees Have Standing?"¹⁰ However, the most politically successful movements have been organized and advanced by Indigenous peoples and trace to "customary indigenous jurisprudence [that] emphasizes nature's living and indivisible qualities."¹¹ When commentators emphasize the groundbreaking innovation in Stone's proposal historical accounts of rights for nature they neglect the deeper roots in Indigenous common law.¹² Indigenous political organizing was a major factor in Ecuador and Bolivia incorporating rights for nature into their constitutions in the early 2000s, and in the basic message from the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth. Held in Cochabamba, Bolivia, in 2010, that conference wrote and adopted a Universal Declaration for the Rights of Mother Earth specifically to elevate Indigenous perspectives in framing the global response to climate change.¹³ Indigenous communities have litigated in multiple jurisdictions seeking rights for specific species, lands, or (especially) waters. In the United States a number of cities and localities have also passed provisions recognizing rights of nature in some way.

Legal standing for nonhuman animals, waters, and ecosystems is often pursued as a way to constrain the activities driving the linked crises of climate change and mass extinction with a broader conception of justice.¹⁴ Frustrated by systemic fracturing and diminishment of relations, the weak protections available from conventional legal instruments, and often with the capture by the extractive industry of legislative avenues, campaigners turn to rights of nature to expand the scope of relations protected by law.

The day after Toledo voted, an agriculture corporation called the Drewes Farm Partnership sued the city, arguing that such a right was incoherent in US federal law. It had standing to do so because US jurisprudence recognizes the legal personhood of corporations. Among arguments made by Drewes Farm Partnership were that it would be impossible to determine the interests of a lake and would lead to irresolvable controversies over which humans could reliably represent it. A federal judge eventually agreed. While complimenting a campaign that had "used the democratic process to pursue a well-intentioned goal," the court found that the bill of rights was unconstitutionally vague about what would constitute a violation of Lake Erie's right to exist and flourish or of residents' right to a health environment.¹⁵ A patchwork of conservation and recovery policies remain in effect, but Lake Erie and sturgeon remain excluded from direct standing before the law or democratic representation in governance.

Framed in soft admiration for the movement's noble values, the court's decision reflects general skepticism toward rights-based multispecies justice found even in environmental law. Reviewing rights for nature campaigns with whose values they broadly sympathize, Mauricio Guim and Michael Livermore summarize three critical liabilities: epistemological uncertainty about how to identify the relevant subjects (which units of "nature"), epistemological uncertainty about how to define their interests (what constitutes a violation of right to flourish), and lack of procedural method for comparing interests, especially between human and nonhuman entities.¹⁶ Guim and Livermore argue that the moral values animating popular movements for rights of nature

involve more relational complexity than direct standing before justice can accommodate. Those relational values may be spiritually or symbolically significant for some people, they hold, but are infeasible for direct standing before the law or direct representation in governance. Can the moral relations involved in contemplative ecologies make a practicable difference to instruments of justice designed for a much narrower set of relations?

2. DOMINION AND HUMAN DIGNITY

Beginning from a more fundamental objection allows us to consider that skeptical question through Pope Francis's turn to contemplation to address climate crisis. An objection informed by Christian theology, joined by humanist values from a number of traditions, is that assigning rights to Lake Erie or Lake Sturgeon would erode the special dignity of humans. Only humans can have rights, on this view, because only humans possess the moral dignity that is the basis of rights. In Christian theology the foundation of that dignity has often been established in reference to the doctrine of dominion, by citing the first chapter of the Hebrew Bible: "God said: let us make humans in our image, after our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth" (Gen. 1:26).

There are many ways of interpreting that passage, including several within Genesis itself. In a time of mass extinctions, in which fish of the sea and birds of the air are being disappeared, some readers offer interpretations that find a relation of care rather than dominion, or that weaken the passage's support from human exceptionalism by expanding the image of God to all creatures. However, repudiating dominion or diversifying who shares in the image of God could have consequences for human dignity. In Catholic social thought of the past 150 years equal status in human dignity is grounded in equal status in dominion.¹⁷

For example, *Rerum Novarum*, the 1891 encyclical often regarded as the beginning of the modern tradition of Catholic social teaching, interpreted conflict between capitalism and socialism by first establishing the equality of humans in a mandate to rule over creation: "it is in the soul that sovereignty resides, in virtue of which man is commanded to rule the creatures below him, and to use all the earth and ocean for his advantage. . . . In this respect all men are equal; there is no difference between rich and poor."¹⁸ Major encyclicals over the following century reaffirmed that foundational point. *Pacem in Terris* from John XXIII in 1963 provided theological grounding for universal human rights by citing Genesis and appealing to lordship over creation: "God created man 'in His own image and likeness,' endowed him with intelligence and freedom, and made him lord of creation. . . . As such he has rights and duties . . . [which] are universal and inviolable."¹⁹ *Populorum Progressio* from Paul VI in 1967 argues for economic development for the sake of human dignity rather than private accumulation by observing: "The Bible, from the first page on, teaches us that the whole of creation is for man, that it is his responsibility to develop it by intelligent effort and by means of his labor to perfect it . . . for his use."²⁰ John Paul II in *Laborem Exercens* in 1981 connects economic work to human dignity by appealing to Genesis 1:26: "Man has to subdue the earth and dominate it, because as the 'image of God' he is a person. . . . Understood as a process whereby man and the human race subdue the earth, work corresponds to this basic biblical concept only when throughout the process man manifests himself and confirms himself as the one who 'dominates.'"²¹ And in *Centesimus Annus*, the encyclical written to mark 100 years from *Rerum Novarum*, and which devotes significant attention to environmental

problems, John Paul II confirms the central thread: “God gave the earth to the whole human race for the sustenance of all its members, without excluding or favoring anyone.”²²

Vatican social teaching is of course subject to criticism that it has not in fact defended the equal dignity of all humans. Particularly in regard of gender and sexuality it has often seemed to do the opposite: derogating and excluding in ways that communicate inequality. Those critiques effectively demand the Vatican more consistently affirm its own moral ideal of human dignity. Shared commitment to the special moral status of humans makes possible conflict over its political implications—however bitterly opposed from one another participants in argument may sometimes seem. So the Vatican and its critics might share concern that considering rights beyond the human world would endanger the moral uniqueness of humanity, thereby increasing the vulnerability of humans most exposed to disrespect. Repudiating dominion could weaken the ground that makes possible arguments over injustice.

