"With his landmark volume *Ora et Labora in Our Common Home*, Lucas Briola offers a compelling retrieval of the Benedictine tradition as a vital yet often overlooked resource for integral ecology. Through a close reading of the Rule of St. Benedict in dialogue with an impressive array of theological voices, he brings its wisdom to bear on the challenges of modern living, revealing a mode of existence in which prayer, work, and community are integrated in a way that orders the human person toward harmony with the broader created order. Significantly, the endeavor is grounded at every turn in serious theology yet moves beyond theory to recover habits and disciplines that make ecological conversion possible. A rich and constructive contribution to contemporary Catholic thought, it will be essential reading for all who desire to embrace the Church's vision of care for creation."

—Matthew J. Ramage, PhD, professor of theology at Benedictine College and author of *Cosmic Covenant: A Catholic Theology of Creation and Communion*

"In this book, Lucas Briola has ably outlined the key tenets of an integral Benedictine ecology in the framework of the See-Judge-Act method. As an associate professor of theology and alumnus of St. Vincent College and Archabbey in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, he is well-qualified to address this topic and does so with insight, clarity, and profound respect for the Benedictine tradition. His book stands as a rich source of both theological and practical wisdom on the value and beauty of Benedictine spirituality as it can inform contemporary approaches to the integration of work, prayer, and care for our common home. I recommend

this book for all interested in learning how the principles of monastic spirituality can help us live more fully into our human vocation to care for God, others, and the created world."

—Sister Damien Marie Savino, FSE, PhD, professor at the University of Notre Dame, and author of *Learning the Language of Creation: Catholic Social Teaching and Integral Ecology*

"In *Ora et Labora in Our Common Home*, Lucas Briola engages in a fresh, deep read of the Rule of Benedict and the 1500-year-old Benedictine tradition to reveal its imperative for addressing much that ails not only our earth and its creatures but human society. We have underestimated the power and the demands of Benedictine listening, stability, humility, hospitality, eating, working, the *Opus Dei*, and seeking peace. Here we learn that they can be antidotes for the slow violence done to the earth, hypermobility, nature-deficit disorder, anthropocentrism, the technocratic paradigm, overconsumption, inequitable distribution, excessive abstraction, overwork, and idolatry. Briola clearly articulates a Benedictine integral ecology."

—Sr. Colleen Maura McGrane, OSB, editor, *American Benedictine Review*

Ora et Labora in Our Common Home

A Benedictine Invitation to Care for Creation

Lucas Briola



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For Nathan Francis Briola
In Memory of Fr. Nathan Munsch, OSB

Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction

An Integral Benedictine Ecology? 1

SEE

Chapter 1 Listening: Hearing the Cries of the Earth and the Poor 29

Chapter 2 Stability: Recovering a Sense of (Common) Home 54

JUDGE

Chapter 3 Humility: Overcoming Tyrannical Anthropocentrism 81

Chapter 4 Hospitality: Overcoming the Technocratic Paradigm 103

ACT

Chapter 5 Fruit of the Earth: Eating for Integral-Ecological Communion 131

Chapter 6 Work of Human Hands: Working for Integral-Ecological Communion 157

Chapter 7 The *Opus Dei*: *Laudato Si'*! 180

Conclusion

To Prefer Nothing to Christ: The Peace of Our Common Home 207

Selected Bibliography on Benedictines and Ecology 216

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First of all, every time you begin a good work, you must pray to him most earnestly to bring it to perfection.

—RB Prol.4

If I have learned one thing from the Benedictines, it is that we learn how to live well only through others. Writing a book is no exception.

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[1] See "Grounding the Ecotheological Vocation: The Benedictine Contribution," *Review for Religious* 3, no. 2 (2023): 135–45; and "*Laudato Si'*: A Benedictine Encyclical?," *American Benedictine Review* 75, no. 2 (2024): 120–33.

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have never guessed it over a decade ago, that course sowed the first seeds for this book. His own wisdom and vocation have deeply shaped my understanding of Benedictine life. When Fr. Nathan died of ALS on March 20, 2024, our family lost a beloved friend and spiritual lodestar. This book is dedicated to his memory.

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> *Place your hope in God alone. If you notice something good in yourself, give credit to God, not to yourself.*
>
> —RB 4.41-42

March 21, 2026
Transitus of St. Benedict

Introduction

An Integral Benedictine Ecology?

By nature, Benedictines are not showboats. Maybe it is the centrality of humility in their Rule. Maybe it is their localism or their frequent rural isolation. Franciscans have the flourish. Jesuits have the achievement. Dominicans have the evangelical fervor. Benedictines have, well, the stability. While those other religious charisms possess a certain pizazz, the famous monastic writer Michael Casey has memorably described Benedictine life as "unexciting."[1] Benedictines are, as the distinguished Benedictine cardinal Basil Hume quips, "just there."[2] The Order of Saint Benedict is one of the oldest monastic orders in the world, and yet, for most people, Benedictine monks and nuns seem like relics of a bygone age, tucked away in cloisters and medieval fantasylands.

Perhaps this explains why Benedictines have received relatively little attention when it comes to care for creation. Within Catholicism, it often seems as if other religious

[1] Michael Casey, "An Unexciting Life: The Sober Spirituality of Saint Benedict," in Casey, *An Unexciting Life: Reflections on Benedictine Spirituality* (St. Bede's Publications, 2005), 13–26.

[2] Basil Hume, *In Praise of Benedict: 480–1980 A.D.* (St. Bede's Publications, 1981), 30.

charisms have cornered the environmental market.[3] Still, look hard enough, and you will see Benedictine fingerprints all over the church's commitments to creation. Take *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, for instance. Released by Pope Francis in 2015, this encyclical moved care for creation to the forefront of Catholic identity. In it, the pope hails the Benedictine tradition, if only briefly:

> We can also look to the great tradition of monasticism. Originally, it was a kind of flight from the world, an escape from the decadence of the cities. The monks sought the desert, convinced that it was the best place for encountering the presence of God. Later, Saint Benedict of Nursia proposed that his monks live in community, combining prayer and spiritual reading with manual labor (*ora et labora*). Seeing manual labor as spiritually meaningful proved revolutionary. Personal growth and sanctification came to be sought in the interplay of recollection and work. This way of experiencing work makes us more protective and respectful of the environment; it imbues our relationship to the world with a healthy sobriety.[4]

This passage is the only explicit reference to Benedictines in the text. Yet, other popes have likewise hinted at this Benedictine legacy. Pope John Paul II, for instance, includes the Benedictine tradition among those schools of spirituality

[3] See, e.g., Dawn M. Nothwehr, *Ecological Footprints: An Essential Franciscan Guide for Faith and Sustainable Living* (Liturgical Press, 2012); and Margaret Scott, *Ignatius Was Green: Ecological Dimensions of the* Spiritual Exercises (Paulist Press, 2025).

