

REAL OR NOT REAL?

In his previous best seller, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis outlined four maxims by which he critiqued the contemporary Western ideologies. Each of these is repeated in *Laudato Si'*:

- 1) Time is greater than space (EG \$222ff, LS \$78)
- 2) Unity is greater than conflict (EG \$226ff, LS \$198)
- 3) Realities are greater than ideas (EG \$231ff, LS \$110, 148)
- 4) The whole is greater than the part (EG \$234ff, LS \$141)

Of these four maxims, *Laudato Si'* gives most attention to 'realities are greater than ideas'. The word 'reality' appears almost fifty times in the encyclical. The assertion represents a categorical rejection of the neo-Platonism that is currently plaguing our society. When reading the encyclical, take note of how positively Pope Francis speaks of 'reality', and the generally more negative connotation words like 'ideal' and 'ideology' take on. Behind this is a strong affirmation of a traditional Catholic Aristotelianism, a sacramental and incarnational way of looking at the world that sees the reality of things in their actual incarnate existence. 'We live and act on the basis of a reality which has previously been given to us, which precedes our existence and our abilities' (\$140). This reality includes our own body, which 'establishes us in a direct relationship with the environment and with other living beings' (\$155). The Pope doesn't mince words: 'We can hardly consider ourselves to be fully loving if we disregard any aspect of reality' (\$92). Instead 'The time has come to pay renewed attention to reality and the limits it imposes' (\$116)

While bodily reality is established by the Creator, it receives a new dignity, through the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ:

[The] Word "became flesh" (Jn 1:14). One Person of the Trinity entered into the created cosmos, throwing in his lot with it, even to the cross. From the beginning of the world, but particularly through the incarnation, the mystery of Christ is at work in a hidden manner in the natural world as a whole, without thereby impinging on its autonomy. (\$99)

The dangerous temptation for human beings in relation to their physical environment arises from the fact that it is within the power of humans to 'transform reality' to fit their ideas (\$5) and to prize 'technological thought over reality' (\$115). Saint Francis, on the other hand, demonstrated his respect for nature by 'a refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled' (\$11). The Pope recognises that there is more than 'just one way of interpreting and transforming reality' (\$63). Reality is not something discerned by science alone, but rather 'science and religion, with their distinctive approaches to understanding reality, can enter into an intense dialogue fruitful for both' (\$62).

WHAT AUTHORITY DOES LAUDATO SI' HAVE?

So what should an honest and open-hearted reader take from the encyclical *Laudato Si'* on *Care for our Common Home*? The long term effectiveness of *Laudato Si'* will rest on three points:

- 1) the reasonableness of its arguments,
- 2) the persuasiveness of those arguments, and
- 3) the moral authority of the author.

The Pope's moral authority does not trump the former two criteria. If the Holy Father's teaching in *Laudato Si'* is received by the wider world, it will be because his arguments are rational and persuasive, not because he is the Pope. All in all, if his world-wide audience finds

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Laudato Si' to be both rational and persuasive, then the moral and pastoral leadership of the Bishop of Rome will be augmented. By the same token, the Pope's authority will be diminished to the extent that any might find his arguments illogical or unpersuasive. The Galileo affair stands as a perpetual reminder: popes – even popes trained in science – are not infallible in any field outside faith and morality. The Church is, however, quite within her rights to say something about the theological and ethical consequences of scientific, political and economic ideas. The pope's duty is to give authentic witness to truth, that is, to reality, and to warn us of the consequences of abandoning this truth.

In his own social doctrine encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict stated clearly that:

The Church's social doctrine is "a single teaching, consistent and at the same time ever new. It is one thing to draw attention to the particular characteristics of one Encyclical or another, of the teaching of one Pope or another, but quite another to lose sight of the coherence of the overall doctrinal corpus." (\$12)

The sheer size of this encyclical, and the fact that there does not appear to be a very logical progression to its argument, means that it is indeed easy to 'lose sight of the coherence of the overall' document. But if we keep our eyes open, we will notice that Pope Francis himself gives us directions about how he wants us to receive this text.

