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Praised Mother Earth: Divesting the Vatican

Melissa Cedillo

Introduction

Mother Earth is a marvelous place to live. When conjuring up ideas of beauty, the mind fills with images of beaming sunflowers, a radiant beach sunset, or a fresh pine tree. These images are organic representations of a God rooted in diversity. Similar to the delight felt when bare feet step on fresh grass after being in shoes all day, the need for human connection with the world is apparent. It can also be in these moments that the role of human creation comes into question. Human-made objects, animals, and other components of nature are constantly intersecting. My faith leads me to believe that, perhaps, creation is not to be viewed as a top-to-bottom approach, with humans at the top and nature at the bottom, but rather, all of creation is called to coexist together. My understanding of nature comes from a theology of creation that describes nature as “both the natural world in which we share and, our own bodily nature.”¹

Yet, when looking at the current state of the world, this is not the case. Humans have placed their authority over the rest of creation. Humans capitalize on oceans, trees, plants, animals, and even other humans. Creation was not intended for humans to subdue, but to flourish within community.² Capitalizing on creation interferes with this community. Christian faith is rooted in redemption, salvation, and grace, meaning that Christianity is rooted in forgiveness, mercy, and love.³ The complexity of these messages can often cause confusion and yet, the Catholic tradition when queried with care may offer up some helpful answers.

Defining the Question

The Sacred Scripture of the Catholic Church is the Bible. This is the Sacred Scripture because it prophesizes and describes God’s anointed, Jesus Christ (Luke 4:18-19).⁴ The Church sees Jesus as the savior because he overcame

¹ Jurgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 3.

² *Ibid.*, 4.

³ Pope Francis. *The Name of God is Mercy*, (New York: Penguin Random House, 2016), 3.

⁴ Luke 4:18-19 (*The New American Bible*).

death by God’s love, which raised him from the dead. Jesus provided many teachings on mercy and how to care for the poor.⁵ The authority of the Bible is still recognized by the Church today. Inspired by common sacred texts, the Catholic Church differentiates itself from other Christian denominations by hierarchy, order, and tradition.⁶ There are some sacred texts that are dated, causing confusion among Church members as to what the historical context is behind a given text or what the relevance is for today. Consequently, the Catholic community looks to religious leaders, like the Pope for guidance.⁷ Thus, many, including myself, turn to the Pope and the encyclicals the Pope produces. Because the Catholic Church is comprised of multiple infrastructures and leaders, these are meant to help guide those who are discerning what it means to be a Christian in their particular setting world. The deterioration and misuse of beauty hinders the contemplative process inherently necessary in a relationship with God.⁸ And for our purposes here, the use of fossil fuels infringes upon this beautiful planet.

Recently, Pope Francis addressed climate change, and how it results in environmental issues, in the encyclical *Laudato Si*, and as research shows, climate change largely stems from the use of fossil fuels.⁹ One solution to the continued use of these harmful fuels is divestment.¹⁰ Divestment in this context means removing funding from companies involved in acts deemed immoral. In this case, companies can be considered immoral if they contribute to increasing climate change. Yet, according to sources, the Vatican has not divested from fossil fuels in its own investment portfolio. This is puzzling because it seems clear that Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si* encourages divestment as the correct solution and a proactive way for everyone, including the Church, to respond to climate change. In order for Church members to properly follow Francis, the Vatican must also set a correct standard. However, it is important to remember that not all Catholics agree with the Pope. Personally, I look to the Vatican and this Pope to set the values I should follow, making divestment all the more vital.

Pope Francis’ theology stresses God as loving, perfect, and being itself.¹¹ The Church aims for a comprehensive understanding of Scripture; however, the Church is still made up of human beings, human beings who are, even with the best intentions, still imperfect when they attempt to “mimic” the Creator.¹² Christians mimic the Creator when they use artificial means to produce something that the Creator has already made naturally, for example artificial grass.

⁵ Pope Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy*, 89.

⁶ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 190.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁹ Ogunlade Davidson & Bert Metz, *Climate Change 2007: Mitigation of Climate Change*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 71.

¹⁰ “Fossil Free –About Fossil Free” last modified 2016 <http://gofossilfree.org/about-fossil-free/>

¹¹ Pope Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy*, 5.

¹² Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 72.

