

Reflections  
on Pope Francis's  
Encyclical,  
*Laudato si'*



# Reflections on Pope Francis's Encyclical, *Laudato si'*

Edited by

Prof. Mary Mills SHCJ,  
Rev. Dr. John Arthur Orr  
and Rev. Dr. Harry Schnitker

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# INTRODUCTION

MARY MILLS

This volume of essays takes as its overall title, *Miscellany* – a naming which aptly fits the nature of the contributions. All the contributors are researchers connected with the Maryvale Institute, Birmingham UK: either as junior researchers who have recently completed their theses or as more senior researchers, all of whose work demonstrates an evaluative approach to the teachings and traditions of the Roman Catholic Church. Each contributor starts from the field of their personal research interest and then reflects on the Encyclical *Laudato si'* through that specific lens. The combination of essays provides points of view common to several contributors as well as expanding the field of Catholic social teaching through individual insights and interactions with the primary text. Hence there is overall both coherence and difference in this collection of theological, philosophical, scriptural and historical approaches to reading and discussing the encyclical.

The volume is divided into three sections: Ecology and the natural world; anthropological, philosophical and catechetical issues; historicity and origins. In the first section three contributors comment on environmental ethics, the interface with biblical texts and modern culture and the role of imagination in understanding the world more deeply. Chappell concludes that the encyclical is a welcome and much needed commentary on environmental issues in the light of Catholic Social Teaching while noting that much needs to be done still to implement the guidance offered by the papal document in material terms. Powell sets the scene with an analysis of Genesis creation materials before turning to some modern receptions of the Eden thematic – a yearning for Eden. Stepnowski brings to bear her own work on the use of the imagination as set out in the works of Pepler and Vann, themselves situated within the philosophical traditions coming from Thomas Aquinas. As Dominicans involved in religious education and its foundations and aware that they were operating in the particular frame of industrial society Pepler and Vann sought to review the positive role of the human imagination as a

force to expand human capacity to engage creatively with the world and society.

In the second part the contributors engage with anthropological matters, gender theory, the Franciscan tradition, the theory of Bernard Lonergan and the interface with the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Marengo argues that a central area for consideration is the nature of Christian anthropology and the contributions to that subject made by recent papal thinkers. Being fully human is accompanied by the need to take care of our home. O'Donoghue notes that Pope Francis refers to gender issues as part of setting the scene for engaging directly with the environment. Both are examples of new initiatives in society whereby attention is consciously drawn to what might be seen as peripheral issues to the major themes of Christian teaching. The encyclical argues that understanding our own humanity more completely provides us with appropriate tools for a rigorous examination of the relationship between humanity and created order. O'Donoghue provides his own critique of gender theory in the light of the papal usage of this subject.

Kavanagh takes readers through some aspects of Catholic philosophical tradition, especially the theological approaches to the created world found in the life and teachings of St Francis of Assisi. She suggests that two principles in particular provide valuable resources for modern environmental engagement – gift and renunciation. Life is gifted to the whole of creation as much as to humanity and for human flourishing it is important to take this to heart and to treat the environment with respect. She argues that the encyclical provides a form of philosophical aesthetics which dialogues with the theological approach to incarnation. Friel also works from within a philosophical base, this time the thought of Lonergan. Friel considers challenge and response as key dynamics for analysis of social origins and the development of a practical intelligence. Finally, in this section, Briliute explores how to read the encyclical alongside the main catechetical handbook of the modern Roman Catholic Church. She notes the significance of Catholic Social Teaching with its respect for otherness and explores the concept of ecological theology before linking this with the commentary on creation in the catechetical volume

In the third part of the volume the topics dealt with include rabbinical alignments, peace-making, Scriptural roots, the modern historical context of papal teaching traditions and the comparison of the work of Pope Francis with that of John Paul II. Hanning dwells on the rabbinical tradition of reading creation and culture as two parts of the same reality. In Genesis 1 the emphasis falls on human 'dominion' over created order but this is paralleled in Genesis 2 with the profiling of human beings as



creatures of the soil whose vocation is to bring nature to its full potential through nurturing cultivation. Humans and nature therefore work together in the totality of divine design. Tumeinski uses his own research on comparison of Yoder and Ratzinger on the subject of peace making and reconciliation as a vehicle for exploring the encyclical. He suggests that in the light of the encyclical's guidance central activities are praise, fraternity and pilgrimage.

Letellier provides a serious examination of the creation materials in Genesis, focusing on the interlocking elements of creation and dominion and examining how to interpret these themes in the light of the encyclical. He also addresses the wider topic of how the document uses biblical resources in Torah and Psalms, suggesting that the central scriptural paradigm is creation, law and salvation. Schnitker treats the issue of roots and origins in an historical mode, examining both the temporal context for Pope Francis' materials and the parallels between his teaching and that of other papal writers in the modern era, notably Benedict XVI and John Paul II. Orr closes this section with a reflection on the contextualisation of *Laudato si'* with regard to the views of John Paul II, having first set out the basic principles which he sees as the rooting of the encyclical.

At the end of the volume Morris provides a response to the varied contributions to the overall analysis of *Laudato si'* made by this collection of essays. Taken together the contents of the volume provide some continuity of perspective. The foundational role of biblical texts comes through in many of the pieces, as does the tradition of social teaching as embedded in Catholic tradition. The role of ancillary voices is apparent in the engagement with aspects of reception history such as Rabbinic and Eastern Orthodox approaches to foundational texts. A further focus is found in locating recent papal teaching within the chain of papal interpreters of Catholic teachings who have wanted to speak not only to the past but also to contemporary social attitudes and common needs of their times. Finally, there is the shared view of several contributors that discussion of creation and incarnational theology needs to lead on to practical activity, whether in terms of protecting the environment or in terms of renewing forms of religious education and catechesis.



