

**ASIAN
HORIZONS**

Vol. 9, No. 4, December 2015

Pages: 621-627

LAUDATO SÍ: A REFLECTIVE SUMMARY

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Abstract

In *Laudato Sí* Francis insists our Christian faith is 'heart' knowledge more than 'head' knowledge. This article contains a summary of Francis's 2015 Encyclical, '*Laudato Sí*' based on the reported comments of various writers and concluding with a summary of the Declaration of Islamic leaders on Climate Change and Ecology (Istanbul, 18/8/15) as reported in the *National Catholic Reporter*, 19/8/15

Keywords: Ecological Spirituality, Environment and Mysticism, Eucharist, Inequality, *Laudato Sí*, Social Justice

A Reflective Summary of *Laudato Sí* (LS)

What is immediately very striking about LS is that it is deliberately addressed to "every person living on this planet" and Francis continues by stressing that he wants it to be accepted as initiating a world-wide dialogue: "In this Encyclical I would like to enter into dialogue with all people about our common home" (LS, 2).

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In an article in *The Tablet* Paul Vallely makes the crucial point that, in the mind of Francis, LS is not primarily an encyclical on climate change but it is first and foremost a *social* document:

Francis told close advisers in Rome on the day it was published that it was not an environmental document but a social one. Global warming is merely a symptom of a deeper malaise. The rich world's exploitation of the environment is rooted in the same world-view as its callousness to the poor — the pursuit of short-term economic gain that puts profit before both people and the planet. 'This economy kills,' *Laudato Si* concluded bluntly.¹

The following passage about global inequality from LS makes the point very strongly:

The deterioration of the environment and of society affects the most vulnerable people on the planet. 'Both everyday experience and scientific research show that the gravest of all attacks on the environment are suffered by the poorest.' (Quoting Bolivian Bishops) ...Many professionals, opinion makers, communications media and centres of power, being located in affluent urban areas, are far removed from the poor, with little direct contact with their problems. They live and reason from the comfortable position of a high level of development and a quality of life well beyond the reach of the majority of the world's population... 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 bear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*" (LS, 48-49).

Many other passages from LS are equally strong on the social nature of the encyclical, including the following:

...an ethical and cultural decline which has accompanied the deterioration of the environment. Men and women of our post-modern world run the risk of rampant individualism, and many problems of society are connected with today's self-centred culture of instant gratification (LS, 162).

A politics connected with immediate results, supported by consumerist sectors of the population is driven to produce short-term growth. In response to electoral interests, governments are reluctant to upset the public with measures that could affect the level of consumption or create risks for foreign investment (LS, 178).

...talk of sustainable growth usually becomes a way of distracting attention and offering excuses. It absorbs the language and values of ecology into the categories of finance and technocracy, and social and

¹Paul Vallely, *The Tablet*, 29-8-2015, 4-5.

environmental responses of businesses often get reduced to a series of marketing and image-enhancing measures (LS, 194).

The principle of the maximization of profits, frequently isolated from other considerations, reflects a misunderstanding of the very concept of the economy (LS, 195).

The current global situation engenders a feeling of instability and uncertainty, which in turn becomes 'a seedbed for collective selfishness'. When people become selfish and self-enclosed, their greed increases. The emptier a person's heart is, the more he or she needs things to buy and consume. It becomes almost impossible to accept the limits imposed by reality. In this horizon, a genuine sense of the common good also disappears. As these attitudes become more widespread, social norms are respected only to the extent that they do not clash with personal needs... Obsession with a consumerist life-style, above all when few people are capable of sustaining it, can only lead to violence and mutual destruction (LS, 204).

Describing a whole variety of factors underlying the present crisis — pollution, waste and the throwaway culture — Francis sums the situation up very vividly: "The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth" (LS, 21).

However, Francis is not trying to arouse purely negative feelings of guilt. That can be counter-productive. His aim is a much more positive one. He is about promoting a climate of hope and encouraging people to open themselves to ecological conversion. This is why he insists on *the interconnectedness of all creation*:

Because all creatures are connected, each must be cherished with love and respect, for all of us as living creatures are dependent on one another (LS, 42).

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 these creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth (LS, 92).

