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A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE RECEPTION OF *LAUDATO SI'* BY PROGRESSIVE AND
TRADITIONAL CATHOLICS

by

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A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE RECEPTION OF *LAUDATO SI'* BY PROGRESSIVE AND
TRADITIONAL CATHOLICS

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University of Nebraska, 2020

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This study considers the impacts of religion, specifically Catholicism, on environmental views. In 2015, Pope Francis published an encyclical entitled *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*. In this encyclical, Pope Francis calls all humans to an “ecological conversion” and identifies environmental stewardship as a Catholic responsibility. Progressive Catholics embraced *Laudato Si'* and its messages, while traditional Catholics condemned the encyclical. In this study, a comparative literary analysis is conducted to determine why traditional Catholics reject the encyclical while progressive Catholics applaud it. Initiatives stemming as a direct result from *Laudato Si'* are also examined. The study found a number of common themes for progressive and traditional Catholics, with traditional Catholics claiming the encyclical to be heretical and progressive Catholics lauding it as a sign of reform. Political and ideological factors were also found to play a role in the divide.

Introduction

Religion has been at odds with the progressive world for centuries. Religious individuals are often pegged as being more politically conservative than non-religious individuals, and this is often accurate. According to 2019 Pew research study, 78% of conservatives identified as believing in God with “absolute certainty,” compared to only 45% of liberals (Pew Research). Further, among Americans who identify as Catholic, 37% are politically conservative, 36% moderate, and 22% liberal. Comparatively, 55% of Evangelical Protestants identify as conservative, with only 13% identifying as liberal. Clearly, religious beliefs tend to be associated with a conservative political affiliation.

Because of the tendency for religious people to be more conservative, the general consensus is that religious beliefs engender more anthropocentric worldviews among people. In 1967, Lynn White Jr. (Ivy League historian whose work is still discussed in the environmental community today) authored a highly controversial article “The Historic Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” largely blaming Christianity for the then-emerging ecological problems. He asserted “especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen” (White 1205). The basis of his argument is the creation narrative, riddled with examples of human dominion over all the land, and how “God planned all of this explicitly for man’s benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man’s purposes” (White 1205). White goes on to claim that “Christianity... established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends” (White 1205). White’s argument is that the Christian creation narrative differs from that of other earlier religions by placing man as the reason and cause for which everything else was created. If man is truly made in God’s image, man is obviously superior to all other creatures and creations. White later references St. Francis of Assisi as a radical Catholic, who leveled himself with all creatures, elevating them to “Brother Ant and Sister Fire, praising the Creator in their own ways as Brother Man does in his” (White 1206). Proposing that the ecologic crisis cannot be remedied until people “reevaluate their religion,” White echoes the beliefs of many people in modern times.

The other side of the coin is that perhaps religious beliefs themselves have less to do with a person’s environmental views than do his or her political affiliations. In his study, Andrew Greely (Catholic priest and

sociologist whose work significantly impacted religious studies) asserts that religion shapes a person's worldview, but it is often political views that form a person's opinions. Because of the correlation between religion and conservatism, religious people are naturally more apt to be less in favor of environmentally focused policies. Greely does make considerable conclusions regarding Catholics and Protestants and their environmental views. In detailing how Catholicism has such deep sacramental roots in raw human nature, he states that "Catholicism might reasonably be expected to have members with more concern for the environment" (Greely 21).

Interestingly, the Catholic Church does have a stance on the environment, calling members to environmental stewardship. Using the resources provided to humans responsibly and with care has always been a proponent of the Catholic faith. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states "Man must therefore respect the particular goodness of every creature, to avoid any disordered use of things which would be in contempt of the Creator and would bring disastrous consequences for human beings and their environment" (339). Further, Pope Benedict XVI, who was regarded as a very traditional pope with strong adherence to Church teachings, spoke about the importance of environmental stewardship often. In his 2009 encyclical "Caritas in Veritate," Pope Benedict XVI states "The environment is God's gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations and towards humanity as a whole" (no. 48). Catholics regard charity as an essential component of a holy life, and as Benedict suggests, responsible use of the environment is a charity of its own. Because of the highly politicized climate surrounding environmental activism, many Catholics are hesitant to support such causes. However, it truly is in line with Catholic doctrine to use the environment responsibly and take care of the planet that was provided for us – so long as we do not fall into idolatry or disorder, which is what many Catholics fear.

Further, the culture of the Vatican has drastically changed since the election of progressive Pope Francis. One issue on which it has specifically been uprooted is environmentalism. In 2015, Pope Francis published an encyclical entitled *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*. As the title suggests, the encyclical is about the responsibility of Catholics to be stewards of the environment, as it was created by God for human use and enjoyment. Thus, Greely's predictions prove true, at least from the point of view of the new

pontiff. Like Greely states, Catholicism embraces the connection between the natural and the divine, as the natural was divinely inspired. As Pope Francis explains in the encyclical, “the diversity of creatures in their ‘multiple relationships’ together convey the goodness of the creator” (Pope Francis 86). Vincent J. Miller (Catholic theologian studying the relationship between religion and culture) provides a breakdown of the encyclical, illustrating how Pope Francis is looking to integral ecology in these passages, as “an understanding, an imagination that enables us to perceive the interconnections among all things” (Miller 14). Pope Francis goes on, stating “each creature has its own purpose. None is superfluous. The entire material universe speaks of God’s love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God” (Pope Francis 84). In this, he is claiming that it is the Catholic responsibility to glorify God by taking care of, appreciating, and even loving, every part of His creation. In line with all of the Pope’s teachings, Greely concludes that “Catholics are more likely to be concerned about the environment because they are more likely to have gracious images of God, and because their picture of God is more likely to affect their environmental concern than is the Protestant’s picture of God” (Greely 26).

In this unprecedented encyclical, Pope Francis introduces a new political theology, radically different from anything the Church has seen before. In essence, he is laying the framework for the evident intersection between ecology and theology. By addressing our interconnectedness and need to “care for our common home,” he is propagating basic ecological principles. Pope Francis uses significant scientific analysis and principles in the introduction of the encyclical, as he takes readers through environmental issues: climate change, the loss of biodiversity, air pollution, the loss of beautiful landscapes, and extinctions. He does not only focus on the human consequences of these issues, but also the harm that will be caused to plants and animals, stating “Because of us thousands of species will no longer give glory to God by their very existence, nor convey their message to us. We have no such right” (Laudato Si’ 33). The encyclical is largely scientific, using data and studies to back up his claims, blaming humans for turmoil in the environment. In between the scientific words, however, runs a thread of a desperate plea for all humans, Catholic and non-Catholics alike, to care for creation and its nonhuman inhabitants because of their “intrinsic value independent of their usefulness” (Laudato Si’

140). This challenges previous Catholic teaching on nonhuman creatures, which has always viewed “the rest of creation as ordered to the human and as existing simply for human use” (Edwards 380).

Francis does not suggest as much for lay people in means of a solution, but rather seeks to pull on readers’ emotions and deepest motivations. An analysis of the science in *Laudato Si’* explains the Pope’s call to action by saying “For Pope Francis, the most serious problems facing humanity do not just need a technical solution, but rather a greater understanding of what motivates human beings to live in harmony and peace” (Deane-Drummond 401). He seeks to change our concept and relationship to the environment, and thus change our behavior towards it. In challenging people’s beliefs along with previous Church teachings, Francis attempts to categorize the ecological crisis and realign the way people approach caring for the environment. His words envelop the spirit that caring for the climate and accepting the limits God has imposed on the earth must be “understood as a substantive practice of love rather than just a logic of deprivation” (Rowlands 419). Francis hopes to leave readers encouraged to care for the planet out of love and charity, rather than out of fear and necessity.

