

ECOLOGICAL CONVERSION THROUGH THE LENS OF THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

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WE ALL KNOW WHEN there are urgent issues in our house, such as leaky pipes, electrical faults or broken windows. We address these problems immediately because they directly affect our living space. This helps keep us safe in our daily lives, in the places where we sleep, read, eat, drink and work. We will do everything we can to protect our home. But what about ‘our common home’, as Pope Francis called it—the Earth?

Everyone loves to watch a sunset, especially by a lake with green pines reflected in the water; it is a wonderful experience to feel the fresh air, follow the clouds and trace the sun as it goes down. But what if the water is foul and polluted, and the air makes us cough and feel dizzy? Imagine the smell of dead fish, the grey, dirty water with plastic floating in it, the withering trees. When we lose the wilderness, we lose our connection with nature, our food, our spirit. When we lose the rainforest, we lose our oxygen; when we lose the glaciers, we lose our fresh water. We lose our home, and with it a fundamental connection to God.

From the perspective of systematic theology, Denis Edwards suggests that humans’ first transcendent connection with God is through nature.¹ God prepared an environment for Adam and Eve to live in, and they encountered God directly in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 1–2). The Earth itself is a manifestation of God’s presence, where we can encounter God as Moses did. When God asked Moses to keep his distance and

¹ See Denis Edwards, *Jesus and the Cosmos* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1991); and Denis Edwards, *Breath of Life: A Theology of the Creator Spirit* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004).

remove his shoes (Exodus 3:5) this was not to avoid contamination: it was a sign that God wanted us to care for and respect what is on the Earth. In this contemporary world, most people feel God's presence in the wonders of nature, including those who do not consciously believe in God but still say, *I am spiritual but not religious*.

Moreover humans are part of nature, as the theologian Elizabeth Johnson reminds us in her reading of Psalm 104: 'Walking meditatively through this psalm awakens a view of creation as one connected community of different beings'.² Johnson guides us through a spiritual and practical meditation on human relationships with ecology. She encourages us to look around where we live, sense how beautifully God has created everything for us, and realise how much we depend on God's creation.

This also calls on us to extend our appreciation for creation to the continuity and empowerment of humanity. In Genesis 1:28 we read, 'God blessed them, and God said to them "Have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth".' Johnson explains:

In its original context, this divine commission gives humans a special responsibility to take good care of all the rest. Over time and especially in the modern era, however, the meaning of dominion has shifted to mean domination.³

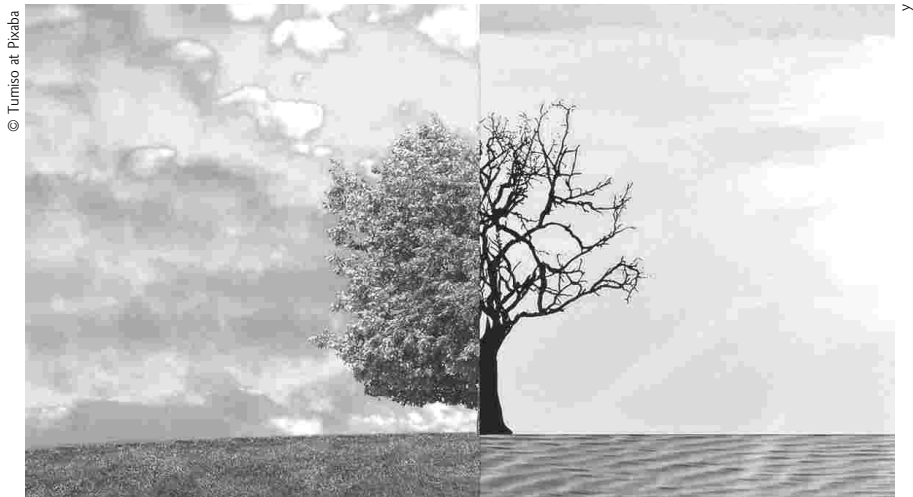
Dominion is actually a responsibility that mandates humankind to be God's 'caretaker' on the Earth.⁴ We are made in God's image (Genesis 1:26–27) and are invited to walk with God hand in hand, bearing a corresponding responsibility towards God's creation. We are not the rulers of the Earth, but stewards who are called to a partnership with creation. Johnson turns to the Book of Job to invite us to reflect on our place in it: 'Do you make the sun come up every morning? Do you control the snow, the rain, the wind, the storms?'⁵ No, we certainly do not. Just like other species, we share rights with the entire ecology.

² Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Come, Have Breakfast: Meditations on God and the Earth* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2024), 14.

³ Johnson, *Come, Have Breakfast*, 9.

⁴ Reinhard Cardinal Marx, "Everything Is Connected": On the Relevance of an Integral Understanding of Reality in *Laudato si'*", *Theological Studies*, 77/2 (2016), 298.

⁵ Johnson, *Come, Have Breakfast*, 150, paraphrasing Job 38.



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Many people have misinterpreted Genesis 1:28, thinking we own this land and can do whatever we want with it. The Earth has cried out about global climate change: wildfires, glacier melts, extreme weather and drought, which have altered and damaged the natural environment and ecology. Humans' irresponsible waste destroys animal habitats and leaves other creatures struggling to survive. Pope Francis stated at the inaugural meeting of the Economy of Francesco movement in Assisi in 2022, 'We human beings, in the past two centuries, have grown at the expense of the earth. The earth is the one that pays the price.'⁶ He made this point powerfully in his film *The Letter*, about the background to the 2015 environmental encyclical, *Laudato si'*:

We're building a tower of human arrogance with bricks of power, bricks of economy. And to build that, so many people work like slaves. And if a slave falls, nothing happens. But we've taken an extra step. If nature falls, nothing happens.⁷

Our social responsibility, as Francis emphasized in *Laudato si'*, is 'to develop a new economy, more attentive to ethical principles' (n.189) and to promote 'more balanced levels of production, a better distribution

⁶ Pope Francis, address at 'Economy of Francesco', Assisi, 24 September 2022. The Economy of Francesco is an initiative established by Pope Francis in 2019 that seeks 'to support young researchers, entrepreneurs, and changemakers in promoting a global economic transformation oriented toward the common good, fraternity, and care' ('Our Story', at <https://francescoeconomy.org/our-story/>), accessed 1 April 2026.

⁷ Pope Francis, *The Letter: A Message for Our Earth*, directed by Nicolas Brown (YouTube Originals, 2022), and see Austen Ivereigh, *First Belong to God: On Retreat with Pope Francis* (Chicago: Loyola, 2024), 92.

of wealth, concern for the environment and the rights of future generations' (n.109). Pope Francis places the Church at the centre of this challenge, engaging in a spiritual conversation and calling us to a new relationship with the created world.

It is time for us to turn to Jesus. In Jesus' public work, like his heavenly Father, he showed his gentleness, 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest' (Matthew 11:28). Our partner, the Earth, needs rest. If we neglect this partner, the Earth will not be able to care for us. The recklessness and self-focus of our unlimited desires will eventually lead us to self-destruction, which is not what God wants from us and is against God's plans.

The Spiritual Exercises

I often wonder what Ignatius of Loyola would say to today's world about what he has observed in it and how the Holy Trinity operates in ecological matters. In April 2018, Pope Francis wrote in *Gaudete et exsultate*, 'Holiness, in the end, is the fruit of the Holy Spirit in your life' (n.15). He turned to Ignatius to show us the path towards such holiness:

At its core, holiness is experiencing, in union with Christ, the mysteries of his life The contemplation of these mysteries, as Saint Ignatius of Loyola pointed out, leads us to incarnate them in our choices and attitudes. (n.20)

Ignatius understood our inner struggles and self-centred desires, recognising how easily our weaknesses could deceive us. He knew how the evil spirit can disguise himself as an 'angel of light' (Exx 332), appearing as a good motivation behind our decisions and deceiving our devout souls. What matters is living in God's love and embracing Christ's life. Ignatius and his Spiritual Exercises remain a valuable guide when we contemplate our connection to divinity within the global ecology.

The acknowledgement of our sins in Week One, the contemplations leading to Week Two's discernment, the unity of the paschal mystery in Week Three and the resurrection of Jesus in Week Four bring us to a deep understanding of the truth. Our relationship with the paschal mystery will profoundly influence how we perceive life in this ecological system where we encounter Jesus' ongoing, incarnate presence in the world.

Our Connection with Creation in the First Week

In the first week of the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius invites us to revisit our creation, see ourselves through the lens of God's plan for the world, and discover God's love and mercy on our journey. The Principle and Foundation teach us that everything in the world is a gift from God, created to help us feel, perceive, learn about, interact with and serve God: 'Human beings are created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by means of doing this to save their souls'. God created all other things on Earth to help fulfil our purpose. With that in mind, instead of abusing and controlling what God has created for us, 'we ought to desire and choose only that which is more conducive to the end for which we are created' (Exx 23).

