
LAUDATO SI': MOBILISING CHRISTIAN FAITH AND PRACTICE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY

《愿祢受赞颂》： 动员基督教徒环境责任信仰与实践

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ABSTRACT

Building upon the work of his predecessors, Pope Francis shaped *Laudato Si'* as an appeal focused on spirituality, in order to mobilise the creativity of all people at all levels of society, in the cause of environmental responsibility. Though clearly grounded in Catholic Social Teaching (CST), *Laudato Si'* is socially innovative, not only in its extended dialogue with scientific studies of climate change, but also in its direct appeal to ordinary people, challenging them to participate in popular movements for sustaining a global shift in developmental priorities toward care for the earth as our "common home." This essay introduces *Laudato Si'*, with special emphasis on its understanding the role of spirituality, interreligious dialogue and collaboration in mobilising popular efforts to address the problem of climate change. In order to illustrate the practical significance of *Laudato Si'*'s perspective, this essay will be followed by two case studies, the one by Franz Gassner, showing its convergence with scientific attempts to revolutionise our waste management practices, the other by Mark Pufpaff, showing the diverse ways in which the Catholics in the Philippines have responded to Francis' challenge to develop transformative approaches to environmental responsibility.

Papal encyclicals—that is, circulating letters from the Pope to anyone who would read them, starting with his brother bishops, Catholic clergy and laity, and all persons seeking a moral basis for shaping the common good—provide the most important benchmarks in the development of modern Catholic Social Teaching (CST). *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis' encyclical letter “On Care for our Common Home” (2015), evoking the famous hymn by St. Francis of Assisi¹, clearly presents itself in continuity with CST's tradition. The letter begins by acknowledging the teachings of recent Popes on environmental responsibility, beginning with Paul VI's warning about ecological catastrophe in *Octagesima Adveniens* (1971, sec. 21), John Paul II's call to “safeguard the moral conditions for an authentic human ecology” in *Centesimus*

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Annus (1991, sec. 38) as well as the more recent statement by Benedict XVI in *Caritas in Veritate* (2009, sec. 51) that “the deterioration of nature is closely connected to the culture which shapes human coexistence.” As Francis observes, “Pope Benedict asked us to recognise that the natural environment has been gravely damaged by our irresponsible behaviour. The social environment has also suffered damage. Both are ultimately due to the same evil: the notion that there are no indisputable truths to guide our lives, and hence human freedom is limitless.” (2015, sec. 6).

Picking up on these leads, Francis had already made a priority of addressing climate change by authorising the Pontifical Academy of the Sciences' sponsorship in 2014 of a “Workshop on Sustainable Humanity, Sustainable Nature:

Our Responsibility” (Pontifical Academy of the Sciences, 2014), and a follow-up workshop in 2015 on “Climate Change and the Common Good: A Statement of the Problem and The Demand for Transformative Solutions.” (Pontifical Academy of the Sciences, 2015). These conferences fostered dialogue focused on the scientific basis for understanding climate change and what can be done about it, and brought the Vatican's policy makers into line with the emerging global consensus on both the problem and its solutions.

The perspectives emerging from the Pontifical Academy of the Sciences supported the high-level international diplomatic efforts that led to the COP21 agreements. In December 2015, representatives of 195 nations met in Paris to pledge collectively to work together to mitigate climate change by setting the following goals for reducing greenhouse gas emissions:

Governments agreed: a long-term goal of keeping the increase in global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels; to aim to limit the increase to 1.5°C, since this would significantly reduce risks and the impacts of climate change; on the need for global emissions to peak as soon as possible, recognising that this will take longer for developing countries; to undertake rapid reductions thereafter in accordance with the best available science. (European Commission, 2015)

While the pledges made through COP21 are not sufficient to keep global warming below the 2°C threshold, they begin a process that, it is hoped, will meet “every five years to set more ambitious targets as required by science.”² (European Commission, 2015)

Prior to the COP21 Agreement, *Laudato Si'* summarised the science of catastrophic climate change, analysing its causes and projected consequences in many paragraphs (2015, secs. 17-52), as well as the curious weakness and lack

1 “The Canticle of the Creatures” was composed by St. Francis of Assisi, in his native Umbrian dialect, in 1226 CE, during his illness at San Damiano, Italy, and is available in translation (Francis of Assisi, S. 1226).

2 For a more detailed review of what the COP21 Agreement means, see the analysis, “Historic Paris Agreement on Climate Change,” issued by the UN Climate Change Newsroom (2015).

of consensus among international agencies, national governments, and other organizations pledged to promote the common good (2015, secs. 53-61). But beyond the policy discussion, the core message of *Laudato Si'* seeks to promote a breakthrough in understanding, calling for a collective change of heart, a decisive shift from

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a “throwaway culture” (2015, sec. 22) based on a “misguided anthropocentrism.” Here is *Laudato Si'*’s analysis of this all-too-prevalent worldview and its destructive consequences:

