

# For Our Common Home

PROCESS-RELATIONAL RESPONSES  
TO *LAUDATO SI'*

JOHN B. COBB, JR.  
IGNAIO CASTUERA  
EDITORS

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY BILL MCKIBBEN



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## A Song-Inspired Narrative of Resistance

*David Carlson*

Pope Francis' encyclical letter to "the whole human family" (13) is permeated with *song*. *Laudato* opens with a brief couplet from St. Francis' *Canticle to the Sun* and closes with an exhortation to Christians: "Let us sing as we go. May our struggles and our concern for this planet never take away the joy of our hope" (244). A third of the way through, most of the entire *Canticle* is included verbatim (88). Its sheer exuberance resonates throughout the pope's message. *Laudato* is song-inspired.

Here, I would like to suggest, first, that the pope's message can be read as a *song-inspired narrative of resistance*. And second, that *song*—broadly speaking—is necessary for the new thinking and the many configurations of dialogue that *Laudato* calls for in order for them to come forth and be manifest. Briefly stated, *song*—in both musical and nonmusical form—is essential for integral ecology.

A song-inspired narrative of resistance

*Laudato* is clearly a narrative that has much in common with other clear-eyed, yet hopeful, critiques of the purely instrumental use of nature's resources and the reduction of the value of human life to the cycles of production and consumption across the earth. I have in mind, for example,

Rebecca Todd Peters' critiques of four theories, or narratives, of globalization: the resistance narratives of earthism and of postcolonialism opposing the dominant narratives of neoliberalism and of social equity liberalism.<sup>1</sup>

Pope Francis does not reject markets per se (see, for example, 94, 129, and 180), but rather rejects "the interests of a *deified* market" (56, italics added) and opposes "a magical conception of the market, which suggest that problems can be solved simply by an increase in the profits of companies or individuals" (190). Similarly, *Laudato* does not stand against technology as such (see, for example, 102 and 103), but instead calls for "resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm" (101). Pope Francis sees a resistance generated by "a distinctive new way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies, an educational programme, a lifestyle and a spirituality" acting together (111). But he is no Luddite.

Indeed, *Laudato* could be called *a spirituality of resistance*. Philosopher Roger Gottlieb has developed this fruitful concept over several years of teaching and writing.<sup>2</sup> In his view, resistance entails, in the first instance, opposing "superior and threatening powers, in a context of injustice, oppression, or violence." To resist is to take a stand, to act. To do so from a "spiritual point of view," Gottlieb cites several expressions from the wisdom literature of centuries, such as "Open your heart to the pain of the world, without fear or judgment," and "Give love in a dark time, when everything seems hopeless." However, he points out that the equanimity which spiritual wisdom and practices may engender risk becoming mere nostrums unless compassionate and resolute resistance to injustice and violence result.

*Laudato*, however, does not center its message in terms of what it opposes in human affairs but rather in its idealized vision for life on earth: namely, *a civilization of love*—grounded in *integral ecology*. *Laudato* calls for an ecology of the environment, economics, society, culture, daily life, and spirituality. All elements are interconnected. In particular, the well-being of nature and humankind are inseparable. Pope Francis approvingly quotes the Earth Charter's vision: "Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening of a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace, and the joyful celebration of life" (207).



Song—in both musical and nonmusical form—is essential for integral ecology.

The power of music to effect personal and social transformation is widely recognized. One outstanding example is the impact of the poem “Amazing Grace,” later set to a hymn tune, upon William Wilberforce and the eventual abolishing of the slave trade in Britain. Another is the undeniable contribution that the song, “We Shall Overcome,” has made in sustaining the civil rights movement in the United States during the 1960s and to this day.

I wonder: Are there comparable tunes that might help unify a world-wide movement toward a “civilization of love”? Is there a tune of caring for our common home—a melody so simple and meaning-filled that 7-year-olds in Colorado, the Congo, and China could sing the same melody with the same words in their native tongues? If not a single tune, perhaps a family of melodies with words from different cultures will emerge that say/sing the same message differently—a pluralism of unity without uniformity.

But does music exhaust the core meaning of “song”? Apparently not. St. Francis’ *Canticle of the Sun* is variously described online as a religious song, a hymn, a prayer, and a poem. Although several composers have set this praise-filled canticle (“little song”) to music hundreds of years after its composition, this canticle clearly stands on its own in *Laudato* (and elsewhere) without musical accompaniment. I think the same can be said for this “canticle” composed in our time:

i thank You God for most this amazing  
 day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees  
 and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything  
 which is natural which is infinite which is yes  
 (i who have died am alive again today,  
 and this is the sun’s birthday; this is the birth  
 day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay  
 great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing  
 breathing any—lifted from the no  
 of all nothing—human m̀erely being  
 doubt unimaginable You?  
 (now the ears of my ears awake and  
 now the eyes of my eyes are opened)<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the lines between song and poetry are blurred. Some say more and regard poetry *as* song.<sup>4</sup>

On this view, poetry can legitimately join song in musical mode in expanding the space for new thinking and multiple forms of dialogue to care for our common home. Moreover, poetry in everyday language, grounded in this place, this planet, is called for. And finally, poetry and song that articulate commitment, steadfastness, and lament (in addition to praise) are sorely needed for the long journey ahead. Here is one example; let us recognize others and share them.

My heart is moved by all I cannot save:  
 so much has been destroyed  
 I have to cast my lot with those  
 who age after age, perversely,  
 with no extraordinary power,  
 reconstitute the world.<sup>5</sup>

*[Note: These reflections owe much to my colleagues in the track Organizing for Change and Sustaining Involvement at the international conference, "Seizing An Alternative: Toward An Ecological Civilization," held in Claremont, CA on June 4-7, 2015. Professor Roger Gottlieb, Worcester Polytechnic Institute, served as chair. Rev. Thandeka led a session that emphasized the central importance of song. Ms. Carol Blaney provided the excerpt of Adrienne Rich's poem displayed above.]*

#### Endnotes

1. Rebecca Todd Peters, *In Search of the Good Life: The Ethics of Globalization* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

2. See, for example, Roger Gottlieb, *A Spirituality of Resistance: Finding a Peaceful Heart and Protecting the Earth* (Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003) and *Political and Spiritual: Essays on Religion, Environment, Disability, and Justice* (Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).
3. e.e. cummings, "i thank You God for most this amazing," in *100 Selected Poems* (New York: Grove, 1959).
4. The philosopher Martin Heidegger, for one. In his 1946 lecture, "Why Poets?" in *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. and ed. by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), Heidegger asserts that the vocation of the poet is to reach into the abyss of the "world's dark night." He writes: "To be a poet in a desolate time means: singing, to attend to the track of the fugitive gods. This is why the poet, at the time of the world's night, utters the sacred" (202).
5. Adrienne Rich, an excerpt from "Natural Resources," in *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems, 1974-1977* (New York: Norton, 1978), 67.