

## Introduction to *Laudato Si'*

John Paul II Pastoral Centre

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Ladies and Gentlemen:

### *Introduction*

Before providing a short introduction to Pope Francis's landmark encyclical entitled *Laudato Si'*, "On Care for Our Common Home," I wish to express my enormous pleasure that this symposium is being held here at the John Paul II Pastoral Centre, with Mayor Gregor Robertson, and then with panelists Father Hrant Tahanian, Mr. Jay Ritchlin and the Reverend Mary Fontaine. I believe that together we provide a vivid witness of the common desire and intention shared by those in this Hall who want to think and work together in order to redress the harm we have inflicted on the Earth by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her (cf. LS 2).

Together we are determined, as Pope Francis writes, to "recognize that . . . that we can always redirect our steps, that we can always do something to solve our problems." It's my hope that tonight will be a step along the way in inspiring a common strategy to meet the challenges that arise from "the environmental crisis and the sufferings of the excluded (LS 13). A climate *of* change and *for* change is afoot.

My task this evening is to present Pope Francis's recent encyclical in such a way that its relevance to all people of good will can be recognized because of the questions it poses, the vision it presents, and

the suggested directions it outlines for meeting the challenges that confront us.

I hope that by providing a brief and selective outline of the Pope's document that you will indeed see that he is bringing to bear the full weight of his moral authority in his appeal "for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation, he believes, that includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all" (LS 14).

### ***The Title***

As in all Vatican documents, this encyclical takes its title from its opening words, "*Laudato Si*," which begin St. Francis of Assisi's "Canticle of the Creatures": "Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth." Pope Francis leaves no doubt that he wants to apply the radical Christianity of his namesake to the problems of the contemporary world. Earth, he writes, is "our common home, . . . a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us" (LS 1). This opening reference to Francis of Assisi sets the tone for the Pope's presentation of what we can call his "integral ecology," one that addresses the "three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships [which ground human life]: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself"" (LS 66).

### ***In Continuity with the Tradition***

In many ways, *Laudato Si'* continues and develops the tradition initiated by Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI (cf. LS 5-6), when they exhorted us to respect the inbuilt grammar of creation. Yet, in significant ways, the encyclical also strikes out on a bold and fresh direction in Catholic social teaching on ecology.

### ***Brief Overview***

Now to a brief overview of the encyclical's six chapters which follow its introduction: in all, 40,000 words and 184 pages. But it is easy to read, avoiding the more academic tone of many previous social encyclicals.

### ***Chapter 1***

The first chapter – “What Is Happening to Our Common Home” – draws heavily on contemporary science to summarize starkly the degradations to creation which human activity have brought about. The Pope laments atmospheric pollution, lack of clean water and its privatization, the loss of biodiversity. He pulls no punches when he writes that “the earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth” (LS 21).

Francis also reminds his readers of the disproportionate impact of environmental damage on the poor, who are the most vulnerable. This is a point he returns to frequently throughout the encyclical. The poor suffer most from the degradation of the earth, because they are the least

protected from the increasingly violent swings of nature caused by global warming, and they have the greatest exposure to air pollution, droughts, unsafe drinking water and the spread of diseases. “Today... 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 hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*” (LS 49).

Specifically of climate change, he says that it “is a global problem with grave implications” and “represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day” (LS 25). At the same time, “our lack of response to these tragedies involving our brothers and sisters points to the loss of that sense of responsibility for our fellow men and women upon which all civil society is founded” (LS 25).

## ***Chapter 2***

His second chapter – “The Gospel of Creation” – has a different point of departure. Here he draws heavily on Scripture to show how thoroughly creation is a good gift of God. He begins by frankly asking, “Why should this document, addressed to all people of good will, include a chapter dealing with the convictions of believers?” And he answers: “science and religion, with their distinctive approaches to understanding reality, can enter into an intense dialogue fruitful for both.” This point is crucial. And I hope it will characterize the kind of

cooperation we must have in the City of Vancouver.

The Pope then explains that the view that many Christians had and have of exercising “dominion” over the earth, meaning the right to subdue, is untenable. It must give way to an understanding that “these ancient [biblical] stories, full of symbolism, bear witness to a conviction which we today share, that everything is interconnected” (LS 70). Now we see more clearly that Scripture tells us that the earth is a gift given to us to steward, not a possession to be abused.

