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ISSN: 2472-2596 (print)
ISSN: 2472-260X (online)

Recommended Citation
Carstens, Phoebe. 2024. To Till and to Keep: Following the Ethical Imperative to Care for Creation Through Gender Exploration and Expression. Obsculta 17, (1) : 78-93. https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta/vol17/iss1/13.

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ABSTRACT:
In light of the recent USCCB document regarding ‘the Moral Limits to Technological Manipulation of the Human Body,’ this essay explores an alternative, transgender-affirming ethical framework drawn from Pope Francis’s Laudato si’. Within this framework, gender-affirming care is presented as fulfilling the call to care for creation through exploration and cultivation of the self.

To Till and to Keep
Following the Ethical Imperative to Care for Creation Through Gender Exploration and Expression

by Phoebe Carstens

In recent months, an increase in legislation aimed at limiting the rights of transgender individuals in America has led to an increase in national and local conversations around gender-related issues. According to the Trans Legislation Tracker, “in just one month [of 2023], the U.S. doubled the number of anti-trans bills being considered across the country from the previous year,” with themes including “attacks on gender-affirming care, education, athletics, birth certificates, religious discrimination, and other
categories.” While the Catholic church has previously been relatively silent on the existence and concerns of transgender individuals, in March 2023, the Committee on Doctrine of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops released their “Doctrinal Note on the Moral Limits to Technological Manipulation of the Human Body.” Ostensibly basing their arguments on natural law, the bishops put forth their assessment of unacceptable medical interventions, particularly as related to gender affirming care, asserting that any interventions that “aim to alter the fundamental order of the body” are morally illicit. Given the scarcity of official Church statements on gender-related issues as well as the authority of the bishops, it would not be unreasonable for readers to assume that this document reflects the position of the greater Church in regards to the ethics of gender transition and the assessment of transgender people. However, despite being quoted in support of the bishops’ argument in this document, the writing of Pope Francis offers a differing view, specifically when read with a queer lens. In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis elucidates an ethical framework which involves three key elements: an openness to and exploration of creation—both in terms of the self and the other—genuine encounter with our neighbors, and solidarity with the poor and vulnerable. These three aspects are required if one is to fully undergo an ecological conversion and fulfill the imperative to care for creation. Furthermore, it is these three aspects, as evident in various queer theologians’ examinations of the transgender experience, that likewise lend themselves to a trans-affirming theology and an ethical imperative not only to respect transgender individuals, but also to exploratively approach one’s identity regardless of gender identity.

Before one can dive into a trans-inclusive reading of *Laudato Si*, it is first necessary to wrestle with the section of the document which specifically speaks to concepts of gender. In section 155, Francis notes that we must accept our bodies as they are. “Valuing one’s own body in its femininity or masculinity,” he says, “is necessary if I am going to be able to recognize

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2 USCCB Committee on Doctrine, *Doctrinal Note on the Moral Limits to Technological Manipulation of the Human Body* (March 20, 2023), 6.
myself in an encounter with someone who is different.” Indeed, in other documents such as *Amoris Laetitia*, Francis speaks at greater length on matters of gender and reinforces the structures of gender essentialism and gender complementarity which are central to Church teachings on marriage and which do not align with a trans-affirming system of ethics. In fact, Craig Ford’s analysis of Francis’ stance towards gender issues identifies not only emphases on gender essentialism and complementarity but also a wariness towards gender-affirming technological intervention that “tempts one into assuming the role of the Creator.” This would certainly seem to align with the bishops’ recent doctrinal note. Yet, one must also consider the fact that throughout his pontificate, Francis has placed incredible emphasis on genuine listening and compassionate encounter with the other. Francis himself has reportedly had regular meetings with transgender people in Rome in a spirit of encounter, not rejection. Most importantly, *Laudato Si* is a 184-page document, and aside from the handful of sections that diverge from a trans-affirming theology, the remainder of the document’s emphasis on exploration, encounter, and solidarity firmly lend themselves to a trans-affirming ethic. While Francis does not explicitly speak about transgender issues and thus one may be hesitant to read *Laudato Si*— written to address the ecological crisis of our world—with a queer lens, Francis himself offers a justification for doing such an exercise in his insistence that environmental issues and social issues cannot be separated. He writes, “We are faced not with two separate crises…but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental.” Caring for creation includes caring for ourselves, our neighbors, and most especially the vulnerable among us, and that includes transgender individuals.