While this encyclical is widely known within Catholic communities, many non-Catholics do not know that the Church has a stance on the environment. The reason the encyclical did not make a significant impact on the proceedings of the Church is because of the heresy some believe it propagates--a pantheistic world view. Thus, *Laudato Si’* was not well received within traditional communities, while more progressive Catholics fully embraced the message. There needs to be a common ground, without risk of apathy or heresy. Catholics make up 17% of the world’s total population (Roberts), and have significant power in governing bodies and nearly every sector of the world. Thus, it is imperative the Catholics know of their duty to protect the environment and can do so in a non-disordered way. The issue with Pope Francis’ proclamations in *Laudato Si’* arises from the fact that it can be interpreted in a heretical, disordered nature, turning many Catholics off from the idea of environmental stewardship. Understanding how the encyclical was received by different groups of Catholics and why it garnered those reactions will be especially helpful in making environmental stewardship an aim of the faithful, along the same lines as the Church’s devotion to helping the homeless and the hungry. The stigma

and scandal that Pope Francis imposed on care for the planet must be removed, so that faithful Catholics are able to do their part in protecting creation without fear or danger of falling into scandal or idolatry.

It is imperative that environmental issues are put into the context of the faith and considered with a traditional lens, in order to garner enthusiasm regarding protecting the planet among Catholics. While many people took issue with the heretical nature of Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'*, there are also many groups that are taking action due to his statements and working to make the Catholic Church more "environmentally friendly." We must find the middle ground, so that all Catholics can be invested in caring for Creation. The categorization for traditional and progressive Catholics will be based around the principles of the Second Vatican Council, which occurred in 1962 and changed the mass to native vernaculars and altered the norms of the Catholic Church. For these purposes, "traditional" Catholics will be defined as those who subscribe to the beliefs and doctrines of the Catholic Church before Vatican II was implemented in 1962. Conversely, "progressive" Catholics will be defined as those who subscribe to post-Vatican II beliefs.

A number of prominent Catholics have taken a stance and written responses to *Laudato Si'*, from both favorable and unfavorable viewpoints. The most well-educated and well-respected of these individuals will be considered for this research, with their essays and publications being analyzed and compared. With environmentalism being such a hot-button issue in our current times, a significant amount of information has already been published regarding the Church and the environment. This prior researched will be used in combination with opinions from a number of Catholics to determine how *Laudato Si'* was received by both traditional and progressive Catholics, and what action *Laudato Si'* inspired within the Church. This thesis will be a thematic analysis of the reception of *Laudato Si'* from traditional and progressive Catholics, as we analyze the themes of scriptural backing, progress and inclusion within the Church, and the notion of "interconnectedness" throughout the encyclical and its reactions. An investigation into any environmental initiatives that sprung from *Laudato Si'* will also ensue.

Progressive Catholic Reactions to Laudato Si'

First and foremost, the categorization of an author as either a “progressive” or “traditional” Catholic has been explained in terms of acceptance of the 1962 Second Vatican Council. For research purposes, the progressive Catholics cited whose opinions are to be analyzed will only be from sources and organizations that follow the teachings of Vatican II and have a reputation within the Catholic community as being progressive. This may seem relative, but with these criteria to meet in order to be considered progressive in this study, the prospects were significantly decreased. Viewpoints from five progressive Catholics from varying walks of life will be explained and analyzed.

The first progressive Catholic reflection on *Laudato Si'* comes from the offshoot of the National Catholic Reporter, EarthBeat. This Catholic news source is known for being increasingly progressive, and is focused on “stories of climate crisis, faith, and action.” The article is by Catholic Daniel DiLeo and is entitled “Peace: an unexpected reaction to *Laudato Si'*.” DiLeo outlines Francis’ main points in *Laudato Si'*: human-caused climate change and its damage to the earth, interconnectedness between all things, and the need for a behavioral as well as political shift in the way these ecological issues are addressed. DiLeo works for the Catholic Climate Covenant, established in 2006 by the USCCB to address “the need to implement Catholic social teaching on ecology within the US Church” (Catholic Climate Covenant). Thus, DiLeo has a very strong interest in the encyclical and the fruit it will produce. He explains the despair that accompanies his work, and the role the encyclical played in alleviating that. DiLeo’s response to the encyclical is overwhelmingly hopeful and positive. He writes “now, after finally reading *Laudato Si'*, I am absolutely convinced that Francis will indeed inspire humanity to save ourselves from ourselves and avoid catastrophic climate change. And I am very peaceful about it” (DiLeo). He goes on with a call to action for US Catholics, saying “adequate reception of the gift [the encyclical], of course, will require fortitude, cooperation, and hard work—especially from Catholics in the United States” (DiLeo).

Other contributors to EarthBeat echo DiLeo’s hope, building on it with specific calls to action. Jesuit Fr. James Hug reveals the need for new liturgical materials to “nurture the ecological transformation that Francis is calling for and that the human family so desperately needs” (Hug). He mentions Catherine Vincie, a liturgical and theological scholar in St. Louis, who is working to develop new materials for “ecological spirituality,” that

will have to undergo the long process of being approved for use. In the meantime, Hug urges liturgical planners to use an ecological lens, saying “the weekly liturgical texts must be consciously read as addressing the social and ecological context of our lives in the midst of the whole human family and at the heart of the complex and interrelated systems of our common home” (Hug). In effect, Hug is saying that the current liturgies do not provide sufficient opportunity to connect spiritually with the ecological vision, and until new liturgical resources become available that do so, it is the responsibility of the individual to bring “the spirit of *Laudato Si*” to the liturgy. Hug continues, suggesting that *Laudato Si*’ can be applied more deeply than just environmentally, but by urging Catholics “to contemplate the beauty and complexity of creation, to see how everything is interconnected, to see ourselves as in it and of it” (Hug).

Known as one of the most progressive priests in America, Jesuit Fr. James Martin also finds favor with *Laudato Si*’. Father Martin has gained significant media exposure for his outreach to LGBT Catholics, also garnering backlash from conservative Catholics. The widely known priest is the author of one of the most popular articles on *Laudato Si*’, entitled “Top Ten Takeaways from *Laudato Si*’.” Reading the article gives a glimpse into why Fr. Martin, and likely other Jesuit priests, are such big fans of the encyclical. One of Fr. Martin’s highlights surrounds Francis’ concern for the poor, stemming from the idea of liberation theology, which Francis couples with the idea of environmental justice. Fr. Martin explains, “throughout the encyclical, the Pope appeals to the Gospels, to Catholic social teaching and to the statements of recent popes to critique the exclusion of anyone from benefits of the goods of creation” (Martin). Francis’ claim is that poorer, developing countries experience the brunt of the consequences of climate change, due to the inability of the poor to adapt to climate change as readily.

Fr. Martin also emphasizes the addition of *Laudato Si*’ to the body of the Church’s social teaching, “against those who argue that a papal encyclical on the environment has no real authority.” He goes on, “By the way, an encyclical is a type of teaching that enjoys the highest level of authority in the church, second only to the Gospels and church councils like Vatican II” (Martin). In essence, Martin’s point is that *Laudato Si*’ is not going anywhere, and can be considered official Church teaching, which is not actually fact.

