

ECOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL VISION IN THE ENCYCLICALS OF POPE FRANCIS

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This article is an attempt to highlight the ecological and social vision of Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'*, *Fratelli Tutti* and *Laudate Deum*-the supplement to *Laudato Si'*. The encyclicals of the Popes are generally addressed to the members of the Catholic Church and often limited to the teachings of the Church on faith and morals. But the encyclical, *Laudato Si'*¹ is addressed to every person on this planet. In the Encyclical, Pope Francis says that he would like to enter dialogue with all people about our common home (LS' 3).LS' focuses on the vital issues affecting people of all religions and cultures, going beyond the differences in dogmas, rituals, and laws. The LS' deals with the relationship between the poor and the consequences of climate change, the interconnectedness of everything in the world, the critiquing of the present development paradigm, alternatives to the present paradigm of development, the need for dialogue to search for sustainable alternatives, and the proposal of a new lifestyle.

There have been positive and negative responses to the pope's views on caring for our common home in LS'. The protagonists of the present unbridled capitalistic economic system that is based on consumerism and unsustainable use of natural resources point fingers

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¹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'- On Care for Our Common Home*, Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 2015. Hereafter cited as LS'.

against the critical analyses of the system by the Pope. Despite the criticism from some quarters, LS' has touched on all aspects of climate change and its impacts on present and future generations. The Pope has called for quick action on the part of world leaders to save the planet from environmental ruin. According to the Pope, only by radically reshaping our relationships with God, with our neighbours and with the natural world, can we hope to tackle the threats facing our planet today. We shall briefly discuss Pope's Eco- vision and Social vision in LS.'

Eco-vision in Laudato Si'

The Pope says: "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" (LS' 1). This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her (LS' 2). According to the Pope "When we can see God reflected in all that exists, our hearts are moved to praise the Lord for all his creatures and to worship in union with them" (LS' 87). We fail to see God reflected in all that exists and as a result "The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth" (LS' 66). Further, the Pope reminds us, "If we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, and ruthless exploiters" (LS' 11).

The Pontiff is convinced that climate change and environmental degradation are due to the exploitation of nature and there is an urgent need for a radical change in the conduct of humanity (LS' 4). He believes that "All of us can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation, each according to his or her own culture, experience, involvements and talents" (LS'14). Pope Francis points out that the solutions to environmental problems are to be sought not only in technology but in a change of humanity with attention to the spiritual and ethical roots of the problem (LS' 9). What is more important is our attitude, "... an attitude of the heart, one which approaches life with serene attentiveness... which accepts each moment as a gift of God to be lived to the full" (LS' 226).

The sixth and final chapter of the LS' proposes education and training for an ecological conversion (LS' 219). Such an ecological conversion fosters a spirit of generous care full of tenderness (LS' 220). It is a community conversion (LS' 219) that develops into a Culture of

Care (LS' 231). The Pope appeals for a new dialogue for the care of creation (LS' 14) and ecological education to raise people's awareness (LS' 210). LS' underlines our duty to protect the earth and its fruitfulness for coming generations (LS' 67).

The LS' reminds us that our short-sighted approach results in a Loss of Biodiversity (LS' 32). Because of us, thousands of plant and animal species have disappeared from the face of the earth (LS' 33). LS' warns us that "We have no such right" (LS' 33). Instead, we must care for the ecosystem with farsightedness (LS' 36). We must promote every effort towards afforestation and conservation. LS' encourages biodiversity spots- the sacred groves-KAVU- Sanctuaries on land and in the ocean (LS' 37). "Living our vocation to be protectors of God's handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience." (LS' 217). The Pope hopes that our seminaries and houses of formation will provide an education in responsible simplicity of life, in grateful contemplation of God's world, and in concern for the needs of the poor and the protection of the environment (LS' 214).

