META: RESEARCH IN HERMENEUTICS, PHENOMENOLOGY, AND PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY
VOL. XVI, NO. 1 / JUNE 2024: 224-251, ISSN 2067-3655, www.metajournal.org

A Phenomenological Reading of Pope Francis' Encyclical *Laudato si'* through Jean-Luc Marion's Account of the Saturated *Phenomenon*

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Abstract

This essay identifies and articulates some phenomenological thoughts implicit in Pope Francis' celebrated encyclical on nature *Laudato Si'*. Careful attention to the nuances of Francis' statements on nature reveals layers of multi-disciplinal ideas, including phenomenology. Thus, it inferentially establishes his thoughts' proximal connection to the phenomenological tradition. However, I do not claim that he directly engages with phenomenology. However, it is not an impossible conjecture. Using Jean-Luc Marion's account of the saturated phenomenon, I try to show that some of Pope Francis' articulated views resonate with Marion's phenomenological insights. It leads me to infer that the encyclical's discursive scope is first broader than what has been thought. Second, in this more general scope, we find in Francis a well-informed multidisciplinary 'thought train' that leads him to engage in a meaningful dialogue with various disciplines within and outside theological-religious discourse. Third, it shows that Marion's saturated phenomenon is wide-ranging beyond its identifiable niche in phenomenological inquiry, like Francis's thoughts in his encyclical on nature.

Keywords: phenomenology, saturated phenomenon, integral ecology, Laudato Si', eco-phenomenology

Introduction

The deadly COVID-19 virus struck us. The pandemic brought countries around the globe into crisis. Yet, others consider the crisis an opportunity to forge and wield power over the most affected and afflicted. Some believe the virus came from bats or pangolins, while others think it was from a lab

experiment.[1] Whatever the case, one thing is profoundly apparent, i.e., the infinite urge of humans to overpower nature and us. We see the inhumanity and the perniciousness of human beings. Ironically, despite human beings' desire to control, manipulate, and dominate nature, the devastating effects of the COVID-19 virus show the limits of human power and control. Weak and unsophisticated intervention and highly advanced technology could not afford to mitigate the problem right away. Armin Grunwald (2021, 280) observes that even advanced technological solutions proved ineffective. The issue concerning technology and its ethical dimension is one of the salient points of Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'* – the only encyclical that addresses the ecological issues and concerns as to its main interest.

The encyclical has gained enormous attention among experts from different human and natural sciences disciplines for six years. From theologians to natural and social scientists, it receives a positive reception outside the entrenched fortress of the Catholic worldview. An environmental philosopher, Dale Jamieson (2015), considers the encyclical "the first really important environmental text of the twenty-first century," which "explicitly invites conversation, with both believers and non-believers" (19-20). Perhaps this observation from an outsider like Jamieson qualifies the view of Lorenzo Orioli (2016, 933) that the encyclical bears an "absolute novelty" because it is the first time that an entire social document solely reflects and dedicates itself to environmental issues. Various issues and topics directly and indirectly articulated in the encyclical have emerged. This is partly due to the multidisciplinary ideas infused in the text. As Celia Deane-Drummond (2016, 392) puts it, the primary aim of the entire document is to interact with various discussions on the said issues.

For Anna Rowlands, the encyclical finds Francis's ideas "frankly excoriating about the state of contemporary life" (2015, 418). Wolfgang Sachs, on the other hand, describes the encyclical as a mark of a new discourse on development because it "covers a lot of ground, spanning from the destruction of creation to the unjust global order to the individual

responsibility that each of us bears. Can one classify the Pope's sentiments under the heading of Post-Development?" (2017, 7). For Jacob M. Kohlhass and Ryan Patrick McLaughlin (2019, 501), the encyclical concerns environmental ethics. The encyclical explicitly resists an anthropocentric temperament. Instead, it tries to articulate a theocentric perspective of nature that is more inclusive and hospitable, according to Steven C. van den Heuvel (2018, 53).

I bring these varied perspectives here to emphasize how the encyclical draws diverse, critical, and charitable perspectives from inside and outside the Catholic Christian perspectives. So far, I have yet to find anything that tries to read the encyclical using a phenomenological framework. However, this does not mean no extant literature on understanding Pope Francis' thoughts on this philosophical view. One interesting essay by Kristof Oltvai (2018) highlighted Pope Francis's views as contiguous with the current French phenomenological enterprise led by Jean-Luc Marion.[2] On this note, I want to follow up on a similar inquiry. But mine is to concentrate on another document, the *Laudato Si*.

The essay will first give a general overview of the encyclical, emphasizing the crucial points that are veneers of phenomenological ideas when closely examined using the lens of the saturated phenomenon. The second part is an explication and elaboration of Jean-Luc Marion's style of phenomenology. It focuses on delineating his account of the saturated phenomenon, its cognate concepts, and its usefulness as a paradigm of ecological reflection. It hopes to shed light on Pope Francis' implicit, if you may, eco-phenomenological thoughts. It indirectly shows that Marion's insights can enrich the phenomenological approach to environmental philosophy. Finally, the third section articulates the relation of the extracted insights from the encyclical to Marion's phenomenological thoughts on the saturated phenomenon.