**PART ONE:**  
**ECOLOGY, THE NATURAL WORLD**  
**AND *LAUDATO SI'***

# CHAPTER ONE

## AN ECOLOGIST'S PERSPECTIVE ON *LAUDATO SI'*

KEITH CHAPPELL

### Introduction

For an ecologist and a Catholic these are truly exciting times. *Laudato si'* must be welcomed as an important contribution in a critical area of human concern. It is a document which I have personally been anticipating for nearly a quarter of a century, and I celebrate both its arrival and its content. This Encyclical will be subject to discussion for many years, in order to explore many of the key theological themes it contains. More importantly, it has the potential to guide significant and important changes in the lives of all Catholics and the whole human race. A bold claim for any document.

*Laudato si'* sits within the context of an important body of Church teaching on social issues and within a wider body of doctrine relating to matters as seemingly diverse as the theology of creation, Christian anthropology, salvation history and eschatology, amongst others. Many of these aspects will be covered in detail elsewhere in this volume. This chapter focusses on the other context in which this Encyclical must be considered, arguably the most important one if it is to have any significant impact in the area of concern. *Laudato si'* is on one level a political document, produced by one of the most important and influential world leaders, someone capable of inspiring very real change in the lives of over one billion people in the first instance and also well beyond. It must, then, be considered as a political text as well as a piece of pastoral guidance.

The term 'ecology' has become one of many words that are abused and misused in common usage much to the chagrin of those of us who are professional ecologists. I must, however, let this go and acknowledge that it is frequently used interchangeably with what might be more accurately

termed 'the environment'. At its heart, 'ecology' has the same root as the word 'church'; both spring from the Greek '*oikos*', meaning house, and are built on notions of relationship. I believe that this alignment points to a central hope for the role of the Church in bringing a special perspective and empathy to what is, without a doubt, a significant crisis that faces humanity at this time. We must also be aware that this is a moment of crisis both ecologically and ecclesially. This crisis provides the impetus behind the project of New Evangelisation and finds expression in declining church numbers in more developed countries. Many deny that this is in any way linked to issues of relevance and credibility but this is misguided and these accusations must be taken seriously.

We must acknowledge that as a Church we have little credibility in the area of environmental protection and have a lot of catching up to do. *Laudato si'* is a vital step which, if accepted and implemented by the faithful, will have an important role in getting both 'houses' into order before it is too late. It is possible that *Laudato si'* could turn out to be the most important contribution yet to the New Evangelisation endeavour.

### **Historical Context of *Laudato si'***

In the foreword to his 1948 book, *A Sand County Almanac*, the naturalist and conservationist, Aldo Leopold, wrote:

"Conservation is getting nowhere because it is incompatible with our Abrahamic concept of the land. We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect. There is no other way for land to survive the impact of mechanized man, nor for us to reap from it the aesthetic harvest it is capable, under science, of contributing to culture".<sup>1</sup>

Leopold died in the same year and so never came to see the significance of these words and the agenda he established in his short book as it gave birth to the 'Leopoldian Land Ethic' which has, for over seventy years, been an important concept in environmental ethics. Since Leopold, many other great figures in environmental consciousness have come forward to warn of hazards or propose a new relationship between humanity and the rest of creation that may allow us to live sustainably. In the 1960s and '70s, Rachel Carson famously brought the attention of the

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<sup>1</sup> Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), p.viii.

world to the disastrous impacts of modern farming practices in *Silent Spring*, and James Lovelock proposed a view of the world rooted in the notion of the planet as single system in his Gaia hypothesis.<sup>2</sup> These and many others have continued to warn of the costs of human detachment from the ecological systems that sustain us. Like prophets, most were ridiculed and rejected; some were subjected to physical threats and even killed, yet most have been shown to be right in the years that followed.

Two key points should be taken from this in the context of this chapter which will be considering the Encyclical, *Laudato si'*, from an ecological perspective, which I would argue is the way it must be considered if it is to have any significance. Firstly, the history of environmental ethics is a long and noble one. Over-exploitation of natural resources and unsustainable lifestyles are as old as civilisation itself and yet few lessons have been learned. We now find ourselves facing a crisis that threatens our ability to maintain human life on this planet in a way that is recognisable in its current form. Let us be clear, there are those who deny the degree of ecological damage that is occurring but I simply place those people alongside those who deny evolution: ignorant of the facts before them and often politically motivated. There is a debate to be had with these people, but I will not enter into it here. The second point that should be taken is that, from an ecological perspective, there is nothing in the Encyclical that has not been said before and perhaps many decades before. This is not to say that the Encyclical is not significant, important, or indeed revolutionary in some aspects. The revolutionary aspect of *Laudato si'* lies not in its identification of the environmental crisis, or indeed the proposals that Pope Francis puts forward to address the crisis, but rather in the fact that it has been written at all.