Water conservation is a key factor in caring for nature and humans. Fresh drinking water is an issue of primary importance since it is indispensable for human life and for supporting terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems (LS' 28). The quality of water available to the poor is yet another serious problem (LS' 29), which results in pollution and water-related diseases. Access to safe drinking water is a basic and universal human right, since it is essential to human survival and, as such, is a condition for the exercise of other human rights (LS' 30).

The LS' encourages a zero-waste culture (LS' 21). It promotes scientific methods of waste reduction, waste management, segregation at the source and disposal, and recycling waste without harming the environment (LS' 22, 23). We need to adopt the practice of not wasting food, which is closely linked to a "throwaway culture" (LS' 22). The throwaway mentality leads to both environmental and social problems. The excessive consumption and waste, according to Pope, are symptoms of a broader issue – our disconnection from nature and each other.

The Pope observes that our throwaway culture can be corrected by adopting the principle of "less is more" (LS' 222) and by restraining the habit of needless buying and spending leading to consumerism. LS' takes a swing at the consumerist culture of our modern society which

can lead to violence and mutual destruction (LS' 204). It also highlights that a rise in consumption and wasting large quantities of all food produced would lead to complex problems linked to pollution, transport, waste treatment, loss of resources, and quality of life (LS' 50).

In short, the eco-vision of Pope Francis in LS stresses the need for an 'integral ecology' that clearly respects everything including the well-being and connectedness of humans and the Earth (LS' 137). At national and local levels steps are to be initiated to promote the conservation of energy and the control of pollution (LS' 180). In every institution, a concerted effort shall be adopted with eco-supportive principles and eco-friendly practices in the care of nature. An ecological education should help us change and develop new convictions, attitudes, and a renewed lifestyle (LS' 202).

Social vision in *Laudato Si'*

The social vision of Pope Francis is woven into the very fabric of the encyclical *Laudato Si'*. The LS' emphasises the interconnectedness of environmental issues and social justice. What the Pope is basically saying is that we cannot care for the Earth without also caring for the people living on it. A true ecological approach, according to the Pope, is always a social approach, so as to hear "both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor" (LS' 49). As the Pope observes, the most vulnerable people on the planet are affected most by the degradation of the environment (LS' 48). Further, the Pope acknowledges the tragic effects of environmental degradation on the lives of the world's poorest (LS' 13). In fact, the poor who are already struggling, suffer most when the climate degrades and resources are depleted. The widespread indifference to such suffering points to the loss of our sense of responsibility for our brothers and sisters (LS' 25).

The Pope highlights the need to focus more on the common good. In his view, "In the present condition of global society, where injustices abound... the principle of the common good immediately becomes a summons to solidarity with the poorest of our brothers and sisters" (LS' 158). Pope reminds us that there are no frontiers or barriers, political or social, behind which we can hide; still, there is less room for the globalisation of indifference. We need to strengthen the conviction that we are one single human family (LS' 52). The human ecology is thus inseparable from the notion of the common good (LS' 156).

The Pope is convinced in affirming the fact that every ecological approach needs to incorporate a social perspective which considers the fundamental rights of the poor and the underprivileged. “The best way to restore men and women to their rightful place...is to speak once more of the figure of a Father who creates and who alone owns the world” (LS’ 75). The Pope emphasises the fact that the earth is essentially a shared inheritance and God created it for everyone, as the Isa Upanishad upholds (Isa.1.1).² Pope Francis wants us to take care of the environment, through which we will be able to address social issues and concerns. Such a holistic approach acknowledges the intricate balance between the health of the planet and the well-being of its people.

The health of the planet and the well-being of its people is emphasised in *Querida Amazonia* (Beloved Amazonia).³ Pope Francis defends vital eco-systems and the nature-friendly Amazonian indigenous peoples against all defilers. He dreams of “an Amazon region that fights for the rights of the poor, the original peoples and the least of our brothers and sisters, where their voices can be heard and their dignity advanced” (QA 7). Care for the people, and for their environment, is absolutely necessary if we want to prevent the callous destruction caused by indifference, corruption and grave injustice in society including the Church. Again, coinciding with the Synod for the Amazon a new book, *Nostra Madre Terra- Our Mother Earth*⁴- is released which gathers writings and discourses from Pope Francis on the environment. The book aims to explain a Christian vision of ecology. We shall explore some of the major social and ecological perspectives of the Pontiff rooted in Christian principles of love and solidarity as presented in FT.