Pope Francis and the *Laudato Si'*

It has been nine years since the first encyclical of Pope Francis dealing with the environment was published.[3] It is one of the most important social documents of the Catholic Church

on the environment. As mentioned, no single social document of the Catholic Church gave a full-length reflection on the environmental questions and issues. The unprecedented historical document emerged when Pope Francis had just begun his stint as the Roman Catholic Church's new Pope. He was elected the 266th pope on March 13, 2013. The first pope elected to the Petrine office from Argentina, South America – considered a far-flung country by Western standards and known for its Marxist movements and liberal theology. For his critics according to Massimo Borghesi in *The Mind of Pope Francis*, Francis is "a populist, an Argentine 'Peronist' who lacks the ability to understand the subtle distinctions of liberal, modern Europe" and "lacks the theological and philosophical preparation to handle the Petrine office" (2018, 27) though without solid evidence to support these assertions. He is a radical pope to his supporters and sympathetic to Francis' papacy. But this radicalism in Francis, as Ivereigh warns, must "not be confused with progressive teaching or ideology. [He] is radical because [he] is a missionary and mystical," and he is "instinctively and viscerally opposed to 'parties' in the Church…[and] will not compromise on the hot-button issues that divide the Church from the secular West" (2014, 386). One of Francis' friends attests to the pontiff's mysticality, describing his personality as possessing "a mystical dimension, of which I saw several signs. His books and encyclicals deal with human behavioral problems: poverty, ecology, slavery, and so on, and his pronouncements are direct and very clear." (Storka 2018, xii) The pontiff is known for his being straightforward in his language. As explained by Borghesi (2018), "[i]t is simplicity that is rooted in long reflection and evangelical simplicity, not in any limitation of expression" (31-32). It is because Pope Francis' model is Jesus Christ, who rarely speaks in sophisticated language. Francis follows his "way of thinking and acting" from Christ. Skorka (2018) explains, "rarely does he [Francis] adopt an intellectual attitude using cerebral sophistication because he has an internal world which is far from a purely intellectual formalism, a mystical world which can only be expressed in the very special language of simple words, silences, and many gestures." (xii) Despite some

unfavorable observations from his critics, it cannot be denied that his many remarks on various occasions are pretty evident, impressive, and have a strong charismatic and pastoral appeal to many. He is clear when articulating his views that most people can easily discern the message of his statements.

Faithful to his pontifical name, he began his pontificate with an encyclical that centers on the pressing concerns and issues of the environment and extends further beyond this sphere. As Naomi Oreskes, describing Pope Francis' encyclical, *Laudato Si'* says, "While it has been billed as an encyclical on the environment, the letter covers virtually every important topic in contemporary life" (2015, 8). Similarly, Clemens Sedmak (2016, 946) comments that the *Laudato Si'* "talks about the inner situation of technology, economics, and politics" and "should be read in light of Francis's pontifical agenda: pastoral and missionary conversion." (Schlesinger 2018, 339)

The *Laudato Si'*

The encyclical is one of a kind as it is the only encyclical that devotes all its pages to reflecting on God's creation and nature's condition today. Pope Francis surveys existing documents that shed light on the Church's position concerning nature, from *Pacem in Terris* of John XXIII, *Octogesima Adveniens* (Apostolic Letter) of Saint Pope Paul VI, *Redemptor Hominis* (Encyclical) of Saint John Paul II, down to the *Caritas in Veritate* of Pope emeritus Benedict XVI. All these documents speak fleetingly about nature. Many readers, believers or not, of the *Laudato Si'* are impressed by it. Leonardo Boff, cited by Alexandre Martins (2018, 410), quips, "It is the first time that the papal ministry has addressed ecological issues deeply and extensively. The Pope realizes the risks that the life-system and the earth-system are facing." Aside from the overall theme that directly discusses environmental issues and concerns, more to it makes this encyclical quite unprecedented and novel.

For one, the encyclical deviates from the traditional perspective that informs the Church's environmental position. The Pope tried to resist the anthropocentric paradigm if not

entirely abandoned it. As Schlesinger (2018) argues, in Francis's decision to adopt a new approach to creation, "[h]umanity is decentered, meaning that we must look not just to our own desires and machinations in terms of our priorities. Instead, the Creator's agenda is in the center of our concerns." (343) Such an approach is theocentric. But Kohlhass and McLaughlin (2019, 503) call it "relationcentric" in "which relationships themselves, rather than persons or other beings, occupy the locus of theological concern." Another reason is the inclusive textual tonality of the encyclical, which signals and invites friendly but critical conversation with all concerned peoples and institutions.

What is more remarkable and unprecedented is that Francis, following Deane-Drummond, considers the natural sciences and related environmental issues in a manner unparalleled by other official, authoritative statements (2016, 414). In this sense, the text shows its successful attempt to step out of its fortress to see greater horizons coming from various points. In this manner, Francis would like to gather everyone at one 'huge table' to discuss a common issue and cause. The encyclical "makes an uncommon pivot from its calls to conversion toward a call for pluralist dialogue," according to Willis Jenkins (2018, 446). This inclusive or hospitable attitude is felt in the textual tone of the encyclical—the reason why it attracts more experts to engage in a friendly and critical conversation with the church.

