

Article

# Laudato Si' and Spatial Turn: A Theological Approach

Alexandre Palma

CITER—Centro de Investigação em Teologia e Estudos de Religião, Faculdade de Teologia, Universidade Católica Portuguesa, 1649-023 Lisbon, Portugal; alexandre.palma@ucp.pt

**Abstract:** This article analyses the encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* against the backdrop of the contemporary and theological “spatial turn”. It asks if and how *Laudato Si'* incorporates the main elements of this movement that pushes for a reappraisal of space and/or place in theological reasoning. This inquiry is motivated by a public and constructive understanding of theology, with the conviction that it too should bring its specific contribution to the challenges of the “Common Home”. The article starts by characterizing this theological “spatial turn”, and by putting it into the context of similar trends in other human and social sciences. Secondly, it focuses on the analysis of *Laudato Si'*, namely by considering the role played in it by spatiality. Thirdly, and in a brief systematic way, it presents some concluding remarks that describe how *Laudato Si'* may be interpreted in the “spatial turn” framework. Following these remarks, the article concludes that there is a moderate incorporation in *Laudato Si'* of the concerns that promote and sustain a theological “spatial turn”.

**Keywords:** *Laudato Si'*; Pope Francis; common home; spatial turn; space; place; spatiality; God; time

“God of love, show us our *place* in this world”

Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*

## 1. Introduction

Spatiality is an essential element of the human historical condition. It is a constitutive anthropological element, relevant regardless of the culture or historical period under consideration. We are always placed beings; that is, in any circumstance, we are always somewhere. And this feature is not merely accidental or irrelevant to who we are and to the way we live. Quite the opposite, the space and/or place in which we live determine, in very deep ways, our own identity and culture.

The current environmental challenges are also spatial challenges, and the growing awareness of them has also shown how vital space and/or place are to human communities. In fact, the degradation or even the loss of some natural spaces and/or places is not just a geographical or environmental issue, because they also have a huge impact on human beings and communities. They are, therefore, challenges to all areas of human activity and thought. That is why one cannot fully address these environmental challenges without seriously taking into consideration all anthropological and social aspects of space and/or place. It is not by chance that these contemporary challenges were described in *Laudato Si'* (Pope Francis 2015) with a great spatial metaphor: “common home” (Pope Francis 2015, n. 1). The complexity and interconnectedness of reality demands such apolyphonic approach, not only to environmental issues but also to space and/or place.

In this article, the issue of space and/or place is tackled from a theological perspective. It assumes that theological reasoning is one of those areas of human thought summoned to delve into the relevance of spatiality, particularly in the current context of environmental and social unrest. This unrest is what *Laudato Si'* describes as an “increasing sensitivity to the environment and the need to protect nature, along with a growing concern, both genuine and distressing, for what is happening to our planet” (Pope Francis 2015, n. 19). The growing awareness to the contemporary environmental challenges should also include



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a reassessment of space and/or place since a significant part of these challenges includes safeguarding particular physical contexts (such as natural ecosystems or social settings). Not by chance, ecology is also a spatial concept since it refers to a home (*oikos*).

This perspective entails a public understanding of theology, aiming, therefore, to challenge a self-referential theological practice. This can be considered in a twofold manner. On the one hand, theological discourse is called to take part in a wider discussion, entering into dialogue with other sources of knowledge, learning from them, and presenting to them its own specific contribution. That is precisely what is tried in this article, in which theology is seen as benefiting from the “spatial turn” initiated by other scientific disciplines while, at the same time, bringing its specific voice to the reassessment of spatiality in times of social and environmental challenges. On the other hand, it is a fact that “public theologies reflect the contextuality of the Christian religion” and that much of it “is dependent on place” (Wabel et al. 2022, p. 3). The present exercise does not focus on particular contexts but, by addressing some more fundamental aspects of space and/or place, it also resonates with a public understanding of theology. This also entails a constructive understanding of theology. Theologians should cooperate with others in the search for solutions and ways forward. The complexity of the “Common Home” and the challenges it faces require nothing less from theology.