God wills the interdependence of creatures. The sun and the moon, the cedar and the little flower, the eagle and the sparrow; the spectacle of their countless diversities and inequalities tells us that no creature is self-sufficient. Creatures exist only in dependence on each other, to complete each other, in the service of each other (LS, 86, quoting *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 340).

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 (LS, 84).

From panoramic vistas to the tiniest living form, nature is a constant source of wonder and awe. It is also a continuing revelation of the divine (LS, 85, quoting Canadian Bishops).

He even goes so far as to follow the example of Mao Zedong and calls for a “cultural revolution”: “The urgent need for us to move forward in a bold cultural revolution” (LS, 114).

Francis links this “cultural revolution” with the challenging and very hope-filled text of the *Earth Charter*, The Hague, June 2000:

As never before in history, common destiny beckons us to seek a new beginning... Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening of a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace and the joyful celebration of life (quoted in LS, 207).

Paul Valley notes² how consistent Francis is in his insistence on the need for radical social change, pointing out how, in his July 2015 visit to Bolivia “Francis issued a denunciation of US-style capitalism that was breathtaking in its ferocity. Behind global capital’s indifference to the poor and the planet, there lies ‘the stench of the dung of the Devil.’” Francis continued: “Let us not be afraid to say it — we want change, real change, structural change. The system is now intolerable.” Valley noted how Francis called for change no fewer than 32 times, saying “It is about giving to the poor and to peoples what is theirs by right.”³

One commentator, David Cloutier, writing in *Commonweal*, highlights the fact that “the ‘official’ date of the document is Pentecost. This ‘birthday of the Church’ is importantly about what the Church is for: not itself, but for the redemption and renewal of all of God’s creation.”⁴

Francis is very strong on the innate dignity of who we are as human persons:

... each human life is not adrift in the midst of hopeless chaos, in a world ruled by pure chance or endlessly recurring cycles! The Creator can say to each of us: ‘Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you’ (Jer 1:5). We were conceived in the heart of God and for this reason ‘each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary’ (Benedict XVI) (LS, 65).

No system can completely suppress our openness to what is good, true and beautiful, or our God-given ability to respond to his grace at work deep in our hearts. I appeal to everyone throughout the world not to

²*The Tablet*, 29-8-15, 4-5.

³*The Tablet*, 29-8-15, 5.

⁴David Cloutier, “The Theological Heart of *Laudato Si’*,” *Commonweal* 18/6/2015, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/blog/theological-heart-laudato-si>

forget this dignity which is ours. No one has the right to take it from us (LS, 205).

It is interesting how Francis respects the notion of the autonomy of creation which is part of the scientific understanding of evolution: "From the beginning of the world, but particularly through the incarnation, the mystery of Christ is at work in a hidden manner in the natural world as a whole, but without thereby impinging on its autonomy" (LS, 99).

In line with his very positive and hopeful approach, Francis puts forward what could best be described as an *Ecological Spirituality*. He also insists that this should have a community dimension to it and points out that it calls for:

a number of attitudes which together foster a spirit of generous care, full of tenderness. First, it entails gratitude and gratuitousness, a recognition that the world is God's loving gift, and that we are called to imitate his generosity in self-sacrifice and good works... It also entails a loving awareness that we are not disconnected from the rest of creation, but joined in a splendid universal communion. As believers, we do not look at the world from without but from within... We do not understand our superiority as a reason for personal glory or irresponsible dominion, but rather as a different capacity which, in its turn, entails a serious responsibility stemming from our faith (LS, 220).

Inner Peace is also an important component of ecological spirituality:

No one can cultivate a sober and satisfying life without being at peace with him or herself... Inner peace is closely related to care for ecology and for the common good because, lived out authentically, it is reflected in a balanced lifestyle together with a capacity for wonder which takes us to a deeper understanding of life... Many people today sense a profound imbalance which drives them to frenetic activity and makes them feel busy, in a constant hurry which in turn leads them to ride rough-shod over everything around them. This too affects how they treat the environment. An integral ecology includes taking time to recover a serene harmony with creation, reflecting on our lifestyle and our ideals, and contemplating the Creator who lives among us and surrounds us, whose presence 'must not be contrived but found, uncovered' (*Evangelium Gaudium*, n. 71) (LS, 225).

