Reflections on *Laudato si’*
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Although I was born just before the onset of the Second World War, I am a space baby. My father and several other members of my family were involved as tech workers in the Manhattan Project because we lived in New Mexico (in Los Alamos itself, for a while). But after the war, my father and many of his coworkers went on to work in the new space program, which was originally located at Holloman Air Force Base in Alamogordo, New Mexico before moving to Florida.

So, growing up I was keenly aware of research and developments in space exploration and in time met several astronauts, one of whom, Edgar Mitchell, was from a small town near Albuquerque. The point of my story is that very few people thought of the Earth as a single, interrelated entity, a system of systems, before 1968, when the astronauts aboard Apollo 8 became the first human beings to see our planet from space, as a whole. To them, it looked like a fragile Christmas-tree ornament, delicately balanced against the black depths of space.

Two years later, the modern environmental movement was born with the first Earth Day. Since then, not only the wholeness of Earth but its fragility has grown much clearer to scientists if more slowly to others. In the 1990s, when teaching at Oxford University, I met and attended lectures by the brilliant scientist and engineer, James Lovelock, whose “Gaia Hypothesis” elevated the interrelationship of the self-regulating systems of the planet to the level of significant theory and increasing alarm. Lovelock, a chemist, engineer, and medical researcher, was one of the first researchers to grasp the implications of global climate change. He was a key figure in the discovery of the “ozone hole” in the southern hemisphere, whose insistence led to positive steps to redress the situation.

In a series of books, lectures, and conferences, Lovelock warned the scientific community and the public of the dire consequences of environmental deterioration, but his warnings, although increasingly ominous, largely went unheeded. When international concern was finally aroused to the point of international action, Lovelock feared that the “tipping point” of irreversible planetary injury had already passed. Now 96, Lovelock continues his research but has not grown more optimistic, so far as I know.

It is with this brief history in mind that I welcomed the slow accumulation of episcopal and papal pronouncements on the environment, culminating in the encyclical of Pope Francis “On Our Common Home,” *Laudato si’.* Inspired and led by the attitude toward nature of his namesake, St. Francis of Assisi, the pope has issued a remarkable document, the fruit of decades of work. The great microbiologist, humanitarian, and environmentalist René Dubos suggested that St. Benedict rather than St Francis should be the patron of the environmental movement, because his example and the work of his followers rebuilt the ecology of Europe’s heartland after centuries of devastation during the barbarian invasions, while Francis mainly rhapsodized about Nature.
Even so, St. Francis is a worthy guide. In one of the most memorable moments of my life, I was allowed to walk through the lovely little garden at San Damiano where Francis, after whom I am also named, composed the Canticle of the Sun, from which the pope drew the title of his letter.

And so, we will begin with a brief overview of the encyclical itself and move on to a discussion of its implications for us here, today.