

A Comparative Analysis of *Laudato Si* and the Rights of Nature Paradigm

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Abstract

The “Rights of Nature” movement promotes a shift in the way we relate with Nature and believes that our ecosystem has inalienable rights that must be recognized and honored, much like our human rights. In the Catholic Church, Pope Francis, is also a fervent advocate of caring for our environment. In 2015, he wrote the first official document in the Catholic Church that specifically deals entirely on this topic entitled *Laudato Si* or “On Care for Our Common Home”. This paper provides a comparative analysis of the essential tenets of the Rights of Nature paradigm and the Catholic teaching on caring for the environment as presented in Pope Francis’ encyclical letter *Laudato Si*. It employs the Comprehensive Literature Review (CLR) methodology in identifying the common themes and points of convergence between the two views. The findings suggest that there are similarities and differences which may be grouped into three areas or themes: objectives, basic premise, and course of action. This paper also provides an attempt to clarify Pope Francis’ opinion about ascribing “rights” to nature. Finally, the findings of this study could be very helpful in providing essential input for those involved in fields related to environmental preservation and conservation.

Keywords: *Environment, rights of nature, Laudato Si, comparative analysis*

Introduction

Our environment is in crisis. Environmental problems such as “biodiversity decline, mass extinction, climate disruption and planetary toxification” are getting worse (Bradshaw, Blumstein, & Ehrlich, 2021) and currently, there is a consensus among scientists worldwide, as published by the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) and the United Nations’ Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR), that we, human beings, are the cause of this worsening crisis, particularly that of climate change which is the “most pressing environmental risk” we are facing (UCS, 2018; OHCHR, 2019). In fact, very few people, if any, would disagree to the opinion that we have nobody else to blame for what is happening to our environment but ourselves. Human activities, such as those that cause pollution, do not just negatively impact the environment in countless ways but also affect the life conditions, well-being, and the enjoyment of the different rights of people. Environmental crisis has greatly affected our individual rights to live in a kind of environment that is beneficial for us. Thus, the United Nations’ Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR) in its 2019 report noted the “effects of climate change on the enjoyment of

human rights and the crucial role for human rights” in facing our current environmental problems. In the said document, the connection between environmental problems and the exercise of human rights was highlighted. Because of this connection, the said United Nations’ report suggested a rights-based approach in dealing with the environmental crisis. A rights-based approach is described as an approach to “climate change from a human rights perspective”. This approach “highlights the principles of universality and non-discrimination, emphasizing that rights are guaranteed for all persons, including vulnerable groups” (OHCHR, 2019). In other words, it is an approach that highlights the integration and interrelationship between human rights and environmental protection. Pathak (2014) described this approach to environmental protection as that which emphasizes that “Environmental protection and human rights are interrelated, interconnected, and mutually responsive as both of them are intended to the well-being of humanity. Safe and healthy environment is the pre-condition for the enjoyment of fundamental human rights” (p. 1). There are, however, several notions of this rights-based approach as noted by Shelton (2002). The first one considers environmental protection as a pre-requisite for the enjoyment of human rights. It considers protection of the environment as an essential means to promote and protect human beings’ right to a decent life and well-being. Here, environmental protection is simply a means to an end. Thus, we have the duty to take care of our environment because we have the right to a safe and healthful environment. Brei (2013) calls it the “right to nature”. The second understanding of this rights-based approach “views human rights as essential elements to achieving environmental protection, which has as a principal aim the protection of human health”. The third approach underscores the “indivisible and inseparable” link between human rights and environmental protection and thus considers the right of all human beings to a “safe and healthy environment as an independent substantive human right” (Shelton, 2002, p. 2). Brei (2013) however, describes another notion under this rights-based approach not mentioned by Shelton (2002) and which I consider as the fourth notion. This fourth approach is the “rights of nature” (RN) approach. This approach is different from the first three because instead of focusing on the rights of the human beings, this approach holds that human beings are not the only ones who possess inalienable rights. Other created beings, particularly, nature, have rights too and “these rights correspond to duties on our part” (Brei, 2013, p.5). Our duty to take care of the environment is rooted not on our duty to take care of the well-being of other people nor on our right to live in a healthful surrounding but rather on our duty to respect and promote the rights of nature. In the Catholic Church, the current ecological crisis and the Christian duty of caring for the environment is also a very important topic and the current pope, Pope Francis, is an ardent advocate of environmental preservation and conservation. In 2015, he published the first ever encyclical letter that deals entirely on this topic which is entitled *Laudato Si* and with the English title “On Care for our Common Home”. The “rights of nature” paradigm which is based on the view that just like human beings, nature has rights that must be protected and respected and the Catholic Church’s teaching on environmental protection particularly Pope Francis’ encyclical letter *Laudato Si*, are the two foci of this paper.

