

## **Rejoice and Resist: A Spirituality of Activism from *Laudato Si'* of Pope Francis**

Shortly after midnight on March 6, 1854, nine men, stole onto the grounds of the Washington Monument, then under construction. They poisoned the watchdog and, at gunpoint, tied up the night watchman. They went to all this trouble in order to smash a piece of marble and dump it into the Potomac. A call had gone out to world leaders to donate pieces of marble to be incorporated into the monument to the father of the American Republic. This odious hunk of marble has been donated by Pope Pius IX, the head of the Papal States, a territory soon to be lost, but at that time comprising a third of the Italian peninsula. It was absolutely intolerable to these patriots that a piece of stone from a man who was an autocratic ruler, a figure of ignorance and superstition, an enemy of science and reason, could be used to honor the father of the American experiment.

We live in strange times, my friends, since, 163 years later, the successor of George Washington is the figure of autocracy, of ignorance and superstition, an enemy of science and reason; and the successor of Pope Pius IX, Pope Francis, is one of the major world figures who most supports the scientific consensus about climate change; the world figure who speaks with the most urgency about the necessity for a concerted global effort to transition to sustainable energy and who invited an atheist scientist to present at the press conference at which *Laudato Si'* was rolled out. So if you despair of the possibility of radical change – here is a breath takingly radical change for you – but the challenge we face can't wait 163 years.

I want to reflect with you on *Laudato Si'* under the double perspective - Rejoice and Resist. Our resistance, our activism, according to Pope Francis has to be rooted in and refreshed by our ability to rejoice and to praise.

I once heard a talk by Brian Swimme, a physicist and cosmologist, who is often dismissed by his scientific colleagues because of his willingness to explore the spiritual implication of science. He was speaking to a conference of Spiritual Directors International; a group of people who wondered what contribution spiritual direction could make in a world of raising temperatures and acidifying oceans. Swimme identified the roots of climate chaos as primarily spiritual. So the solution was not primarily technological but spiritual. He said that the problem is not that there is a lack of scientific information. Scientific information is plentiful and readily available. The problem is spiritual. This information is not entering the human mind and not being integrated by the human spirit because it is blocked by the dominant story of Western civilization. Unless there is an inner change of that story, no merely technological solution will do the job.

Here are some elements of the dominant story of Western civilization:

-Earth has no intrinsic value but is merely the stage for human activity. This seems to be supported by the Genesis creation story that God took a few days of stage-setting of the universe and then the really important stuff starts to happen when humans appear on the scene. There is a mere few days of pre-history to the human in the Genesis story. But

science tells us that in reality the first eyes developed in the Cambrian period (about 540 million years ago). The incredible beauty of creation unfolded for billions of years without any eye, let alone a human eye, to see it!

-Humans are radically separate from and superior to the rest of Earth.

-In the human person, the eternal element is the spiritual and the body is just the car in which the soul rides around for a relatively short period of time.

-The human person has an inherent dignity and an eternal destiny; Earth does not.

What we have in *Laudato Si'* is astounding: the leader of a religious tradition that helped to form this dominant story, systematically deconstructing it. Pope Francis says:

-Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or a mere setting in which we live (139).

-“Even the fleeting life of the least of beings is the object of God’s love and in its few seconds of existence, God enfolds it with his affection,” (77). So a subatomic particle, a quark, that exists for a millisecond is enfolded in divine affection.

-“There is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, a mountain trail, a dewdrop, a poor person’s face,” (223). Not just the human but all of creation is endowed with a mystical meaning.

-Contemplation or spirituality is not just a journey within, a journey to discover the divine in our souls; rather it is also an outward journey of relationship to everything that exists and to the divine present in Earth.

-That all beings, and indeed God too, live in a web of inter-relationships (240).

-Pope Francis highlights in St. Francis a refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled.

-If Pope Francis has only said this line, it would have been enough for me: “Living our vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience.”

Let that sink in – it’s the most radical thing in *Laudato Si'* for me – that for those who follow the way of Jesus, indeed for any person seeking to live a good life: care of creation is not optional or secondary – therefore it is obligatory and primary. There can be no authentic spiritual life, no authentic human life without it.

