



The Cry of the Earth and the Cry of the Poor

Progressio's guide to Laudato Si'

Introduction

Laudato Si' is Pope Francis' passionate call to humanity for a change in direction. While we have made so much progress in science and technology, we have not matched this with moral, ethical and spiritual growth. This imbalance is causing our relationships with creation, with humanity and with God to break down. Our hearts are hardened to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor, and we become arrogant and neglect creation. Pope Francis calls the Church and the world to acknowledge the urgency of our environmental challenge. Poor nations are ill-prepared to adapt to the effects of climate change and will bear the brunt of its effects, he says. Developed nations are morally obligated to assist developing nations in combating the climate-change crisis.

Laudato Si' marks the first time ecological issues have been the main focus of an encyclical, but these concerns are not new to Catholic Social Teaching (or CST - the body of papal documents published on a range of social issues over the last 120 years). There is a rich history of Christian thought about how we relate to creation, going all the way back to



“I will point to the intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet, that everything is connected...and [to] the proposal of a new lifestyle” (16)

the foundation of the Church as well as a tradition shared with Judaism that predates this. Pope Francis draws upon this wellspring of thought and experience in Laudato Si'.

Pope Francis holds up Saint Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of ecology, as an example throughout

as someone who was in communion and in harmony with all of creation. It is from one of his prayers about 'our sister, Mother Earth' that the encyclical finds its name, *Laudato Si'*, 'praised be!' The pontiff also draws on the thought of many others including Romano Guardini, a priest who resisted the Nazis in Germany; Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit scientist and theologian and Ali al-Khawwas, a Sufi Mystic, to name just a few.

While many CST documents can seem dense and technical, *Laudato Si'* has a more readable style. Some have said that CST encyclicals can feel distant and aloof because they tend to deal with concepts and ideas rather than tangible examples. This is not the case in *Laudato Si'*. One of Pope Francis' mantras is that "realities are more important than ideas", and the text is placed firmly in the modern world.

This short guide is not a comprehensive summary or academic analysis, nor is it intended as an alternative to reading the encyclical itself. We hope it will give you a flavour of *Laudato Si'* and encourage you to read the text itself, which is available both in print and online.



"The entire material universe speaks of God's love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God." (84)

The Modern Myth

Pope Francis dedicates the first chapter of *Laudato Si'* to discussing the many ways that we are degrading our world. His goal is not to make a comprehensive list, but to jolt us into action by recognising the extent of the damage and take it on as our own suffering. Pope Francis believes we can only understand how to remedy this when we look beyond the symptoms to the human origins of the ecological crisis.

Many of the world's resources are being plundered because of a short-sighted approach to the economy and what Pope Francis calls the "modern myth" of unlimited material progress. This short-termism allows profit to trump wider considerations about the common good and the effect on the world's ecosystems.

While some nations have been successful in tackling corruption and regulating corporations that are driven by purely economic interests, these nations have, at the same time, failed to address their own unsustainable levels of consumption. *Laudato Si'* talks positively of cooperatives and business

"We need to grow in the conviction that a decrease in the pace of production and consumption can at times give rise to another form of progress and development." (191)

"You cannot serve both God and money."
(Matt 6:24)

practices that encourage diversity and creativity, such as the small-scale food production that feeds a huge section of the world's population.

Pope Francis is not against progress or profit, in fact, he makes a point of saying that business is a noble vocation that can do much to contribute to the common good. But, true progress is one that has human dignity at its heart and profit must be earned responsibly.

Key Lines (KL): 27, 50, 54-56, 189-195



Progressio's UK and Nicaraguan volunteers proudly stand with a newly built eco latrine, as part of Progressio's International Citizen Service project focusing on hygiene and sanitation

Technology & Responsibility

As we get further into *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis looks deeper to get to the heart of our wilful disregard for creation. He finds that our approach to the world around us is one of domination that is not only bad for the environment, but also deeply damaging to ourselves, and our relationships with those around us.

This attitude has developed in modern times because of the immense technological developments that have given us much more power over nature and the lives of our sisters and brothers. This progress has not been matched by a development of responsibility, so we do not know how best to use the power it gives us. Rather than directing technology responsibly so that we work in harmony with nature, technology ends up directing us and alienating us from creation.

This alienation breaks down social bonds as it breeds instability and uncertainty in people's hearts. We come to think more and more of ourselves and our own interests and become greedy. "The emptier a person's heart is, the more he or she

"We have the freedom needed to limit and direct technology; we can put it at the service of another type of progress, one which is healthier, more human, more social, more integral." (112)

"One's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." (Luke 12:15)

needs things to buy, own and consume" (204). The communal bonds and values that hold our communities together are respected only in so far as they don't clash with the individuals' freedom to consume.

Pope Francis calls for a bold cultural revolution. We must overcome individualism and develop a new lifestyle. He passionately believes that we have within us the capacity to come out of ourselves and put the care and concerns of others before our own, that we can move beyond a culture that focuses on consumption and superficiality and that we have hope in a better tomorrow.

KL: 46-47, 105-115, 203-215



Rhoda Khumalo standing outside her home in Zimbabwe with a solar panel that has given her the power to join the fight against climate change

In Harmony with Nature

Pope Francis looks to the symbolic and narrative language of the book of Genesis to understand the relationships between humankind, the earth and God. It teaches us that human life is grounded in these closely intertwined relationship and that, if this harmony is broken by treating others as objects and by behaving like “lords and masters”, we harm our relationship with the environment, with God, with others and with our own self.