This article is, therefore, guided by the effort to answer the following fundamental question: how does Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si’* contemplate the issue of space and/or place? The encyclical constitutes, therefore, this study’s object of research. The hypothesis being explored is that space does play some role in the argument made by Pope Francis. But what role might that be? How can it be theologically characterized? This study takes notice that the encyclical’s essential statement is expressed by a spatial metaphor: “common home”. That is surely one reason for *Laudato Si’* to be considered under the issue of space and/or place. It is the encyclical itself to support such an approach. In addition to that, one should ask if *Laudato Si’*, a pivotal document in contemporary Catholic *magisterium* (but also an expression of a broader evolution of Christian theology with regard to environmental challenges), is consistent in its theological argument with the desired goal of an “ecological conversion” (Pope Francis 2015, n. 217). Since this cannot be performed here in its entirety, this article focuses on the spatial aspect of that theological argument. That is the reason why the encyclical is also considered in the context of the theological “spatial turn”. In fact, this movement has been underlining the theological importance of space and/or place, and that is precisely what is at stake in this analysis of *Laudato Si’*.

In order to reach its goal, and to present a well-founded answer to these posed questions, this article is structured in three parts: in the first part, it presents and contextualizes the “spatial turn” in theology and how it benefited from a similar trend in other academic fields; in the second, the study focuses on *Laudato Si’*, paying attention to how space and/or place are considered in it; and, finally, in the third, it proposes a systematic synthesis of the way spatiality is considered in *Laudato Si’*.

## 2. Theology and Its “Spatial Turn”

Space has been largely overlooked in Western thought and, as a consequence, also in Christian theology. This is, at least, the view of the majority of theologians who have delved into the issue of spatiality. Moltmann, perhaps one of the first theologians who focused his attention on it, stated that “[theological] meditations on space are rare. [...] The categories of space have been left to scientists” (Moltmann 1985, p. 140). Bergmann agrees: “Space and place have been marginalized or even absent in theology for long periods of its history” (Bergmann 2007, p. 353). To almost all of them, this absence in theology is a consequence of a “demise of place” (Inge 2003, pp. 1–13) in Western thought altogether. Similarly, Sheldrake talks about a “crisis of place in Western societies, and sense of rootlessness, dislocation or displacement. Part of this crisis is cultural” (Sheldrake 2001, p. 2). These analyses, though, do not go completely unchallenged. Lion, for example,

in his review of Inge's work, finds these claims unconvincing, since "there is plenty of philosophical reflection on the subject" (Lion 2005, p. 255). His analysis focuses more on Inge's work than on the main conviction that space and/or place have been overlooked in Western thought and in Christian theology. For instance, Lion argues that Bachelard's work *The Poetics of Space* shows that spatiality was not demised to the degree that Inge and other proponents of a "spatial turn" say it was. But, this view too can be questioned, since Bachelard can be seen as a key figure in the philosophical "spatial turn" and not as someone that preceded that trend. In addition to this legitimate debate regarding how absent space and/or place really have been from Western and Christian concerns, the fact is that the so-called "spatial turn" rests on this critical analysis and on the effort to overcome what is understood to be an absence of spatiality in Western and theological thought.

### 2.1. "Spatial Turn" and Its Interdisciplinary Nature

"Spatial turn" can be described as a broad intellectual movement that assumes spatiality as a fundamental element to interpret the human condition and its social dynamics. This trend really gained traction from the 1980s onward, mainly in the humanities and social sciences. According to Warf and Arias, it insists that "no social or cultural phenomenon can be torn from its spatial context, [...] that no meaningful understanding of how human beings produce and reproduce their worlds can be achieved without invoking a sense that the social, the temporal, the intellectual, and the personal are inescapably always and everywhere also the spatial" (Warf and Arias 2009, p. 7). But, the main intuition in "spatial turn" goes beyond the sheer recognition that something that happens always occurs somewhere. More than just that, it assumes that the place where something is and happens plays an active role in that. Therefore, space and/or place play an active role in human phenomena. "Space matters [then] not for the trivial and self-evident reason that everything occurs in space, but because *where* events unfold is integral to *how* they take shape. [...] Space is not simply a passive reflection of social and cultural trends, but an active participant" (Warf and Arias 2009, p. 10). As a consequence, welcoming this "spatial turn" in theology also means not just recognizing that any religious experience of God always happens somewhere, but also that the place where it happens plays a decisive role in that experience. The theological "spatial turn" assumes, therefore, that space and/or place play a decisive role in the religious experience of God and in the idea believers have of him.