Elements of the radical Evangelical right want to promote global violence and aren’t perturbed by the prospect of destruction of Earth’s life systems because their cosmivision is of a final Armageddon in which Earth will be destroyed. For them, human

violence and climate chaos are hastening the day of the final divine conflagration when God will destroy Earth and start over afresh. How different the vision of Pope Francis: “eternal life will be a shared experience of awe in which each creature, resplendently transfigured, will take its rightful place.” All beings, not just the human, are destined together for transfiguration, for transformation not conflagration.

As you know, LS is framed around the first poem written in the Italian language – St. Francis’s Canticum of the Creatures. But Francis only mentions four creatures in his Canticum– earth, air, fire, and water. In medieval cosmology, everything was made of these; they were the building blocks of reality. So all creation is made of the same stuff and all beings are kin to one another. St. Francis with poetic intuition anticipated what science now confirms – everything that exists shares a common origin and is joined in radical relatedness.

“Francis helps us to see that an integral ecology calls for openness to categories which transcend the language of mathematics and biology, and take us to the heart of what it is to be human. Just as happens when we fall in love with someone, whenever he would gaze at the sun, the moon or the smallest of animals, he burst into song, drawing all other creatures into his praise. He communed with all creation, even preaching to the flowers, inviting them ‘to praise the Lord, just as if they were endowed with reason’. 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.”

This quote presents a needed challenge to our activism. Does our activism overwhelm people with unpleasant information? Does it promote feelings of guilt and powerlessness? Or does our activism awaken something in people that is akin to falling in love?

Pope Francis reminds us that our resistance, our activism has to be rooted in relationship with creation. If we spend more time at meetings than we do outside, something is the matter. We invite you, at the end of the day, instead of rushing off to the next thing – to spend some time on this beautiful land and water. That’s a practical way of acting against the mental construct we have – that a day spent talking with other people is of more value than a day listening to Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brother Air, Sister Water.

The sisters I work for sponsor a college on our campus, the College of Saint Elizabeth. One of the core courses is called “Earth: Yours, Mine, and God’s” – it attempts to promote Earth literacy through an inter-disciplinary approach that combines Earth Science, theology and philosophy. In this course I show students a slide of ten corporate logos – the Nike swoosh, McDonald’s golden arches, etc. There has never been a student who couldn’t identify everyone of them. Then I show slides of the trees and plants on the campus – and there’s rarely a student who can identify even the most common of them – oak, pine, crocus. When global marketing has so thoroughly colonized the consciousness of the young, we are in deep spiritual trouble.

The famous activist, founder of 350.org, Bill McKibben wrote a book whose title is *Eaarth* – with the extra “a”. McKibben says that the human presence of the planet has now so altered the planetary life systems that it is no longer the same Earth on which humans first appeared so it needs a new name. Even with his sense of urgency over climate chaos, McKibben says – Earth will never be more beautiful than it is now and I want to spend every minute I can enjoying that beauty.

Kenneth Leech was an Anglican priest who spent most of his ministry in the East End of London, historically one of the poorest sections of the city, before recent gentrification. Leech speaks of “the dangers of activism”. I won’t ask for a show of hands but see if you find yourself reflected in this list.

- a. a neglect of inactivity, rest and stillness
- b. a neglect of close friends and neglect of self
- c. a life built on frenzy and compulsive business (I once lived with a priest from Nicaragua who said, “No American ever answers no to the question – Are you busy?”)
- d. a constant sense of urgency and lack of time
- e. a tendency to despise such things as beauty, joy, music, amusement, laughter, and dancing and to see them as luxuries.
- f. the commitment to pseudo-certainty – no room for doubt, perplexity or uncertainty
- g. a spirituality of indignation, frustration, and condescension that often turns to bitterness and pessimism in middle age.

Pope Francis devotes a section of LS to Sabbath: a day when we do not struggle to reshape the world according to our plans and agendas but during which we receive reality as a gift. How many of us practice Sabbath on even a monthly basis, let alone on a weekly basis?

Pope Francis says, “Christian spirituality incorporates the value of relaxation and festivity. We tend to demean contemplative rest as something unproductive and unnecessary.” He calls us to “a prophetic and contemplative lifestyle, one capable of deep enjoyment free of the obsession with consumption.” Do people perceive in our often frenzied activism anything that looks like “deep enjoyment”? If we want to challenge at a profound level our capitalist culture that birthed climate chaos, contemplation and sabbath are the most counter-culture things we can do.