Francis employed a familiar framework known to many Catholic theologians as the see-discern/judge-act. He first presents the current ecological situation and what the Church's social teachings say about it. Then, it provides an illuminating, multi-disciplinary analysis of the current ecological crisis's actual and possible causes and effects on peoplekind and the earth. Lastly, he offers lines of approach and action that he thinks are sustainable, inclusive, and open to all, especially to those responsible leaders and institutions who are directly accountable for affecting changes to the state or condition of our environment.

The first two chapters of the encyclical lay down the context of the ecological scenario and how the teachings of the Church offer guiding points of what to think about the said issue. Francis identifies some ecological or environmental problems today. They are intimately connected with moral and social concerns. These environmental problems include pollution, climate change, water problems, and biodiversity loss. These problems are correlated with social issues of global inequality and the decline in the quality of human life.

Consequently, these endanger society to the point of a breakdown. These twin problems result from what Pope Francis (2015, 22) calls "throwaway culture, which affects the excluded just as it quickly reduces things to rubbish." He proceeds to explain specific concerns on pollution, such as carbon emission (which calls for universal solidarity) and water ethics – questioning the control of water consumption. He argues against the privatization and management of water distribution by emphasizing the inviolable and inherent right of all people to have "access to safe drinkable water" as "a basic and universal human right since it is essential to human survival and, as such, is a condition for the exercise of other human rights." (ibid., 30) The problem of water distribution, consumption, and access is "an educational and cultural issue" because people must be aware of the value and use of safe water. The universal access to it must be fully known to people. The pontiff sees the water problem as a cause of "great inequality." He also takes up the issue of biodiversity. The problem arises from "short-sighted approaches to the economy, commerce, and production" (ibid., 34), which caused havoc on nature's biodiversity. It is partly due to the intense degree of "human intervention, often in the service of business interests and consumerism." (ibid) Next, he speaks about the decline in the quality of human life as seen in the "disproportionate and unruly growth of many cities" and the "privatization of certain spaces" only for the consumption of the few and so are signs of "real social decline" and the "silent rupture of the bonds of integration and social cohesion." (ibid., 46) Francis emphasizes the value of habitable urban greenspaces. Cities should be well-

designed to avoid excluding or neglecting those on the margins. Another contributory factor to the decline of society is the role that media and the digital world play. Since media is ubiquitous, "their influence can stop people from learning how to live wisely, to think deeply and to love generously." (ibid., 47) Such biting characterization of media reminds us of the Frankfurt School's critique of the culture industry and mass communication.[4] Critical theorists believe that media and technology reduce culture into an "industry" where capitalists profit by persistently and subtly developing false consumer consciousness and transforming them into mere desiring machines. In *The Culture Industry*, Adorno explains that culture as an industry "refers to the standardization of the thing itself…and the rationalization of distribution techniques" (2001, 100). Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985), a groundbreaking polemic on the corrosive effects of media, especially television, observes that we can no longer think independently of what is being fed or subtly dictated to us by the media. As Fr. John Culkin, S.J. said, "We become what we behold. We shape our tools, and then our tools shape us."[5] That is why for Pope Francis, "Efforts need to be made to help these media become sources of new cultural progress for humanity and not a threat to our deepest riches" (2015, 47).

All these problems intertwined with the ecological concerns led Pope Francis to assess whether our responses so far are enough to contain or at least can give a long-term solution to these problems. In his view, the responses are relatively weak for several reasons: first, "lack of culture needed to confront" the crisis; second, lack of "leadership capable of striking out on new paths and meeting the needs of the present"; third, "techno-economic paradigm" which for him is one-dimensional – the reason why many things were left out crucial to the salvation of creation or nature (Pope Francis 2015, 53).

The Pope emphasizes the value of the Church's teachings about today's ecological problems. He clarified that any 'tyrannical anthropocentric' view of nature has no theological basis. He writes, "The Bible has no place for a tyrannical

anthropocentrism unconcerned for other creatures" (2015, 68). Instead, the Church teaches this conviction: "Everything is interconnected, and genuine care for our own lives and our relationships with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice, and faithfulness to others" (ibid., 70). Therefore, he tries to dismiss the misconception that the kind of anthropocentrism the Church espouses is tyrannical. He pointed out that 'dominion' does not mean controlling or manipulating other living beings.

On the contrary, it should be interpreted as "responsible stewardship." Pope Francis, therefore, did not deny anthropocentrism per se but clarified its sense. In a way, it addresses the issue of some environmental critics of Christian teachings being complicit in promoting anthropocentrism. For instance, Lyn White Jr., in "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" (1967), argues that "Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion in the world has seen…not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploits nature for his proper ends" (1205). As understood by Patrick J. Dobel (1977), what White implies is that Christianity, therefore, "must accept most of the 'blame' for the unique 'Western' perspectives which have led to the present state of affairs" (906-907). But Dobel, in response to White's criticism, argues that "The attempt to discover historical roots is a dubious business at best, and in this case, it borders on the ludicrous" (1977, 907). What the Christian critics failed to consider is the complexity of the issue according to Dobel, they "consistently underestimate the economic, social and political influences on modern science and economy;" and "ignore the rise of the secularized nation-state from the decay of 'Christendom, yet these new government regimes provided much of the impetus to maximize the exploitation of resources and the discovery of new lands" (ibid).

