



The Encyclical *Laudato Si'*: On Care for Our Common Home

"What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up?"
Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (160)

"Start by doing what is necessary, then what is possible and suddenly you are doing the impossible."
St Francis of Assisi

1. Introduction

An encyclical is not a scientific document, but rather one that explores a particular issue in the light of Catholic teaching. Sometimes, though, in the case of encyclicals dealing with social issues, scientific, empirical and economic questions must be addressed. For example, the question of economics is often used to try to deflect the climate debate, with suggestions that challenging the *status quo* will impede the economic progress of developing countries. However, the Vatican discussions in May left us in no doubt that it is the pursuit of purely economic growth by richer countries that is leading to exploitation of natural resources and contributing to a growing gap between the world's richest and poorest.¹ On 24 May 2015, Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'*² was released after much anticipation. The letter, sub-titled 'On Care for Our Common Home' touches on scientific matters, but it is framed in terms of ethics and the Christian faith. Its central message is that the urgent challenge to protect our common home must lead us to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that this is the only way in which things can change.

2. *Laudato Si* Summary

Laudato Si' aims to foster dialogue with all people about our common home. This is a notable departure from how papal documents are usually addressed: to the bishops or to Catholics in general. The Pope's intention is to give people the

information they need in order to become conscious of the necessity of an 'ecological conversion,' an expression borrowed from St. John Paul. Thus the Pope chose to cite not only previous popes and scripture, but bishops' conferences, theologians and some modern thinkers. He made room also for the thought of the Eastern Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch, Bartholomew, and even cited a Sufi thinker, Ali al-Khawwas.

The goal of the dialogue is to give direction about the way in which we are shaping the future of our planet; a conversation that necessarily includes everyone, especially considering the current environmental trials we are experiencing, the human roots of which concern and affect us all. These issues are at the heart of the document, but Pope Francis also has a very concrete call to conversion for those in the Church. In one sense, the letter is a message for committed and prayerful Christians, who – rightly or wrongly – are often regarded as insensitive to environmental concerns.

Laudato Si' consists of six chapters, which can be summarised briefly as follows:

Chapter 1: What is Happening to Our Common Home?

The first chapter sets out the nature of the problem. It explores issues such as pollution, waste and the throwaway culture; climate change; water shortages and loss of biodiversity. Concerns such as the decline in the quality of human life and the breakdown of society; global inequality; weak

responses; and a variety of opinions are also considered.

“But a sober look at our world shows that the degree of human intervention, often in the service of business interests and consumerism, is actually making our earth less rich and beautiful, ever more limited and grey, even as technological advances and consumer goods continue to abound limitlessly. We seem to think that we can substitute an irreplaceable and irretrievable beauty with something which we have created ourselves.”³

Chapter 2: The Gospel of Creation

The second chapter looks at topics such as the light offered by faith; the wisdom of biblical accounts; the mystery of the universe; the message of each creature in the harmony of creation; and the notion of a universal communion. The earth was here before us. Although Christians have at times incorrectly interpreted the Scriptures, nowadays we must forcefully reject the belief that our being created in God’s image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures. This responsibility for God’s earth means that human beings, endowed with intelligence, must respect the laws of nature and the delicate equilibria existing between the creatures of this world. Together with our obligation to use the earth’s goods responsibly, we are called to recognize that other living beings have a value of their own in God’s eyes. Our insistence that each human being is an image of God should not make us overlook the fact that each creature has its own purpose. None is unnecessary. The entire material universe speaks of God’s love, his boundless affection for us - soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God.⁴

Chapter 3: The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis

Humanity has entered a new era in which our technical prowess has brought us to a crossroads. It is right to rejoice in these advances and to be excited by the immense possibilities which they continue to open up before us, because science and technology are wonderful results of a God-given human creativity. The modification of nature for useful purposes has distinguished the human family from the beginning, with technology being an expression of the inner tension that impels people gradually to overcome material limitations. Technology has remedied countless

evils which used to harm and limit human beings. How can we not feel gratitude and appreciation for this progress, especially in the fields of medicine, engineering and communications? Technoscience, when well directed, is able to produce significant means of improving the quality of human life, from useful domestic appliances to great transportation systems, bridges, buildings and public spaces.