Part of the reason so many Catholics appreciate and support *Laudato Si'* is because of its scriptural basis, another component of the encyclical that Martin mentions. He explains how Francis “traces the theme of love of creation through both the Old and the New Testaments,” giving believers a reason to start caring for the environment (Martin). Francis focuses significantly on the creation narrative, illustrating the “call to care for creation,” “to till and keep the earth,” but, as Martin puts it “we have done... too much tilling and not enough keeping” (Martin). By using scripture to illustrate the Catholic stewardship of the environment, many people were convinced that Francis’ words were entirely biblically based, thus leading many people to embrace the encyclical and all that it entails.

Tony Magliano, “an internationally syndicated social justice and peace columnist,” and also a Catholic, highly praises the encyclical, gushing “it’s courageous, it’s prophetic, it’s challenging, it’s holistic, it’s wonderful: That’s why I think of Pope Francis’ environmental encyclical, *Laudato Si', on Care for Our Common Home*” (Magliano). Magliano sites Francis’ use of science, appreciating how he ignored “the weak scientific claims of those who deny the climate is changing and that the earth is warming principally because of human pollution.” Francis’ tug on emotions resonates with Magliano as well, who writes “Francis tries to awaken the consciences of all, especially the economically and politically powerful, to the plight of the poor.” By connecting poverty with the environmental crisis, Francis turns environmentalism into a social justice issue, spurring more people to take action. Finally, Magliano concludes “Pope Francis has given the world a great gift. With wise insight, he has laid out for us the truth of our interconnectedness with all creation – not only in the ecological web of life, but as people sharing one human nature and, spiritually, as brothers and sisters united to God, father of all.” It is the interconnectedness that Pope Francis proposes that causes so many to favor his approach. Francis is able to unite environmentalism with at least one issue that every person identifies, in saying “when we fail to acknowledge as part of reality the worth of a poor person, a human embryo, a person with disabilities – to offer just a few examples – it becomes difficult to hear the cry of nature itself; everything is connected” (Pope Francis). Elevating environmentalism to the levels of abortion, poverty, and discrimination, Francis compels many, Magliano included, to begin to see the interconnectedness.

In California, which is home to some of the most progressive dioceses in the United States, a number of Bishops spoke out praising the encyclical. Archbishop Jose Gomez of the archdiocese of Los Angeles and the president of the USCCB, says the Pope “writes with a prophet’s eye for injustice,” reflecting “a profound confidence and openness to the world.” He lauds the encyclical for its addressing of a wide range of issues, extending far beyond ecology, but all with a progressive and controversial flair – “the myth of progress,” the need to accept “one’s own body in its femininity or masculinity,” and how it is “not healthy to cancel out sexual difference” (Gomez). All of these issues that the Pope speaks out about are issues that the Church has traditionally had an immutable and straight-forward approach to, so Francis’ acknowledgement of potential changes to these is unprecedented. Gomez prides Pope Francis on his inclusion of other religious beliefs in the encyclical, explaining how he “draws on an ecumenical and interdisciplinary range of authorities.... From other world religious leaders... he even quotes a Sufi mystic in one of his footnotes” (Gomez). This same point that brings discontent to traditional Catholics due to the implications of pantheism is a point of celebration for this progressive. Gomez also applauds the Pope’s cautious approach, in that he “does not mention the name of Jesus until he is almost 13,000 words into his long document” (Gomez). This absence is due to Francis’ desire to appeal to people of all faiths, as “he understands that the Gospel and the Church have no necessary authority in today’s secular society, in which the idea of God is either rejected or irrelevant” (Gomez). Gomez also expresses his opinion that “Pope Francis in this document is laying the groundwork for a new Christian humanism” as Christians live the way the Pope writes Jesus did – “As a man of work and a man who “lived in full harmony with all creation”” (Gomez). Finally, Gomez expresses Francis’ message as “a call for all of us to look at the earth and all its creatures with the eyes of Jesus” (Gomez). Archbishop Gomez clearly connects with Pope Francis’ implication that Jesus would have cared for the environment, and that in revering creation, we are revering Jesus, as “the very flowers of the field and the birds which his human eyes contemplated and admired are now imbued with his radiant presence” (Francis 100).

Analyzing these reactions from progressive American Catholics has revealed a number of themes that are prevalent throughout. These progressive Catholics, along with many more who were not represented, hold a positive view of *Laudato Si’*, often praising it for its poetic and unprecedented nature. In all of these reviews,

Laudato Si' is praised for its call to progress and reform, engagement with scripture to reinforce its claims, celebration of the interconnectedness of human beings and creation, and inclusion of and aim toward people of all different faiths. The same themes can be identified in the reviews of traditional Catholics, but often as points of critique and worry.

Traditional Catholic Reactions to Laudato Si'

The five authors cited in this analysis are considered to be “traditional Catholics.” For the purposes of this analysis, “traditional” is characterized by a preference of pre-Vatican II liturgy and traditions, celebration or participation in an ancient rite of the mass, and a reputation among Catholic communities as being traditionally minded. For example, the Diocese of Lincoln is often considered to be the most traditional in the country, because of its refusal to have extraordinary ministers of communion, lack of girl altar servers, and condemnation of “adding or omitting things [from the proper order and words of the Mass] for the sake of innovation as in some other dioceses” (Reeves).

The first traditional response to *Laudato Si'* comes from “The Latin Mass: The Journal of Catholic Culture and Tradition.” An article by Charles Molineaux, traditional Catholic attorney and author, entitled “*Laudato Si'* on Global Warming: The Good, the Bad, and the Silly,” delineates the traditional Catholic concerns with the encyclical. One major concern is the natural relationship between environmentalism and population control, which Francis does not address in his encyclical. When environmentalism is pushed, population control is often touted as a solution. This is especially concerning as Francis published the encyclical in advance of the Paris climate conference, hoping to influence policy makers to support environmental policies. The inevitable result from increased environmental action is increased attempts and advocacy for population control. As Molineaux explains, “also troubling are the encyclical’s alignment with dubious and ambiguous United Nations’ efforts in the areas of ‘sustainable development’” – which, assumedly, contain calls for population control (Molineaux 35). Further, Francis sites the “Earth Charter,” which sets out principles for ethical living, one of which is “universal access to health care that fosters reproductive health and responsible

reproduction” (Molineaux 35). Molineaux explains that “‘responsible reproduction’ is, of course, the familiar euphemism concerned with access to contraception and abortion” (Molineaux 35).

Further concerning to Molineaux is Pope Francis’ interpretation of scripture, specifically regarding the commandments. The Ten Commandments can be separated into two categories, as “the Ten Commandments were given on two tablets – three of the ten concerned with the love of God on one tablet and seven with love of neighbor on the other (CCC 2067). In *Laudato Si’*, Molineaux notices that Pope Francis adds a third category – love of the earth. Molineaux explains “*Laudato Si’* now presents an additional dimension: readers are advised that, “human life is grounded in *three* fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbor, and with the earth itself” (Molineaux 34). He goes on, “The encyclical asserts that, ‘these three vital relationships have been broken, both outwardly and within us. This rupture is sin.’ The next paragraph indicates that Abel’s blood, ‘cursed from the ground’ (Gen. 4:9-11), is the earth itself crying out, the relationship ruined” (Molineaux 34). These statements worry traditional Catholics, as they appear to be inching towards pantheistic and New Age viewpoints by suggesting that humans can have a relationship with the earth. Molineaux summarizes this concern, saying “we approach New Age thinking – Gaia is the mythological personification of the Earth” (Molineaux 35). Along the same line of thinking, the emphasis on relationships with nature takes away from man’s true purpose. Molineaux outlines this contradiction, explaining “At 139 we learn that, ‘we are part of nature.’ In the words of Pope John Paul II, on the other hand, we are advised that man is the image of God, “not reducible to a mere fragment of nature” (Molineaux 35). In other words, traditional Catholics take issue with the notion that man is simply a part of nature, rather than an intentional and important creation. In this analysis, Molineaux effectively lays the foundation of traditional Catholic concerns about the encyclical, specifically in connection to population control and doctrinal error.