Specifically, this qualitative research paper tries to answer the questions: What are the similarities and differences between the “rights of nature” paradigm and the Catholic teaching on caring for the environment as expressed in the encyclical letter Laudato Si? How can the notion that Nature has rights be evaluated from the point of view of Laudato Si?

Methodology

To answer the above questions, I followed the Comprehensive Literature Review (CLR) Methodology suggested by Onwuegbuzie and Frels (2016). CLR is a seven-step model subdivided into three phases: exploration phase, interpretation phase, and communication phase. The exploration phase consists of the following: “exploring beliefs and topics, initiating the search, storing and organizing information, selecting/deselecting information, and expanding the search to include one or more MODES (Media, Observations, Documents, Experts, Secondary data)” (Onwuegbuzie & Frels, 2016). The second phase, the interpretation phase, involves analyzing and synthesizing information, while the third phase, the communication phase, is focused on the preparation and presentation of the report. Thus, the preceding discussion is the result of the first and the second phases and corresponds to the third phase of the CLR model.

Results and Discussion

This section of the paper is divided into four parts. Initially, I present a synthesis of the essential tenets of the “rights of nature” (RN) paradigm based on the opinions of its selected proponents. Secondly, I discuss the Catholic teaching on taking care of the environment with particular focus on the encyclical letter Laudato Si. Thirdly, I present the themes and points of convergence of the RN paradigm and the Catholic Church’s teaching. In the fourth part, I present a discussion on the view that nature has rights. I argue that although Laudato Si (LS) falls short of using the exact term “rights of nature” some of the basic principles of the rights of nature paradigm may be found in Laudato Si.

Rights of Nature Paradigm

“Rights of Nature” paradigm is based on the opinion that other created beings, just like us humans, have rights (Brie, 2013). It is based on the main premise that “ecosystems and natural communities have the right to exist and flourish, and people, communities and governments have the authority to defend those rights on behalf of those ecosystems and communities” (Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature, n.d.). Brie (2013) divides it into two parts: one that is focused on the protection of animal rights and the other that protects the “non-animal (and non-human) rights—i.e., the rights of plants, rivers, landscapes, and other natural features” (Brie, 2013, p. 398). As a paradigm, it offers a new ecological perspective that provides a kind of personhood to nature to better promote and ensure its protection. This perspective has now become the catalyst in a global movement that promotes the rights of Nature such as rivers, lakes, and forests. In this paradigm, Nature is defined broadly as “ecosystems, rivers, streams, lakes, oceans, mountains, and even individual trees” (Chilton & Jones, 2020).

La Follette (2019) holds that the present movement that promotes the “rights of Nature” idea started with the opinions of Christopher Stone, a professor at the University of California

School of Law, in 1972 when he wrote the article “Should Trees Have Standing” in support of those who were protecting the Mineral King Valley in the Sierra Nevada of California from a planned building of a recreation and lodging facilities. His article caught the attention of Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas who wrote that “Contemporary public concern for protecting nature’s ecological equilibrium should lead to the conferral of standing upon environmental objects to sue for their own preservation” (La Follette, 2019). The first country to include the rights of Nature in its constitution was Ecuador in 2008. Today, more and more countries around the world are recognizing the rights of Nature and adopting laws that respect and protect the rights of nature such as Colombia (Vargas-Chaves, Rodríguez, Cumbe-Figueroa, & Mora-Garzón, (2020), New Zealand, India (Knauß, 2018) and Bolivia (Berros, 2021).

