



# Caring for our common home, in *this* world and with *this* climate

Cardinal Michael Czerny SJ

Returning to Gonzaga University in Washington, Cardinal Michael Czerny SJ spoke to students and staff about how study of and action on climate issues have developed in the 55 years since he graduated from the university. He explains how Pope Francis' encyclicals set out a vision which calls us all to action to care for our common home – how can universities answer this call?

## I. Background

In 1966-1968, when I was an undergraduate at Gonzaga University in Washington, what did the world look like? I don't remember words like 'ecology' and 'environment'. Three Mile Island, the nuclear disaster in Pennsylvania, was still more than ten years in the future.

Instead, 'Vietnam' was the key word. I guess because Boeing was located just across the Rockies from the university, we'd occasionally see a B-52 flying overhead on a trial run before being commissioned for service overseas. We also began hearing about napalm, a lethal mixture of gas or diesel with a sticky gel. One such firebomb could destroy 2,500 square yards of terrain; about a million tonnes were dropped on Vietnam each year between 1965 and 1973. The terrible logic was 'drain the pond to catch the fish'. With the Viet Cong proving hard to eliminate, napalm was all about making their habitat uninhabitable. So, without our knowing it, napalm was an early and terrible lesson in the interconnectedness of human and environmental destruction.



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Digging even deeper in my memory, I manage to find more than one prophetic hint that allows me to say: 'When I was an undergraduate at Gonzaga University over five decades ago, we had this intimation of the ecological revolution that was to come.' I remember that, in his wonderful courses on European Literature, Professor Kornel Skovajsa

taught us about the Romantic poets expressing great emotive sympathy or fellow-feeling with nature, and I now see how important such empathy is for us in so-called advanced cultures if we are to get beyond a flat, cold, 'objective' view and recover the awe for creation that indigenous people have. I guess it may be odd to read about environmental learning in literature rather than in science classes. Now it's quite clear that the emotional or sentimental bonds that connect us with our fellow creatures are an important access to reality, and an important motivator for taking necessary action. Pope Francis invites us to follow in St Francis of Assisi's footsteps by immersing ourselves in 'wonder and awe' of nature, which makes us feel 'united with all that exists'.

In contrast with the *Sturm und Drang* of the Romantics, with their agitation and yearning, who perceived in the irrational manifestations of nature a vaguely divine character, St Francis celebrates the beauty of nature as ‘a work of the Lord, a wonder in our eyes’. Thus nature is an expression of the love of a personal God who, reflecting his providence, brought the entire universe into being, other than himself.

Hobbes was also on the menu. From him we learned the Latin proverb, ‘*Homo homini lupus est*’, which could be rendered: ‘Man is a wolf to humanity’. Nowadays we rightly protest that the saying is insulting to wolves, who don’t even come close to the destructive capacity of the human leaders whom Hobbes compares with them. It reminds me of my father who always spoke not of humankind, but of human-very-unkind.

1968 turns out to have been a turning point in both the first and second worlds, but when you’re in the midst of such a seismic shift, you don’t even realise it’s going on. In 2023, 55 years later, where are we?

Let’s paint the world as it is now: frightening news of climate-related disasters – wildfires, hurricanes, floods and droughts, record summer highs and warmer winters with terrible cold snaps – comes at us almost daily and from almost everywhere in the world. Millions of families are fleeing, their homes and livelihoods destroyed ‘by climate’, and these people are often but not always in resource-poor places without the means to bounce back.

Since 1966-68, the world seems to have become a lot smaller, more fragmented and yet more interconnected. What happens in one small corner of the world instantly gets transmitted via the internet or social media. Many, many voices are demanding attention. It’s very noisy.

If I was speaking after the Earth Summit of 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, or even after the Summit on Sustainable Development of 2002 in Johannesburg, both of which I was involved in, I would have tried to share what these two landmark conferences had taught us, and to persuade you that what I was talking about – the environment – was really important and urgent. With luck, I would have persuaded about 20% of my listeners. For the other 80%, it would have been too much of a stretch to agree that we humans need to pay attention to the natural environment and our fellow creatures.

Another twenty years have passed, and today everyone knows. The problem now isn’t ignorance, so I won’t say more to convince you. You are already convinced. The real problem, instead, is indifference and despair.

## II. What to read?

The reading list is Francis’ encyclicals: *Laudato si’* and *Fratelli tutti*. Let us enter into an in-depth reading of these letters to the world, so that, instead of saying, ‘Yeah, I heard about them’, you can proudly say: ‘They’re my way – and what about you?’

