

## ***Laudato 'si: How Can We be Challenged to Care for Our Common Home?***

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Jean Vanier is right when he quotes a well-known French atheist sociologist: “The document is the first act in the birth of a new civilisation.” Vanier is also absolutely correct when he says that this remarkable ecological document integrates many disciplines in his assessment of this crucial challenge – the future survival of our planet. As a *political* document it is an extensive examination of the impact of the powerful on the powerless. As an *economic* statement, it is a withering evaluation of the unregulated business profit model. As a *cultural* document, it shows how one thoroughly balanced charismatic and wise person, Pope Francis, can evoke widespread interest for a global crisis. But as a *moral* document, it illustrates the extent and ability of theology to understand and react to what is happening in our contemporary world. Francis persistently calls on everyone to struggle with the sin of climate change, but in his usual style he does so in a compassionate and merciful way: “Sister, Mother Earth...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” (pars.1 and 2).<sup>1</sup>

In the encyclical’s opening Francis places the blame for our climate crisis right where it belongs. We humans have violated the earth, but sin has violated us: “The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life” (par.2).The encyclical has six chapters. For example, Chapter 1 describes what is happening to our common home: “We cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend the causes related to human and social degradation” (par.48). Chapter 2 describes the Gospel of Creation. “We are not God. The earth was here before us and it has been given to us”(par.67) as stewards. “The harmony between the Creator, humanity and creation as a whole was disrupted by our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations. This in turn distorted our mandate to ‘have dominion’ over the earth (cf. Gen 1:28), and to ‘till it and keep it’ (Gen 2:15).”

He does not apologize for his assessment of what is happening: “Doomsday predictions can no longer be met with irony or disdain. We may well be leaving to coming generations debris, desolation and filth. The pace of consumption, waste and environmental change has so stretched the planet’s capacity that our contemporary lifestyle, unsustainable as it is, can only precipitate catastrophes” (par.161). And the people on the margins of society, the powerless, are those who suffer the most.

### **Political Action Needed**

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<sup>1</sup>See Emma Green, “The Pope’s Moral Case for Taking on Climate Change,” [www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/06/pope-francis-encyclical-mo](http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/06/pope-francis-encyclical-mo)

The quoted paragraphs of the encyclical are from *Laudato si’: On Care for Our Common Home* (London: St Pauls Publishing, 2015).

The encyclical challenges us to action at two levels: politically and individually. “A great cultural, spiritual, and educational challenge stands before us, and it will demand we set out the path of renewal” (par.202). Francis is critical of governments that ignore what is happening. At the same time he recognizes there is need for a robust role for governments in regulating their economies and protecting the environment according to ethical principles. “A strategy for real change calls for rethinking processes in their entirety, for it is not enough to include a few superficial ecological considerations while failing to question the logic which underlies present-day culture. A healthy politics needs to be able to take up this challenge”(par.197).

Summarizing what he calls the “weak responses” of global leaders to the environmental crisis, Francis states: “The problem is that we lack the culture needed to confront the crisis. We lack leadership capable of striking out on new paths and meeting the needs of the present with concern for all and without prejudices towards coming generations.”

He criticizes the idea of a carbon tax, saying that such a levy would impose unfair burdens on the poor, and also deplors the idea of a global cap-and-trade system. “This system seems to provide a quick and easy solution under the guise of a certain commitment to the environment, but in no way does it allow for the radical change which present circumstances require” (par.171) Francis is suggesting instead that large payments be advanced to developing countries to assist them in financing clean-energy systems, and that richer countries dramatically reduce consumption.

### **Individual Action Needed**

“Not everyone is called to engage directly in political life” (par.232).What then can we individually do? “The ecological crisis is also a summons to profound interior conversion” (par.217). “An awareness of the gravity of today’s cultural and ecological crisis must be translated into new habits”(par.209). What do these two statements mean for you and me?

Jean Vanier answers the questions in two ways. First, like the Pope he is intensely sensitive to the seductive power of culture. Left unchallenged the cultures of L’Arche communities can insidiously drift away from their authentic founding story and its primary Gospel roots. Therefore, he sees the ever-present need for *refounding* L’Arche communities.<sup>2</sup> That is, the need to go back and be constantly inspired by the primary roots of L’Arche. It is love. It is Christ’s loving concern for people particularly on the margins of society.

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<sup>2</sup> Jean Vanier, “The danger is that the [founding story] disappears completely. The real meaning of a community, its *raison d’etre* in the church and in the world may get lost [under the pressure of routine and the human difficulties of living with people who are disabled mentally]...It is because of this danger that the specific myth of the community, its sacred story, needs to be announced over and over. Without it we can slip gently into the primacy of the need for security, comfort and the need for recognition. Without the myth [that is, the founding story] that awakens and stimulates hearts, galvanizing energies, we can quickly discover the demands of community life intolerable.” “The Founding Myth and the Evolution of Communities,” *Prophetic Papers* No. 2 (n.d.), 8-9.

So also for us. Refounding means returning to, and re-owning, the founding story of our faith. Love of God and love of our neighbour.<sup>3</sup> It is this love for one another that should impel us to respond to the ecological crisis in whatever way we can. Thus Francis writes: “A sense of deep communion with the rest of nature cannot be real if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human being... Concern for the environment thus needs to be joined to a sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society” (par.91).

The test of this love, therefore, will be our concern for people on the margins who suffer most from the ecological crisis. “The mindset which leaves no room for sincere concern for the environment is the same mindset which lacks concern for the inclusion of the most vulnerable members of society” (par.196). From loving will automatically follow an effective desire to do something – big or small - to relieve our climate crisis. “Love, overflowing with small gestures of mutual care... makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world... social love is the key to authentic development” (par.231). “I wish to insist that love always proves more powerful [than violence]” (par.149). We can all do something – using public transport, car-pooling, planting trees, cutting back a little on air-conditioning, turning off the lights and recycling. “Reusing something instead of immediately discarding it, when done for the right reasons, can be an act of love which expresses our dignity” (par.210).

Secondly, Jean Vanier calls us, if we can, to go further than these gestures. He invites us to work *with* people on the margins, but with a warning. We must be prepared to learn from these people not just to give them the benefits of our expertise. Jean believes that people with mental disabilities, for example, have by “their very weakness and their call to friendship and communion the ability to touch the hearts of the powerful and strong, calling them to love and to a deeper recognition of their fundamental humanity. They possess thus a healing power, bringing people to unity, renewing the church and humanity.”<sup>4</sup> Jesus Christ has truly chosen the foolish and the weak of this world to confound the wise and the strong (1 Cor 1:27).<sup>5</sup>

### Discussion Questions

1. Why does Pope Francis assert “we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation?” (par.48)
2. Pope Francis asks: “What is the purpose of our life in this world? Why are we here? What is the goal of our work and all our efforts? What need does the earth have of us?” (par.160)
3. In what ways must the encyclical change my life?

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<sup>3</sup> See Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Catholic Identity or Identities? Refounding Ministries in Chaotic Times* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), 89-198.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Vanier, “The Founding Myth” op.cit., 7. See also reflections by Hans S. Reinders, “Being with the Disabled: Jean Vanier’s Theological Realism,” eds. Brian Brock and John Swinton, *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2012), 467-511.

<sup>5</sup> See Jean Vanier, *Letter to My Brothers and Sisters in L’Arche* (Trosly: 1996) 7.