

6-15-2021

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### Recommended Citation

Araque, Nelson "Environmental Refugees and the Human-Environment Relationship," *Journal of Hispanic / Latino Theology*. Vol. 23 : No. 1 , Article 4. (2021) :4-25  
Available at: <https://repository.usfca.edu/jhlt/vol23/iss1/4>

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**Environmental Refugees  
and the  
Human-Environment Relationship<sup>1</sup>**

*Nelson Araque  
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One of the first times I read the term “environmental refugees” was in Pope Benedict XVI’s message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace, *If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation*. He asked: “How can we disregard the growing phenomenon of ‘environmental refugees,’ people who are forced by the degradation of their natural habitat to forsake it – and often their possessions as well – in order to face the dangers and uncertainties of forced displacement?”<sup>2</sup>

This question from Pope Benedict XVI made evident the moral character that his predecessor, John Paul II, saw in the ecological crisis. At the time of his pontificate, John Paul II pointed out an “urgent moral need for a new solidarity.”<sup>3</sup> It is precisely this urgency for a new solidarity that Benedict XVI tried to highlight when he drew attention to migrants seeking to flee from the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation.”<sup>4</sup> Then, Pope Francis, echoing

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<sup>1</sup> This article was updated from an earlier version, “Communion of Creation: Latinx, Environmental, Racism and the Struggle for Ecological Justice,” paper presented at the June 3-6, 2018 ACHTUS Colloquium in Indianapolis, IN.

<sup>2</sup> Benedict XVI, Message for the 43<sup>rd</sup> (2010) World Day of Peace, “If You Want to Cultivate Peace Protect Creation,” 10, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20091208\\_xliii-world-day-peace\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20091208_xliii-world-day-peace_en.html).

<sup>3</sup> Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*, 25, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html).

<sup>4</sup> Francis, *LS*, 25.

his predecessor, highlighted the urgency of a new solidarity by denouncing widespread indifference to the suffering of environmental refugees. As the current Pontiff states:

Sadly, there is widespread indifference to such suffering, which is even now taking place throughout our world. Our lack of response to these tragedies involving our brothers and sisters points to the loss of that sense of responsibility for our fellow men and women upon which all civil society is founded.<sup>5</sup>

The widespread indifference to the suffering of environmental refugees<sup>6</sup> and the loss of our sense of responsibility regarding this issue and the care for creation in general, challenged my own lived experience as a U.S. Latino theologian and moved me to research these topics more thoroughly. I argue that the widespread indifference toward the environmental refugee's suffering is a consequence of the brokenness of the human-environment relationship.

In this paper, I will briefly examine the term “environmental refugee” and will present three reflection points concerning the improvement the human-environment relationship, with the aim of helping to change the current indifference toward the suffering of environmental

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<sup>5</sup> *LS*, 25.

<sup>6</sup> The fear of persecution of a person fleeing from his country of nationality due to environmental matters cannot be linked to the fear of persecution as it is expressed in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, a United Nations multilateral treaty. The only reasons for being a refugee, according to the Convention, are race, religion, social group, ethnicity, and political opinion. However, as Cosmin Coredea explains, the Principle of Non-Refoulement, a customary principle in international law, can be applied as legal argument on behalf of the environmental refugees. The Non-Refoulement principle clearly states, “No Contracting State shall expel or return [French ‘refouler’] a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social or political opinion.” See Cosmin Coredea, “Hybrid Legal Approaches Towards Climate Change: Concepts, Mechanisms and Implementation,” *Annual Survey of International & Comparative Law* 21, no. 1 (2016), available at: <http://digitalcommons.law.ggu.edu/annlsurvey/vol21/iss1/5>. The existence of the Non-Refoulement principle remains to be legally established and the widespread indifference to the suffering of environmental refugees continues increasing day by day.

refugees. First, I will analyze two important ideas from the first chapter of the Book of Genesis, dominion and *imago Dei*. Second, I will examine Alejandro García-Rivera’s theological cosmology, which is a “reflection on how humans view themselves in relation to the larger place we call home—the cosmos.” Finally, I will review the call to an “ecological conversion” in Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si.*<sup>7</sup>

### **What Does the Term “Environmental Refugee” Mean?**

According to scholar Patricia L. Saunders, the term “environmental refugee” was initially used as early as the 1970s, when it was first invoked by Lester Brown, the founder of the World Watch Institute.<sup>7</sup> However, the term “environmental refugee” is often “credited to Essam El-Hinnawi’s 1985 paper for the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP),<sup>8</sup> through which the author brought the term into public debate.

