

LAUDATO SI': ON CARE OF OUR COMMON HOME
BY POPE FRANCIS

Reviewed by Stephen Schneck*

*Laudato si, mi Signore, per sora nostra matre Terra,
la quale ne sustenta et gouerna . . .*[†]

–Francis of Assisi, Cantic of the Sun (1241)

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I. INTRODUCTION

The importance of the second encyclical of Pope Francis cannot be overstated. *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* marks what portends to be the Roman Catholic Church's full pastoral engagement on issues related to climate change, biodiversity, environmental protection, water and natural resource rights, and ethical technology.¹ Yet, it is also much more than that—and much, much more than the encyclical's general depiction as a pious but worthy contribution to the climate change debate. It is a sweeping assessment of how the contemporary world's understanding of the meaning and purpose of human life in relation to creation and the Creator has gone astray, and the consequences of that straying for our home and life in that creation. It presents a compelling moral and religious imperative for limits to growth, the responsibilities of government, and the regulation of the economy in light of humanity's covenant with God to care for creation. *Laudato Si'* (“Praise Be to You,” in medieval Umbrian) is the most important social encyclical of the Catholic Church since the first: *Rerum Novarum* in 1891. Yet, while it signals a new activism for the church, the teachings at its heart are as ancient as the faith itself and the essential change that it preaches is an inner transformation of the human person.

Drawing deeply from Christianity's and Judaism's earliest scriptures, frequently referencing documents and pastoral letters from past Catholic bishops' conferences around the globe, and prominently reiterating the environmental

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† Be praised, my Lord, through our sister Mother Earth, who feeds us and rules us

1. POPE FRANCIS, *LAUDATO SI': ON CARE FOR OUR COMMON HOME* (2015), available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html [hereinafter *LAUDATO SI'*].

teachings of Benedict XVI, Saint John Paul II, and Saint John XXIII, *Laudato Si'* emerges from a hermeneutic of continuity and is not a revolutionary manifesto. Its very title hearkens to Saint Francis of Assisi's 13th century Canticle of the Sun. The encyclical is a compelling retelling of traditional Catholic theology about creation as God's artwork and the moral covenant that obliges us as its caretakers. It places at center stage the church's call to transform humanity's relationship with the natural world by recognizing that creation is luminous with the message of its Creator. The encyclical is breathtaking in its boldness and the pontiff's prophetic voice may be unsettling to many modern ears. But, *Laudato Si'* is not new theology and its provenance in continuity lends powerfully to the document's gravity and significance.

II. SURVEY OF THE CRISIS

The encyclical's analysis of our moral shortcomings as creation's caretakers is unsparring. With "hundreds of millions of tons of waste" generated each year, the pontiff laments that "The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth."² Rejecting the arguments of climate change deniers, he insists that a "disturbing warming of the climactic system" is occurring—a crisis that is "mainly as a result of human activity."³ "Climate change," he writes, "is a global problem with grave implications" for sustaining the planet's ecosystems, for our social, political and economic order, and especially for our poorest and most vulnerable populations.⁴ Fresh water resources are threatened across the globe, although access to "safe drinkable water is a basic right and universal human right."⁵ Extinctions of plant and animal species are accelerating and "[b]ecause of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God . . ."⁶ The overfishing of the seas and reefs, the industrialized clearing of tropical forests, monocultural agriculture, and all in conjunction with widespread pollution and rising air and ocean temperatures, are devastating the divinely ordained biodiversity of life.

This widespread corruption of the natural order, moreover, comes with enormous human costs, especially for the most vulnerable, poor, and oppressed among us. Climate change, resulting in drought, storms, and rising sea levels, impacts all but more greatly impacts the marginalized, impoverished, and powerless who have little recourse for either remedy or escape. The northern hemisphere's power and demand for resources impact the less powerful global south in ways that are destructive for indigenous cultures and for human life and dignity. "A true 'ecological debt' exists . . . between the global north and south" that demands justice.⁷ "Today," Pope Francis preaches, "a true ecological approach . . . 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."⁸

2. *Id.* para. 21.

3. *Id.* para. 23.

4. *Id.* para. 25.

5. *Id.* para. 30.

6. LAUDATO SI', *supra* note 1, para. 33.

7. *Id.* para. 51.

8. *Id.* para. 49 (emphasis omitted).