This contemporary reappraisal of space is a movement that did not start in theology. On the contrary, theology has been benefiting from numerous outputs of other disciplines and, above all, has greatly inherited from them the concern with space and the recognition of its active role in human dynamics. This is a profoundly interdisciplinary endeavour. A more comprehensive synthesis of this contemporary spatial movement can already be found in the works of Warf and Arias (2009), of Döring and Thielmann (2008), and of Wüthrich (2015, pp. 28–89). It is worthwhile to mention, though, that the expression "spatial turn" was first used by geographer Edward Soja (Wüthrich 2015, p. 27), in his work *Postmodern Geographies* (Soja 1989). But this new look at spatiality had its roots in previous contributions and from different research areas. In this context, other geographers should also be mentioned, such as Yi-Fu Tuan, who coined the expression "topophilia" (Tuan [1974] 1990), and David Harvey (2001). But, many other decisive contributions came from philosophy, such as *The Poetics of Space* by Bachelard, with its "topoanalysis" Bachelard ([1958] 1994), *Human Space*, by Bollnow ([1963] 2011), or the essay "Des espaces autres", by Foucault ([1967] 2004); from sociology, such as *The Production of Space*, by Lefebvre ([1974] 1991) and *Central Problems in Social Theory*, by Giddens (1979); from anthropology, such as *The Sacred and the Profane*, by Eliade ([1957] 1987) and *Non-Places*, by Augé ([1992] 2009); or from literary studies, such as *Esthétique et théorie du roman*, by Bakhtine ([1975] 1987), with its concept of "chronotopos", and *Geocriticism*, by Westphal (2011).

This scientific movement was, at least from the get-go, influenced by a materialistic approach to geography. Harvey, for example, says it clearly: "Space relations and geograph-

ical phenomena are fundamental material attributes" (Harvey 1985, p. 33). There is, in fact, a material or physical nature in space that cannot be overlooked, as perhaps it too often has been in theological approaches to spatiality. But, the human experience of space is not reducible to this physical or quantitative dimension. There is also a more subjective element to it, which explains why an individual might experience the same place in different ways in different times, or why different people might experience the same place differently. As sociologist Löw rightly puts it, "materialist approaches are unable (and often unwilling) to move conceptually into everyday spaces". Alternatively, she considers that "spaces designate relationships" (Löw 2013). This is paramount for a theological "spatial turn" since it cannot downplay the material aspect of space and/or place, but it also has to allow for its openness to transcendence. Not by chance, this relational understanding of place is essential to contemporary theologians' views on space and/or place (Inge 2003, pp. 78–86).

## 2.2. "Spatial Turn" in Theological Discourse

Classic theology did face the issue of spatiality, considering it under the attribute of divine omnipresence and in the realm of natural theology. But, the development of modern science introduced to Western culture significant transformations in the understanding of space. Space became less and less a metaphysical reality and more and more a physical variable. It was "disenchanted" and mathematized. This may be one of the reasons why, since modernity and according to some "spatial turn" proponents, theologians avoided dealing with the logic of place (Inge 2003, pp. 5–9; Hjalmarson 2014, pp. 26–27). On the one hand, being God a spiritual entity, he would be beyond any spatial consideration. He would be anywhere and nowhere at the same time, rendering, therefore, space and/or place of little theological meaning. On the other hand, being space and/or place a quantitative and measurable reality, there is no easy way to relate it with a spiritual being such as God. This question was met with very different answers. Various forms of *deism* tended to dismiss, altogether, any theological significance of space. On almost the opposite side, *pantheism* strongly associated God with all existing things and, therefore, with spatiality. More nuanced answers were proposed by *panentheism* or by authors, such as Augustine, Anselm, or Thomas Aquinas, who tried, each in his own way, to distinguish different forms of presence. Augustine and Anselm seem more effective in affirming that God, while being fully present in every place, cannot be spatially contained than in characterizing what that other form of presence might be (Hudson 2009; Wierenga 2023). Aquinas, on the other hand, states that God is present by his power ("inasmuch as all things are subject to His power"), by his knowledge ("as all things are bare and open to His eyes"), and by his essence ("inasmuch as He is present to all as the cause of their being", Thomas Aquinas 2017, STh I, 8, 3). This way, he does propose a positive answer to the question of knowing if and how God can be said to be present in the world. Some contemporary theological approaches propose a relational interpretation of space and/or place. What qualifies space theologically is the revelation that happens in it and the relation with God that it evokes. That is why elements, like memory, narrative or particularity, are so vital to some of these contemporary theologies of place (Sheldrake 2001, pp. 16–32; Inge 2003, pp. 78–86). Without going against the patristic and medieval views on the omnipresence of God, these approaches have opened new ways for a theological reassessment of space and/or place.