#### *Who Is Considered an Environmental Refugee?*

The answer to this question depends on what it means to be a refugee. Since the adoption of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, scholars from the Wilson Center write, “the global regime has distinguished between economic migrants, who come to pursue work, and refugees, who flee war and persecution. Environmental migrants do not fit neatly into either category.”<sup>9</sup> The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) defines “environmental

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<sup>7</sup> Patricia Saunders, “Environmental refugees, the origins of a construct,” in *Political Ecology: Science, Myth and Power*, ed. Philip Anthony Stott and Sian Sullivan (London, UK: Oxford, 2000), 220.

<sup>8</sup> James Morrissey, “Rethinking the 'Debate on Environmental Refugees': From 'Maximalists and Minimalists' to 'Proponents and Critics,’” *Journal of Political Ecology* 19, no.1 (2012), <http://dx.doi.org/10.2458/v19i1.21712>.

<sup>9</sup> James Hollifield and Idean Salehyan, “Environmental Refugees,” Wilson Center website, December 21, 2015, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/environmental-refugees>.

refugees” as “those people who have been forced to leave their traditional habitat, temporarily or permanently, because of a marked environmental disruption (natural and/or triggered by people) that jeopardized their existence and/ or seriously affected the quality of their life.”<sup>10</sup> Following the UNEP’s definition of “environmental refugee,” the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), whose aim is to work with governments to understand what drives economic, social and environmental change, defines an “environmental refugee” as a “person displaced owing to environmental causes, notably land loss and degradation, and natural disaster.”<sup>11</sup> Disasters that result in “environmental refugees” have a wide variety of causes and can be attributed to both natural and human causes. In her essay on environmental refugees, Jessica Karpillo observes:

Some examples of natural causes include drought or floods caused by shortage or excess of precipitation, volcanos, hurricanes, and earthquakes. Some examples of human causes include over-logging, dam construction, biological warfare, and environmental pollution.<sup>12</sup>

These definitions give us a sense of the complex situation of environmental refugees. They are not just suffering because of environmental disruptions and/or natural disasters that force them to leave their traditional habitat. Environmental refugees also suffer because of the current lack of a legal framework to help them in their situation. For this reason, it is urgent to provide environmental refugees with a framework that protects their rights as human beings,

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<sup>10</sup> Jessica Karpillo, “Environmental Refugees. Displaced From Their Homes by Disaster and Environmental Circumstances,” ThoughtCo, June 21, 2018, <https://www.thoughtco.com/environmental-refugees-overview-1434944>.

<sup>11</sup> Karpillo, “Environmental Refugees.”

<sup>12</sup> Karpillo, “Environmental Refugees.”

since the causes of their displacement will increase, as has been projected.<sup>13</sup> Ashley Feasley, a policy advisor for Migration and Refugee Services at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, explains:

The number of global environmental refugees and environmentally displaced migrants are projected to increase in the future. With the increasing frequency and severity of natural disasters, climate change is expected to expose millions to largescale displacement and forced migration – most notably affecting the global working poor.<sup>14</sup>

In order for the environmental refugees to gain the recognition needed to alleviate their suffering, a new framework to address the global phenomenon of refugees in general is necessary. On September 19, 2016, the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants was unanimously adopted by the UN General Assembly. By adopting this declaration, member states committed to the following six points, clearly expressed in the Declaration:

1. Expressed profound solidarity with those who are forced to flee.
2. Reaffirmed their obligations to fully respect the human rights of refugees and migrants.
3. Agreed that protecting refugees and supporting the countries that shelter them are shared international responsibilities and must be borne more equitably and predictably.