Although currently, there are countries with legal systems and jurisprudence that protect the rights of Nature, this paradigm is first and foremost a perspective, not just a legal structure. It is a perspective that provides Nature the rights to exist, to thrive, to be protected and maintained, just like human beings. Furthermore, it involves the “concept that humans and Nature are in a relationship, rather than Nature merely providing a hoard of natural resources for indiscriminate human use” (La Follette, 2019). It holds that we need to restore our relationship with Nature – a kind of relationship that humans used to have but was somehow set aside and forgotten (although we can still see this kind of relationship among indigenous communities) with the coming of industrial age.

Ito (2017) further explains that the main intention of this “rights of Nature” paradigm is to deviate people’s perspective from considering Nature as “objects or property” without “legal personality or rights”. She explains that the view that considers the natural world as objects or property “fuels an economic paradigm based on endless growth that is coupled with the destruction of nature - which ultimately benefits no-one” (Ito, 2017).

Laudato Si and the Catholic Teaching on Caring for the Environment

Taking care of our environment has been highlighted in the teaching of the Catholic Church for many decades. However, it was only after the Second Vatican Council when official church documents started to include specific pronouncements and discussions about it. These pronouncements are normally within the context of the social teaching of the Catholic Church. For instance, in 1971, Pope Paul VI, in his encyclical letter *Octagesima Adveniens* (OA) which was published on the 80th anniversary of the encyclical letter *Rerum Novarum*, included a paragraph that talks about the environment. He wrote

“While the horizon of man is thus being modified according to the images that are chosen for him, another transformation is making itself felt, one which is the dramatic and unexpected consequence of human activity. Man is suddenly becoming aware that by an ill-considered exploitation of nature he risks destroying it and becoming in his turn the victim of this degradation. Not only is the material environment becoming a permanent menace - pollution and refuse, new illness and absolute destructive capacity - but the human framework is no longer under man's control, thus creating an environment for tomorrow which may well be intolerable. This is a wide-ranging social problem which concerns the entire human family” (OA, #21).

In the same year, the Synod of Bishops published the document “Justice in the World” which underscored the proliferation of different forms of injustices that disregard the rights of people, particularly the poor, including the injustice being done by richer nations whose “material demands” cause the destruction of the environment (Synod of Bishops, 1971).

But it was Pope John Paul II who first presented a systematic and substantial discussion of the Catholic teaching on ecology and our responsibility to take care of our environment and considered it a “moral issue”. From his very first encyclical letter *Redemptor Hominis* (1979) he has underscored destruction of environment as a form of social injustice caused by the lack of “right relationship” not only between human beings but also with the environment, and the wrong interpretation of man’s “dominion over the earth”. In the encyclical letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (SRS), John Paul II included “ecological concerns” as one of those that must be taken into consideration when talking about development and suggested that there is a “need to respect the integrity and the cycles of nature and to take them into account when planning for development, rather than sacrificing them to certain demagogic ideas about the latter” (SRS, #26). This same regard on the importance of taking care of our environment are present in many other documents and pronouncements of John Paul II. For instance, in the encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (EV) John Paul II wrote that

“As one called to till and look after the garden of the world (cf. Gen 2:15), man has a specific responsibility towards the environment in which he lives, towards the creation which God has put at the service of his personal dignity, of his life, not only for the present but also for future generations. It is the ecological question-ranging from the preservation of the natural habitats of the different species of animals and of other forms of life to “human ecology” properly speaking - which finds in the Bible clear and strong ethical direction, leading to a solution which respects the great good of life, of every life” (EV, #42).