[4] Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, May 24, 2015, no. 126. References to *Laudato Si'* will hereafter be LS, followed by section number, in the text. All references to Vatican documents come from the Vatican website.

that witness to the "kinship of man with his creaturely environment, fostering in him an attitude of respect for every reality of the surrounding world."[5] Pope Benedict XVI observes how "small paradises, oases of creation were and continue to be born" in settings "around monasteries," showing that, there, "people strove to save creation and not to destroy it."[6] "Monasticism," Pope Leo XIV reminds a group of Benedictines, "has been a reality of the 'frontier'" that "often transform[s] desolate areas into fertile and rich terrains, from the agricultural and economic point of view, but above all the spiritual point of view."[7] These claims tantalize in their brevity and beg for further exploration. Such is the challenge set before us: to unearth the deep roots of the Benedictine tradition that invite us to care for our common home.

Integral Ecology

For several decades now, the Catholic Church has developed an increasingly vigorous response to the ecological crisis. In 1990, Pope John Paul II delivered the first Vatican magisterial text devoted primarily to environmental concern. In it, he encourages Christians to "realize that their responsibility within creation and their duty towards nature and the Creator are an *essential* part of their faith."[8] Christian discipleship requires caring for creation. It is part

[5] Pope John Paul II, "Address to Participants in a Convention on 'The Environment and Health,'" March 24, 1997, no. 4.

[6] Pope Benedict XVI, "Meeting with Clergy of the Diocese of Bolzano-Bressanone," August 6, 2008.

[7] Pope Leo XIV, "Homily for the 125th Anniversary of the Dedication of the Church of Sant'Anselmo," November 11, 2025.

[8] Pope John Paul II, "Message for the 1990 Celebration of the World Day of Peace," January 1, 1990, no. 15. Emphasis added.

and parcel of a faith in a God who creates and sustains the world through love.

Pope Benedict XVI, who took his papal name in honor of St. Benedict, continued to highlight the importance of care for creation. In fact, commentators dubbed him "the Green Pope" for his efforts to make Vatican City the first fully carbon-neutral country. In his writings, Pope Benedict stresses the connection between care for the environment and care for human life. Since "the book of nature is one and indivisible," he tenders in his 2009 social encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, "our duties towards the environment are linked to our duties towards the human person."[9] Disregard for both the natural world, from forests to animals, and human life, from the unborn to the elderly, reveal a more fundamental disregard for the integrity of creation. A commitment to care for the natural world requires an equal commitment to care for human life and vice-versa. When we divide these two commitments—or, even worse, when we pit them against each other—we undermine them both. In a way that defies the polarization of pro-life and pro-environment movements in the United States, Pope Benedict proposes an integrated approach to care for creation.

Pope Francis built upon the work of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI in *Laudato Si'*. Citations of each pope fill the encyclical. Echoing John Paul II, Pope Francis reminds Christians that "living our vocation to be protectors of God's handiwork is essential to a life of virtue" and thus "not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience" (LS 217). Echoing Pope Benedict XVI, Francis posits that a "sense of deep communion with the rest of nature cannot be real if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human beings" (LS

[9] Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, June 29, 2009, no. 51.

91). Care for our common home requires caring for the environment, yes, but also those who are unborn and those who are poor—all those who are vulnerable. This linkage is a key reason why care for creation is truly essential to a Christian life of virtue.

Standing at the center of *Laudato Si'* is the concept of "integral ecology." Pope Francis devotes an entire chapter to the theme. While neither John Paul II nor Benedict XVI used it, the term names how the Catholic tradition integrates care for the environment with both Christian identity and concern for human life. One theologian submits that integral ecology is "the most distinctive contribution" of the encyclical.[10] When we understand the meaning of integral ecology, we can better grasp the challenge set forth by *Laudato Si'* and, by extension, church teaching on the subject. Indeed, this concept of integral ecology has surfaced repeatedly in Catholic magisterial reflections on care for creation since.[11] As Pope Leo XIV has urged, "May integral ecology be increasingly accepted as the right path to follow."[12] Integral ecology now supplies the primary grammar through which Catholicism discusses care for creation.

Yet the term, as understood in this tradition, eludes any straightforward definition. At first glance, it comes from the

[10] Kevin W. Irwin, *A Commentary on* Laudato Si'*: Examining the Background, Contributions, Implementation, and Future of Pope Francis's Encyclical* (Paulist Press, 2016), 102.

[11] See, e.g., Synod of Bishops, *The Amazon: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology*, October 28, 2019; Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, February 12, 2020; and Pope Francis, *Laudate Deum*, October 4, 2023. In the latter text, something of a "sequel" to *Laudato Si'*, Francis laments the lack of progress in implementing an integral ecology.

[12] Pope Leo XIV, "Message for the 2025 World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation," September 1, 2025.

traditional understanding of ecology: the scientific study of relationships in the world. Ecologists recognize that we cannot study things in the world in isolation but that we can only understand them within complex webs of interactions. Consider the water cycle. Precipitation falls to the ground, watering vegetation and finding its way to streams, lakes, and oceans. Water vapor evaporates from those bodies of water and transpires from plants. The vapor condenses into clouds, which eventually leads to more precipitation and another turn of the water cycle. The water cycle also plays a vital role in the health of soil and the flourishing of wildlife, both of which are similarly cyclical in character and affect the water cycle. And, of course, all these webs of interactions make human life possible. Human life, as exemplified most clearly in economic systems, likewise consists of dynamic relationships that impact the natural world (for better and for worse) and point to the relational character of being human.

The concept of integral ecology yokes together these natural and human ecologies. As Pope Francis repeats throughout *Laudato Si'*, "Everything is interconnected" (LS 70, 138, 240). In the fourth chapter of *Laudato Si'*, entitled "Integral Ecology," Pope Francis discusses environmental ecology, economic ecology, social ecology, human ecology, cultural ecology, and an ecology of daily life. All together fall under the umbrella category of integral ecology. All these ecologies reveal our interconnectedness in our *common* home. The ecological crisis is not simply an environmental crisis but instead overlaps with a range of cultural, political, economic, and even religious crises. The book of nature is one and indivisible.