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<sup>13</sup> According to the Oxfam policy paper titled “Forced from Home: Climate-fueled Displacement,” on average, over twenty million people a year were internally displaced by extreme weather disasters over the last ten years—87 percent of all people internally displaced by disasters during this period. Millions more have been driven from their homes by drought, rising sea levels, and other slow-onset climate-fueled disasters. More still are forced to flee across borders to find refuge outside their home country.  
<https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620914/mb-climate-displacement-cop25-021219-en.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Ashley Feasley, “*Laudato Si*’ and the Environmental Refugee,” blog post on [wearesaltandlight.org](http://wearesaltandlight.org), formerly [togoforth.org](http://togoforth.org), a blog of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development (JPHD), July 7, 2015, <https://www.wearesaltandlight.org/blog/2015/07/07/laudato-si-and-the-environmental-refugee>.

4. Pledged robust support to those countries affected by large movements of refugees and migrants.
5. Agreed upon the core elements of a Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework.
6. Agreed to work towards the adoption of a global compact on refugees and a global compact for safe, orderly and regular migration.<sup>15</sup>

The historic New York Declaration is a step forward toward the adoption of a new framework to address the global phenomenon of refugees in general. Pope Francis, in his message for the celebration of the 51<sup>st</sup> World Day of Peace, referred to the possible adoption by the UN General Assembly of the two Global Compacts—one for safe, orderly, and regular migration and the other for refugees—contained in the New York Declaration. Pope Francis hopes that global indifference toward the situation of refugees around the world would be addressed with compassion, courage, and as an opportunity for peace-building. In the Pope's words,

It is my heartfelt hope this spirit will guide the process that in the course of 2018 will lead the United Nations to draft and approve two Global Compacts, one for safe, orderly and regular migration and the other for refugees. As shared agreements at a global level, these compacts will provide a framework for policy proposals and practical measures. For this reason, they need to be inspired by compassion, foresight and courage, so as to take advantage of every opportunity to advance the peace-building process. Only in this way

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<sup>15</sup> New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, UNCHR, <https://www.unhcr.org/new-york-declaration-for-refugees-and-migrants.html>.

can the realism required of international politics avoid surrendering to cynicism and to the globalization of indifference.<sup>16</sup>

The two global compacts were finally adopted by the UN General Assembly on December 17, 2018. Pope Francis's hopes that the global compacts were "by compassion, foresight and courage . . . to advance the peace-building process" are also guidelines needed in the discussion on environmental refugees, especially when the causes of their displacement are evident and obvious but their status as refugees is not considered legally binding.

Regarding the legal status of the environment refugees, Cosmin Corendea, a legal expert from the United Nations University in Tokyo, Japan and lecturer at University of Bonn Institute for Public International Law in Bonn, Germany, highlights the urgency of addressing legally the phenomenon of environmental refugees. He explains:

With no legal protection under international law, a lack of legal language when addressing climate change, and no mechanisms with a mandate, the number of environmental/climate migrants continues to increase and the gap in international law to address this issue continues to expand. Considering the IPCC AR5 findings and the flows of environmental migrants challenging regional legislations to act . . . the urgency of *legally* addressing this category of migrants is unquestionable, and a hybrid approach, inclusive and instrumental, represents an arguable solution.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Francis, message for the 51<sup>st</sup> (2018) World Day of Peace, "Migrants and Refugees: Men and Women in Search of Peace," 5, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco\\_20171113\\_messaggio-51giornatamondiale-pace2018.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20171113_messaggio-51giornatamondiale-pace2018.html).

<sup>17</sup> Cosmin Corendea, "Hybrid Legal Approaches Towards Climate Change: Concepts, Mechanisms and Implementation," *Annual Survey of International & Comparative Law* 21, no. 1 (2016): Article 5. Available at: <http://digitalcommons.law.ggu.edu/annlsurvey/vol21/iss1/5>.

The environmental refugees' suffering reflects the brokenness of the human–environment relationship. In the next sections, I will present three reflection points aimed at improving the human-environmental relationship, in order to help to change the current indifference toward the suffering of environmental refugees.

## **Genesis 1 and 2**

To review the human-environment relationship from the biblical perspective, I analyze two important ideas from the first two chapters of Genesis. They are dominion and *imago Dei*.