A misguided anthropocentrism leads to a misguided lifestyle... When human beings place themselves at the centre, they give absolute priority to immediate convenience and all else becomes relative. Hence we should not be surprised to find, in conjunction with the omnipresent technocratic paradigm and the cult of unlimited human power, the rise of a relativism [that] sees everything as irrelevant unless it serves one’s own immediate interests. There is a logic in all this whereby different attitudes can feed on one another, leading to environmental degradation and social decay. (2015, sec. 122)

In Francis’ view, the problem created by “practical relativism” is general, a pervasive

attitude whose symptoms are evident in a vast range of social evils:

The culture of relativism is the same disorder which drives one person to take advantage of another, to treat others as mere objects, imposing forced labour on them or enslaving them to pay their debts. The same kind of thinking leads to the sexual exploitation of children and abandonment of the elderly who no longer serve our interests. It is also the mindset of those who say: Let us allow the invisible forces of the market to regulate the economy, and consider their impact on society and nature as collateral damage. In the absence of objective truths or sound principles other than the satisfaction of our own desires and immediate needs, what limits can be placed on human trafficking, organized crime, the drug trade, commerce in blood diamonds and the fur of endangered species? Is it not the same relativistic logic [that] justifies buying the organs of the poor for resale or use in experimentation, or eliminating children because they are not what their parents wanted? This same “use and throw away” logic generates so much waste, because of the disordered desire to consume more than what is really necessary. (2015, sec. 123)

It is not unusual to find statements condemning moral “relativism” in CST. But *Laudato Si'* goes well beyond analysing theoretical fallacies to pointing out their practical consequences, especially as these converge in a dominant and increasingly globalised lifestyle that is not only socially irresponsible, but also environmentally disastrous. However, if this is the problem, what might be the solution? *Laudato Si'* rightly admits the ineffectiveness of politics-as-usual or pious appeals to the rule of law. “When the culture itself is corrupt and objective truth and universally valid principles are no longer upheld, then laws can only be seen as arbitrary impositions or obstacles to be avoided.” (2015, sec.

123). When the culture itself is corrupt, violence may seem to be the only way to shake things up and start down a different path. But is it?

Laudato Si's response points in an entirely different direction. Reorienting aspirations for a better life requires transforming the habits of our hearts. But such a transformation can only begin on the basis of genuine “dialogue,” a term frequently used by Francis that may provide the key to unlocking the encyclical’s actual recommendations. What he means by dialogue is genuine conversation among people who, despite or perhaps because of, their diverse backgrounds, recognise their common humanity and responsibility for our common home (2015,

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secs. 199-201). Dialogue, therefore, must be nonviolent, respectful of basic norms of civility, open to achieving interreligious understanding and cooperation, and grounded in authentic spirituality.

As a contribution to this global dialogue, Francis thus offers a Biblical perspective on environmental responsibility that affirms humanity’s stewardship—in contrast to domination or unbridled exploitation—over nature (2015, sec. 116). A proper theological understanding of humanity’s role in Creation is indispensable for developing a culture in which environmental responsibility becomes a top priority. This theology of Creation (2015, secs. 65-75) is what Christians bring to the dialogue

with other religious traditions, in order to respond collectively to the threat of catastrophic climate change. A deepening spirituality that honours both the limits and possibilities of humanity’s stewardship can be communicated and shared with others, as is so eloquently demonstrated by the universal appeal of St. Francis of Assisi.

Here is one of *Laudato Si's* many reflections on the meaning of St. Francis’ famous “Canticle of the Creatures”:

Moreover, when our hearts are authentically open to universal communion, this sense of fraternity excludes nothing and no one. It follows that our indifference or cruelty towards fellow creatures of this world sooner or later affects the treatment we mete out to other human beings. We have only one heart, and the same wretchedness [that] leads us to mistreat an animal will not be long in showing itself in our relationships with other people. Every act of cruelty towards any creature is “contrary to human dignity”. We can hardly consider ourselves to be fully loving if we disregard any aspect of reality.... Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of his creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth. (2015, sec. 92)

One practical consequence of this perspective is that the challenge of catastrophic climate change cannot be solved on the backs, so to speak, of the poor. “Peace, justice and the preservation of creation are three absolutely interconnected themes” (2015, sec 92). Since, as *Laudato Si'* insists, the dramatic rise in social and economic inequality accompanying globalisation has contributed to the environmental crisis (2015, secs. 48-52; cf. also secs. 93-95), it is impossible to address the crisis effectively without also reversing the trend toward inequality:

Today, however, we have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it 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. (2015, par. 49)

Francis rejects any falsely posed trade-off between social justice and environmental responsibility. They must go hand in hand, or neither goal will be achieved.

If dialogue intending to stimulate a universal change of heart is *Laudato Si'* alternative to a downward spiral into violence, despair, and ultimately collective suicide, how is that dialogue to proceed? Given the enormity of the problem and its urgency, Francis' proposals may seem curiously modest, or too little and too late. But this impression should be set aside as soon as one understands that *Laudato Si'* is not a public policy document, but a call to personal conversion, ecological as well as spiritual (2015, secs. 216-221).