As Pope Francis says, we do not possess nor own the earth and its living beings because "[t]he ultimate purpose of other creatures is not to be found in us. Rather, all creatures are moving forward and through us towards a common point of

arrival, which is God" (2015, 83). But this does not mean subscribing to a Taylorian view of egalitarianism, biocentrism, or ecocentrism (see Taylor 2011). Contrariwise, his main point is that the Church recognizes the value and dignity of other living beings. It condones any form of "ecological fascism" (Aldo Leopold 2001) that treats nature and other living beings as simply instrumental. Another salient point is the distinction between 'nature' and 'creation.' The Pope identifies 'nature' as a system, reducible to an object to be "studied, understood and controlled" (2015, 75) while 'creation' is understood as a gift—"an order of love." (ibid., 76) It is also essential to add that 'nature' is not just a 'mere' system. It is a 'living' system. Perhaps there is a profound meaning to what Christians believe: that we are made of earth (Adam) and shall return as earth. Our relationship with nature is so intricate and intimate that we share our resources and are interdependent. One way of putting this is how Curt Stager, in "You Are Made of Waste" (2013), aptly describes in his article that we are made of waste.

Furthermore, Pope Francis proceeds by evaluating the ecological crisis today. He raised two essential points. First is his view of science and technology as a hegemonic one-dimensional paradigm that "exalts the concept of a subject who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object." (2015, 105) This view leads to the second main point: the exaltation of the subject and its mastery over nature. Francis reminds us that this results from what Hegel (1988, 35) calls the "cunning of reason." Enlightenment promises to secure man a firm or stable foundation, managing to reduce everything according to the conditions set by human reason. It gets its highest expression in technology – the subject's central power resource or, in Heidegger's terms, in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (1977), "machinations." The power of human logic reduces everything to scientific understanding and authenticates science and technology as the only legitimate "epistemological paradigm" par excellence. The effect of this, according to Francis, is the weakening and "deterioration of the

environment – a sign of a reductionism which affects every aspect of human and social life." (2015, 107)

Francis also argued that "technological products are not neutral (ibid.)." It means that they "create a framework which ends up conditioning lifestyles and shaping social possibilities along the lines dictated by the interest of certain powerful groups (ibid.)." This view affirms the belief that technology as an extension of man has inherent and derivative value, at least based on its impact. Such an idea contradicts the belief that technology is neither good nor bad but simply a tool (Vogels et al. 2020). However, Pope Francis (2015) says this is not the case. It can be seen how the impact of technology conditioned life in general, where "life gradually becomes a surrender to situations conditioned by technology itself viewed as the principal key to the meaning of existence." (110) The technological meaning of existence is made possible because technology is not a neutral tool. It colonizes our consciousness (*via* Habermas) and life's activities according to its own rules. It is this technological phenomenon that Francis (2015) tries to point out when he says that "technology…is presented as the only way of solving these problems, in that proves incapable of seeing the mysterious network of relations between things and so sometimes solves one problem only to create others" (20). That is why finding real solutions to the crisis cannot depend solely on what science and technology can offer. Instead, Francis insists that to have a real and long-term solution to the crisis, "openness to categories which transcend the language of mathematics and biology, [will] take us to the heart of what it is to be human." (2015, 11) He urges us to "continue to wonder about the purpose and meaning of everything," which we cannot do when we allow ourselves to be enslaved by technology. We cannot rely solely on technology. We need a new way of thinking in treating the crisis, a "distinctive way of looking at things." (ibid.)

Another thing that Francis wants us to overcome or at least avoid is the widespread relativism as an effect of the technological paradigm. Following his predecessor, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, a rabid and staunchest critic of

relativism, Francis warns us of the dangers of "practical relativism." One of which is the corruption of culture. For Pope Francis, "When the culture itself is corrupt and objective truth, and universally valid principles are no longer upheld, laws can only be seen as arbitrary impositions or obstacles to be avoided." (2015, 123) Such a sinister view perpetuated by relativism further contributes to the ecological problem. That is why Francis highlights the value of integral ecology. Two crucial points need to be emphasized here. First is the role of culture as a "living, dynamic and participatory present reality" in finding an integral solution to ecological problems. In this context, understanding local cultures and communities' active participation is necessary for "studying environmental problems, favoring a dialogue between scientific-technical language and the language of the people" (2015, 143). Second, integral ecology requires "intergenerational solidarity," which is less vital without it. Such a form of solidarity is a question of fundamental justice. Therefore, ecological crisis managers and planners must consider the future generation to solve the crisis.