Pope Francis sets the stage by addressing these encyclicals to everyone, not just to the Catholic world as was traditional, but to ‘every person living on this planet’ in order ‘to enter into dialogue with all people about our common home’ (*Laudato si’* [LS] §4). He invites everyone in the world to dialogue (cf. *Fratelli tutti* [FT] §6).

*Laudato si’* begins with a full immersion into reality. The first chapter, entitled with the question, ‘What is Happening to Our Common Home?’, presents the physical and moral state of the world. Pope Francis alerts us to the fact that our common home is crumbling around us. For evidence, we have the multiple manifest-

ations of the ecological crisis: the climate emergency, unprecedented loss of biodiversity, pollution, depletion of natural resources, *etc.* These ‘several aspects of the present ecological crisis’ (LS §15) are what the Holy Father calls ‘cracks in the planet that we inhabit’ (LS §163). It is a long list and certainly an alarming one.

It’s not just the earth that is crying out. Millions of our siblings are crying out, too. Moreover, those siblings who have contributed the least to causing the crisis in the first place, are usually its early and disproportionate victims. So, far from just a ‘green’ document, *Laudato si’* is actually a full-blown social encyclical. As an attentive reader pointed out, ‘climate’ is mentioned just fourteen times in *Laudato si’*, while ‘the poor’ 59 times.<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis affirms that

we have to realise 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 – italics in the original)

How did we get to this? Pope Francis offers a clue in the third chapter, entitled ‘The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis’. I think it is the most difficult chapter of *Laudato si’*, for what it describes is horrible. It’s important to shed light on the accusations it makes and the questions it raises. There’s no responding to the ecological crisis unless we willingly dig deeper and unearth the underlying root causes. For ‘it would hardly be helpful to describe the symptoms without acknowledging the human origins of the ecological crisis’ (LS §111), otherwise there will be no coming out of such a complex crisis (LS §63). All the elements, however, have a common source: they ultimately stem from a mind-set, a worldview, a flat way of perceiving the natural world and relating with it. ‘A certain way of understanding human life and activity has gone awry to the serious detriment of the world around us’, and Pope Francis invites us to ‘focus on the dominant technocratic

paradigm and the place of human beings and of human action in the world.’ (LS §101)

The technocratic paradigm ends up determining ‘the kind of society we want to build’ (LS §107). Pope Francis draws inspiration from the twentieth century theologian Romano Guardini: ‘The technological paradigm has become so dominant that it would be difficult to do without its resources and even more difficult to utilize them without being dominated by their internal logic’ (LS §108).

What is this internal logic? What are the ‘deepest roots’ of the dominant technocratic paradigm which subjects our mode of living and operating in the world to its ‘ironclad logic’ (LS §108)? Three pillars prop up the conceptual paradigm of modernity: we are totally in charge (anthropocentrism), all the rest is just engineering (mechanics), and my ‘me’ is at war with all my siblings and with nature.

This paradigm exalts the concept of a subject who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object... Men and women have constantly intervened in nature, but for a long time this meant being in tune with and respecting the possibilities offered by the things themselves. It was a matter of receiving what nature itself allowed, as if from its own hand. Now, by contrast, we are the ones to lay our hands on things, attempting to extract everything possible from them while frequently ignoring or forgetting the reality in front of us. Human beings and material objects no longer extend a friendly hand to one another; the relationship has become confrontational. (LS §106)

Modernity’s dominant technocratic and economic paradigm pits us against the natural world and against one another. The economy and polity and, to a large extent, the educational system’s curricula and programmes, all operate within the technocratic paradigm. We are part

and parcel of the problem! Our most prestigious centres of higher education continue to breed engineers and entrepreneurs, lawyers and managers, who measure success narrowly in terms of economic output and profit margins alone, at the cost of human and planetary well-being, even though it means depleting life-sustaining resources and destroying our common ecosystems.<sup>2</sup>

But since according to Einstein, 'we cannot solve a problem with the same mentality that created it in the first place', a very new mindset is needed.<sup>3</sup>

'We are all connected' Pope Francis repeats throughout *Laudato si'* and, in a complementary sense, throughout *Fratelli tutti*. We are interconnected with the created world, with all our other siblings in the human family, and with those waiting to come after us. The self-sufficient isolation of the [Marlboro Man](#) is a very false myth. We exist only within a web of relationships. 'Human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself' (LS §66). 'Everything is related, and we human beings are united as [siblings] on a wonderful pilgrimage, unfolding in the love God has for each of his creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth' (LS §92).

*Laudato si'* is about *what* needs doing. Now *Fratelli tutti*, the second text from Pope Francis that I bring to your attention, is about *who's* to do it.