What is needed is a program in environmental education, aiming at the creation of a commitment to "ecological citizenship." Environmental education that is limited to providing information will fail to instil the indispensable habits of the heart. In this as in most other areas of life, the existence of laws and regulations is insufficient in the long run to curb bad conduct, even when effective means of enforcement are present. If the laws are to bring about significant, long-lasting effects, the majority of the members of society must be adequately motivated to respond proactively to them. Only by cultivating sound virtues will people be able to make a selfless ecological commitment. (2015, sec. 211). Here is *Laudato Si'*'s description of a transformative shift in environmental education:

Environmental education has broadened its goals. Whereas in the beginning it was mainly centered on scientific information, consciousness-raising and the prevention of environmental risks,

it tends now to include a critique of the "myths" of a modernity grounded in a utilitarian mindset (individualism, unlimited progress, competition, consumerism, the unregulated market). It seeks also to restore the various levels of ecological equilibrium, establishing harmony within ourselves, with others, with nature and other living creatures, and with God.³ Environmental education should facilitate making the leap towards the transcendent which gives ecological ethics its deepest meaning. It needs educators capable of developing an ethics of ecology, and helping people, through effective pedagogy, to grow in solidarity, responsibility and compassionate care. (2015, sec. 210)

Transformative education is the process (2015, secs. 209-215); focused and structured dialogue at all levels of public policy formation, as well as the mobilisation of popular support for environmental sustainability, is the outcome (2015, secs. 164-201).

Francis' pedagogical shift from policy analysis to the cultivation of "sound virtues" is radical in that it is meant to mobilise ordinary people to change their attitudes, lifestyles, and personal consumption habits. The practices that he recommends not only will tend to reduce environmental pollution in small, but cumulatively significant ways, but will also transform attitudes toward making "a selfless ecological commitment":

A person who could afford to spend and consume more but regularly uses less heating and wears warmer clothes, shows the kind of convictions and attitudes which help to protect the environment.

3 Apart from the reference to God as understood in Catholic theology, Francis' focus on the importance of "establishing harmony within ourselves, with others, with nature and other living creatures" resonates very well with Chinese approaches to environmental responsibility informed by the Confucian and Daoist wisdom traditions (Christensen, J.E., (2014); Li T. (2003); Palmer, M. (2013)). Studying developments in environmental ethics in these traditions confirms the benefits that Francis' approach to interreligious dialogue and collaboration may have in mobilizing ordinary people to "care for our common home."

There is a nobility in the duty to care for creation through little daily actions, and it is wonderful how education can bring about real changes in lifestyle. Education in environmental responsibility can encourage ways of acting which directly and significantly affect the world around us, such as avoiding the use of plastic and paper, reducing water consumption, separating refuse, cooking only what can reasonably be consumed, showing care for other living beings, using public transport or car-pooling, planting trees, turning off unnecessary lights, or any number of other practices. All of these reflect a generous and worthy creativity [that] brings out the best in human beings. Reusing something instead of immediately discarding it, when done for the right reasons, can be an act of love [that] expresses our own dignity.⁴ (2015, sec. 211)

The transformation envisioned here involves doing many little things well, animated by a fresh and compelling vision of their ultimate significance. These small acts connect ordinary people with a public policy dialogue that can only go forward if sustained and informed by them. In other words, the ecological conversion of the masses, manifested in billions of little lifestyle modifications, is the only sustainable basis for meaningful and effective public policy.

With one end of the spectrum of transformative education grounded in small changes, the other end opens toward a vision of the one truly big thing, namely, earth's ultimate destiny in God's own reality. *Laudato Si'* thus concludes with reflections on the "Mystery of the Universe" represented in the Church's own sacramental life, culminating in the daily celebration of the Eucharist most fully realized in the Sunday liturgy (2015, secs. 236-237). Francis boldly makes the connection between ecological conversion and the transformative reality of God's drawing near to us in the Trinity (2015,

secs. 238-40). Participating in the movement to overcome the danger of catastrophic climate change, as Francis would have us understand, is a religious act of love, one reaffirming our covenant with a God who will never abandon the earth or its people:

God, who calls us to generous commitment and to give him our all, offers us the light and the strength needed to continue on our way. In the heart of this world, the Lord of life, who loves us so much, is always present. He does not abandon us, he does not leave us alone, for he has united himself definitively to our earth, and his love constantly impels us to find new ways forward. Praise be to him! (2015, sec. 245)

Ending with a prayer for both "our earth" and "our union with creation," *Laudato Si'* is an appeal that deliberately goes over the heads of the rich and powerful, whose voices tend to dominate public policy debates on climate change. The rich and the powerful are invited—politely and without the threat of violence—to make room for all peoples, whose fate is just as dependent upon the outcome of those deliberations as anyone else's. Because he places his hope in God, and in all of God's people—Catholic or otherwise, Christian or otherwise, religious or otherwise—Pope Francis is optimistic that his appeal for a sustainable solution to catastrophic climate change will be heard, as ordinary people find their own ways to take it to heart and respond for the sake of their families and communities.

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⁴ News accounts (Erikson, 2013; Squires, 2013) of Francis' personal lifestyle, both before and after his installation as Pope, indicate his willingness to practice what he preaches by way of ecological conversion.

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