



## *Laudato si'*: a Seismic Event in Dialogue between the Catholic Church and Ecology

Damian Howard SJ

*Laudato si'* has been billed by many as Pope Francis' intervention in the climate change debate, but it is so much more than that, says Damian Howard SJ. In this detailed analysis of the Pope's first encyclical, he sets the text in its cultural and political context, and asks how it fits into the tradition of Catholic Social Teaching. How does this 'exciting new synthesis' of Catholic theology and the ecological movement have the potential to change our civilisation?

Pope Francis' long-awaited encyclical on ecology is finally published today. The title *Laudato si'* means 'may you be praised', the opening words of a canticle written by the Holy Father's namesake and inspiration, St Francis of Assisi.<sup>1</sup> The document represents the latest authoritative contribution to Catholic Social Teaching and the first encyclical written by Pope Francis alone.<sup>2</sup> At nearly 250 paragraphs, it is a huge text; Pope Benedict's first encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* weighed in at a modest 42. It is available in a number of European languages of which we can assume that the Pope's native Spanish is the original.

In this encyclical, we see two great bodies of thought jolt palpably in each other's direction like tectonic plates, changing the landscape and opening up new perspectives. It is an earthquake whose effects are entirely productive. On the one hand, it brings the prophetic urgency of the ecological movement to a Church that hitherto has been at odds with itself as to how to respond to huge and undeniable (but oft denied!) global challenges. On the other, it proffers the fresh spirituality and theological vision of Catholicism to a campaigning agenda which all too often has resorted to fear-mongering to advance its arguments. The dialogue between the two, which has clearly been going on for some time in the Pope's heart and prayer (even informing the selection of



'Francis' as his papal name) now holds out the promise of an exciting new synthesis which may just help to change our civilisation.

This encyclical's principal objective could be described as the articulation of an integral vision of ecology, building on Pope Benedict XVI's concept of a 'human ecology'. In other words, rather than think of our relationship with the natural environment as an issue separate from the other spheres of human interest and activity, it conceives of it as an integral part of a greater whole which includes the social, the cultural, the political, the spiritual etc. The encyclical contains inspiring spiritual exhortations and reflections. It also features extended passages which tackle general environmental issues, such as pollution, alongside more specific ones faced in particular countries and contexts. (It helps in these latter sections if one can read between the lines to identify what is being alluded to.) It has no concrete or technical solutions to offer. Its treasures are the theology and spirituality which it deploys to frame the environmental imperative and to motivate us to change, the way it challenges the implicit assumptions about reality that underlie and bolster harmful attitudes and behaviours, and its harsh critique of the current state of the global economy and its corrosive influence on many levels of life in what it calls our "common home".

The Pope's right to pronounce on these matters, supposed by some to be the preserve of scientists and politicians, has been the subject of a public challenge to his authority. *Laudato si'* does not hesitate to pick up that gauntlet. The ecological crisis our world is facing poses the question of the place of humanity – yes, humanity; the encyclical makes a clear effort to use inclusive language throughout, and not just in English – in the grand scheme of things. It is characteristic of the dominant culture of our day to be confused about what it means to be human. We are encouraged to assume we enjoy something like semi-divine status, our rights absolute, our freedom to believe, say and do what we want practically untrammelled. But at the same time, we are constantly reminded that we are mere animals, bundles of chemicals, genes and neurons who happen to suffer from the delusion that we are free and that our lives have meaning. You can see a parallel bafflement in much ecological thinking too. On the one hand, nature is good and beautiful and we humans are monsters for having caused the pollution of the environment, destroyed natural habitats and brought about the extinction of other species. Perhaps the world would be better off without us! On the other hand, are we not part of nature ourselves? And a rather special part at that, in that we can do scientific research and think and analyse and perhaps one day solve the problems we have caused in the first place. We are a puzzle to ourselves. By and large, we learn to get by with this alarming disjunction at the heart of our self-image. Meanwhile, it confuses, wounds and paralyses us.