Human beings are part of the environment; they live in communion with it, not above it as masters. The environment itself entails ethical limits which human activity must acknowledge and respect. We possess a body shaped by physical, chemical and biological elements, and can only survive and develop if the ecological environment is favourable. Any harm done to the environment, therefore, is harm done to humanity (cf. Address to UN, 26.IX.2015).

### ***Chapter 3***

In the third chapter – “The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis” – Francis argues, not against science and technology, but “that humanity has taken up technology and its development according to an undifferentiated and one-dimensional paradigm” (LS 106). Science and technology have “given those with the knowledge, and especially the economic resources to use them, an impressive dominance over the

whole of humanity and the entire world” (LS 104). Francis says we are enthralled with this technocratic paradigm, which promises unlimited growth. But, he observes, this paradigm “is based on the lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth’s goods, and this leads to the planet being squeezed dry beyond every limit”(LS 106). Those supporting this paradigm show “no interest in more balanced levels of production, a better distribution of wealth, concern for the environment and the rights of future generations. Their behaviour shows that for them maximizing profits is enough” (LS 22). And this is only one of his blistering assessments of an economy built on greed and ruthless competition.

In a paragraph too good to pass up citing, Francis writes his evaluation:

Science and technology are not neutral; from the beginning to the end of a process, various intentions and possibilities are in play and can take on distinct shapes. Nobody is suggesting a return to the Stone Age, but we do need to slow down and look at reality in a different way, to appropriate the positive and sustainable progress which has been made, but also to recover the values and the great goals swept away by our unrestrained delusions of grandeur (LS 114).

Positive and sustainable progress: that’s what we want for our city, province and nation!

## *Chapter 4*

Francis's reflection on technology prepares for chapter four – “Integral Ecology” – which contains the central argument of the encyclical. Integral ecology is a new paradigm of justice, an ecology “which respects our unique place as human beings in this world and our relationship to our surroundings” (LS 15). “We must regain the conviction, he writes, that we need one another, that we have a shared responsibility for others and the world, and that being good and decent are worth it” (LS 229).

For Francis, “Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature,” he writes, “included in it and thus in constant interaction with it” (LS 139). Therefore, the analysis of environmental problems cannot be separated from an analysis of human, family, work-related and urban contexts, nor from how we relate to ourselves. All creation is interconnected. There can be no human well-being without planetary well-being. Thus, the problems of the poor, whose plight has been the Pope's concern right from Buenos Aires to Rome, are inseparable from environmental concerns.

He ends this chapter with a question which, in fact, animates the whole encyclical. This question is our question as well. And it gives his document an ethical tone, just as one would expect from the Pope. He

asks:

What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up? This question not only concerns the environment in isolation; the issue cannot be approached piecemeal. When we ask ourselves what kind of world we want to leave behind, we think in the first place of its general direction, its meaning and its values. Unless we struggle with these deeper issues, I do not believe that our concern for ecology will produce significant results. But if these issues are courageously faced, we are led inexorably to ask other pointed questions: 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? It is no longer enough, then, simply to state that we should be concerned for future generations. We need to see that what is at stake is our own dignity (LS 160).

Our environmental concerns must take these questions to heart.

### ***Chapter 5***

In his fifth chapter – “Lines of Approach and Action” – Francis, perhaps in light of the upcoming Paris Conference, proposes the kinds of dialogue necessary to deal with the crisis: international and national; with economics and politics; and between religions and science.

He also makes the sharpest and most controversial point of the encyclical: “technology based on the use of highly polluting fossil fuels – especially coal, but also oil and, to a lesser degree, gas – needs to be progressively replaced without delay” (LS 165).

### ***Chapter 6***

In the sixth and final chapter – “Ecological Education and Spirituality” – Francis connects the global issues of the encyclical with day-to-day life. He calls all people, but those of the wealthier countries in particular, to question their habits of consumption, and to begin to live more simply and less wastefully. But rather than approaching these suggestions with a kind of save-the-planet seriousness, Francis argues that we need to use the gifts of creation in an attitude of thankfulness and joy.

### ***Conclusion***

I want to close by affirming that, despite its dire warnings, a ray of hope flows through the entire encyclical, which gives a clear message: “Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home” (LS 13) and “Men and women are still capable of intervening positively” (LS 58) to resolve the crisis. He is appealing to us, inviting us to work together to meet a challenge.

As the Pope wrote, and to which we wish to bear witness this

evening: “All is not lost. Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new start” (LS 205).