One of the ways to mitigate and address the crisis is to take what the Church thinks to be a more comprehensive, multidisciplinary approach to the ecological crisis. First, such an approach requires higher stakes such that all parties involved must negotiate under the "global common good" rubric instead of their "national interest." Second, the "magical conception of the market" must be rejected "where profits alone count" without thinking "about the rhythms of nature, its phases of decay and regeneration, or the complexity of ecosystems that may be gravely upset by human interventions" (Pope Francis 2015, 190). Third, we need a politics entirely divorced from economics, a "far-sighted and capable of a new, integral and interdisciplinary approach to handling the different aspects of the crisis" (ibid., 197). Such politics is possible when it will allow itself not to be dictated by impulsive economic power. Fourth is "cultivating sound virtues," which is an unconditioned demand to all ecological citizens to be "able to make a selfless ecological commitment" (ibid., 211). Finally, it

can be made possible if we, according to Francis, make a "profound interior conversion" (ibid., 217).

What can we make out of this text? The overall theme is guided by an essential principle, which Pope Francis stated, "Without anthropology, there is no ecology" (2015, 12). This means that the reflection on the ecological crisis is grounded and informed from a Christian anthropological point of view. Although one can sense that Francis has focused heavily on the effects of science and technology, it still boils down to the question of man's mastery over nature – an invention of the modern anthropological view, which Francis wanted us to overcome. We remain modern in this sense. But many believe that we are now in a postmodern stage. From a postmodern perspective, the subject no longer positions itself as the center of everything. The human subject no longer possesses the superlative power to control everything. If Pope Francis is correct in his analysis, perhaps we can say we are still modern, and postmodernism is a bad joke. Perhaps he agrees with geologists in describing our geological epoch as an epoch of the Anthropocene. It is a geological term that describes an age where a single species – humans – is increasingly dictating Earth's future. If the old forces of nature like meteorites, mega volcanic eruptions, and plate tectonics were the significant causes of changing the Earth's geological makeup, this time, it is humans. Human actions have transformed the Earth into a new geological period in which human impacts on the planet's ecological systems reach a dangerous limit. The Anthropocene, therefore, symbolizes a future of superlative control of our environment.

It may be said that the Anthropocene is a height of hubris, the profane revelation of our mastery over nature. This is what Francis wants us to overcome or urges us to resist by correcting our view of ourselves as no longer masters of nature or the sole Subject while the rest are mere objects to be controlled and manipulated. Francis clearly states that the "world is a sacrament of communion." The world is not "a problem to be solved; the world is a joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and praise" (2015, 12). This view of the world defies

the principles of human reason or metaphysics. It requires a new way of thinking – a thinking that is not technological, hence, calculative but meditative or poetic, following Heidegger. A kind of thinking that does not stop us from wondering. This view of nature or creation as a mystery to be awed and enjoyed resonates with what Marion considers a saturated phenomenon. What is this saturated phenomenon? How does nature fit into this kind of description? These questions try to show the phenomenological overtones of the encyclical. The profundity of Pope Francis' insights and views in the *Laudato Si'* may not manifest without careful reading and attention to our collective experience of nature. The richness of the human experience enriches and nourishes the encyclical. With this view, phenomenological insights are evident, if not axiomatic.

Jean-Luc Marion's Saturated Phenomenon

Jean-Luc Marion is one of the leading French phenomenologists today. He belongs to the new generation of phenomenologists – the so-called 'new phenomenology.' (see Simmons & Benson 2013). As Steven Delay (2019, 74) puts it, referring to Marion, "today's most pioneering phenomenologist…innovative reader of Descartes, and imaginative theologian". Marion is well-respected and well-known as Descartes' expert and commentator. He wrote a triptych on Descartes' thoughts and philosophy. In theology, Marion follows the theological persuasions of Hans Urs von Balthasar, Louis Bouyer, Jean Daniélou, Henri de Lubac among others (Horner 2016, 3).

One may think that in our time, it is not easy to be well-versed in theology and philosophy, which are seemingly far apart. But it seems that to use Emmanuel Falque's expression in *Crossing the Rubicon* (2016), Marion has crossed the 'Rubicon' – a sign of a 'great crossing' that was so difficult to do in the last two centuries. Such crossing is due to Marion's attempt to re-open the doors of both disciplines to a dialogue that was dormant for a long time. Through his brand of phenomenology, Marion appears to make philosophy, specifically phenomenology and theology, allies rather than hostile to one another. As Thomas Carlson puts it, "his [Marion]

theology and phenomenology inform one another more" (2001, xv). Marion considers phenomenology an important resource for theology. But he comments in an interview that, "Real theologians…what they need is an adapted methodology that reaches far beyond a mere readaptation of what they call metaphysics or philosophy. They need to use a phenomenological strategy" (Dika and Hackett 2016, 59). In this case, Marion is trying to overcome people's stereotypes of philosophy and theology. Instead, he shows that these seemingly opposing disciplines are, at their core, showing isomorphic relations. It is demonstrated in Marion's works that are, in the view of Gschwandtner, "all characterized by a desire to overcome metaphysics: whether ascertaining the nature of metaphysics in Descartes, whether attempting to free the divine from the idolatry of being and onto-theo-logy, or whether extending phenomenology into new realms of possibility" (2007, xiii). What binds these works together is Marion's interest in the phenomenological understanding of self, love, and the divine. He is known for his phenomenological concept of the saturated phenomenon. Essential to this section is how Marion's account of the saturated phenomenon resonates with Pope Francis's ecological/environmental thinking.

