



South Africa and *Laudate Deum*

1. Introduction

Pope Francis's new Apostolic Exhortation, *Laudate Deum*,¹ exposes the unusual acceleration of the deterioration of our planet. Delivered by the head of the Catholic Church and addressed to "all people of goodwill", *Laudate Deum* is a strong warning about the growing climate crisis. The present crisis goes well beyond normal ecological change, and we need to become more aware of the necessity to care for one another, and for the earth, because the two are intimately bound together. Humanity needs to realise that we are presently experiencing an unusual acceleration of global warming and that in our lifetime – preferably in a single generation – we must escalate our interventions to care for our common home, as by doing this we can ensure that our families and our future families can live healthy and sustainable lives in harmony with the planet.

The world needs to end fossil fuel emissions, grow the renewable energy industry, and empower the majority who are poor. South Africa is the 7th highest² global fossil fuel energy producer, largely due to our reliance on coal for producing electricity. Despite all attempts to deny, conceal, gloss over or relativise the issue, the signs of this critical climate change are here and increasingly evident. No one can ignore that extreme weather is increasing all over the world, and in South Africa, more than at any time since records have been kept. These phenomena include heatwaves and drought, rising sea levels, ocean acidification, wildfires, and other extreme weather events. The earth is emitting cries of protest that are only the start of a silent disease set to emerge in real disaster.

2. The Present Situation

Human activity is causing the continual increase

in global warming, which in turn increases the intensity and frequency of great rains, hail and floods, severe droughts, extreme heat waves, extraordinary snowfalls, and wildfires. This present unceasing global warming is heading toward 2°C above pre-industrial levels, where the Greenland icecap and parts of Antarctica will melt, with grave consequences for everyone, especially as sea levels rise.³ The escalating increase in extreme weather will increase human diasporas as those with the least resources will look for healthier environments where they can obtain basic services and make a living; this will result in overcrowding, more pollution, and greater pressure on resources. Pope Francis acknowledges that warming is not linear; there are also "intermittent periods of extreme cold" but those who use these to deny the reality of global warming fail to grasp that "this and other extraordinary symptoms are nothing but diverse alternative expressions of the same cause: the global imbalance that is provoking the warming of the planet."⁴

3. South Africa & Climate Change

Sub-Saharan Africa contributes only 2.3% to human and industrial global warming activities like greenhouse gas emissions, yet the present degree of climate change is an unfolding existential calamity for this area. The top 1% of wealthy communities contaminate the planet far more than the poorest 50%.⁵

A general overview of South Africa shows that the country is not improving much on an economic front, but there have been some improvements in socio-economic indicators. For example, 83.6% of the South African population now lives in formal housing and only around 17% in informal and indigenous dwellings; and the mortality rate for children under five continues to

decrease. On the other hand, it is concerning that an estimated 20% of the population do not have in-house running water and piped sewerage; household debt has doubled since 2011; and there is still 31.9% unemployment.⁶

Electrical power is widely available and is used by most of the population, but wood, oil and gas are substitutes in poorer communities and an unknown percentage acquire power through illegal connections to the distribution grid. Poverty-stricken, working- and middle-class communities in South Africa are most vulnerable to the forecasted natural disasters like droughts, heatwaves, floods, and damage from severe storms, all of which are expected to intensify as a consequence of accelerated climate change. More lives will be tragically lost and increased severe infrastructure damage will occur in the imminent extreme weather patterns.

4. The Climate Crisis Is a Global Phenomenon

In *Laudate Deum*, Pope Francis confirms that, in a special way, what happens in one part of the world has repercussions for the entire planet. His Holiness reiterates two convictions that he repeats over and over again: “Everything is connected” and “No one is saved alone”.⁷ Bearing that statement in mind, all manifestations of the climate crisis can be said to be ‘global’, coming to bear on all people living today, especially in areas of poverty and few resources.

5. The Dangers of Technology

Pope Francis strongly advises us to be aware of the dangerous notion, developing from the present technocratic paradigm,⁸ that human beings have no limits and are able to expand power infinitely through technology and artificial intelligence. Human technological capability creates both useful and dangerous inventions like weapons and, most specifically, nuclear weapons. Fortunately, South Africa has signed an anti-nuclear weapon treaty, but it is still considering nuclear power expansion. Nuclear is a clean energy at the point of generation, but the acquisition of nuclear fuels poses high risks to humanity and to the natural environment, while the high cost of decommissioning nuclear power stations and the management of nuclear waste outweigh any short-term benefits derived from nuclear power.

