

## Saving Both Birds and People: Toward a Spirituality of Sustainability

By **John A. Ostenburg**

“I worry about *both* birds and people,” Thomas Merton once wrote. “We are in the world and part of it.”<sup>1</sup> Perhaps those words inspired Pope Francis, in his remarks before the U.S. Congress on September 24, 2015, to cite Merton as one of four Americans who set examples of shaping “fundamental values which will endure forever in the spirit of the American people.”<sup>2</sup> On that occasion, Pope Francis also referenced his own encyclical, *Laudato Si'*,<sup>3</sup> as a “call for a courageous and responsible effort” (Pope Francis, “Address” 21) to assure sustainability both of humankind and the world in which it lives. This paper explores the relationship between the ideas of Pope Francis and Thomas Merton as they relate to both environmental and human sustainability.

The prognostication is that the present climate in Washington, DC is not likely to be conducive to advancing the ideals of either Thomas Merton or Pope Francis regarding sustainability. As such, it is incumbent on people of faith to be unwavering in advocating – even aggressively arguing on behalf of – those policies that advance the existence of humankind in all regards. People of faith must demonstrate the courage that has been shown by both Merton and the Pope in adopting positions that are not necessarily popular, not necessarily those that will win praise rather than criticism, not necessarily those that are easy to teach rather than being complex and requiring careful deliberation.

Thomas Merton seemed aware of how out of step he was in December 1962 when he wrote in his journal of “indiscriminate use of poisons” (*TTW* 274) that were causing the deaths of whole varieties of birds. “Someone will say: you worry about birds: why not worry about people? I worry about *both* birds and people. We are in the world and part of it” (*TTW* 274). Those words are not very far removed from what Pope Francis said in his 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si'*: “We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it” (*Laudato Si'* 94 [#139]). And later, “We read in the Gospel that Jesus says of the birds of the air that ‘not one of them is forgotten before God’ (Lk. 12:6). How then can we possibly mistreat them or cause them harm?” (*Laudato Si'* 143-44 [#221]).

Merton concluded his journal entry with a social criticism: “we are destroying everything because we are destroying ourselves, spiritually, morally and in every way. It is all part of the same sickness, and it all hangs together” (*TTW* 274). Likewise, the Pope’s words in Chapter 4 of the encyclical also hold a social context: “Recognizing the reasons why a given area is polluted requires a study of the workings of society, its economy, its behavioral patterns, and the ways it grasps reality. . . . 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”

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(*Laudato Si'* 94 [#139]). For both Merton and the Pope, the way to solve the “complex crisis” is by recognizing the spiritual dimensions of the situation as well as the social ones.

“[T]he light breaks through and the full meaning of the world and of time is seen in its real relation to God and to His eternal and loving designs,” Merton wrote in *Mystics and Zen Masters*.<sup>4</sup> The context for that conclusion was expressed elsewhere in the same volume: “The world is a sacred vessel which must not be tampered with or grabbed after. To tamper with it is to spoil it, and to grasp it is to lose it” (*MZM* 76). And in the words of Pope Francis in Chapter 2 of *Laudato Si'*:

In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the word “creation” has a broader meaning than “nature,” for it has to do with God’s loving plan in which every creature has its own value and significance. Nature is usually seen as a system which can be studied, understood and controlled, whereas creation can only be understood as a gift from the outstretched hand of the Father of all, and as a reality illuminated by the love which calls us together into universal communion. (*Laudato Si'* 54 [#76])

So, given this introduction to some of the thinking of these two spiritual giants, how do we take their thoughts and words and make them our own spirituality of sustainability? It begins, I believe, by giving some definition to the two operative words here: spirituality and sustainability.

