



**From safeguarding creation to integral ecology:
Catholic thought put to the test by Philippe Descola's anthropology**

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Philippe Descola occupies a unique place among contemporary anthropologists. A student of Claude Lévi-Strauss and professor at the Collège de France, he has profoundly renewed the social sciences by attacking one of the pillars of Western modernity: the separation between nature and culture. His work—based on his extensive experience with the Achuar people of the Amazon and an ambitious comparison of human cosmologies—has established a central idea: humans have not everywhere divided the world according to the same principles. The opposition that has structured the modern West since the 17th century, that of objective nature and autonomous humanity, is neither universal nor necessary.

In *Beyond Nature and Culture*, Descola proposes a typology of 'ontologies' – naturalism, animism, totemism, analogism – which describes the main ways in which human societies compose a world. Western naturalism is just one regime among others: an intellectual construct that produces the idea of nature as exteriority, of individuals as autonomous units, and of humanity defined essentially by rupture rather than by relationship. This framework not only provides an anthropological toolkit; it opens up a theoretical and spiritual space for thinking differently about our place in the cosmos. By revealing the contingency of naturalism, Descola makes it possible once again to conceive of a worldview in which relationship takes precedence over objectification, in which beings are defined by the bonds they forge, and in which matter itself is imbued with meaning.

In other words, he offers religious traditions – and particularly the Catholic tradition – the opportunity to reinterpret their heritage in a new light, fully embracing what might be called an ontology of relationship.

It is in this context that contemporary Catholic thinking on ecology takes place. Far from being a simple moral or environmental extension, it touches on the very heart of our understanding of creation. The notion of integral ecology, promoted by *Laudato Si'* and further developed under the pontificate of Leo XIV, echoes many aspects of Descola's analysis: the rejection of the nature/culture dualism, attention to the relational fabric of living beings, and recognition of fragility as a constitutive dimension of our existence.

Far from any superficial appropriation, drawing on Descola's work thus provides solid intellectual legitimacy to the ongoing theological effort: to demonstrate that the Catholic vision of creation is not a reaction to modernity, but a structured response to its unthought aspects. Recalling Descola's contribution is thus to affirm the relevance of Catholic thought in the contemporary debate. His anthropology sheds light, by contrast, on what the Church proposes today: not a spirituality of nature, nor a green technocracy, but a relational anthropology, deeply rooted in Christian analogism, where each created being is a sign, a mediation and a call to responsibility.

It is on this basis that the analysis proposed in the following pages is based, with no other ambition than to encourage discussion between different but potentially fruitful intellectual approaches: a comparative reading of the evolution of Catholic thought on creation and Philippe Descola's anthropological framework, to show how the Church today contributes to a recomposition of the visible that is faithful to its tradition and relevant to the contemporary world.

The beginnings of a Christian ecological consciousness

Ecological awareness in the Christian world did not begin with the encyclical *Laudato Si'*. As early as the 1980s and 1990s, a group of active minorities within European Christianity began to develop a renewed theology of creation.

The Ecumenical Assembly in Basel (1989) was one of these founding moments: the Churches of Europe affirmed that justice, peace and the safeguarding of creation were three inseparable dimensions of Christian faith and mission. This triptych, which would later inspire the concept of "integral human development", already linked ecological conversion to social and spiritual conversion.

In the years that followed, movements such as Pax Christi played an essential role in spreading this awareness. Far from reducing ecology to an environmental discourse, they rooted it in a Christian anthropology of connection, emphasising the dignity of all life, non-violence and cosmic solidarity. The theme of the "suffering of creation" then appeared in papal messages for World Peace Day, particularly under John Paul II (*Peace with God, Peace with All Creation*, 1990) and Benedict XVI (¹, 2010). These texts invited us to reinterpret human domination over nature in the light of Genesis, not as a mandate for exploitation, but as a vocation for responsibility.

¹ <https://eglise.catholique.fr/sengager-dans-la-societe/ecologie-integrale/372028-la-sauvegarde-de-la-creation/>

This evolution was already paving the way for an ontological shift: the transition from a dualistic conception – man and nature – to a relational vision of creation. It is this shift that Philippe Descola, in his work, describes as a departure from modern naturalism.

***Laudato Si'* or the analogical rehabilitation of the world**

In 2015, with the encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis decisively placed Catholic thought in a perspective that, in the light of Descola, can be described as analogist. The encyclical does not merely reiterate the need for ecological conversion; it proposes an ontology of connection, based on the idea that "everything is connected". Every being, every creature, every ecosystem has its own dignity and participates in a harmony willed by God.

According to Descola's framework, analogism is defined by a discontinuous but connected world, where differences between beings are not abolished but integrated into a network of correspondences. *Laudato Si'* falls precisely within this framework: creation is not a homogeneous whole, but a differentiated set of entities connected to each other by divine love.

The world is described as a fabric of sacramental relationships, where the visible constantly refers to the invisible. The cosmos is no longer a nature to be mastered, but a communion to be contemplated and served.

Francis thus brings about a reconciliation between science and faith, between reason and spirituality. He embraces the naturalist heritage of the West (trust in research, dialogue with scientific ecology) while transcending it with an anthropology of relationship and responsibility.