The need for urgent action is clear and he appeals to us to become “painfully aware” of what is happening to the world and “to grow in solidarity, responsibility and compassionate care” (LS 210). And together. There is a climate for change. Now let’s do it.

Thank you.

✝J. Michael Miller, CSB  
Archbishop of Vancouver

## **Chapter 1 – *What is happening to our common home***

The first chapter presents the most recent scientific findings on the environment as a way to listen to the cry of creation, “to become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it” (19). It thus deals with “several aspects of the present ecological crisis” (15). *Pollution and climate change*: “Climate change is a global problem with serious implications, environmental, social, economic, political and for the distribution of goods; it represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day” (25). If “the climate is a common good, belonging to all and meant for all” (23), the greatest impact of this change falls on the poorest, but “many of those who possess more resources and economic or political power seem mostly to be concerned with masking the problems or concealing their symptoms” (26)..

*The issue of water*: the Pope clearly states that “access to safe drinkable 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”. To deprive the poor of access to water means to deny “the right to a life consistent with their inalienable dignity” (30).

*Loss of biodiversity:* “**Each year sees the disappearance of thousands of plant and animal species which we will never know, which our children will never see, because they have been lost forever**” (33).

They are not just any exploitable “resource”, but have a value in and of themselves. In this perspective “we must be grateful for the praiseworthy efforts being made by scientists and engineers dedicated to finding solutions to man-made problems”, but when human intervention is at the service of finance and consumerism, “it is actually making our earth less rich and beautiful, ever more limited and grey” (34).

*Decline in the quality of human life and the breakdown of society:* in the framework of an ethics of international relationships, the Encyclical indicates how a “**true ‘ecological debt’**” (51), exists in the world, above all in the North with respect to the South. In the face of climate change there are “differentiated responsibilities” (52), and that of the developed countries is greater. Aware of the profound differences over these issues, Pope Francis shows himself to be deeply affected by the “**weak responses**” in the face of the drama besetting many peoples and populations.

Even though positive examples are not lacking (58), “a complacency and a cheerful recklessness” prevail (59). An adequate culture is lacking (53) as is a willingness to change life style, production and consumption (59), but fortunately efforts are being made “to

establish a legal framework which can set clear boundaries and ensure the protection of ecosystems” (53)

### **Chapter three – *The human roots of the ecological crisis***

This chapter gives an analysis of the current situation, “so as to consider not only its symptoms but also its deepest causes” (15), in a dialogue with philosophy and the human sciences. Reflections on technology are an initial focus of the chapter. The great contribution of technologies to the improvement of living conditions is acknowledged with gratitude. However it gives **“those with the knowledge, and especially the economic resources to use them, an impressive dominance over the whole of humanity and the entire world”** (104). It is precisely the mentality of technocratic domination that leads to the destruction of nature and the exploitation of people, especially the most vulnerable populations. “The technocratic paradigm also tends to dominate economics and political life” (109), keeping us from recognizing that **“by itself the market cannot guarantee integral human development and social inclusion”** (109).

“Modernity has been marked by an excessive anthropocentrism” (116): human beings no longer recognize their right place with respect to the world and take on a self-centred position, focused exclusively on themselves and on their own power. This results in a “use and throw away” logic that justifies every type of waste, environmental or human,

that treats both the other and nature as simple objects and leads to a myriad of forms of domination. It is this mentality that leads to exploiting children, abandoning the elderly, forcing others into slavery, practicing human trafficking and throwing away unborn babies because they do not correspond to what the parents want, of selling “blood diamonds” and the pelts of animals in danger of extinction, and of over-evaluating the capacity of the market to regulate itself. This is also the mentality of the many mafias involved in drug trafficking and trafficking of organs (123). In this light, the Encyclical addresses two crucial problems of today’s world. Above all work:

“any approach to an integral ecology, which by definition does not exclude human beings, needs to take account of the value of labour” (124), because **“to stop investing in people, in order to gain greater short-term financial gain, is bad business for society”** (128).

The second problem regards the limitations of scientific progress, with clear reference to GMOs (132-136). This is a “complex environmental issue” (135). Even though “in some regions their use has brought about economic growth which has helped to resolve problems, there remain a number of significant difficulties which should not be underestimated” (134), starting from the “productive land being concentrated in the hands of a few owners” (134). Pope Francis thinks particularly of small producers and rural workers, of biodiversity, and the network of

ecosystems.

