

# A Feast of Creation?

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## Introduction: The Emergence of Environmental Theologies

In March 2024, in the beautiful medieval city of Assisi, theologians, ecumenists, environmental advocates, and liturgists from around the world gathered for a seminar to discuss the possibility of adding a new feast day to the calendar: a Feast of Creation. All the papers and responses from this seminar can be found online.<sup>1</sup> The sponsors of the event were from the Laudato Si' Institute, a Catholic group with wide ecumenical connections, keen to see collaboration between all the churches on matters relating to our identity as creatures made by God and our mission as Christians to care for the whole of creation.

Christians of many ecclesial traditions recognise the continuing and intensifying challenges of the damage being done to the environment. Science and faith are not, in most quarters, the enemies that many thought them to be for a good part of the last two hundred years. Instead, faith communities are speaking up alongside scientists. Both are calling for an end to extinctions, for a radical change to developed countries' relentless consumption of resources, and for recognition that the cost of climate change is falling most heavily on those who have contributed least to it.

Many, perhaps most, branches of Christianity in their denominational institutions have recognised the need to be better stewards of creation. Since 1989, the Orthodox, following the lead of Patriarch Demetrios, have kept the first day of September as a Day of Prayer for Creation. For the Orthodox, 1 September has historical significance as the former beginning of the ecclesiastical year, derived from the supposed first day of God's creation of the world. It is also the feast of the Indiction, which in Byzantine times marked the beginning of the financial and civic year.<sup>2</sup> Since 2015 and the publication of Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'*,<sup>3</sup> Catholics have likewise kept a World Day of Prayer for Creation on 1 September. In 1990 Anglicans added a fifth 'mark of mission' to the existing four: 'to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew

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<sup>1</sup> <[drive.google.com/drive/folders/1Vwfbpj3irpIqJb9zRgYbtTggpsL5UxL5](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1Vwfbpj3irpIqJb9zRgYbtTggpsL5UxL5)>. Accessed 4 October 2024.

<sup>2</sup> <[oca.org/news/headline-news/september-1-the-day-of-prayer-for-creation](https://oca.org/news/headline-news/september-1-the-day-of-prayer-for-creation)>. Accessed 4 October 2024.

<sup>3</sup> <[vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](https://vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)>. Accessed 4 October 2024.

the life of the earth'. Ecumenically, the World Council of Churches has spoken emphatically about the climate crisis and its impact upon the world's poorest people.<sup>4</sup>

### **A Season of Creation**

In parallel with and to some degree influenced by these developments, some churches have explored a 'season of creation' or an environmental focus on 'sustainable September'. In Australia, this innovation was strongly influenced by the work of Lutheran scholar Norman Habel, and it has been taken up with enthusiasm by many communities. The 'season' is usually deemed to run from 1 September to 4 October, the feast day of St Francis of Assisi. It usually takes the form of a series of thematic Sundays, such as 2018's Planet Earth Sunday, Humanity Sunday, Sky Sunday, Mountain Sunday, and Blessing of the Animals.

A cynic might wonder whether the long succession of 'green' or 'ordinary' Sundays after Pentecost or after Trinity, depending on who is counting, may pall for both preachers and congregations. Perhaps a congregational or clergy boredom syndrome has developed. A month or so 'off' from the in-course readings from the Old Testament, epistles and gospels may appeal, and thematic replacements may seem attractive. Even if the Season of Creation is not seen as light relief from the lectionary, Christian environmental justice groups may call for a focus on their particular mission and advocacy. So, in some places, the lectionary readings are retained, while significant effort goes into linking them to important creation-related topics for preaching and prayer.

The choice of Francis' feast day to end the Season of Creation is significant because he is the author of the famous canticle that begins, in medieval Italian, '*Laudato si', mi Signore*' ('Praise to you, my Lord'). Many Protestants know the canticle better in its version as the hymn 'All creatures of our God and King'. In this canticle, the saint addresses sun and moon, earth, water, fire, air, and even death as sisters and brothers created, like him, by God, and which, like him, give praise to the One who made them. In popular Christian culture, Francis is often adopted as a patron saint for animals. His feast day may be used to invite people to bring their pets to church for a blessing. This is, of course, a regrettable diminution of the significance of Francis as a major theologian on many subjects, but popular piety is hard to fight.