Catholic social teaching is visibly dominionist only because it makes explicit a foundation often left implied in other traditions: the project of universal human dignity relies on exceptional moral status for humans grounded in dominion over the rest of life. In Christian and post-Christian worlds anyway, human equality is grounded on human dominion. To what extent is that foundation necessary to justice?

An influential thesis traces the rise of ecologically extractive societies to a shift in the interpretation of dominion that happened in medieval Christianity. The historian Lynn White argued (in 1967) that as medieval Europeans developed more powerful agricultural equipment, they abandoned existing protocols of seeking permission from lands, forests, rivers, and nonhuman animals. As those protocols were maligned as vestiges of pre-Christian paganism, Christianity in its Western form, wrote White, became the “most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen.”²³ An alliance emerged of technological power justified by Christian dominion, and, held White, throughout all the changes in technology and religion afterward, that alliance has been basically unbroken. The technological powers now destabilizing ecological systems, like mechanized application of chemical fertilizers across Lake Erie’s watershed, White was saying, are authorized by a cultural assumption of dominion. Even if people employing those technologies are no longer themselves Christian, the deep common sense that organizes relations of humanity and nature—by which asking permission of waters would seem pagan or at least silly—are rooted in Christian dominion.

While there are many reasons to doubt or qualify White’s thesis,²⁴ it is not hard to find passages in European medieval Christian theology that support White’s basic idea that dominion ideas in that context offered legitimacy to powers extending control over other creatures. Here is just one of many possible examples from Thomas Aquinas, the most influential theologian of the period:

The imperfect are for the use of the perfect as the plants make use of the earth for their nourishment, and animals make use of plants, and humans make use of both plants and animals. Therefore it is in keeping with the order of nature that humans should be master (*dominatur*) . . . Wherefore, as humans, being made to the image of God, are above other animals, these are rightly subject to their government. (*ST I.96.1*)

The idea that the natural order holds a special place for the human creature, whose dignity is recognized by subjecting other creatures to its government, became central to the way that modern Christianity articulated the universality of human dignity within a morally ordered cosmos. Indeed, in the encyclicals cited above, that ground was routinely secured by quoting Thomas Aquinas together with the Genesis dominion passage.

3. THE CONTEMPLATIVE TRANSFORMATION OF DOMINION

So when Pope Francis set out to write an encyclical on the climate crisis, how would he negotiate those precedents? *Laudato Si'* (*LS*) takes a twofold approach.²⁵ First, it extends the implications of dominion by critiquing the way that climate change and some proposed climate policies exacerbate injustice to vulnerable humans. Second, it attempts to transform dominion by making it about contemplation rather than control.²⁶

The first move is an extension of the received tradition, which conceptualizes justice from a basis of human dignity. The impacts of climate change and a series of other environmental problems, *LS* observes, fall most severely on people already marginalized. Climate instability thus becomes another driver of human degradation. Those already vulnerable bear the first and worst consequences of sea level rise, higher temperatures, storm intensity: “Our lack of response to these tragedies involving our brothers and sisters points to loss of that sense of responsibility for our fellow men and women upon which all civil society is founded.”²⁷ Moreover, policies in response to climate change created by the affluent and powerful often would extend their power over the poor and vulnerable. If every human has an equal share in the moral status of dominion, then it violates human dignity for the wealthy to use ecological relations in ways that expose the vulnerable to grave harm—as they are doing by dumping their carbon pollution in the atmosphere. It is spectacularly unjust that wealthy polluters would then invest more in measures to protect themselves from the consequences than those more vulnerable or would use climate policies to gain further control over land and resources of the poor. Solutions like building seawalls around wealthy cities or establishing offset markets could reinforce and extend the advantage of the powerful over the poor.

While perhaps standing out from previous encyclicals in its emphasis on the poor and its skepticism toward “technocratic” solutions, so far that line of interpretation is an application of the Church’s received doctrine of dominion, simply extending its implications for climate-mediated threats to human dignity. But Pope Francis also sets out to transform what dominion means.²⁸ That signal is sent from the opening lines, where he invokes a canticle of his namesake, St. Francis: “Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us.”²⁹ While the first appearance of Mother Earth in a papal encyclical garnered most public attention, the reversal in the last clause should not be overlooked: instead of creation subject to human government, as in the Aquinas passage, Mother Earth governs us.

Laudato Si' then glosses the canticle from a situation of ecological crisis: “This sister now cries out to us because of . . . [our] abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her.” If hearing the cry of Earth sounds strange, the encyclical suggests, that is because a modern mindset has hardened us against recognizing that we are kin with other creatures who make claims on us. In other words, it is because we live by a mistaken idea of dominion: “We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will.”³⁰

Some readers might wonder: Have we not come to see ourselves as lords and masters of Earth because Christianity taught us to do so? We have just seen that more than a century of previous papal encyclicals have made explicit that dominion is the foundation of human dignity, which remains the basis for the Church's condemnation of climate injustice.

Pope Francis attempts to affirm how the tradition establishes universal human dignity while redefining dominion in contemplative terms. Authentic dominion was exemplified in St. Francis, he writes, who could hear the cries and praise of other creatures. For the saint, dominion was an interior capacity of the heart—not a mandate to control—taking shape in relation with the goodness of other creatures. In that sense dominion arises from respect for “the intrinsic dignity of the world” and takes its highest shape from joy for other creatures rather than contempt as resources or obstacles.³¹ “If we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and wonder,” states *LS*, “if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs.”³² “Subduing” creation becomes inward spiritual work to learn to hear their voices and songs: “Rather than a problem to be solved, the world is a joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and praise.”³³ The basis of humanity's universal dignity now lies in that relational capacity rather than radical separation from nonhuman kin.

