

Laudato Si' mi Signore – Praise be to you, my Lord

The Encyclical Letter of the Holy Father

Francis

on Care for our Common Home.

I am horrified to hear that Pope Francis's ratings have dropped in the USA. This is an incredibly important document. It is not just about climate change, which many anticipated. It goes far, far deeper, and wider and it is so good.

Have you read it? I ask as I encourage you all to do so. I found it difficult preparing for this talk as there are so many passages I want to quote.

Now that I can no longer read the Cape Times, I try to get my news from Enews. On Monday the lead story in Daily Maverick read: *The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) terrorists have blown up the Palmyra Baalshamin temple. The Roman-era temple was destroyed on Sunday. This followed the beheading of archaeologists responsible for the priceless temple's maintenance and study.*

This is abominable, is really depressing and makes us all shudder. It underlines the need for all the Pope is calling for in his Encyclical - sound faith, justice and values.

The Encyclical is a re-affirmation of values – transcendent values in a world that has lost any sense of values in our mad pursuit wealth.

The Encyclical is also significant in who and what these values apply to and how they are applied.

The **inclusivity** of the letter is one of its cardinal principles, a principle upheld as crucially important by SAFCEI.

Pope Francis is saying:

First, our values must be applied to and include the natural environment – nature – and the poor, for everything is connected.

At present we apply values and legal rights to people, but there is a growing movement of Earth Jurisprudence, promoted by Cormac Cullinan, that excellent Cape Town environmental lawyer, that is calling for legal rights for nature, so that indigenous forest has a legal right to continue, that river has a legal right to flow to the sea, those fish have a legal right to spawn in that estuary, even though you could make a lot of money mining it for heavy metals.

Secondly, he addresses it to all people, not just Roman Catholics.

He also comes from a deeply spiritual perspective. Not all people of faith would follow his strongly Trinitarian spirituality, but that does not matter. Come with your own spiritual values and there is much that will resonate with what he has written.

At the end of chapter 5 he states: *"the majority of people living on our planet profess to be believers. This should spur religions to dialogue among themselves for the sake of protecting nature, defending the poor, and building the networks of respect and fraternity"*. SAFCEI endorses that!

So what is Pope Francis saying, in brief?

If there is time, I will also quote passages from the Encyclical, so you can catch a glimpse of his all-encompassing language.

The Encyclical starts with the Canticle of St Francis of Assisi *"Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs."*

This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, the air and in all forms of life. This is why the Earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she "groans in travail" (Romans 8:22)

He continued with a quotation from his predecessor Pope Benedict XVI: *"Eliminating the structural causes of the dysfunctions of the world economy and correcting models of growth which have proved incapable of ensuring respect for the environment"*.

The natural environment and the social environment have suffered damage due to the "same evil: the notion that there are no indisputable truths to guide our lives, and hence human freedom is limitless".

This is fundamental because the Pope is calling for the recognition of transcendent values that are overarching and overcome our own self-centred wishes and desires.

He then quotes the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew.

His hope is that this Encyclical Letter will help us to acknowledge the immensity and urgency of the challenge we face. It is his appeal to the world. In the six chapters he says he will deal with the following:

- 1) *Aspects of the present ecological crisis, drawing on the results of the best scientific research available;*
- 2) *Principles drawn from the Judaeo-Christian tradition;*
- 3) *Going to the roots of the present situation, considering deepest causes;*
- 4) *Provide an approach to ecology which respects our unique place as human beings in this world and our relationship to our surroundings;*

5) *Advance some broader proposals for dialogue and action, involving us as individuals and international policy;*

6) *Convinced that change is impossible without motivation and a process of education, offer some inspired guidelines for human development to found in the treasure of Christian spiritual experience.*

Crucially important, Pope Francis asserts the need for transcendent values – values that transcend our own self-centred demands, which allow us to believe we can do what we want, without regard to others or the natural environment. We behave as if we have limitless power.

A theme that runs through the Encyclical is that **everything is connected**, so when we cause pollution and waste, destroying the natural environment, or climate change, or impoverishment, it has repercussions on all aspects of life.

An interesting insight is his examination of technology and the technological impact on us, and the environment, and its link with economics.