Ignatius encourages us to use contemplative prayer to stay connected with the brokenness of our relationship with God and creation. In terms of ecological conversion, we see our selfish, abusive control and domination over the other creatures; we hear the Earth cry out. We see our sins in abusing and ignoring God's love, and we ask for mercy to return to this ecological family of sacred gifts from God. In our triple colloquy, we feel remorse for what we have done to this environment; we pray for the encouragement to care for the Earth; and ask for the light to guide us in what we should do.

Ecological Choice in the Second Week

In the Second Week, it is time to choose and act based on the discernment tools that are given to us, such as the meditation on the Two Standards (Exx 137–147), which dramatizes the conflict within our inner selves between the standards of God and Satan. Here we stand at a crossroads with two diverging paths. We see that how we treat the Earth is rooted in what governs us, what we value and desire. As Austen Ivereigh puts it, in a retreat guide based on the writings of Pope Francis:

What world do we desire? Do we want to resign ourselves to a rivalrous, individualist world or do we want to work toward solidarity and cooperation? Do we accept a world hurtling toward ecological devastation, a world in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer? Or do we want to build a world in which people see the earth as 'a shared inheritance, whose fruits are meant to benefit everyone'?⁸

⁸ Austen Ivereigh, *First Belong to God: On Retreat with Pope Francis* (Chicago: Loyola, 2024), 104, quoting *Laudato si'*, n. 93.

The Two Standards contemplation reveals what lies before us, shows the interconnectedness of God's creation and love, and explains how we can free ourselves to embrace God's grace by following the Standard of Christ. Ecology brings together the most instinctive human emotions and the sense of love through intrinsic mutuality. Douglas Christie uses the story of St Anthony the Great (251–356) to illustrate the integration of the individual and the community, a practice of contemplation and action, a 'contemplative ecological vision' in Christ.

At the heart of this practice was the effort to realize in their lives what the monks sometimes referred to as purity of heart (cf. Mt 5:8), a way of seeing oneself and the world as whole and undivided. The self was a cosmos unto itself, as rich and intricate and profound as the physical cosmos, and the monks believed their fates were intertwined with one another.⁹

The world is beautiful—nature, animals, human beings, men or women, straight or gay, black or white ... they are all good, created by God. God is satisfied and decides to live with us. God is mysteriously incarnate within nature, ecology and all life forms. We are partakers in God's glory and presence through the ecological and cosmic systems, contemplating God's incarnate love and living in Jesus' gracious resurrection.

On the other hand, Satan is offering us a short period of happiness, but at the cost of God's creation and the expense of our future. It is the parable of the son who took his father's money, decided to leave and then eventually returned home (Luke 15:11–16). We all know what happened to this man before he came back to his father. The evil spirit has sought to cause harm to this world since the Garden of Eden, often by means of short-term economic benefits. Like taking heroin, abusing the planet can produce temporary pleasure. But the evil spirit disguises the long-term consequences, offering us consolation to deceive us.¹⁰ We need to distinguish between true and false consolation, returning to the foundation of humanity and the love of God. The meditation on the Two Standards clears away the clouds that disguise the evil spirit and reveals the light of hope and love.

⁹ Douglas Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology* (Oxford: Oxford U, 2013), 41–53.

¹⁰ See George A. Aschenbrenner, *Stretched for Greater Glory: What to Expect from the Spiritual Exercises* (Chicago: Loyola, 2004), 189–199.

When I was a child I remember chasing hundreds of dragonflies in my neighbourhood with other kids, smiling and laughing freely. We would lie on the grass, breathing in the fresh air filled with the scents of grass and trees, looking up at the clear blue sky, sharing fanciful thoughts and dreams. We had no fears about jumping into lakes or rivers to swim or catch freshwater shrimp. These rare divine gifts are often out of reach now, and the land has become toxic, no longer naturally clean. The river has no fish or shrimp. Even if there were any, the numbers would be much smaller, and they could be contaminated with chemicals, plastic particles and hormones. I miss those days when I felt free and connected to nature. I saw myself in nature. I felt, and smelt, God's presence through his creation and creatures.

It took me two years to get used to bringing a reusable bag while shopping for groceries. Looking back, I realise that I might have used at least ten large plastic bags weekly from different stores, totalling 21,000 bags wasted somewhere on Earth over the past forty years. Consider the number of people who go shopping worldwide! Overcoming climate change is no easy task. Human greed and the desire for self-sufficiency weave a complex and intricate economic web.