The encyclical is on 'fraternity and social friendship'. Our interrelated and interdependent human existence is its core message. If *Laudato si'* reminds us that the earth is our common home and shared inheritance, *Fratelli tutti* emphasises that we are all created siblings, members of a single family.

'Am I my sibling's keeper?' (cf. Gn 4:10) To disown this responsibility is to walk with Cain, a choice which can only lead to fratricide and ecocide, as we are seeing around us.

On the contrary, two key messages of *Fratelli tutti* are the call to solidarity and the invitation to dialogue.

The second chapter is the most touching, dedicated to 'to a parable told by Jesus Christ two thousand years ago' (FT §56). Listen to it as if for the first time.

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher', he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.' And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.' But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbour?' Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to

him, 'Go and do likewise.' (Lk 10:25-37 quoted in *FT* §56).

Did you notice that Jesus the narrator, the mugged fellow, the two clerics passing-by, and the innkeeper are all Jewish? The other passer-by could also have been Jewish without ruining the story— except that Jesus had a hugely important extra point to make about tribe.<sup>4</sup> 'Neighbours without borders' could be a contemporary summary of it (cf. *FT* §§80-83). Today,

- My neighbours include indigenous people driven out of their homelands in the Amazon, as vast swathes of tropical forests are slashed down for mining or for agrobusiness.
- My neighbours include communities displaced on Pacific islands like Tuvalu or Kiribati by rising sea levels, with encroaching waters destroying homes and livelihoods.
- My neighbours include helpless migrants from sub-Saharan Africa where year-long droughts lead to hunger and malnutrition and desperate people undertake perilous journeys across the Mediterranean, or the English Channel.
- My neighbours include families trying to cross the Mexican border to get into the USA, as living conditions deteriorate in their homelands increasingly affected by floods, hurricanes and lawlessness.
- My neighbours might live close by but I don't associate with them because of their political allegiance or skin colour.

My neighbours are from other tribes.

Jesus wants us to notice that being like me in origin, race, language, religion, orientation, political affiliation are all irrelevant when answering the question, 'Who is my neighbour? Who is my sibling?' Genuine humanity – or call it *love* if you like – does not care if a neighbour

or sibling (it's the same!) comes from here or some other place. For 'love shatters the chains that keep us isolated and separate; in their place, it builds bridges. Love enables us to [embrace] one great family where all of us can feel at home...'<sup>5</sup> and care for our common home.

Unless we get beyond tribalism, we won't be able to offer our poor, beaten-up, half-dead world the first aid it needs more and more each day. The alternative – to deny the science, to ignore the cry of the poor, to blame the system, to blame the victims – is to fall into despair.

The complaint that 'everything is broken' is answered by the claim that 'it can't be fixed', or 'what can I do?' This feeds into disillusionment and despair, and hardly encourages a spirit of solidarity and generosity. Plunging people into despair closes a perfectly perverse circle: such is the agenda of the invisible dictatorship of hidden interests that have gained mastery over both resources and the possibility of thinking and expressing opinions. (*FT* §75)

An effective antidote to indifference and despair is to invest our time, talents and energy in compassion, solidarity, charity and the preferential option for the poor. These are the best ways of seeking the common good, actively restoring us as siblings, and rebuilding our common home. Solidarity is both intragenerational (among everyone on the planet at the same time) and intergenerational (between current and future generations).

It is also a question of eco-justice, namely, a concern for the poor and vulnerable members of our common household right now, 'whose life on this earth is brief and who cannot keep on waiting' (*LS* §162). Eco-justice demands that the right to development of the poor, and the alleviation of poverty, be placed at the heart of an intelligent and moral response to the crisis of our common home. We need to hear more about eco-justice in our universities.

Solidarity is also intergenerational. According to Pope Francis, ‘our inability to think seriously about future generations is linked to our inability to broaden the scope of our present interests and to give consideration to those who remain excluded from development’ (LS §162). ‘The environment is part of a logic of receptivity. It is on loan to each generation, which must then hand it on to the next’ (LS §159).

If *Laudato si’* speaks of what the situation of our common home is and our shared responsibility towards it, the parable of the Good Samaritan ‘eloquently presents the basic decision we need to make in order to rebuild our wounded world’ (FT §67). The path that Pope Francis indicates is called ‘dialogue’. This is something absolutely vital in a university, especially in a country like the United States where both society and the Church have become so polarised.