Francis outlines many requirements to act ethically according to this goal of caring for creation, and “his account pays particular attention

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4 Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, apostolic exhortation, Vatican website, April 8, 2016, sec. 56.
7 Francis, *Laudato si’*, sec. 139.
The body and the human person are not separate from nature or separate from the unfolding of the mystery of Creation. For this reason, Francis stresses that individuals must contemplate the world with gladness and praise, witnessing and appreciating the glory of God in his Creation, viewing nature “as a magnificent book in which God speaks to us and grants us a glimpse of his infinite beauty and goodness.” Each creature has something to communicate that reflects God, and as creatures ourselves we are called to seek out that message in ourselves and in others. This is not merely a spiritual matter, either, because “our body itself establishes us in a direct relationship with the environment and with other living beings.” The physical body is of incredible importance and value, because it links each person to nature. The authors of the doctrinal note likewise emphasize the importance of honoring the bodily dimension of human existence, naming the body as “a constitutive part of the human subject, a gift to be received, respected, and cared for as something intrinsic to the person.” Many of those who are unfamiliar with the experiences of transgender people assume that because altering one’s body is often an aspect of being transgender, then trans people must be rejecting nature and Creation because they seem to reject their bodies. As an analysis of various queer theologians will soon show us, however, often the trans experience is quite the opposite: not a rejection, but an exploration and a cultivation.

Indeed, a deep exploration of Creation specifically within oneself is a strong theme both in Laudato Si and in trans-affirming theology. Francis notes the impossibility of truly beholding the glory of Creation without first exploring the self, saying, “we learn to see ourselves in relation to all other creatures: “I express myself in expressing the world; in my effort to decipher the sacredness of the world, I explore my own.” To truly honor creation, one cannot live an unexamined life, with no personal exploration. To fulfill the commandment to love one another in the

9 Francis, Laudato si’, sec. 12.
10 Francis, Laudato si’, sec. 155.
11 USCCB Committee on Doctrine, Doctrinal Note, 7.
12 Francis, Laudato si’, sec. 85.
deepest and most personal way, one must first know oneself. Scholar Rachel Huegerich explains how gender exploration and expression answer this call, saying:

With our evolutionary gift of self-knowledge, we have a deeper understanding of the self to give to others and to love in them. As a mode of expressing our inner selves in a way we can share with others, gender authenticity allows the deepest personal love. Transgender authenticity and social, physical, and emotional transition, as a way of expressing a deeply authentic self, is sacred in its allowance of personalized love, thus actualizing a deeper presence of God.\(^\text{13}\)

Craig Ford, in his discussion of the virtue of gender transition, argues that this exploration of self, especially as it relates to gender, is necessary for all people, not just those who are transgender. As Aquinas teaches, to acquire a virtue is to achieve a mean between two extremes (ST I-II, q. 64, a.1), and when it comes to gender identity, alignment serves as the mean between dysphoria and naturalization. While transgender people are often the only ones thought of as experiencing dysphoria—a sense of discomfort and distress stemming from gender identity not aligning with sex assigned at birth—many people, often without realizing it, are at risk of naturalization, in which they “unreflectively [inhabit] one of the binarized gender identities.”\(^\text{14}\) As a result of naturalization, individuals may exhibit “a gender performance that reflects a mentality associated with a limited (and therefore false) consciousness of gender.”\(^\text{15}\) The risks of an unexamined gender identity and performance are many and far reaching: unexamined manhood may lead to violence towards women, unintentional misogyny, and an inhibited ability to express emotions, all stemming from uncritically accepted social narratives like “Men should be sexually assertive” and “Boys don’t cry.” Lisa Tessman provides a

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sobering example of the danger of unexamined social constructions of womanhood, explaining, “Many girls and women have been socialized to have character traits that potentially contribute to their vulnerability to rape, traits such as passivity [and] fear of fighting back.”