What is spirituality? Well, let us begin by saying what it is not. It is *not* religion, for many of the world’s most spiritual inhabitants over the centuries never have been associated with any specific religion. Religion generally is thought of as an organized set of beliefs to which individuals adhere. As Catholics, we subscribe to the tenets of the Creed, we accept the power and significance of the sacraments, we respect the authority of the Chair of St. Peter; members of other religions have other specific standards to which they show acceptance. Spirituality, however, has less to do with those outward actions and much more to do with the acceptance of the presence of God resident within every individual person. Spirituality defies organization because it is spontaneous. It simply happens, without any planning, without any anticipation, without it even being willed. It springs, as one commentator on Merton – Sister Monica Weis, SSJ – says, from those *kairos* moments “after which nothing about life or our understanding of it is the same.”<sup>5</sup> It is that presence of God in everyone that Merton speaks of when he writes: “The only true joy on earth is to escape from the prison of our own false self, and enter by love into union with the Life Who dwells and sings within the essence of every creature and in the core of our own souls.”<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis advances the same perspective in these words from Chapter 2 of *Laudato Si'*: “God is intimately present in each being . . . His divine presence, which ensures the subsistence and growth of each being, ‘continues the work of creation’” (*Laudato Si'* 56-57 [#80]). Those final five words are from St. Thomas Aquinas. Pope Francis similarly comments on the spontaneous nature of spirituality in Chapter 6 of *Laudato Si'*: “each creature reflects something of God and has a message to convey to us, and . . . Christ has taken unto himself this material world and now, risen, is intimately present to each being, surrounding it with his affection and penetrating it with his light” (*Laudato Si'* 143 [#221]).

For us Christians, the intimate presence of the Christ-God in everyone, showing affection to everyone, penetrating everyone, is what constitutes spirituality, for true spirituality is the realization of the Spirit’s Pentecostal presence in all, even if humankind catches and experiences that presence only in brief glimpses, only in *kairos* moments. Non-Christians, of course, share this experience of God’s internal presence, albeit they may address it differently than do Christians. The Holy Spirit came to all on Pentecost, and because of the timelessness of God’s presence, it likewise came to those who predated Pentecost and those who post-date Pentecost, to those who call it the Holy Spirit and

to those who do not. The created always has been blessed with the intimacy of the Creator, albeit not always recognizing its presence nor engaging it.

But for both Thomas Merton and Pope Francis that engagement is recognized and is valued and is utilized and they are sanctified by it. They understand that in order for one to be spiritual, he or she must engage with the Spirit; in order for one to be spiritual, he or she must recognize the presence of the Spirit in all others too. Just recently, speaking to a crowd in Sweden on All Saints Day, the Pope actually stated this as a modern-day beatitude: “Blessed are those who see God in every person and strive to make others also discover him.”<sup>7</sup> We begin, then, with the identification of spirituality as a recognition of the Spirit within.

What, then, of sustainability? While that specific word is not easily found in either Merton or Pope Francis, what both teach readily falls within its definition. Simply put, to sustain means to provide the wherewithal to continue. The goal of ecological sustainability, then, is to assure continuance of our ecological systems. The word “ecology” is formed of two Greek words: “oikos” which means “the family home,” and “logos” which means “word.” To speak the “word” of something is to teach it, so ecology is teaching about the family home, the world in which we live. When we talk of global sustainability, therefore, we are speaking of all that is necessary for our world to continue providing for humankind’s needs and satisfaction as the Creator intended. When we take steps that interfere with the world’s ability to do that, we are acting contrary to the will of the Creator.

And what must the world provide to meet humankind’s needs and satisfaction? Clean air to breathe, adequate and pure water to drink, sufficient food to provide sustenance, a home as shelter from the elements, suitable employment to provide for both self and dependents, good health and safety, protection from those who would do them harm. Can anyone doubt that those were the items on the mind of the Pope when he proclaimed another modern-day beatitude on All Saints Day? “Blessed are those who protect and care for our common home” (CNS [1 November 2016]). Indeed, throughout his encyclical, the Pope mentions those items repeatedly as the blessings humankind deserves to find in its common home.

Throughout the writings of Thomas Merton, and present in each of the six chapters of *Laudato Si’*, is written large the message of our deep spiritual connectedness to one another and to the world in which we live. In a letter to ecologist Rachel Carson in January 1963, Merton speaks directly to this point: “man is at once a part of nature and he transcends it. In maintaining this delicate balance, he must make use of nature wisely.”<sup>8</sup> Pope Francis expresses the same message by his very choice of the words of St. Francis of Assisi that he uses in the opening paragraph of his encyclical: “*Laudato si’, mi’ Signore’ . . . . ‘Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us . . . .’*” (*Laudato Si’* 7 [#1]). So, logically, a spirituality of sustainability, therefore, means respecting and protecting our common home – the earth – because it is where God dwells with us and it provides what God wants us to have for our continuance. And in so respecting and protecting our common home, we engage in blessed interaction with both the Creator and all that has been created.