There are certain environmental issues where it is not easy to achieve a broad consensus. Here I would state once more that the Church does not presume to settle scientific questions or to replace politics. But I am concerned to encourage an honest and open debate so that particular interests or ideologies will not prejudice the common good. (\$188)

Thus *Laudato Si'* belongs to the old and familiar struggle of Catholic social doctrine to champion 'the common good' against 'particular interests or ideologies'. What the Pope says about the science of climate change is not intended to settle the scientific question or to replace the political effort required to achieve the common good. The purpose of this encyclical is not to close down debate, but to open it up. For that reason the many controversial and provocative claims of the text will achieve their goal if they succeed in opening up an honest and broad discussion between all parties about the realities facing us all, and challenge us to a true conversion of heart as we seek to 'care for our common home'. ■

David Schütz is the Executive Officer of the Ecumenical & Interfaith Commission of the Archdiocese of Melbourne. A former Lutheran pastor, he entered the Catholic Church in 2001 after a 'year of grace' and soul-searching.



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LAUDATO SI'

On care for our common home

AN ENCYCLICAL LETTER ON

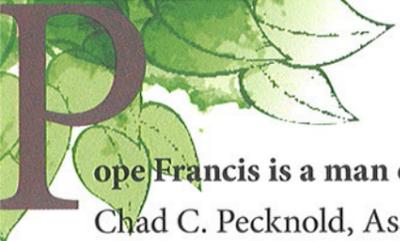
Ecology and
Climate



POPE FRANCIS
ENCYCLICAL
Franciscus

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David Schütz discusses the major themes and provides an insightful reader's guide. What is Pope Francis trying to tell us? How do we put it into practice?



Pope Francis is a man on a mission.

Chad C. Pecknold, Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at the Catholic University of America, recently tweeted:

Francis has a different missionary strategy than I would take, but people should recognize that he actually has one. Conversion is his aim. @CCPECKNOLD

You could not ask for a better summary of Pope Francis' almost 38,000 word encyclical *Laudato Si'* in 140 characters.

The Holy Father has been a man on a mission since he chose the name 'Francis' at his election. Everyone knows St Francis of Assisi: the saint who loved poverty and the poor, the saint who praised God the Creator by singing of his creatures, the saint who forsook all his earthly wealth for the sake of the Gospel. So no surprise that 'Papa Francesco' has made the poor, the environment and the proclamation of the gospel his mission. The encyclical *Laudato Si'* is clearly a part of that 'mission strategy'. It might not be the mission strategy that you or I would choose, but you have to acknowledge that he has radically altered the narrative the secular world uses to speak of the Church, and in the current context, that is no bad thing.

Throughout the encyclical 'conversion is his aim'.

As for conversion, every paragraph of *Laudato Si'* throws down a moral challenge. Like a modern day John the Baptist, the more Pope Francis preaches repentance, the more popular he becomes. But no-one comes out scot-free. Conservatives are constantly challenged on their scientific, economic and political ideologies. The left-wing, on the other hand, are told that birth rates are not the problem (\$50), that 'the protection of nature is...incompatible with the justification of abortion' (\$120), and that the new gender ideology is at odds with reality (\$155). Throughout the encyclical 'conversion is his aim'. 'Many things have to change course,' he writes, 'but it is we human beings above all who need to change' (\$202).

While this encyclical does not create any 'new sins' (eg. the sin of climate change denial), it doesn't mince words about the damage that human actions and attitudes have on our relationship with God, with creation and with each other:

[H]uman life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself. According to the Bible, these three vital relationships have been broken, both outwardly and within us. This rupture is sin. (\$66)

The only cure for sin is repentance, confession and forgiveness. If you want to call *Laudato Si'* a 'prophetic' document then it should be in this sense: like prophets of old, Pope Francis is calling us to conversion.

