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A priest blesses a dog outside a church during a prayer service for blessing of the animals in

A priest blesses a dog outside a church during a prayer service for blessing of the animals in Rio de Janeiro Oct. 4, 2023, the feast of St. Francis of Assisi, patron of animals. (OSV News/Reuters/Pilar Olivares)

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On the feast of St. Francis this year (Oct. 4), Pope Francis released his latest apostolic exhortation, *Laudate Deum*. Many of us who work in applied Catholic moral theology were quite interested to read it, especially in the context of the start of the Roman phase of the Synod on Synodality, gathering this month at the Vatican.

Billed as part two of Francis' great eco-encyclical *Laudato Si'*, the new exhortation promised new emphases, new issues and perhaps even new teachings to consider for a Catholic vision of right relationship with our common home. Its release on the feast of a saint known for his unique relationship with animals gave particular hope that more would be said about humanity's right relationship with other animals.

Developments in Catholic teaching on this matter, it must be said, have been frustratingly slow in recent years, especially compared with progress on other ecological matters. A case could be made that Pope Benedict XVI made more headway on this particular set of issues than Francis. Indeed, before he became pope, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger explicitly condemned factory farming, saying it violated the understanding of the proper relationship between human and nonhuman animals found in Scripture.

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As I wrote in 2015 when *Laudato Si'* appeared, that encyclical moved the needle in serious ways. First, and most importantly, it blew up forever the detestable idea that our fellow creatures only have value insofar as they serve us. Animals, the church now clearly teaches, "have value in themselves," and that worth is "intrinsic" and "incalculable." Second, *Laudato Si'* located the moral questions of our exploitation of animals within a broader "technocratic paradigm" that includes Big Agriculture and biotechnology.

Unfortunately, there were also missed opportunities. A big one was its lack of specifics. Virtually everyone can get behind the encyclical's call for "reasonable limits." But how does that look when it comes to animals? Sure, Francis calls for smaller farms, but what about explicitly condemning factory farming? Is there any distinction among different creatures? Is swatting a mosquito or pulling a weed the same thing as torturing a pig in a factory farm or a monkey in medical laboratory?

Into this context comes *Laudate Deum* — what does it have to say?

Cows graze on a farm in the early morning outside Oklahoma City April 28, 2023. (OSV News

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The word "animal" does not appear in the relatively short document, but "creature" is used eight times. Here are some key quotes (emphasis added):

"Ocean waters have a thermal inertia and centuries are needed to normalize their temperature and salinity, which affects the survival of many species. This is one of

the many signs that *the other creatures of this world have stopped being our companions* along the way and have become instead our victims."

Hence, "the creatures of this world no longer appear to us under merely natural guise, because *the risen One is mysteriously holding them to himself and directing them towards fullness as their end*. The very flowers of the field and the birds which his human eyes contemplated and admired are now imbued with his radiant presence."

"God has united us to all his creatures. *Nonetheless, the technocratic paradigm can isolate us from the world that surrounds us and deceive us by making us forget that the entire world is a* '*contact zone*'."

"The Judaeo-Christian vision of the cosmos defends the unique and central value of the human being amid the marvelous concert of all God's creatures, but today we see ourselves forced to realize that it is only possible to sustain a 'situated anthropocentrism'. To recognize, in other words, that *human life is incomprehensible and unsustainable without other creatures*."

A horse grazes in a field amid geese on a farm in Huntingtown, Md., March 11, 2022. (OSV Ne

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So much good stuff here. Francis acknowledges that creatures are to be united to us as companions who make our lives comprehensible — not merely used. He says that the technocratic paradigm isolates us from the "contact zone" (love this image!) of the world God has created. He reaffirms that God cares for his creatures for their own sakes and their own ends.

But in a document that is otherwise chock full of specifics, particularly with regard to the realities of catastrophic global climate change, this exhortation, like the encyclical before it, is far too general. We get more discussion of creatures as part of a "great concert" (another beautiful image), but once again it is one without distinctions — indeed, flowers and birds are explicitly lumped together.

Significantly, and unlike *Laudato Si*', there are no references to food or farms or farming. This is particularly disappointing and puzzling, and not only because factory farms are so obviously an example of the horrors of the technocratic paradigm the Holy Father is at pains to critique. Factory farms are essential contributors to climate change — if not the most important contributors.

Nevertheless, *Laudate Deum* is a move in the right direction. The fact that people and organizations dedicated to resisting factory farming were among the first invited to comment on the exhortation sends a positive signal that the church will find a workable vision of our relationship to our fellow animals.

But we aren't there yet. Catholic concern for nonhuman animals, in our technocratic times, still has a long way to go.

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