As previously mentioned, any reassessment of space and/or place in contemporary theology is grounded in the critical analysis that this issue has been marginalized from the theological agenda. In this aspect too, theology follows the lead of other disciplines, since a similar diagnosis has been made regarding other human and social sciences or regarding Western cultures at large. Two particular features stand out, though, in the theological discourse on space and/or place: the first is in regard to the relation between time and space; the second relates to the search for the most suitable theological term for spatiality.

### 2.2.1. Time versus Space

A first common feature in the theological discourse by authors proposing a “spatial turn” is that Western cultures and theologies have granted more importance to time than to space. In his scientific and philosophical inquiry on space, Jammer had already denounced the bias of assuming that “time is logically prior to space” (Jammer 1993, p. 5). Casey, one of the philosophers who inspired this “spatial turn”, even coined the expression “temporocentrism” to name the “belief in the hegemony of time” (Casey 1998, p. x). Inge agrees with him by also talking about a cultural and theological “subordination of space to time” (Inge 2003, p. 9). He goes so far as to see in the II Vatican Council “a shift from emphasis on sacred space to sacred time” within the Catholic Church (Inge 2003, p. 119). Bergmann, too, thinks that “Christian theology [. . .] mirrors a strong characteristic of the so-called ‘Western culture and its history’, which consequently has placed time over space” (Bergmann 2007, p. 354). Moltmann says the same thing but does it in a more biographical way. He notices a shift in his own long theological carrier from time-centred concerns, in an earlier stage, to space-centred concerns (Moltmann 2000, p. 313). Ecotheological concerns were at the core of this shift, and it can be seen as a “spatial turn” within Moltmann’s own theology.

This hegemony of time over space impacted, above all, the theological consideration of history, with consequences, for example, in the way Revelation and Salvation were understood. All too often, and in a non-programmed way, history meant (and perhaps still does), above all, the flow of time. The focus was on the *diachronic* nature of history and not as much on its *diatopical* relevance. As a consequence, Revelation tended to be seen as progressing, from one stage to another (patriarchs, kings, prophets, sages), until the period of its complete fulfilment. Salvation tended to be seen as the transition from a time marked by sin to a time marked by grace, until the advent of its eschatological wholeness. The different spaces and/or places where revelatory events occurred were acknowledged but not given an equivalent theological significance. Different spatial images were used to talk and think about eschatological salvation (such as paradise or “new Jerusalem”), but they were used more as symbolic forms of expression than as real theological descriptions. The theological method also tends to be preferably diachronic. It, too, is particularly attentive to the way theological sources, issues, and concepts evolve through time. Only recently, with the development of contextual approaches, did the logic of space gain some momentum in theological practice. “Spatial turn” advocates that history is not just time. It is also space. History is lived time in a particular place. The historicity that constitutes human existence and, consequently, its relationship with the divine is temporal, but it is also spatial.

### 2.2.2. Space versus Place

A second recurring element in the arguments made by authors pushing for a “spatial turn” in theology relates to the search for the most accurate concepts to support this trend. Two main words are in play: space and place (which is why both terms are referred to across this study). On this particular issue, the authors mentioned tend to follow different paths. Moltmann, for example, uses the broader notion of “space” (*Raum*). In fact, he seems less concerned than others with a more generic or theoretical approach to theological spatiality. This has also to do with whom he wants to dialogue with: physicists and other scientists. Other authors, such as Inge, criticize not only the hegemonic role of time in Western culture but also the scientific notion of space. Here, too, he seems to follow the view of Casey. According to him: “place barely survived discussion by the end of the seventeenth century. By the end of the eighteenth century, it vanished altogether from serious theoretical discourse in physics and philosophy” (Casey 1998, p. 133). As a consequence, there was a “radical dissolution and disappearance of place” and “place ceded place fully to space in the course of just two centuries” (Casey 1998, p. 133). Inge extends this same argument, speaking about “demise” and “eclipse of place”. He struggles against the abstract nature of space, which he thinks is not suited to a theological reappraisal of spatiality. Instead, he clearly prefers the logic of place, which he explains in this way: “‘space’ is more abstract



