

WHAT *LAUDATO SÍ* MEANS TO MALAWI

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Malawi

Abstract

Malawi, a central-southern African country, is listed by the World Bank as one of the poorest countries in the world. It faces serious climate change problems (floods and droughts) caused by deforestation that is closely linked to its main export earning crop, tobacco. The strong words of Pope Francis's *Laudato Sí*, recognising the reality of climate change and its impact on the poor, is very relevant to Malawi. One practical response to curtailing deforestation is the promotion of small clay stoves (*mbaula*) that do not use charcoal or large amounts of fire wood for cooking purposes. Another response is found in the *construction* and *instruction* of the new Jesuit secondary school supporting a "green" (environmentally sensitive) culture.

Keywords: Climate Change, Deforestation, Ecology, Environment, Global Warming, *Laudato Sí*, Malawi, Pope Francis

It was a very tall and very full tree, branches thick and thin. Ideal for cutting down to cook many meals and to warm many huts. But over the years, no one touched it, despite trees all around it having been cut down and the landscape left quite barren.

When asked why this tree had been preserved, one of the local Malawian villagers answered very directly and simply: "The spirits protect the tree, to help us draw water locally." And yes, a closer look

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at the roots of the tree revealed a small spring that provided good fresh water. A further probe revealed that people of this local village and other villages in the area have a very strong cultural tradition of belief in a spirit-filled world. For instance, the people in the area believe that this particular tree shelters spirits which provide water for the communities around, offering good environmental protection for the people.

That recognition of a spirit-filled environment that is for the delight and the good of humans is central in *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis's dramatic encyclical on the environment. Indeed, this is another way of expressing the message with which the Pope begins his encyclical. "In the words of this beautiful canticle, Saint Francis of Assisi reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us."¹

It is important to take serious note of the theological foundation upon which Pope Francis builds his ecological argument in LS. Simply put, that foundation is the fact that God is the Creator of everything that exists: rocks and water, weeds and trees, insects and elephants, moons and stars, and every woman and man who has ever passed time here on earth. The common source of creation means a common relationship that is essential and life-giving. When the Pope urges both praise of and protection of our environment, he bases his plea on this theological foundation. And it is a theology, a tradition, with practical environmental consequences.

We hope that LS can reinforce that good tradition in Malawi, a developing country that so very much needs environmental protection today. It is lack of protection from the impact of climate change that daily and substantially contributes to making Malawi one of the poorest countries in the world. We personally know this as one of us assists village women to produce and promote use of energy efficient stoves that reduce use of wood fuel, and the other of us is working with a secondary school with a "green" commitment in both construction and instruction.

Indeed, Malawi is a poor country, ranking 174 out of 187 on the UN Human Development Index.² But it is a peaceful country with a

¹Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, Vatican, 2015, 1. (Hereafter LS, followed by paragraph number).

²United Nations Development Program, *Human Development Report*, New York, 2014.

fairly lively democratic tradition and is very appropriately called “The Warm Heart of Africa.” Its future, however, is threatened by the major global phenomenon addressed in LS: environmental damages due to increasing climate change.

Pope Francis’s message should be well received in Malawi for two reasons: 1) it firmly acknowledges the reality of climate change and its close connection with human activities; and 2) it highlights in particular the need to respect and protect the dignity and lives of the poor, those most vulnerable to climate change, who are the majority of Malawians.

Climate Change is Real

The message of LS could not be clearer:

A very solid scientific consensus indicates that we are presently witnessing a disturbing warming of the climatic system... Humanity is called to recognize the need for changes of lifestyle, production and consumption, in order to combat this warming or at least the human causes which produce or aggravate it (LS, 23).

What does that mean in Malawi? A serious problem facing this southern African country and contributing to its environmental difficulties is its over-dependence on one export crop: tobacco. British colonialists oriented the economy in that direction and we still live with its consequences today. Tobacco now brings in over 60% to 70% of foreign earnings. But projections for future earnings will be seriously affected by increased controls on tobacco trade, e.g., WHO’s proposed international regulations.

But to talk about tobacco in Malawi is not simply to talk about the commercial side of its production or the health consequences of smoking cigarettes. Even more central has become attention to the environmental consequences of producing tobacco.

Deforestation — with consequent climate change effects — in this once very green country increases every day and tobacco production is one major cause. Serious ecological damage is due to increased clearing of land to plant tobacco and heavy use of trees for fires to cure the tobacco. Studies have estimated that a hectare of wooded land may be needed to cure one hectare of tobacco. And that adds up fast to deforestation.

However, even if Malawi did not face environmental damage because of its heavy dependence on tobacco production, it still would face the environmental consequences of heavy use of biomass to

produce energy for cooking and heating for the majority of Malawians. About 83% of Malawi's population live in rural areas and rely on wood-fuel for basic energy supply. With less than 9% of households having access to electricity (one of the lowest rates in Africa), both large trees and scrubby bushes are eagerly cut for firewood and to make charcoal, for Malawians to cook and to warm. And this significantly contributes to the widespread phenomenon of deforestation with its disastrous impact on climate change.

Forests in Malawi were once strongly protected during the 30 year iron rule of the country's founder, Hastings Kamuzu Banda (1964-1994). Banda forbade the indiscriminate cutting of the country's beautiful and resourceful forest cover. But with his passing, such protection also passed and deforestation has become widespread, with the sad consequences of promotion of global warming and climate change. Trees and forest soils absorb and store carbon. Diminishing forests result in this carbon being released as carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases.