While this use of integral ecology is indebted to the natural and human sciences, Pope Francis adds a theological twist to the term. As he observes, the Bible narrates

something like an integral-ecological vision in presenting "human life [as] grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbor, and with the earth itself" (LS 66). The biblical narrative begins with an image of integral-ecological harmony in Eden, one where God, human beings, and the rest of creation all stand in right relationship with each other (Gen 2). Sin, however, upsets that harmony; since everything is interconnected, the disruption of any one of these relationships—whether with God, neighbor, or nonhuman creation—undermines all of them (see, e.g., Gen 3:6-7). The rest of the Bible narrates God's restoration of that communion. As the specification of Israel's covenanted relationship with God, for instance, the Torah includes laws meant to establish right relationships with God, neighbor, and creation alike (see, e.g., Deut 15).[13] Above all, it is Christ who, through his embodiment of the Torah and inauguration of God's kingdom, heals a creation "groaning in labor pains" from the effects of sin (Rom 8:19-23). That basic narrative arc explains why care for creation is essential in the life of the church, for lives of Christian virtue. Integral ecology has an unmistakably theological character.

This material helps us define integral ecology, as understood within the Catholic tradition. First, integral ecology entails seeing reality as radically interconnected, both horizontally (human and nonhuman) and vertically (human/nonhuman and God). Second, it requires living in a way that reflects the truth of this interconnection, recognizing that we are both made from the earth and made in God's image (see Gen 2:7). Third, given the many broken relationships that mark our fallen world, an integral ecology also

[13] See Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 66–119.

encompasses restoring those relationships that have been broken.[14] Such a call is a daunting one. Christians, however, recognize that such saving work cannot come from sheer effort alone but results from God's gift of grace.

St. Francis: Patron Saint of Ecology

In no place is this claim on clearer display than in the lives of the saints. One saint looms especially large in Catholic reflections on creation: St. Francis of Assisi. In 1979, Pope John Paul II declared Francis the patron saint of ecology. In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis describes the saint as an "example par excellence. . . of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically" (LS 10). Pope Francis, after all, took his papal name in honor of St. Francis, and the very title of *Laudato Si'* comes from a prayer written by the Italian friar. Through his kinship with the natural world, with people, and with God, the person of St. Francis can help fill out the meaning of integral ecology.

Today, we most often encounter St. Francis in birdbaths and garden statues. This way of honoring the saint makes sense, given his close association with the natural world. St. Francis lived during the Middle Ages, from 1181/82 to 1226. During that time, certain Christian theological heresies deemed the material world as evil and as something from which Christians are called to escape. Against this dualism, Francis reverenced the material world as

[14] A very helpful and similar definition of integral ecology comes from Vincent J. Miller, "Integral Ecology: Francis's Spiritual and Moral Vision of Interconnectedness," in *The Theological and Ecological Vision of* Laudato Si'*: Everything Is Connected*, ed. Vincent J. Miller (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 12–21.

something good and revelatory of God, the loving Creator.[15] Legend has it that Francis would preach to animals such as birds, asking them to glorify God, an action that took as literal Jesus's admonition to preach to all creation (see Matt 28:19). Another legend centered around a fearsome wolf that ravaged the Italian town of Gubbio, eating both its livestock and people. The desperate citizens of Gubbio begged Francis to act. Soon, the saint visited the wolf in the mountains, tamed it, and brokered a peace pact between the wolf and the town's inhabitants. One could even say that Francis restored the integral ecology of the region! Both stories illustrate the medieval saint's close connection with the natural world, a key pillar of an integral ecology.[16] Since the late twentieth century, it has become common for churches to host blessing services for pets on the feast of St. Francis (October 4). The saint's unique communion with the natural world still manages to capture our contemporary imaginations.

In his ministry, St. Francis's care for the natural world matched his care for his fellow human beings, especially those who were poor and vulnerable. Coming from a relatively wealthy family, the man from Assisi underwent a dramatic conversion and gave everything he had to the

[15] In particular, Francis's positive estimation of the natural world can be read as a counter to a medieval form of dualism called Catharism; see Roger D. Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature: Tradition and Innovation in Western Christian Attitudes toward the Environment* (Oxford University Press, 1988), 77–79, 147–48.

[16] For these stories, see Thomas of Celano, "The Life of Saint Francis," in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, ed. Regis J. Armstrong et al., 3 vols. (New City Press, 1999–2001), 1:234–36; and Ugolino Boniscambi of Montegiorgio, "The Deeds of Blessed Francis and His Companions," in Armstrong et al., *Francis of Assisi*, 3:482–85.

poor. As a way to imitate Christ's own poverty, Francis embraced what he dubbed "Lady Poverty."[17] This commitment allowed him to stand in solidarity with the poor and the vulnerable. One example displays the power of this commitment. People with leprosy, a contagious skin disease whose only treatment was exiling the patient from society, long disgusted Francis. One day, however, Francis saw a leper, felt compelled to embrace him out of compassion, and gave him money. When he rode away and looked back, the leper was not there, and Francis suddenly realized that the outcast he had encountered was, in fact, Jesus.[18] Francis lived out Jesus's admonition that "just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matt 25:40). Francis summoned his followers to the same. In this way, they, like him, might become true servants of their neighbors.

St. Francis's communion with both the natural world and humanity found basis in his communion with God. Whether in preaching the Gospel to all creation or in divesting himself of all comfort and security, the saint devoted his life to conforming himself spiritually and even physically to Christ. Toward the end of his life, the saint received the stigmata, marks on his body that resembled the wound marks of the crucified Christ.[19] Francis's effusive praise of God likewise expressed his intimate union with God and his insatiable desire to bring all creation toward this union. This vocation finds its clearest expression in his famous "Canticle of the Creatures." In that hymn, he

[17] See "The Sacred Exchange between Saint Francis and Lady Poverty," in Armstrong et al., *Francis of Assisi*, 1:534–36.

[18] See Thomas of Celano, "The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul," in Armstrong et al., *Francis of Assisi*, 2:248–49.

[19] See Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, "The Major Legend of Saint Francis," in Armstrong et al., *Francis of Assisi*, 2:630–34.

invites all creation—"Sir Brother Sun," "Sister Moon and the stars," "Brother Wind," "Sister Water," "Brother Fire," "Sister Mother Earth," and even "Sister Bodily Death"—to praise and bless God.[20] In the original Italian, this invitation to praise God reads "*Laudato si'*"!

St. Francis's love of the natural world, fellow human beings, and God—the three intertwined relationships that comprise an integral ecology—forms a single piece. Besides inspiring the title of *Laudato Si'*, the saint typifies well the integrated life that care for our common home requires. The life and witness of St. Francis, a legacy sustained by the Franciscan tradition at large, shows both the interconnectedness of environmental and social concern, and how care for creation is essential to a life of Christian virtue. St. Francis is indeed an example par excellence of an integral ecology.

St. Benedict: Another Patron Saint of Ecology?