than 'place'. What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value. [...] When we think of space, most of us will tend to think about 'outer space' and 'infinity', but when we think of place, on the other hand, we will tend to think locally, a particular spot. What is undifferentiated space becomes for us significant place" (Inge 2003, p. 1). The same view is shared by Sheldrake, for whom "the concept of place refers not simply to geographical location but to a dialectical relationship between environment and human narrative. Place is space that has the capacity to be remembered and to evoke what is most precious" (Sheldrake 2001, p. 1). This theological reappraisal of place, and the critical analysis of Western culture that underlies it, should also consider more thoroughly the advantages of modern and scientific homogenization of space. Despite that, this theological rehabilitation of place might well be one of the most fruitful contributions of "spatial turn" to ecotheology.

### 3. *Laudato Si'* and Spatiality

Pope Francis' encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* represents a landmark in ecotheology. Although it should be read in the light of the broader social teaching of the Catholic Church, this letter sealed the full reception of ecology into Catholic *magisterium* and theology. One main principle gives unity to the whole text and, more importantly, to its view on Creation: "Everything is interconnected" (Pope Francis 2015, n. 240). This key intuition allows for a more comprehensive view of ecology, opening it to social, anthropological, economic, political, cultural, and religious dimensions, rather than narrowing it to just a set of environmental problems. It is precisely this deeper and wider understanding of ecology that came to be labelled "integral ecology" (Pope Francis 2015, chp. IV). This same view is also symbolically translated into the spatial metaphor "Common Home" (Pope Francis 2015, n. 1).

This study will now inquire about the role of spatiality in *Laudato Si'*. It tries, then, to analyse this encyclical against the backdrop of the described "spatial turn" in theology. In sum, it will try to understand if and how space and/or place are considered in *Laudato Si'*. Are there, in the text, traces of the trends that have set this theological movement in motion? And, if so, does Pope Francis take spatiality as seriously as the "spatial turn" proponents would expect? The following topics will present, as objectively as possible, the fundamental conclusions of this inquiry.

#### 3.1. Spatiality in the Text

After a textual or lexical analysis of *Laudato Si'*, it is fair to say that no great role is given to the notions of space and place. These two concepts do appear in the text, but they do not seem to be vital in it. In addition to that, both terms seem to be used in an interchangeable fashion, which might signal that, differently from authors somehow related to the theological "spatial turn", *Laudato Si'* does not question potential differences in meaning between space and place.

In some cases, the terms are used with no specific meaning, and they serve more as linguistic tools to build an argument, for example, when it is said that "within the *space* of a few years countless species are lost" (Pope Francis 2015, n. 38), or when it proposes "an approach to ecology which respects our unique *place* as human beings in this world" (Pope Francis 2015, n. 15).

In several other cases, these two terms are used to make reference to more or less specific external spatial environments, and such are the cases of "green *spaces*" (Pope Francis 2015, nn. 44–45), of the "environmental *space* throughout the world for depositing gas residues" (Pope Francis 2015, n. 51), of "public *spaces*" (Pope Francis 2015, n. 103) or "public *place* (a building, a fountain, an abandoned monument, a landscape, a square)" (Pope Francis 2015, n. 232), or even of "sacred *space*" (Pope Francis 2015, n. 146).

There is also a use of these terms that suggests a more internal or even relational understanding of spatiality. That can be found, for example, in the appeal for a "*space* for each one's alternative creativity" (Pope Francis 2015, n. 108). This more open understanding

of space and/or place also includes the relationship with God, admitting, therefore, that spatiality can be theologically open to transcendence; that is, the transcendent God may reveal himself in and through immanent spaces and/or places. For example, when *Laudato Si'* mentions monks, it says they were convinced that the desert “was the best *place* for encountering the presence of God” (Pope Francis 2015, n. 126), or when it talks about the family, it states that it is “the *place* in which life—the gift of God—can be properly welcomed” (Pope Francis 2015, n. 213).