*Laudato si'* sits firmly within the tradition of Catholic Social Teaching as expressed in papal Encyclicals and other documents reaching back to Leo XIII, and his 1891 call to social action in *Rerum Novarum*.<sup>3</sup> Since then other Encyclicals have developed upon the tradition established by Leo XIII and some can be seen as equally revolutionary in their way. Perhaps most notable amongst these was *Pacem in Terris* written by John XXIII in 1963,<sup>4</sup> which raised important social questions and, in particular, questioned the accepted worldview amongst governments regarding the

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<sup>2</sup> Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (First Mariner Books, 20002); James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* [1979] (Oxford Landmark Science, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Leo XIII, *Rerum novarum: On the Rights and Duties of Capital and Labour* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1891).

<sup>4</sup> John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris: On establishing universal peace in truth, justice, charity and liberty* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1963).

arms race. As great as these, and other Encyclicals, have been with regard to social issues none of them can claim to be ground breaking or prophetic in nature. That simply is not the way of Church teaching on these matters. The issues raised in *Rerum Novarum* regarding justice for workers follows behind the pioneering work of many others in the Church and, more significantly, beyond the institutional structures of the Catholic Church. For decades prior to *Rerum Novarum*, figures such as Dorothea Dix, Harriet Tubman, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, John Bosco, Robert Owen and William Wilberforce had fought for just such changes as Leo XIII later identified as necessary. Similarly, *Pacem in Terris* followed the post-war peace movement and the growth of equality movements for women and oppressed minorities. *Laudato si'* finds itself building on the shoulders of giants just as the whole of papal social teaching has. As the priesthood in Scripture has always been slow to react to the message of prophets, so the magisterium of the Church has always been slow to consolidate radical ideas into teaching. This is right and proper, it allows for discernment and consolidation of ideas. This does not mean that work is not done 'on the ground', so to speak, by lay people, religious orders and by clerics. The Church has a fine tradition of movements and orders dedicated to social works, including in the field of environmental protection.

On rare occasions, the vacuum left by a lack of teaching allows more destructive notions to rise to the fore. The absence of social action by civil governments and by the Church in the nineteenth century left a void that was quickly filled by Marx and by anarchist thinkers, leaving consequences that we continue to struggle with today. The fact that coherent teaching on the environment has been delayed until the second decade of the twenty-first century has been just such a delay. This is not to say that there has been no teaching on the matter. John Paul II and Benedict XVI both taught on environmental matters, and many of their teachings are referred to in *Laudato si'*, but their teachings were frequently qualified or somewhat hidden within addresses to particular groups. For a social issue to gain prominence in the Church it requires a document of the standing of *Laudato si'*; the fact that it has taken so long is both significant and leaves open accusations of negligence on the part of Pope Francis' predecessors. Significant because it is clear from their teaching that they were aware of the level of the issue, yet chose not to address it in a substantial manner. Negligent, because it both allowed continuing impacts on the environment and the poor, and contributed to accusations of irrelevance levelled at the Church which is seen by ecologists as part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

Additionally, like the void left by inaction in the nineteenth century, the absence of a Catholic voice in the ecological sphere has left a spiritual space which has been filled by alternative religions, new age practices and secular humanism. This is the consequence of inaction in the face of a persisting and developing crisis; neutrality is not an option in this case. The nature of the crisis we are dealing with is one in which there can be no return, so delay is potentially disastrous; extinct species cannot be resurrected, consumed resources cannot be replaced and global feedback mechanisms once altered cannot be reversed. Pope Francis is, then, remarkable for doing what his predecessors failed to do in standing up to be counted and calling on each and every Catholic to do likewise. For the future of the environment, social justice and for the Church this document represents an important step in terms of teaching, action and for evangelisation.

In the introduction to *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis establishes some key points which immediately speak to an ecologist reading the Encyclical, and open the important channels of dialogue that must take place if it is to be anything more than an interesting piece of teaching relevant only to the pious with little by way of concrete outcomes. After drawing on the life of his namesake, St Francis of Assisi, he states in paragraph twelve: "Rather than a problem to be solved, the world is a joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and praise".<sup>5</sup> This assertion, combined with a later point that each species has intrinsic worth independent of their potential for use by humanity,<sup>6</sup> presents an optimistic view of creation and distances the Church both from the exploitative position of modern capitalism and the notion that some form of 'fix' can be used. The second point, particularly with regard to technological fixes, is developed at length in chapter three of *Laudato si'* where the Pope considers an unhealthy relationship with technology to be both at the heart of the crisis and not capable of providing the necessary answers. Also in the introduction he alludes to two key points which will help to facilitate the necessary dialogue and action that must take place if the Church is to be an important factor in meeting the ecological challenges that face humanity.

Firstly, he calls for a conversation that includes the whole of humanity, acknowledging the historical context within which his call stands by mentioning the substantial efforts which have been made by many organisations.<sup>7</sup> This, in a manner which is becoming typical of Pope Francis,

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<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato si': on care for our common home* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2015), no. 33.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 14.



provides the all-important opening for dialogue that the Church must approach in full humility and in acknowledgement that it is a latecomer to this particular table, with much to offer but also much to learn. The second point is one that perhaps requires a little more analysis. He professes regret that attempts to seek concrete solutions have met with apathy or direct obstruction, “even on the part of believers”.<sup>8</sup> Why then would believers have little interest or, even worse, seek to prevent solutions? As the Pope rightly identifies there has been widespread denial about the nature of the environmental challenges facing us.<sup>9</sup> This is completely understandable and in many ways a natural human response to a crisis, especially one that we may feel individually unable to address. Much as a patient who discovers an unusual lump or strange skin blemish may wait months before consulting a physician, so it is with the malignant growth that has been ecological degradation.