Contemplation has in some lines of Christian thought denoted an intellectual indifference to the creaturely world and a spiritual contempt for the problems of everyday life (*contemptus mundi*).³⁴ *LS* picks up the tradition's contrast of contemplation with practical problem-solving not because it wants people to be less concerned with overcoming ecological and social challenges but because it wants to counter solutionism with a contemplative account of the relations involved. This sense of contemplation thus differs from a movement of transcendence away from earthly relations toward God; in *LS* contemplative movement toward God moves one toward intimacy with other creatures. Its closing prayer is: “Teach us to discover the worth of each thing, to be filled with awe and contemplation, to recognize that we are profoundly united with every creature as we journey toward your infinite light.”³⁵

How does that account of (what we may call) contemplative dominion stand in relation to the preceding tradition? “What has sometimes been taught was incorrect,” states Francis. “If a mistaken understanding of our own principles has at times led us to justify mistreating nature, to exercise tyranny over creation . . . we believers should acknowledge that by doing so we were not faithful.”³⁶ The correction here goes deeper than saying the dominion idea grew out of hand as technological powers grew; the pope argues that transcendent notions of dominion, in which humans exert mastery as if creatures not belonging to Earth, make a mistake about human dignity. “When human beings fail to find their true home in this world, they misunderstand themselves and end up acting against themselves.”³⁷ He follows that sentence by citing a passage from *Centesimus Annus* that links human dignity with dominion, making it plain that he knows what he is doing: simultaneously affirming dominion while requalifying it in contemplative terms.

Does contemplative dominion elide justice commitments to the human poor? With its concept of “integral ecology,” *LS* argues that a bad theology of dominion is at root of connected forms of violence: the same false mastery that impoverishes Earth also oppresses the human poor. One reason privileged people cannot hear the cry of Sister Earth is because they do not listen to the cry of the poor. One reason wealthy people do not listen to the poor is because radical social inequality

encourages in the privileged a mindset of dominion that moralizes their power as brilliant mastery. For those who think this teaching of “integral ecology” sounds novel, Pope Francis appeals again to his namesake: St. Francis “shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace.”³⁸ It was because he rejected a bad form of dominion, claims *LS*, that St. Francis was able to hear the voices of other creatures while living in solidarity with poor and excluded humans.

Does integral ecology include political rights for creatures facing extinction? The direction of argument in *LS* seems to move that way, and the encyclical devotes 10 paragraphs to biodiversity loss and extinctions. It condemns unthinking biological diminishment in the name of human progress and, after affirming that “all creatures are to be cherished with love and respect,” calls on every region to survey the nonhuman family members that it hosts and develop better strategies of protection, especially for those species facing extinction.³⁹

Yet on the matter of their legal standing the encyclical was quiet. That led to some initial conflict among interpreters about the policy implications of the encyclical’s emphasis on the moral dignity of nonhumans. Inside the Church, some supporters claimed it impossible that the pope could have intended rights for nonhumans even as some US conservatives simultaneously claimed the Vatican was drifting into paganism. The pope seemed to issue a clarification a few months later: in his 2015 address to the UN General Assembly his first point was that “a true ‘right of the environment’ does exist.” He offered two justifications: “because any harm done to the environment . . . is harm done to humanity” and “because every creature, particularly a living creature, has an intrinsic value.”⁴⁰ Yet while that affirmation was clear and made on the highest policy stage, in the years since, including in the 2023 *Laudate Deum* written as a follow-up to *Laudato Si’*, the point has not been developed.

The unresolved ambiguity could be attributable to social conflicts within the Church or to hesitation to change the tradition too quickly, or it may be rooted in theological uncertainty. Beyond curiosity about policymaking at the Vatican, the question that matters for our broader inquiry is, what is the relation of Contemplative Ecology to multispecies justice amidst climate and extinction crises? Because its governance implications were left underdeveloped in the encyclical, leaving uncertain the answer to that question, I now briefly examine the two medieval precedents cited by *Laudato Si’* and then turn to contemporary efforts to undo the colonial versions of dominion that displaced the contemplative. Thomas Aquinas and Francis of Assisi each draw on contemplative theology to establish a form of (what we may call) multispecies justice, but in ways quite different from one another and from the mainstream of their modern receptions.

4. THOMAS AQUINAS

I observed above that Thomas Aquinas has been regularly cited in encyclicals to help establish human dignity by way of the dominion doctrine. Modern Catholic social thought developed various applications of justice from the special place of humans in the order of nature, as articulated by Thomas. *Laudato Si’* shifts its medieval sources, deprioritizing Thomas for Francis as more apt theological ground for understanding dominion. St. Thomas is scarcely cited, while St. Francis frames the entire teaching. Before following that turn to St. Francis, I here briefly note that, while 20th-century papal citations of Thomas probably assumed dominion near to a version of a

theological mandate to control Earth for the sake of material human progress, that interpretation was not inevitable from the theology of Thomas.

I have argued elsewhere that Thomas's account of the perfection of human nature requires biodiverse relations and that his gloss on dominion constrains its use for mastery.⁴¹ Both elements are evident in the way Thomas works with the Genesis 1:26 passage. In the *Summa Theologiae* and in commentaries, Thomas interprets the strong language of subduing creation through the subsequent story of God inviting Adam to name the animals. God is not there inviting humans to exploit the other creatures or even establish rights over them, writes Thomas, but rather inviting them first to learn how each creature expresses some aspect of divinity. Subduing them, argues Thomas, must have originally meant learning their distinct goods and incorporating the names of those goods into praise of God.

In the same passage about the order of nature being that the imperfect serves the perfect (I.96.1 from the *Summa*, quoted above), Thomas observes that in Eden humanity would have had no need for food or clothes. So why are there other animals at all? "Humanity needed animals in order to have experiential knowledge of their natures" (*ST* I.96.1 ad 3). Before the Fall, before humans needed clothing or ate other animals for food, observes Thomas, the animals were not there for humans to exploit; they were there for humans to contemplate. By inviting humans to give creatures names expressive of their distinct goods, says Thomas, God inducts humans into spiritual friendship with God by teaching them to name divinity from its manifold expressions in Earth's creatures.

Dominion on that reading, forgotten and overwhelmed by the Thomisms of modernity, is first an interior exercise seeking to understand how each creature participates in discrete perfections of God. "Subduing them" means pursuing with one's mind and heart the way they exist in God, as an exercise of the human desire to find our own end in God. In a question critical to his entire theological system, on how it is possible for finite human minds to know God, Thomas writes: "our knowledge of God is derived from the perfections which flow from God to creatures. . . . we know and name God from creatures" (*ST* I.13.3). Modern Thomism focused on the extent to which humans could or could not know God from nature apart from additional divine action—a point important to theological method. But the point for spiritual practice, implicit along the range of debate and yet obscured by all positions, is this: by learning the distinct goodness of each creature and their mutual relations, grace draws humans into flourishing with God through a process that inwardly shapes them after the flourishing of other creatures.