In this book, I will propose that another saint—along with the tradition he bequeathed—can serve as an additional example par excellence of an integral ecology: St. Benedict of Nursia. In 1972, the Pulitzer Prize–winning microbiologist René Dubos published an article entitled "Franciscan Conservation Versus Benedictine Stewardship." (Dubos was a Benedictine oblate, someone who is not a monk or nun, usually a layperson, who promises to live a Benedictine way of life.) In the article, Dubos suggests that more prominent Franciscan models of care for creation—and the nature mysticism they espouse—produce a conservational ecology wherein "wilderness should be preserved

[20] Francis of Assisi, "The Canticle of the Creatures," in Armstrong et al., *Francis of Assisi*, 1:113–14.

wherever possible," as it advocates for "the maintenance of undisturbed ecological systems and the preservation of endangered species."[21] While such calls are not wrong per se, Dubos fears that they risk segregating the human person from the natural world in a way that belies reality.[22] Dubos instead calls for a Benedictine "stewardship" model that promotes "not only protecting nature against human misbehavior but also developing human activities which favor a creative, harmonious relationship between man and nature."[23] We might say that this Benedictine legacy

[21] René Dubos, "Franciscan Conservation Versus Benedictine Stewardship," in Dubos, *A God Within* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), 162.

[22] A similar (and somewhat famous) argument against valorizing pristine "wilderness" in this way can be found in William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," *Environmental History* 1, no. 1 (Jan. 1996): 7–28. He worries, "Wilderness embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural. . . . If this is so—if by definition wilderness leaves no place for human beings, save perhaps as contemplative sojourners in God's natural cathedral—then also by definition it can offer no solution to the environmental and other problems that confront us. To the extent that we celebrate wilderness as the measure by which we judge civilization, we reproduce the dualism that sets humanity and nature at opposite poles. We thereby leave ourselves little hope of discovering what an ethical, sustainable, *honorable* place in nature might actually look like. Worse: to the extent that we live in an urban-industrial civilization but at the same time pretend to ourselves our *real* home is in the wilderness, to just that extend we give ourselves permission to evade responsibility for the lives we actually live" (17).

[23] Dubos, "Franciscan Conservation Versus Benedictine Stewardship," 168. More recently, "stewardship" has come under theological critique for its managerial and potentially anthropocentric connotations. Dubos's inclusion of "harmonious relationship" in this passage suggests that a Benedictine understanding of stewardship finds its strongest positioning within what Elizabeth Johnson calls a "community of creation paradigm"; in this model, "we are situated within, not over, the magnificent circle of life, whose center and encompassing horizon is the generous God of

represents an integral-ecological one insofar as it affirms the interconnections between human beings and the rest of creation. While Dubos likely overstates the contrast, his more constructive point still stands. In its refusal to isolate human activity from its ecological context and vice-versa, the Benedictine tradition offers an approach to creation that is especially suited for an integral ecology. As Joan Chittister contends, "The Benedictine heart practiced ecology before it was a word."[24] This book will tease out that latent sensibility.

It does not take long to notice the ecological richness of the Benedictine tradition, even if not much is known about St. Benedict himself. We do know that he lived from approximately 480 to 547 in central Italy, inspiring the largest and most influential monastic order in the church. Much of the tradition surrounding Benedict the person comes from St. Gregory the Great's *The Life of Benedict*, written around 593. Though Gregory is most well-known as a consequential pope (590–604), he was originally a monk. By focusing on Benedict, Gregory attempted to pay homage to him and secure his legacy for the universal church. Admittedly, the text sounds strange to our contemporary ears. It is not a biography in the modern sense of the word. Instead, it is a hagiography, an idealized portrait that tries to capture the distinctive character and sanctity of a charismatic figure—in this case, Benedict.

When we examine parts of this text, we can uncover an underlying ecological sensibility contained in the saint's

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life" (Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* [Bloomsbury, 2014], 268).

[24] Joan Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st Century* (Crossroad Publishing, 2010), 161.

legacy.[25] Gregory begins his account with Benedict traveling to Rome for his education. Dismayed by the worldliness of both the city and his classmates, Benedict soon abandoned his studies and "sought retreat in a wild place called Subiaco."[26] For three years there, he lived a harshly ascetic life in a cave and spent much of his time in prayer. We can only imagine what these three years were like. With a little help from his friend Romanus, Benedict would have had to live off the land in the truest sense of the phrase: gathering berries for food, collecting rainwater for drink, adapting to seasonal changes for survival, and listening for danger in the wild. In the life of Benedict, these three years represented a time of hard-won intimacy not only with God but also with the natural world.

The motif of Benedict's kinship with the natural world recurs throughout *The Life of Benedict*. One of the most memorable stories from the saint's life concerns his friendship with a crow (sometimes identified as a raven). On one occasion, a jealous monk named Florentius poisoned some of Benedict's bread. Benedict sensed Florentius's ploy and threw the bread to a crow who "used to come from the adjoining woods and accept food from [Benedict's] hand." Benedict clearly knew this bird well, to the point that he could converse with it. The crow initially refused Benedict's request, but Benedict nonetheless urged him, "Take it away! Do not be afraid! Throw it where no one can find it." The crow eventually obeyed Benedict, returning three hours later without the bread; Gregory assures us that, upon its return, the crow "received its daily

[25] For a deeper exploration of this sensibility in *The Life of Benedict*, see Samuel Torvend, *Monastic Ecological Wisdom: A Living Tradition* (Liturgical Press, 2023), 28–74.

[26] Gregory the Great, *The Life of St. Benedict*, trans. Terrence G. Kardong (Liturgical Press, 2009), I.3 (7). References in parentheses are to the page numbers in the Kardong translation.

ration from the hand of the man of God."[27] Benedict was a holy man who cared not only for his monks but also for the whole of creation. The many nature miracles performed by Benedict—involving water, iron, stone, and oil—only confirm his harmony with the natural world.[28]

As with St. Francis of Assisi, Benedict's kinship with creation rested on a sturdy spiritual bedrock. Over time, Benedict successfully established a monastic community at Monte Cassino that officially began the Benedictine order; Gregory makes it clear that it was Benedict's profound sense of God's presence and God's providential care of creation that animated this endeavor. The saint's spiritual depth becomes increasingly apparent as Gregory's account progresses. Toward the end of his life, at Monte Cassino, the elderly Benedict rose to pray one night and underwent a mystical experience that was cosmic in scope. As Gregory tells it, "Standing at the window and praying to almighty God in the middle of the night, [Benedict] suddenly saw a light pour down that routed all the shadows. It shone with such splendor that it surpassed daylight, even though it was shining in the darkness. A wonderful thing followed in this vision, for as Benedict reported later, the whole world was brought before his eyes as if collected in a single ray of sunlight."[29]

This vision signals the spiritual climax of Benedict's closeness with creation. In it, Benedict saw how everything is interconnected through its shared, radical dependence on

[27] Gregory the Great, *Life of Benedict*, VIII.3 (42). This story evokes the biblical story of the prophet Elijah being fed by ravens (see 1 Kgs 17:1-7).