In decentralised ecclesial polities, the Season of Creation has been variously adopted or adapted in different parts of the world, and sometimes in different regions of the same country. Local enthusiasm for the adoption of the season of creation has depended on a variety of factors, including the influence of church environmental commissions or committees; theological ambivalence about what exactly is being

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<sup>4</sup> <[oikoumene.org/resources/documents/the-living-planet-seeking-a-just-and-sustainable-global-community](http://oikoumene.org/resources/documents/the-living-planet-seeking-a-just-and-sustainable-global-community)>. Accessed 4 October 2024.

discussed, celebrated, lamented or prayed for; and liturgical caution about extended departures from calendars and lectionaries that are embedded in authoritative denominational prayer books.

A key insight in the tension between the proposed feast and the widely current season is in a distinction that Italian possesses, and which is not easy to see in many other languages. *La Creazione* is the act of creation, the divine action of making all things, visible and invisible. *Il creato* is the result of the divine action. *Il creato* encompasses everything from galaxies to human bodies, from rocks to oceans, from bacteria to kangaroos. The season has largely focussed on *il creato*. A feast would be very clearly focussed on *la Creazione*. I am using a capital letter to indicate the divine action, and perhaps we might do well to adopt a custom in English where ‘creation’ refers to the things God has made, and ‘Creation’ is the making of them by God.

### **Environmental Advocacy in the Churches**

Many church communities have dedicated environment commissions or committees. These aim to raise church members’ awareness of the crisis confronting the planet, to provide resources to help church members to make personal changes, and to advocate from a faith perspective for political changes. They are usually driven by well-informed and passionate people who love the natural world, whose conscience has been formed by Christian social teaching and its emphasis on care for the poor, and who are willing to embrace the findings of the best of contemporary science. They are keen to create opportunities to educate church members about environmental concerns.

Given the climate crisis, the rate of extinction of species, the impact of waste and pollution, and the ways in which the cost of inaction falls disproportionately on the poorest peoples of the planet, the tone of much environmental and eco-justice theology is one of lament and warning. It is prophetic, in the tradition of those biblical prophets who declared God’s displeasure with human disobedience. It calls Christians to repent of our sins of waste, exploitation, and neglect of the non-human component of creation. It calls for amendment of life. It teaches human interdependence on other creatures and the integrity of planetary systems of earth, air and water. It asserts that since every created thing belongs to God, better human stewardship of all created things is a divine requirement. The World Council of Churches document, ‘The Living Planet: Seeking a Just and Sustainable Global Community’ is a good example of this type of advocacy:

The climate emergency is an ethical, moral and spiritual crisis, manifested in a fixation on profit. The extractive and, ultimately, unsustainable systems of production and consumption, by those complicit in this crisis, continue to ignore increasing scientific, and moral warnings. We are running out of time. We must

repent from our continuing human selfishness, greed, denial of facts and apathy, which threatens the life of all creation.<sup>5</sup>

This kind of advocacy, with its strong biblical precedents, does not exaggerate the problem. In terms of its persuasiveness, though, I wonder how effective fear, blame, reproach and anger—even righteous anger—are when we trying to promote behaviour change. Public health and road safety campaigns use them, but those campaigns are aimed at individual choices (for example, to drive with seatbelt fastened, or not smoke, or not to have unprotected sex) rather than collective decision-making and behaviour change.

An alternative mode popular with environment advocates is the celebration of nature. From Genesis 1 and the psalms to the book of Job and the agrarian parables of Jesus, the Bible uses nature imagery extensively to praise God and teach about God's kingdom. There is some risk that Christians who are city-dwellers in developed countries, who do not ordinarily live too close to nature's destructive capacity, may sentimentalise creation and its beauties. 'Nature' can be a lovely place to visit but a dangerous place to live, even without the human-produced environmental problems that now plague us.