A significant source of scholarly information comes from “Notes on the unacceptable philosophy and theology of *Laudato Si’*” by Arnaldo Vidigal Xavier da Silveira. Silveira is a Brazilian theologian who has often spoken out against what he considers to be heresies in the church, who was asked to compile a criticism of the encyclical. Silveira’s criticism is less about the social ramifications, and more about what he believes is problematic and even heretical theology in the encyclical. Most prominently, Silveira looks at “the encyclical’s

strange mysticism... reflected in the very relationships between the Trinity and Creation” (5). Among the examples he cites are “The universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely” (233), and “One person of the Trinity entered into the created cosmos, throwing in his lot with it, even to the cross” (99). This mysticism has traces of animism, ascribing divine properties to the created world.

Further, Silveria criticizes Francis’ apparent “new theology of the Sacraments and a new liturgy” (5). The Eucharist, which Catholics believe to be the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ and worthy of the highest reverence, is presented as an “act of cosmic love,” as Francis says “In the Eucharist, fullness is already achieved: it is the living center of the universe, the overflowing core of love and of inexhaustible life. Joined to the incarnate Son, present in the Eucharist, the whole cosmos gives thanks to God. Indeed, the Eucharist is itself an act of cosmic love” (236). Francis also quotes a schismatic Orthodox Patriarch, saying “As Christians, we are called ‘to accept the world as a sacrament of communion’...” (9), which many argue waters down the power of the Eucharist and strips it of the reverence it deserves. As the Sacraments are regarded as the backbone of the Catholic Church, these apparent mystifications of them sound the alarm for many Catholics. Silveria continues through the encyclical, claiming that Pope Francis “modifies devotions... on an ecological key,” treats the earth as a living being, and quotes Islamic leaders in what is meant to be a Catholic encyclical on social teaching. In his conclusion, Silveria determines that “the “philosophical and theological vision of the human being and creation” presented by the Encyclical is incompatible with Catholic dogma and sound philosophy, and is, therefore, unacceptable... not only for the grave errors it contains but also for its insinuations, ambiguities, omissions, and biases, all favoring a pantheistic worldview” (Silveria 8). In his rejection of the encyclical and outlining of its theological iniquities, Silveria lays the foundation for many traditional Catholics to come to the same conclusions.

Perhaps the most critical analysis of *Laudato Si’* comes from traditional Catholic Chris Jackson, author of a number of articles regarding controversies with the current papacy, who writes a colorful and frank review of the encyclical. Jackson goes through the encyclical, pulling out paragraphs of particular interest and disputing them, pulling out the theological iniquities within Francis’ words. A major theme throughout Jackson’s analysis is the immense focus on the environment as the most important issue, when there are

numerous other grievous problems in the Church and in the world. Pope Francis says, “our goal is not to amass information or to satisfy curiosity, but rather to become painfully aware, to 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” (Francis 19). In response, Jackson outlines his concern that the Pope is calling for people to feel the world’s suffering, rather than “turning the infinite number of offenses against Christ Our Lord being perpetrated daily by modern man into our own personal suffering and offering reparation and penance for it.” He goes on, “This is actually what we should be doing. No. Instead we need to unite our sufferings to the June bug, the firefly, and particles of dust (where man meets the divine) to inspire us to some sort of action to “save” them” (Jackson). Thus, we see that Jackson’s issue is not necessarily with the call to care for the planet, but rather the prioritization of environmentalism over fixing the crisis of faith in the Church and in the modern world. As Pope Francis explains “harmful habits of consumption,” including “the increasing use and power of air-conditioning,” Jackson goes on, saying “with all of the true moral outrages occurring across the globe, including ISIS beheading and slaughtering Christians, the Pope is going to say humanity has disappointed God’s expectations in not turning off their air conditioners?” (Francis 55). Clearly, Jackson echoes the chagrin of other traditional Catholics who take issue considering the magnitude of the ecological crisis in comparison with other tragedies happening around the world.

Jackson also delineates Francis’ use of scripture to successfully convince many readers that environmental stewardship is a Christian duty. The central part of Jackson’s argument lies with this paragraph in *Laudato Si’*: “The laws found in the Bible dwell on relationships, not only among individuals but also with other living beings. “You shall not see your brother’s donkey or his ox fallen down by the way and withhold your help... If you chance to come upon a bird’s nest in any tree or on the ground, with young ones or eggs and the mother sitting upon the young or upon the eggs; you shall not take mother with the young” (Dt 22:4, 6).” (Francis 68). Jackson explains that Francis truncates the scripture passage, which continues with the command “Help the owner get to its feet.” Thus, where Francis paints this verse as a support of the dignity of animals, its true meaning is to “assist one’s brother in retrieving his property” (Jackson). Further, the passage about the bird’s nest is commonly explained with the commentary “Those who refrain from cruelty, even towards beasts,

will be induced more easily to shew mercy to their fellow creatures, (Tertullian, contra Marc. ii) and will draw down the blessings of God upon themselves” (Menochius). Jackson points out “thus, again, the purpose of this admonition is not to build a relationship with momma bird, but to build charity in one’s soul towards one’s fellow man.” Jackson concerningly remarks, “After witnessing his selective truncating of Holy Scripture to fit his agenda, one is made to wonder if we can really trust any of the other citations in this encyclical.” Therefore, according to Jackson, the validity of the scriptures that Francis uses to support his claims and calls to action come into question.

Finally, Jackson pinpoints a number of theological concerns regarding the encyclical, questioning their alignment with Church teachings. As Francis says “The Spirit of life dwells in every living creature and calls us to enter into relationship with him. Discovering this presence leads us to cultivate the “ecological virtues” (Francis 88). Jackson expresses dismay with this sentiment, as the Church teaches the importance of the “cardinal virtues” of prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude, and the three “theological virtues” of faith, hope, and charity. One wonders what those “ecological virtues” would be and how they would bring Christians closer to God. Francis also states, “Here I would reiterate that “God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement” (Francis 89). Jackson rebukes this, saying “the constant allegories attempting to tie our feelings to inanimate objects and non-sentient animals almost instinctively gives rise to a sort of pantheistic aversion in me. It is reminiscent of some sort of Eastern Zen philosophy.” Ideas of pantheism, defined as “the belief that God is everything and everything is God” and of “the universe as the embodiment of the divine essence,” has always been condemned by the Church (Catholic Answers). However, many would argue that the infusion of interconnectedness throughout the encyclical and Francis’ sentiment that “all the creatures of the material universe find their true meaning in the incarnate Word, for the Son of God has incorporate in his person part of the material world,” harbors undertones of pantheism (Francis 235). Jackson believes this pantheistic approach is further echoed as Francis says “The universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely. Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person’s face. The ideal is not only to pass from the exterior to the interior to discover the action of God in the soul, but

also to discover God in all things” (Francis 223). Here, Francis is suggesting that God is one with the world and He can be found in all things, which echoes the definition of pantheism. Jackson also takes issue with the notion that saving plants and animals is more important than saving one’s own soul. Francis suggests “Human beings, endowed with intelligence and love, and drawn by the fullness of Christ, are called to lead all creatures back to their Creator” (Francis 83). Jackson retorts, “Our job on this earth is to save our soul... why is it that our pope is not informing us, in this most perilous of times for the soul in human history, precisely what we can do to save it? Instead our pope is informing us that we are called to lead animals to God.” Obviously, Jackson finds this problematic. Finally, Jackson criticizes Francis in saying “so what they all need is an “ecological conversion,” whereby the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them” (Francis 217). Jackson explains dismay in that the Pope “is not calling every person on the face of the earth to conversion to Jesus Christ, the only name by which man may be saved, but instead calling them to ‘ecological conversion’?” All in all, Jackson’s frustration with the encyclical pours over into his sarcasm-laden review, through which a better understanding of the traditional Catholic’s worries can be obtained.