III. A MORAL AND THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

How has humanity come to fail so miserably in its responsibility to care for what God has created? For Pope Francis, the failure is not simply a matter of sinful individuals. It reflects a deep structural misalignment in the institutions of the global order. Even more fundamentally, it reflects a distorted philosophical and theological anthropology. Creation as it came from hands of the Creator is necessarily good and aglow with the order of divine purpose. The human person is ordained to be part of that order—and not above it or outside it or alienated from it. This means that the natural world is not an assemblage of mere meaningless things at our feet for us to use as we please. Creation belongs to God and its intrinsic meaning is divine. The fundamental anthropological error behind so much of humanity's failure in regard to the natural world begins with forgetting to whom creation belongs and with the vain imagining that the human person is its master. Pope Francis writes, "The harmony between the Creator, humanity and creation as a whole was disrupted by our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations."⁹ He continues, "we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God's image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures."¹⁰ The "appropriate hermeneutic" to understand the Genesis account is that we are to "'till and keep' the garden of the world," where "'keeping' means caring, protecting, overseeing, and preserving."¹¹

Understanding the relation between the Creator, the human person, and creation in this way, yields often startling criticism of many of the structural institutions of the contemporary world, including critiques of market economy, minimalist ideologies of governance, technology, and excessive individualism. In this, *Laudato Si'* extends analyses from the pontiff's 2013 apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (Joy of the Gospel).¹²

If indeed all of creation belongs to its Creator, then the labor theory of private property and the corresponding theory of free exchange that are foundational concepts for the market economies of the contemporary world must be viewed with some concern. Citing scripture, Pope Francis explains that "'The earth is the Lord's' (Ps 24:1); to him belongs 'the earth with all that is within it' (Dt 10:14). Thus, God rejects every claim to absolute ownership."¹³ Accordingly, property relations are better understood as a kind of stewardship wherein our duties as stewards are to "till and keep" for the Creator's purposes rather than exploit for our own. Property, the exchange of property, and the market logic driven by such exchanges would seem to be all properly subject to regulation in accordance with divine purposes and the common good—both for the present and for the future. As Pope Francis puts this in one example:

9. *Id.* para. 66.

10. *Id.* para. 67.

11. *Id.*

12. POPE FRANCIS, THE JOY OF THE GOSPEL: *EVANGELII GAUDIUM* (2013), available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

13. *LAUDATO SI'*, *supra* note 1, para. 21.

Once more, we need to reject a magical conception of the market, which would suggest that problems can be solved simply by an increase in the profits of companies or individuals. Is it realistic to hope that those who are obsessed with maximizing profits will stop to reflect on the environmental damage which they will leave behind for future generations? Where profits alone count, there can be no thinking about the rhythms of nature, its phases of decay and regeneration, or the complexity of ecosystems which may be gravely upset by human intervention.¹⁴

Similarly, *Laudato Si'* is insistent about the need for laws, governments, and international bodies to be empowered sufficiently to coordinate and regulate human activity that might threaten the natural world. The encyclical advocates as well for both education and the development of personal virtues to promote a comprehensive care for creation but the authority of the state and similar institutions remains a critically important public component of any remedy. Indeed, quoting from paragraph sixty-seven of his predecessor's encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate* (June 29, 2009), Pope Francis reiterates previous Vatican calls for a global authority with power to sanction international businesses and even national states themselves when protection of creation or similar matters of the common good are at stake.

As Benedict XVI has affirmed in continuity with the social teaching of the Church:

To manage the global economy; to revive economies hit by the crisis; to avoid any deterioration of the present crisis and the greater imbalances that would result; to bring about integral and timely disarmament, food security and peace; to guarantee the protection of the environment and to regulate migration: for all this, there is urgent need of a true world political authority, as my predecessor Blessed John XXIII indicated some years ago.¹⁵

Unfettered technological development also poses concerns for the pope that parallel those he expresses about an unfettered global economy. The logic of technological "progress" leaves scant room for reflection on what is right in light of divine purpose or the common good, especially when such technological change is harnessed to market imperatives. Further, a technological attitude can constrain the human spirit in ways counter to human dignity and counter to humanity's covenant to care for creation. Saint Francis of Assisi's *Canticle of the Sun*, the text from which the title "*Laudato Si'*" is drawn, encourages seeing creation in a familial and intimate way, speaking of Brother Sun, Sister Moon, and Mother Earth. A technological attitude toward the natural world encourages seeing the natural world not as a family to which we belong, but as an array things to use and employ for our interests. The pontiff quotes from the mid-20th century theologian, Romano Guardini:

[T]he technological mind sees nature as an insensate order, as a cold body of facts, as a mere 'given', as an object of utility, as raw material to be hammered into useful

14. *Id.* para. 190.