I am enormously encouraged by his examination of our present economic system, allows the market and profit to be the criteria for decision making and so-called development. I think this is a key and I would hope that the CPLO would have a workshop on our economics. The government, understandably, talks about the need to overcome unemployment, poverty and inequality, but I believe they are going about it in completely the wrong way. We have got to put the well-being of people and planet as our goal and objective, not economic growth and wealth accumulation. We are not here on this planet just to accumulate wealth. We are here to fulfil God's plan for peace, beauty and fullness.

Another important aspect is his call for global governance, which has to include all people, including the poor, and not just the rich and powerful.

He ends in Chapter six with the need for education and spirituality. Sister Hermenegild was to have spoken on this important aspect.

Pope Francis writes: *“Environmental education should facilitate making the leap towards the transcendent which gives ecological ethics its deepest meaning”*.

A crucial point for us, gathered here, is to note that Pope Francis is affirming the need for people of faith to be involved in seeking to establish environmental and social justice.

A fascinating point was made by Cardinal Turkson, the President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace who was closely involved in the preparation of the document. He highlighted its focus on care for creation rather than on stewardship. Talk of 'stewardship' implies a relationship based on duty. The notion of 'care' taps into something deeper: “When one cares for something it is something one does with passion and love” (Naomi Klein).

Put another way, if we are going to undergo the type of 'ecological conversion' that *Laudato si'* calls us to embrace, it is going to be driven by a desire to become better,

more compassionate people, rather than by a feeling that we *ought* to do our bit for the environment.

You care for and love something that is important to you. I can't understand, I must say, why people don't love and care for our planet and home. It is our only home and we are totally dependent on its well-being.

Pope Francis is saying that we should love and care for God's creation. For too long, it seems we have turned our back on creation lest we be labelled pantheists or pagans. The Encyclical is at pains to show from Scripture that God cares for all He has brought into being.

He also quotes the Earth Charter, which asked us to leave behind a period of self-destruction and make a new start, but, he said, "we have not as yet developed a universal awareness needed to achieve this. Here, I would echo that courageous challenge from the Earth Charter: 'As never before in history, common destiny beckons us to seek a new beginning..... Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening of a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace, and the joyful celebration of life'".

I wrote an op-ed on the Encyclical. In it I said: The course of European history was changed when allied forces defeated Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo on 18 June 1815. Exactly 200 years later, 18 June 2015, Pope Francis released his encyclical "Praise be to you – On care for our common home". Will this change the course of history and bring victory for a sustainable future at the climate change talks in Paris in November this year?

The COP 21 climate talks in Paris could well be a battle – hopefully not bloody and violent like Waterloo – but if the forces of reason and sustainability are defeated, the casualties, suffering and deaths will be infinitely greater as climate change takes its toll and becomes unstoppable.

Paris will become a battleground between multinational and fossil fuel industries on one side and environmentalists, climate realists and people of faith who recognise the seriousness of our environmental crisis. We pray it won't be a battle between nations, but that the political leaders of the world will follow the sane and realistic counsel of Pope Francis.

Waterloo was one of the early battles of different European countries becoming allies to confront a common enemy, Napoleon. The course of the battle was decided with the arrival in the late afternoon of the Prussian army. Could the Pope's encyclical prove to be a decisive new ally?

We in the Southern African Faith Communities Environment Institute (SAFCEI) have longed for such a positive and inclusive affirmation of our interconnectedness with all of life, the natural environment – creation – and our responsibility to care for it.

In the battle against the forces of greed, pollution and destruction, inequality and conflict, the allies have been scientists and environmentalists, often maligned by free marketers.

Until recently, faith communities had not come to the fore to care for, protect and defend creation. We in SAFCEI were a minority voice when we were founded in 2005. There were some notable voices: The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has repeatedly stated:

“For human beings...to destroy the biological diversity of God’s creation; to degrade the integrity of the earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the earth of its natural forests or destroying its wetlands; for human beings to contaminate the earth’s waters, its land, its air, and its life – these are sins”.

Pope Francis refers to the "limits imposed by reality". The reality is that our home is a finite planet with limited, fragile resources. In our search for endless growth we are destroying our life support systems, leaving coming generations with "debris, desolation and filth."

Why is this happening?

The rise of globalisation coincided with the 1992 Rio Earth Summit’s call for "sustainable development".