Being ordinary people, we might not have as much influence as we wish, but we possess more political power than we realise. We can raise our voices to echo the cry of the Earth, and each of our votes counts. We are also responsible for our lifestyle: 'The decisive point is for each individual to exercise their freedom responsibly on the way to development that respects the needs of humankind and the environment'. Our

free will is not an unlimited but a responsible freedom. Cardinal Marx goes

on: 'Ecological and social damage, "both are ultimately due to the same evil: the notion that there are no indisputable truths to guide our lives, and hence human freedom is limitless"'.¹¹



¹¹ Marx, "Everything Is Connected", 305.

The Divine Appearance in Ecological Systems in the Third and Fourth Weeks

Weeks One and Two of the Spiritual Exercises invited us to look into our deeper selves and respond to God's calling. In the Third and Fourth Weeks our discipleship is renewed and transformed during our pilgrimage with Jesus. We discern on this devastated Earth, disregarding false consolations and journeying together with Jesus from the cross through the tomb to his resurrection. We witness his surrender to redemption and crucifixion, and we envision his ultimate humility, humanity and victory over death. Within this ecological system, we are part of God's plan for recovery and restoration.

We must undertake the Third and Fourth Weeks as a unified journey. When the Earth suffers, we suffer too, which is also Christ's suffering. Our intimacy with this Earth is intimacy with our Lord. This land, created by God, is the 'land flowing with milk and honey' (Exodus 3:8) that God has promised to all of us. It is the land where Adam and Eve first met God without fear or shame, where Moses met Yahweh—with fear, concerns and surrender—and where Jesus was raised. Jesus is the hope and fulfilment of the continuation of this promise. Without Jesus' redemption, nothing would persist or remain in the world. Life on Earth is a gift resulting from Jesus' passion.

In the Third Week, we stay with Jesus, accompanying him as he enters the chaos of what we have messed up. The increasingly extreme weather caused by climate change echoes the darkness and earthquake that fell over the land when Jesus died (Matthew 27:45–54); but this also prophesies the hope of restoration through Jesus' resurrection from death. At the foot of the cross in the Third Week, we are with Jesus in this beautiful but messy land, experiencing agony, sorrow and suffering. We recognised such affliction in Week One (*what have I done to Christ?*) and decided to align ourselves with Jesus' standard, becoming moral witnesses for Christ in the Second Week. In the Third Week the Earth is ruined, and both we and Jesus are ecologically, physically and spiritually traumatized. Now we aim to preserve God's Kingdom and promote ecological justice, even if it means sacrificing some joy or convenience.

The rescue and restoration process for us and the ecology continues in Week Four and beyond. The path towards healing all our wounds begins with Jesus' resurrection. Elizabeth Johnson focuses on the moment when, after rising from his death and tomb, Jesus invites us all to have

breakfast with him (John 21:12) in this renewed land. According to Johnson, this invitation, ‘opens a portal into an ecological image of the living God, active with cordial hospitality toward all creatures, willing their good, wanting all to be fed’.¹² Johnson suggests that we deepen and hear anew the calling in this ritual with Jesus, as expressed in the words, ‘Feed my lambs feed my sheep’ (John 21:15–17), to contemplate further the internal and external vocation to care for ecology and tend to this divine land with Christ.

The divine summons to ‘Come, have breakfast’ resounds with prophetic challenge. It cracks through the complacency of privileged people with insistence: stop global warming, make peace, change unjust business practices, feed the hungry, make it possible for every last person to start the day with nourishing food.¹³

You Open Wide Your Hand

I would like to conclude by sharing a photograph that I took in March 2025 while travelling through the countryside on my way to Nicaea, now known as Iznik, in Turkey. This is where the Council of Nicaea was held in 325 AD, and the Nicene Creed was first adopted. I saw the untouched land with the simple lives of the people, as if had I gone through a time tunnel that took me back to Jesus’ lifetime, when he said, ‘The gatekeeper opens it for him, and



¹² Johnson, *Come, Have Breakfast*, 212.

¹³ Johnson, *Come, Have Breakfast*, 212.

the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out' (John 10:3).

Those goats looked at me with hope as if they were waiting for something from me. During our breakfast with Jesus, like his disciples, we are called, healed and reshaped and given the role of ensuring that the sheep have a place to live and meet God. In this co-constitutive world, we must provide food for all species through collaboration and care for them alongside Jesus, empowering them with what they need while they support what is essential to us in this ecological mutuality.

The eyes of all look hopefully to you; you give them their food in due season. You open wide your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing. (Psalm 145:15–16)

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