This cognitive dissonance is what Pope Francis seeks to tackle, touching and healing our self-understanding at a deep level with the power of the Gospel and so helping us to approach the ecological crisis and life itself more positively. To do so, he strikes out on a robust middle path between the twin extremes of anthropocentrism and misanthropic nihilism. The encyclical certainly upholds human dignity, refusing to deny our human uniqueness or the special value of the human person. In that sense, it follows a long line of papal documents which have staunchly defended human life against the threats of totalitarianism, relativism and unfettered capitalism. But *Laudato si'* also relativises humankind in two ways: first by bluntly reminding us that 'we are not god', and second by affirming that our God-given 'dominion' over creation must be understood not as power to

dominate but as a special kind of responsibility. Doggedly affirming our special dignity whilst at the same time putting us in our place by restoring God to His is doubly countercultural. The extent to which this move persuades its more sceptical readers might well prove to be the eventual measure of the successful reception of the whole encyclical.

Anyone looking here for proof of an alleged gulf between Pope Francis and his predecessor, still living inside the Vatican, is in for a huge disappointment. The thesis that the Holy Father is taking themes from Benedict's papacy 'on tour' has never looked as convincing as it does in this document. Not only are references to Papa Ratzinger's encyclicals and addresses scattered profusely throughout, but the theological emphases are also recognisably his: ecology itself, the importance of beauty, the place of liturgy, the dangers of relativism and a warning about technology's impact on human hope, to name but a few. Above all, the entire encyclical is guided by the thought that to be a created being is to have received one's self, one's being as a gift and that this obliges us not only to offer gratitude but to accept ourselves for what we are and not to try and start over again, building a new identity at whim. When he was still Pope, Benedict got into trouble for drawing a parallel between the respect we owe, on the one hand, to our God-given sexual identity and, on the other, to the earth out of which we have been formed.<sup>3</sup> The alert reader of *Laudato si'* will find exactly the same thought proposed by Pope Francis; let's hope this time around it provokes serious thought rather than jeering incomprehension.

This is not to say there are no differences whatsoever between the two Popes. Benedict's compositional style is always meticulously constructed, the concepts perfectly aligned and co-ordinated; it helps to have a few degrees in theology under one's belt to read him properly. Francis is more pragmatic, his text rich in nuggets of wisdom, spiritual and practical, gleaned down the years. Benedict may always have been at pains to stress the importance of caring for the poor but Francis is unrelenting in illuminating almost every issue he treats with the light shed by the perspective of the excluded. And where Benedict seems most at ease speaking to the heart of the Church, Francis wants to be heard beyond her walls and has no hesitation in dialoguing with people who do not share his faith or his views. That he takes a

dialogical approach for granted is clear: not only does he at one stage quote a Muslim mystic and offer a prayer which Christians can recite with believers of other religions, but the whole encyclical can be read as a large-scale and complex exercise in dialogue between the Church and those who are committed to the pursuit of ecological justice.

What might non-Catholic ecologists take from the document? First of all they will conclude that Catholics in general, if they follow the lead of the Pope, ought henceforth to be natural allies of all those involved in the struggle to defend creation from attack and to respect nature. The Pope's reading of the mandate given to Adam to have dominion over creation stresses that this is not a matter of arbitrary power but of stewardship and care. This is non-negotiable and not subject to caveats invoked by proponents of sovereign market forces or by cultures which have learned habits of contempt for creation. In this line, the Holy Father also goes surprisingly far down the path of calling for more respect to be given to all living creatures. This typically Franciscan theme is likely, I would think, to stimulate new discussions about meat-eating and the acceptability of scientific experimentation on live animals. Behind this generous instinct are great voices of the Catholic tradition such as St Bonaventure and Pope Francis' fellow Jesuit, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, both of whom help the Pope articulate a truly cosmic spirituality which finds God present in all things. There is no doubt but that Catholics have their work cut out to take all this on board so as to live up to the expectations which others will now have of them. Pope Francis has unapologetically set the agenda for years to come.

But there is something further which we have to hope committed ecologists might come to appreciate. The encyclical sets characteristically ecological concerns within a much bigger and more integrated picture, pointing up connections which are not often highlighted. There is, naturally, the proposal of the "seamless garment" of respect for life in all its manifestations, a message that will be challenging for nature- and animal-lovers who also believe that human abortion and euthanasia are permissible. More likely to be immediately attractive to them is the Pope's penchant for linking respect for the environment to issues as wide-ranging as the value of human community, the need to beautify our cities and to treasure the stories lived

out in them, to reform the banking system, and to improve public transport systems. This integrated vision, so typical of Catholic thought, ought to be compelling in a world of fragmentation and specialisation.