And how best to do that? Pope Francis suggests we do so by accepting the Benedictine motto, which also is the motto of Thomas Merton’s religious order, the Trappists: “*ora et labora*” (“Pray and work”) (*Laudato Si’* 84 [#126]).<sup>9</sup> In *Laudato Si’*, the Pope first identifies the problems and then carefully lays out the steps we must take in our work to protect and preserve our common home; he concludes the encyclical, however, with prayer: “*All-powerful God . . . [p]our out upon us the power of your love, that we may protect life and beauty*” (*Laudato Si’* 158).

Thomas Merton and Pope Francis share a common love for St. Francis of Assisi, albeit neither

of them chose to be a Franciscan<sup>10</sup> when deciding on his religious vocation. Merton initially applied to the Franciscans but then – after some complications relating to the reckless life he had led during his younger days – decided on the much more contemplative Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, the Trappists as they more commonly are called. There are no indications that Pope Francis ever contemplated joining the Franciscans rather than the much more active Jesuits. But it is interesting that the Pope, as a Jesuit, would choose the name of Francis to characterize his papacy: he chose to be Pope Francis, not Pope Ignatius. That certainly wasn't a rejection of his Ignatian roots as a Jesuit, but rather an attempt to blend the characteristics of Ignatian spirituality, that he had been taught from his first days of formation as a member of the Society of Jesus, with the much less systematic spiritual approach espoused by St. Francis of Assisi.

The Ignatian approach is a recognition of the role one must play to be an authentic Christian. It is characterized by three fundamentals: (1) recognition of the individual's role and purpose in life; (2) choice of a method for fulfilling that role/purpose; and (3) doing what is natural and rewarding, both personally and universally, in using spirituality to fulfill one's role/purpose. *Laudato Si'* reflects all of those characteristics. The Franciscan approach on the other hand is characterized by three different fundamentals: (1) purification, which is a willingness to hear God's voice within; (2) illumination, meaning that we must become enlightened as to the will of God for us; and (3) union, or an awareness of the reality of our oneness with God and therefore our oneness with all others who also are one with God.<sup>11</sup> Again, *Laudato Si'* reflects all of those characteristics. The first of these approaches is very active, while the second is more passive. The Ignatian approach drives one to undertake external actions for both common and personal good; the Franciscan approach internalizes the actions in an almost Taoist way to put the emphasis more on goodness for goodness' sake rather than on a specific end – complementary, not contradictory.

In like manner, Thomas Merton too has been heavily influenced by Francis of Assisi, so much so, in fact, that in a 1966 letter he called himself “a son of St. Francis,” and added, “There is no saint in the church whom I admire more than St. Francis.”<sup>12</sup> In the introduction to *When the Trees Say Nothing: Writings on Nature*, a collection of Merton's writings, Sister Kathleen Deignan, CND observes that “Thomas Merton had a Franciscan soul, and this realization grew in him over time.” She continues, “Francis of Assisi personifies a way of celebrating familial intimacy with all the creatures of the universe: Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Mother Earth.”<sup>13</sup> An echo of St. Francis rings loud in the following entry from Merton's journal for Pentecost Sunday 1960: “The first chirps of the waking birds – *‘le point vierge’* of the dawn, a moment of awe and inexpressible innocence, when the Father in silence opens their eyes and they speak to Him, wondering if it is time to ‘be’? And He tells them ‘Yes.’ Then they one by one wake and begin to sing. First the catbirds and cardinals and some others I do not recognize. Later, song sparrows, wrens, etc. Last of all doves, crows” (*TTW* 7).

St. Francis was a lover of the world and all things in it, and both Merton and Pope Francis share those feelings. Furthermore, St. Francis was a lover of peace, fairness and justice; likewise those are important components to be found in the writings of both Thomas Merton and Pope Francis. But, just as Pope Francis blends his Franciscan spirit with the structure of the Ignatian methodology that he follows, so too does Merton merge his Franciscan influences with the *Rule* of St. Benedict that he and other Trappists follow. As Patrick O'Connell points out: “Merton sees ecological awareness as part of an authentic contemporary monastic spirit, in continuity with traditional Benedictine respect for the land.”<sup>14</sup> He notes that Merton holds as being of equal importance, as he says in his journal entry of June 6, 1963: “Sensitivity on the issue