Notably, Tessman gives this example not to suggest that victims are ever responsible for or to be blamed for being assaulted; rather, she argues that such socialization of women and the subsequent expected naturalization leads to social narratives that excuse rapists and deny cases of rape. Men should be sexually assertive and women are passive, naturalization says, and this presents a clearly dangerous and false narrative about the circumstances of sexual assault. Naturalized and unexamined gender performance harms everyone, and everyone would benefit from the virtue of alignment. In seeking to avoid both extremes of dysphoria and naturalization, the task, Ford says, “is to bring our gender into alignment and to adopt the practices that allow us to do so responsibly and as informed decision makers in the process—whether those practices be spiritual, mental, hormonal, or surgical.”

Thus, an examination and knowledge of one’s gender identity can guide one to the virtue of alignment and answers Pope Francis’ call to contemplate and explore Creation in the self. Francis does not stop there, however. Pointing to Biblical texts’ instructions for how humans are to interact with Creation, he says, “they tell us to “till and keep” the garden of the world (cf. Gen 2:15). “Tilling” refers to cultivating, ploughing or working, while “keeping” means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving.” If each person is a part of Creation, and gender is a part of each person’s self-knowledge, then there is an imperative to properly till and keep oneself and one’s identities, as well. As we have seen, in the process of acquiring the virtue of alignment, one must necessarily cultivate and work towards an acceptable gender expression, and in doing so, they care for, protect, and preserve their body. Both transgender and cisgender people participate in this personal project. “What,” Ford asks, “substantively separates the cisgender woman who undergoes cosmetic

18 Francis, Laudato si’, sec. 67.
surgery from the transgender woman who undergoes the same thing, especially when both attempt to do so in order to “bring out their real self”?

Indeed, numerous gender-affirming practices are undertaken by people every day, even if naturalization prevents them from being seen as such. Hair removal, performance-enhancing drugs, and shapewear are regularly part of cisgender people’s cultivation of their gender expressions. Often, no ethical or religious objections to these practices are raised unless the individual seeking them out is transgender.

Yet all people, trans people included, undergo such personal cultivation to enhance and call forth the truth and beauty of their created bodies, and Pope Francis says that this cooperation between Creator and creature is necessary. God created “a world in need of development” in order to “draw us into the act of cooperation with the Creator.”

We must participate in Creation and cooperate with God to truly appreciate the beauty of what unfolds. Francis goes on, saying, “The Spirit of God has filled the universe with possibilities and therefore, from the very heart of things, something new can always emerge.”

Daniel M. Lavery, a transgender author, echoes this statement, saying, “As my friend Julian puts it, only half winkingly: ‘God blessed me by making me transsexual for the same reason God made wheat but not bread and fruit but not wine, so that humanity might share in the act of creation.’”

A cultivation of the self and an understanding of oneself as cooperating with God in Creation is necessary; otherwise, alienation may result, which prevents an individual from engaging ethically with the rest of Creation: “When human beings fail to find their true place in this world, they misunderstand themselves and end up acting against themselves.”

As we have seen, Francis emphasizes the bodily dimension of human experience and the importance of feeling connected to the Earth and connected to the rest of Creation. This certainly cannot happen when one feels disconnected from themselves. When any person, transgender

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20 Francis, Laudato si’, sec. 80.
21 Francis, Laudato si’, sec. 80.
23 Francis, Laudato si’, sec. 115.
or otherwise, feels a sense of disconnect within themselves and feels that they cannot adequately express or be received as who they are, then this sense of alienation expands to further disconnect the self from others. According to Judith Tatton-Schiff, “the flesh is the site from which redemption and reconciliation takes place; the location of the healing, connecting and growth where incarnation must take root. Where there is alienation, this cannot happen and the germination required for spiritual as well as personal wholeness is precluded.”

This sense of alienation is dangerous, because Pope Francis does not include exclusively personal calls to action in *Laudato Si* that a person can satisfy in isolation; rather, Francis outlines a system of ethics for society as a whole. We certainly must engage with the natural world in an ethical way, but first and foremost we must engage with one another, guided by the principles of love and justice. “A correct relationship with the created world,” Francis says, “demands that we not weaken this social dimension of openness to others, much less the transcendent dimension of our openness to the “Thou” of God.” A constant refrain of Francis’ is that everything is connected. When we seek to explore the mystery and majesty of creation, we do not do it alone, but rather in the company of our siblings and neighbors as a shared project of mutual learning. Thomas Aquinas asserts that “we are the types of beings who go about the world learning the truth—admittedly partial and imperfect—by exploring the world…representing that world and the things in it to ourselves by abstraction through concepts, and sharing those concepts with others.”