These imperfections are sometimes reflected in the Church,¹³ causing discrepancies that can leave Church members, specifically those who adhere to the Pope’s message on climate change, frustrated. Although care for the Earth must be lived out by all those who inhabit this planet, the encyclicals are typically intended for a Catholic and more broadly Christian audience (LS 3).¹⁴ Church members may be angered by the Vatican’s slow-moving action on divestment.¹⁵ Some may even feel this is hypocrisy. Francis, the leading figure of the Catholic Church, is preaching for divestment, but the Church itself has not divested. An urgent need to address this hypocrisy surfaces. The seriousness of this issue has also inspired students like myself across the nation to push for divestment within their universities.¹⁶ Would it add to the hypocrisy if Catholic schools across the world divest before the Vatican bank does, especially because Catholic schools typically look to the Vatican, not the other way around?

There are many factors that go into divesting the Vatican. There is a financial piece, a theological piece, and science piece.¹⁷ All sides of these arguments must be explored to fully comprehend the complexity behind this issue. Again, humans construct all of these structures and humans are flawed, undoubtedly resulting in errors from all sides, and making it hard to appease all parties. Before diving into the depths of these arguments, it is important to keep in mind this idea first stated by Saint Francis of Assisi, and again celebrated by Pope Francis, “Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs” (LS 1). Citing the famous canticle, Pope Francis reminds us that if humans continue to kill the Earth, they will no longer have a home. The argument over fossil fuels and divestment can potentially be broken up into three segments: finance and politics, theology, and science.

Finance and Politics Within the Vatican

This first segment involves the political and economic aspects of divestment within the Vatican. In times of adversity, many look to the Pope for guidance, even on political matters.¹⁸ “The Pope’s position makes him a moral authority in global politics and an important participant in the dialogue over the role of religion in international relations.”¹⁹ This notion is significant because the world often separates international politics and the Church; however, it is clear that is not always the case.

¹³ Ibid., 272.

¹⁴ Pope Francis. *Laudato Si- Praise Be to You: On Care for Our Common Home*. Saint Peter’s: Vatican Franciscus, 2015.

¹⁵ “Fossil Free –About Fossil Free.”

¹⁶ “Fossil Free –About Fossil Free.”

¹⁷ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 72.

¹⁸ B. Robert Shelly, “The Vatican’s Role in Global Politics” *The Johns Hopkins University*. Press 2 (2004): 2.

¹⁹ Ibid., 159.

As seen in Catholic Social Teaching, the Church often gauges the moral implications of global affairs.²⁰ “The Vatican may be a useful example of religious authority opposed to the secular tendencies of the modern Western world, which is simultaneously a part of that world. In terms of divestment, this perspective becomes critical” (LS 159). The secular world may view the investment of fossil fuels as purely an economic and political issue.²¹ This typically excludes the Church from entering this conversation, but the Church is called to do more. The Vatican, in particular, is called to remember the beauty of Mother Earth.

Again, referring to Catholic Social Teaching, the Church is also called to look at the bigger picture. The Church is called to unite the human being to God and neighbor to neighbor,²² but that relationship is being interrupted because of fossil fuels.²³ Fossil fuels contribute to the escalation of climate change, which is responsible for the declining health of our common home. “The Vatican has been, and will continue to be, a participant in this struggle. The Vatican’s foreign policy since the end of Vatican II has been a struggle to discern what is acceptable [in society] and what must be opposed.” Fossil fuels can be an example of a factor that makes it hard for humans to orient themselves towards God.²⁴ Holding the Church to a higher standard is crucial and differentiates the Vatican from others who have a financial stake in fossil fuels.²⁵

To further understand this first issue, another economic factor must also be taken into consideration. Specifically, the Vatican Bank which controls the finances of the Vatican. Any discussion of the finances of the Vatican must include the question of its investments and bank deposits, both in Italy and throughout the world.²⁶ Furthermore, “The Bank has removed its investments from any firm whose products might involve 'moral problems.'”²⁷ Investigating the economic and political branches is key when discussing the topic of divestment. From a financial standpoint, the Vatican Bank must continue to stay up-to-date on the world of finance to remain relevant and have a voice on current issues. A spokesman for the Vatican Bank, Max Hohenberg, claimed the issue

²⁰ Anthony Elson, *Reclaiming the Catholic Social Teaching: A Defense of the Church’s True Teachings on Marriage, Family, and the State* (New Hampshire: Sophia Institute Press, 2011), 16.

²¹ Shelly, 3.

²² Elson, *Reclaiming the Catholic Social Teaching*, 10.

²³ “Fossil Free –About Fossil Free.”

²⁴ Elson, *Reclaiming Catholic Social Teaching*, 10.

²⁵ “Fossil Free –About Fossil Free.”