15. *Id.* para 175 (citing BENEDICT XVI, ENCYCLICAL LETTER: *CARITAS IN VERITATE* 67 (2009), available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html).

shape; it views the cosmos similarly as a mere 'space' into which objects can be thrown with complete indifference.¹⁶

In the gaze of such an attitude, Pope Francis says, "The intrinsic dignity of the world is . . . compromised."¹⁷ Hence, in the analysis of *Laudato Si'*, there is no technological option to pursue to address our moral failure as caretakers of creation. "Nobody is suggesting a return to the Stone Age," the pope maintains, "but we do need to slow down and look at reality in a different way, to appropriate the positive and sustainable progress which has been made, but also to recover the values and the great goals swept away by our unrestrained delusions of grandeur."¹⁸

The technological attitude and the mindset of the global market economy not only distort the way in which we see creation but also the way in which we see others and ourselves. In the commodification of labor, workers become mere labor capital. Consumerism looks to mold and manipulate the consumer as if she were a purchasing machine. The technological attitude that reifies the world into things lends itself toward an attitude that also objectifies others before our gaze. In these and other ways, the individual isolates herself in alienation from the personhood of others. The increasingly radical individualism of the contemporary world is the upshot. Solipsistic individualism undercuts the appreciation of the common good and of the divine purpose in creation. In some of his strongest words, Pope Francis indicts such "rampant individualism," lamenting that "many problems of society are connected with today's self-centered culture of instant gratification."¹⁹

IV. INTEGRAL ECOLOGY

The pivot in *Laudato Si'* from analysis and critique to positive ideas for awakening humanity to its covenant with God for creation reflects the most challenging and possibly unattainable admonition in the encyclical because it calls for the seemingly impossible: a transformation of our understanding of the human person, a transformation of who and what we understand ourselves to be in creation.

Against the anthropocentrism of contemporary life, *Laudato Si'* proposes what is termed an "integral ecology" that de-centers our age's human vanity and re-centers the Creator and creation. "There needs to be," the pontiff explains, "a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies, an educational programme, a lifestyle, and a spirituality which together" implement a process of formation for human conscience and consciousness.²⁰ Integral ecology integrates a profound awareness of our covenantal responsibilities to God as caretakers of creation into every aspect of our lives, not just what our industries do but also society, culture, and daily life.

16. LAUDATO SI', *supra* note 1, para. 115 (quoting ROMANO GUARDINI, THE END OF THE MODERN WORLD: A SEARCH FOR ORIENTATION 63, (Frederick D. Wilhemsen ed., Joseph Theman trans., London: Sheed and Ward 1956)).

17. LAUDATO SI', *supra* note 1, para. 115.

18. *Id.* para. 114.

19. *Id.* para. 162.

20. *Id.* para. 111.

The difficulty with the papal argument for integral ecology lies in part in the jargon itself. What Pope Francis hopes to convey is idea of harmony and balance among integrated elements of an ecosystem. He wants us to view our lives in relation with God and our relation with the natural world and our relations with each other as something like an ecosystem—with the ethic being always to live so as to maintain such harmony and balance. But the ecology metaphor for expressing the ethic, probably chosen because this is the “environment encyclical,” is awkward and ironically technical sounding.

Catholic teachings’ traditional language for presenting this ethic and the integrated responsibilities of each of us to the whole and each other is the language of the common good. The principal of the common good, perhaps the key principal of the Catholic Church’s social teachings, begins with the idea that the human person is a relational being. Properly and naturally, we are always integrated in community with each other, with the creation, and with the Creator—and not just in the present but also in the future. The common good is what is good for that community. *Laudato Si’* sporadically and in passing mentions the common good, but surprisingly and perhaps mistakenly it is largely overlooked.

The language of the common good, moreover, would also seem to be a particularly apt way to frame the call for dialogue in Chapter Five of the encyclical. There, Pope Francis calls for stepping up the ongoing international dialogue on the environment, for widespread and frequent national and local dialogue on environmental needs and policy, for political dialogue on the moral consequences of economic policy, and for dialogue between religion and science. For the pontiff, these discussions are not imagined as mere meetings for the casting of votes or formal decision-making. Through this dialogue, the Pontiff believes, the human mind, heart, and spirit may renew humanity’s covenant to care for creation. This renewal would transform our understanding of our place in creation, our appreciation of our relationship with the Creator, and our sense of what it is to be a human person.

V. CONCLUSION

Laudato Si’ has much to say about our responsibility to address climate change, management of the energy industry, pollution, water rights, biodiversity, animal rights, and so much more. At the end of the day, though, its real message is far loftier: It is a call for us to renew our relationship with the earth, “our common home,” by recognizing the still active intentions of its Creator. Near the end of the encyclical, Pope Francis writes:

The universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely. Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person’s face. The ideal is not only to pass from the exterior to the interior to discover the action of God in the soul, but also to discover God in all things.²¹

Laudato Si’ has been criticized for its policy implications, as has the pope himself for deigning to speak to matters addressed in the political sphere. But, the encyclical reminds us that it is not so easy to divorce faith from action. Faith in God, Pope Francis instructs, calls for us to act in a way that sees the purpose of God in the world around us, and to treat creation accordingly.

21. *Id.* para. 233.