Dialogue is needed between disciplines. It is too easy to fall into the temptation of excessive or even exclusive focus on one type of education or expertise. Let me mention a new publication called ‘Our Common Home’, jointly produced by the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development and the prestigious Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI). Intense and fruitful dialogue took place between two usually counter-posed sectors: science and faith. At the launch of the joint publication, I described the

...process during which we sought to listen and learn from one another, and engaged in an open and empathetic dialogue about how to respond to the crises that we face in common. While starting from complementary worldviews, what we hold in common is what matters – science and faith share core values and purpose capable of healing the world, but neither in isolation. Principles of inter-connection and co-responsibility frame our climate as a common good, and the planet as our common home. The call to protect, care, and regenerate creation must be a priority for everyone, regardless of

one’s belonging to this or that religion or none at all.<sup>6</sup>

In a polarised world where we continue to erect walls, both real and ideological, dialogue is explicitly the vocation of a faith-based university in the Jesuit tradition. Critical thinking and dialogue between disciplines in the light of *Laudato si’* and *Fratelli tutti*: let these become essential elements of every Catholic university.

### III. What to do?

Now for part three. Francis’ two great encyclicals are not meant for our library shelves. We need to convert them into action. Let me lay out some things to do.

Facing the environmental horrors that humans have managed to produce since the Industrial Revolution, it is not surprising to see the young indifferent, or hear them cry out, ‘Where is God in all this?’ The bitter accusation is understandable, but blaming God is not helpful. A better approach is to re-ask the question as: ‘Where am I, where are we in all this?’ In many situations, the best antidote for despair is action!

Earlier I spoke of how my classmates and I experienced the Vietnam War and the upheaval of 1968. Pouring into the streets, we protested the war and other social evils. A significant fruit of such activism was Earth Day. First celebrated in 1970, it brought an estimated 20 million people together at educational and community sites across the United States. Among the driving forces behind those epochal events, I remember, were mainly universities, the famous 1968 generation of young people!

Fast forward to September 2019: climate protests took place in 4,500 locations in 150 countries across the world. This time around, the movement was led, not by university students or faculty, but by schoolchildren and teenagers. Where were the universities? I leave you to ponder the question... But let’s agree that

the current planetary emergency is too serious to leave to kids. Universities need once again to become hotbeds of critical thinking and incubators of radical action. Can *Laudato si'* and *Fratelli tutti* convince you to rethink what a university should be all about?

In fact, some enthusiastic responses to *Laudato si'* did come from universities, and Catholic ones in particular. One of the earliest was the 'Statement of Leaders in Catholic Higher Education Globally', signed by leaders in Catholic higher education, including nearly a hundred university presidents from the United States alone. Less admirable is the fact that between 1200 and 1500 worldwide have not yet signed!

The statement welcomes the encyclical as 'timely, comprehensive, and inspiring' and embraces its 'urgent call to action to address the climate and justice crises threatening the planet'. Here are some key passages:

Higher educational institutions globally must seek to provide influential leadership in discovering new and lifegiving paths to address the pressing emergencies of climate change, social exclusion, and extreme poverty and in uncovering new paths to achieving peace, justice and environmental sustainability for the whole human family and the entire family of creation. . . .

We commit ourselves as leaders in Catholic Higher Education to work together regionally and globally, through all the means available to and appropriate for our colleges and universities as institutions of higher learning, to study, promote, and act on the ideals and vision of integral ecology laid out by Pope Francis.

More specifically, we commit ourselves as leaders in Catholic Higher Education globally to integrate care for the planet, integral human development, and concern for the poor within our research projects, our educational curricula and public programming, our institutional infrastructures,

policies and practices, and our political and social involvements as colleges and universities.<sup>7</sup>

This is indeed a concrete, visionary, and courageous response to Pope Francis' invitation to undergo an 'ecological conversion', to live in better harmony with God, with one another, and with all of God's creation. As Pope Francis tells us, 'a great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge stands before us, and it will demand that we set out on the long path of renewal' (LS §202).

The Church seeks to inspire concrete and participatory action in the fight against the climate breakdown at local and global levels. One way of turning the encyclicals and the university statement into action, is the ambitious '*Laudato si'* Action Platform' [LSAP] that Pope Francis launched in May 2021 on the fifth anniversary of the encyclical.<sup>8</sup>

LSAP is encompassing in scope and ambitious in planning and proposing. Its purpose is to assist everyone to contribute in different practical ways to integral ecology.<sup>9</sup> Sectors such as the following can get involved: individuals and families; parishes and dioceses; health care; agriculture, business, labour; groups and organisations; religious orders (communities, provinces, orders, etc.); and of course, universities and schools.