The truth is inherently difficult to hear. On a more considered level there have been those with certain political or economic interests who have perpetuated the denialism that we encounter. These voices have been associated with large corporate interests and western political elites. It is, then, perhaps surprising that we find many within the Church aligned with such views. This, one would like to suggest, is a by-product of the manner in which the Church has sought to influence political decisions over the last few decades. In many countries the Church has become little more than a pressure group, one amongst many, and the issue it has chosen to stand for has been that of ‘life issues’ or those relating to sexuality. In Europe, North America and other industrialised countries, the only high level campaigning seen over many years has been with regard to changes in abortion law, end of life and the legal status of homosexuals. On the whole, these are vitally important areas. Abortion is responsible for the deaths of millions of children each year and assisted suicide devalues life. Homosexuality has been an unnecessary distraction and campaigns have done little but cause pain and alienation. There are, however, many pressure groups out there and each one has its own single issue to argue for. Single-issue politics rarely produces the integrated response that is necessary when considering complex issues such as ecological degradation, and this necessity for integration is recognised by Pope Francis. We have found ourselves in recent years with the Church’s social teaching being labelled ‘our best kept secret’. This is not a badge we should wear with honour; it should be a point of shame as we have lost the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, no. 14.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, no. 59.

fullness of teaching and relegated ourselves to a marginal group rather than a significant player.

Few, if any, global institutions have the resources and constituency of the Catholic Church, and so the potential to effect genuine change. Yet, we find ourselves in a position where in 2015 the Church in Ireland, perhaps one of the most Catholic of countries by heritage, felt unable to contribute to the referendum debate on same sex marriage due to its lack of credibility. This was a wise move as stepping back from a perceived obsession with sexuality can only be a good thing for the Church as we face far more important issues. I realise that this may be controversial, for a long time these matters have been seen as issues where the Church holds authority and they are deeply ingrained into the self-identity of many Catholics. If, however, we are truly concerned with human life then we need to shift our focus a little, whilst not letting go of the life issues mentioned above. As the Catholic Bishops of the Philippines stated in 1988, the degradation of the environment is “the ultimate pro-life issue”.<sup>10</sup>

In order to increase its influence the local Church, as many pressure groups do, has frequently aligned itself with particular political parties, which have typically been on what might be considered the more conservative wing of politics. For example, we find instances where Catholic bishops in the USA effectively align themselves with the Republican Party. The Church in Poland is closely associated with the Law and Justice Party. This again is understandable; it has normally been the more conservative parties that have argued for life issues. Unfortunately, a by-product of this association has been the acceptance by many Catholics of the environmental denialist positions of many conservative politicians and parties. As Noam Chomsky states in the North American context: “The Republican party now has its catechism of things you have to repeat in lockstep, kind of like the old Communist party. One of them is denying climate change”.<sup>11</sup> Only when the Church presents the fullness of its teaching, rather than acting as a pressure group, can it avoid the hazard of subscribing to the catechisms of others. *Laudato si'* presents a very real attempt to do this, particularly in the presentation of an ‘Integral Ecology’ that takes into account the breadth of human and ecological concerns that face us. Before looking in more detail at the nature and implications of this integral ecology it is worth considering briefly Pope Francis’ view of the origins of the crisis.

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<sup>10</sup> Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, *What is Happening to Our Beautiful Land?* (Manilla, 1988), no. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Noam Chomsky, “Interview”, *New Scientist Magazine*, 17 March 2012, 28-29.

There can be no avoiding the fact that in Chapter 3, which concerns itself with the origins of the ecological crisis; science comes in for something of a battering. To be fair, Pope Francis does emphasise the positive elements of science as a God given aspect of human creativity.<sup>12</sup> What follows, however, is a presentation that risks setting science and religion in conflict, as a scientific and technological worldview is seen as being at the heart of the crisis. A closer reading, however, reveals that what is really being criticised is scientism, a reductionist view of the world which has little to do with how most scientists view the world. Reductionism is not an essential element of science and many, indeed most, scientists do not hold such a view regardless of whether they hold a religious belief. Pope Francis suggests that a scientific view of the world has allowed an economic system to develop that is fundamentally damaging to the ecology of our planet. I would argue that it should also be noted that the unquestioned and unrivalled development of modern capitalism has harnessed the power of science to its ends and ignored the warnings of many scientists that we do not live on a planet with unlimited resources. Importantly, the Pope does mention the key failing of our social system as he highlights that the financial paradigms we operate with have become divorced from our real economy and as such our 'economy' has become fixed to a model of unlimited growth which is unsustainable economically and ecologically.

It is later in the chapter that the Encyclical addresses some of the key economic concerns and in so doing becomes even more noticeably aligned with the thought of one of the giants of environmental thought: the Catholic economist E.F. Schumacher.<sup>13</sup> Schumacher's economics were deeply rooted in his Catholic, belief and he consciously drew from sources, such as *Rerum Novarum* and distributist thinkers, such as Chesterton and Belloc. His most famous book, *Small is Beautiful: a study of economics as if people mattered*, was published in 1973,<sup>14</sup> and was followed by numerous writings on sustainability, including *A Guide for the Perplexed* in 1977, which appeared before his death in the same year.<sup>15</sup> In his writings, he criticises the scientism and materialism that is also criticised in *Laudato si'* in much the same way, and proposes a similar economics

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<sup>12</sup> This draws on John Paul II's address to scientists in Hiroshima, 25 February, 1981.

<sup>13</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, no. 129.

<sup>14</sup> Ernst Friedrich Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered* (London: Abacus, 1988).