On that reading, the perfection of the human in Thomas Aquinas should be understood as a multispecies exercise. Respecting human dignity therefore requires policies to protect the other creatures and relations through which human nature is realized. Contemplative dominion requires protecting the full diversity and health of the creaturely relations on which it depends. Moreover, because the spiritual value of contemplating other creatures is, in the Thomist view, based on the distinct dignity of each creature as a finite participation in divine goodness, it also seems to imply moral and political standing for nonhuman creatures. That is, the reason why nonhuman relations are beneficial to the contemplative practices through which humans find their end in God is precisely because they have their own ends in God, and thus basis for their own standing. Legal standing for nonhuman creatures may be justified to protect the ecology of contemplative practice.

5. ST. FRANCIS

In St. Francis, contemplative dominion appears differently from even the most ecological reading of Thomas. Here it is the subversion of mastery and the tutoring of authentic freedom by kinship with other creatures. St. Francis is of course remembered as the holy fool who entered into unusual friendship with other creatures and thus became the inspiration of countless birdbaths. Thomas of Celano, who recorded the first life of Francis, wrote: “who would be able to narrate the sweetness he enjoyed while contemplating in creatures the wisdom of their Creator?”⁴² Francis particularly took joy in birds, finding in them the spontaneous praise of God he sought in himself. But it was not only other animals in whom he delighted; Thomas of Celano also remembers that “so it was with cornfields and vineyards, rocks and woods, fields . . . fountains . . . gardens, earth and fire, air and wind”; all of them Francis would “in complete sincerity urge to love God and serve him with gladness.”⁴³ The 13th-century anonymous biographical compilation *Legend of Perugia* attests: “We who lived with him saw him find great cause for interior and external joy in all creatures; he caressed and contemplated them with delight.”⁴⁴ Multiple sources report Francis delighting in the companionship of nonhumans. The way his canticle addresses “Brother Sun” and “Sister Earth” apparently accords with a lifelong habit he had of addressing other creatures as “brother” and “sister.” He discouraged members of his order from keeping animals for food or riding horses both because it was inconsistent with poverty and because he recoiled from the treatment of animals as objects.⁴⁵

Legend recalls animals from wolves to crickets obeying his instruction. Many early interpreters of this behavior understood it as a recovery of dominion as it was intended in the Garden of Eden. The responsiveness of other creatures to St. Francis, including their obedience to his instructions, was regarded by companions and many subsequent commentators as a sign of natural order being restored. Bonaventure’s *Life of St. Francis* made that interpretation—wherein human dominion over creation would be restored by following the way of Jesus—into a mainstream spiritual aspiration.⁴⁶

However, the symbol of nonhuman obedience to Francis may have come to overshadow the way the saint was also subverting human mastery. His most common instruction to other creatures was to praise God through their own voices and given ways of life—to be themselves, free of imposed servitude. Consider this passage from his famous homily to the birds:

My little bird sisters, you owe much to God your Creator, and you must always and everywhere praise Him, because He has given you freedom to fly anywhere—also He has given you a double and triple covering, and your colorful and pretty clothing, and your food is ready without your working for it, and your singing that was taught to you by the Creator, and your numbers that have been multiplied by the blessing of God—and because He preserved your species in Noah’s ark so that your race should not disappear from the earth . . . He gives you high mountains and hills, rocks and crags as refuges, and lofty trees in which to make your nests. . . . So the Creator loves you very much, since He gives you so many good things. Therefore, my little bird sisters, be careful not to be ungrateful, but strive always to praise God. (*Actus-Fioretti* 16, *Omnibus* trans.)⁴⁷

The message here seems less about the right of humans to teach the birds than that they have their own nobility, their own freedom to fly, their own God-given right to certain habitats, an expectation that their kind will not disappear from the earth, and an affirmation that their first reason for existing is to praise God. Thomas Sorrell, who is otherwise cautious about appropriating Francis for contemporary environmental thought, argues that one reason commentators have struggled to locate this sermon in the teaching of dominion is because directly addressing other creatures in affirmation of their nobility was new to Christian practice. Sorrell sees it going beyond even the record of Jesus's sayings: "Jesus had wished to emphasize God's care for humanity, since humankind was so far above the birds God protected and cared for. Francis, however, uses the phrases to stress instead the birds' status in creation and God's special favor that they enjoyed."⁴⁸

If so, St. Francis represents an ecocentric shift in Christian spiritual practice, an interpretation of the lifeway of Jesus that illuminated previously unknown intimacies with the creaturely world. It is all the more striking, then, that *Laudato Si'* shifts the ground from Thomas to Francis on precisely the point of contemplative dominion, orienting it to the latter's sibling-like admiration for how other creatures praise for God: "his response to the world around him was so much more than intellectual appreciation or economic calculus, for to him each and every creature was a sister united to him by bonds of affection."⁴⁹ Whereas in the ecological reading of St. Thomas contemplation is intellectual internalization of the goods of creation as a path of perfecting humans in God, in St. Francis contemplation enters into the joy of other creatures' praise.

What could that mean for spiritual life amidst mass extinction? In my own lifetime a third of the avian life in North American skies has disappeared.⁵⁰ It seems difficult, if not selfishly misdirected, to seek to enter into the joy of Saltmarsh Sparrow, whose lifeway is projected to become impossible by 2040, or Red Knot, whose hemisphere-spanning migration is threatened at a dozen points by climate stresses on oceans, coasts, and the Arctic. Whatever its proper theological status, in the Anthropocene dominion of powerful humans over the planet seems material fact. In conditions of actual planetary domination, is there a conceivable role for the ecocentric contemplative joy of St. Francis?

Consider the admonitory purposes to which St. Francis applies his account of contemplative dominion. When he invokes dominion, it is often to point to how much better other creatures exemplify its performance. Consider how he glosses that Genesis 1:26 dominion verse:

Be conscious, O human, of the wondrous state in which the Lord God has placed you, for He created you and formed you to the image of His beloved Son . . . *And yet* all the creatures under heaven, each according to its nature, serve, know and obey their creator better than you.⁵¹

Francis first affirms the status of humans only in order to then humble them in relation to nonhumans. Contemplation of other creatures admonishes humans, for in them we are to see that other creatures spontaneously serve and praise God, while we often seek wealth or power without thought either for our creaturely siblings or for our Creator. Contemplation of one's bird siblings, on this view, is an ascetic practice, a way of dispossessing forms of self made in mastery. If those siblings are facing death by violent forms of mastery, attentiveness to them, including to their

innocence and fundamental impulse to freedom, becomes all the more important. Contemplation of other creatures becomes an exercise in learning to abandon pretenses to mastery.