Eco-Social Vision in Fratelli Tutti

The LS’ spoke of an integral ecology, and Fratelli Tutti (FT)⁵ spoke of how to channel this integral ecology through fraternity and social

² S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upanishads*, Noida: HarperCollins Publishers (24th impression 2014, 567.

³ Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia - To the People of God and To All Persons of Good Will*, Trivandrum: Carmel International Publishing House, 2020. Hereafter cited as QA.

⁴ Pope Francis, *Our Mother Earth - A Christian Reading of the Challenge of the Environment*, trans., Joseph Thenasseril, Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2021.

⁵ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti - On Fraternity and Social Friendship*, Conference of Catholic Bishops of India, Bangalore: ATC Publishers, 2020. Hereafter cited as FT.

friendship. According to FT a true ecological concern is always a social responsibility. The entire text of FT provides a comprehensive examination of the social concerns of Pope Francis. The Pope invites us to acknowledge the dignity of each human person, which will help us dream together as a single human family in solidarity (FT 8). In the first chapter of FT entitled “Dark Clouds over a Closed World,” Pope Francis considers certain unacceptable social trends in our world that hinder the development of universal fraternity and cause widespread social alienation. The second chapter of the Encyclical, “A Stranger on the Road,” responds to such social trends through the parable of the Good Samaritan, calling everyone to become neighbours to others. The remaining six chapters of FT offer prescriptions for closing the distance that separates us from our own neighbours and for overcoming the disheartening divisions that our dysfunctional political and economic systems have allowed to fester.

In today’s world, the sense of belonging to a single human family and working together as brothers and sisters seems to be a utopia. What reigns mostly is a globalised indifference, that often results in isolation and withdrawal into one’s own interests, disconnected from humanity and nature. It is in this context that Pope Francis is calling the entire humanity – all of us – to a new way of living together to build a more just and fraternal world, a world of connectedness. It results from an awareness that our lives are interwoven and connected with those of others and nature. The following are some of the major concerns of the Pope in FT.

Environmental Stewardship

The FT acknowledges the urgent need to address environmental degradation and climate change. It calls for responsible stewardship of the Earth and advocates for policies that promote sustainable development. Man, as a steward, has the primary mission of safeguarding the integrity of creation.⁶ The pope speaks about the need to take care of the planet in order for the planet to take care of ourselves (FT 17). The FT encourages us to listen to each other and listen to nature, as St. Francis did (FT 48). While speaking of the need to care for our common home, the Pontiff appeals to the spark of universal consciousness and mutual concern in people’s heart to conserve the

⁶ Bishop F. Antonisamy, *Integral Ecology - Reflections on the Eco-Teachings of Pope Francis*, Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2021, 26.

resources for the sake of the greater human family (FT 117), to which all of us belong.

Social Fraternity and Friendship

The FT affirms the importance of social fraternity and the idea that all people are brothers and sisters. Pope Francis visualises a more inclusive and interconnected world where people care for one another. According to the Pope, it is a new way of living together to build a more just and fraternal world (FT 85-86). FT extends an urgent call for reform to the task of setting right our relationships with our fellow human beings. It invites us to a renewed sense of global solidarity and a rejection of selfishness and individualism. Fraternity, the bond of our interwovenness, should become a habit that takes us to sublime levels of dignity and unity. While individualism runs rampant in much of society, the Pope seeks a world where we are one human family (FT 08) – an ideal very much in line with the Indian wisdom of *Vasudeva Kudumbakam*- the world is one family. In the very first article of FT, the Pope calls for a love that transcends the barriers of geography and distance and declares blessed all those who love their brothers and sisters (FT 01). We must learn to realise that strangers are really our neighbours in one great family, where all of us can feel at home (FT 62).