of *peace*, racial justice, but also technology, and the great spiritual problem of the profound disturbances of ecology all over the world, the tragic waste and spoilage of natural resources etc.” (TTW 330). In the same day’s passage, Merton speaks of how he values the time now available to him to be alone in nature. For more than a year, he has enjoyed the permission of his Abbot to spend increasingly more time at the building that about 18 months later will become his hermitage: “I find now that with *more time* out here . . . [i]t is no longer a prayer answered in the silence and peace of nature, but beyond that, more deeply interior, more a prayer of faith *without* the external medium of visible creation (which I did not think I was using as a medium, but I was)” (TTW 329). What an intriguing phrase that is: “the external medium of visible creation.” Merton is saying that the ecological world has been his medium for achieving greater contemplation. Even more so, he is stating that he has achieved even greater unity with the divine Spirit because he has used the “external medium of visible creation,” albeit he wasn’t even aware that he was doing so. The medium of visible creation has been his conduit for a cataphatic meditative process; what ultimately was achieved, however, was an unanticipated deeply apophatic unity with God.

Perhaps this is the one way in which Merton’s ecological spirituality and that of Pope Francis take slightly different paths. As a Cistercian monk – and a hermit by choice – Merton is much more contemplative in his approach, while the Jesuit Pope Francis is more active. For Merton, nature is a means toward greater unity with God which overflows into more action on behalf of his fellow humans, who also are imbued with the Holy Spirit. Pope Francis, on the other hand, appears to see actions on behalf of humankind’s well-being as a fulfillment of the responsibility God has placed on humankind itself as the stewards of his creation. That in turn, from Pope Francis’ perspective, leads to a greater spiritual status for those who accept God’s assigned role of stewardship. They both end up at the same place, but the paths are to some extent different.

The sixth and final chapter of *Laudato Si’* is titled “Ecological Education and Spirituality.” In it, Pope Francis advocates for a changed lifestyle for humankind, one that holds better opportunity for the world God has given to us to continue to provide what humanity needs for its daily sustenance. In effect, he is admonishing humankind that if it prays for its “daily bread,” then it cannot allow that bread to grow moldy and spoil. “The universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely. Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person’s face. The ideal is not only to pass from the exterior to the interior to discover the action of God in the soul, but also to discover God in all things” (*Laudato Si’* 150 [#233]).

Merton has given us a similar thought. He writes in *New Seeds of Contemplation*:

This leaf has its own texture and its own pattern of veins and its own holy shape, and the bass and trout hiding in the deep pools of the river are canonized by their beauty and their strength. The lakes hidden among the hills are saints, and the sea too is a saint who praises God without interruption in her majestic dance. The great, gashed, half-naked mountain is another of God’s saints. There is no other like him. He is alone in his own character; nothing else in the world ever did or ever will imitate God in quite the same way. That is his sanctity.” (NSC 30-31)

That passage is complemented by the following that he wrote in his journal on July 17, 1956: “Either you look at the universe as a very poor creation out of which no one can make anything or you look at your own life and your own part in the universe as infinitely rich full of inexhaustible interest opening out into infinite further possibilities for study and contemplation and interest and praise. Beyond all and in all is God.”<sup>15</sup>

What, then, is to be learned from Pope Francis and from Thomas Merton regarding a spirituality of sustainability? Not only what is each individually telling us about God and nature, but what are they saying when their words and thoughts are mingled? When Pope Francis in his address to the U.S. Congress called Merton “a source of spiritual inspiration and a guide for many people,” was he hoping that those inspired by Merton’s writings would be guided to *Laudato Si’* and to fulfilling the Christian mandate that he leveled in that treatise? Only one paragraph prior to his comments about Merton, he had cited the encyclical, saying, “In *Laudato Si’*, I call for a courageous and responsible effort to ‘redirect our steps,’ and to avert the most serious effects of the environmental deterioration caused by human activity.” Who better to aid in that effort than a person described by Francis in that same address before Congress as “above all a man of prayer, a thinker who challenged the certitudes of his time and opened new horizons” (Pope Francis, “Address” 21).

When Merton wrote in his journal about caring for “*both* birds and people,” and when Pope Francis noted in *Laudato Si’* that Christ’s words in the Gospel of St. Luke mean that man should not do harm to the birds of the air (*Laudato Si’* 143-44 [#221]), both are using metaphor to make the point that nature and man are inexplicably connected. The message they are conveying is found in numerous other passages of the encyclical, including “everything is closely interrelated” (*Laudato Si’* 93 [#137]) and there is “a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature” (*Laudato Si’* 49 [#67]) and “We need to strengthen the conviction that we are one single human family” (*Laudato Si’* 38 [#52]). Likewise that message is found repeatedly throughout Merton’s writings.