²⁶ A. Ernest Lewlin, “The Finances of the Vatican” *Journal of Contemporary History* 18 (2016): 194.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

was largely irrelevant because “there really isn’t much to divest.”²⁸ He said about 95% of the Bank’s assets are invested in government bonds and the rest are invested in stocks held in investment funds, and he has no knowledge of what specific stocks are held.²⁹ Another argument against divestment is that financially contributing to the fossil fuel economy may allow the Vatican to participate in secular conversations. That being said, as long as the Church remains invested in fossil fuels, they are disregarding Catholic Social Teaching.³⁰ The challenge that arises is discerning how to stay financially relevant while upholding the moral covenant of the Church.

The Theology of Divestment

The second segment is grounded in the theological dimension of divestment. Pope Francis’ encyclical, *Laudato Si*, looks past the financial element of divestment and explores how climate change and fossil fuels have harmed the Earth and why this disobeys one’s call as a Christian.³¹ The dialogue on climate change is a conversation in which all must have a voice. Pope Francis suggests, “We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all” (LS 22). This allows all of God’s beautifully composed creatures to be included in the dialogue. Pope Francis also reminds the world that, “Climate is a common good” (LS 24). Everyone will feel the implications of climate change; however, the poor and the marginalized will feel these consequences to a greater extent. Theologically, this becomes even more problematic.

According to the Gospel of Luke, the Christian Church is obligated to the preferential care of the poor (Luke 6:17-26; 16:19-37). Those who are being oppressed are to find refuge within the Church. Christians are to take up their crosses and the crosses of others, advocating for those who cannot advocate for themselves. This concept can and should be applied to the topic of climate change, which has direct ethical ramifications for the poor (LS 35). The poor do not have the means to combat the changes of the Earth in the same ways as others. “Many of the poor live in areas particularly affected by phenomena related to warming, and their means of subsistence are largely dependent on natural reserves and ecosystemic services such as agriculture, fishing and forestry” (LS 55). Those

²⁸ Lewlin, “The Finances of the Vatican,” 192.

²⁹ Stephanie Kirchgaessner, “Vatican ‘May’ Consider Divestment From Fossil Fuels, Despite Pope’s Call To Arms” *The Guardian* (2015) accessed Nov. 08 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/jul/01/vatican-may-consider-divestment-from-fossil-fuels-despite-popes-call-to-arms>.

³⁰ Elson, *Reclaiming Catholic Social Teaching*, 17.

³¹ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 3.

classified as poor in *Laudato Si* are our brothers and sisters. To do nothing on behalf of those on the margins is to limit beauty only to the wealthy, which was not the intention of God.³²

Upon reading *Laudato Si*, this second issue of framing divestment through a theological lens is expanded and brought forward. Modern day Christians cannot ignore issues of climate change and must wrestle with finding appropriate ways of using Scripture to combat it. This makes *Laudato Si* particularly helpful in responding to this subject. It seems quite obvious that Pope Francis would encourage the world to not partake in any matter that would further the danger of climate change. Yet, the controversy emerges when we investigate ways in which the institutional Church may be contributing to climate change. “The Vatican may consider, but is not committed to, divesting its holdings in fossil fuels.”³³ It appears that the same institution telling Christians to take a stand on global warming are contributing to global warming. “As a result, campaign groups and activists, like 350.org and Naomi Klein, have called for the Vatican Bank to match the Pope’s message on climate change and divest from oil and coal firms.”³⁴ Thus, a theological perspective reveals why the inconsistency between the Church leaders and the Church teachings must be addressed.

The Science Behind Divestment

The third segment of divestment is rooted in a scientific approach to the issue of divestment, and is also included in *Laudato Si*. “A number of scientific studies indicate that most global warming in recent decades is due to the great concentration of greenhouse gases (carbon dioxide, methane, nitrogen oxides and others) released mainly as a result of human activity” (LS 22). Scholars outside of the Church have dedicated a great deal of time and effort to studying the causes of climate change. Their studies have found that, “Global GHG emissions due to human activities have grown since pre-industrial times, with an increase of 70% between 1970 and 2004.”³⁵ Humans often forget to make the connection between the conditions of the Earth and their own actions.³⁶ This accountability is crucial in terms of fossil fuels. The Vatican must understand that having financial stock in companies that have high emission levels is detrimental.

³² Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 4.

³³ Kirchgaessner, “Vatican ‘May’ Consider Divestment From Fossil Fuels.”

³⁴ Sandler Joe Clarke, “Revealed: Vatican Bank Officials Tied to Fossil Fuels” *Energy Desk Green Peace* (2016) accessed Nov. 08 2016, <http://energydesk.greenpeace.org/2016/07/19/pope-francis-vatican-bank-fossil-fuels/>

³⁵ Ogunlade Davidson & Bert Metz, *Climate Change*, 3.