<sup>15</sup> Ernst Friedrich Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Vintage, 1993).

on a small scale that is called for by Pope Francis. It is wonderful that Schumacher's thought has been brought into the magisterium of the Church in this way, both because of its intrinsic insights, but also due to the large body of thought derived from his ideas since his death. Much of the work based on Schumacher is highly practical in terms of political, technological and economic approaches. Much work could be done integrating this into Church guidance on the matters touched upon in *Laudato si'*.

The sustainable economics proposed by Schumacher is taken up in Chapter 5 of the Encyclical; here Pope Francis calls for a fundamental re-thinking of our current economic paradigm. This is developed in section four of the chapter, which opens: 'Politics must not be subject to the economy, nor should the economy be subject to the dictates of an efficiency-driven paradigm of technocracy.'<sup>16</sup> This statement effectively captures the argument put forward by Schumacher in chapter three of *Small is Beautiful*, and the following Encyclical paragraphs continue to bring forward the ideas into the setting of the twenty-first century. As this relationship between *Laudato si'* and Schumacher becomes more widely recognised, it will undoubtedly cause concern amongst those closely associated with right-wing political institutions, as much of what both say presents a fundamental challenge to the neo-liberal economics that have dominated the past few decades of the global finance-led economy. Schumacher is of course, drawing deeply from Catholic social teaching, and particularly the notion of subsidiarity put forward by Pius XI in the 1931 Encyclical, *Quadragesimo anno*.<sup>17</sup> Pope Francis does the same, and in doing so both seek to bring the global crisis down to the human level of communities, families and individuals. It is at this level that the ecological crisis is most real, particularly in poorer communities, and it is also the level at which change can be effected.

In an ecological sense, all systems are the product in interactions on an individual scale and do not exist independently of the organisms that live within the ecosystem. Until a habitat is populated it is meaningless to consider it as an ecosystem. Small changes in the numbers or behaviour of those populating the ecosystem can have enormous impacts, especially amongst those that are towards the top of the 'food chain'. Aldo Leopold provided an excellent example of this in *A Sand County Almanac*, in which the removal of a few wolves from a mountain caused ecological

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<sup>16</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, no. 189.

<sup>17</sup> Pius XI, *Quadragesimo anno: On reconstructing the social order and perfecting it, conformably to the precepts of the Gospel* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1946), no. 80.

disaster as the deer population exploded, damaging the trees enormously.<sup>18</sup> And the point is? We are clearly at the top of the food chain when it comes to the use of ecological resources, and a small change in our behaviour can have enormous impacts on environmental degradation. This is the message of Leopold, Schumacher and Pope Francis. The difficulty is that to make a difference as an individual or small community brings with it risks within the current economic paradigm. Not least amongst these is the reality that if I reduce my consumption it is likely that someone else, likely someone richer and more powerful, will take the surplus for himself. The sum environmental gain will be zero, but I (or my family) will be poorer. *Laudato si'*, perhaps more than any other document previously, recognises this in the integrated and comprehensive nature of its teaching. It provides a coherent set of teachings and demands that mean that all can be emboldened to take action in the hope that real change might be effected, and that the burden will not fall unjustly on the weak and the poor. As a message of solidarity with the poor, ground which the Pope has prepared previously, *Laudato si'* recognises their hopes for a better existence, and the need for the rich to make active choices to “accept decreased growth” and “even retracing our steps before it is too late”.<sup>19</sup>

Change in behaviour is essential if we are to avoid the worst implications of environmental degradation. Such changes are particularly important amongst the rich nations and those in poorer countries who are wealthy, and live lifestyles that exceed those that could ever be hoped for by the majority of the world's population. Equality of lifestyle is beyond the ability of ‘economic growth’ to provide, as it brings with it the environmental degradation that drags down those already mired in poverty. Behavioural change is, then, a vital component in the ecological rebalancing of the human relationship with the rest of creation. Indeed, it is the most important component. There is, however, an ‘elephant in the room’; something we are uncomfortable talking about but which cannot be ignored. That ‘elephant’ is, of course, human population levels and their continuing growth.

Every ecosystem has a ‘carrying capacity’ for any particular species, which is the maximum population that can be sustained assuming certain levels of resource requirements. Beyond this capacity it is likely that the population will decline rapidly, perhaps even catastrophically, and that other species too may be adversely affected. This principle in essence applies to humans too, although it is complicated by layers of detachment

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<sup>18</sup> Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There*, 129.

<sup>19</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, no. 193.

caused by technology, such as agriculture enhanced by the use of petrochemicals. It is quite possible that if we factor out the developments in agriculture since World War II we have already exceeded the carrying capacity of the planet. Without oil-based fertilisers and pesticides, or the use of genetically modified (GM) crops, it is unlikely that we could continue to feed the people already living. To depend on either of these is dubious, and GM crops are highlighted as of specific concern in *Laudato si'*.<sup>20</sup> Even with significant shifts in the lifestyles of the rich, and an assumption that those seeking increased wealth will not exceed a basic standard of living, it is unlikely that any great increase in human population can be sustained.