Pope Benedict XVI continued the teaching of his predecessors by expressing in his pronouncements the same regard on taking care of our environment as a Christian duty and the connection between social justice and ecology. His continuous emphasis on humanity’s responsibility to care for creation got him the nickname “the green pope” (Stone, 2008).

The current pope, Pope Francis, pushed the church’s teaching further by writing an entire encyclical letter on environmental issues entitled *Laudato Si* with the English title “On Care for our Common Home” which is addressed to all people of the world (Francis, 2015). This is a landmark document in the Catholic Church in terms of its focus on the responsibility of all human beings to care for the environment, the widespread environmental crisis we are all facing, the interconnectedness of all created beings, and its contribution in providing suggestions on possible “lines of approach and action” (LS, #163-201).

Aside from underscoring that the reality of the environmental crisis is a fact, that this crisis affects the quality of human life, that humans are the roots of this crisis, and that there is a weak international political response to the crisis, Pope Francis emphasized the following main tenets of the Catholic Church on our responsibility to the environment:

1. Caring for our environment is our duty.

Caring for our environment is not something optional. It is a God-given instruction to us as “stewards” of this earth. It is an essential part of the Christian faith. To be a Christian includes becoming caretakers of God’s creation. Pope Francis cites Biblical narratives to highlight the teaching that “human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbor, and with earth itself” (LS, #66). He underscored the teaching that the universe is a “continuing revelation of the Divine – a gift from the outstretched hand of the Father of all (LS, #76) where all created beings are linked together “by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family” (LS, #89). Furthermore, he emphasized that the harm we do to our environment is a “crime against the natural world” and “a sin against ourselves and a sin against God” (LS, #8).

2. Integral ecology as the new paradigm.

In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis taught that this ecological crisis “demands an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature” (LS, #139). Hence, he proposed an “integral ecology” as the new paradigm. This paradigm is founded on the “conviction that everything in the world is connected” (LS, #16). Citing biblical narratives to explain and support this view, Pope Francis further declares that “These ancient stories, full of symbolism, bear witness to a conviction which we today share, that everything is interconnected, and that genuine care for our own lives and our relationships with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice and faithfulness to others” (LS,#70).

This integral ecology paradigm also includes the integral development of each part of reality. It includes the respect and protection of all individuals in all stages of growth and development, be it an endangered species, a human embryo, a poor person, a river, etc. Thus, there exists an intimate connection between the care and protection of the natural world and the human affairs.

3. The necessity of ecological conversion and different forms of dialogue.

Pope Francis underscores the necessity of changing one’s attitude or a kind of “ecological conversion” for a lasting change to happen. He also suggests different forms of dialogue in response to the need for a higher awareness, appreciation, and realization of an integral ecology. According to him, dialogue is necessary for us to “escape the spiral of self-destruction which currently engulfs us” (LS, #163). These paths of dialogue are dialogue with all the people of the world (#3), dialogue with different philosophical thoughts (#63), dialogue between religions and science (#199), between economy and politics in local and international communities (#165) and even among different organizations and movements (#14).

Points of Convergence

After analyzing the main tenets of RN paradigm and the Catholic teaching on caring for the environment, specifically Pope Francis’ pronouncements in the encyclical letter *Laudato Si*, several points of convergence in their views were identified. These points were grouped together into the following themes: objectives, basic premise, and course of action.

1. Objectives

The RN paradigm aims to lead human beings not only to the realization of the immense ecological crisis we are all facing but more importantly, to the conviction to respect and protect Nature not only for ourselves but because it is what Nature deserves. This is founded on the perspective that humans are not the only ones with inalienable rights that must be respected and protected. Human beings must recognize that Nature too, has rights. This is a kind of paradigm shift from the prevailing perspective that Nature can be human beings' property and exists solely for our benefit. The Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature (GARN) states that

“It is the recognition that our ecosystems – including trees, oceans, animals, mountains – have rights just as human beings have rights. Rights of Nature is about balancing what is good for human beings against what is good for other species, what is good for the planet as a world. It is the holistic recognition that all life, all ecosystems on our planet are deeply intertwined”(GARN, n.d.).