Brian Williams, writing for OnePeterFive, another traditional Catholic news site, echoes the sentiment of other traditional Catholics regarding the importance of weighing issues, and the problem of making the environment the priority. Williams’ article, entitled “Before Saving Mother Earth, Let’s First Save Holy Mother Church,” looks at Francis’ suggestion of “intergenerational solidarity,” in that the current generation is responsible for preserving things for future generations. Williams applies this idea to preserving the Catholic Church, criticizing clergy members for having “often demonstrated little respect for the gift they received, let alone their obligation to future generations.”

Citing statistics showing drastic declines in weekly mass attendance, total priests in the US, and belief in Catholic doctrines, Williams states “in the United States alone we can objectively declare that the preservation of the faith, taking what was received and then sharing it with those who follow, has been the real environmental disaster of the last fifty years.” Williams is suggesting that the crisis of people leaving the Catholic Church is the real crisis, as future generations will only have a glimpse of what the ancient Church was intended to be like. While not directly opposing Francis’ ideas in *Laudato Si*, Williams simply thinks restoring

the Church should be prioritized over the environment and takes issue with the Pope's lack of commentary regarding the issue. Williams ends with a simple plea, "before the U.S. bishops rush off to find new and exciting ways to incorporate this Eco-encyclical into the life of the Church, possibly they could first look to recover what the Vatican II generation failed to preserve. Is it asking too much for our bishops to be good stewards of the Church first? Shouldn't the priority be more on saving souls and less on saving trees?" Like other traditional Catholics, for Williams it is a matter of priorities.

The final traditional Catholic opinion analyzed is that of Riccardo Cascioli, who is working to bring awareness to the problems of the Amazon Synod that took place at the Vatican. As he examines the "constant growth of an ecologist current in the Church," Cascioli looks to *Laudato Si* as the place where ecology "had its official recognition and therefore elevation to doctrine." Cascioli asserts that since the publication of *Laudato Si* in 2015, the Catholic Church has gotten more deeply ingrained with the ecologist and environmentalist movement, most recently manifesting in the Amazon Synod, which, among other things, implicated the idea of "ecological sin."

Speaking on *Laudato Si*, Cascioli states "In it, man loses his centrality in Creation and becomes part of a "community of life" in which he has equal dignity with animals and plants." Echoing other traditionalists, Cascioli suggests the encyclical portrays "a fundamentally pantheistic vision," suggesting the union between the divine and the material world. However, Cascioli is not against the idea of environmental stewardship, explaining "man's correct relationship with nature is a consequence of his recognition of belonging to God, to whom one is responsible for the way one uses the gifts of nature and relates with other men." Thus, Cascioli, along with other traditional Catholics, do believe it is imperative that humans use nature responsibly, but simply take issue in the way in which Francis portrays this environmental stewardship.

Cascioli also condemns the Pope's encouragement of "sustainable development," explaining that sustainability is not simply "the inclusion of respect for the environment," but "is a much broader concept... which results from an atheistic and materialistic conception." He argues that "the basis of the concept of sustainability is a negative vision of man as a disturbing element for the global ecosystem," with sustainable development having ramifications suggesting "you must have birth control in poor countries, put the brakes on

development, and promote de-industrialization in rich countries.” In this is found a common issue others have with the encyclical – its inevitable encouragement of population control. All being said, Cascioli rejects Francis’ assertions and methods, but not the importance of caring for the environment. He concludes “therefore, at stake is not so much the care for the environment – which is obviously a duty – nor measure to save the Amazon forest (assuming that is a specific task of the Church). There is much more: the very content of the Catholic faith.” For Cascioli and many others, it is not a matter of disagreeing with the notion environmental stewardship, but of deeper worry for the direction of the Catholic Church.

These five traditional Catholic responses to *Laudato Si’* are filled with condemnations of the encyclical, for many reasons. Contrary to the progressive Catholics, the traditional Catholics take issue with the encyclical’s call to progress and reform, deeply question the use of scripture to support Francis’ claims, and are concerned by the Pope’s attempts at inclusivity and inter-faith connections. Further, these traditional Catholics find undertones of pantheism and heresy in the Pope’s words, as he encourages all believers to seek God in the universe. Finally, most prominent among these traditional Catholics is the worry that elevating environmentalism to the top priority downplays a number of significant issues – including the future and survival of the Catholic Church as it was intended to be. Clearly, traditional and progressive Catholics have very different views and approaches to *Laudato Si’*, which will not be further compared and analyzed.

Methods and Materials

The format of this research was entirely based in a thematic comparative literary analysis. Therefore, there were no surveys conducted or quantitative data collected. The samples used for this research were opinions collected from individuals, scholarly articles, and previously completed studies. Five viewpoints were selected to represent each traditional and progressive Catholic ideologies, through a process that is detailed below. Reports and investigations were identified in order to determine the impact *Laudato Si’* has had within the Catholic Church. The only material needed was a computer with the ability to search for and obtain scholarly articles, most of which was done through the UNL Library resources.

In order to compile a selection of reputable and well-respected sources, specific measures were taken in finding information and articles to use for this review. First, I did a preliminary search on the library's search engines with the key words *Laudato Si'*. In this initial Google search, I found almost exclusively praise of *Laudato Si'*. In the first ten pages of the search, there was no criticism of the encyclical, but rather summaries, reactions full of praise, and even curriculum developed by the convent community intended to teach children about the encyclical. I found the overwhelming positive reaction to the encyclical interesting and wanted to see if that reaction was representative of the Catholic population.

In deciding which of these articles to use for the literature review, I decided that all I was trying to obtain were opinions from both traditional and progressive Catholics. Therefore, I decided that the use of blogs to publish personal opinions could not be totally eliminated as a potential source but also could not be the main source of my information. I opted to search for scholarly articles but found very little information. In order to ensure the articles I chose adequately represented the viewpoints of traditional and progressive Catholics, I decided to require that the articles be from reputable sources with a reputation for being either traditional or progressive. Because of the nature of this topic, very few of the selected articles are peer-reviewed. This is not a study of scientific data, but instead a compilation and analysis of people's opinions. Thus, rather than requiring peer-reviewed data from the articles I selected, I concluded that it is enough for the authors to have sufficient theological knowledge, which I determined from a) their role within the Church, b) respect among other Catholics, and c) scholarly degrees and experience. From my initial search, I chose five articles that fit these criteria to use in my analysis of progressive Catholics and *Laudato Si'*. After narrowing search criteria to obtain traditional viewpoints, I used the same criteria to identify five articles to represent traditional Catholics.

