

TOWARD AN INTERSECTIONAL INTEGRAL ECOLOGY

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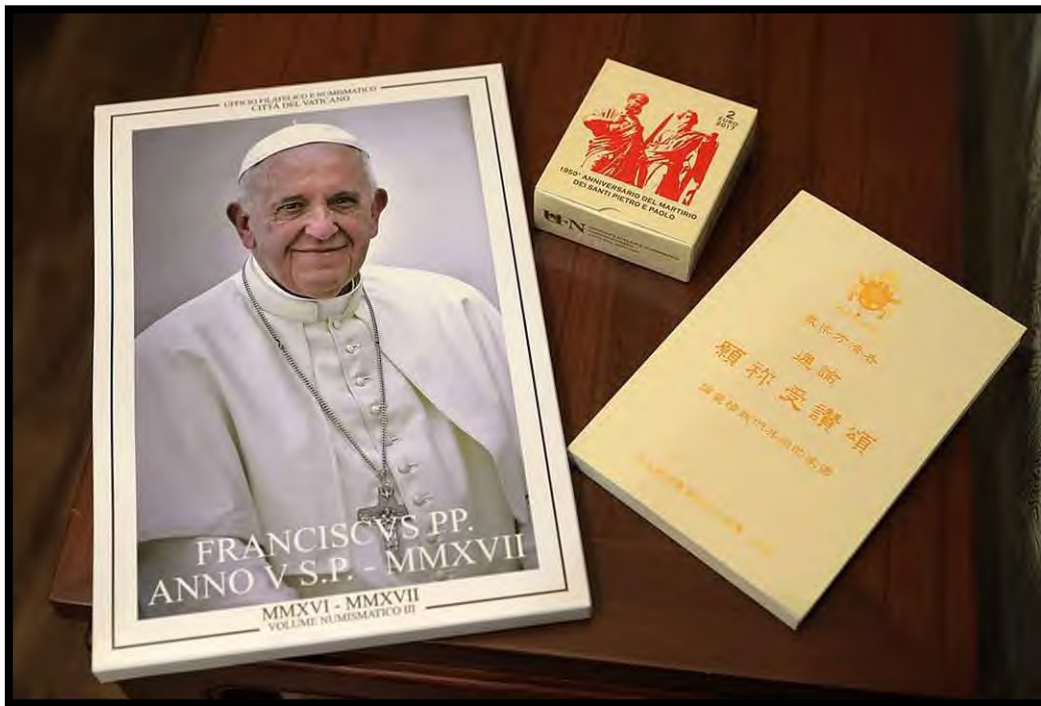


In *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, Pope Francis promotes an integral ecology, which intends to account for the entanglement of environmentalism and social justice. Throughout the encyclical, Francis compellingly addresses the intersection of ecological degradation and the plight of people experiencing poverty. For instance, Francis asserts that “we have to realize that a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*.”¹ Though Francis consistently emphasizes the inextricable link between social justice and ecology throughout the encyclical, and though he fervently critiques the devastating impact of poverty, he does not explicitly address such vast and death-dealing systems as patriarchy and white supremacy. And yet, as ecofeminist and ecowomanist scholars have urged us for decades, environmental sustainability and human flourishing is unthinkable apart from the naming and dismantling of these systems.

In this respect, while Francis’s vision is inspiring and generative, it requires critical sharpening by activists and theologians who aim to express and en flesh

¹ Francis, encyclical letter *Laudato Si'*, *On Care for Our Common Home* (May 24, 2015), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html, §49 (italics in the original) .

an explicitly intersectional integral ecology.² Inspired by Kimberlé W. Crenshaw's understanding of intersectionality, this paper envisions an intersectional integral ecology in three brief movements. First, it analyzes Pope Francis's depiction of integral ecology in *Laudato Si'*, emphasizing its generativity as well as its limits. Next, it turns to the insights of Catholic ecofeminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether, highlighting the ways in which her work has grappled with the necessary link between environmentalism and social justice decades before the publication of *Laudato Si'*.³ Lastly, this paper argues that in order to be authentically integral, an ecological vision must be intersectional. It must promote the naming, dismantling, and transformation of particular systems—such as patriarchy, white supremacy, and classism—as they intersect and interact.



