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THE ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS OF POPE FRANCIS:
PARSING KEY TERMS AND CLAIMS IN *LAUDATO SI*

On October 4, 2023, Pope Francis published the apostolic exhortation *Laudate Deum* (“Praise God”), an 8000-word document advocating for urgent action to counter climate change.¹ Its date of publication is significant on two accounts. First, it was released on the feast day of Saint Francis of Assisi, the thirteenth-century Italian mystic who is recognized as the patron of animals and of ecology, and who inspired the twenty-first pontiff to select this papal name. Perhaps more significantly, the document appeared exactly eight weeks before the start of COP 28, the latest in a series of global summit meetings addressing the existential challenge of global warming. In an unprecedented turn of events, Pope Francis at that time announced his intention to attend in person and to address the delegates at the conference to be held in Abu Dhabi—something that no pope (and few top religious leaders of any faith) had previously done at any such gathering. Clearly, the leader of 1.3 billion Roman Catholics around the world was sending a clear message regarding the great significance of the upcoming meeting involving nearly all the world’s nations.

This was not the first time that this same pope had signaled his deep commitment to the cause of halting climate change. From the very start of his papacy, Francis had identified care for the environment as among his highest social priorities, eclipsing even his relentless protection of refugees, promotion of economic justice and advocacy for peace—causes that had clearly long appeared very close to his heart. The first foray of Pope Francis to put into writing his wide-ranging reflections on ecology was of course the encyclical letter *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*.² Published in June 2015, eight years before the follow-up message of *Laudate Deum* and over five

¹ Pope Francis, *Laudate Deum*, Apostolic Exhortation on the Climate Crisis, 4 Oct., 2023, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html

² Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*: Encyclical Letter on Care for Our Common Home, 24 May 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_ enciclica-laudato-si.html. Note: although dated May 24 (the day on which the Roman Catholic observance of the Solemnity of Pentecost fell in 2015), the text was not actually released and available until 18 June 2015.

times longer in the English translation of the original texts in Latin, *Laudato Si'* was similarly timed to exert the maximum influence on the proceedings of a global climate change conference—in this case the momentous COP 21 meeting in Paris at which global partner nations were engaged in setting key goals for reductions in carbon emissions in future decades. Pope Francis most evidently aims for timeliness as well as originality in tailoring his contributions to the global crisis of climate change.

The remainder of this essay describes the many pivotal contributions of *Laudato Si'* to the cause of countering climate change, including the introduction of several original intellectual concepts and categories that provide valuable resources to the ecological movement. This article is thus divided into three sections. The first section describes some of the *context* (both historical and intellectual) which led Francis to address the climate crisis. The second section examines the *content* of the authoritative teaching document *Laudato Si'*, focusing on six particularly influential components of the message of Francis as he analyzes the causes and potential solutions to the contemporary ecological crisis. The third section explores the key *effects and outcomes* of the effort of Pope Francis in this momentous document. Without in any way diminishing the many accomplishments of other religious leaders (either before or since Francis arrived on the global scene in 2013), this article proposes the argument that *Laudato Si'* is the most valuable and prominent expression of religious advocacy to protect the natural environment and to promote ecological justice.

Context

Before the veritable explosion of faith-based environmental concern and activism in recent decades, religious voices were not consistently supportive of ecological sustainability. Unfortunately, Western religious traditions too often justified and propped up the untrammled exploitation of natural resources by portraying the divine will as supportive of unfettered human dominion over created things. The concluding verses of the first chapter of the book of Genesis depict a God who, at least on a superficial level, grants unlimited prerogatives to the first humans to fill the earth and subdue it (see Gen. 1: 28-30). The strand of theological ideology known as *contemptus mundi* and the impulse towards a *fuga mundi* attitude only fed the inclination to disregard the health of the earth and exacerbated the unfortunate tensions between Christian faith and environmental responsibility. The disastrous

effects of a theology that allows or even favors unregulated human dominion over creation were treated by Dr. Lynn White, Jr.'s famous 1967 article "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis."³ White blamed the legacy of a distorted picture of God for many of the problems of pollution, environmental degradation and the loss of biodiversity that were just beginning to snowball a half-century ago.