One way that we explore the world and share our knowledge with one another is through gender expression, recognizing that gender is a socially constructed category that is inherently relational in nature. Gender expression and exploration informs how we exist in the world and interact with others and helps to communicate our deepest self-knowledge. Due to the various ways that gender can be presented and received, to interact in an ethical and loving way even with those different from us, we must submit to Francis’ emphasis on personal encounter.

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26 Ford, “Transgender Bodies, Catholic Schools,” 91.
Robert Ryan notes in Francis’ account that “authentic encounter requires sustained, face-to-face, bodily interaction that requires genuine listening and openness to the other.” 27 It is not enough to be vaguely aware of the existence of a person or group different from you, or even to be conscious of their challenges or suffering. True encounter, which is vital, means that one must physically and personally engage with someone else, to listen with enough vulnerability that they are open to being changed by the other. This includes the poor, the marginalized, and the disliked. Encounter requires reverence and a willingness to seek the face and voice of God in the person who you are engaging with, however strange, however unfamiliar they are to you. A genuine embrace and encounter does not necessarily mean that either party will leave the interaction with a thorough understanding of the other, but it does mean that both parties received the other as Christ, accepting them as they are. An encounter with a transgender person, or indeed any person with a gender different from one’s own, necessitates listening to their story, honoring their humanity, and refraining from imposing one’s own cultural (including gender-related) norms. Francis warns that failing to encounter the other in this way “can lead to a numbing of conscience and to tendentious analyses which neglect parts of reality.” 28 Failing to encounter one another means that we fail to recognize the reality that God has made.

Francis’ calls to explore, reverence, and cultivate Creation in the self and the other and his instructions for encounter culminate in his insistence that one cannot live morally without preferential care for the most vulnerable among us. In essence, “for Pope Francis, solidarity serves as the criterion by which a particular policy can be understood as morally defensible or not.” 29 This assessment extends beyond policy into personal and social relations, as well. According to Francis, “we should be particularly indignant at the enormous inequalities in our midst, whereby we continue to tolerate some considering themselves more worthy than others.” 30 When we consider the struggles faced by the transgender community, we can clearly see that they are included amongst our most

28 Francis, Laudato si’, sec. 49.
29 Ryan, “Pope Francis,” 63.
30 Francis, Laudato si’, sec. 90.
vulnerable in society. The William’s Institute reports that “transgender people are over four times more likely than cisgender people to experience violent victimization,” with the highest rates of violence experienced by trans women of color. 31 According to data from 2019, about 3 in 10 transgender adults live in poverty. Thus, many transgender people not only must face the unique challenges that come with experiencing gender dysphoria, but their lives are further complicated by lack of housing, lack of employment, and increased rates of violence as a result of the identities that they hold. Additionally, “82% of transgender individuals have considered killing themselves and 40% have attempted suicide, with suicidality highest among transgender youth.” 32 The contributing factors to this high rate of suicide are not opaque: despair cannot be far away when an individual has been kicked out of their home, rejected by family, friends, and church, and highly vulnerable to violence, as is the experience of many transgender people. The preferential option for the poor and vulnerable “is in fact an ethical imperative essential for effectively attaining the common good,” and surely the vulnerability of those in the transgender community calls forth Francis’ instruction for preferential care. 33

Therein lies the most egregious way that the bishops’ doctrinal note goes against Francis’ ethical imperatives as set forth in Laudato Si, previously discussed in this paper. The bishops assert that they do not attempt to address pastoral issues related to transgender people within the document and rather speak only to the morality of medical interventions, including those procedures meant to address gender dysphoria (gender-affirming care). The language and arguments in the document can, in fact, have considerable pastoral impact especially in their fundamental misunderstanding of the transgender experience, but it is appropriate first to take the bishops at their word and consider the