W.H.Auden wrote a poem on the death of Yeats: *In Memory of W.B. Yeats*

Follow, poet, follow right  
To the bottom of the night,  
With your unconstraining voice  
Still persuade us to rejoice.  
With the farming of a verse  
Make a vineyard of the curse,

Sing of human unsuccess  
In a rapture of distress.  
In the deserts of the heart  
Let the healing fountains start,  
In the prison of his days  
Teach the free man how to praise.

We will make a vineyard of the curse and release the healing fountain when we environmental activists learn to teach the free person how to praise.

Resist: What kind of resistance flows from a life of praise and rejoicing?

I don't know if the saying is original to him, but one of my heroes and mentors, peace activist Philip Berrigan often said: "Dissent without resistance is consent." If we are merely noticing and disagreeing but not resisting, we are allowing ourselves to be carried along by the tide of our own destruction.

What we are resisting is what Pope Francis calls "the technocratic paradigm." This model

- is a model of confrontation and control;
- is based on the false notion of unlimited growth (Has there every been a politician of any party who did not promise to "grow the economy.");
- is reductionist in reducing everything to a question of science or technology;
- dominates economic and political life;
- sees profit as the only criterion;
- fosters a kind of specialization that blinds us to the big picture.

Our resistance must be rooted in what Francis calls "integral ecology" – not merely a matter of adding ecology and stirring, of green washing and trendy marketing:

"Given the scale of change, it is no longer possible to find a specific, discrete answer for each part of the problem. It is essential to seek comprehensive solutions which consider the interactions within natural systems themselves and with social systems. We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature."

Since a mindset that sees the human as separate from Earth is what got us into climate chaos, only an approach which sees the integral flourishing of Earth can save us.

Many of you have probably read Naomi Klein's daunting 2014 book *This Changes Everything*. She finds good news in climate chaos. If we choose to face it, it will also force us to face every intractable human problem as well. Unregulated global

capitalism and melting glaciers and women abused by Harvey Weinstein are just different faces of the same planetary phenomenon.

In her 2017 book *No is Not Enough*, Klein affirms that people need to be galvanized by a utopian vision; “we need to exercise the utopian muscle.” We need to revive the memories of the labor movement, the women’s movement, the civil rights movements, when ordinary people were galvanized to act for great causes...and won. I was privileged a few years ago to visit the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta where Martin Luther King was pastor. What most impressed me was not the beautiful sanctuary and the pulpit which was the site of MLK’s powerful preaching – it was the church basement. It looked like every basement of a house of worship that you’ve ever seen – cracked green linoleum floor, long folding tables and chairs, battered coffee pots. It was also holy ground because it was there that ordinary people dreamed, and plotted and planned and strategized, over and over, for years; they exercised their utopian muscle – and of such people revolutions are made.

Again, Pope Francis reminds us in LS :”Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new start, despite their mental and social conditioning. We are able to take an honest look at ourselves, to acknowledge our deep dissatisfaction, and to embark on new paths to authentic freedom. No system can completely suppress our openness to what is good, true and beautiful, or our God-given ability to respond to his grace at work deep in our hearts. I appeal to everyone throughout the world not to forget this dignity which is ours. No one has the right to take it from us,” ( 205).

A special strength of LS is the attention Pope Francis gives to indigenous peoples:

“In this sense, it is essential to show special care for indigenous communities and their cultural traditions. They are not merely one minority among others, but should be the principal dialogue partners, especially when large projects affecting their land are proposed. For them, land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God and from their ancestors who rest there, a sacred space with which they need to interact if they are to maintain their identity and values. When they remain on their land, they themselves care for it best. Nevertheless, in various parts of the world, pressure is being put on them to abandon their homelands to make room for agricultural or mining projects which are undertaken without regard for the degradation of nature and culture, (146).

I’m sure all of us were moved by the resistance at Standing Rock– an absolutely stunning example of the kind of world we are working for. On the table in front of me is one of the tags worn by those at Standing Rock who were practicing civil disobedience by risking arrest. A Native Elder at Standing Rock commented – the most important thing is not that we stop the pipeline; the most important thing is that we had indigenous peoples and colonizers living together trying to learn a new relationship with the land.