If we are to be honest with ourselves and engage in some *realpolitik* rather than hiding behind theory, it is unlikely that the wealthy will greatly decrease their living standards and whilst they maintain such living standards it is not unreasonable to expect the poor to aspire to something similar. The rate of increase in population is slowing but the global population continues to increase. Thus, if we are truly to address the ecological crisis we must begin to talk seriously about the stabilisation or reduction of the human population. This is a point conspicuous by its absence in *Laudato si'*. For too long the issue of population control has been conflated with the issue of contraception in the minds of Catholics and has, at best, been avoided, as in *Laudato si'*, or more frequently resisted. To reiterate my earlier point, there is no room or time for neutrality in these issues. It may well be that the Church's teaching on contraception should be revisited in light of a broader, ecological, concept of what it is to be human but at the very least further teaching is required to emphasise that reproductive control is not contrary to our faith. It is this aspect more than any other that could make a very real and immediate contribution towards sustainability.

In conclusion, it should be reiterated that *Laudato si'* represents an important contribution, not only to Catholic social teaching, but also to the debate on an appropriate response to the ecological crisis. The very fact that papal teaching leaves no room for the denialism that exists in some elements of society, and within the Church, is itself important. The most significant aspect of the Encyclical is that an integrated approach to what are the joint issues of social and environmental justice is recognised. There can be no opportunity for setting the human and ecological in conflict, nor any doubt that a genuine search for the best for one involves seeking the

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, nos 133-5.

best for all, both human and non-human. Pope Francis does this elegantly in *Laudato si'*.

Too often ecological issues are reduced to particular issues, perhaps most notably with climate change being seen as the only environmental challenge facing humanity. In avoiding this and drawing on those such as Schumacher, who have long recognised the intimate and complex relationships at play, Pope Francis prevents those who seek to exploit division and obscure the full nature of the social, economic and ecological crisis that faces us. Undoubtedly, there are elements that need clarification or that are missing and these will be addressed soon as time is not on our side in these matters. This said, if Aldo Leopold had been able to see the content of *Laudato si'* it is hard to imagine he would have had difficulty accepting its core teaching. He might even have felt able to remove his comment about our Abrahamic concept of the land and recognised that a Christ-centred vision rooted in the Gospel and the virtue of love for creation had redeemed and transformed it.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *LAUDATO SI'* AND NATURE

SCOTT POWELL

In the summer of 2015, Pope Francis released his second Encyclical letter, entitled, *Laudato si'*, a line taken from his namesake, Saint Francis' well-known poem, *Canticle of the Sun*. In releasing *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis produced the Catholic Church's first ever, full length, Encyclical letter devoted to the care of the natural world. When it was released, many Catholics, among others, questioned why the Church needed a document devoted to the environment, particularly when it seemed that there were many more pressing moral and cultural issues.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the release of *Laudato si'* signalled to the world that the Catholic Church—or at least its current leader—saw the natural world as having a particular moral and ecclesial importance. Certainly, this was meant as a call to all of Christianity to take a stronger role in solving the world's environmental ills.

The intersection of Christianity and the environment is not without its difficulties. In a 2005 article in the journal, *Conservation Biology*, David Orr pointed to what he called “an interesting convergence of views between conservation biologists and religious fundamentalists on the state of culture and the environment.” “Both”, he said, “agree that things are going to hell in the proverbial hand basket, but thereafter the differences

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<sup>1</sup> Some Catholics—particularly very traditional and politically conservative ones—voiced strong negative reactions to the Pope's Encyclical upon, and even before, its release. See for example, Maureen Mullarkey, “Where Did Pope Francis' Extravagant Rant Come From?”, *The Federalist* (June 24, 2015). A number of American Catholic politicians also reacted against the Pope's Encyclical, including Republican presidential candidates, Jeb Bush (Suzanne Goldenberg, “Jeb Bush Joins Republican Backlash “Against Pope on Climate Change”, *The Guardian Newspaper* (June 17, 2015), and Rick Santorum, (Alison Walter, “Picking a Fight With Francis? Rick Santorum Misses the Point of Pope's Encyclical”, *Busted Halo* (June 17, 2015).



are great and have great implications for the human prospect.”<sup>2</sup> Noting that both scientists and the group he calls “evangelicals” look at societal and ecological evidence and conclude that the future looks bleak for our natural world, and that some sort of an end is near, he concludes that science and Christianity both see that end and its ramifications as very differently. “The result,” he says, “on environmental issues and others, is a kind of standoff between an increasingly militant fundamentalist Christianity on one hand and science on the other.”<sup>3</sup>

What Orr points out is a dangerous dichotomy. While Christianity does indeed look forward to a future return of Christ and an “end” to the space-time universe in a certain sense, the material world, and the role of humans within it, has a much more important place in that paradigm than Orr thinks it does. He charges much of Christianity with trying to hold together the false dichotomy of an imminent return of Christ, and with it, the end of the material world on the one hand, with a sense of stewardship and protection of that same material world on the other. Can these two be mutually exclusive? In other words, what is the point of preserving and stewarding creation if that same creation is bound for immanent destruction? Is this not, as it were, like rearranging deck chairs on the sinking Titanic?

From a Christian point of view, one of the major difficulties seems to be how to balance the popular idea that Christians are called to be “stewards”, and “caretakers” of the earth, with the fact that many Christians do indeed believe that Christ will come again soon and obliterate the space-time world. In other words, why should believers really care about a world for whose end they are anxiously waiting? Whether or not this is the reality of Christianity, this is often the perception of Christianity—at least to some degree. Indeed, perhaps because of this, it seems that many Christians see the environmental movement as a waste of time—or at best, a misguided concern. How then, ought the Christian—who does expect, and hope for Christ’s *parousia*, but still feels compelled to care for the natural world—approach questions of the environment?