Marion describes the saturated phenomenon as an experience or event where the person can no longer reduce such experience to mere concepts. In short, one's experience is saturated with intuition to the point that putting intuition into the concept is no longer possible. Marion wants to challenge the view of Kant regarding our understanding of experience as experience regulated both by sensibility and understanding. These two conditions for Kant make our experience or "knowledge of *an* object possible" (Marion 2008, 28). Sensibility refers to our capacity to receive intuitions through our internal and external senses, while understanding is responsible for organizing such intuitions through and into concepts. As Kant said, "intuitions without concepts are blind." But this does not mean that the concept precedes or overpowers intuitions.

On the contrary, for Marion, "in the realm of the phenomenon, not the concept but intuition is king." (2008, 28-29) Kant may agree with this when he explains that "intuitions, in general, through which objects can be given to us constitute the field or the entire object of possible experience" (Kant 2017, A96). The reason is that there could be no concept without intuition, even if, for Kant, "all cognition requires a concept, however imperfect or obscure it may be" (Kant 2017, A106). A concept without content (intuition) is empty and so unnecessary. While it is true that, according to Marion, "phenomenon is thought through the concept," it does not mean it is primary over intuition. He justifies the primacy of intuition by saying, "intuition without concept, although still blind, nevertheless already gives matter to an object, whereas the concept without intuition, although not blind, nevertheless no longer sees anything, since nothing has yet been given to it to be seen" (Marion 2008, 28). Marion contends that "in order to be thought it must first be given; and it is given only through intuition" (ibid., 29). Despite the primacy of intuition over the concept in terms of its function, Marion believes that intuition remains finite or limited in the Kantian sense. It leads him to think that the I constitute any knowledge we have of objects, so "the phenomenon must be reduced to the status of finite objectivity." (ibid., 31) Marion's point is that there are phenomena that escape from our act of constituting because we limit our understanding of our experience to an experience of an object and that, according to Marion, "some actually given intuition in general…finds itself assumed, framed, and controlled by a concept, playing the role of a category" (ibid., 119). That is why we failed to acknowledge and recognize that there is more to what we constitute as an object. This leads Marion to develop, in *Being Given,* one of his phenomenological principles: "so much reduction, so much givenness" (2002a, 14). It captures his attempt to release phenomenality from the Kantian restriction of intuition as finite. The main point is that if intuition is unrestricted and allows itself to appear absolutely without our intentionality that limits it, it will appear that reduction "grants access to absolute givenness and it has no other goal but this." (ibid., 14) There is so much excess that

saturates our experience. The question is, how do we characterize the saturated phenomenon, which cannot be reduced to a mere object through concept?

Marion uses the Kantian categories to hinge the saturated phenomenon's essential features: it is *invisable* according to quantity, *unbearable* according to quality, *absolute* according to relation, and *incapable of being looked at* [irregardable] according to modality. In his book, *In Excess*, Marion (2002b) elaborates on these features using the following modes of the saturated phenomenon: the *event* for quantity, the *idol* or *work of art* like painting for quality, *the flesh* for relation, and *the face of the other* for modality. He uses a lecture hall as an example of a mode of the event. He explains that other than its "objective availability" of the hall, i.e., physical characteristics or appearance and the like, which everyone can enumerate, is its "unexpected fact, unforeseeable, coming from an uncontrollable past" (2002b, 32). The lecture hall as a mode of the event shows the inexhaustible character of the event. Marion explains, "The event of the 'hall' of the lecture hall allows a phenomenon to rise up for us in full light that not only does not proceed from our initiative, or respond to our expectations, and could never be reproduced" (ibid., 34). As such, a locus of an event of lecturing gives excessive intuition that one could not afford to constitute. It is a banal experience when one enters a lecture hall that cannot absolutely describe what the hall is with our perception of it, its connection to our previous experience, and so on. In this case, our experience saturated with too much intuition cripples our ability to conceptualize such experience.

A similar experience happens when one sees a painting with awe. When one is captivated by the radiance of a painting, it reveals the painting's exuberant and abundant intuition, which can render one in a frenzy. In short, when one marvels at a painting, one is overwhelmed by its intuition to the point that one cannot fully grasp the meaning of the painting. Every time the painting is seen, it opens new horizons. Marion explains, "We cannot see a painting once and for all. Unlike the objects of

the world that – if one knows enough about their structure, their purpose, and their use – it suffices to see once in order to be able to use them daily and no longer have to come back there *to see."* (ibid., 70)

The *flesh* reveals a similar mode of a saturated phenomenon because it is irreducible. Our experience of the *flesh* is inseparable from oneself. Any scientific description escapes one's experience of the flesh. It is not the physical body, to be sure. Phenomenologists like Heidegger, Michel Henry, and Marion, among others, would distinguish the flesh from the body. The body can be examined using medical technology to determine its state or condition, but the flesh is something else. It is lived and felt rather than objectified. In this sense, the *flesh* escapes or eludes our attempt to characterize it, to name it objectively. As Marion puts it, the *flesh* "eludes all relation – my pain, my pleasure, remain unique, incommunicable, unable to be substituted – in an absoluteness without compromise, without anything like it or equal to it" (ibid., 100).