From the book of Genesis we learn that creation is not just the environment we live in, but that we are part of it. It is not an object to be studied, but rather “it has to do with God’s loving plan in which every creature has its own value and significance”. (76) This interconnectedness means that our care for the environment is only one part of an integral ecology. We must at the same time defend all human life as to ignore is to ignore the cry of nature itself.

KL: 9, 66-71, 86-90

“Human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself.” (66)

“Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honour Him.” (Proverbs 14:31)

The more we nourish and develop these relationships, when we put the care of others and the care of the whole of creation before our own selfish interests, the more we grow. As we do, we become more fully human and live in closer communion with our Creator.



A Progressio development worker sharing skills on how to grow crops sustainably with a community member in Zimbabwe

Ecological Conversion

In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis calls us to an ecological conversion and puts forward proposals for an ecological spirituality. He recommends a way of understanding and living out our relationships with God, creation and everyone that is a part of it.

Our fast-paced world, characterised by busyness, increased consumption and growing distractions, can prevent us from cherishing the beauty in every moment. Pope Francis' ecological spirituality draws us towards a simpler life in which we find joy and peace. It is this joy and peace that, in the Christian tradition, Jesus exemplifies.

Pope Francis takes Francis of Assisi as his model for this spirituality, the saint who approached the world as a joyful mystery to be adored with praise and thanksgiving. *Laudato Si'* likens this attitude to how we experience falling in love; it is much more than just a reasoned appreciation of recognition based on economic value.

KL: 10, 91-98 , 216-220

“I believe that Saint Francis is the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically.” (10)

“God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.” (Gen 1:31)

We must not mistake this view for naive romanticism. It is not being soppy or sentimental, but is an attitude that shapes our thoughts, our behaviours and our passions. It is in cultivating this attitude or spirituality that we can resist a mentality of consumption and exploitation, and it is through this that Pope Francis wants to do what doctrine alone cannot: “motivate us to a more passionate concern for the protection of our world”. (216)



Woman farmers irrigating crops with buckets of water in Zimbabwe where Progressio has trained hundreds of women in resilient livelihoods

A Healthy Politics

For Pope Francis, we need a change of heart if we are to tackle the challenges facing the planet, but he also sees an essential role for politics at the local, national and international levels.

This politics, however, also needs a culture change as, too often, it is not able to resist short-term solutions, ideologies or powerful economic interests. Politicians must be courageous enough, Pope Francis tells us, to take decisions that might outlast their government, because the political solutions related to climate change and environmental protection take time. International agreements are essential, as are regional, national and local policy, but, for policy to be effective, it has to be the product of a healthy politics.

This healthy politics is one based on love. Love applied to our social, political and economic choices is the only route to authentic development. We must not let this be pushed aside as an irrelevant

“We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all.” (14)

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” (John 13:34)

motivation in our political discourse, but rather let love be the thing that shapes our politics.

Laudato Si repeatedly calls for a conversation that includes everyone. We must “regain the conviction that we need one another, that we have a shared responsibility for others and the world, and that being good and decent are worth it”. (229)

KL: 13-14, 178-198, 229-232



A woman campaigning in Somaliland ahead of the elections in November 2012. The centres of power are far removed from the poor; those in power need to hear the cry of the poor and the planet

Perspective of the Poor

All of the encyclicals that make up the social teaching of the Catholic Church have a particular concern for the poor and the vulnerable. In fact, one of the key themes of Catholic Social Teaching is the 'Preferential Option for the Poor'. In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis makes a subtle but significant advancement on this; he writes not only out of concern for them, but brings their concerns, their voice and their perspective right to the heart of the encyclical.

The perspective of the poor is integral to *Laudato Si'*. The Pope writes scornfully about those with power who are far removed from the poor, who never come into contact with them and experience their concerns. For Pope Francis, to help and love the most vulnerable means being close to them.

Throughout the document, the fate of the poor and the planet are repeatedly linked. This is because they are the ones who most closely share in the pain of the earth. They cry out as it cries out, yet have done so little to cause it.

“The deterioration of the environment and of society affects the most vulnerable people on the planet.” (48)

“We must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive”.” (Acts 20:35)

It is evident from the footnotes to *Laudato Si'* that the Pope wants us to hear the voice of the Church in the poorest and least developed parts of the world. The process of putting this document together involved consultation with people from all corners of the world.

KL: 13-14, 178-198, 229-232



Heroina Arasena standing in the shop she bought in the Dominican Republic with a loan and training from the Mothers' Union which is supported by Progressio

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Conclusion

Laudato Si' is a powerful and prophetic document full of many moments of joy and sorrow. Pope Francis thanks campaigners and politicians who have made gains and kept up the profile of environmental questions, alongside praising all those who are already modelling more sustainable and responsible ways of living. Yet there is still much to be done.

Pope Francis talks of hope in a better future while, at the same time, challenging us all. This document remains, however, just text on a page if we do not take it to heart, accept its challenges and live it out in the everyday of our lives. As Pope Francis himself says, "The poor and the earth are crying out"; it is time for us all to do something about it.

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