³⁶ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 4.

The world of religious faith is often categorized separately from other domains, however, that should not be the case. “The current warming trend is of particular significance because most of it is very likely human-induced and proceeding at a rate that is unprecedented in the past 1,300 years.”³⁷ Christians must continue to have fruitful dialogue with experts in the world of science. This dialogue will allow Christians to adequately be their brother and sister’s “keeper” and inform those on the margins of the condition of the environment (LS 22).

Theologian Alex Garcia-Rivera provides tools for answering these questions. Garcia-Rivera uses the term “interlacing”³⁸ to describe how to merge different fields of study together. Interlacing will shift one’s current perspective and provide new insight.³⁹ From this, the next question is, “What is the new insight that one is to gain?” Garcia-Rivera would reply by saying, “God who... wishes to be known and loved by [God’s] human creation.”⁴⁰ Christians are called to know God and advance their relationship with the Creator. Climate change allows for creation to be destroyed, preventing Christians from knowing and loving the authentic creation.⁴¹

Fossil Fuels Impede God’s Beauty

Faith does not discriminate, its possibility is open to all, as is God. The image of God can be found not just in humans, but in all parts of Earth.⁴² God desires to be known, loved, and cared for, as do humans.⁴³ If fossil fuels continue to be emitted at the same rate, God’s gift of beauty on the earth will soon be limited. By not divesting, only some will know God’s beauty, but God’s love was meant for all. The beauty of creation is also an idea that was intended for all to rejoice in. Garcia-Rivera proposes an idea of Heaven on Earth pertinent to this conversation. The theologian-physicist says that it is human sin that blocks the visible signs of Heaven that are already part of Earth.⁴⁴ Continued investment in fossil fuels may block us from seeing and extending the beauty of Heaven on Earth. Perhaps, the new insight that is to be gained lies within the idea of beauty. This unique idea forces us to reconsider what is beautiful and how we may hide God’s beauty. Participating in fossil fuels should be viewed as a sin, as it blocks access to the presence of God.

³⁷ Ogunlade Davidson & Bert Metz, *Climate Change*, 71.

³⁸ Garcia-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 8.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Alex Garcia-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics*, (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 11.

⁴¹ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 4.

⁴² Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy*, 29.

⁴³ Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy*, 89.

⁴⁴ Garcia-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 65.

Many Christians focus their life on working towards salvation with the idea that they may be redeemed from their sins one day. Yet, remaining indifferent to climate change hinders a Christian’s works of salvation.⁴⁵ The sin that accompanies fossil fuels clouds God’s inherent beauty. Smog and rising temperatures threaten blossoming spring flowers, families of squirrels, and fresh, flowing streams. This is problematic because these notions of nature are all parts of perceiving Heaven on Earth. These are gifts of God that were intended for us to befriend and relish. The Vatican Bank having stakes in fossil fuels worsens conditions for the natural world. The Church is supposed to guide Christians through the modern world as they struggle with works of salvation. This cannot be properly lived out if the leaders of the Church are contributors to this great sin.

The idea of Heaven on Earth is depicted in Genesis 2. In this image, Heaven comes in the form of a garden.⁴⁶ The garden was intended to be pure; humans stain this purity with sin. This timeless image is recalled when considering the current condition of Mother Earth. Human needs have been placed before God and nature, slowly removing the glimpses of Heaven that are given by God for all.

Conclusion

Economics, politics, theology, and science all bring forth different truths. All of these fields are equally important in the conversation on climate change. Traces of God’s craftsmanship are also found in all of these disciplines. The question that follows is, “How do we interlace all of these segments together?” and, “What does this mean in terms of divestment, fossil fuels, and the Vatican?”

Theological aesthetics allow humans to verbalize the transcendent beauty of Mother Earth. The discipline of theology can sometimes be consumed in intellectual abstractions; however, theological aesthetics reminds me that theology is also a matter of the heart. My heart is what allows me to feel the presence or absence of beauty. Fossil fuels are not just a matter of intellect, politics, or science, but also a matter of environmental justice. To threaten this is to threaten the beauty created by God. If one cannot describe something like fossil fuels as aesthetically beautiful this speaks volumes about its truth and also its goodness. The Vatican must divest in fossil fuels to allow the beauty and the heart to flourish. LMU: SST

⁴⁵ Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy*, 37.

⁴⁶ See Genesis 2: 2-25

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