Although the development of legal systems that will recognize the legal standing and rights of Nature and will provide a legal personhood to nature is one of the aims of the rights of Nature movement, it is not their primary concern and it is just a means to an end. The utmost objective is to enhance the way people relate with Nature and realize a world where justice and harmony among all beings prevail.

Similarly, a just and harmonious relationship between human beings and the whole of creation is at the heart of the Catholic teaching on environmental protection. In Laudato Si, it is clear that the aim is to instill among human beings the commitment to respect and protect Nature because the whole creation is a result of God's love (LS, #77) and God entrusted it to our care “in order to protect it and develop its potential” (LS, #78). Pope Francis calls the attention of the readers to the alarming state of our planet, which he calls our common home, and urges everyone to care for our environment. Thus, he urges us to a renewed relationship with our neighbor, with the whole of creation, and with God (LS, #66). This is, in fact, the main reason why for the first time in the history of the Catholic teaching, an entire encyclical was dedicated to this topic.

Furthermore, just like the RN paradigm that negates an anthropocentric worldview, LS denies anthropocentrism and endeavors to clarify that we, human beings are not separated from Nature. Pope Francis wrote that “Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves. We are part of Nature” (LS, #139).

Finally, just like the RN paradigm, that aims to bring about a shift in people's perspective, Pope Francis aims for a change of heart, which he calls “ecological conversion” that leads to an “ecological spirituality grounded in the convictions of our faith” (LS, #216). Speaking of those “committed and prayerful Christians” who disregard the current ecological crisis and are unmindful of their Christian duty to the environment, he wrote

“So, what they all need is an “ecological conversion”, whereby the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them. 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” (LS, #217).

2. Basic premise

The main premise of RN paradigm, as the name suggests, is the view that Nature has rights, and these rights are being violated when we fail to respect and protect the environment. The current ecological crisis is caused by human activities and it will only get worse if we do not change our perspective about Nature and the way we relate with Nature. We must realize that we are in a relationship with Nature. We are not above Nature, and the needs of Nature must come before human needs “so that human needs are reconfigured within Nature’s limits” (La Follette, 2019). Ito (2017) explains Nature’s rights in terms of a “hierarchy of rights”. She clarifies that Nature’s rights is the most fundamental rights and is above human rights. She wrote that

“This then leads to a natural hierarchy of rights with Nature’s rights as our most fundamental rights because our life depends on it, then human rights as a subsystem of Nature’s rights - and then property or corporate rights as a subsystem of human rights . . . the rights are in service of each other rather than in conflict - working synergistically to protect the integrity of the whole . . . human activities have to be beneficial for humans as well as nature - or its not viable in the long run” (Ito, 2017).

Nature does not only have rights. Nature’s rights to exist and flourish is more fundamental than our rights. Furthermore, RN paradigm underscores the “Primacy of nature’s protection and flourishing over natural resources extraction and use” and to realize sustainability, “human needs must be reconfigured within Nature’s limits”. Thus, actions that violate the rights of Nature are forms of injustice and must never be tolerated.

On the other hand, Pope Francis’ views in *Laudato Si* revolves around the basic tenet of universal communion - that all created beings form a “universal family linked by unseen bonds” (LS, #89). He wrote that the whole universe belongs to God and because of this all created beings are interconnected. He further states that “God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement” (LS, #89). We are not just in a relationship with Nature, we are part of it (LS, #139). Moreover, Pope Francis highlights that Nature is the locus of God’s presence (LS, #88) and the whole of creation is “imbued with His radiant presence” (LS, #100). Thus, created beings have a value of their own. Citing the Catechism of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis explains that

“In our time, the Church does not simply state that other creatures are completely subordinated to the good of human beings, as if they have no worth in themselves and can be treated as we wish. . . . where other creatures are concerned, “we can speak of the priority of being over that of being useful”. The Catechism clearly and forcefully criticizes a distorted anthropocentrism: “Each creature possesses its own particular goodness and perfection... Each of the various creatures, willed in its own being, reflects in its own way a ray of God’s

infinite wisdom and goodness. Man must therefore respect the particular goodness of every creature, to avoid any disordered use of things””(LS, #69).

