



## On Care for Our Common Home – Laudato Si'

(A selective short summary)

### A. The Spiritual and Ethical Dimension

In the Judeo Christian tradition, the word “creation” has a broader meaning than “nature” for it has to do with **God’s loving plan** in which every creature has its own value and significance. “Our common home is **like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us** (1). “**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:** (2) “Today however we have to realize that a true ecological approach....must integrate questions of justice....so as to **hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor**” (49). The problem is that we still lack the culture to confront this crisis (53).

An Integral Ecology. Referring to St. Francis of Assisi, the Pope says, “**He shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace. (Par. 10)** “Francis helps us to see that an integral ecology calls for openness to categories which transcend the language of mathematics and biology and take us to **the heart of what it is to be human,**” (11). To him **each and every creature was a sister united to him by bonds of affection.** If we approach nature....without this openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the **language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship** with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless, exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs. By contrast if we feel intimately united with all that exists, then sobriety and care will well up spontaneously” (11).

The Encyclical contains an ethical and spiritual itinerary which acknowledges:

- The value proper to each creature, (16)
- The conviction that everything in the world is connected, (16)
- The intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet (16)
- The throwaway culture and the need for a new lifestyle, (16)
- The call to seek other ways of understanding the economy and progress. (16)

Like St. Francis, Pope Francis anthropomorphizes the earth to help us feel sympathy for her. While it makes a strong connection between global sustainability and care for the poor, the encyclical also recognizes the intrinsic worth of each element of creation.

Francis emphasizes the need for dialogue with all religions. He also affirms that it is an article of faith that Christians “**have a responsibility to nature akin to their responsibility to God,**” quoting John Paul

II's Message for World Day of Peace (1990, p. 156). The central question is how will each of us carry out that responsibility?

## **B. An Immense and Urgent Challenge**

Francis states that "It is my hope that this Encyclical... can help us acknowledge the **appeal, immensity and urgency** of the challenge we face" (15). The challenge includes, inadequate access by millions to clean water; pollution; the loss of biodiversity (the enormous and rapidly accelerating extinction of species), and global inequality.

This discussion however focuses on climate change. Since 1750 global temperatures have increased .9 Celsius and the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> already in the atmosphere will cause an additional increase of .6 Celsius, meaning that a 1.5 degrees Celsius increase over pre-industrial levels is inevitable. Although the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) sets a goal of limiting the increase to 2 degree C to avoid the worst impacts, Catholic bishops and other parts of the movement now advocate for limiting the increase to "1.5 to Stay Alive." What all this means is climate change is a matter of the utmost urgency.

## **C. Acknowledges the Scientific Consensus and Need for Action**

Francis states that "A very solid scientific *consensus* indicates that we are presently witnessing a disturbing warming of the climatic system... **Humanity is called to recognize the need for changes of lifestyle, production and consumption**, in order to combat this warming..." "Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a pretext for postponing cost-effective measures which prevent environmental degradation" (186).

"Climate change is a global problem with **grave implications**...its worst impact will probably be felt by developing countries...Many of the poor live in areas particularly affected...and their means of subsistence are...dependent on natural reserves such as agriculture, fishing and forestry" (25).

## **D. Call for Action – The Future of Fossil Fuels**

The pope acknowledges that "... self-improvement on the part of individuals will not by itself remedy the extremely complex situation facing our world today.... The ecological conversion needed to bring about lasting change is also a community conversion" (219). "Enforceable international agreements are urgently needed, since local authorities are not always capable of effective intervention" (173). While the Paris accords are a major step forward, we know that the 'Independently Determined National Goals' (INDBs) are not enforceable and the collective commitments of the current INDBs will not limit temperature increase to 2 Degrees C. The work being done in states, communities and communities of faith is absolutely essential.

The Encyclical says: "We know that technology based on the use of highly polluting fossil fuels....needs to be progressively replaced without delay." (165). As part of a strong critique of both multi-national capitalism and 21<sup>st</sup> century consumerism, Francis criticizes cap-and-trade programs. He speaks

favorably about pricing carbon by capturing the social costs of carbon dioxide; and of consumer boycott movements, but stops short of calling on the Catholic Church or its members to divest from fossil fuels.

According to the International Monetary Fund global oil companies receive massive subsidies estimated at \$5.3 trillion, more than all the world's economies spend on health care. Sean McDonagh, SSD, an Irish Columban priest who was a consultant to the Pope on the encyclical recently completed a speaking tour of the US promoting his commentary on Laudato Si'. (See recommended reading below). He believes that the Catholic Church should join with the Anglican Church and the World Council of Churches and divest from fossil fuel companies.

**On Care for Our Common Home**, is a beautifully evocative, exhaustively researched articulation of why we need to work together to take bold action to care for creation. It is now time for faiths, denominations, congregations and all people to engage in the dialogue, education and action that creation needs!

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#### **FOR FURTHER READING:**

##### **On Care For Our Common Home – Laudato Si'**

[http://www.mipandl.org/faith\\_resources/Laudato\\_Si'.pdf](http://www.mipandl.org/faith_resources/Laudato_Si'.pdf)

McDonagh, Sean. **On Care for Our Common Home, Laudato Si' – The Encyclical of Pope Francis on the Environment, with commentary by Sean McDonagh**, (New York: Orbis, 2016).

Delio, Warner, and Wood. **Care for Creation (a Franciscan spirituality of the earth)**, 2008. Has reflective action and guided prayer experiences.

Rasmussen, Larry, L. **Earth-Honoring Faith; Religious Ethics in a New Key**, (New York: Oxford, 2013).

**Massachusetts Interfaith Power and Light** and our 235 faith community members stand ready to work with you on this immensely important challenge.

Please consult our website [www.MIPandL.org](http://www.MIPandL.org) for a variety of practical, faith and public policy resources. **Please contact me** if you would like to join or volunteer.

**Vince Maraventano, M.Div., J.D, Executive Director**    [vince@MIPandL.org](mailto:vince@MIPandL.org)    **617-244-0755**