All humanity, with a strong focus on South Africa

now, needs lucidity and honesty in order to recognize in time that the power we yield and the endless progress we pursue are turning against us.⁹ Our technical power in South Africa has resulted in the extinction of natural ecosystems and various species in our advancing agriculture and increasing urbanisation, by replacing the natural environment and severely damaging biodiversity. Often the success of technological advancement occurs through a lack of ethics that disguise and hide the dangers to the natural environment and humanity, favouring overconsumption and production which enables maximum gain at minimal cost for the minority.¹⁰ *Laudate Deum* calls for a serious look at how a country’s economy is managed and calls on all to consider future generations rather than immediate financial growth. This sustainable strategy upholds the value of true, extensive and inclusive multilateral diplomacy with the goals being the common good, the eradication of poverty and hunger, and the defence of human rights.¹¹

6. South Africa in 2024

As South Africa approaches its 30th anniversary of democracy, with another chance to vote for our choice of political leadership to run the country, it helps to be open to following a solution that relates to global decision making, to reach a just, fair, honest, collaborative democracy as found in article 43 of *Laudate Deum*:

“All this presupposes the development of a new procedure for decision-making and legitimizing [those] decisions, since the one put in place several decades ago is not sufficient nor does it appear effective. In this framework, there would necessarily be required spaces for conversation, consultation, arbitration, conflict resolution and supervision, and, in the end, a sort of increased ‘democratization’ in the global context, so that the various situations can be expressed and included. It is no longer helpful for us to support institutions in order to preserve the rights of the more powerful without caring for those of all.”

7. The Outcome of COP 28 for South Africa

The outcome of COP 28 needs to be more than a paradigm shift toward the implementation of previous agreements. In South Africa, as a beneficiary of COP funding to assist in the increased reduction and eradication of fossil fuel energy production, as well as for the Just Energy

Transition (JET), we need to ensure that the JET is exactly that: just, fair and all-inclusive. The systems-thinking framework mentioned in article 43 above applies in the implementation of the JET process, and it is encouraging that the South African government has set up valuable platforms to ensure that the JET is implemented as planned.

South Africans need to keep track of these processes and ensure that all voices are heard, most especially those who have been severely affected by the fossil fuel energy industry. The UN's Sustainable Development Goals¹² call for a focus on Eradication of Poverty (SDG1)Reduction of Inequalities (SDG10) when implementing the JET within and among countries. The South African Presidential Climate Commission¹³ has an inclusive 'Watch Group' which is working to ensure the holistic implementation of the JET in South Africa.

8. Conclusion

Pope Francis is strongly appealing for irresponsible derision, unfulfilled promises, and abuses of power to take a step backwards, and for leaders to admit that the decisions made at each

Conference of the Parties, held annually since 1995, and especially at COP 28¹⁴ have to become the foundation of real transition, and of action through the implementation of agreed commitments.

The characteristic performance of the COP socio-ecological system, which is complex and controlled by reinforced feedback, needs to shift into a new system and pattern of behaviour with no chance of returning to old ways. South African leaders, faith-based, political, and business, need to make their voices heard at COP 28 and to ensure that all the development and financial deals agreed are implemented urgently so as to start the process of repair of our planet and heal its people damaged by climate events that have emerged out of our global anthropocentrism over the past 200 years.

A new culture needs to be created, beginning in families and households. A culture of prudence where every person, family and community, business and organisation, begins contributing by way of example to the enlightenment of those leaders and countries who still blatantly disregard the precarious reality the planet and its people are in today.¹⁵

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¹ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html

² <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/visualizing-the-scale-of-global-fossil-fuel-production/>

³ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html para 4.

⁴ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html para 7.

⁵ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html para 9.

⁶ <https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=16785>

⁷ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html para 19.

⁸ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html para 25.

⁹ https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/speeches/1970/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19701116_xxv-istituzione-fao.html

¹⁰ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html para 31.

¹¹ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html para 35.

¹² <https://sdgs.un.org/goals#>

¹³ <https://www.climatecommission.org.za/>

¹⁴ <https://www.cop28.com/>

¹⁵ <https://www.unep.org/resources/emissions-gap-report-2022>

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