In *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis subtly pointed to four distinct relationships, which the Catechism of the Catholic Church says defined life on earth prior to the sin of Adam and Eve.<sup>4</sup> In other words, when God created

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<sup>2</sup> David W. Orr, “Armageddon Versus Extinction”, *Conservation Biology*, 19, 2 (2005), 290-292 and 290.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 290.

<sup>4</sup> Speaking about Saint Francis of Assisi, the Pope said, “He was a mystic and a pilgrim who lived in simplicity and in wonderful harmony with God, with others,

humanity, humans existed in a state of harmony with God. This relationship is what the Church calls “Original Holiness”. Because of this holiness, humans were able to exist in harmony with themselves, with the people around them and with the rest of creation. These subsequent three relationships are what the Catechism calls, “Original Justice”.<sup>5</sup> When Adam and Eve disobeyed God in Genesis, they ruptured the first relationship—that between humans and God. Because this first, and most fundamental, relationship was now broken, the subsequent three relationships (humans with themselves, other humans, and creation) were also broken. All of this changes, however, in the New Testament. Paul says in Romans 5:1, “Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” In other words, because of Christ, the first relationship, broken by Adam and Eve has now been restored. Paul spends much of Romans explaining how, because of this, the other three relationships have been reconciled for believers as well. In chapter 7, Paul gives his well-known discourse about why “I do not do the good that I want to do.” Here, Paul seems to be describing an internal conflict.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, the overall purpose of the Epistle to the Romans was to address a growing strife between factions of Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome.<sup>7</sup> Here, we see the third relationship—that of humans with each other, undergirding the entire epistle. Finally, we arrive at Romans 8:19-22, in which Paul comes to a kind of climax in his thought, tying the

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with nature and with himself. He shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace.” Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, no. 10.

<sup>5</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), 95.

<sup>6</sup> While many interpreters classically assumed Paul’s statements in Romans 7 to be the normative understanding of the human condition and the reality of sin (particularly Augustine and Luther), some more recent scholarship (notably Krister Stendahl, “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West”, in *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 78-96) has argued against this understanding, suggesting that the “I” is not necessarily Paul, but perhaps rather a literary “representation of human self-consciousness.” See Emma Wasserman, *The Death of the Soul in Romans 7* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 2.

<sup>7</sup> While still much debated, I believe that the context for the Epistle to the Romans to be the period shortly after the Jewish people (and by implication, Jewish Christians) who had been expelled from the city under the Emperor Claudius subsequently returned under the new Emperor Nero. This would have left the local Christian community under the control of gentiles, thus creating a tension upon the return of the Jewish believers.

entirety of creation into his theology—an imperative as it were—for Christians who have been reconciled back to God, to bring that reconciliation to creation. As Paul says in 8:19, creation “waits with eager longing for the revelation of the children of God”. The world of nature, in other words, is waiting for Christians to live out their redemption.

For believers then, the Titanic is not sinking, but rather is coming back to the surface. How can we apply this paradigm to the question of the environment? I believe that the key piece, which is often missing in Christian teaching and preaching—and the piece, which makes Pope Francis’ words in *Laudato si'* palpable—is the role of the material world in Christ’s redeeming work. If Christianity is merely a waiting period for the return of Christ and the obliteration of the space-time world, then the environment is, indeed, a misguided concern. If, however, believers are called to look forward to a resurrected, redeemed, and glorified creation, then the picture is very much changed. While many Christians think quite a lot about the second coming of Christ, the questions of what comes after Christ’s *parousia* are largely ignored altogether in many Christian circles. David Lawrence articulates this well, calling on his readers to look beyond what he calls the “‘traditional’ end-of-the-world issues” and ask a more important question:

“when Armageddon has happened, when the tribulation has occurred, when we know for sure whether or not there is a rapture (and if there is who goes where when!), when the Lord Jesus has returned, and when pre-, post-, or a-millennialists know who is right – WHAT THEN?”<sup>8</sup>

What then indeed? On the issue of what comes after the so-called “end of the world”, much of Christianity is simply silent, leading to the logical conclusion that Christians have no real reason to care about the natural world after Jesus’ return. As Lawrence says, “the ‘endtime’ signs Paul describes as merely ‘labour pains’ often appear to be of more interest than the new creation which is to be born!”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the Old Testament frequently uses the imagery of birth pangs as a way of pointing to future glory and new birth that God had in store for his people; a common view of the *eschaton*.<sup>10</sup> In Romans 8:22, however, Paul seems to put his readers

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<sup>8</sup> David Lawrence, *Heaven: It’s Not the End of the World! The Biblical Promise of a New Earth* (London: Scripture Union, 1995), Kindle E-Book, Location 61.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, Kindle Locations 82-83.

<sup>10</sup> Consider for example, Isaiah 66:9-11: “Shall I bring to the birth and not cause to bring forth? says the Lord; shall I, who cause to bring forth, shut the womb? says your God. Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her;

directly in the middle of this metaphor. The birth pangs have begun (at least with regard to creation), but the birth is not yet complete. What is remarkable about Paul's statement is that the creation is not merely a part of this imagery, but actually at the centre of it. The "new creation" which is being born out of these birth pangs is not merely a spiritual reality, but a material reality. This is perhaps difficult to imagine because Paul's language is so poetic and even apocalyptic in Romans 8:19-22. This makes his words hard to take seriously. Perhaps this is why so much of Christianity has either ignored this passage, or taken it as a metaphor for something else. If, however, one recognizes the four relationships, which were broken in Genesis, and sees Paul pointing toward their reconciliation throughout Romans, then the relationship of human beings to a physical creation—and the role of humans in bringing about that reconciliation—is essential to Christian thought.