A CHRISTIAN MESSAGE FOR A UNIVERSAL AUDIENCE

Once upon a time, papal encyclicals were addressed 'to the Venerable Brethren, the Patriarchs, Primates, Archbishops, Bishops, and other Local Ordinaries in Peace and Communion with the Apostolic See.' Encyclicals were thus traditionally letters which the Bishop of Rome addressed to his brother bishops. Blessed John XXIII broke new ground by addressing his 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris* ('Peace on



"A spirituality which forgets God as all-powerful and Creator is not acceptable. That is how we end up worshipping earthly powers, or ourselves usurping the place of God, even to the point of claiming an unlimited right to trample his creation underfoot."

Pope Francis (\$75)

As his disciple St Bonaventure noted (\$11), behind St Francis' talk of 'brother Sun' and 'sister Moon' etc. is the rock solid theology that God is Father and Creator of all. Pope Francis is no more a worshipper of nature than St Francis was: they are both committed to creation because they worship the Creator.

EVERYTHING IS INTERCONNECTED – HUMAN BEINGS TOO!

According to Pope Francis, this encyclical presents both a 'philosophical and theological vision of the human being and of creation' (\$130). Our relationship with God, our neighbour and the environment is a *single integrated and interconnected reality*. For Francis, care for the poor and care for the environment are thus two sides of the same coin in an 'integral ecology' (cf. Chapter Four). He therefore can speak in the same breath about 'making radical decisions to reverse the trend of global warming' and 'the goal of eliminating poverty' (\$175).

Ecologists have long claimed that 'everything is interconnected'. *Laudato Si'* embraces this theme with a passion (\$70, 91, 138, 240). 'Everything (in the world) is connected' (\$16, 91, 117), 'all creatures are connected' (\$42), 'everything is related' (\$92, 142), 'reality (is) interconnected' (\$112), 'everything is (closely) interrelated' (\$120, 137), and 'we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures' (\$220).

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Lest anyone think that Francis is just picking up on new-age greenie jargon, he gives it a solid Christian undergirding when he discusses 'the Trinity and the relationship between creatures'.

240). Catholics can readily embrace the environmentalist's dictum that 'everything is interconnected' because 'the divine Persons are subsistent relations, and the world, created according to the divine model, is a web of relationships' bearing the stamp of its Creator. Citing once more the Franciscan Doctor of the Church, St Bonaventure, he says that 'each creature bears in itself a specifically Trinitarian structure', such that we must 'read reality' itself 'in a Trinitarian key' (\$239).

Further, by his frequent use of the term 'integral ecology' (\$10, 137, 159, 225, 230), and the even more frequent phrase 'integral (human) development' (\$13, 18, 46, 50, 62, 110, 141, 147, 157, 185), we see that when the Pope uses a word, it means just what he chooses it to mean—neither more nor less. In opposition to a strong tradition of thought in the environmental movement which denies 'any pre-eminence to the human person' (\$90), in his own 'approach to an integral ecology', Francis 'by definition does not exclude human beings' (\$124):

Earth') 'to the clergy and faithful of the whole world' and 'to all people of good will'. In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis does not limit himself to 'people of good will'; he intends 'to address every person living on this planet' (\$3). Given such a universal audience, it is understandable that we find that most of the arguments presented in *Laudato Si'* are made from natural law, philosophical reason, and sometimes even plain old persuasive rhetoric, rather than from theology.

But at the other end of the encyclical we notice another difference. John Paul II and Benedict XVI routinely closed their encyclicals with a prayer to the Blessed Virgin Mary. This encyclical does close with a paragraph about Mary, but then matches it with one to St Joseph, strengthening the family and labour themes in the encyclical. Then follows not one, but two prayers:

The first we can share with all who believe in a God who is the all-powerful Creator, while in the other we Christians ask for inspiration to take up the commitment to creation set before us by the Gospel of Jesus. (\$246)

There is something quite astonishing about a pope actually proposing what is in effect an 'interfaith prayer', but it is further proof that in this encyclical he is cutting his coat to his cloth, as he attempts to persuade a universal audience of an essentially Christian ethic.