### *Dominion*

According to biblical scholar Theodore Hiebert, the first account of creation in Genesis 1:1-2:4a “contains the most controversial idea of the human role in creation in the entire Bible, and it is the idea that is referred to more frequently than any other text when describing biblical perspectives on nature.”<sup>18</sup>

Then God said: Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the tame animals, all the wild animals, and all the creatures that crawl on the earth. (Gn 1:26, NABRE)

This text is controversial because Genesis 1:26 contains the idea of dominion that has often been cited as one of the reasons for the current ecological crisis. In his well-known essay “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” historian Lynn White Jr. says that Christianity had “not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for [human] ends.”<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Hiebert notes the following about dominion:

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<sup>18</sup> Theodore Hiebert, “Reclaiming the World: Biblical Resources for the Ecological Crisis,” *Interpretation* 65, no. 4 (October 2011): 347.

The verb translated "have dominion," *radâ*, signifies the authority, power, and control of one person by another. It is used of the authority of kings over their subjects (1 Kgs 4:24), of officers over conscripted laborers (1 Kgs 5:16), and of household heads over their servants (Lv 25:43).<sup>20</sup>

This idea of dominion is amplified by Psalm 8:5-6 (NABRE): "What is man that you are mindful of him and a son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him little less than a god, crowned him with glory and honor." According to Hiebert, this Psalm "imagines humanity at the top of a hierarchy of life with a unique place at the top."<sup>21</sup> Theologian Gloria Schaab concurs with Hiebert regarding this idea of dominion. For Schaab, "the command to subdue and have dominion has been interpreted as giving human beings the absolute freedom to use the natural world as they wish and thereby distorted the divine gift into human license."<sup>22</sup> In other words, dominion places "humans above the rest of the creation and . . . nature in their power to use for their own purposes."<sup>23</sup> Pope Francis, in *Laudato Si'*, condemns a way of living in which this form of dominion of creation is the rule. "We have come to see ourselves as [Earth's] lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will."<sup>24</sup> Pope Francis further states, "[We] must forcefully

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<sup>19</sup> Lynn White Jr. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (March 10, 1967). The original says, "for his proper ends" rather than "for human ends."

<sup>20</sup> Theodore Hiebert, "Rethinking Dominion Theology," *Direction* 25, no. 2 (1996): 17.

<sup>21</sup> Hiebert, "Reclaiming the World," 347.

<sup>22</sup> Gloria Schaab, "Renewing the Vision: Christian Lenses on the Environment," Elizabeth Anne Seton Medal Award Lecture, Mount Saint Joseph University, Cincinnati, OH, November 11, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Hiebert, "Reclaiming the World," 347.

<sup>24</sup> *LS*,.2.

reject the notion that our being created in God's image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures."<sup>25</sup>

On a more positive note, dominion has been interpreted as stewardship by the Presbyterian Church (USA), in a 1996 policy statement named "Hope for a Global Future" "While dominion has been interpreted as a divine grant to prey on the rest of nature without restraints, we regard dominion to mean the entire stewardship of nature. . . . A careful exegesis of Genesis 1 does not suggest domination or despotism."<sup>26</sup> However, Schaab contends that stewardship still maintains a utilitarian relationship with the environment. She explains:

While stewardship represents a positive step away from the often distorted stance of dominion, it nonetheless maintains an imbalanced and utilitarian relationship between humanity and the rest of creation. Remember that the steward is the one who manages and directs how the goods of the household and the household itself are used and dispersed. Cast steward is the one who manages and directs how the goods of the household and the household itself are used and dispersed. in the light of human sinfulness, it is clear to see that even stewardship has the potential to slip into domination in the face of the unbridled wants of the human species and the competing needs of Earth's inhabitants.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *LS*, 67.

<sup>26</sup> Presbyterian Church USA, "Hope for a Global Future: Toward Just and Sustainable Human Development," <https://www.pcusa.org/resource/hope-for-a-global-future-toward-just-and-sus-25449/>.

<sup>27</sup> Schaab, "Renewing the Vision."