As FT attests, if we are to assume our identity as ‘a single human family,’ then we may not remain indifferent to the plight of those who are suffering anywhere in the world. Thus, FT impels us towards a universal communion – accepting others as part of a continuing adventure with a greater sense of mutual belonging (FT 95). A sense of mutual belonging enables us to widen our perspectives to embrace a global community that transcends all borders and helps us encompass people from every race, every nationality, every religion, and every tribe.

The Pope tells us not to fear the differences but to overcome them with “a love capable of transcending borders” (FT 99) and a commitment to serving the vulnerable (FT 115). A rising consciousness of our human commonality will forge an enhanced solidarity capable of showing the way forward to a better, more equitable world. We are all called to action and promote the culture of fraternity- close to the African ideal of *Ubuntu* (I am because we are). In fact, Pope’s focus on Social Friendship and Universal Fraternity is a timely antidote to the

individualism that pervades our society, undermines our interwovenness, and thus destroys the common good.

Human Dignity and Rights

The FT underscores the intrinsic value of every human being and the importance of upholding human dignity and rights. The encyclical emphasises the inherent dignity of every person and calls for a recognition of the equal worth of all individuals, irrespective of their background, race, or social status. Social friendship and universal fraternity necessarily call for an acknowledgment of the worth of every human person. In Pope's view the words of Jesus compel us to recognise Christ himself in each of our brothers and sisters (Mt. 25:40-45). Referring to the teachings of St. John Paul II, Pope continues, faith has untold power to inspire and sustain our respect for others, for believers come to know that God loves everyone with infinite love and thereby confers infinite dignity upon all humanity (FT 85).

The FT advocates for a society that respects and protects the rights and dignity of every person. Everyone must be given respect because all creatures share a common dignity. The right of some to free enterprise or market freedom cannot supersede the rights of people and the dignity of the poor, or, for that matter, respect for the natural environment, for "if we make something our own, it is only to administer it for the good of all" (FT122). The issues of human dignity are often symptoms that emerge from a lack of solidarity.

Globalisation and Economic Inequality

Pope Francis criticises growing economic inequality and calls for more inclusive economic policies. He advocates for an economy that prioritises the well-being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable. The FT suggests closeness to the underprivileged and promotion of the common good (FT 205) and the need for a change of heart, attitudes, and lifestyles (FT166). We are invited to act with the poor and for the poor by bearing good social fruits and by promoting integral human development (FT 169). The FT expresses great concern regarding economic divides and the disproportionate burdens that fall upon poorer nations. According to the Pope the negative impacts of globalisation often lead to increased inequality.

The Pope critiques the form of globalisation that prioritises economic interests over the well-being of individuals and advocates for a globalisation of solidarity that promotes the common good. The FT signals the danger of 'globalised indifference' – that we must

overcome, and the danger of 'isolation and withdrawal' – that we must avoid (FT 30). The Pope repeatedly reminds us to realise our inherent human dignity as sisters and brothers striving towards something greater than ourselves (FT 49). Globalisation of economy and technology gives the impression that we live in a more unified world, but the truth is globalisation of the economy often leads to standardisation and false universalism. Quoting the encyclical letter *Caritas in Veritate* of Pope Benedict XVI, FT says, '...as society becomes ever more globalised, it makes us neighbours, but does not make us brothers (FT 12). Such a massified world promotes individual interests and weakens the communitarian dimension of life. Hence, the Pope denounces the prevailing neoliberal economic system and the dogma of the free market.

Migration and Refugees

Another significant social concern in FT is the plight of migrants and refugees. While discussing the migration and refugee issues in FT 37-41, Pope Francis urges a compassionate response to those seeking refuge. He encourages nations to adopt more inclusive policies, work together to address the root causes of migration and provide support, treating them with dignity and respect. The Pope emphasises moral obligation to welcome, protect, promote, and integrate those who are forced to flee their homes due to various reasons.