Most importantly of all, Francis brings the Catholic tradition of spirituality to the fore, making two particularly strong points which are of relevance to believers and non-believers alike. The first is an anthropological one. Advanced globalised capitalism does bad things to us. It tries to turn us into machines. It warps our desires and conditions our consciousness. It generates a 'throw-away' culture of waste. It turns us into little tyrants, ever more domineering and isolated from true community. Right now, it is making us all run round in ever decreasing circles, working harder, relating less to each other and hardly ever thinking profoundly about our situation. Francis is not the first to point to any of these phenomena. But the way in which he calls on us all to break out of this most vicious of spirals is deeply attractive. He locates the root source of the ecological crisis not in the western philosophical or theological tradition, still less in the order of purely technical problems, but in a disorder of the human heart. And so he points to that practice which, more than any other, purifies and cleanses it and opens us up to mystery, truth and creativity: prayer. Francis would have us all learn to rest, to contemplate, to drink deep at the wellsprings of the Spirit who is present as an inextinguishable joy at the heart of creation. He asks Catholics to return to the practice of saying grace before meals, not as mere routine but as a means of cultivating a deep sensitivity to God's gifts. In short, if you want to resist the machine, a first radical gesture of defiance is to gaze on God's creation with the eyes of loving contemplation.

The second point is theological and can be read as a critique not so much of unbelief as of a certain tendency in modern Christianity. We will only be able to tackle the huge challenges which face us today, Francis says, if we trust that God is all-powerful. I think what he is eying here are kinds of Christianity which, having, for understandable reasons, lost sight of the reality of God's power, now revel in the thought that God is fundamentally weak. They amount to practical atheism masquerading as sophisticated belief. Now, it is, of course, essential for Christians to speak in some sense of God's weakness when it comes to elucidating the mystery of the Cross, as St Paul does in 1 Corin-

thians 1:25. But he deploys this language in a paradoxical way to say something about God's power. There are other modes of discourse which somehow deny it. It's what happens when we plunder 'religious and spiritual traditions' for 'resources' to solve our problems. It's what we get when we laud 'faith' rather than the God in whom we are supposed to place it. It's Christianity as a principled lifestyle choice instead of unbridled life and joy in the resurrection. (And if you are wondering if Pope Francis is getting at you, you are welcome to join the club!) Francis takes a dim view of these kinds of religiosity. For all that they sound intellectually respectable, they turn out to be insipid, like the God of which they conceive. If I live my Christian life not out of faith in the Risen Lord but simply as a well-argued existential option, I am effectively ruling out a relationship with the omnipotent Creator God, the one who, according to Gerard Manley Hopkins, "hews mountain and continent,/ Earth, all, out"<sup>4</sup> and who alone has the power to get us out of the environmental catastrophe we are gradually entering. Everybody admits that we are almost hopelessly unlikely to get our communal act together to sort out climate change. Pope Francis says that we are not without hope if the living Creator God is on our side.

What are the implications of the encyclical for Catholic Social Teaching (CST)? A great many pages will be written on that subject (or perhaps, to be more ecologically coherent, a great number of words will be typed). But some first thoughts. In one sense, little changes in its characteristic way of proceeding because all the main ideas which have dominated CST hitherto appear more or less on cue in *Laudato si'*: the common good, human dignity, the autonomy of earthly affairs, subsidiarity, natural law, justice, virtue *et al.* But in this encyclical, CST has also just become rather more complex. Pope Francis struggles to name all the connections between the different spheres of life and human activity which are in play in any given situation. The more difficult parts of the encyclical to read are those in which the main objective is to show that every created thing is connected to every other created thing, whether it is a matter of animals and human beings, economics and culture, politics and religion... That most brilliant and underused of modern Catholic reference works, the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, may well need redrafting rather than just paragraphs added to it if it is to catalogue all these interconnections at work in social reality.

I think it is fair to predict that one of the positive fruits of this complexity is that more Catholics will come to realise that their passions and professions are, in fact, directed towards the 'social mission' of the Church. Until now it has been relatively easy for, say, politicians, social workers and people working with refugees to see themselves as promoting the common good in some way or other. The palette which Francis uses to paint his picture contains all sorts of other shades and hues. You might be a campaigner for more humane forms of farming. Perhaps you are working to restore a part of the city which has fallen into dereliction. Or you took part in the wave of Occupy protests against a corrupt banking system. The curator of a museum and the designer of a new public transportation system and many others besides, all now have reason to see what they are doing with their lives as intrinsically linked to their Catholic faith. It's up to them, of course, to discover that link for themselves and to draw it into their prayer, but it is now on the map and pastors will need to reflect seriously on how to communicate this in their preaching and catechesis and on the establishment of new structures to support people and encourage their apostolic reflection.