Through my literary analysis of these ten articles, I attempt to a) show that progressive Catholics have a much more favorable view of *Laudato Si'* than traditionalists do, b) explain why this is, and c) show what initiatives have been implemented due to *Laudato Si'*, and whether those efforts have occurred in traditional or progressive communities.

Results

The thematic literary analysis supported the preconceived hypothesis that traditional Catholics tend to reject *Laudato Si'*, while progressive Catholics support the encyclical. Throughout the reviews of traditional and progressive opinions, three themes were interwoven throughout and used by the parties as support for their opinions. These themes are progress and inclusion in the Church, the scriptural backing for the encyclical, and the idea of “interconnectedness” and its theological implications. Interestingly, these themes were all discussed in a positive light and as reasons for embracing the encyclical by progressive Catholics, while the traditional Catholics analyzed all pointed to these themes to explain their opposition to the encyclical. These three themes will be explained in further detail below.

As implicated by their classification, progressive Catholics are more apt to support progressive reform within the Church, often looking for ways to modernize the Church and become more relevant on the basis of inclusion. By contrast, traditional Catholics want to hold to what the Church has taught and practiced for two thousand years. Considering this distinction, it becomes obvious that progressive Catholics would support such an encyclical, while traditional Catholics would be more skeptical of it. In the encyclical, Pope Francis proposes radical ideas, of “ecological conversion” and “eco-spirituality,” terms which are new to the Catholic faith. Along with these new terms, the Pope is proposing radical ideas as he takes a politically left stance regarding the economy, the poor, and the climate.

Further, Francis address the encyclical “to all people of good will,” not just Catholics, acknowledging “that in the areas of politics and philosophy there are those who firmly reject the idea of a Creator, or consider it irrelevant, and consequently dismiss as irrational the rich contribution which religions can make towards an integral ecology and the full development of humanity” (Francis 62). As a means to appear more relevant and reach more people, Francis essentially abandons the lens of faith and speaks to a secular group, attempting to urge them into environmental stewardship. Because of this, Archbishop Gomez points out, Francis “does not mention the name of Jesus until he is almost 13,000 words into his long document” (Gomez). Not surprisingly, progressive Catholics praised Pope Francis for his efforts at inclusion and call for progress in the Church. Thus, in their minds they want to make the faith inclusive and accessible, even if that means watering it down or changing doctrines to bringing more people to the Church and making it stronger. Conversely, traditional

Catholics criticized the Pope for his limited mention of Jesus and apparent abandonment of the faith as he addresses “every living person on this planet” (Francis 3).

In the spirit of inclusion, Francis does not ask people to convert to Christianity, but instead says “what they all need is an ‘ecological conversion’, whereby the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them” (Francis 217). In response to this, traditional Catholics are disheartened that the Pope “is not calling every person on the face of the earth to conversion to Jesus Christ, the only name by which man may be saved, but instead calling them to ecological conversion’?” Further, traditional Catholics are concerned by the Pope’s referencing of Islamic, Sufi, and schismatic leaders in the encyclical, suggesting that their inclusion leads to the deterioration of the encyclical as a Catholic statement. As for Francis’ call for progress and reform, traditional Catholics worry that environmentalism is not the main issue people should be worried about right now. Rather, they focus on human rights injustices, moral crises in the world, and a crisis within the Church. Brian Williams pleads “before the U.S. bishops rush off to find new and exciting ways to incorporate this Eco-encyclical into the life of the Church, possibly they could first look to recover what the Vatican II generation failed to preserve. Is it asking too much for our bishops to be good stewards of the Church first? Shouldn’t the priority be more on saving souls and less on saving trees?” All in all, while the encyclical’s appeal to progress and inclusion was successful among progressive Catholics, it distanced traditional Catholics even further as they found more concerns with the encyclical.

In *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis uses a significant amount of references to scripture in order to illustrate his claim that environmental stewardship is a Christian issue called for in the Bible. For many progressives, the use of convincing scripture in the encyclical fostered agreement with the Pope and a sense of duty to share this interpretation with others. Francis himself, in chapter two of the encyclical, which is aimed towards believers and offers a scriptural basis for environmental stewardship, says “Christians in their turn ‘realize that their responsibility within creation, and their duty towards nature and the Creator, are an essential part of their faith’” (Francis 64). The Pope then goes on to walk Christians through scripture, explaining how the idea of caring for Creation comes from the Bible. He starts with Genesis, which he claims, “suggests that human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbor, and with the earth

itself” (Francis 66). He explains that the idea men have dominion over the earth has been “distorted,” and that Genesis 2:15 tells us to “‘till and keep’ the garden of the world,” in which “‘keeping’ means caring, protecting, overseeing, and preserving” (Francis 67).

Francis continues through the Bible, quoting the Psalms, claiming “they also invite other creatures to join us in this praise: ‘Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars! Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens! Let them praise the name of the Lord, for he commanded and they were created’ (Ps 148:3-5)” (Francis 72). The encyclical continues, with Francis quoting scripture and explaining how it commands environmental stewardship. For many readers of the encyclical, the apparent scriptural basis of Francis’ call to an “ecological conversion” led to full support of the encyclical. As Father James Martin, one of the progressive Catholics analyzed, explains, Francis “traces the theme of love of creation through both the Old and the New Testaments,” which inspires this love of creation in readers.

However, traditional Catholics cited Francis’ use of scripture as a reason to approach the encyclical with skepticism. Traditionalist Chris Jackson analyzed the encyclical and claimed that the Pope used scripture out of context, specifically when he states “The laws found in the Bible dwell on relationships, not only among individuals but also with other living beings. “You shall not see your brother’s donkey or his ox fallen down by the way and withhold your help... (Dt 22:4)” (Francis 68). In this verse, Francis leaves out the next part, which says “Help the owner get to its feet,” implying the verse is in fact about charity towards humans, not animals. Jackson goes on to say, “After witnessing his selective truncating of Holy Scripture to fit his agenda, one is made to wonder if we can really trust any of the other citations in this encyclical” (Jackson). Thus, the use of scripture emphasized Francis’ message for progressive Catholics, who were more inclined to accept it, while stripping his credibility for traditional Catholics, who more heavily analyzed the Pope’s words.

Finally, the idea of “interconnectedness” of all things is woven throughout *Laudato Si’*. Throughout the encyclical, Francis repeatedly raises this point, saying “It cannot be emphasized enough how everything is interconnected” (Francis 138). Stemming from this, Francis calls believers to see God in creation, saying “The universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely. Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person’s face. The ideal is not only to pass from the exterior to the

interior to discover the action of God in the soul, but also to discover God in all things” (Francis 223). For the progressive Catholics, along with many others reading the encyclical, the interconnectedness Francis speaks of engenders feelings of responsibility to care more for creation. Father James Hug reacts to this sentiment, saying it encourages Catholics “to contemplate the beauty and complexity of creation, to see how everything is interconnected, to see ourselves as in it and of it” (Hug). For many Catholics reading the encyclical, it is the appeal to feelings and suggestion that “both the poor and the earth are crying out” that engender these feelings of connection with and stewardship of the environment (Francis 246).