According to Marion, the *face* or the icon "shares the privilege of flesh" (ibid., 113). It remains invisible, and no signification can reveal the 'who' of the *face*. I am powerless before the *face* of the other. I am reminded of the injunction, 'Do not kill.' The *face* of the other remains a mystery despite my witnessing and experience. I cannot reduce the other to my categories since doing so makes the other no longer other but the same me. The face, for Marion, becomes an icon "addressing a call, in short, envisaging me" (ibid., 119). I cannot constitute the *face* since it watches me. The *face* overwhelms or paralyzes my ability to constitute it. The *face* is not an object for me but an infinite subject beyond my determination.

Given all these modes of the saturated phenomenon, Marion intends to show that our understanding of experience is limited and equivocal. The saturated phenomenon, for him, is an example of how we have failed to realize that there is no single and universal meaning of experience. It is not true for Marion that "we do not have any experience of what passes beyond the

conditions for the possibility of experience" (2008, 121). Against this view, Marion introduced the idea of the saturated phenomenon. He explains, "The entire question of the saturated phenomenon concerns solely and specifically the possibility that certain phenomena do not manifest themselves in the mode of objects and yet still do manifest themselves" (ibid., 122). Not all forms of experience are reducible to objects of the human constitution. There are modes of experience that cannot be understood within the realm of an object or being. Marion explains, "The saturated phenomenon refuses to let itself be looked at as an object precisely because it appears with a multiple and indescribable excess that suspends any effort at constitution" (ibid., 43). The question is, does this view relate to nature in that our experience of nature is saturated? If affirmative, does this view connect or resonate with Pope Francis' views in the encyclical?

Saturated Phenomenon and its Resonances with Pope Francis's Ecological Thoughts in *Laudato si'*

A careful examination of Marion's works reveals that he rarely comments about the environment or nature, more so on the saturated phenomenon and its application to nature or the environment. If he speaks about nature, it aligns with his view of technology and humanity. For example, in *Believing in Order to See*, he comments about the condition of nature and his idea of nihilism and humanity. He says, "What is the point of the humanity of humans, the naturalness of nature, the justice of the city, and the truth of knowledge? Why not rather their opposites, the dehumanization of humans for improving humanity, the systematic bleeding of nature in order to develop the economy?" (Marion 2017, 9). Others are allusions to his discussion concerning technology or technical objects.

However, inferentially, it is easy to show how the saturated phenomenon may apply to our experience of nature, especially when we look at our experience of natural things in nature. Given the characteristics of the saturated phenomenon as having an "unforeseeable character," "incommensurable, not measurable (immense), "disproportionate," "exceeds the

categories and the principles of understanding," "produces amazement," "unbearable," "bedazzling," and overwhelming, we may infer that these attributes resonate with our experience of natural things in the environment. Take biotic systems such as forests, mountains, seas, rivers, or an anthill. Our experience of nature through them shows their being ungraspable. Seeing the clouds on a mountain's peak, ocean blue waters, or rock formations on the hill and the like exudes feelings that cannot be put into words. We cannot fully constitute such natural phenomena. It is true that they also become technical objects being studied by natural science. However, such activity remains inadequate. It is precisely this kind of reductionism or naturalism that eco-phenomenology is trying to resist. As Charles S. Brown and Ted Toadvine (2003, xii) describe, "Phenomenology suggests alternatives to many of the ingrained tendencies that limit our inherited perspectives: our myopic obsession with objectivity, our anthropocentric conceptions of value, and other legacies of Cartesian dualism." Natural scientists tell us why there are sunsets and different seasons in a year, but they cannot explain how the same phenomena give depth to our experience (Gschwandtner 2014).

People are drawn to places where they find a beautiful sunset; others visit the Scandinavian country to witness the Northern Lights, while others are fascinated with anthills, rice fields, hills, and trees. Feeling the traces of the sound of raindrops, the wind blowing on your face, the sun's heat on your skin, the chirping of the birds in the morning, or the smell of the coffee tree flower gives temporal and spatial depth to our experience of them. It provides the person with an overwhelming and bedazzling feeling. These kinds of experiences escape our constituting of them as objects. All these suggest saturation for Marion. For example, the human interaction with the landscape or a garden of whatever kind shows how it is being experienced as saturated. This means that the landscape is not merely an object we can constitute at will but gives a much richer intuition, as in Marion's account of the lecture hall as a mode of the event. St. Francis's experience

in his garden when talking to birds and plants can be described as a saturated phenomenon.