[28] See, e.g., Gregory the Great, *Life of Benedict*, V.1–3 (32–33), VI.1–2 (33), IX.1 (50), and XXIX.1–2 (104). As Bernard McGinn argues, these miracles depict Benedict as a "New Adam" figure in his power over the natural world. See Bernard McGinn, "St. Benedict as the Steward of Creation," *American Benedictine Review* 39, no. 2 (June 1988): 165–67.

[29] Gregory the Great, *Life of Benedict*, XXXV.2–3 (131–32).

and orientation toward God the Creator. Glimpsing God's own vision, Benedict saw how God constantly sustains all creation, human and nonhuman alike. This theologically informed, integrated vision likewise characterizes an integral ecology, and it has been this integrated vision that has characterized the Benedictine tradition writ large.

History shows the many ways that Benedictine communities have lived this legacy. During the Middle Ages, for instance, Benedictine monasteries served as hubs of agricultural innovation, developing farming techniques that worked with the land for its highest possible yield in sustainable ways.[30] As the passage from *Laudato Si'* that began this introduction suggested, this innovation was due in part to the Benedictine integration of contemplative prayer and manual labor. The historian Lynn White can accordingly describe the medieval Benedictine monk as "the first intellectual to get dirt under his fingernails."[31] Or, as Pope Pius XII puts it, Benedictines evangelized Europe with both "the cross and the plough."[32]

The cross and the plough guided their missionary efforts in the United States as well. Boniface Wimmer, the founder of Benedictine monasticism in the United States, was certainly an intellectual who got dirt under his fingernails. His biographer relates that the abbot "was never above tucking the pectoral cross into his scapular and joining his monks for a day's work in the fields. In Rome he had been called, somewhat disparagingly, 'the farmer-abbot.' He gloried in the name. Along with prayer, work was the second pillar

[30] See, e.g., Annette Kehnel, *The Green Ages: Medieval Innovations in Sustainability*, trans. Gesche Ipsen (Brandeis University Press, 2024), 33–43.

[31] Lynn White, "Dynamo and Virgin Reconsidered," *The American Scholar* 27, no. 2 (Spring 1958): 189.

[32] Pope Pius XII, *Fulgens Radiatur*, March 21, 1947, no. 22.

SEE

Chapter One

Listening: Hearing the Cries of the Earth and the Poor

O that today you would listen to his voice!
Do not harden your hearts.

—Ps 95:7-8

Most harm against our common home escapes our attention. That is, environmental degradation is a form of "slow violence." As Rob Nixon defines the term, this is a "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all."[1] On the one hand, the complexity of various natural and social systems can mask the effect of this violence. The significance for a broader ecosystem of losing a specific species of beetle is not immediately apparent to those of us with untrained eyes. On the other hand, natural timescales typically far surpass human timescales. The melt of glaciers induced by warming global temperatures takes decades—if not generations—to progress. The

[1] Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

cascading consequences of such occurrences take even longer, making this slow violence practically imperceptible. The erosion of our common home accordingly does not grip our imaginations in the ways that tragedies like natural disasters, shootings, and war do, all of which demand immediate responses.

The only way to combat this slow violence, then, is to slow down, to take time to listen. In fact, Pope Francis chose "Listen to the Voice of Creation" as the theme for the 2022 Season of Creation. In his announcement of the theme, he summons the world to "learn how to listen" so that "we can hear in the voice of creation . . . an anguished plea, lamenting our mistreatment of this our common home."[2] Through that work of listening, we can better attend to that anguished plea and respond rightly. An integral ecology begins with listening.

Learning to listen is also central to the Benedictine tradition. In 2018, Pope Francis likened Benedictine monasteries and convents to "oases, where men and women of every age, origin, culture and religion can discover the beauty of silence."[3] Benedictine monasticism has long attracted people precisely because of its commitment to silence amid the distracted superficiality of the world. In Benedictine settings, silence supplies the needed topsoil for a healthy ecosystem of attentive listening, an oasis that invites us into the risk of noticing what we typically miss. The stakes are high. As the naturalist Thomas Lowe Fleischner remarks, "In a very fundamental sense, we are what we pay attention to. . . . Our attention is precious, and

[2] Pope Francis, "Message for the 2022 World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation," September 1, 2022.

[3] Pope Francis, "Audience with the Monks of the Benedictine Confederation," April 19, 2018.

what we choose to look at, and to listen to—these choices change the world."[4] The Benedictine tradition challenges us to consider how we listen, what we listen to, and thus what we become. A Benedictine approach to listening is foundational to an integral ecology, for the health of our common home depends on rightly directed attentiveness.

Merciful Attention

We likely assume that social problems demand quick responses and fixes. Yet, as we see from the "see, judge, act" methodology of Catholic social reflection, seeing—becoming aware of the problem—comes first. Attention must precede judgment and action. That prime commitment reflects a real wisdom. Without such awareness, fixes can be hasty or worsen problems. Even more, paying attention can unveil and overcome the "injurious invisibility" distinguishing the slow violence that damages our common home.[5]

This attentiveness grounds an integral ecology. Thus, organizing *Laudato Si'* around "see, judge, act," Pope Francis begins by detailing "what is happening to our common home" (the title of its first chapter). He does so by confessing a litany of sins that upend the fragile relationships throughout all creation. He bemoans the environmental and human costs of pollution. He rues the decline of biodiversity throughout the world and its effects on other species. He laments climactic changes that threaten farming

[4] Thomas Lowe Fleischner, "The Mindfulness of Natural History," in *The Way of Natural History*, ed. Thomas Lowe Fleischner (Trinity University Press, 2011), 9.

[5] Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 6.

patterns, stable water levels, forests, and thus people (LS 20–52).

The poor especially bear the consequential brunt of this environmental degradation. The slow violence committed against our common home remains invisible in part because the communities it hurts the most are also invisible.[6] The Appalachian region, notoriously forgotten in panegyrics to the US economy, exemplifies these dynamics most clearly.[7] For well over a century, companies have mined the mountains of Appalachia for resources like coal to power the American way of life. Today, the most efficient mining technique is mountaintop removal. To allow easy access to valuable seams of coal, mining companies blast the tops of mountains using very powerful explosives. Most obviously, the resulting craters mar the natural beauty of the Appalachians. The costs run much deeper, though. The debris from the mountain tumbles into neighboring valleys, polluting streams that provide water for vegetation, animals, and humans. The erasure of forests on mountaintops means less absorption of rainwater, resulting in excessive flooding. Coal dust settles on neighboring towns, leading to cases of deadly, suffocating "black lung" even in non-miners. In this Appalachian context, everything is indeed connected.[8]

And it is no accident that Appalachia is one of the poorest areas in the United States. As the Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff argues in his famous work *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, it is the same violent logic that exploits the

[6] See Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 55–60.