Therefore “**a broad, responsible scientific and social debate needs to take place, one capable of considering all the available information and of calling things by their name**” starting from “lines of independent, interdisciplinary research” (135).

#### **Chapter four – *Integral Ecology***

The heart of the Encyclical’s proposals is integral ecology as a new paradigm of justice, an ecology “which respects our unique place as human beings in this world and our relationship to our surroundings” (15). In fact, “**nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live**” (139). This holds true in all fields: in economy and politics, in different cultures particularly in those most threatened, and even in every moment of our daily lives. The integral perspective also brings the ecology of institutions into play: “if everything is related, then the health of a society’s institutions affects the environment and the quality of human life. **‘Every violation of solidarity and civic friendship harms the environment’**” (142).

First, it must be stated that a true “right of the environment” does exist, for two reasons. First, because we human beings are part of the environment. We live in communion with it, since the environment itself entails ethical limits which human activity must acknowledge and

respect. Man, for all his remarkable gifts, which “are signs of a uniqueness which transcends the spheres of physics and biology” (Laudato Si, 81), is at the same time a part of these spheres. He possesses a body shaped by physical, chemical and biological elements, and can only survive and develop if the ecological environment is favourable. Any harm done to the environment, therefore, is harm done to humanity. Second, because every creature, particularly a living creature, has an intrinsic value, in its existence, its life, its beauty and its interdependence with other creatures. We Christians, together with the other monotheistic religions, believe that the universe is the fruit of a loving decision by the Creator, who permits man respectfully to use creation for the good of his fellow men and for the glory of the Creator; he is not authorized to abuse it, much less to destroy it. In all religions, the environment is a fundamental good (cf. *ibid.*). The misuse and destruction of the environment are also accompanied by a relentless process of exclusion. In effect, a selfish and boundless thirst for power and material prosperity leads both to the misuse of available natural resources and to the exclusion of the weak and disadvantaged, either because they are differently abled (handicapped), or because they lack adequate information and technical expertise, or are incapable of decisive political action. Economic and social exclusion is a complete denial of human fraternity and a grave offense against human rights and the environment.

The poorest are those who suffer most from such offenses, for three serious reasons: they are cast off by society, forced to live off what is discarded and suffer unjustly from the abuse of the environment. They are part of today's widespread and quietly growing "culture of waste". The dramatic reality this whole situation of exclusion and inequality, with its evident effects, has led me, in union with the entire Christian people and many others, to take stock of my grave responsibility in this regard and to speak out, together with all those who are seeking urgently-needed and effective solutions. The adoption of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* at the World Summit, which opens today, is an important sign of hope. I am similarly confident that the *Paris Conference on Climatic Change* will secure fundamental and effective agreements.<sup>1</sup>

### *Questions and Answers*

dealing explicitly with the Encyclical

1. What's new in *Laudato si'* (LS)? What's in this document that we have not seen from the Church before?

The document is a call to conversion and action. While *Laudato si'* fits perfectly within Catholic tradition, it is saying with new force

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<sup>1</sup> Francis, Address to the General Assembly of the United Nations (25 September 2015).

that concern for the environment is no longer “optional” for a believer. Caring for the environment is now even more clearly and surely part of Church teaching.

2. Why does the Pope pay little attention to the population problem?

LS acknowledges that population density can be a complicating factor in some areas. But people are not the problem. Waste is a much bigger problem: our throwaway culture and our tendency to consume without reflecting on our real needs, both material and spiritual.

3. The Encyclical seems to make technology and finance enemies.

Isn't that a bit simplistic, even retrograde?

Technology and the financial markets can be wonderful instruments, as long as they are serving human beings, enhancing human dignity, as opposed to making relatively few very rich and a lot of people slaves. This calls for honest debate. What constitutes real technological progress? Where does it help human dignity, but where does it degrade it? Or financial markets: are they helping to spread the wealth? Are they helping to bring people out of poverty?

4. LS argues against fossil fuels. And yet cheap energy has done a lot to lift the poor out of poverty. Does the Pope want to deny them that possibility?

No. The Pope wants the wealthy nations, and those that have

polluted more, to cut back on fossil fuels. He argues that alternative energy is available for all. But that requires solidarity: wealthy nations sharing their profits, helping the poorer nations to develop alternative energy sources.

5. It appears that the Pope is backing global agricultural planning on a massive scale ( n. 129, 164). That's not really his job, is it?