Globalisation has dominated. Why? Is it not because of our contemporary fixation on the worship of Mammon – riches and accumulated wealth? It panders to our greed and self-centred interests. Those in power and with the wealth claim that economic growth is the way to overcome poverty and solve the problems of our planet. International instruments such as the World Bank, IMF, WEF, support this and most governments have bought into it.

Why? The Pope is quite clear: We have "deified the market". *"Economic powers continue to justify the current global system where priority tends to be given to speculation and the pursuit of financial gain, which fails to take the context into account let alone the effects on human dignity and the natural environment" (#56)*

What the Pope is doing is calling on us to recognise that the way ahead is to establish justice for all of life - the poor and all of creation – and that by working together we can overcome the manifold problems confronting us. He is making a crucial call for transcendent values and ethics, so that we recognise the limitations to our power and the need to live in harmony with all of life. He calls for farsighted leadership upholding high principles and citizen governance whereby all people – especially the poor and indigenous people – are involved in decisions affecting their lives.

He quotes the "Earth Charter" and ends on a note of hope and joy, concluding with two prayers, the first a general one "A prayer for our Earth" and the second "A Christian prayer in union with creation."

If the Earth Charter and the Pope's encyclical are taken as guidelines for our future political, economic and environmental decision-making, there is most certainly hope for the future. If we disregard the wisdom and insight contained in both these documents and continue on a path of self-centred greed, we shall be bringing about a planet vastly reduced in beauty and abundance.

It is our prayer that just as the arrival of the Prussian army in the Battle of Waterloo turned the tide, so the Pope's encyclical will be a new ally to turn the tide so that the forces of "justice, love and goodness" will prevail at the Battle of Paris.

The fundamental point I want to make is whether we – all people of whatever race, faith, nationality – will come together to meet the hugely threatening challenges to our future well-being.

How do we go forward, for this Encyclical is critically important?

I would hope that it will be made into a study document, for congregational and group study, not only by the Roman Catholic Church but people of all faiths.

I would hope too that the Catholic Parliamentary Liaison Office will take it forward to Parliament in whatever way you can to emphasise the importance of caring for environmental issues and that we should be guided by the transcendent values put forward in the encyclical. If we do that we shall overcome poverty, unemployment and inequality.

I would hope too that we can take it to the Department of Environment to take to COP21.

And finally let us bring it to faith communities so that in united action we bring about a tipping point. I cannot stress more strongly how important this is for the future well-being of our children and all of God's creation.

Ends

A prayer for our earth

All-powerful God,
you are present in the whole universe
and in the smallest of your creatures.
You embrace with your tenderness all that exists.
Pour out upon us the power of your love,
that we may protect life and beauty.
Fill us with peace, that we may live
as brothers and sisters, harming no one.
O God of the poor,
help us to rescue the abandoned
and forgotten of this earth,
so precious in your eyes.
Bring healing to our lives,
that we may protect the world and not prey on it,
that we may sow beauty,
not pollution and destruction.
Touch the hearts
of those who look only for gain
at the expense of the poor and the earth.
Teach us to discover the worth of each thing,
to be filled with awe and contemplation,
to recognize that we are profoundly united
with every creature
as we journey towards your infinite light.
We thank you for being with us each day.
Encourage us, we pray, in our struggle
For justice, love and peace.

A few Encyclical Quotations

In chapter 1 "what is happening to our common home", he describes the pollution in our throwaway culture "The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense piles of filth". Under the issue of Water he writes "in addition the exploitation of the planet has already exceeded acceptable limits and we still have not solved the problem of poverty. Fresh drinking water is an issue of primary importance, since it is indispensable for human life and for supporting terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems".

We cannot commercialise and commodify the essentials of life!

He acknowledges that that "differing species have a right to exist and a value in themselves. Each year sees the disappearance of thousands of plant and animal species. Because of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God by their very existence nor convey their message to us. We have no such right."

Under the heading of Global Inequality he states "The human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation".

He then makes the most important point of seeking justice: "We have to do realise that that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment so as to hear both the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor".

And we have to hear his call that an ecological debt exists. This could turn the tide for renewable energy and development in the "developing nations".

"The warming caused by huge consumption on the part of some rich countries has repercussions on the poorest areas of the world, especially in Africa, where a rise in temperature, together with drought, has proved devastating for farming." "They do what they would never do in developed countries or the so called first world."