Likewise that message is found repeatedly throughout Merton’s writings. Merton’s journal entry for Holy Thursday 1965 seems almost an anticipation of the encyclical Pope Francis would pen a half-century later. “Perhaps the most crucial aspect of Christian obedience to God today,” Merton wrote, “concerns the responsibility of the Christian in technological society toward God’s creation and God’s will for His creation. Obedience to God’s will for nature and for man . . . in the awareness of our power to frustrate God’s designs for nature and for man – to radically corrupt and destroy natural goods by misuse and blind exploitation, especially by criminal waste.”<sup>16</sup> How similar those thoughts are to those of Francis: “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” (*Laudato Si’* 13 [#11]).

So, in conclusion, we can draw both from Thomas Merton and from *Laudato Si’* the realization that humankind – made up of the only creatures within God’s creation who are imbued with the divine presence of the Holy Spirit – has an obligation to do God’s work in preserving and protecting what has been given to us. True, that God has given the rest of his creation to us for our good use and to advance our human sustenance; untrue, however, that we should neglect our moral obligation to sustain all that God has created for our use. What Pope Francis and Merton both tell us: it is for our use, *not* abuse.

The cultivation of spirituality – regardless of the religious context in which it might be found – generally revolves around two practices undertaken by those who choose to be spiritual: meditation and contemplation. Meditation involves taking specific topics and reflecting on them to attain a deeper personal mode of positive behavior, thought, prayer, etc. Meditation thus is an active engagement of the mind. Christians often will meditate on specific Gospel stories, or on the words of the Lord’s Prayer, or on the life of a particular saint, or on something similar. From those periods of deep study they will gain insights related to behaviors or practices that will enhance the spiritual life. The *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola provides a framework for this type of meditative prayer.

Contemplation, on the other hand, is to allow the mind to be inactive, to listen rather than to speak.

*Laudato Si'* gives much to be meditated upon. Pope Francis uses his own words, the words of former pontiffs, the words of other religious leaders and theologians, indeed even the words of various saints, to explain the beauty of God's creation, its utilitarian aspects, humankind's role within it, but also how humans have failed in their responsibilities, and finally steps that can be taken to put things right again. The encyclical is a call to spiritual people to hearken to its message and to take actions that are consistent with that message. Doing so is a critical component of building a spirituality of sustainability.

But Merton would advise the spiritual person to engage in a contemplative approach also. In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, he tells us: "Contemplation is the highest expression of man's intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness and for being" (NSC 1). As Merton demonstrates in numerous passages of his writing, the wonderment of the created world is the chapel in which contemplation most readily takes place. He tells us to sit and listen, to open our eyes and see, to be enveloped in all that God has given us. Being imbued with creation, therefore, is to encounter God; encountering God in his created world is the spirituality of sustainability.

1. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 274 [12/11/1962]; subsequent references will be cited as "TTW" parenthetically in the text.
2. Pope Francis, "Address of the Holy Father to a Joint Session of the United States Congress, September 24, 2015," *The Merton Annual* 28 (2015) 17; subsequent references will be cited as "Pope Francis, 'Address'" parenthetically in the text.
3. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2015); subsequent references will be cited as "*Laudato Si'*" parenthetically in the text.
4. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967) 141; subsequent references will be cited as "MZM" parenthetically in the text.
5. Monica Weis, *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011) 50.
6. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 25; subsequent references will be cited as "NSC" parenthetically in the text.
7. Catholic News Service, November 1, 2016; subsequent references will be cited as "CNS [1 November 2016]" parenthetically in the text.
8. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 71.
9. Of this phrase Merton writes that it "sums up all that we need to know about man's true culture and life on earth" (Thomas Merton, *The Rule of Saint Benedict: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 4, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell [Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2009] 16).
10. Merton was a member of the Franciscan Third Order while teaching at St. Bonaventure College: see Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 300, 343; Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation. Journals, vol. 1: 1939-1941*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995) 309-11.
11. This pattern, which is not exclusively Franciscan, can be traced to the writing of the pseudonymous Dionysius, a monk of the Eastern Church from the sixth century; it is found in the Franciscan St. Bonaventure's *De Triplici Via (The Triple Way)* as well as being widely used elsewhere in Western Christian spirituality.
12. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 298.
13. Thomas Merton, *When the Trees Say Nothing: Writings on Nature*, ed. Kathleen Deignan, CND (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2003) 26.
14. Patrick F. O'Connell, "Nature," in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O'Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 126.
15. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 45.
16. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 227.