[7] See, e.g., Henry M. Caudill, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands: A Biography of a Depressed Area* (Little, Brown, 1963).

[8] These kinds of connections are underscored by the Catholic Bishops of Appalachia in their pastoral letters *This Land Is Home to Me* (1975) and *At Home in the Web of Life* (1995).

poor and the earth alike.[9] This linkage rings true across the globe, from Appalachia to sub-Saharan Africa to the Amazon. We can think of victims of wars caused by water shortages, the forced immigration of subsistence farmers due to desertification, or the loss of islanders' homes from rising ocean levels.[10] The many social and environmental crises that plague our common home demand that we "hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor" (LS 49). See before we act, hear before we respond.

Still, an integral ecology requires more than mere awareness. The call specifically to *hear*—rather than *see*—the cries across our common home signals the commitment that this responsibility entails. Unlike seeing, over which we have a certain degree of control, hearing involves surrender; hearing necessarily makes us vulnerable to the voice of another.[11] We can quickly close our eyes; it is much harder to fully close our ears. Given the hiddenness of violence against our common home, this awareness thus demands a radical attentiveness that moves the very fiber of our being. As Pope Francis explains in the first chapter of *Laudato Si'*, "Our goal is not to amass information or to satisfy curiosity, but rather to become painfully aware, to

[9] Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Orbis Books, 1997), 104–13.

[10] See, e.g., Lael Brainard et al., eds., *Climate Change and Global Poverty: A Billion Lives in the Balance* (Brookings Institution Press, 2009); and The Catholic Episcopal Conferences and Councils of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean, *A Call for Climate Justice and the Common Home: Ecological Conversion, Transformation, and Resistance to False Solutions* (2025), https://www.raoen.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/A-Call-for-Climate-Justice-and-the-Common-Home_The-Churches-Global-South-on-the-occasion-of-COP30_12Jun2025.pdf.

[11] For this distinction, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Seeing, Hearing, and Reading," in Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology II: Spouse of the Word* (Ignatius Press, 1991), 474–76.

dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it" (LS 19). Living out an integral ecology, perceiving how everything is interconnected, obliges us to feel the pains of the world as our own and to "weep with the anguished plea of creation."[12] And this awareness should, in turn, inspire a sense of responsibility. As the subtitle of *Laudato Si'* intimates, an integral ecology entails *caring* for our common home, and care means the passionate willingness to bother to love.[13] This is an attention sensed through the heart.

That is, the call to care for our common home is a call to mercy. In his 2016 message for the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, Pope Francis urges people to "show mercy to our common home," even declaring care for our common home "a new work of mercy" alongside the traditional spiritual and corporal works of mercy.[14] This mission lies at the heart of the Christian faith. To use John Paul II's words, by its nature, "the Church professes the mercy of God and proclaims it."[15] This is because, as Francis puts it, the very "name of God is mercy."[16] The Mercy that *is* God

[12] Francis, "Message for the 2022 World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation."

[13] This is how Cardinal Peter Turkson, a chief architect of *Laudato Si'*, explained the encyclical's frequent use of the language of care. See Naomi Klein, "A Radical Vatican?," *The New Yorker*, July 10, 2015, https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/a-visit-to-the-vatican.

[14] Pope Francis, "Message for the 2016 World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation," September 1, 2016.

[15] Pope John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, November 30, 1980, no. 13.

[16] Pope Francis, *The Name of God Is Mercy*, trans. Oonagh Stransky (Penguin Books, 2016). See also Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, April 11, 2015.

reveals itself through Christ, God's willingness to enter into and redeem the anguish of history.

It is through Christ, then, that we can understand the call to show mercy. One especially clear exposition comes from his parable of the Good Samaritan (see Luke 10:25-37).[17] In it, Jesus tells of a man beaten by a group of robbers and left on the side of the road half dead. Two men, a priest and a Levite, both pass by the injured man, failing to notice him. A Samaritan, though, while traveling down the same path, "came upon him, and when he saw him he was moved with compassion" (Luke 10:33). Or literally, as the original Greek says, he was "moved in the guts" (*esplanchnisthē*).[18] As indicated by the other places where the gospels use this exact verb, the Samaritan mirrors God's own self being "moved in the guts" (see Luke 7:13; 15:20; Matt 9:36; 14:14).[19] Only from this posture does the Samaritan fullheartedly tend to the injured man's needs, regardless of the risk. Jesus concludes the parable by asking who the injured man's neighbor is. His interlocutor answers, "The one who showed him mercy," and Jesus responds, "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37).

In the parable, the meaning of mercy centers around the heart. After all, the Latin word for mercy, "*misericordia*," refers to a feeling of compassion with the heart (in Latin, *cor* means "heart"). Biblically, the heart refers to the inmost part of ourselves, the very essence of a person. Thus, mercy means to be moved to care in a profound way—at the level

[17] See Pope John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, no. 3; Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, October 3, 2020, nos. 56–86; and Pope Leo XIV, *Dilexi Te*, October 4, 2025, nos. 105–7.

[18] François Bovon, *Luke 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 9:51–19:27*, trans. Donald S. Deer, ed. Helmut Koester (Fortress Press, 2013), 58.

[19] See John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels* (Fortress Press, 1988), 131–32.

of our guts! The parable of the Good Samaritan, as Pope Leo XIV notes, presents us with a picture of "seeing with the eyes of the heart, looking more closely, empathizing with the other, sharing his or her experience, letting ourselves be touched and challenged."[20] To have mercy on our common home, then, is to cultivate this same attitude of compassionate attention that is willing to be touched and challenged. We can even say that an integral ecology presumes an entire "politics of mercy"—rooted in this heartfelt attention—which challenges the facelessness of the slow violence despoiling our common home.[21] An integral ecology requires that we develop a visceral compassion toward what is happening in our common home, such that it becomes our own pain. Only then will our hearts be broken open, such that we might hear, experience, and respond to the cries of the earth and the poor. Only then can we begin to judge and act in a way that truly cares for our common home.

The Globalization of Heartless Indifference

Nevertheless, the promotion of this merciful awareness remains a challenge. The growing cries of the earth and the poor warn us that we do not hear rightly. "In modern life," Kate Murphy observes, "we are encouraged to listen to our hearts, listen to our inner voices, and listen to our guts, but rarely are we encouraged to listen carefully and with intent to other people."[22] Susan Cain identifies an "extrovert

[20] Pope Leo XIV, "Homily," July 13, 2025.