[Presidential Office Building, Taiwan](#), CC BY 2.0, [Wikimedia Commons](#).

² See Leah Thomas, *The Intersectional Environmentalist: How to Dismantle Systems of Oppression to Protect People + Planet* (New York: Voracious / Little, Brown and Company, 2022), 25. As we do this work, we must specifically lift up the contributions of Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, who developed the concept of intersectionality in 1989 (25). We must hold in mind Leah Thomas's insistence that "any advancement or more broad adoption of intersectional theory should start with the fact that it was bred from the Black experience and was developed as a tool to help Black women feel seen, heard, and validated in their everyday lives" (25).

³ I first explored the concept of an intersectional integral ecology by placing Pope Francis's insights into conversation with Rosemary Radford Ruether's in *The Catholic Worker*. See Jim Robinson, "Rosemary Radford Ruether," *The Catholic Worker*, vol. XCI, no. 2, March-April 2023, pg. 4.

As we have seen, Pope Francis insists on the enmeshment of ecological degradation and social injustice throughout *Laudato Si'*. He observes that "We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental."⁴ He insists that "Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature."⁵ Francis employs the term integral ecology throughout *Laudato Si'* in an effort to illuminate the complexity of our ecological and social crisis, as well as the holistic response that this crisis requires. He devotes an entire chapter, chapter four, titled "Integral Ecology," to exploring these themes. He opens this chapter with the following observation, "Since everything is closely interrelated, and today's problems call for a vision capable of taking into account every aspect of the global crisis, I suggest that we now consider some elements of an *integral ecology*, one which clearly respects its human and social dimensions."⁶ We can sense in this quote that the concept of integral ecology is intentionally capacious, as it is inspired by the ambitious aim of "taking into account every aspect of the global crisis."⁷ We can furthermore sense that Francis's depiction of this concept is impressionistic rather than complete. He does not exhaustively delineate the concept. Instead, he identifies "some elements of an *integral ecology*."⁸ The impressions that Francis provides suggest that, most basically, an integral ecology aims to hold together environmental and social realities.

Though the capacious nature of the concept of integral ecology could be conducive to a broad view of the roots of our eco-social crisis, the concept does run the risk of lingering in the realm of abstraction without theoretical clarification and practical application. In this respect, Pope Francis's depiction of an integral ecology is perhaps best viewed as a foundation to build upon, or soil to work with, rather than a fully fleshed out vision. Within the space of the encyclical, the meaning of the concept is gestured toward rather than firmly and fully expressed. Daniel P. Castillo aptly observes that though the "concept of integral ecology is at the center of Pope Francis's call for the renewal of our common home...this concept remains somewhat under-defined."⁹ Castillo

⁴ Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §139.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., §137.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Daniel P. Castillo, "Integral Ecology as a Liberationist Concept," *Theological Studies* 77, no. 2 (May 12, 2016): 353, Sage Journals.

proposes that Francis “does not offer a clear definition of the term. As a result, the precise meaning of integral ecology remains somewhat elusive.”¹⁰

Ultimately, Pope Francis’s depiction of integral ecology leaves ample room for activists and theologians to build upon and evolve the concept, and such constructive work is vitally important. For instance, while Rosemary P. Carbine compellingly observes that Pope Francis “portrays our global environmental crises in similar ways to ecofeminist theologies,” she also observes that *Laudato Si’* “fails to realize an integral ecology with respect to gender justice.”¹¹ She therefore suggests the importance of turning to the witness of Catholic women who “engage in prophetic eco-activism that more fully realizes an integral ecology.”¹² In this spirit, we will now turn to the work of Catholic scholar-activist Rosemary Radford Ruether, as we constructively build upon Pope Francis’s vision of an integral ecology.

Throughout her academic career, Rosemary Radford Ruether’s scholarship has always been inextricable from her embodied involvement in movements for social justice and ecological flourishing. Attentive to this pattern, Gary Dorrien aptly refers to Ruether as the “epitome of a scholar-activist” and emphasizes that every book Ruether wrote “had a community behind it,” since she “forged friendships with activists in various fields and wrote books out of her activist commitments.”¹³ As Mary Joanne Henold has it, “in the sixties, Ruether became deeply involved in the civil rights and peace movements as well as the Catholic left” so that “while pursuing her academic career as a theologian, and raising her children in a racially integrated Washington neighborhood, she could frequently be found at demonstrations, on picket lines, and occasionally in jail.”¹⁴ Through her active involvement in justice movements, Ruether developed and articulated a multifaceted critique of the unjust systems which oppress and marginalize human beings while bringing about the ruin of the earth.