Naturalism is retained as a method, but subverted as a cosmology: nature ceases to be an object and becomes a sign once again. In Descola's language, *Laudato Si'* marks an attempt at an analogical return within the naturalistic world itself: a reintroduction of symbolism, correspondence and meaning into a universe previously perceived as pure materiality.

The world as a fabric of sacramental relationships

The expression refers to a worldview in which every created being exists through and for relationship. From the perspective of *Laudato Si'*, creation is not a collection of objects but a network of living relationships, each of which can become a mediation of the divine presence. The world is thus 'sacramental': it makes the invisible visible, it manifests grace in matter. On an anthropological level, this intuition ties in with what Philippe Descola calls analogical ontology: a cosmos where discontinuous realities – God, man, creatures – are connected by correspondences. Christian theology offers a unique version of this: these correspondences are not merely symbolic. The water of baptism, the Eucharistic bread, and cosmic brotherhood do not sacralise nature; they recognise in the very link between the visible and the invisible, matter and spirit, the continuous action of the Creator.

Leo XIV: from integral ecology to Christocentric ecology

The election of Pope Leo XIV continued this line of thinking, while giving it a more explicit theological emphasis. His recent statements – notably in his message for the 2025 World Day of Prayer for Creation and in his speeches on climate change – continue Francis' legacy by adding a more distinct Christological dimension.

Leo XIV affirms, in continuity with Francis, that "nature must not be reduced to a commodity," and calls for an inner conversion based on sobriety and environmental justice. His concrete initiatives, such as the creation of the ecological education centre "*Borgo 'Laudato Si'*"² or the institution of a liturgy for the care of creation, reflect this desire to embody ecological conversion in the daily life of the Church. But he also provided a major doctrinal clarification regarding the possible excesses of an overly "eco-spiritual" discourse, denouncing "a new temptation of Babel," that of "wanting to save creation without going through the Saviour."

This criticism is not a conservative retreat: it is part of a theological purification of ecological discourse. By recalling that creation is not divine but sacramental, Leo XIV redefines the right balance between recognising the world as a sign of God and rejecting any deification of the cosmos. Where Francis had opened up the field of cosmic brotherhood, Leo emphasised its boundaries: the world leads to God, it does not replace him. In other words, Leo XIV accepted Francis's analogism, but rejected its animistic risk.

Creatures are signs of the divine presence, not divine subjects.

Their beauty and fragility call for the adoration of the Creator, not the veneration of creation itself. Thus, his criticism of "ecological idolatry" does not reject integral ecology, but restores its theological hierarchy: the preservation of creation is a matter of redemption, not of natural or self-produced salvation.

Descola's contribution: an anthropological key to understanding

Descola's typology of ontologies—animism, naturalism, totemism, analogism—helps us understand the specifically Catholic position in the contemporary ecological debate. Christian creation theology is fundamentally based on theological analogism: God is both transcendent and immanent, and the creation is a series of mediations between these two poles. The world thus becomes a space of ascending mediations, where grace flows from the visible to the invisible. Descola's "analogism" finds its theological counterpart here: a differentiated but connected cosmos, ordered not by impersonal forces, but by the participation of created beings in the divine Being. This analogist model explains Christianity's ability to dialogue with science (naturalist heritage) and to recognise cosmic brotherhood (animist accents), while preserving the verticality of transcendence.

² <https://www.vaticannews.va/fr/vatican/news/2025-07/borgo-laudato-si-castel-gandolfo-service-creation-volontaires.html>

Descola offers here a fruitful interpretative framework for overcoming the polarisation between technological rationalism and diffuse 'ecospirituality'.

Towards a theology of relationship

The challenge of the era, which Francis and then Leo XIV each faced in their own way, was to re-establish the relationship between God, man and the world. Christianity, without merging with indigenous cosmology, rediscovers in this anthropological reflection the resources of a way of thinking about connection that modern humanism had partially forgotten. Through the notion of integral ecology, the Catholic Church reinscribed its mission in an anthropology of the inhabited world, where moral responsibility became the contemporary form of holiness. This turning point opened up a middle way that was neither naturalistic (the world as object) nor animistic (the world as divine subject), but analogical (the world as sign and relationship).

Conclusion: the Catholic recomposition of the visible

The evolution of Catholic thinking on ecology, from Basel to Leo XIV, reveals a profound transformation: the Church has moved from environmental morality to an ontology of relationship. This change, which can be explained by Descola, reflects a desire to inhabit the world differently—no longer as owners, but as "stewards" of the mystery. In this way, Catholicism offers naturalistic modernity a credible alternative: a world where the visible refers to the spiritual, where scientific reason coexists with contemplation, and where ecology becomes a path to salvation. Francis laid the foundations, Leo XIV ensured its theological coherence: one opened up the horizon of cosmic brotherhood, the other recalled its Christological source. Thus, contemporary Catholic thought joins, through theological paths, what Descola calls the composition of worlds: a constant effort to weave together meaning, matter and relationship, in other words, to re-enchant the visible without idolising it.