Some of the greatest practical struggles St. Francis faced were what this abandonment of mastery meant for everyday life and especially for eating. Sometimes he received and ate other animals given as gifts; sometimes he set them free. Sometimes he tried to welcome insects and rodents that tormented his rest; sometimes he banished them. Contemplative kinship did not solve the ambiguities of an embodied existence dependent in every breath on using other creatures. The direction of his effort, however, seems to have been to abjure a property right over other creatures, to receive them always in their own dignity. Entering into friendship and mutual praise with other creatures meant opening oneself to them in ways that would permit their lives to do the work of grace, of undoing false dominion.

On this account, the very difficulty of legal rights for nonhuman creatures could add warrant to their justification. We need not fully understand the interests of other creatures nor how to balance those interests with our own before we make the attempt to consider them. Legal standing would compel societies wholly organized around human welfare (or around concentrated wealth accumulation moralized as “human welfare”) to learn how to consider the interests of nonhumans. Where societies lack the cultural competence to treat other creatures as relations rather than resources, the everyday legal struggle of negotiating nonhuman rights could build epistemological capacities to articulate interest and representation. Instead of recoiling from the difficulty of learning the diversities and interests of the nonhuman world, we could embrace it as a transformative exercise. In short, the rights of nature could become a social practice for unlearning dominion.

That seems in line with why *Laudato Si'* invoked St. Francis on the eve of the 2015 Paris gathering of global leaders to try to manage a crisis caused by wealth's pollution of the planet: rather than trying to solve this problem by the same premises, let kinship with other creatures undo habits of domination. On this view, establishing a democracy of all creatures is not so much a sweet vision of all creation in harmony but rather a transformative discipline for people malformed by the dominion of property. Attending upon other creatures—from birds to wolves to Lake Erie—because we stand in relations of reciprocal duties, tutors humans into authentic freedom.

6. INDIGENOUS ECOLOGICAL GOVERNANCE

Among settler people, resistance to learning political kinship with other creatures may trace to the way Christian dominion theologies of the colonial and modern eras taught people to denigrate as pagan any notion of protocol or politics with more-than-human relations.⁵² One year after Columbus's first voyage to North America, Pope Alexander VI issued a papal bull that helped establish what came to be called the Doctrine of Discovery, offering moral and legal basis for Christian colonists to take Indigenous lands and dismantle their cultural systems. A premise of the discovery doctrine was that Indigenous peoples were not exercising authentic dominion over the land. Political and religious relations with nonhumans were cited as evidence of that lack of dominion. Indigenous political practices involving multispecies kin and reciprocity with nonhuman beings were regarded as barbarous, as remnant forms of paganism and animism that must be stamped out. One justification for colonial Indian schools, now known to have been scenes

of subjugation and terror, was that Indigenous children needed to be separated from pagan lifeways and inducted into the culture of dominion's civilization.

Laudato Si' referred to Indigenous peoples only twice, but its correction of colonial dominion, with justice for vulnerable humans and for the dignity of other creatures grounded in contemplative spirituality, seems to have since propelled Francis into deeper engagement. David Lantigua thinks that "the papal turn to Indigenous Amazonian wisdom shows a maturation, even conversion, of thought from earlier writings and statements."⁵³ While some find that maturation incomplete and I have noted that papal policy on rights of nature seems vague, the posture of learning from Indigenous political ecologies is significant for signaling the practical direction of contemplative spirituality after *Laudato Si'*. That direction was made especially evident in the 2019 Synod of Bishops from the Amazon. The synod's document underscored from the beginning the extent to which it was shaped by voices of Indigenous representatives, and cited *Laudato Si'* in explaining why: "Listening to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor and of the peoples of the Amazon with whom we walk, calls us to a true integral conversion, to a simple and modest style of life, all nourished by a mystical spirituality in the style of St Francis of Assisi."⁵⁴ The connection is made explicitly: a Franciscan version of contemplative life propels the Church toward decolonial justice with Indigenous peoples, the human poor, and the whole living earth.⁵⁵

Francis then seemed to confirm that interpretation in his 2023 *Laudate Deum*. Marking eight years from *Laudato Si'* and candid in its assessment of lost opportunities to slow climate injustice and extinctions since Paris, *Laudate Deum* cites continuously from the Amazonian dialogue in its critique of technocratic dominion and call for a politics that recognizes family relations with other creatures.⁵⁶ Such openness does not threaten the dignity of human persons, writes Pope Francis, but locates it in the contemplative spirituality of St. Francis and Jesus.

That contemplative account of human dignity had already led toward a new posture of learning from Indigenous ecological governance in the years shortly after *LS*. Speaking to the Third Global Meeting of the Indigenous Peoples' Forum in 2017, Francis affirmed that Indigenous people have "the right to prior and informed consent" regarding development on their ancestral lands.⁵⁷ While that might seem anodyne, the reference to right of refusal over what is done on historic territories was much closer to recognition of ecological sovereignty than anything the Vatican had said previously. In the United States there was immediate observation that such teaching implied support for the Standing Rock Sioux opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline. Informed consent to development projects on historic lands would constitute stronger and more extensive governance than Indigenous peoples consistently enjoy. A central claim of the Standing Rock Sioux against the Dakota Access Pipeline aligns with that of several Anishinaabe nations currently opposing the Line 3 pipeline and that of the Bad River Band of the Chippewa suing for removal of Line 5 from their territory. In each case, they argue from their rights of self-governance, which includes rights to maintain important ecological relations, especially relations with waters.⁵⁸ It would take transformative learning in surrounding settler legal regimes to understand those claims correctly, but that does not seem inconceivable.