However, traditional Catholics often cited Francis’ assertion of interconnectedness as one of the main issues with the encyclical. Robert Cascioli explains of the idea of interconnectedness “In it, man loses his centrality in Creation and becomes part of a “community of life” in which he has equal dignity with animals and plants” (Cascioli). Further, the encyclical has been accused of promoting pantheism, the belief that God is in everything. As these traditionalists have pointed out, Francis is calling readers to “discover God in all things” (223) and suggesting “that nature as a whole not only manifests God but is also a locus of his presence” (Francis 88). Francis is cautious to make the distinction, saying “This is not to forget that there is an infinite distance between God and the things of this world, which do not possess his fullness,” suggesting that he is aware his words could be interpreted as pantheistic (Francis 88). However, Francis does go on with this sentiment of connecting with nature, saying “Here I would reiterate that “God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement” (Francis 89). Regarding this statement, Chris Jackson reports “the constant allegories attempting to tie our feelings to inanimate objects and non-sentient animals almost instinctively gives rise to a sort of pantheistic aversion in me. It is reminiscent of some sort of Eastern Zen philosophy” (Jackson). Silveria echoes his discomfort with “the encyclical’s strange mysticism... reflected in the very relationships between the Trinity and Creation,” as being mystical and pantheistic. Clearly, the Pope’s words were interpreted very differently by progressive and traditional Catholics – one group wholeheartedly embraced them, while the other criticized them as completely anti-Catholic.

Through these three themes, the difference in thinking between progressive and traditional Catholics comes to light. Traditional Catholics uphold strict adherence to scripture and Church teachings, while progressive Catholics are more open to reform and feelings-based theology. Considering this distinction, it is no surprise that traditionalists rejected *Laudato Si'* while progressives praised the encyclical. Thus, through a literary analysis we have determined that due to differences in thinking regarding the scripture used in the encyclical, its' call for progress and interfaith inclusion, and the notion that everything is connected, traditional Catholics had an unfavorable view of *Laudato Si'*, while traditional Catholics have a favorable view of the treatise.

Discussion

The literary analysis clearly showed that progressive Catholics have an overwhelmingly favorable opinion of *Laudato Si'*, whereas traditional Catholics tended to be reluctant to show support for the encyclical. As previously discussed, this distinction can be attributed to differing opinions on reform and inclusion, the validity of the scriptural basis of the encyclical, and the implications of the “interconnectedness” the Pope introduces. While the thematic analysis effectively revealed the reasons behind the disputing stances of traditional and progressive Catholics, more analysis needs to be done to identify the factors behind this dissent. Why are progressive Catholics more inclined to support *Laudato Si'*, and why are traditional Catholics more inclined to oppose it? In this discussion, factors explaining the inclinations for progressive and traditional Catholics to support or oppose *Laudato Si'* will be determined. Further, the impacts *Laudato Si'* has engendered among the Catholic community will be explored, and a recommendation will be given to help close the gap between traditional and progressive Catholic viewpoints on the environment.

A number of the progressive Catholics included in this study are Jesuits. As an entity, the Jesuits have wholeheartedly embraced the teachings of *Laudato Si'*. An article entitled “Jesuit Institutions Rise to Pope Francis' Challenge of *Laudato Si'*” outlines the immersive ways that 26 Jesuit colleges and 16 high schools brought *Laudato Si'* to their campuses within just one year after the publication (Ignatian Solidarity Network). Readings, discussions, panels, and conferences on these campuses encouraged students to engage with the call

of *Laudato Si'*. The Jesuit Higher Education Journal published an article specifically calling Jesuit universities to action, citing that “Jesuit universities are uniquely positioned to lead the behavioral changes that are mandated by our social justice sensibilities, and implied in *Laudato Si'*” (Weis 99). In recent years, Jesuits have been known for their “avowed advocacy for social justice and environmental sustainability,” so it is only logical that they would be strong supporters of the encyclical. Further, their rapid and widespread action on the topic is in line with Francis’ clear call to action, summarized by Weis when he says, “in the end, we embrace and consecrate the document through action, not through protracted debate” (Weis 97). Connecting the Jesuits even deeper to *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis is a Jesuit himself, and *Laudato Si'* is penetrated by Ignatian spirituality throughout, asking readers to do an examination of conscience of their lifestyles and “to detach from our personal desires and listen to where God is calling us to something more” (Clark). While reading the encyclical, they obviously recognize so much of their own theological upbringing, that they cannot help but feel supportive and connected with the encyclical and its philosophies.

Progressive Catholics realize that there is a problem within the Church, and their solution is to reform the Church to make it more relevant, appealing to more people. One article sums up their views, explaining “Rather than leave the church because of its mistreatment of the LGBTQ community, we should push the church to be inclusive of everyone regardless of their sexuality and to make that clear in church actions. Rather than leave the church because it does not allow women or married people to be priests, we should push the argument that a larger pool of qualified priests will make it easier for the church to let go of bad priests” (Garcia). Rather than be contrary to society and teach the rationales behind these long-held doctrines, progressive Catholics believe the doctrines should be changed. These Catholics are not strongly attached to Church traditions and accept and follow the teachings that came out of the Second Vatican Council in 1962, which radically changed the face of Catholicism. Moreover, progressive Catholics typically shy away from political conservatism, which may be considered mainstream for Catholics due to the issue of abortion, stating that “Catholics who were focused on a single issue – abortion – were eroding the Church’s tradition of working for the common good” (Townsend) Progressives also strongly support Pope Francis, as he himself is often labeled a progressive, because of his positions on issues like gay marriage, married priests, and now, the

environment. Considering these issues, it is reasonable to assume that progressive Catholics are more likely to embrace the teachings of *Laudato Si'*. For people that are already inclined to think about social justice and Church reform, a call to environmentalism will definitely be applauded. Further, the definitive separation between environmental activism and political conservatism is another point that may drive politically liberal Catholics to support the encyclical. Written on something generally contrary to the Church's political tendencies, Catholics who lean politically left would generally perceive themselves to be more sympathetic to the encyclical. Thus, progressive Catholics are more likely to accept *Laudato Si'* due to their bias for Church reform, tendency to lean politically left, and connection with Pope Francis.

On the other hand, traditional Catholics pursue a different ideology. The primary identifying characteristic among traditional Catholics is the preference for pre-Vatican II liturgies and traditions. The Second Vatican Council in 1962 marked the beginning of a new revolution within the Church, with a new mass in the regional vernacular, attempts to engage and entertain parishioners, and a relaxation of previous Church norms. Traditional Catholics prefer to attend the Traditional Latin Mass, as it was practiced before Vatican II, and often reject further reforms in the Church that go against tradition and Church teachings. Traditional Catholics are often watchful of potential heresy and scandal within the Church. Thus, these Catholics are much more hesitant to accept progressive opinions and ideas, especially when it comes to Church reform. Further, a number of these Catholics oppose Pope Francis for being too progressive, as he has contradicted Church teaching on a number of occasions, regarding things such as gay marriage, married and women clergy, and the environment. Traditional Catholics also tend to be more politically conservative, often due to the issue of abortion. In sum, a number of traditional Catholics analyzed for this research do not believe that climate change is a significant issue, and are less inclined to support an encyclical that suggests the world is in an environmental crisis. Considering these factors, one can understand why the traditional Catholics deeply analyzed the encyclical, bringing to light what they considered to be any traces of heresy, pantheism, or irreverence. Traditional Catholics have often seen both sides of the coin, having come from more progressive upbringings, and thus developing a mindset that has tradition in mind and a very specific, critical lens by which to examine new Church documents. Consequently, because of their affinity for tradition, skepticism of change

and of Church leadership, and tendency to seek out any potential traces of heresy and anything against traditional Catholic teaching, traditional Catholics are more likely to be skeptical towards and thus reject the teachings of *Laudato Si'*.