On the other hand, we cannot observe the symptoms of today’s ecological crises without acknowledging the extent of their human origins; hence the call for an inspection of the effects of technology, globalization and anthropocentrism. A certain way of understanding human life and activity has gone awry, to the serious detriment of the world around us and we need to pause and consider this. Pope Francis proposes that the focus be placed on doing away with the prevailing mindset that enables technology, and scientifically knowledgeable people, to shape the lives of individuals and the workings of society - a technocratic paradigm. Now is a good time to scrutinise the place of human beings and of human action in the world.

Chapter 4: Integral Ecology

By definition, ecology is the study of the relationship between living organisms and the environment in which they develop. This encyclical sites examples of how ecology can be applied in daily living through our neighbourly interactions, the buildings we design, transportation means we employ, and the way we value our own bodies. The notion of the common good also extends to future generations, so much so that it is groundless to speak of sustainable development while neglecting intergenerational solidarity; justice must stretch across the generations. Pope Francis questions the kind of world we want to leave to our children and grandchildren; as things stand, it could very well be a world of desolation, debris and filth.

Chapter 5: Lines of Approach and Action

The penultimate chapter of the document discusses the appropriate action to take and the various avenues to use. These include the following:

- In recent decades, environmental issues have given rise to considerable public debate and have elicited a variety of committed and generous civic responses.

Worldwide, the ecological movement has made significant advances, thanks also to the efforts of many organizations of civil society, whose work has placed the topic on public agendas.

- Technology based on the use of highly polluting fossil fuels – especially coal, but also oil and, to a lesser degree, gas – needs to be progressively replaced without delay. Until greater progress is made in developing widely accessible sources of renewable energy, it is legitimate to choose the less harmful alternative or to find short-term solutions. But the international community has still not reached adequate agreements about the responsibility for paying the costs of this energy transition
- As far as the protection of biodiversity and issues related to desertification are concerned, progress has been far less significant.
- With regard to climate change, the advances have been regrettably few. Reducing greenhouse gases requires honesty, courage and responsibility, above all on the part of those countries which are more powerful and pollute the most.
- Some strategies for lowering pollutant gas emissions call for the internationalization of environmental costs, which would risk imposing on countries with fewer resources burdensome commitments to reducing emissions comparable to those of the more industrialized countries.
- There is a need for common and differentiated responsibilities in relation to the imposition of measures that penalize countries most in need of development. A further injustice is perpetrated under the guise of protecting the environment. Here also, the poor end up paying the price. Furthermore, since the effects of climate change will be felt for a long time to come, even if stringent measures are taken now, some countries with scarce resources will require assistance in adapting to the effects already being produced, which affect their economies.

- Enforceable international agreements are urgently needed, since local authorities are not always capable of effective intervention. Relations between states must be respectful of each other's sovereignty, but must also lay down mutually agreed means of averting regional disasters which would eventually affect everyone.
- Environmental impact assessments should not come after the drawing up of a business proposition or the proposal of a particular policy, plan or programme. They should be part of the initial process, and be carried out in a way which is interdisciplinary, transparent and free of all economic or political pressure.
- We need to stop thinking in terms of 'interventions' to save the environment in favour of policies developed and debated by all interested parties. The participation of the latter also entails being fully informed about such projects and their different risks and possibilities; this includes not just preliminary decisions but also various follow-up activities and continued monitoring.

Chapter 6: Ecological Education and Spirituality

In conclusion, attention is shifted to the individual believer, families and communities, and we are invited to make a difference in small but tangible ways. Consumer choices, cultivating ecological virtues such as reducing wastefulness, and environmental education for the young are explained as practical steps leading to a deeper, spiritual *ecological conversion* through which the followers of Christ recognise the true worth of all created entities. Pope Francis teaches that God created the world, writing into it an order and a dynamism that human beings have no right to ignore. This is supported by the natural law tradition that every creature has in its nature an end, a purpose, which humans should respect and honour. The intrinsic value of non-humans is noted when the encyclical states that "the ultimate purpose of other creatures is not to be found in us" but rather in the Risen Christ who embraces all things.⁵