In *To Change the World: Christology and Cultural Criticism* (1981), Ruether argues that “social domination is the missing link in the question of domination of nature.”¹⁵ In this sentence, Ruether crystalizes an insight that is explored by

¹⁰ Ibid., 354.

¹¹ Rosemary P. Carbine, “Imagining and Incarnating an Integral Ecology: A Critical Ecofeminist Public Theology,” in *Planetary Solidarity: Global Women’s Voices on Christian Doctrine and Climate Justice*, ed. Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Hilda P. Koster (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2017), 47; 56.

¹² Ibid., 58.

¹³ Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Crisis, Irony, and Postmodernity (1950-2005)* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 187.

¹⁴ Mary Joanne Henold, *Catholic and Feminist: The Surprising History of the American Catholic Feminist Movement* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press), 39-40.

¹⁵ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *To Change the World: Christology and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 59.

Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'*,¹⁶ an insight that has been explored for decades now by countless scholars—including ecofeminists, ecowomanists, liberation theologians, and advocates of environmental justice—whose work emerges from a sensitivity to the intertwining of ecological degradation and social injustice. Even earlier, In *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (1975), Ruether insists that “an ecological revolution must overthrow all the social structures of domination.”¹⁷ Throughout this text, Ruether analyzes and critiques the ways in which various systems—such as patriarchy, systemic racism, and classism—interact and intersect in bringing about eco-social ruin. She calls for a recognition of the “interstructuring of race, sex, and class.”¹⁸ Thinking of Ruether, Elina Vuola reflects on the “early inclusion of what is today called intersectionality” in the scholarship of first-generation feminist theologians.¹⁹ Vuola specifically centers Ruether’s *New Woman, New Earth* as an early text to consider that “gender should always be analyzed in relation to race and class.”¹⁹

Simply put, Rosemary Radford Ruether has offered a robust analysis of the inextricable link between social injustice and environmental degradation decades before the publication of *Laudato Si'*. She developed and embodied this analysis throughout her career, in conversation with a wide web of scholars and activists working to move the world in the direction of sustainability and justice. As we build on Pope Francis’s vision of integral ecology by integrating insights from Ruether, we might draw inspiration from her commitment to naming and resisting the impact and interaction of specific systems of domination, such as patriarchy, systemic racism, and classism. We might also draw inspiration from her commitment to fleshing out a liberating theology by drawing on her own experience as a scholar actively involved in movements for justice.

While engaging with the insights of Catholic theologians such as Ruether in order to evolve the concept of integral ecology, we might simultaneously turn toward the insights of a wider web of activists, theologians, and theorists. We might turn, for instance, to the work of Leah Thomas. In *The Intersectional Environmentalist: How to Dismantle Systems of Oppression to Protect People + Planet* (2022), Thomas argues that intersectional environmentalism “advocates for the protection of both people and the planet” as it recognizes that the “same systems of oppression that oppress people also oppress and degrade the

¹⁶ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), 204.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹⁸ Elina Vuola, “Feminist Theology, Religious Studies and Gender Studies: Mutual Challenges,” in *Contemporary Encounters in Gender and Religion: European Perspectives*, ed. Lena Gemzöe, Marja Liisa-Keinänen, and Avril Maddrell (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2016), 316.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

planet.”²⁰ Thomas draws on the insights of ecofeminists as well as the history of environmental justice initiatives in fleshing out her call for an intersectional environmentalism. As we continue to expand on Pope Francis’s vision of integral ecology through ongoing creative dialogue, we might reflect on how we can best enfold an intersectional integral ecology in our scholarship and in our lives. In the process, may we always work to name, resist, and dismantle the death-dealing systems—such as patriarchy, white supremacy, and classism—which weigh so heavily on our world.

²⁰ Leah Thomas, *The Intersectional Environmentalist: How to Dismantle Systems of Oppression to Protect People + Planet* (New York: Voracious / Little, Brown and Company, 2022), 43-44.