Violence, War and Death

Pope Francis denounces war and violence, advocating for peaceful conflict resolution and dialogue between nations. It stresses the need for disarmament and the promotion of a culture of encounter rooted in bridge building and community (FT 216). According to the Pope, there are many who totally ignore our connectedness and "seek solutions in war, frequently fuelled by a breakdown in relations..." (FT 256). Pope Francis said on 18 October 2023 that "War does not solve any problem, it only sows death and destruction, increases hatred, and multiplies revenge. War erases the future." The Pope then added, "I urge believers to take only one side in this conflict, *that of peace*, but not with words but with prayer and total dedication."

Pope Francis exhorts all to reject the allure of violence and reiterates the Church's opposition to the death penalty. The Pope also addresses issues such as abortion, euthanasia, and the throwaway culture that disregards the respect and value of human life. Since the scourges of war and terrorism continue to kill civilians in large

numbers, FT weighs in on the need for greater reliance on diplomacy and creative modes of reconciliation and conflict transformation.

Social and Political Dialogue

The FT emphasises the importance of social dialogue to address various issues and build a more just and inclusive society. According to the Pope, the development of a global community of fraternity calls for a better kind of politics. He encourages political leaders to engage in sincere dialogue and make politics “truly at the service of the common good” (FT154). The new politics Pope promotes has charity at its core, ‘animated by the willingness to make sacrifices and the openness required to be truly unitive.’ Such a political charity is expressed in a spirit of openness to everyone (FT 190).

The Pope spells out the need for a healthy and effective politics for a growth towards universal fraternity and social peace (FT177). He appeals for a renewed appreciation of politics as “a lofty vocation and one of the highest forms of charity, in as much as it seeks the common good” (FT180). In the face of many petty forms of politics focused on immediate interests, Pope advises the politicians to uphold high principles and think of the long-term common good in forging a common project for the human family (FT178).

The apathy, uncharitable, and inhuman treatment of the political Bosses towards people all over the world reminds the entire world how relevant the call of FT is for a better kind of politics in our own times. The Pope calls our attention to the dialogue that he had with Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb. They had jointly appealed to international policy and the global economy to obliterate divisive politics and to promote a culture of tolerance (FT 285). He also speaks of the need to be concerned, in the face of a policy that sows hatred and fear towards other nations in the name of the country’s welfare. As a remedy to all this hate mongering, the Pope says that good politics combines love with hope and confidence in the reserves of goodness present in human hearts (FT192,196).

Social Media and Communication

The FT reflects on the impact of social media and communication technologies on society. It highlights the importance of responsible communication that fosters genuine human connection and understanding. Social media and digitalization give the impression that we are interconnected. But it is an illusion of communication (FT 42) because we limit ourselves to like-minded people who confirm our

own beliefs. It is more a case of parallel monologue than a real dialogue (FT 200). In essence, FT invites individuals and societies to reflect on their relationships with others, promoting a culture of encounter, solidarity, and social justice.

Pope Francis proposes certain practical suggestions for how to navigate the path that leads from a troubled present to a more promising future. We need to summon our collective courage to breach the walls that divide humankind so that the full realisation of universal solidarity, a key Gospel value that Pope lauds, becomes a tangible reality. In short, FT promotes a holistic view of social justice and challenges individuals and societies to work towards a more compassionate and equitable world. In the face of present-day attempts to eliminate or ignore others, Pope offers FT as a social Encyclical that makes us capable of responding with a new vision of fraternal love in its openness to every man and woman (FT 6). Now let us have a look at the *Laudate Deum*- a supplement to *Laudato Si*.⁷

Laudate Deum and Eco-social Concerns

Pope Francis released *Laudate Deum* (LD)⁷ – Praise God - on October 4, 2023, the feast day of St. Francis of Assisi, the lover of all creation. It is addressed to all people of good will to care for the poor and to care for the earth. In LD, the Pope highlights his eco-social vision and conviction that “our care for one another and our care for the earth are intimately bound together” (LD 3). Like *Laudato Si*’ and *Fratelli Tutti*, LD strongly reproaches wealthy nations that contribute the most to climate change, accusing them of ignoring the plight of the poor (LD 72).