Granted that nature or creation is a saturated phenomenon, it leads us to infer that first, looking at nature as saturated refrains us from giving a one-dimensional solution to our current environmental problems. As Francis asserts, technology, a byproduct of scientific knowledge, is "the only way of solving these [environmental] problems." But then, we fail to realize that it "in fact proves incapable of seeing the mysterious network of relations between things and so sometimes solves one problem only to create others." (2015, 20) This statement resonates with Marion's account of saturation in that it speaks about the irreducibility and excess of our experience when we encounter things in nature. Technology, for Marion, is a product of thought and human calculation. Technology determines and constitutes its objects with certainty and accuracy. Unfortunately, we tend to rely so much on the narrative of natural science regarding the best possible solution to environmental problems. It is because we have given too much premium to the objectivity of its results and the efficiency of its solutions. That is why Pope Francis tells us to think creatively about the issues. By that, he means to listen to as many narratives as possible. Aside from fostering inclusivity, such a strategy allows a more nuanced and in-depth view of the issues, fostering universal or 'intergenerational solidarity.' The overwhelming experience of the adverse effects of climate change or global warming, giant floods, and super typhoons puts our capacities into question. It humbles us when all our efforts are insufficient to mitigate such horrendous calamities. Pope Francis describes this attitude as our "irrational confidence in progress and human abilities." (ibid., 19)

Second, if our experience of some biotic systems is saturated, it enhances our sensitivity toward nature and fosters emphatic feelings as we relate to natural things. Our saturated experience of them makes us think and contemplate what an appropriate ethical or moral response should be. It reminds us of Pope Francis' call for integration and solidarity with nature,

condemning a kind of anthropocentrism that is fascistic, oppressive, and destructive. Integral ecology values a holistic approach to pressing issues and concerns such as the environment. Aside from it "calls for openness to categories which transcend the language of mathematics and biology." (ibid., 11) Also, this line of action presupposes relationality with nonhuman living beings. It promotes life-centered values instead of human-centered values.

Pope Francis's invocation of St. Francis' life is a fitting reminder of how we should treat and understand creation as a gift born out of God's unconditional love (ibid., 76). This view resonates with Marion's phenomenological treatment of gift and charity. The gift must be understood not as an object but as a phenomenon that defies the logic of exchange. Contrary to Derrida, Marion (1999) insists that the gift is possible. Its possibility is seen in how the gift cannot be returned. Likewise, it is the same if we consider creation a gift. It is freely given an act of gratuity.

Third, considering nature or creation as a saturated phenomenon enlarges our perspectives and understanding of our role as human beings, just like what Marion describes when we see a painting, we are bedazzled by the superabundance of intuition that nature shows us to the point that we find nature as a mystery – something that cannot be comprehended, grasped, or aimed at. Nature remains elusive and invisible. If we keep looking at it objectively, it hides more. Nature is like the face of the other. We are reminded of its irreducible subjectivity – that it is inexhaustible and infinite. In this sense, we are pinned down by a nonhuman living other. With this, we are transformed by nature, not vice versa. It reminds us of Pope Francis's thought that the world is not an object to be measured and controlled but "a sacrament of communion" (2015, 12).

Conclusion

The essay shows that identifiable phenomenological thoughts are articulated in Pope Francis' celebrated encyclical on nature, *Laudato Si'*. Careful attention to the nuances of

Francis' statements on nature reveals layers of multi-disciplinal ideas, including phenomenology. The phenomenological view of nature is thus seen. Thus, it inferentially establishes Pope Francis's proximal connection to the phenomenological tradition. The encyclical has shown that some of Pope Francis' views resonate with Marion's phenomenological insights through Jean-Luc Marion's account of the saturated phenomenon as a framework. It leads us to infer that the encyclical's discursive scope is first broader than what has been thought. Second, in its more general scope, we find a well-informed multidisciplinary perspective in Francis, which leads him to engage in a meaningful dialogue with various disciplines within and outside the ambit of theological-religious discourse. Third, it shows that Marion's saturated phenomenon is wide-ranging beyond its identifiable niche in phenomenological inquiry. It can provide a paradigm to deeply understand and reflect on our moral or ethical perspective toward nature or the environment.

NOTES

[1] "Coronavirus History," https://www.webmd.com/lung/coronavirus-history; "Coronavirus cause: Origin and How it Spreads," https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/coronavirus-causes; WHO, "Origin of SARS-CoV-2," (March 26, 2020), https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/332197/WHO-2019-nCoV-FAQ-Virus_origin-2020.1-eng.pdf; Mallapaty 2021.

[2] In fact, this article gives me an initial drive to explore the possible resonances of Francis's thoughts in the *LS* with that of Marion's account of the saturated phenomenon as a framework.

[3] The publication came months before the Paris Climate Conference in December 2015. According to Mark Graham, whether it was intentional or incidental, its release "was critical for creating the political momentum necessary to forge a substantive international agreement on reducing greenhouse gas emissions – an agreement that was sorely needed!" See Graham (2017, 57).

[4] Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) first used the expression "culture industry" in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. In the "Preface," they explain that the culture industry "shows the regression of enlightenment to ideology which is graphically expressed in film and radio." (2002, xviii)

[5] This statement often mistakenly attributed to Marshall McLuhan. Reading McLuhan's works one could not simply find this statement anywhere.

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