Linked to this is the particular way in which Pope Francis thinks and writes. His images and metaphors repeatedly draw us away from the abstract to the concrete. He is constantly trying to put us in touch with our own experience. He does so not merely to encourage trust in his analysis or ideas, rather, this is the Holy Father at his most Ignatian, giving his readers a spiritual exercise rather than a lecture. It is linked to something he has been saying for years: "realities are more important than ideas".<sup>5</sup> It is exposure to reality that can change us; ideas are useful in many settings but generally have an altogether more ephemeral presence to our lives. Take the almost overwhelming litany of environmental woes which forms the first main section of *Laudato si'*. It is not an enjoyable read and it certainly doesn't give us much for the speculative mind to chew on. But Pope Francis has a reason for including it. He tells us that we need to see what is happening with our own eyes and to be affected by it. It is when we look without seeking escape in frivolous distraction that the reality we are gazing at sinks in and is converted into our own personal suffering. Only then does it engender change in us. The idea enshrined in this encyclical is that CST has to go hand in hand with a method for

imparting a spirituality, a transformative pedagogy which can enable the faithful to live out the social implications of their faith, connecting their social responsibility to their prayer life. This is a major task of post-conciliar Catholicism which we now see being taken up at the highest level in the Church. That is a breakthrough for all those who have sensed a call to be contemplatives in social action but haven't quite known how to go about it.

One last thought. CST has been criticised by those of a radical bent for being hard wired for conservatism. It is certainly true that it is not anarchistic, nor does it analyse society in terms of class struggle. Still less does it look forward with hope to the revolution. But Francis manages here to imbue it with a spirit of protest and resistance which will enthuse many just as it disturbs some, and I have no doubt that that is his intention. When it comes to his socio-economic analysis, to say that there are no holds barred is an understatement. Never one for mealy-mouthed platitudes or safely vague denunciations, Francis is positively excoriating about the motivation of climate-change deniers, about the profit-driven special interests which, directly and indirectly, wreak havoc with creation, and with those who delude themselves with a green consumerism which only serves to salve their consciences. The price he will have to pay for these harsh words in terms of ridicule and derision will be high indeed in those quarters that feel particularly targeted; doubtless this will be a feature of his impending trip to the United States, to take just one important example.

At the very least he will have confirmed his reputation in certain (under-informed) circles as a communist sympathiser. He is no such thing, of course, and such accusations will be like water off a duck's back. What he is, however, is someone who knows (because he has been there to see it) that God regenerates the

world not from great centres of power and wealth, with good things trickling down to the poor, but rather by agitating at the margins and peripheries, gently fomenting new cultures and attitudes which, because God is behind them, can confound the destructive power of the global machine. This is the logic of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, celebrated in the Eucharist and animated by a spirituality, like that of St Thérèse of Lisieux, which finds God in the little things. It also happens to be the hope of the Church. In this encyclical, Papa Bergoglio suggests that it ought to be a hope for the entire world.

*Damian Howard SJ is a lecturer at Heythrop College, University of London and a member of the editorial board of Thinking Faith.*

---

<sup>1</sup> For those who have noticed a curious inconsistency in the spelling of this Italian phrase, *si'* is a more colloquial version of the more grammatically correct *sii* in the Umbrian dialect of the thirteenth century spoken by St Francis. The best-known version in English of his hymn is 'All Creatures of Our God and King', a paraphrase of the canticle by William H. Draper (1855–1933).

<sup>2</sup> He did sign an encyclical called *Lumen Fidei* on 29 June 2013 but it was known and stated to be principally the work of Pope Benedict XVI. Available online at [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130629\\_enciclica-lumen-fidei.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20130629_enciclica-lumen-fidei.html)

<sup>3</sup> Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the members of the Roman Curia for the traditional exchange of Christmas greetings, Clementine Hall, Monday, 22 December 2008. Available online at [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/december/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20081222\\_curia-romana.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/december/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20081222_curia-romana.html)

<sup>4</sup> In a poem called 'St. Alphonsus Rodriguez'.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Evangelii Gaudium* 231-3.