

ON CARE FOR OUR COMMON HOME

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THE PUBLICATION of Pope Francis' Encyclical *Laudato si'* has probably received more media attention than any other Encyclical in history. In part because information technology has meant the Encyclical is only a click away from being read by everyone with access to a computer, but also because the contents impact each and every one of us alive today. The central theme of how we rightly relate to this glorious creation that has been entrusted into our care is as relevant to my little grand daughter as it is to Pope Francis.

From the beginning of the document it is clear what kind of relationship Pope Francis believes we need have with the earth and with our environment. He begins:

'Laudato si', mi' Signore'—'Praise be to you, my Lord'. 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. 'Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs'.

He then immediately locates the problem, saying:

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. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid

waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she "groans in travail" (Rom 8:22). We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. Gen 2:7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters.

Pope Francis clearly connects our collective alienation from the earth with a debasement of each other and ourselves—the interdependency of this primary relationship is clear as the Pope says:

The destruction of the human environment is extremely serious, not only because God has entrusted the world to us men and women, but because human life is itself a gift which must be defended from various forms of debasement. Every effort to protect and improve our world entails profound changes in 'lifestyles, models of production and consumption, and the established structures of power which today govern societies'.

It is clear from reading *Laudato si'* that Pope Francis loves this earth. In fact love is the central, though largely unnamed, motivation for this teaching document. This Encyclical calls us to a truly resilient love that acknowledges our intimate relationship with the earth, with the suffering wrought by greed, with the limits of our own works and economies and ways of being in the world.

The case for action on global warming is very carefully and fully laid out—as it has been elsewhere by others. We share a powerful self-interest in cutting our carbon emissions because if we don't the world will heat past the critical point of two degrees and we could create a planet unable to support life as we know it today.

The moral case is clear, and again this has also been made by aid organisations across the globe for the last few decades. There is no doubt these organisations were heartened to have the Pope now included in their number.

However, the Pope has done what no world leader has done before. He has challenged all of us to create national and global economies that are no longer predicated on endless growth. He has challenged a largely capitalist world to find a way to live without endless consumption.

He has challenged all of us to create the intellectual frame—the scaffolding on which we build a world economy that has the humility of living within the earth's means. He challenges us to create economies that recognise the essentially moral character of development, saying:

Authentic human development has a moral character. It presumes full respect for the human person, but it must also be concerned for the world around us and ‘take into account the nature of each being and of its mutual connection in an ordered system’. Accordingly, our human ability to transform reality must proceed in line with God's original gift of all that is.

The last century has been dominated by two grand ideologies—International Socialism and Capitalism and neither ideology gave credit for a transcendent authority. With both of those meta narratives finished—for reasons too complex to go into here—Pope Francis is calling on all of us to



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create a new story, a new narrative that will allow us to recognise and live within the earth's limits, our own fragility and interdependence with each other, and to live in a right relationship with the biosphere.

When Pope Francis says: *Every effort to protect and improve our world entails profound changes in ‘lifestyles, models of production and consumption, and the established structures of power which today govern societies’*, he is walking in the steps of the prophets that have gone before him. It is no small task to find new lifestyles, models of production and consumption and to change the established structures of power which today govern societies, but at least we know that if we fail to do all of that, the result will be dire.

This is an historic document. Future generations may point to this moment and this document as the time when the tide turned on global warming, global inequality and species extinction. And for that we are all responsible.

We can be silent witnesses to terrible injustices if we think we can obtain significant benefits by making the rest of humanity, present and future, pay the extremely high costs of environmental deterioration.

—Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, 36.