Again, cultural practices and political procedures that would involve Lake Erie as kin and fellow participant in shared governance are not novel; they seem to have been part of various Anishinaabe political assemblies for centuries. Consider how Kyle Powys Whyte, the Potawatomi scholar of philosophy, reflects from Anishinaabe history to describe a shared characteristic of

Indigenous environmental governance systems: “institutions should be structured to function as conveners . . . of relationships that connect diverse parties (from humans to forests) as relatives with reciprocal responsibilities to one another.”⁵⁹ Insofar as settler people are open to contemplative relations with Lake Erie and to possible legal implications for recognizing the lake’s own dignity, another connection of Contemplative Ecology to rights-based justice follows: their first, most practical step toward multispecies justice would be to fully respect existing treaties with Indigenous nations of the Great Lakes basin, including their right of self-determination to construct environmental governance institutions.

Insofar as mastery notions of dominion continue to shape cultural bias against Indigenous environmental governance, settler respect for treaties and the other forms of governance they permit may require intentionally disavowing bad dominion and opening space to listen anew. In 2022 Pope Francis undertook a “penitential pilgrimage” to North America where he apologized for the Church’s role in the evils of residential church schools in Canada and listened to representatives of First Nations.⁶⁰ Some First Nations leaders asked the pope to revoke the Doctrine of Discovery that authorized the schools in the first place by narrating their role within a dominion story of civilizing pagan cultures. In March 2023 the Vatican formally repudiated it.⁶¹ The apology and the repudiation open space for dominion-shaped people to learn to listen to Indigenous political philosophies and all the relations they may convene.

Whyte argues that Indigenous rights to manage ecological systems of their territory should be understood to include a right to convene all the relationships necessary to that governance, as part of ensuring that all the members of the society fulfill their respective responsibilities. Whyte quotes a multination forum on water governance held by the Chiefs of Ontario, which stated that “water . . . has responsibilities to humans and other forms of life within a system of relationships.”⁶² Lake Erie not only has rights but also responsibilities, including responsibilities to Lake Sturgeon, which has its own social roles and responsibilities. If that sounds strange in settler societies, maybe that says something about their narrow idea of politics, of who can belong to a political assembly and shape its orders of justice.⁶³ In Métis political society “fish are an integral part of Indigenous legal orders,” writes Zoe Todd: “we can and should think through our responsibilities to one another by also considering the duties and obligations we have to fish.” A central practice in that consideration, writes Todd, citing an elder, is “to ask the fish *what they think*” and then see how fish, waters, humans make up a collective of people resisting, surviving, and disrupting settler political orders by making their own law.⁶⁴ In the long stretch of time in which sturgeon, the lake, and Anishinaabe peoples have mutually recognized one another as kin in a shared law-bound society, a regime organized around the notion that only humans have politics is both short and increasingly dubious.

In postcolonial conditions where those reciprocal responsibilities have been degraded, Whyte argues that governance institutions should then “be structured to function as conveners of processes that renew or initiate systems of relationships that form the basis of reciprocal responsibilities among relatives.” Whyte points to a Lake Sturgeon restoration program initiated by the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians, which is organized not just to bring back the endangered fish but also to restore relations among sturgeon, Ottawa people, and lake.⁶⁵ Todd writes of learning from fish how to make political kin with the oil and gas that threaten their waters,

to extend the Indigenous practice of incorporating all the beings of a place into a sustaining legal order.⁶⁶

In rejoinder to the skeptical question of whether legal systems could possibly develop the epistemological competence to recognize the appropriate entities and know their interests, one might simply point to customary Indigenous jurisprudence as evidence that some societies have already overcome those challenges. One reason why some Indigenous movements may organize or support movements to establish rights of nature is that they could protect relations already at the center of their specific governance systems. Moreover, precisely the philosophical and cultural challenges they present to settler jurisprudence would in many cases situate the First Nations of that land to function as (in the eyes of dominant legal regimes) representatives, proxies, or guardians for nonhuman people. Who better to develop procedures for Lake Erie to represent itself than those already schooled in Anishinaabe forms of convening?

That prerogative derives from the sovereignty of specific Indigenous nations with specific lands and waters and would take political form accordingly. Native ecological governance protocols do not present themselves as transportable across land and territory, and they do not necessarily use terms of rights, kin, or persons in identical ways. The point here is just that those insuperable barriers to rights of nature identified by Guim and Livermore have in some cases already been overcome by Indigenous legal regimes. In their proposal for enhanced organizational rights, which would include Indigenous peoples among environmentalist and other organizations, Guim and Livermore partially elevate the multispecies policymaking capacity of Indigenous societies. Yet they leave aside as infeasible the decolonial transformation of dominant cultural forms to recognize and receive claims from multispecies sovereignty already existing in many lands.

A main point from Whyte and Todd, and the many elders and scholars they cite, is that treaty-based recognitions of rights of self-determination for Indigenous peoples must include a right to multispecies relations in ongoing governance. Mass extinction is more than a story about violence against nonhuman species; extinctions are also violence against relations by which people know themselves and political practices through which they reproduce societies. Nonetheless, Whyte observes that non-Indigenous governance would be more successful if it learned how to convene more-than-human relations. Doing so might require of settler societies, he observes, learning to reintegrate spiritual practice and empirical inquiry into environmental relations as part of a more holistic science.⁶⁷

Respecting rights to sovereignty and political self-determination of Indigenous societies may induct settler people into learning how interact with the more-than-human relations and life-forms who participate in those societies. At least it will require them to recognize the possibility. It entails recognizing, as Kim TallBear puts it, that Indigenous societies are often constructed and sustained by making kin beyond the bounds of the human species.⁶⁸ That does not imply, as TallBear herself has pointed out,⁶⁹ supposing that all Indigenous societies are or have been models of ecological sustainability—only that those societies often have and continue to develop their policies with more than only human voices at the table.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, the Potawatomi scholar of botany and culture whose *Braiding Sweetgrass* has become a bestseller in part because of settler interest in learning those practices, writes of learning the “grammar of animacy.” Kimmerer reports that as she was learning

Potawatomi language late in life she found herself struggling with its many verbs and tenses. A lake in English is a noun, but in Potawatomi would be a verb: to be a lake. As that verb is conjugated, the language implicitly conveys a sense of its aliveness, its animacy to the world around it.⁷⁰ But there, by referring to the lake with the pronoun “it,” my English usage just pushed the lake back toward inert object. English de-animates. Just so, writes Kimmerer, colonized thought shapes the imagination of the world and constrains what readers can make of her book.⁷¹ Indigenous peoples who are preserving, transmitting, relearning languages are then also resisting ongoing cultural violence and sustaining the possibility of a society in which water is living and has person-like responsibilities. She writes: “the language reminds us in every sentence of our kinship with all the animate world.” Kimmerer goes on to argue that, for non-Indigenous people, that grammar of animacy and kinship may be “medicine for a broken world.” Regarding Indigenous knowledges as resources for settler societies to heal themselves is ripe for cultural appropriation of Indigenous political thought. Aware of the risk and excluding the possibility of non-Indigenous people “becoming native to place,” Kimmerer writes that she hopes that settler people could at least learn enough from Potawatomi interpretation of their relations to find ground to reestablish legal standing for nonhuman species, for that would protect the Potawatomi futures, including language and governance systems.⁷²