*Imago Dei*

Genesis 1:26 also states that God has created human beings in the divine image and likeness of God, the *imago Dei*, which, coupled with the idea of dominion, has led to some serious criticism of Christianity. As theologian David J. Bryant explains,

Some serious charges have been advanced against traditional Christian views of humanity's role in nature, a view rooted in Christianity's claim that humans are made in God's image. The charges center on the claim that traditional Christian views of the *imago* have encouraged people in the West to abuse the environment, by leading people to suppose that they are the center of God's creative purpose and that the rest of creation is simply there for their use, which inevitably becomes abuse.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, an interpretation of *imago Dei* that positions people as the center of God's creative power sets up a distinction between humans and the rest of creation, one that is exacerbated in the second chapter of Genesis, in which humans are created prior to the creation of other living creatures. Schaab writes:

In Genesis 1, the man and woman gain advantage because they are both created in the image and likeness of God while the rest of creatures are not. Now in Genesis 2, God creates the human first, makes all the other creatures for the sake of the human being (Gn. 2:18), and brings them to the human to see what the human would name them (Gn. 2:20).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> David T. Bryant, "*Imago Dei*, Imagination, and Ecological Responsibility," *Theology Today* 57, no. 1 (April 2000): 35.

<sup>29</sup> Schaab, "Renewing the Vision."

This distinction is made even clearer by the act of naming. As biblical scholar Phyllis Trible writes about the naming of the animals in Genesis 2:20, “through the power of naming, the animals are subordinated to the earth creature.”<sup>30</sup>

In contrast to these positions, biblical scholar Dianne Bergant proposes *imago Dei* as a sign of God’s supreme sovereignty in which the command to subdue and have dominion must be exercised as if God would do it. As Bergant explains,

For the ancient Israelites "image of God" meant that the man and woman were a sign of the sovereignty of God. Thus, as images, they represent how God, not humanity, reigns supreme. As images, they are meant to carry out God's role on earth. As images, they are meant to subdue and have dominion in the way God would, in a way that enhances rather than destroys the earth.<sup>31</sup>

Divine sovereignty exercised according to Bergant’s interpretation requires several conditions from humans. For example, humans are to “walk through the world with understanding and trustworthiness”<sup>32</sup> because the earth is in their keeping; they must limit their research and testing before they “squander our treasure and lose it forever.”<sup>33</sup> As responsible stewards, humans “must be considerate of the strains that maturation must bear and be patient with [nature’s] timing.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1978), 92.

<sup>31</sup> Diane Bergant, “The Bible Tells Me So,” *U.S. Catholic*, June 2008, <http://www.uscatholic.org/2008/06/the-bible-tells-me-so>.

<sup>32</sup> Bergant, “The Bible Tells Me So.”

<sup>33</sup> Bergant, “The Bible Tells Me So.”

<sup>34</sup> Bergant, “The Bible Tells Me So.”

These three conditions will avoid a behavior pattern that leads to the destruction and squandering of the treasure of creation. These three conditions will also give evidence of a humble recognition that humans must “live in accord with [Earth] and care for it. As we do this,” Bergant writes, “we manifest the tender compassion that our God has toward all creation.”<sup>35</sup> This is what is meant when we say that humans are created in the image of God.

While seemingly in contrast, Schaab’s interpretation of *imago Dei* as a distinction between humans and the rest of the creation and Bergant’s proposal of *imago Dei* as God’s tender compassion toward the rest of the creation are nonetheless related. Both theologians focus on the intrinsic value of creation through the appreciation of the marvelous, purposeful, and unique life forms created by God. Both theologians caution humans against the solely utilitarian relationship with creation that has led humans to think and act as distinct from the rest of creation rather than acting with tender compassion toward creation.

As humans realize their right relationship with creation, they will be able to recognize their interconnection with and dependency on earth. Humans are “made of the same stuff as the mountains and the rain, the sand, and the stars. We are no less governed by the laws of life and growth and death than the birds and the fish and the grass of the field. We come from the earth as from a mother.”<sup>36</sup> Bergant writes. Or, as Carl Sagan used to say, “we are all made of stardust.”<sup>37</sup> This is the way to understand how humans are created in the image of God, a distinction that brings not power over, but compassionate responsibility, for the whole earth’s community.

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<sup>35</sup> Bergant, “The Bible Tells Me So.”

<sup>36</sup> Bergant, “The Bible Tells Me So.”

<sup>37</sup> Carl Sagan, *The Cosmic Connection: An Extraterrestrial Connection* (Garden City, NY: Anchor/Doubleday, 1973), 189-190.