[21] See Matthew T. Eggemeier and Peter Joseph Fritz, *The Politics of Mercy: Catholic Life in an Era of Inequality, Racism, and Violence* (Crossroad, 2020), 8–9.

[22] Kate Murphy, *You're Not Listening: What You're Missing and Why It Matters* (Celadon Books, 2020), 1.

ideal" that currently dominates society—from advertising to politics to education—and privileges expression over attention, talking over listening.[23] Both Murphy and Cain name how unconducive contemporary culture is to the type of sympathetic, merciful listening on which an integral ecology depends.

This incapacity to notice can become systemic in a way that hurts our common home. Various powers, for one, can mute the cries of the earth and the poor. "Slow violence," Nixon laments, "provides prevaricative cover for the forces that have the most to profit from inaction: under cover of deferred consequences, these energetic new bewilderers literally buy time."[24] Such denialism acts as if there is nothing to notice, nothing to hear. It engenders an "evasiveness [that] serves as a license to carrying on with our present lifestyles and models of production and consumption" (LS 59; see also LS 56). It typifies what Pope Francis calls the "globalization of indifference." Such indifference deafens us to the cries of the earth and the poor, sapping our love and suffocating our care. As Francis writes:

> To sustain a lifestyle which excludes others, or to sustain enthusiasm for that selfish ideal, a globalization of indifference has developed. Almost without being aware of it, we end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people's pain, and feeling a need to help them, as though all this were someone else's responsibility and not our own. The culture of prosperity deadens us; we are thrilled if the market offers us something new

[23] Susan Cain, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* (Crown, 2012), 19–33.

[24] Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 40.

> to purchase. In the meantime all those lives stunted for lack of opportunity seem a mere spectacle; they fail to move us.[25]

Under the reign of indifference, we spend much of our lives like the priest and the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan, too oblivious to notice the suffering around us and too superficial to bother to love. The result is nothing less than what Francis describes as a cultural "heartlessness."[26] Consumed by consumption and stuffed with stuff, we buffer ourselves from the indicting interruptions that the anguished plea of creation poses. We live in a culture that quite literally "amuses itself to death."[27]

One key source of this cultural plight is the ubiquity of digital technologies. At first glance, these technologies promise unparalleled levels of connection. They can transport us to any place we want and locate any information we want, all at any time we want. Paradoxically, though, unparalleled levels of inattention and isolation also mark contemporary society.[28] Our devices share more than a little of the blame. By design, such technologies—from our smartphones to social media—shallow our capacity for deep attention. The sheer amount of information they contain, the constant notifications they send, and the immediate gratification they provide all strengthen those parts of the brain devoted to scanning and multitasking, while

[25] Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, November 24, 2013, no. 54; see also LS 14, 25, 52, 91, 92, 115, 232.

[26] Pope Francis, *Dilexit Nos*, October 24, 2024, nos. 12, 17.

[27] See Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in an Age of Show Business* (Penguin, 1985).

[28] Jean M. Twenge, *Generations: The Real Differences Between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers, and Silents—And What They Mean for America's Future* (Simon & Schuster, 2023), 407–8, 443–45.

atrophying those parts of the brain devoted to sustained focus.[29] It is difficult to discern what merits our attention when so many chimes and vibrations constantly vie for it.

That attentional deficit cannot but shallow our relationships with others and the world around us. These technologies tend to remove us from the attentive, incarnate, and empathetic interactions that sustain authentic communion.[30] Contemporary technologies alluringly promise an immense level of control over the unpredictability of the world. Our phones, for instance, often serve as security blankets that shield us from awkward encounters with others and divert us from the vulnerability of eye contact. Social media filters information to our own liking based upon our ideological persuasions. Headphones and earbuds mute what we deem as superfluous noise. As Pope Francis writes:

> When media and the digital world become omnipresent, their influence can stop people from learning how to live wisely, to think deeply and to love generously. . . . True wisdom, as the fruit of self-examination, dialogue and generous encounter between persons, is not acquired by a mere accumulation of data which eventually leads to overload and confusion, a sort of mental pollution. Real relationships with others, with all the challenges they entail, now tend to be replaced by a type of internet

[29] See Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (W.W. Norton, 2010), 115–43.

[30] See Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (Penguin, 2015), 137–76. Similar connections find magisterial warrant; see the Vatican's Dicastery for Communication, *Towards Full Presence: A Pastoral Reflection on Engagement with Social Media*, May 23, 2023, nos. 30–40.

> communication which enables us to choose or eliminate relationships at whim, thus giving rise to a new type of contrived emotion which has more to do with devices and displays than with other people and with nature. Today's media do enable us to communicate and to share our knowledge and affections. Yet at times they also shield us from direct contact with the pain, the fears and the joys of others and the complexity of their personal experiences. (LS 47)

Digital connection can very easily replace real relationships with the world, in all their demanding complexity and challenge. Distracted and unmoored from our surroundings, we pass by the suffering on the side of the road obliviously. Aided and abetted by technological distraction, our hearts remain comfortably numb to the cries of the earth and the poor.

Still, inattention—the refusal to listen—has been a perennial human problem. Digital technologies only exploit it. Human beings rightly desire a certain level of control and autonomy in their lives. We want to have a say over who we will become and what we will do. Yet, by its nature, listening to another requires a risk of self. As we noted above, in contrast to seeing, listening opens us to be transformed by something or someone beyond our control. While it might be tempting to silo ourselves in a political echo chamber, for instance, encountering and hearing out someone of a different partisan stripe can prompt a conversion in us. Listening might very well entail altering our key assumptions about the world and demand a change of life. On a fundamental level, listening requires that we cede the illusion that we play the central role in determining ourselves. And so it is no surprise that, for the most part, we resist listening.

Of course, the human reluctance to listen need not be intentional. Consider the sheer busyness of life. Genuine attention involves a certain level of effort. We spend most of our lives, though, constantly on the move. We spend much of life, as the famous Catholic novelist (and Benedictine oblate) Walker Percy once put, "sunk in everydayness."[31] We have meals to prepare and groceries to buy. We have relatives to tend and houses to clean. We have errands to run and appointments to fulfill. We have jobs to do and homework to finish. We have emails to answer and more emails to answer. I myself hurriedly write this paragraph in the thirty free minutes I have as my son takes his morning nap. There is just not much time for contemplative silence or attuning ourselves to the sufferings of creation. Most of us do indeed live quiet lives of desperation, and that desperation makes it difficult to embrace and learn from the quiet.

Still, as the parable of the Good Samaritan makes clear, the manner of our attention bears a spiritual weight. It is clear from the parable that Jesus reserves his primary moral judgment not for the robbers who left the man on the side of the road but rather for the priest and the Levite who, weighed down by their own preoccupations, refuse to notice and be transformed by the suffering of another.[32] Throughout the Bible, various characters are criticized as "stiff-necked": those who refuse to turn their attention to hear the voice of God (see, e.g., Exod 32:9). Channeling the biblical prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, Jesus laments that "this people's heart has grown dull, / and their ears are hard of hearing" (Matt 13:15; see also Isa 6:9-10; Jer 5:21). Taking

[31] Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer* (Ivy Books, 1988), 10.