33 Francis, Laudato si’, sec. 158.
matter of gender-affirming care alone. The bishops implore Catholic healthcare providers to refrain from any interventions that would “transform the sexual characteristics of a human body into those of the opposite sex,” in other words, gender-affirming care. Though this suggestion is made specifically to Catholic healthcare providers, this does not mean that transgender people need only find a non-Catholic provider to access the care they need. Often, Catholic healthcare providers are the only feasible option. According to a 2020 report, 4 of the 10 largest health systems in the US are Catholic, 1 in every 6 hospital beds in the US is in a Catholic facility, and there are 52 “short-term acute care Catholic hospitals designated by Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services as the “sole community hospital” for their region. Thus, for many Americans, a Catholic facility is the only option for healthcare. For the bishops to suggest that Catholic healthcare providers ought not provide gender-affirming care means that patients at 2/5 of America’s largest health systems may be denied life-saving gender affirming care. Of course, the bishops insist that healthcare providers ought to, somehow, “mitigate the suffering of those who struggle with gender incongruence,” although it is unclear what this would entail, and the bishops offer no further insights. The bishops have ruled out medical transition as an option, despite the scientific reality that this may be one of the most effective ways of mitigating the suffering of transgender people: a 2022 study found that there were 60% lower odds of depression and 73% lower odds of suicidality among youths who had received gender-affirming care (puberty blockers or hormone therapy) compared to those who had not. There must be a different way, then, to address the suffering of transgender individuals, to care for and protect

34 USCCB Committee on Doctrine, Doctrinal Note, 12.
36 Solomon, Uttley, HasBrouk, and Yoolim, Bigger, 4.
37 Solomon, Uttley, HasBrouk, and Yoolim, Bigger, 15.
38 USCCB Committee on Doctrine, Doctrinal Note, 12.
them in their vulnerability, and to authentically encounter them. Yet this doctrinal note offers no pastoral guidance regarding these concerns. On the contrary, this document goes entirely against Pope Francis’ calls for exploring, reverencing, and encountering Creation, when we consider that transgender people and the care they may need are certainly a part of that creation.

Interestingly, the doctrinal note contains many statements that do align with the above imperative, but it presents them in such a way as to suggest that transgender people are the ones rejecting the imperative to care for and respect nature. “A soul can never be in another body,” the bishops note, “much less be in the wrong body. This soul only comes into existence together with this body. What it means to be a human person necessarily includes bodiliness.” Of course, we have seen how trans people exemplify this concept of bodiliness, carefully “tilling” and “keeping” their body and their gender presentation to bring soul and body into alignment. It is a curious rhetorical strategy to suggest that transgender people somehow aim to generate an entirely new body from nothing, entirely rejecting the gift of the body they have been given rather than the reality: that indeed all people, transgender or cisgender, cooperate with God in the cultivation of themselves. The bishops bemoan those who change their body with acts of “destruction or of mutilation” rather than treating it as “a gift to be received, respected, and cared for as something intrinsic to the person,” once again failing to recognize that trans-affirming care, including non-medical interventions such as accommodating language, pronouns, and chosen name usage, is indeed an act of deep, reverent care, not mutilation.

Within this document, there is an abundance of the dangerous effects of naturalization, leading to a lack of logical consistency in the permission of certain procedures for those seeking to simply perfect their features, yet rejecting those same procedures in the case of someone dealing with life-threatening dysphoria. The bishops note that someone “who already

40 USCCB Committee on Doctrine, Doctrinal Note, 3.
41 Francis, Laudato si’, see 67.
42 USCCB Committee on Doctrine, Doctrinal Note, 5.
43 USCCB Committee on Doctrine, Doctrinal Note, 7-8.
has a normal appearance and who, as Pope Pius XII put it, seeks “the perfection of his or her features” [through technological manipulation of the body]. . . . could be morally licit, if undertaken with the correct intention and in the correct circumstances.” And yet those same or similar procedures to alter appearance are categorically rejected by the bishops as ethically permissible if the patient is transgender and pursues them for the sake of attaining gender alignment. This reveals a failure to participate in the necessary exploration and contemplation of the reality of Creation.