Thus, the relationship between humans and the environment from the biblical perspective lends itself to varied interpretations. On the one hand, it points to the supremacy and hierarchy of humans over the rest of the creation by divine command. This idea of supremacy suggests humans' entitlement to plunder Earth, based on the notion of being granted dominion and being the sole creature created in the image of God. Many, including Pope Francis, have criticized this morally bankrupt interpretation. The widespread indifference toward the environmental refugees' suffering is a clear consequence of this idea of supremacy and hierarchy of humans over the rest of creation by divine command. On the other hand, a different interpretation suggests that the notions of *imago Dei* and dominion challenge humanity to understand, trust, respect, be patient, and be responsible toward Earth and its creatures by exercising God's tender compassion and humbly recognizing humans' interconnection and dependency on earth. When humanity puts this into practice, the suffering of the environmental refugees will not be overlooked.

In the next section, I will present the second reflection point to improve the human-environment relationship, with a view to helping to change the current indifference toward the suffering of the environmental refugees.

### **Alejandro García-Rivera's Theological Cosmology<sup>38</sup>**

Latino theologian Alejandro García-Rivera begins his theological cosmology with the question, "Are we at home in the cosmos?"<sup>39</sup> Elements of his answer to that question will be helpful in understanding the human-environment relationship. His initial question is about how

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<sup>38</sup> A different version of this section on Alejandro García-Rivera appeared in Nelson Araque, "Gift and Fiesta: Two Ways from the Hispanic Latino/a Perspective to Combat Climate Change," in *The Urgency of Climate Change. Pivotal Perspectives*, ed. Gerard Magill and Kiarash Aramesh (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), 281-291.

<sup>39</sup> Alejandro García-Rivera, *The Garden of God: A Theological Cosmology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 1.

humans view themselves in relation to the larger place we call home—the cosmos: “Our answer involves how we understand our relationship to, our responsibilities to, our shaping of this relationship, and, more profoundly our own understanding of what it means to be human in the cosmos.”<sup>40</sup> In the development of his own answer, García-Rivera compares the two accounts of creation in the book of Genesis. In the first account, “humans are at home in the cosmos.”<sup>41</sup> They are told to multiply, subdue, and have dominion over “every living thing that moves upon the earth,” in the words of Genesis 1:28. In the second account, García-Rivera sees human beings in their tragedy, “born at home in the cosmos, they now must struggle to survive in the cosmos”<sup>42</sup> as they are told in Genesis 2:17-19.

What García-Rivera highlights in his interpretation of the human engagement with the cosmos is that it is about both glory and struggle.<sup>43</sup> This mix of glory and struggle is “a great mystery not only about humanity but about our cosmos.”<sup>44</sup> This mystery will reveal to humans an essential knowledge, namely, how to live in harmony with the cosmos. The first part of the answer depends on humans’ attitude toward knowing “the inner and outer workings of the cosmos.”<sup>45</sup> Receiving this knowledge of the cosmos and even of humans themselves implies sacrifice, humility, and an openness to receive it as a gift and to give back. Furthermore, receiving this knowledge as a gift enables humans to realize the magnitude of the gift. Lewis

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<sup>40</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 74.

<sup>41</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 75.

<sup>42</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 75.

<sup>43</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 75.

<sup>44</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 75.

<sup>45</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 75.

Hyde states that the notion of gift has two senses, one inner, the other outer: “The inner sense of gift is the sense of being gifted, of being given a talent or charism. The outer sense of gift is the sense of gift as a vehicle of culture, of that which creates relationships based on the reception of a gift.”<sup>46</sup>

Thus, seeking the knowledge of the universe and of themselves and receiving it as a gift helps humans to create relationships within the cosmos and prepares them to return it in gratitude. This process of receiving and giving back involves humans in a journey of spiritual transformation, one that is necessary to be fully human and to live in the cosmos as home.

This journey of spiritual transformation proposed by García-Rivera has also been suggested by Thomas Berry, who points to the appreciation and recognition of the beauty that surrounds us as a way to honor the earth and to turn away from those activities that violate the integrity of the planet and its inhabitants. Berry writes:

If we were truly moved by the beauty of the world about us, we will honor the earth in a profound way. We would understand immediately and turn away with certain horror from all those activities that violate the integrity of the planet.<sup>47</sup>

However, if humans do not let themselves be moved by the beauty of the world, the knowledge of the cosmos and of themselves leads humans to arrogance. As happens in the story of Adam and Eve, they will bring to the cosmos a self-centered dominion and power that will affect their relationship to it, provoking a terrible devastation.