Malawians do not need scientific investigations to show them that climate change in their beautiful country is indeed very real. They have unfortunately been undergoing that change in very dramatic ways in recent years.

A summary of the consequences of that change is sad to read, but sadder still to experience: increased water scarcity, unpredictable weather patterns, recurring flooding and droughts, unpredictable start of rainfall with short rainy seasons, prolonged dry spells during rainy seasons, drying up of rivers and lakes with lowering fish supplies, heat waves, frequent bush fires, increased prevalence of water borne diseases, low and unstable hydro-electric production, declining flora and fauna, and declining natural species.

A Malawian woman farmer ably describes the effects of climate change:

In years past, I used to plant my maize field at the end of October or beginning of November, when rains are just beginning. Then with rains stopping in late March I would have been assured of a good harvest. But in recent years, the rains don't start until late November, then stop in mid-December, trickle in a bit in January, and dry up completely by February. No good harvest, and plenty of hunger in my family!

The woman's story is verified in the announcement that in 2015 the UN World Food Programme will provide over 700,000 Malawian

families with food assistance because of crops destroyed by both flooding and drought in the past year.

Global Contributions to Local Climate Change

Of course it isn't only the deforestation in the country itself that is causing climate change in Malawi. This point is made strongly by Pope Francis, a point ringing so true and so sad for Malawians.

...a number of scientific studies indicate that most global warming in recent decades is due to the great concentration of greenhouse gases (carbon dioxide, methane, nitrogen oxides and others) released mainly as a result of human activity... The problem is aggravated by a model of development based on the intensive use of fossil fuels, which is at the heart of the worldwide energy system (LS, 23).

This fossil fuel use on a global scale — firing the global energy system — has been strongly disordering the climate of our fragile earth. For example, global emissions of carbon dioxide have increased over 50% from 1990 levels. Very little of these global emissions come from a poor and non-industrialised country like Malawi, but from the mighty fossil fuelled economies of Europe, North America and China.

Thus it is understandable why Pope Francis turns his discussion of environment so strongly into a powerful call to respect and protect the dignity and lives of the poor, those most vulnerable to climate change. He emphasises that "...we have to realise 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*" (LS, 49).

Again and again, the Pope returns to lift up the suffering of the poor as a consequence of the deterioration of the environment.

The human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation. In fact, the deterioration of the environment and of society affects the most vulnerable people on the planet (LS, 48).

This emphasis will be heard clearly in Malawi, where it is estimated that 66.7% of the 16 million Malawians experience "*multidimensional poverty*" — a newly-designed measurement of several factors that constitute poor people's experience of deprivation.³ This

³Oxford University Department of International Development, *Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative*, Oxford: 2015.

includes things such as poor health, lack of education, inadequate living standard, lack of income, disempowerment, poor quality of work and threat from violence.

Responses in Malawi

It is a difficult fact to face, but face it we must: Malawians alone can't alter the climate change catastrophe the country faces. Major global actors must be honest in looking at the situation, creative in designing effective responses and courageous in taking some hard and unpopular actions. Pope Francis repeatedly calls upon more effective international cooperation for protection of our common home.

That is the importance of the United Nations Climate Change Conference, to be held in Paris this coming December. Pope Francis sadly notes that previous such conferences have not been effective in addressing this issue:

International negotiations cannot make significant progress due to positions taken by countries which place their national interests above the global common good. Those who will have to suffer the consequences of what we are trying to hide will not forget this failure of conscience and responsibility (LS, 165).

But there are some steps that can indeed be taken at the local level in Malawi to move in a direction that offers more hope than despair.

It is significant, for example, that the major development offices of the Episcopal Conference of Malawi recently issued a strong challenge to the members of the Malawi Parliament to design national budget priorities that would realistically take into account the need for recovery from the climate change floods experienced by thousands of Malawians earlier this year.

At a local level, efforts are being made to substitute the traditional three-stone open fire cooking which uses much firewood with energy efficient stoves (*mbaula*) which reduce the use of firewood by 70-80%. The Jesuit Centre for Ecology and Development (JCED) in Lilongwe is working with local women groups to construct simple stoves, disseminate them to rural communities, and promote their adoption and use. Apart from reducing the use of wood-fuel, the energy-efficient *mbaula* also reduces emission of carbon into the atmosphere. Use of these simple energy-efficient stoves is an example of the personal steps that Pope Francis calls for that can make a difference in the protection of the environment.

Early on in *LS*, the Pope notes his conviction that “change is impossible without motivation and a process of education...” (*LS*, 15). In Malawi a new secondary school is aiming to make that education for ecological change possible in its construction as well as in its instruction. Loyola Jesuit Secondary School (LJSS) in Kasungu has used soil based bricks to build its many new buildings, rather than relying on the traditional kiln burnt bricks that consume many trees in preparation of the final brick. The joinery preparing furniture for desks and chairs, bunk beds, etc., uses trees from its lot where new trees are planted regularly to prevent local level deforestation. Solar water heaters have been installed around campus, cutting electrical usage. Small steps, but good steps.

It is certainly true when *LS* speaks of “our common home,” it is the whole globe of Mother Earth that is referred to. But for we who live in Malawi, the message of Pope Francis is particularly meaningful and challenging. Our response will determine our future.