### 3.2. *Space and Reductive Views on It*

*Laudato Si'* challenges a technocratic view of space, understood as being reductive and misleading. In this regard, Pope Francis' theology is fairly in line with the proponents of a “spatial turn”. These are critical of an understanding of space as a mere container for physical entities, which may have started with Aristotle, and led to the modern and scientific homogenization of space (Inge 2003, pp. 3–7). In this case, space would not play a decisive role in reality, being instead a fundamentally passive variable in the equation of the human world. *Laudato Si'* also criticizes this view, associating it with the nefarious effects of anthropocentrism and with the rule of a technological mindset: “Modern anthropocentrism has paradoxically ended up prizing technical thought over reality, since “the technological mind sees nature as an insensate order [. . .], as a mere ‘given’, as an object of utility, as raw material to be hammered into useful shape; it views the cosmos similarly as a mere ‘*space*’ into which objects can be thrown with complete indifference” (Pope Francis 2015, n. 115). Implied in this statement is, then, an understanding of the cosmos and of its spatiality as being much more than just an empty box to be filled by human activity.

In this regard, *Laudato Si'* also moves away from a passive understanding of space, just like “spatial turn” theologians do too. It does it, perhaps, for different reasons. Within the “spatial turn” movement, this is a consequence of the theoretical reassessment of what space is, while in *Laudato Si'*, this is rooted in a more practical, social, and cultural analysis, aimed at a transformation of reality.

### 3.3. *Space and Time*

In *Laudato Si'*, one finds an echo of the same dialectic relationship between space and time that can also be found in many essays on the “spatial turn”. As previously mentioned, these tend to denounce a historical hegemony of time over space. *Laudato Si'*, however, seems to transform that hegemony into a theological principle of its own: “Time is greater than space” (Pope Francis 2015, n. 178). This principle had already been expressed by Pope Francis in some of his previous documents: *Lumen fidei* (Pope Francis 2013b, n. 55) and *Evangelii gaudium* (Pope Francis 2013a, nn. 222–25). The disagreement between Pope Francis and this decisive element of the “spatial turn” argument seems hard to miss.

In its proper context, perhaps the view that “time is greater than space” might not seem so contradictory to this cornerstone of the “spatial turn”. As a matter of fact, nowhere in *Laudato Si'* does there seem to be any will to undermine the relevance of space and/or place as such. On the other hand, if we take *Lumen fidei* and *Evangelii gaudium* into consideration, it becomes clear that this principle was formulated in order to value ecclesial and social processes opened to the future: “*Space* hardens processes, whereas time propels towards the future” (Pope Francis 2013a, n. 55); “One of the faults which we occasionally observe in sociopolitical activity is that *spaces* and power are preferred to time and processes. Giving priority to *space* means madly attempting to keep everything together in the present, trying to possess all the *spaces* of power and of self-assertion [. . .]. Giving priority to time means being concerned about initiating processes rather than possessing *spaces*” (Pope Francis 2013b, n. 223). It is, therefore, clear that Pope Francis' criticism is not aimed at space as such but much more at the efforts to control reality and to close it in its present state. This association of space with domination and limitedness should be critically addressed because it assumes a restrictive understanding of what space is. As modern physics shows, space and time form a continuum, and space is an expanding reality, being, therefore,

radically open to the future (Jammer 1993), precisely as Pope Francis prophetically wants to propose through this principle. But, despite all that, and to sum it up, *Laudato Si'* still propagates a certain prevalence of time over space, even though that seems to be a consequence of the form in which it addresses the issue and not the result of a deliberate intention to undermine the importance of space and/or place.