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<sup>46</sup> Lewis Hyde, *The Gift* (New York: Vintage, 1983), 48.

<sup>47</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1990) 10.

The second part of the answer as to whether we are at home in the cosmos depends on how humans understand the role of the Holy Spirit in theological cosmology. Here is how García-Rivera defines his theological cosmology:

Let me suggest that a theological cosmology attempts to “see” God in all things. It makes visible the inner meaning of phenomena by allowing them to move the human heart. In other words, a theological cosmology is an aesthetics of creation. Like science, it pays attention to the phenomena of the universe, but it also attempts to “see” the inner meaning of all things. A theological cosmology, however, recognizes that for humans there cannot be detached observation. Phenomena proper to a cosmos move the human heart. We do not simply observe; we participate.<sup>48</sup>

Thus, a theological cosmology is both a scientific and a theological attempt to “see” the inner meaning of all things. Pierre Teilhard of Chardin is among the first to attempt to see the inner meaning of all things from both scientific and theological perspectives. His genius lies in his ability to recover and reinterpret the almost lost doctrine of the Cosmic Christ in the context of a relational, interconnected, and dynamic universe as it was revealed by the natural sciences in the twentieth century. In the twenty-first century, Alejandro García-Rivera, looking for a synthesis between theology and science, revises Teilhard’s cosmic christology, concluding that it is the primacy of the Holy Spirit that Teilhard’s work is lacking. García-Rivera further proposes a deeper cosmological question: “Where is Jesus now?” The answer to this question will bring three new pneumatological dimensions to Teilhard’s christology and will help clarify the role of a theological cosmology. These three new dimensions are the relevance of the Ascension, the notion of place, and the role of beauty.

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<sup>48</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 21-22.

In the event of the Ascension, the Holy Spirit's dynamism and power is what animates the convergence of everything in the Cosmic Christ. According to García-Rivera, the lack of a theology of the Holy Spirit in Teilhard's work makes it impossible for the Cosmic Christ to draw all things to convergence in himself, precisely because only the "power and dynamics of the Holy Spirit"<sup>49</sup> allow such convergence toward abundant life. In the notion of place, it is the Holy Spirit who, in the Old and New Testaments, makes the Promised Land "home" in the cosmos. García-Rivera contends that it is the Holy Spirit who enables humans to journey through the cosmos to a new creation where the risen and "ascended Christ sits now at the right hand of the Father."<sup>50</sup> Finally, it is the Holy Spirit through whom humans understand the cosmos as an ordered unity in the realm of beauty. As García-Rivera says, "Beauty is the most visible sign of the work of the Holy Spirit."<sup>51</sup> Moreover, it is only through the Holy Spirit that humans can recognize this beauty. Thus, the role of the Holy Spirit is crucial in a theological cosmology. García-Rivera realizes the absence of this essential pneumatological element in the theological cosmology of Teilhard. The Holy Spirit is "not only the ultimate source of the beauty of living forms in creation but is also the source who unites us to their beauty."<sup>52</sup>

Thus, García-Rivera's theological cosmology asks humans to seek the knowledge of the universe and of themselves in order to recognize God's creation as a gift—a gift that must be shared by all. This process of recognition implies sacrifice, humility, and openness to the Holy

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<sup>49</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 51.

<sup>50</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 45.

<sup>51</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 52.

<sup>52</sup> García-Rivera, *The Garden of God*, 99.

Spirit through which humans will be transformed to acknowledge others, especially the suffering of the environmental refugees.

In the next section, I will present the third and last reflection point to improve the human-environment relationship with the aim to challenge current indifference toward the suffering of environmental refugees.

### **Ecological Conversion in *Laudato Si'***

Pope Francis refers explicitly to an ecological conversion in the last chapter of his encyclical *Laudato Si'*. The Pope writes that such “conversion calls for a number of attitudes which together foster a spirit of generous care, full of tenderness.”<sup>53</sup> This ecological conversion calls for a number of attitudes that will help us to understand the human-environment relationship and to avoid the widespread indifference toward the suffering of environmental refugees.