However, Pope Francis maintains that human beings possess a God-given dignity not equivalent to that of the natural world. He holds that human beings and the natural world are not on the same level (LS, #90).

Lastly, Pope Francis teaches that the issue of caring for our environment is a moral issue and “to commit a crime against the natural world is a sin against ourselves and a sin against God” (LS, #8).

3. Course of action

Rights of Nature proponents suggest ecological governance as the appropriate course of action. Ecological governance is a kind of governance that provides high regard to ecological welfare and “places human activities within the framework of Nature’s laws and limitations” (La Follette, 2019). One of its main characteristics is the provision of legal structures that affords legal personhood to Nature, however, ecological governance is much more than that. More than the legal structures, ecological governance aims for a change in the way human beings understand and perceive Nature and its role in human life.

Similarly, Laudato Si proposes integral ecology, ecological conversion, dialogue, and ecological education and spirituality. All of these are interconnected and overlapping concepts, after all, integral ecology is founded on the view that “everything is connected”. As the main response to the challenge of ecological crisis, integral ecology paradigm must prevail in the way individuals, communities, and governments proceed in their different activities. But before it actually happens, a kind of “ecological conversion’ must take place within the individual members of the society. Ecological conversion involves a change within the individual and results in a renewed way of relating with the environment. Pope Francis holds that only when the whole community experiences this kind of conversion can a truly lasting change happen (LS, #219). Ways of fostering this kind of conversion involves different forms of dialogue, such as dialogue among all the people of the world, among local and international communities, among philosophical thoughts, among religion and science, science and culture, economy and politics, and even among different organizations and movements. Pope Francis recognizes that these goals demand a “long path of renewal” (LS, #202) and will become a reality a continuous “ecological education” and living out a certain way of life or spirituality that conforms to our calling as Christians.

Table 1 below presents a summary of the different themes and points of convergence among the main principles in the Catholic teaching on caring for the environment as expressed in the encyclical letter Laudato Si and the essential principles expressed by the proponents of the “rights of Nature” paradigm.

Table 1

The Different Themes and Points of Convergence

Themes	Rights of Nature (RN)	Laudato Si (LS)
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To bring about a paradigm shift • To Restore human relationship with nature 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To lead people to an ecological conversion • To lead people to a renewed

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To make people recognize that Nature has rights • Lead people to a conviction to respect and protect Nature 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • relationship with God’s creation • To make people honor God in creation by respecting and protecting the whole of creation
Basic premise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humans caused the environmental degradation • Humans and nature are in a relationship • Nature has rights • Human needs must be reconfigured within nature’s limits • “Primacy of nature’s protection and flourishing over natural resources extraction and use” • Destruction of nature is an injustice against nature and violates the rights of nature. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “We are the roots of the ecological crisis” • Universal communion of all created beings • Nature is entitled to protection and respect. We must respect creation and its inherent laws. • “Priority of <i>being</i> over that of <i>being useful</i>” • God is also present in nature. • We are part of nature. • Destruction of nature is an injustice against nature and a form of sin.
Course of Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ecological governance • Restore sustainable living within nature’s limits • Legal structures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integral ecology • Ecological conversion • Dialogue • Ecological education and spirituality