For those of us shaped in the epistemic habits of a colonial version of dominion it may not seem imaginable for politics to encompass responsibilities of waters or for society to include more-than-human persons. For us, learning to listen to Lake Erie and Lake Sturgeon may require practices that feel spiritual or contemplative in the depth of transformation they require—but their purpose is not merely contemplative enhancement of settler lives. Undertaking that learning can be one aspect of decolonial practice, helpful not only for recognizing and respecting Indigenous political societies but also for becoming competent to be governed by them on their lands through learning how to listen to all the voices they include. In both cases, the argument is that rights for nature protect relations by which we may be transformed.

7. CONCLUSION

What is the relation of Contemplative Ecology to multispecies justice amidst climate crisis and mass extinction? Working from the case of Pope Francis’s negotiation with dominion theology, I have shown how his turn to premodern Christian contemplative practices should move toward three forms of rights-based justice: (i) environmental justice claims for vulnerable humans to live in healthy and diverse ecological relations, (ii) procedural justice claims for Indigenous governance, and (iii) rights of nature for direct legal consideration. For those shaped by the moral worldview of modern Christianity, that could raise concerns about the special dignity of humans, affirmed in the doctrine of dominion. I showed how dominion and dignity have been linked in papal teachings, and then how Pope Francis has tried to maintain that link while transforming dominion from practical mastery to contemplative listening. That move has supported the Vatican’s contemporaneous shift in regard for the rights, knowledges, and wisdom of Indigenous peoples.

From these arguments, admitting nonhuman claimants into settler legal and social systems would not erode human dignity but rather dismiss a colonial version of it. What is actually dehumanizing, corrosive of human dignity, is enacting the human as separate and alien from other

creatures, incapable of hearing them yet destined to subject them to mastery. There are other possibilities, worlds in which human dignity is bound up with the waters of Lake Erie and the politics of Lake Sturgeon.

Learning our kin begins from attention, and especially from listening. Just the practice of trying to listen to some other establishes a relation, a moral attending and waiting, that itself becomes the basis of moral significance.⁷³ Contemplative practices are often exercises in difficult listening, of attending upon relations that seem to exceed one's competence. "Practices that will help us feel and respond to the claim of the living world upon our lives" allow people formed in dominant culture to reject the premise that being held to account by nonhumans is infeasible or at best an individual moral experience.⁷⁴ They permit us to refuse the counsel that interior transformation and exterior transformation are unconnected, that the fragmentation and monetization of the attention economy is somehow unconnected from the fraying and impoverishment of Earth's economy. Connecting those lines of transformation is not only spiritually possible but also may be necessary to a reasonable, livable account of climate justice: "If the contemplative tradition has anything to offer us in this moment of acute loss and fragmentation, it is the conviction that this vision of the whole can be restored to our world."⁷⁵ These kin may ask something of you, may indeed properly make demands. Contemplative practices can become formation into the attentive capacities necessary for multispecies justice.⁷⁶

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- ¹⁶ Maurico Guim and Michael A. Livermore, “Where Nature’s Rights Go Wrong,” *Virginia Law Review* 107, no. 7 (November 2021): 1347–1420.
- ¹⁷ The following paragraphs draw out a point made briefly in Willis Jenkins, “The Mysterious Silence of Mother Earth in *Laudato Si’*,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 46, no. 3 (September 2018): 447.
- ¹⁸ Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum* (Vatican City: The Holy See, May 15, 1891), para. 32.
- ¹⁹ John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* (Vatican City: The Holy See, April 11, 1963), para. 3, 9.
- ²⁰ Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* (Vatican City: The Holy See, 1967), para. 22.
- ²¹ John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens* (Vatican City: The Holy See, 1981), para 6.
- ²² John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* (Vatican City: The Holy See, 1991), para. 31.
- ²³ Lynn White Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203–1207.
- ²⁴ Peter Harrison, “Having Dominion: Genesis and the Mastery of Nature,” in *Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present*, ed. R. J. Berry (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 17–31; Elspeth Whitney, “The Lynn White Thesis: Reception and Legacy,” *Environmental Ethics* 35, no. 3 (2013): 13–31.
- ²⁵ Francis I, *Laudato Si’* (Vatican City: The Holy See, 2015)—hereafter cited as *LS*.
- ²⁶ This section draws from Jenkins, “Mysterious Silence,” which comments on some of the same passages from *Laudato Si’*.
- ²⁷ *LS*, para. 25.