But of course, acknowledging a creator God who places humanity at the top of a hierarchy of life does not necessarily justify wanton rape of natural resources and the utter subordination of other species. A theistic worldview can also support a theological model of stewardship, one which understands humans as called to be sensitive caretakers of earth and all its resident species. It can even inspire a creation-centered spirituality that emphasizes ecological co-responsibility and deep kinship with our fellow species— themes found in Franciscan spirituality and many venerable religious traditions.

After many missed opportunities, full-throated concern for the environment within official Roman Catholic teachings began to sprout around 1990 with the publication of some landmark teaching documents (though still rather brief ones) on sustainability emanating from the Vatican and from local bishops' conferences around the world.⁴ As welcome as this new attention to protecting the environment was after a long history of neglect, the Catholic response to the ecological crisis in word and deed was still fragmentary and incomplete, in need of further momentum. We witnessed a few paragraphs lamenting pollution and toxic over-consumption here, a short pastoral letter encouraging energy conservation there. Even Pope Benedict XVI, who at the time earned the moniker "The Green Pope" for his many commendable words and deeds to protect the earth,⁵ was only barely catching up to consciousness-

³ Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967): 1203-07.

⁴ See, for example: Pope John Paul II, "Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation," Message for World Day of Peace, 1 Jan. 1990, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19891208_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Renewing the Earth: An Invitation to Reflection and Action on Environment in Light of Catholic Social Teaching," 14 Nov. 1991, <https://www.usccb.org/resources/renewing-earth>.

⁵ Pope Benedict XVI demonstrated his commitment to promoting renewable energy by, for example, ordering the installation of thousands of photovoltaic cells on the roofs of Vatican buildings. He also dedicated several stirring paragraphs of an encyclical letter to the topic of the ecological crisis; see pars. 48-52 of *Caritas in Veritate* ("Charity in Truth"), 29 June 2009,

raising commitments of other Christian communities. Eastern Orthodox Christians, especially under the visionary leadership of Patriarch Bartholomew,⁶ and Protestants, especially those within the fold of the Geneva-based World Council of Churches, each enjoyed a major head-start in adopting the theme of “the Integrity of Creation” as a major social objective alongside justice and peace.

Enter Pope Francis. From the very start of his papacy in 2013, he has signaled an eagerness to embrace a genuine spirituality of creation, has invited broad audiences to reimagine humanity’s place in the natural world, and has proved himself even greener than the “Green Pope” who preceded him. The publication of his social encyclical *Laudato Si'* (aptly translated as “Praise Be to You, Lord” and subtitled “On Care for Our Common Home”¹) was of course the most important landmark in this constructive development. Even before examining the content of this authoritative teaching document, it is important to recognize how Francis framed this encyclical. First, he consistently hastened to portray it not as some narrowly cast position paper aimed at the debate over a single issue, but rather Francis invited his audiences to view it as a holistic contribution to the overall social mission of the church, which includes many inter-related dimensions of justice and elements that comprise the common good, of which the environment is an integral feature and concern. Second, as noted above, Pope Francis deliberately timed the release of the encyclical, the writing process of which took well over a year to complete, for June 2015, a full six months before the convening of the Paris Climate Conference (or COP 21 in United Nations parlance) in the final weeks of that same year. This publication timetable felicitously allowed the document to exert maximum effect on the international community and its climate change deliberations, granting adequate lead time for dissemination but not excessive time that would render it stale or outdated by December 2015. Indeed, several other world religions (including certain leaders of Islam, Judaism and Buddhism) wrote and released their own climate change documents that followed *Laudato Si'*, though each of these was much briefer and of course had their own distinctive tone and message. Nevertheless, Francis emerged at that time as a preeminent voice of faith-based environmental concern, and

https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html.

⁶ For a full account of the impressive moral leadership of Patriarch Bartholomew on environmental issues, see John Chryssavgis, ed., *On Earth as In Heaven: Ecological Vision and Initiatives of Patriarch Bartholomew, Orthodox Christianity and Contemporary Thought Series* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011).

with his good friend Patriarch Bartholomew continues to play exactly that role.

The 40,000 words of Pope Francis's encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* are divided into 246 paragraphs, with 172 footnotes citing the work of previous popes, local bishops' conferences, philosophers, spiritual writers and the international community, with especially frequent reference to the 1992 Rio Declaration on the Environment and Development and subsequent U.N. climate change documents. The encyclical is available free on the Vatican website in numerous languages and has been printed in many formats throughout the world. Its six chapters bear titles such as "What is Happening to Our Common Home," "The Gospel of Creation," "The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis" and "Ecological Education and Spirituality." The methodology of the document follows the see-judge-act paradigm common in documents of Catholic social teaching.