### 3.4. Space and God

It is also important to consider how *Laudato Si'* links spatiality and God. On the one hand, the encyclical talks about spaces and/or places in which human beings experience God and, therefore, of spatiality as one feature of a historical encounter with God. For example, when talking about indigenous communities, Pope Francis underscores that the “land [for them] is not a commodity but rather a gift from God and from their ancestors who rest there, [it is] a *sacred space*” (Pope Francis 2015, n. 146). This is surely the most common theological approach to spatiality, widely echoed by “spatial turn” proponents. This theological interpretation of space and/or place can be labelled as “sacramental” and can be framed in the following way: “sacramentality does not mean that the world itself is self-revelatory of God in a general and indiscriminate manner. Rather, it means that the world in all its diverse aspects can be the *place* of God’s own self-revelation” (Inge 2003, p. 67). Hjalmarson talks about a “*via media* [...] between the idolatry of place on the one hand and the de-sacralization of place on the other” (Hjalmarson 2014, p. 108). This balanced way to theologially value space and/or place, neither setting it apart from God nor sacralising the world as such, also sees them as elements of conversion or transformation, just like sacraments also are: “a sacramental sensibility is not affirmative of the sacredness of the world of *places* in some naïve way. It also has a transformative element. The world may be a gift of God but it is also a *place* at odds with itself” (Sheldrake 2001, p. 76). On the other hand, *Laudato Si'* suggests another way to theologially link God to space. In this case, God (the Father) is presented as a “space” giver: “Every creature is thus the object of the Father’s tenderness, who *gives* it its *place* in the world” (Pope Francis 2015, n. 77). This different “theo-logical” approach to space does not go as far as some theologians have gone, but it points in the direction that God may not only be seen as present in space and/or place (the sacramental approach), but that God himself is the space that allows Creation to exist and subsist. In the contemporary theological scenario, it is Moltmann who has further developed this view, considering not just God in space but also God as space for its Creation (Moltmann 2000, pp. 140–57; Moltmann 2002, pp. 29–41; Wüthrich 2015, pp. 325–68). *Laudato Si'* surely does not go as far as that but, at the least, allows for that theological perspective to be explored.

## 4. *Laudato Si'* and Spatial Turn

This study began with a contextualization of the “spatial turn” in contemporary thought and, most importantly, how it has been received in theology. Afterward, it analysed how the issue of space and/or place is considered by Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*. It is now the moment to present some concluding remarks on how *Laudato Si'* can be interpreted against the backdrop of the “spatial turn”. These remarks are now briefly presented in a systematic fashion in the following topics.

### 4.1. Concrete Approach to Space and/or Place

The “spatial turn” movement aims for a positive reappraisal of real spaces and/or places, be it for theological reasons or be it for ecological concerns. Some authors engaged with this topic in the context of pilgrimage practices (Hjalmarson), others as an element of their studies on spirituality (Sheldrake), others in the context of the pastoral care of sanctuaries (Inge), and others as natural progress in a long and established academic life (Moltmann). Underlying these different theological reasons, one can find, in much of the theological literature on space and/or place, environmental concerns. As Bergmann admitted, “environmental breakthrough and creative ecological thinking offer the wider



context for the *spatial turn* of the academy in general as well as of theology in particular” (Bergmann 2007, p. 356). Something similar can be said about *Laudato Si’*. Its goals are wide, going from politics to lifestyle, from economics to culture, and from education to spirituality. But, a main concern with “integral ecology” and the assumption that this is truly a theological issue give coherence to the encyclical’s broad spectrum of interests. It, too, is moved by theological reasons and ecological concerns, namely the realization that “a crime against the natural world is a sin against ourselves and a sin against God” (Pope Francis 2015, n. 9). In other words, the encyclical assumes that there is a specific theological dimension in the contemporary environmental challenges and that there are, as a consequence, specific theological insights to ecology.

Both tend to value an appraisal of concrete spaces and/or places over a more generic or fundamental approach to spatiality. As previously mentioned, in *Laudato Si’*, the words space and/or place frequently refer to real external areas. In fact, Pope Francis does not speculate theoretically about spatiality but, rather, talks about particular spaces and/or places. “Spatial turn” proponents often ground their theology on more theoretical analyses of what space and/or place are (and are not) and on the way the topic has been overlooked in Western Christian theology. But, they too tend to value concrete spaces over a theoretical hermeneutic of spatiality. Moltmann might be considered an exception in this regard since he does speculate on what space is and on how God can be interpreted in spatial terms. Typical of the “spatial turn” movement is a negative assessment of the homogenization of space, established in modernity and that does not promote the realization of the peculiar identity of each particular space. That is the reason why a significant number of these “spatial turn” proponents are critical of the theological use of the term “space” and passionately use, instead, the term “place”. For them, space is an abstraction. Only concrete places are real. In its own way, and even if pursuing different goals, *Laudato Si’* seems to agree with that and to follow the same inductive method that starts with what exists.