Neither the Pope, nor the bishops around the world, are going to provide technical solutions. But they will speak on behalf of those with no voice. That's all the Pope is doing: saying that we either change the way we are producing crops, or we're headed for trouble. It will be for others – conscientious laypeople – to work out the solutions.

6. This document has a fair amount of economics in it. For example, claiming in n. 109 that finance overwhelms the real economy. Is that the kind of opinion a Pope should be expressing?

The Pope is not lecturing on economic theory. He has very clear ideas on human dignity, and what it means for someone to be excluded or without work. They're missing that sense of self-worth that comes from work hard and putting food on the table for their family.

7. Why is the Pope so anti-market? (for example: 189, 190) Isn't this just a Latin American prejudice?

Look at the unemployment rates among young people in Europe, and the number of people risking their lives to leave Africa. There's nothing Latin American about this at all. The global economy right now is simply not serving the great majority of people. That's all he's saying. Yes, plenty of wealth has been created by the market economy; but there's also too much absolute misery, and plenty of indifference to go with it.

8. The Pope claims that global warming is one of the principal challenges for humanity right now (no. 22). Leaving all debate aside, that seems to be a very earthly concern for a man with a spiritual mission.

Everything is connected, and nothing truly human is outside of the Church's concern. A person of faith should show even more responsibility regarding creation, which is a gift from God. Climate change isn't a theoretical matter, it is already doing a lot of damage, especially to those least able to adapt.

9. Who, besides Cardinal Turkson, helped the Pope write this? There are a lot of Bishops' Conferences quoted, but where did the science come from?

A number of people helped the Pope on this, but his name is on it and, in the end, it is his encyclical. The science comes from the same place we all get it: the scientific community, which has been

working on this for decades. It's important to note that Pope Francis recognizes there are points subject to debate; he simply wants the debate to be honest.

10. What ever happened to natural law? It has always been at the center of the Church's moral teaching, but the Pope does not see to use it in LS. Is this a theological shift? Is he turning his back on Pope Benedict, who at the Bundestag used natural law in talking about the environment?

What we see in LS is not a theological shift but an attempt to find new language for a broader audience. In this case, even those who don't have an ethos based on natural law can see that taking care of the environment for future generations is the right thing to do.

11. No. 24 claims technology and finance pretend to be the only solution to our problems. But technology and finance have brought a lot of people out of poverty, and made the economy grow. Does LS want to take us backwards?

Technology and finance have helped some people a lot more than others. LS is not about moving backwards at all. It's about moving forward in a way that respects human dignity, doing everything possible to reduce the numbers of those who keep on being excluded from decent jobs, decent housing and decent healthcare. It's also about moving forward in a way that respects the planet.

12. The Bolivian Bishops (n. 48) claim that environmental problems hit the poor the hardest. Others counter by saying that environmental controls will hurt the poor more. Why should one take the word of the Bolivian bishops?

The Bolivian Bishops are echoing the protests of so many poor people from around the globe who are hungry because they can't grow enough food for their family. Just listen to those who are risking their lives to cross the Mediterranean from North Africa, or the Rio Grande into the United States, because it's their only hope.

13. With all due respect, is the Pope living on another planet? Does he really believe what he writes in N. 52, that wealthier should help contribute to solve the energy problems of poorer countries?

Pope Francis is the first to admit that solidarity is not a popular word. But without solidarity, while some places may get richer, we won't be going anywhere as a global community. The poorer nations will develop when wealthier nations give them a hand, and energy is a part of that.

14. N. 55 is a kind of condemnation of air conditioning. We know a lot of Europeans don't like it, but is it really that bad?

Just as many of us waste water, consuming a lot more of it than we really need, many countries waste energy with excessive airconditioning. When the Pope talks about a more sober lifestyle, it's an

invitation to see what each one can learn to live without.

15. Does LS promote wealth re-distribution? N. 193 seems to suggest that.

LS promotes solidarity among people and nations. Pope Francis has no magic formula for how the wealth should be shared, but he certainly is calling on those who have more than they can eat to open their minds and their hearts, and to share with those who don't have enough.

16. Buying and selling and trading have been going on forever. It also keeps people working. Is consumerism really as bad as LS depicts it (n. 124, for example)?

We all have to consume, to eat healthy foods, and to drink clean water. What we don't need is to foment an insatiable desire for more; creating needs that aren't really nece

*Loren Wilkinson*