On Ascribing Rights to Nature

Central to the RN paradigm is the opinion that Nature has inalienable rights. Is the same stance present in LS? It is clear that “rights of Nature” paradigm and the Catholic teaching on caring for the environment have a lot of similarities and points of convergence. They are not exactly the same but their essential concepts converge on certain points. For instance, both highlight the interconnectedness of human life and Nature, the need to promote a renewed understanding of our duty towards Nature, the worsening degradation of our environment due to human activities, etc. One of the most important among these points is the belief that we need to take care of the environment because it has its own value independent of the value human beings ascribe to it. Rights of Nature paradigm claims this is so because Nature is a “being,” a legal “person” with inalienable rights just like any individual person. Thus, just like human rights, these inalienable rights of Nature must be promoted, respected, and protected and if the need arises, be represented by caring humans in the court of law. LS identifies the source of this innate value of Nature as God himself and proclaims that God is present in each being for “each creature reflects something of God” (LS, #221). It can be observed that LS does not explicitly use the term “rights of Nature”. I would like to argue that when LS talks about human beings’ duty to protect the earth and respect the laws of Nature because of its innate value as God’s creation and when it teaches about justice towards the environment and “covenant between humanity and environment”, LS implicitly agrees to the intention of ascribing to Nature the right to exist, flourish and be protected. However, LS does not extend this view as far as to subscribe to the opinion that Nature is

equal to or higher than human beings in the hierarchy of created beings. LS and RN paradigm differ on this point. LS still maintains that nature and human beings are not on the same level and that human beings possess the unique worth and the tremendous responsibility it entails” (LS, #90) provided by God to him alone. However, this unique dignity given to human beings does not give human beings the right to become “masters” of Nature but rather it gives the foremost responsibility “to protect the earth and to ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations” (LS, #67). For this reason, I believe, Pope Francis, in the said encyclical, probably intentionally avoided the use of the term “rights of Nature” so as not to be misconstrued as promoting a view that denies the unique dignity of human beings as stewards of God’s creation. But at the same time he agrees with RN paradigm that Nature is entitled to all the respect and protection that bearing a “right” entails. In fact, in another document written by Pope Francis he explicitly calls a forest a “being”. He wrote that “the forest is not a resource to be exploited; it is a being, or various beings, with which we have to relate” (Querida Amazonia, #42).

Additionally, he agrees with RN paradigm in denying an “excessive and distorted concept of anthropocentrism” that puts too much emphasis on the dignity of human beings and promotes a “human-centered” consideration of other created beings and leads to a destructive relationship between human beings and Nature. Nature has intrinsic value, independent of human recognition. However, Pope Francis also warns against reducing the value of a human person to “simply one being among others” (LS, #118) for human beings have a unique dignity and role in creation.

Conclusion

“Rights of Nature” paradigm and the Catholic teaching on caring for the environment have commonalities in their opinions which may be summarized into three themes: objectives, basic premise, and course of action. They are united in denouncing the destruction of our environment and in underscoring that we human beings are the cause of this crisis and therefore, we need to do something about it. They both agree that there is no way for humanity to continue existing if we keep on doing what we have been doing. Thus, they both espouse a shift in the way we look at and appreciate the natural world. They both denounce a perspective that considers the natural world as a mere property that humans can own and exploit. For RN, it is because of the “inalienable rights of Nature” to exist and flourish. This “rights of Nature” is much like the human rights that all human beings possess, but more fundamental than human rights and above human rights. Although LS falls short from espousing exactly the same opinion, it agrees with RN that Nature is entitled to the utmost respect and protection from us humans and must be given all the opportunities to exist and flourish by virtue of its innate value as God’s creation “imbued with God’s radiant presence” (LS, #100).

Finally, the clarification on the similarities and differences between the Catholic teaching on caring for environment and the rights of nature paradigm provided by this comparative study could be very helpful in providing essential input for those in different fields related to environmental preservation and conservation. The realization that the official teaching of the Catholic Church supports most of the opinions of the proponents of the rights of nature movement could be an immense impetus in the efforts to “care for our common home”.

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