#### 4.2. Unsolved Tension between Time and Space

As previously observed, *Laudato Si’* still extends a tensional or even dialectical view of the relationships between time and space. In this regard, by stating that “time is greater than space” (Pope Francis 2015, n. 178), the encyclical tends to confirm the general understanding by “spatial turn” proponents that there is a “one-sided emphasis on time” (Bergmann 2007, p. 373) in theology. In this sense, *Laudato Si’* fails to explore all the theological significance of space and/or place and cannot be easily associated with the contemporary theological “spatial turn” movement.

It seems, though, that, in the encyclical, there is no deliberate will to demise spaciality, but there is just an underdeveloped understanding of what space is. As previously shown, the relativization of space in Pope Francis’s thought serves a bigger goal, which is to “initiate processes” (Pope Francis 2013a, n. 223). Time, in his view, better expresses that desired openness to new possibilities, free from the temptation of wanting to control reality. Why such a higher purpose could not be formulated in spatial terms is something that the Argentine Pope never really clarifies.

A more balanced perspective could have been reached if the encyclical’s view of time and space was more influenced by modern science. In fact, and differently from other historical periods, modern physics no longer opposes time and space as if they were two unarticulated variables. On the contrary, space-time forms a *continuum*, which better describes nature and reality. The when and the where of things are mutually dependent. In other words, modern physics suggests that time and space are not to be dialectically interpreted but, rather, seen as two faces of the same reality. *Laudato Si’* would have benefited from such a view when dealing with the relationships between time and space, especially when its main thesis is precisely that “everything is interconnected” (Pope Francis 2015, n. 240). Time and space too are deeply interconnected, to a degree that might make little sense to say that one is greater than the other.

#### 4.3. Space and/or Place as Theological Elements

*Laudato Si'* does assume the logics of space and/or place as true theological elements, even when it seems to underplay their role. This is obviously decisive for any attempt to promote a “spatial turn” in theology. In this sense, *Laudato Si'* strengthens and is in accordance with the described efforts to give more relevance to spatiality in theological thought.

On a more basic level, concrete spaces—such as “green spaces”, “public spaces”, or even “sacred spaces” (Pope Francis 2015, nn. 44–45, 103, 146)—are the objects of a discourse that is also theological. Often, the references to these spaces help to describe “what is happening to our common home” (Pope Francis 2015, chp. I) and, therefore, to settle the ground for ulterior theological considerations. In this sense, spaces and/or places are assumed in *Laudato Si'* as ingredients of theological reasoning, both as its starting points (what theological questions are raised from particular spaces and/or places) and as its end (what light does theology shine on those particular spaces and/or places). Generally speaking, this theological consideration of space and/or place tends to adopt an ethical or moral perspective, drawing its attention mainly to what should be carried out in regard to the environmental, social, political, or economic challenges being addressed.

On a deeper level, spaces and/or places are also considered in their spiritual or even revelatory capacities. Although this is not a recurrent element in *Laudato Si'*, the fact is that the encyclical somehow echoes the idea that certain physical places and relational spaces promote the encounter with God (Pope Francis 2015, n. 126). This comes close to what several “spatial turn” theologians have analogically called a sacramental vision of spatiality. Spatiality in general and specific places play, therefore, a relevant role in the spiritual experience of God. Alternatively, as Hjalmarson puts it, “in Christ God has redeemed all places [. . .]. We meet God in particular places. Particular places express something of the divine in their own unique texture and existence (Hjalmarson 2014, p. 128). *Laudato Si'* surely does not take the issue this far but, at the least, seems reasonably in line with such a theological view on space and/or place. At this second level, spatiality is prevalently considered from a fundamental or systematic theological perspective.

#### 5. Conclusions

Coming to the end of this study, it makes sense to recall the fundamental question raised in the Introduction and that has guided it: how does Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si'* contemplate the issue of space and/or place? Although both the issue and the *Laudato Si'* deserve further inquiry, one can conclude that there is a moderate incorporation in it of the concerns that have set the “spatial turn” in motion. Some main elements of this turn are present in *Laudato Si'* (a positive appraisal of concrete spaces and/or places), some are absent (the different meanings of space and place), some need further clarification (the relationships between time and space), and some would benefit from further delving (the relationships between God and space).

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