Impacts of Laudato Si'

While it may be difficult to see the encyclical's fruits, they are clearly there. Perhaps most notably, it is "said to be the most quoted papal document in history"- it is clear that Pope Francis got people talking about the Catholic Church's role in the environment (Midulla). What's more, Pope Francis has been using his sway and power as the Bishop of Rome to inspire change on a global level. In a 2018 meeting with oil companies, he urged them to "speed up the transition away from fossil fuels," which spurred BP, ENI, and Shell to roll out plans to reduce carbon emissions (Midulla).

Universities are also playing a major role in bringing the philosophies of *Laudato Si'* into practice. Following a Costa Rican symposium regarding the encyclical, the Catholic University of Costa Rica launched the *Laudato Si'* Observatory and the *Laudato Si'* Social and Environmental Development Index. These measures are intended for universities to become the "environmental consciences" of their communities, by improving both the ecological vision and the speed of development of their countries. The first set of results put out by the Index had bleak implications, illustrating that "more than 55 percent... live in conditions, whether human or environmental, that are not acceptable according to the Holy Father and the *Laudato Si'* encyclical" (Sanchez). This Index will be compiled yearly and shared with universities across the globe, in efforts to bring the data to light and urge them to be the epicenters for change.

Since the initial symposium, universities across the globe have begun participating in the program. Many Catholic universities, especially in Germany and America, have hosted talks and events informing students about *Laudato Si'* and the Index. Even non-Catholic universities, such as the University of San Diego, have shown support for the movement. The University of San Diego web site has an entire section dedicated to *Laudato Si'*, with resources and suggestions on how to "live out *Laudato Si'*" (USD). Other South American Universities have also taken action due to the encyclical, creating "Laudato Si professorships" and installing

rooftop gardens, all in efforts to raise ecological awareness (Rodriguez). Clearly, *Laudato Si'* is engendering action from entities with various interests, a positive phenomenon for environmentalists. This is likely because, as Sanchez explains, “the encyclical’s major advantage is that it deals with an awareness issue more than a religious one,” stirring reactions with both religious and non-religious motivations.

Another significant product of *Laudato Si'* was the formation of the Global Catholic Climate Movement, an organization seeking to bring the philosophies of *Laudato Si'* into action in Catholic communities. Since 2015, they have “helped over 150 Catholic institutions divest from fossil fuels trained and certified nearly 1500 *Laudato Si'* Animators to lead action in their communities, [and] supported 900 member organizations in hosting thousands of local events” (Insua). Other initiatives include launching the “*Laudato Si'* Generation youth movement,” facilitating a meeting between Pope Francis and young climate activist Greta Thunberg, and working to develop eco-spirituality (One Earth). Through GCCM, *Laudato Si'* has been brought to parishes and religious across the country, specifically in more progressive dioceses.

For example, in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, one of this country’s most progressive dioceses, layman Joe Meyer started a nonprofit called “The *Laudato Si'* Project.” Inspired by the encyclical, specifically Francis’ statement that “Living our vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience,” Meyer started the nonprofit to get people outside (Francis 217). “To help people recognize that obligation, the *Laudato Si'* Project often begins by getting participants, especially children and teens, out into nature... Meyer believes such experiences can spur excitement and a person connection with nature than can become the foundation for conversations about conservation and also about God” (Roewe). Like Francis suggests in the encyclical, Meyer is working to get people to establish a connection with nature, in hopes that they will then feel a stewardship and a responsibility to care for it.

One of the group’s main projects is with the Schoenstatt Sisters of Mary at their Retreat Center in Waukesha. They have “cleared two nature trails through the dense woods... put in place nesting boxes for bluebirds and kestrels, removed invasive plant species, and planted a butterfly garden” (Roewe). Beyond just fostering a connection with nature, Sr. Joanna Buckley says, “One of the greatest benefits is that the *Laudato Si'*

Project really helps to restore and preserve the beautiful landscape and nature that is inherent to this part of Wisconsin” (Roewe). Clearly, the *Laudato Si’* project is generating a lot of positive interactions and experiences, especially with children, working with twelve Wisconsin schools. Claire Hoffmeyer, director of youth ministry for St. John Vianney Parish, explains that the importance of working with children to teach them to “care for creation” is that “it’s one of those elements of our spirituality that the sooner we know about it the better off we are” (Roewe). Plainly, *Laudato Si’* inspired Meyer, along with many others, to instill an ecological aspect into their spirituality.

Recommendation for bridging the gap

Evidently, a divide exists within the Catholic Church regarding environmental issues. Progressive Catholics are wholeheartedly embracing environmental teachings such as those presented in *Laudato Si’*, whereas traditional Catholics are hesitant to embrace environmental stewardship for fear of falling into heresy and scandal. This is not to say that traditional Catholics do not believe that stewardship of the environment is important. In fact, quite the contrary. One of the traditional Catholics represented, Robert Cascioli, says “therefore, at stake is not so much the care for the environment – which is obviously a duty,” acknowledging that all people must responsibly use and care for the environment. The problem most of these traditional Catholics have with the encyclical does not extend into their daily lives – it is not that these people do not want to care for the environment, it is simply that they believe the Pope is falling into pantheism, heresy, and idolatry, and do not want to support that. Further, there are other crises in the world and in the Church that they believe should take precedence over environmental issues. Thus, I think in order for traditional Catholics to be comfortable with environmental stewardship, a traditional Catholic must write on the issue, explaining the responsibility to care for creation from a truly Catholic point of view.

Summary & Conclusions

This thesis considered Pope Francis’ 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*. Reception of the encyclical was examined from both progressive and traditional Catholic viewpoints. The

research was seeking to address the questions of a) Do traditional and progressive Catholics have different views on the encyclical? b) Why does each group hold the opinions that they do? and c) What impact has *Laudato Si'* spurred within the Catholic Church? The comparative literary analysis found that progressive Catholics are more inclined to embrace the encyclical, while traditional Catholics tend to oppose it. These findings were consistent with the hypothesis formed based on prior knowledge. The analysis also found three themes common amongst all reactions analyzed: reform and inclusion within the Church, the scriptural basis of the encyclical, and Francis' notion of "interconnectedness." Among progressive Catholics, these were points of praise, whereas these were the points that caused traditional Catholics to reject the article. Numerous projects and initiatives were found to have come as a result of the encyclical.

A deeper analysis revealed that progressive Catholics were more likely to accept *Laudato Si'* for a number of reasons. Primarily, progressive Catholics tend to push for reform in the Church to become more relevant, which *Laudato Si'* did. They also tend to be politically left leaning, not as attached to Church traditions, and supporters of Pope Francis. On the other hand, traditional Catholics tend to be politically conservative, skeptical towards the Pope and changes in the Church, and be on the lookout for heresy among Church documents. A comparison can be taken further, in that progressive Catholics embraced and adapted the teachings of Vatican II, where traditional Catholics rejected and prefer the way things were before Vatican II. In the same sense, progressive Catholics embraced this encyclical, whereas traditional Catholics found heresy within and rejected it.

For further study, an interview of progressive and traditional Catholics should be conducted. Finding sufficient information on the internet was difficult, and it would be helpful to hear from a variety of people, not just those who post their opinions online. I would conduct interviews and surveys of diocesan and FSSP (traditional order) seminaries, as well as at traditional and diocesan parishes. It would also be informative to survey Catholics in general, to determine what percentage even know that this encyclical exists. In sum, for future study I would obtain an IRB in order to conduct this research on Catholics and thus strengthen my conclusions.

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