You may have seen in the news recently that Pope Francis has called for a high level meeting, a “synod” for the Amazon basin; the first time to my knowledge that a synod was call not for a country or group of people but for a bioregion. And one of Francis’s goals for this synod is to make indigenous peoples “principal dialogue partners.”

Our resistance must mean a lot of showing up for one another, across usual ideological and cultural lines. As Naomi Klein observes, echoing Pope Francis:

“Instead of ranking issues, we start from the premise that we live in a time of multiple, intersecting crises, and since all of them are urgent, we cannot fix them all sequentially. What we need are integrated solutions, concrete ideas for how to radically bring down emissions while creating huge numbers of unionized jobs and delivering meaningful justice to those who have been abuse and excluded under the current extractive economy.” (Klein, 2017, p.238)

Environmental activists are often off-putting by the unintentional impression we give that the polar bear on the melting glacier is more compelling to us than the minimum wage worker. We in the environmental movement need to be not just in our echo chambers but be in conversation with multiple partners in our polarized society. It’s a time for strange bedfellows and unconventional alliances.

Pope Francis tells us that our utopian muscle is also strengthened by essential, small gestures. There was an article in *Orion* magazine last year called “Forget Shorter Showers” by Derek Jensen. He says that it’s meaningless for us to take shorter showers as a gesture of sustainability. More than 90 percent of the water used by humans is used by agriculture and industry. The remaining 10 percent is split between municipalities and actual living breathing individual humans. Collectively, municipal golf courses use as much water as municipal human beings. So take your luxuriant 20 minute shower as long as you’re advocating against Bechtel, Nestlé, and Pepsi Cola. Jensen has an important element of truth but he misses the point. Of course we have to protest industrial use of water and commodification of water. But we also have to act out of the spirit that water is sacred. No parent says, “I have four kids; it’s no big deal if I loose one. I can always get another.” All that water wasted down the drain of my shower is sacred. Without that inner spirit of awe and sense of kinship with our precious Sister Water, all our protesting of Bechtel or Pepsi will not bring about the new world we need. And so Pope Francis says:

“There is a nobility in the duty to care for creation through little daily actions, and it is wonderful how education can bring about real changes in lifestyle. Education in environmental responsibility can encourage ways of acting which directly and significantly affect the world around us, such as avoiding the use of plastic and paper, reducing water consumption, separating refuse, cooking only what can reasonably be consumed, showing care for other living beings, using public transport or car-pooling, planting trees, turning off unnecessary lights, or any number of other practices. All of these reflect a generous and worthy creativity which brings out the best in human beings.

Reusing something instead of immediately discarding it, when done for the right reasons, can be an act of love which expresses our own dignity,” (211).

Wendell Berry, patriarch of the American environmental movement, wrote a biography of Harlan and Anna Hubbard who lived a Walden Pond life on the banks of the Ohio River. They live near the site of a local campaign against a power plant in which, to everyone’s amazement, they declined to participate.

“Later, I understood that by the life they led Harlan and Anna had opposed the power plant longer than any of us, and not because they had been, or ever would be its “opponents.” They were opposed to it because they were opposite to it, because their way of life joined them to everything in the world that was opposite to it. What could be more radically or effectively opposite to a power plant than to live abundantly with no need for electricity?”

If our activism is based on anger, ego, violence, grand gestures – it won’t get us where we need to go. “To live abundantly with no need of electricity” is the ultimate resistance. What motivates *Laudato Si’* and must motivate us is abundant life. As Pope Francis says, “Rather than a problem to be solved, the world is a joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and praise,” (87).

To conclude our reflection, I invite you to share with me a Buddhist vow. Usually, Buddhist vows are famous for flexing the utopian muscle – “Though beings are numberless, I vow to save them all.” This one invites us to the more modest goal of not burning out.

Aware of suffering and injustice, I, \_\_\_\_\_, am working to create a more just, peaceful, and sustainable world. I promise, for the benefit of all, to practice self-care, mindfulness, healing, and joy. *I vow to not burn out.*

Mushim Patricia Ikeda

May our resistance flower from the rich soil of joy!

Rev. Terrence J. Moran  
Convocation of ROAR (Religious Organizations Along the River)  
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