Like much other Christian social teaching, the focus on environmental advocacy has the potential to be interpreted as 'political'. Rich countries and their governments continue to avoid treating the state of the planet as a crisis or an emergency. Political policymakers are still delaying the major decisions that science insists need to be made sooner rather than later. Members of faith communities may be variously keen to, anxious about, or opposed to taking a stand on issues perceived as political. So Christian environmental advocates may find it difficult to find and use suitable platforms within their church organisations from which they can teach, influence and equip church members to be active in care for the planet.

With all this in mind, the largest group of participants at the Assisi seminar, and the most heartily in favour of a new Feast of Creation, were the Christians from all denominations who are already heavily involved in environmental advocacy and eco-justice action. Much of their work is already done ecumenically, since there are almost no historical grudges being held in this relatively recently emerging area of theology. Each of the above approaches—warning and lament, praise and delight, and political seriousness—were represented.

### **Theological and Liturgical Engagement with Creation**

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<sup>5</sup> WCC, *The Living Planet*, 2–3.

While I think that the earliest and strongest pressure for a new Feast of Creation has come from the environmental and eco-justice advocates, others are also enthusiastic about the idea and bring additional perspectives to bear on the proposal. For example, systematic theologians recognise that in the Nicene Creed (and the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, if not of the creed itself in its evolved form, occurs in 2025) each person of the Trinity is ascribed a role in the divine creation of the cosmos. God the Father is ‘maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen’. Jesus Christ is the one ‘through [whom] all things were made’. The Holy Spirit is ‘the giver of life’. Yet the calendar does not have a designated feast for this aspect of God’s work. In Assisi the contribution of Francis and his Canticle of the Creatures was prayed, interrogated and expounded with considerable depth, along with insights from many theologians, from the historical Aquinas and Bonaventure to the more recent Hans Urs Von Balthasar and Elizabeth Johnson.

The liturgical scholars were the smallest cohort of theologians present in Assisi, and probably the most cautious about the proposal for the new feast. Liturgists need little convincing about the need to care for the planet, its creatures, and our fellow human beings, especially the poor who are feeling the greatest impact from the degradation of the planet. Liturgists also recycle, install solar panels, avoid waste, and seek to influence policy makers about the environmental action that is needed and the timeframe in which change needs to happen. But liturgists are also the most aware of the complexities of the relationship between theology and worship, and of the many factors that will influence whether or not particular churches will adopt and support a new feast, even one ecumenically endorsed. What to call it? Who can authorise it? What will be its theological substance? How will it relate to existing calendars and lectionaries? What will be the date? Where will it sit in the hierarchy of holy days and seasons?

The proposal for a Feast of Creation is being considered by an increasing number of denominations, some liturgically focused, some less so. Reformed and Pentecostal churches are very interested. Could there be a ‘joint statement of intent’ from a wide range of churches, some time in 2025, in the aura surrounding the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, about the desire for a new Feast of Creation? As discussions continue, I propose some questions that liturgists, with our particular theological skills, may need to consider in detail and in depth. Our polities and processes vary from denomination to denomination, and (for example, in the Anglican Communion) even within denominations, so that global answers to these questions will not be possible. One size will definitely not fit all. But if most of our churches are going to embrace a new Feast of Creation, all of our churches, with our liturgical experts, will need to consider these questions. What will be the environmentally aware and theologically astute liturgists’ particular contribution to the church’s discussions about introducing a new feast? The following list sketches some of the dimensions that must be addressed as proposals move forward.

### *Ecumenical Energy*

The proposal is strongly ecumenical, and that is a very good thing. Liturgists have a fine history of collaborating ecumenically over the past seventy-five years. We have worked hard to produce some ecumenically agreed liturgical texts for general use across the denominations. So, we may ask: What will be our protocols for adopting, adapting and sharing liturgical texts ecumenically for the new feast?