The multi-year LSAP is organised not idealistically but strategically, in terms of goals such as these: the *Response to the Cry of the Earth*; the *Response to the Cry of the Poor*; *Ecological Economics*; the *Adoption of Sustainable Lifestyles*; *Ecological Education*; *Ecological Spirituality*; and *Community Resilience and Empowerment*. With some resemblance to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, they provide a framework within which: '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).

The ever-growing LSAP already counts well over a thousand educational institutions. Membership means aligning a university's mission, vision and guiding principles with the values promoted by *Laudato si'*, and belonging to a worldwide community of committed action. Members are expected to complete the *Laudato si'* reflection which, each year, asks:

How do the university operations/mission already reflect and connect with the vision of *Laudato si'* and *Fratelli tutti*?

How does integral ecology and our all being siblings help to understand the university's purpose?

In what ways can the university foster spiritual/ecological conversion for its faculty, its staff and its students as siblings?

What are ways the university can impact the surrounding local community?

The university is encouraged to complete a baseline assessment of sustainability practices, including the generation of energy and the use of water. The university is also expected to develop curriculum to include integral ecology as practised by siblings in its courses, community service, cultural and spiritual formation.

Dr Thayne McCulloh, President of Gonzaga University, believes that its students, 'are called to live, learn and explore, not comfortably at the centre of the culture, but at the frontiers – the cutting edge, the margins, the places that require courage.'

I would add that, for students and staff to participate actively in the LSAP is an opportunity to practise the most important chapter, number 5, of *Laudato si'* on **dialogue**, and the most important chapter, also number 5, of *Fratelli tutti* on a better kind of **politics**. Dialogue is mentioned 75 times in the two

encyclicals, and politics 150 times. These two patient approaches to the common good are the *only*, **only** and I mean *only* way out.

The LSAP marshals the power of walking and working together. The precarious state of our common home calls for unified responses at all levels – local, regional, national and international. The action platform highlights partnerships at various levels and seeks to generate 'a people's movement' – an alliance across churches, faith communities, educational institutions, NGOs and governments – to care for our common home.

For an important lesson hopefully learned from the Covid-19 pandemic is that: 'No one can be saved alone'. Combatting Covid-19 together – and combatting climate change together, one could add – requires embarking together on paths of peace.<sup>10</sup>

Developing bonds of cooperation and embracing the weakest amongst us are sustainable responses to today's challenges and tomorrow's. This couldn't be truer regarding the climate crisis and care for our common home. In conclusion, I say with Pope Francis: '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).

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*This article is based on a speech delivered on 9 March 2023 at Gonzaga University, hosted by the Gonzaga Center for Climate, Society, and the Environment, the Gonzaga Jesuit Community, and the Gonzaga Office of Mission Integration.*

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<sup>1</sup> Mike Hulme, 'Finding the Message of the Pope's Encyclical', *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development* 57/6 (2015), 17.

<sup>2</sup> David Orr, a distinguished educator and environmentalist, pointed out that the ecological crisis is caused mainly by society's literate and best educated people – people who hold a BA, BSc, LLB, MBA and PhD. Cf. *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment and the Human Prospect* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1994), p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Instead of inventing a new mindset, maybe we need to recover an older one. Canada is undergoing a huge awakening about the injustices of newcomer society towards the indigenous peoples. If speaking there, I would highlight the high degree of similarity between what the pope urges in *Laudato si'* and the traditional practical and spiritual relationship of indigenous people to nature. One could summarise, 'We are all one, humans and all other forms of life. All use; none should abuse.' However, although

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Pope Francis acknowledges this perspective in *Laudato si'* and via the Amazon Synod of 2019, it is not the framework that he adopts in the two encyclicals.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Czerny, *Why Samaritans?*, 4 May 2020 <https://ignation.ca/2020/05/04/why-samaritans/>

<sup>5</sup> FT §62 quoting Pope Francis, *Address to Those assisted by the Charitable Works of the Church*, Tallinn, Estonia, 25 September 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Czerny, 'Pre-Launch of the Resource *Our Common Home: A guide to caring for our living planet*', Joint Initiative of the Holy See and the Stockholm Environment Institute, 4 February 2023.

<sup>7</sup> 'Laudato si': On Care for Our Common Home': Statement of Leaders in Catholic Higher Education Globally. <http://ignatiansolidarity.net/catholic-higher-ed-encyclical-sign-on/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://laudatosiactionplatform.org/>

<sup>9</sup> Pope Francis, Message launching *Laudato si'* Action Platform, Press Conference, 25 May 2021.

<sup>10</sup> This is based on the title and subtitle of Pope Francis' Message for the World Day of Peace 2023.