3. Expectations

Since Pope John Paul II published his ecologically ground-breaking 1990 World Day of Peace Message, *Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation*, the Church's approach to creation care has steadily been defined by several core elements that were expected to feature in Pope Francis' Encyclical; among them are:

- God's on-going presence in all creation which reflects God's incarnation.
- The intrinsic goodness of all creation that is independent of humanity.
- Humanity's role as stewards of creation, invited to use its gifts without exploiting it for superfluous desires.
- Human ecology, by which the Church recognizes that the protection and promotion of human life and dignity is inexorably connected to care for all of creation.
- Care and justice for the poor and vulnerable who are disproportionately and unjustly harmed by environmental degradation.
- The universal destination of created goods, by which all persons have a right to share in the fruits of creation.
- Protection and promotion of the common good. To which the climate and natural environment are central.
- Application of the principle of subsidiarity which calls for the lowest possible *but highest necessary* level of government intervention required to protect the common good.
- Intergenerational solidarity that calls us to hand on to posterity a clean and habitable environment.
- Recognition of anthropogenic climate change as a moral issue, and the need for all people of faith and goodwill to address it as such.
- Advocacy for an economic price to be placed on greenhouse gas emissions, especially carbon dioxide.

- Commentary about the manner in which current economic systems and investment strategies foster or undermine environmental sustainability and climate stability.
- Condemnation of industry-funded efforts to deny and/or confuse the science of anthropogenic climate change.
- Reflections on contemporary energy issues, especially the transition to renewable energy and the controversial practice of fracking.⁶

4. Roundtable Discussion

On the morning of 26 August 2015, the CPLO hosted a roundtable discussion entitled "Exploring the Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*". The speakers for the event were Bishop Geoff Davies from the South African Faith Communities Environmental Institute (SAFCEI) and Professor Coleen Vogel from the Global Change and Sustainability Research Institute at Wits University. The two speakers provided stirring and engaging presentations. Bishop Davies clarified thematic issues in the encyclical, such as the reaffirmation of values in a money motivated era, the moral imperative to take global action on climate change, and the importance of acknowledging and protecting nature; while Professor Vogel delved into mechanisms that we as a society, could use to mitigate and adapt to effects of climate change.

One of the main discussion points was about how we balance growth and the provision of basic needs with looking after the earth. Another striking theme in the discussion was that of scaling back, in sacrifice, very much in line with what the encyclical letter is urging us to do. A shift from knowledge impartation to behavioural change was encouraged in this regard. Highly essential is the framing of language for the poor, taking account of the diversity of nations when explaining concepts such as recycling, greenhouse gases and climate change. Suggestions were made to approach city mayors to implement the teachings of *Laudato Si'* as well as to expose more independent churches to the teachings of the encyclical. Following in the footsteps of the Greek Orthodox Church, this year Pope Francis declared September 1 as the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation and the discussion culminated in the organisation of a service to celebrate the Care of Creation.

5. Conclusion

Since his election, Pope Francis has shown a willingness to address contemporary issues by courageously challenging people and systems that hinder the growth of God's Kingdom. It is foreseeable that, once certain resources have been depleted, the scene will be set for new wars, albeit under the guise of noble claims. Living our vocation to be protectors of God's creation is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience. In conclusion, we should echo Pope Francis by entreating for an ecological spirituality grounded in the convictions of our faith, since the teachings of the Gospel have direct consequences for our

way of thinking, feeling and living. Let this be a spirituality that can motivate us to a more passionate concern for the protection of our world. No matter who you are or where you find yourself in relation to protecting the environment, Pope Francis invites all to embrace with open hearts this encyclical, which stands firmly in line with, and significantly adds to, the Church's social doctrine.⁷

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¹<http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/may/14/how-will-the-world-react-to-pope-franciss-encyclical-on-climate-change>

²Encyclical Letter Laudato Si': On Care for our Common Home

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

³ Chapter 1 – Laudato Si' Encyclical -http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

⁴ Chapter 2 – Laudato Si' Encyclical -http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

⁵ Chapter 6 – Laudato Si' Encyclical

⁶ <http://millennialjournal.com/2014/01/27/expectations-and-hopes-for-pope-francis-ecological-encyclical/>

⁷ General Audience, June 17, 2015.

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