### *Necessary Allies*

For a new feast to be adopted, its promoters will need allies. Those allies will be part of various existing bodies: ourselves as the liturgy bodies; the denominational ecumenical conversations; denominational doctrinal bodies; bishops' or pastors' conferences; and other church social policy bodies. Of these, who has the most clout, and can exercise influence for change in our various contexts? Which of these are liturgists most likely to be able to influence or persuade? And whom will liturgists need to cultivate, when the time comes for agreeing new text, readings and actions for the high-level adoption of a new feast?

### *Beyond a Mere Feast*

A new feast will not, by itself, get all Christians committed to saving the planet and protecting the poor. There are no shortcuts from the prayer and worship of *lex orandi* to the ethics and action of *lex vivendi*. Furthermore, in the secular world, environmental matters are often perceived as highly political. There are many Christians who are avoidant, at best, when it comes to the connection between faith and politics. The feast will be helpful for consciousness-raising, but it will not be sufficient to fill the perceived creation-shaped gap in the calendar. It will not remove the need for creation to be preached all year round. There is ample material already in the lectionary that an astute preacher can use to focus attention on the Creator and the creation. So, we must ask: What can liturgists offer by way of catechesis about Creation beyond a new feast?

### *Patriarchy and Doxology*

'God the Father, maker of heaven and earth' comes first in the creed and is firmly embedded in the minds of worshippers. Christ ('through whom all things were made') and the Spirit ('the Lord, the giver of life') are certainly credited in the creed for their role in Creation, but they tend to fall out of the spotlight. We definitely do not need another feast of 'God the Father'. Theologians are working on this. Catholics have the exhortation that the calendar should expound the whole mystery of Christ, to encourage christological exploration and are leveraging this to call for the new feast as having a strongly christological focus. Yet the Spirit remains, too often, an afterthought in Western theology, and some have noted that, Creation aside, the biggest ecumenical problem with the Nicene Creed is still the *filioque*! How can liturgists help to prevent a new feast becoming yet another re-inscription of patriarchal God-language? How can

we use the opportunity presented by this new feast to make our trinitarian language richer, more expansive, and less masculine?

#### *Interactions: Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi, Lex Vivendi*

Most of the current impetus for this new feast has come from environmental advocates, stressing the importance of ethical action, the *lex vivendi*. Classically, though, prayer comes first, then theology explores what prayer teaches, and our way of life then expresses the developed theology. In the case of the proposed new feast, we seem to be working backwards through the series. The prayer resources for *La Creazione* don't exist yet. What will they look like? How will they be generated? They will need to be terse, repeatable, true, grammatical, theologically significant, and, God willing, even a bit beautiful. What will the liturgical propers (collects, readings, thanksgivings, canticles, confessions, absolutions, blessings, dismissals, occasional prayers, and so on) for a new feast look and sound like? How and by whom will they be generated? And, once they are in use, what response will subsequent theology and ethics have to those liturgical propers?

#### *Authorisation and Publication Processes*

For most Australian Anglicans, both calendar and lectionary are embedded in *A Prayer Book for Australia* (1995). This book was authorised as 'liturgical resources' by our General Synod. Changes to the calendar and the lectionary would require majority votes by all houses of General Synod, but Synod is not a great place for discussing theological niceties. Other Anglican provinces and other denominations will have their own in-house authorisation processes to negotiate. If there is an ecumenical joint statement of intent about the new feast, and if our various churches want to pursue the formal adoption and full authorisation of a new feast, making it a reality will likely be a long and inevitably controversial process for most of us. Liturgists will need to ask early, and start work early, on what would be required, in each of our systems, polities and authorisation regimes for full authorisation of a new feast. And we will also need to consider the consequences for the various forms of liturgical publishing, from the traditional hard-copy books to the now-widespread digital publication of resources.