Under the heading of "Weak responses", "these situations have caused sister earth, of along with all the abandoned of our world, to cry out, pleading that we take another course. Never have we so hurt and mistreated our common home as we have in the last 200 years. Yet we are called to be instruments of God our Father, so that our planet might be what he desired when he created it and correspond with his plan for peace, beauty and fullness. The problem is that we still lack a culture needed to confront this crisis. We lack leadership capable of striking out on new paths".

He continues "It is remarkable how weak international political responses have been. The failure of global summits on the environment make it plain that our policies are subject to technology and finance. There are too many special interests, and economic interests easily end up trumping the common good and manipulating information so that their own plans will not be affected".,

He then gives a really important quotation from the Latin American Bishops "the interests of economic groups which irrationally demolish sources of life should not prevail in dealing with natural resources."

He then continues with this most important statement "in the meantime, economic powers continue to justify the current global system where priority tends to be given to speculation and the pursuit of financial gain, which failed to take the context into account, let alone the effects on human dignity and the natural environment".

"Whatever is fragile, like the environment is defenceless before the interests of a deified market, which become the only rule".

In chapter 2 "the Gospel of creation" he calls for integral ecology and the full development of humanity" and he asks "Christians to realise that their responsibility within creation and their duty towards nature and the creator, are an essential part of their faith".

A common theme that is running through the encyclical is that everything is interconnected.

Under the heading of the mystery of the universe he writes this really important sentence: "**Creation is of the order of love. God's love is the fundamental moving force in all created things**".

When nature is viewed solely as a source of profit and gain this has serious consequences for society. The solution of "might is right" has engendered immense inequality, injustice and acts of violence against the majority of humanity. Completely at odds with this model are the ideals of harmony, justice, fraternity and peace as proposed by Jesus".

"When our hearts are authentically open to universal communion, this sense of fraternity excludes nothing and no one. It follows that our indifference or cruelty towards fellow creatures of this world sooner or later affects the treatment we meet out to other human beings. We can hardly consider ourselves to be fully loving if we disregard any aspect of reality: peace, justice and the preservation of creation are three absolutely interconnected themes, which cannot be separated and treated individually without once again falling into reductionism. **Everything is related.**

In chapter 3 "the human roots of the ecological crisis" Pope Francis focuses on the dominant technocratic paradigms and the place of human beings and of human action in the world." With great insight he recognises the technocratic and technological impact of our present-day world combined with that of the economic drivers as being fundamental to our environmental and poverty crises. "The economy accepts every advance in technology with a view to profit, without concern for its potentially negative impact on human beings. Finance overwhelms the real economy".

Under the heading "the crisis and effects of modern anthropocentrism" he again states everything is connected. "Once the human being declares independence from

reality and behaves with absolute dominion, the very foundations of our life begin to crumble".

He ends that this chapter affirming the need for ethical principles "technology severed from ethics will not easily be able to limit its own power."

Chapter 4 is headed "integral ecology"

"Ecology studies the relationship between living organisms and the environment in which they develop. This necessarily entails reflection and debate about the conditions required for the life and survival of society, and the honesty needed to question certain models of development, production and consumption. It cannot be emphasised enough how everything is interconnected. When we speak of the "environment", what we really mean is a relationship existing between nature and the Society which lives in it".

Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature."

He then writes of human ecology which implies another profound reality: the relationship between human life and the moral law". This is a crucially important part of the encyclical, the reaffirmation of morality.

"Human ecology is inseparable from the notion of the common good, a central and unifying principle of social ethics. He also asks us to look at the issue of justice between generations so that we show responsibility for future generations. "We realise that the world is a gift which we have freely received and must share with others, including those who will follow us.

Leaving an inhabitable planet to future generations is, first and foremost, up to us. We may well be leaving to future generations "debris, desolation and filth".

The pace of consumption, waste and environmental change has come stretch the planet's capacity that our contemporary lifestyle unsustainable as it is, can only precipitate catastrophes such as those which now periodically occur in different areas of the world. The effects of the present imbalance can only be reduced by our decisive action, and now".

This is a result of our ethical and cultural decline which has accompanied the deterioration of the environment. Men and women of our post-modern world run the risk of rampant individualism and many problems of society are connected with today's self-centred culture for instant gratification.

End