[32] See James F. Keenan, *Moral Wisdom: Lessons and Texts from the Catholic Tradition* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 124–26.

its cue from this biblical witness, the Christian tradition has described sin as "*incurvatus in se*" ("being curved in upon oneself"), the cocooning of ourselves from the demands that another or the Other might place upon us. Today, the globalization of indifference only buoys that crabbed self-absorption which refuses to hear and be moved.

The growing cries of the earth and the poor indicate both the depth and the breadth of this cultural inattention. Like the canary in the coal mine, today the poor and the earth cry out, warning of the ecological dangers currently afoot. Quite literally, contemporary migrations of humans and birds alike signal that something is awry.[33] Still, distracted by our phones, locked in our own routine, and swamped by the mundane, we cannot hear and thus cannot be moved to action by the figurative canaries around us. Something must inspire another way of life. While canaries did not live in sixth-century Italy, a crow did famously warn St. Benedict of imminent danger. Much of Benedict's life was marked by such engaged attention to the world around him. This heart-transforming disposition stands at the core of Benedict's Rule and so can help us respond to our ecological plight.

Listening with the Heart

If sin involves an unwillingness to listen, then biblical faith rests on the willingness to attend to the voice of another. At the foundation of Israel's covenantal relationship with God is the Shema: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God,

[33] See, e.g., Bridget Stutchbury, *Silence of the Songbirds: How We Are Losing the World's Songbirds and What We Can Do to Save Them* (Walker, 2007); and Gaia Vince, *Nomad Century: How Climate Migration Will Reshape Our World* (Flatiron Books, 2022).

the LORD alone" (Deut 6:4). The story of Israel begins with Abraham's readiness to hear God's voice, leave his home, and believe—no matter how absurd God's promises seem (see Gen 12:1-9; also Gen 22). Faith here involves hearing, understood as a trusting willingness to surrender oneself to God. The same call recurs throughout the life and ministry of Christ. During the transfiguration, God the Father's voice tells Jesus's closest followers, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" (Mark 9:7). The blind, poor man Bartimaeus implicitly grasps the essence of discipleship when he "hears" Jesus, cries out to him, and follows Jesus "on the way" (Mark 10:47, 52). Elsewhere, Jesus likens his disciples to sheep who "follow him because they know his voice" (John 10:4). "[F]aith," St. Paul tells the early Christians, "comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ" (Rom 10:17). Christian faith entails listening to the voice of Christ in all circumstances, to be led by him despite the cost.

Moreover, to listen to that word of God is to listen to what God hears: the cry of the oppressed (see Exod 2:23-25; Sir 4:5-6) and the groanings of creation (see Hos 4:3; Rom 8:22). "O that today you would listen to [God's] voice!" exhorts the psalmist, so that you would "not harden your hearts" (Ps 95:7-8). Indeed, such listening should transform hardened, indifferent hearts (see Ezek 36:26).

In this spirit, the Benedictine way of life trains a person to more clearly hear God and conform his or her life accordingly. With this theological end in mind, it aims to foster deep attention as an entire way of life. As David Steindl-Rast puts it, for Benedict, "the monastery is . . . conceived as a place where one learns to keep one's eyes

and ears open."[34] Today, this Benedictine listening can help overcome the globalization of indifference and soften our hardened hearts to better hear the cries of the earth and the poor. This Benedictine emphasis can foster the painful awareness and care for which our common home cries out.

Benedict begins his Rule in a similar way to Pope Francis's call for an integral ecology: with an admonition to pay attention. "Listen carefully, my son, to the master's instructions, attend to them with the ear of your heart" (RB Prol.1). By deliberately beginning his text with the call to listen, he positions it as foundational for monastic life. Moreover, the Latin word that Benedict uses for "listen" in this verse, "*obsculta*," refers to a deep, fullhearted listening.[35] It is an attentive listening that engages the entirety of our being—hence, Benedict's cardiac metaphor of "the ear of your heart." As for the Bible, so too for Benedict: the heart points to the very recesses of the self. First and foremost, Benedictines should attend to the voice of God with all their hearts or, we might say, at the level of their guts. From the perspective of the Rule, right Christian judging and acting only follow from this heartfelt readiness to listen.

Another name for that readiness is obedience, a focal motif of the Rule. As Benedict states, "The labor of obedience will bring you back to him from who you had drifted through the sloth of disobedience," so that one will be "armed with the strong and noble weapons of obedience to do battle for the true King, Christ the Lord" (RB Prol.2-3). Benedict will later refer to the "blessing" of obedience

[34] David Steindl-Rast, *The Way of Silence: Engaging the Sacred in Daily Life* (Franciscan Media, 2015), 102.

[35] Aquinata Böckmann, *Perspectives on the Rule of St. Benedict: Expanding Our Hearts in Christ*, trans. Matilda Handl and Marianne Burkhard (Liturgical Press, 2005), 15–16.

(RB 71.1), and he devotes an entire chapter of his Rule to obedience (RB 5).

At first, the word "obedience" probably strikes our modern ears as backwardly authoritarian, perhaps implying a passivity that undermines legitimate responsibility. The etymological root of "obedience" connotes a fuller meaning, however. "*Obaudire*" is an intensive form of the Latin word for hearing, "*audire*." Thus, it too refers to the act of listening, while also indicating the type of hearing that demands a response. Benedictine obedience forbids "sluggishness" or "grumbling" (RB 5.14) but "must be given gladly," swiftly, and lovingly (RB 5.16).

Obedience, conceived of in this way, contrasts starkly with passivity. Benedict speaks of the *labor* of obedience. Listening requires effort and practice—especially in a noisy and distracted world. Indeed, a central threat to Benedictine living is the sloth of disobedience. Benedict tells monks "to utterly flee oblivion" (RB 7.10), which Colleen Maura McGrane defines as "the state of being unaware or unconscious of what is happening."[36] Passive, oblivious indifference—from being sunk in mere living to being thrown from one distraction to another—is precisely the problem. Understood as the work of listening with the heart, the *labor* of obedience aims to dissolve those forces of indifference that harden hearts.

Benedict exempts no one from this labor. While the Rule of the Master reserves listening for those immature monks who cannot live holy lives on their own (see RM

[36] Colleen Maura McGrane, "Practising Presence: Wisdom from the Rule on Finding Balance in a Digital Age," *American Benedictine Review* 64, no. 3 (December 2013): 371.

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