The role of the material world—particularly in the eschaton—is precisely why the Catholic tradition, in particular, is uniquely poised to take part in the modern ecological conversation. On a personal level, it was largely the Catholic understanding and liturgical use of the material world that led me back to the faith of my childhood after staying away for many years. While many of the evangelical protestant services I had attended focused on sermons and singing, the Catholic Mass, I realized, focused much of its attention on bodily movement (standing, sitting, kneeling, singing), in addition to the material things—and particularly, things of the earth—which were a fundamental part of the Catholic Church's liturgical life (water, bread, wine, oil, etc.).<sup>11</sup> While there is a heavy emphasis on the spiritual in Catholicism, there is also a heavy emphasis on the material.

Without a soteriology and an eschatology that stresses materiality, however, Christianity seems inevitably to drift in the direction of Gnosticism. We can see a sort of pseudo-Gnosticism even in the traditional hymns of Western Christianity. A popular hymn, "This World is Not My Home" reflects this thinking:

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rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her; that you may suck and be satisfied with her consoling breasts; that you may drink deeply with delight from the abundance of her glory."

<sup>11</sup> These elements are, of course, not exclusive to Catholicism. One finds a robust sacramental life in Orthodox and Anglican communions as well as many other (to varying degrees) protestant denominations. This statement merely speaks to my personal experience in both American evangelicalism and Roman Catholicism.

“This world is not my home, I'm just passing through.  
 My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue.  
 The angels beckon me from Heaven's open door  
 And I can't feel at home in this world anymore.”

Likewise, in one popular protestant hymnal from the mid part of the last century, titled, *Living Above*,<sup>12</sup> the very first hymn is called *I Want to Rise Above the World*. This idea of a rejection of the world in favor of a destination far away has been popular in the Christian imagination for hundreds of years. As N. T. Wright says,

“A massive assumption has been made in Western Christianity that the purpose of being a Christian is simply, or at least mainly, to ‘go to heaven when you die,’ and...texts that say the opposite, like Romans 8:18-25 and Revelation 21-22, are simply screened out as if they didn't exist.”<sup>13</sup>

This is precisely why many Christian conversations about the environment seem inevitably to run into difficulty. The concept of a ‘new creation’ is all but ignored.

In his 2008 book, *Surprised by Hope*, N. T. Wright tackled this pseudo-gnostic view of heaven and the afterlife, which, he argues, has so permeated popular Christianity. He points to a then-recently published coffee table book, which depicts human understanding of death and the afterlife from many different cultural and religious perspectives. Wright highlights one passage in particular, which deals with the Christian question of bodily resurrection. The author says, “Current orthodox Christianity no longer holds to the belief in physical resurrection, preferring the concept of the eternal existence of the soul, although some creeds still cling to the old ideas.”<sup>14</sup> Wright's point in quoting this passage was to highlight a particular problem in both Christianity and popular perceptions of Christianity; the physicality of Christianity and of the Christian view of salvation has been widely lost in popular understanding and practice. If there is no physicality to the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the dead for example—if it is merely a spiritual or worse, a metaphorical reality—then it seems that Christianity is thus stripped of something fundamental.

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<sup>12</sup> F. Carlton Booth, *Living Above: Songs and Choruses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947).

<sup>13</sup> N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (New York: Harper One, 2008), 90.

<sup>14</sup> Brian Innes, *Death and the Afterlife* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

While we will not venture into the much larger theological questions of the nature of the resurrection of the body in Christian thought and belief,<sup>15</sup> it will help us create an analogy to our current problem. Belief in a physical, bodily resurrection goes hand in hand with a physical vision of the afterlife. After all, if there are to be physical bodies in the afterlife, then one needs some place physical to put them! As Lawrence points out, “Does the very promise of physical resurrection not imply a more physical eternity than traditional views of heaven would allow?”<sup>16</sup> The greater point, at least for our purposes, is this: the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus points to two analogies for the modern day believer. First, the New Testament seems to suggest, to put it bluntly, that if it happened to Jesus, it will happen to the rest of believers. Consider 1 Peter 1:3, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,” as well as 1 Corinthians 6:14, “And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power.” Thus we see that while the certainty of physical death always looms on the horizon, the promise that believers will also be raised from the dead is always held in balance. Can we create yet another analogy then, that the earth itself—even though it will eventually pass away after the *parousia* of Christ,<sup>17</sup> will also be resurrected? The idea of a “new heavens” and a “new earth”, as well as a heavenly Jerusalem, which will descend from the clouds, permeates the Bible.<sup>18</sup> Should not this suggest to us that the physical world might be more important for the *parousia* than some Christians suspect?

## Ecological Readings of the Bible

One of the duties of Christianity is to try and find principles for how humans ought to treat the natural world here and now — particularly if believers are to presume that the *eschaton* has, in some sense, arrived with the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. What Paul seems to be suggesting in Romans, is that the cues for what it means to be “in Christ” with regard to creation come from the story of Adam and Eve. Just as

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<sup>15</sup> For a good, if somewhat dated overview of the parameters of the current discussion, see Marcus Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1989).

<sup>16</sup> David Lawrence, *Heaven: It's Not the End of the World! The Biblical Promise of a New Earth*, Kindle Locations 131-132.

<sup>17</sup> Matthew 24:35; Mark 13:31; Luke 21:33; 2 Peter 3:10.

<sup>18</sup> See Isaiah 65:17, 66:22 and Revelation 21-22.