#### *Sacramentality*

I noted earlier the distinction between *il creato* and *la Creazione*. *Il creato* is accessible, understandable, sensory. It can be touched, tasted, smelled, seen and heard. It is easy to incorporate in liturgical expression, and it dominates the current de facto Season of Creation. *La Creazione* is much harder to grasp and to represent. But the new feast will be primarily about *la Creazione*, not *il creato*. How will liturgists help to change the focus for the new feast? How can we help the created things point to their Creator rather than to themselves in all their beauty and complexity? This is about sacramentality, about how the visible points to and makes present the invisible, without replacing or upstaging it. How will liturgists support a change of focus from *il creato* to *la Creazione*?

### *Major feast, or?*

Liturgical churches usually have a hierarchy of feasts. Catholics have memorials, feasts, solemnities. Australian Anglicans have Principal Holy Days (which merit a first Evensong as well as eucharistic propers), Holy Days and Commemorations or Lesser Festivals. Liturgists will need to consider where, in their particular church's hierarchy of feasts, a new Feast of Creation would sit. Must it be observed on its given date (likely 1 September)? Could it be transferred to the following Sunday? What are the local criteria for categorising celebrations? Where would this new feast sit in the rankings, and why?

### *Tension: Feast versus Season*

Liturgists may support a feast but resist a 'season' with associated departures from calendar and possibly lectionary for up to five weeks. The enthusiasm for the Season of Creation may be difficult or impossible to rein in. If liturgists agree to promote the feast, what will we recommend about the de facto season, and all the multitude of creative resources that have already been generated to help to celebrate it?

### *Balance of Liturgical Modes*

Lament, penitence, thanksgiving, petition, doxology—each of these liturgical modes has a proper place not only in the calendar but in each celebration of the Eucharist. In a new Feast of Creation, the principal focus would likely be on doxology, in the spirit of St Francis' Canticle of the Creatures, which praises God the Creator. Lament and penitence have featured in much environment-related liturgical creativity, and they remain important. But what are the best motivators for people to change their behaviour? How can liturgy provide those nudges? What do liturgists see as the right balance between the major liturgical modes, for a new Feast of Creation?

### *Creation, Redemption and Sanctification*

Many Christian traditions, and perhaps especially Protestants, have a bias toward theologising about redemption, with heavy devotional attention to the cross in preaching and hymnody. Catholics, in turn, have the Stations of the Cross. To bring Creation forward, a *Via Creationis* is being developed and tested,<sup>6</sup> modelled on the Stations of the Cross. In it, participants read and pray both Genesis 1 and the 'book of science', from the Big Bang to modern scientific theories of evolution. Prayed in the outdoors, the 'cathedral of nature', the *Via Creationis* can be useful in making sure that the focus of our praise does not shift too quickly from God creating the world to God saving the world. The subsequent shift, from human gratitude for Creation and redemption to active human commitment to creation-related sanctification, will also need to be carefully managed. What can liturgists do, to make a focus on Creation a real priority for those for whom a focus on redemption has long been primary?

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<sup>6</sup> <laudatosimovement.org/news/via-creationis-contemplating-the-mystery-of-creation>. Accessed 4 October 2024.



### *Creative Arts Partners*

New liturgical texts are likely to be few, limited and heavily scrutinised. Additional devotional and spiritually expressive material will be needed to flesh out the basic liturgical provisions that are eventually authorised for a new feast. Visual artists, musicians, hymn writers, poets and others will need to help create a new treasury of creation-related material. How will liturgists help to connect with artists, poets and musicians, offering clear and inspiring invitations to complement and illuminate the texts for a new feast?

### **Next Steps**

In Assisi in May 2025, another gathering will be held to discuss further the ecumenical promotion of a Feast of Creation. Liturgists from all the churches need to be represented there, either in person or online. We will need to prepare carefully and well, not only for possible input to the conversation, but also to the world-wide and local decision-making that may flow from it. The future of our calendars, lectionaries and embodied celebrations will reflect the quality of our engagement with the challenge of a new Feast of Creation.