The first two attitudes Pope Francis refers to are gratitude and gratuitousness. (The latter refers to the state of giving freely, without expectation of anything in return.) These two attitudes help us understand that the human–environment relation is lived in a world “that is God’s loving gift.”<sup>54</sup> We must live gratitude and be gratuitous toward every single creature because all creatures are given to us as a gift. The indifference toward environmental refugees contradicts the gratitude and gratuitousness toward God’s loving gifts and demand our conversion, to assure “the flourishing of people in the present and a life-flourishing planetary home for future generations.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> *LS*, 220.

<sup>54</sup> *LS*, 220.

Pope Francis then explains the second attitude that is part of an ecological conversion. It is “a loving awareness that we are not disconnected from the rest of the creatures but joined in a splendid universal connection.”<sup>56</sup> This idea of interconnection makes us responsible for every one of God’s creatures. As the Catechism states: “Creatures exist only in dependence on each other, to complete each other, in the service of each other.”<sup>57</sup> Living in disconnection and disharmony from the rest of the creatures results in an “I don’t care” attitude toward everything and encloses us in ourselves to do what is convenient for our individual good. It is through this disconnection that humans become masters, consumers, and merciless exploiters who turn the goods of creation into objects of pleasure simply to be used and controlled. Living in this disconnection will perpetuate the current indifference toward the suffering of the environmental refugees.

Finally, Pope Francis points out two more attitudes in an ecological conversion. “By developing our individual, God-given capacities, an ecological conversion can inspire us to greater creativity and enthusiasm in resolving the world’s problems.”<sup>58</sup> A sense of a greater creativity and enthusiasm is found in the acknowledgement of our God-given talents. As humans we are endowed with many talents. As Pope Francis tweeted on December 7, 2017, “We all possess God-given talents. No one can claim to be so poor that they have nothing to offer

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<sup>55</sup> Jame Schaefer, “Converting to and Nurturing Ecological Consciousness—Individually, Collectively, Actively,” in *All Creation is Connected: Voices in Response to Pope Francis’s Encyclical on Ecology*, ed. Dan R. DiLeo (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2018), 141.

<sup>56</sup> *LS*, 220.

<sup>57</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 340, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/p1s2c1p5.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p1s2c1p5.htm).

<sup>58</sup> *LS*, 220.

others.” Sharing the talents given by God to all of us creates an opportunity to build an enthusiastic community committed to the solution of the problems of the world. To reject sharing our talents, especially when looking for creative and enthusiastic solutions to the environmental crisis, will result in environmental refugees suffering even more from the indifference of others.

An example of a talent that can help people to face the suffering of an environmental refuge is to be bilingual. In the United States, there are several languages spoken besides English. Speaking both English and Spanish can be a creative and enthusiastic solution to the current indifference toward the suffering of environmental refugees, especially those from Central America. The indifference reflected in the expression “I don’t care” will be turned into hospitality, welcoming, and connection to the environmental refugees, who will be heard –by which I mean, “be acknowledged and esteemed precisely as others, each with his or her own feelings, choices and ways of living and working.”<sup>59</sup> Language serves as a tool for community-building and even identity—essential to those leaving their home communities because of ecological devastation.

Thus, the ecological conversion Pope Francis calls us to is one of gratitude, gratuitousness, an awareness of our interconnection to the rest of the creation, and a greater creativity and enthusiasm to resolve the world’s problems. Each of these attitudes helps us to reflect on the human–environment relationship to avoid widespread indifference toward the suffering of environmental refugees.

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<sup>59</sup> Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Querida Amazonia*, 27, [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20200202\\_querida-amazonia.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20200202_querida-amazonia.html).

## Conclusion

This paper has examined the term “environmental refugee” and offered three reflection points toward the human-environment relationship: first, an analysis of two important ideas from the first chapter of the Book of Genesis, dominion and *imago Dei*; second, a reflection on Alejandro García-Rivera’s theological cosmology, a reflection on how humans view themselves in relation to the larger place we call home, the cosmos; and third, a review of the call to an “ecological conversion” in Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si’*. Each of these reflections point to attitudes that can improve the human-environment relationship, in order to help change our current indifference toward the suffering of environmental refugees. Finally, as the number of environmental refugees increases day by day, I ask for more research about this topic, from a variety of disciplines—surely another way to move toward relieving the widespread suffering of our brothers and sisters, the environmental refugees, and transforming our indifference toward them.