- ²⁸ In order to distinguish the contemporary Francis from his medieval namesake, I will use their ecclesial titles.
- ²⁹ *LS*, para. 1.
- ³⁰ *LS*, para. 2. On the gendered figures of nature and humanity in *Laudato Si'*, see Nichole Flores, “‘Our Sister, Mother Earth’: Solidarity and Familial Ecology in *Laudato Si'*,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 46, no. 3 (2018): 463–478.
- ³¹ *LS*, para. 115. It is unclear how intentional is the use of “dignity” here. In the Spanish version it appears as “el valor que tiene el mundo en sí mismo” and in Latin as “intrinsicum bonum.”
- ³² *LS*, para. 11.
- ³³ *LS*, para. 12.
- ³⁴ A classic early text in Christian thought is the 5th-century *De Contemptu Mundi* by Eucherius of Lyon.
- ³⁵ *LS*, para. 246.
- ³⁶ *LS*, para. 200.
- ³⁷ *LS*, para. 115.
- ³⁸ *LS*, para. 10.
- ³⁹ *LS*, para. 42.
- ⁴⁰ Francis I, “Address of the Holy Father,” transcript of speech presented to the members of the General Assembly of the United Nations, United Nations Headquarters, New York, September 25, 2015.
- ⁴¹ Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). The following paragraphs refer to the argument made there and from Jenkins, “Mysterious Silence.”
- ⁴² Quoted in Jame Schaefer, *Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics: Reconstructing Patristic and Medieval Concepts* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009), 157.
- ⁴³ Quoted in Schaefer, *Theological Foundations*, 162.
- ⁴⁴ Quoted in Roger Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature: Tradition and Innovation in Western Attitudes toward the Environment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), chap. 1.
- ⁴⁵ Augustine Thompson, *Francis of Assisi: A New Biography* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), 55.
- ⁴⁶ Sorrell, *St. Francis*, chap. 2. On the various cultural and environmental afterlives of that aspiration, see Carolyn Merchant, *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004).
- ⁴⁷ *Actus-Fioretti* 16, quoted in Sorrell, *St. Francis*, chap. 3.
- ⁴⁸ Sorrell, *St. Francis*, chap. 3.
- ⁴⁹ *LS*, para. 11.
- ⁵⁰ Kenneth Rosenberg et al., “Decline of the North American Avifauna,” *Science* 366, no. 6461 (2019): 120–124.
- ⁵¹ *LS*, para. 29.
- ⁵² “Christian” and “Indigenous” are of course not necessarily antonymous terms: many Indigenous people also identify as Christian, some writing theology that draws from Indigenous cultural sources. Historians of religion would point out that the European Christianity that took shape across the medieval period was itself a product of dialogue and exchange between Mediterranean Christianity and Indigenous practices of Europe. Meanwhile Palestinian Christianity might be considered an uninterrupted expression of Indigenous Christian religiosity.
- ⁵³ David Lantigua, “Translating *Buen Vivir*: Latin American Indigenous Cultures, Stadias Development, and Comparative Religious Ethics,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 51, no. 2 (June 2023): 300.
- ⁵⁴ Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region, “The Amazon: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology—Final Document,” The Holy See, October 26, 2019, para. 17.
- ⁵⁵ “The proclamation of Christ often took place in collusion with the powers that exploited the resources and oppressed the local populations. At the present time, the Church has the historic opportunity to distance itself from the new colonizing powers by listening to the Amazonian peoples.” Special Assembly, “Amazon,” para. 15.
- ⁵⁶ Francis I, *Laudate Deum* (Vatican City: The Holy See). More than half of its citations are from the Amazonian synod.
- ⁵⁷ Francis I, “Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants of the III Global Meeting of the Indigenous People’s Forum,” The International Fund for Agricultural Development, Rome, February 15, 2017.
- ⁵⁸ Nick Estes, *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (New York: Verso Books, 2019); Sâkhitowin Awâsis, “‘Anishinaabe Time’: Temporalities and Impact Assessment in Pipeline Reviews,” *Journal of Political Ecology* 27, no. 1 (2020): 830–852.
- ⁵⁹ Whyte, “Indigenous Environmental Movements,” 564.
- ⁶⁰ Indian Country Today, “Papal Visit: Pope Takes First Step toward Apology,” July 24, 2022, <https://ictnews.org/news/papal-visit-pope-takes-first-step-toward-apology>.
- ⁶¹ In their repudiation, the Vatican holds that it never formally established a teaching called the Doctrine of Discovery: “Joint Statement of the Dicasteries for Culture and Education and for Promoting Integral Human

Development on the ‘Doctrine of Discovery,’” Holy See Press Office, March 30, 2023, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2023/03/30/230330b.html/>.

⁶² Whyte, “Indigenous Environmental Movements,” 569.

⁶³ In an article warning about the way Indigenous cosmologies become abstracted from specific places as they are used by settler thought to reimagine their worlds (as I am here), Vanessa Watts writes: “Habitats and ecosystems are better understood as society from an Indigenous point of view; meaning that they have ethical structures, inter-species treaties and agreements, and further their ability to interpret, understand, and implement.” Vanessa Watts, “Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency amongst Humans and Non Humans (First Woman and Sky Woman go on a European World Tour!),” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 2, no. 1 (2013): 23.

⁶⁴ Zoe Todd, “Refracting the State through Human-Fish Relations: Fishing, Indigenous Legal Orders and Colonialism in North/Western Canada,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 7, no. 1 (2018), quoted at 67 and 60.

⁶⁵ Whyte, “Indigenous Environmental Movements,” 571.

⁶⁶ Zoe Todd, “Fish, Kin and Hope: Tending to Water Violations in Amiskwaciwâskahikan and Treaty Six Territory,” *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 43, no. 1 (2017): 102–107.

⁶⁷ Kyle Powys Whyte, “Critical Investigations of Resilience: A Brief Introduction to Indigenous Environmental Studies & Sciences,” *Daedalus* 147, no. 2 (2018): 136–147.

⁶⁸ Kim TallBear, “Making Love and Relations beyond Settler Sex and Family,” in *Making Kin Not Population*, ed. Adele E. Clark and Donna Haraway (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2018): 18–28; Kim TallBear, “Why Interspecies Thinking Needs Indigenous Standpoints,” *Fieldsights*, November 18, 2011.

⁶⁹ Kim TallBear, “Shepard Krech’s The Ecological Indian: One Indian’s Perspective,” review of *The Ecological Indian*, by Shepard Krech, International Institute for Indigenous Resource Management Publications, September 2000.

⁷⁰ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed, 2013), 49–59.

⁷¹ Robin Wall Kimmerer, “Speaking of Nature,” *Orion*, June 2017.

⁷² Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 49–59.

⁷³ Willis Jenkins, “Coastal Futures Conservatory: Listening as a Model for Integrating Arts and Humanities into Environmental Change Research,” *Environmental Humanities* 13, no. 1 (2021): 201–223.

⁷⁴ Christie, *Blue Sapphire*, 20.

⁷⁵ Christie, *Blue Sapphire*, 334.

⁷⁶ Research and criticism from PhD candidate Kate Tarrant, whose own work on Catholic ecological thought will be transformative, shaped this essay. Ideas here were workshopped and improved through lectures at Miami University of Ohio, Loyola University, Xavier University, and University of Detroit Mercy. Kyle Powys Whyte, in a 2017 conversation about our mutual relations with the lakes, turned around my mind on learning to think with them. Beth Roach remains a teacher on how to listen and learn in support of Indigenous water politics; see one part of her many works in Kasey Jernigan and Beth Roach, “Indigenous Virginia Digital Storytelling Project: A Creation Story,” *Genealogy* 5, no. 4 (2021): 88–98.