Francis even allows room for a kind of ecological mysticism: "The universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely. Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person's face" (LS, 233).

In a footnote to this passage, Francis quotes the Sufi mystic, Ali al-Khawwas: “There is a subtle mystery in each of the movements and sounds of this world. The initiate will capture what is being said when the wind blows, the trees sway, water flows, flies buzz, doors creak, birds sing, or in the sound of strings or flutes, the sighs of the sick, the groans of the afflicted” (LS, footnote 159).

This ecological spirituality leads Francis to write a very profound passage on ‘The Trinity and the Relationship between Creatures’:

The Franciscan saint (St Bonaventure) teaches us that *each creature bears in itself a specifically Trinitarian structure...* he points out to us the challenge of trying to read reality in a Trinitarian key... The divine Persons are subsistent relations and the world, created according to the divine model, is a web of relationships. This leads us to discover... a key to our own fulfilment. The human person grows more, matures more and is sanctified more to the extent that he or she enters into relationships, going out from themselves to live in communion with God, with others and with all creatures. In this way, they make their own that Trinitarian dynamism which God imprinted on them when they were created. Everything is interconnected, and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity, which flows from the mystery of the Trinity (LS, 238-240).

Naturally, Francis high-lights the key importance of the Eucharist in his ecological spirituality, going so far as to describe the Eucharist as an “Act of Cosmic Love”:

In the Eucharist fullness is already achieved; it is the living centre of the universe, the overflowing core of love and of inexhaustible life. Joined to the incarnate Son, present in the Eucharist, the whole cosmos gives thanks to God. Indeed the Eucharist is itself an act of cosmic love: ‘Yes, cosmic! Because even when it is celebrated on the humble altar of a country church, the Eucharist is always, in some way, celebrated on the altar of the world’ (John Paul II) (LS, 236).

In his *Tablet* article quoted earlier, Paul Vallely points out that Francis “wants a monarchical model of papacy replaced by more collegial and consultative decision-making.” This is very marked in the text of LS. Whereas papal encyclical normally restrict quotations to other papal documents, in LS Francis cites 17 different bishops’ conferences or regional meetings representing Southern Africa, the Philippines, Bolivia, Germany, Argentina, the United States, Latin America and the Caribbean, Canada, Japan, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Paraguay, New Zealand, the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences, Portugal, Mexico, and Australia.

The notion of 'receptive ecumenism' is close to the heart of Francis and comes out clearly in LS with regard to his special regard for the Orthodox Church. He quotes Patriarch Bartholomew repeatedly in the opening of the encyclical (LS, 8 & 9) and at the launch of the encyclical gave a special welcome to the Orthodox theologian, John of Pergamon, representing Patriarch Bartholomew. Francis even wrote a personal dedication in the presentation copy for Patriarch Bartholomew: "*fratello, Patriarca Bartolomeo, con gratitudine.*"

Appendix: Declaration of Islamic leaders on Climate Change and Ecology (Istanbul, 18/8/15) cf. *National Catholic Reporter*, 19/8/15

Addressing the world's 1.6 billion Muslims, the 'Islamic Climate Change Declaration' urges them "do not strut arrogantly on the earth." The declaration concludes by calling "on all Muslims, wherever they may be" to follow Muhammad's example and to address the root causes of climate change and environmental degradation. "We bear in mind the words of our Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him). The world is sweet and verdant, and verily, Allah has made you stewards in it, and He sees how you acquit yourselves."

The declaration also challenged "the well-off nations and oil producing states," people of all nations and their leaders, and the business and finance sectors — to aim to:

- Lead in phasing out greenhouse gas emissions by no later than 2050,
- Provide financial and technical support to the less well-off,
- "recognize the moral obligation to reduce consumption so that the poor may benefit from what is the left of the earth's non-renewable resources,"
- Commit to 100% renewable energy and invest in its decentralization and the creation of a green economy, and assist fossil fuel divestment,
- Refocus concerns from unethical profit from the environment to that of preserving it and aiding the world's poor,
- Shoulder the consequences of profit-making activities and take a visibly more active role in reducing their carbon footprint.

The Islamic leaders described their declaration as being "in harmony" with Francis's encyclical, *Laudato Si*.