Finally, the bishops’ conception of the goal of gender-affirming care reveals a blatant lack of encounter. According to the bishops, gender-affirming care is “intended to transform the body so as to make it take on as much as possible the form of the opposite sex, contrary to the natural form of the body. They are attempts to alter the fundamental order and finality of the body and to replace it with something else.”44 On the contrary, listening to transgender people’s stories reveals that gender-affirming care, especially intense and expensive surgical intervention, is never undergone for the sake of itself, and certainly not to replace the body with something new. Gender-affirming care, rather, is undergone to cultivate the self and cooperate with God’s mystery of creation, to express the authentic truth of oneself in order to receive the truth of the other, and to allow for genuine forms of relationality between persons and between an individual and the natural world. This is indeed what is means to “[learn] to accept our body, to care for it and to respect its fullest meaning,” and perhaps the bishops would grow in this understanding if they were to authentically a transgender person.45 The bishops claim that those who seek ‘morally illicit’ medical interventions are seeking to exercise absolute power and authority over their bodies, and admittedly Pope Francis shares their wariness of the relation between technology and power. However, Francis also asserts: “When we fail to acknowledge as part of reality the worth of a poor person . . . it becomes difficult to hear the cry of nature itself . . . Once the human being declares independence from reality and behaves with absolute dominion, the very

44 USCCB Committee on Doctrine, Doctrinal Note, 11.
45 Francis, Laudato si’, sec. 155.
foundations of our life begin to crumble.” It would seem that the sin of absolute dominion lies not with those attempting to authentically express themselves, but rather with those who ignore the cry of the vulnerable for the sake of upholding rigid binaries and structures, like those of gender essentialism and complementarity. To dictate a proper way of being a human being, to diminish and squash genuine exploration of and awe at God’s ongoing Creation, and to subsequently deny oneself from being fully human, seems—more than anything else—to reek of sinful domination.

The bishops are understandably concerned with the speed and scope of the techniques of technological manipulation of the human body that are becoming available, and with the rise in media and social attention towards transgender issues, it makes sense that they sought to address the ethical concerns raised by these topics. As the authors of the doctrinal note point out, “as the range of what we can do expands, we must ask what we should or should not do.” However, in order to make this important ethical deliberation, an authentic encounter with those facing these difficult decisions—like those seeking gender affirming care—is a necessary first step, and that includes acknowledging their existence, witnessing their struggles, and listening to their stories.

Thus, we arrive at Francis’ seminal call in Laudato Si, which can be applied to transgender issues just as appropriately as it is to ecological issues: the call for conversion. Care for transgender people, just as care for the Earth, is a complex issue, and “many things have to change course, but it is we human beings above all who need to change. We lack an awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone.” The whole of Laudato Si outlines and describes the depth of blindness and lack of awareness that plagues humanity’s approach to Creation and the ecological crisis. Likewise, the attitude and narratives presented in the bishops’ doctrinal note reveal a common and pervasive misguided understanding of transgender people. Just as we need a conversion to recognize the beauty of nature, our place

46 Francis, Laudato si’, sec. 117.
47 USCCB Committee on Doctrine, Doctrinal Note, 19.
within it, and our duty to protect it, so too do we need a conversion to recognize the beauty and dignity of trans people, their place in our communities, and our duty to protect and honor them as our siblings, neighbors, and very own selves. To be able to ethically respond to the challenges of the transgender community, we may take up Francis’ reminder that we must be “ever open to God’s grace and [able] to draw constantly from [our] deepest convictions about love, justice and peace.”

If we do not, the potential consequences are clear. Not only will we have failed to act justly and failed to be our siblings’ keeper, but we will also likely lose countless lives. When we fail to respond to the ecological crisis, “thousands of species will no longer give glory to God by their very existence, nor convey their message to us.” Similarly, when we fail to adequately embrace, shelter, and care for the transgender community, thousands of transgender people will no longer glorify God with their existence because their lives will be lost to violence, poverty, and suicide. On the other hand, when we honor each person in their uniqueness and we allow each person to glorify God with the “hymn of [their] existence,” freely explored and joyfully expressed, then we truly allow the beauty of God to be made manifest. Pope Francis invites us: “let us sing as we go,” denying no person or voice from the choir of Creation.

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50 Francis, *Laudato si*’, sec. 33.
51 Francis, *Laudato si*’, sec. 85
52 Francis, *Laudato si*’, sec. 244.

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