The LD links environmental problems with economic, social, and technological issues. Along with LS’ and FT, LD rebukes rampant individualism. It laments that responses to global crises of climate change and the pandemic have led to “greater individualism” (LD 36) and hoarding of wealth, ignoring fraternity and social friendship envisioned in FT. In LD, the Pope expresses hope that societies around the world will change their lifestyles and intensify grassroots activities aimed at reducing the negative human impact on nature and people. LD warns of “grave consequences” if humanity continues to ignore the threat of climate change (LD 50).

⁷ Pope Francis, *Laudate Deum - To all People of Good Will on the Climate Crisis*, Trivandrum: Carmel International Publishing House, 2023. Hereafter cited as LD.

Along with the threat of climate change, the world community is threatened by the scenario of invasion and war between nations, causing destruction of nature and humanity. Climate change and environmental degradation strongly affect the life and families of many persons (LD 2) and are a global social issue whose effects are borne by the most vulnerable people (LD 3). The Pope acknowledges that technological innovations, including Artificial Intelligence (LD 21) have destroyed healthy and harmonious relationship with nature (LD 27).

Pope Francis calls on nations and politicians, to work for the global common good (LD 52) and not for their own profit or particular interests (LD 54, 60). The Pope repeats his conviction that “Everything is connected” and “No one is saved alone” (LD 19). He understands the entire world as a “contact zone” (LD 66). For him, human life is incomprehensible and unsustainable without other creatures (LD 67). The LD reaffirms that “As part of the universe... all of us are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family, a sublime communion that fills us with a sacred, affectionate, and humble respect” (LD 67).

Conclusion

Pope Francis, in his encyclical letters *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti*, along with his apostolic exhortation *Laudate Deum*, passionately instructs us that the dream of our ‘common home’ can only be done together as sisters and brothers in solidarity and social friendship. They remind us that true ecological and social concern is a mutual responsibility, and it “calls for involvement on the part of all” (LD 58). We need to develop a culture of encounter with one other and with our natural environment, recognise one another as brothers and sisters, and learn to hear the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor with selfless love and care. It will put our lives in deeper communion with God, with humans, and with nature. It is a commitment to unity resulting from a deeper experience of interwovenness with one another and nature which calls for adopting practical steps to change.⁸

In *LS'*, *FT* and *LD*, Pope Francis lays out a comprehensive vision of how the world should change to be more caring for the world and

⁸ Tom Gill, *Our common home - A guide to caring for our living planet*, Rome: Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development and Stockholm Environment Institute, 2023.

caring for humans as brothers and sisters. In fact, the care for our common home as visualised in *LS'*, naturally results in the care of the universal human family, as envisioned in *FT*. The vision and conviction of the Pope that all people are our brothers and sisters urge us to integrate and unite in the practice and experience of charity. Charity, with its impulse towards universality, can build a new world of connectedness, paving the way for a healthy life linked with that of others and nature. Fraternity, kindness, and trust are the essential bedrock of social action.

We are given the example of Christ himself, who attracted people through his kindness, and asked to reflect on whether we cultivate kindness (*FT* 224) in our own communities to foster a spirit of cooperative dialogue. The final chapter of *FT*, 'Religions at the Service of Fraternity in Our World' reminds us of the importance of religions, which 'contribute significantly to building fraternity and defending justice in society' (*FT* 271). Reaffirming the togetherness of humanity and the connectedness to nature, *LD* calls once again on all people of good will to care for the poor and for the Earth. Such profundity invites us all to work together as one people, one family, with a moral concern to have hope for a future of greater peace, love, and justice for us and for the earth. Let us join hands to make this world a beautiful place to live.