I suspect this is part of Pope Francis' mission strategy. In an age when many are 'spiritual but not religious', he is trying to reach that spiritual remnant. Some Christians, looking for a more dogmatic form of expression, will be put off by language that seems a bit fuzzy and even 'new age'. In his very first paragraph, the Holy Father describes the earth as 'a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us'. Saint Francis is said to have 'communed with all creation' (\$11). 'Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God' (\$84), and 'there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person's face' (\$233). He even references a Sufi poet in this connection (fn. 159).

Thankfully, for the theologically minded, Pope Francis does not fail to link his thoughts to core issues of Catholic doctrine: the Sacraments (\$233-237), the Trinity (\$238-240) and Christology (\$96-100). And in the end, those who are 'spiritual but not religious' are called to repentance too:

A spirituality which forgets God as all-powerful and Creator is not acceptable. That is how we end up worshipping earthly powers, or ourselves usurping the place of God, even to the point of claiming an unlimited right to trample his creation underfoot. The best way to restore men and women to their rightful place, putting an end to their claim to absolute dominion over the earth, is to speak once more of the figure of a Father who creates and who alone owns the world. Otherwise, human beings will always try to impose their own laws and interests on reality. (\$75). >

When we speak of the "environment", what we really mean is a relationship existing between nature and the society which lives in it. Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it. ... We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature. (\$139)

And again:

That is why it is no longer enough to speak only of the integrity of ecosystems. We have to dare to speak of the integrity of human life, of the need to promote and unify all the great values. (\$224)

Throughout *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis is adamant that an authentic 'human ecology' is essential for an authentic ecology of nature:

There can be no renewal of our relationship with nature without a renewal of humanity itself. There can be no ecology without an adequate anthropology. (\$118)

'An adequate anthropology' – that is, an adequate philosophy of human nature and society – is as essential as an adequate theology. Thus, while on the one hand, 'the Bible has no place for a tyrannical anthropocentrism unconcerned for other creatures' (\$68, cf. also \$115, 116), yet there is the affirmation of an authentic human 'dominion' over the cosmos 'understood more properly in the sense of responsible stewardship' (\$116). This interpretation of Genesis 1:26-28 is by no means new with Pope Francis:

The Catechism clearly and forcefully criticizes a distorted anthropocentrism: "Each creature possesses its own particular goodness and perfection... Each of the various creatures, willed in its own being, reflects in its own way a ray of God's infinite wisdom and goodness. Man must therefore respect the particular goodness of every creature, to avoid any disordered use of things." (\$69, cf. CCC \$339)

However revolutionary the encyclical may appear to those lacking familiarity with the Catholic tradition, its theology is completely in line with the Catechism (quoted ten times) and the teaching of recent popes from Saint John XXIII (cited twice) and Blessed Paul VI (cited four times) to Saint John Paul II and Benedict XVI (several dozen citations each). Furthermore, in another first for a papal encyclical, Pope Francis demonstrates the universality of his teaching by underscoring it with no less than sixteen quotations from Bishops' Conferences throughout the world, from South Africa, Latin America, the Philippines, Bolivia, Germany, United States, Canada, Japan, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Paraguay, New Zealand, Asia, Portugal, Mexico and even Australia.

Even his central idea of an 'integral' connection between environmental and human concerns is not original with Pope Francis. Saint John Paul II coined the term 'human ecology' in his encyclical *Centesimus Annus* in 2001, when he called for an 'ecological conversion' (\$5). Pope Benedict XVI, in *Caritas in Veritate*, wrote that 'the book of nature is one and indivisible' and that 'the deterioration of nature is closely connected to the culture which shapes human coexistence' (\$6). >