A word about each of the three steps. Pope Francis first surveyed the damage done to the environment, observing in paragraph 21 that "earth, our home, is looking more and more like an immense pile of filth." The second (or judgment) phase includes pointed analysis of the human-induced causes of global warming, confirming the general consensus among scientists and making no concessions to climate change deniers. As the bold moral teacher he is, Francis does not shy away from making stern ethical judgments about the selfishness and myopia that have long supported crass exploitation of God-given natural resources, including vital rain forests such as the Amazon and the Congo, which the pope (in paragraph 38) dubs the two vital lungs of our planet. When he reaches the third phase, the action stage of the paradigm, Francis strongly recommends a thorough about-face in human approaches to the natural environment and our fellow creatures on earth. The recommended actions, including abrupt changes in lifestyle, economic practices and political policies, all depend upon an underlying change in consciousness regarding our place in the universe and our relationships to all creatures we encounter and the ecosystems we inhabit.

In the course of the pope's ethical analysis in *Laudato Si'* there arise several motifs that had rarely or never before appeared in papal writings. The numbered list of six items that follows can only provide the briefest glimpse of these themes and concepts.

Integral ecology. This phrase, which serves as the title of chapter 4 of *Laudato Si'*, captures the holistic perspective Francis seeks to emphasize regarding the entire topic of climate justice. In order to fashion an adequate response, we need to see and appreciate the big picture regarding the climate crisis, where its many dimensions come together into an underlying unity. On a dozen occasions throughout the text, Francis invites the reader to recognize the insight, worded in various ways, that “everything is interconnected” or “all things are inter-related” or that “nothing can be considered in isolation.” More than a verbal tic, this repeated insistence on recognizing the unity of all things reflects a common theme in Christian mysticism, especially in the spirituality associated with the 13th century Saint Francis of Assisi, who is so obviously an inspiration for the environmentalism of the first pope to choose this name. It also advances an argument regarding the connection between the environmental crisis on one hand, and the social crisis of injustice and inequality (rightly called diseases of social ecology), on the other hand. To foreground the phrase “integral ecology” as Francis does is to insist on a unified response to these social and ecological crises. We cannot solve one without addressing the other, since they are two faces of the same pathology. In sum, the relationships we share with the earth and with our fellow creatures can only be healthy in the aggregate. Injustice, dysfunction and disorder in any relationship poisons all the other relationships, and manifests in exploitative attitudes and practices towards other people and things. Ultimately, it is easy to discern that the phrase integral ecology says everything Pope Francis seeks to affirm about the centrality of a socially responsible approach to living today.

Intergenerational solidarity. This is another term rarely heard in previous Catholic social teaching, though it represents a logical extension of the church’s long advocacy for the virtue of fellow-feeling and commitment to the greater good of society. Paragraphs 159-62 of *Laudato Si'* treat the seminal concept of “justice between generations” which is a creative adaptation of familiar religious notions regarding social responsibility. One of the master concepts of Catholic social thought is the common good, which emphasizes our obligations to attend to needs that are more broadly defined than by our own individual interests. Pope Francis here is expanding our perception of the common good to include not just the needs of currently living people, but even those yet to be born – both humans and even members of other species. If our wasteful practices and profligate lifestyles disadvantage future persons and other beings by harming their ecosystems and exhausting available resources, then we are

acting irresponsibly. We not only harm them but also dishonor God, who creates all beings for the purpose of their flourishing. To frustrate the intentions of God in this way is to sin grievously. We must not, the pope entreats here, ignore our solemn obligations to preserve the earth, and to safeguard the sustainability of the planet that Francis repeatedly calls “our common home.”

The technocratic paradigm. Francis is far from the first commentator to launch a critique of how the indiscriminate reliance on technology threatens key human values. It is not technology itself that is objectionable – Francis is no crass Luddite – but rather the myopic and self-centered employ of technologies that introduces distortions in human relations, including in our interactions with the natural environment. This danger grows especially vivid when humans foolishly imagine that the introduction of new technologies will provide quick fixes to deeply rooted social and cultural problems. As Francis writes in paragraph 109: “The technocratic paradigm tends to dominate economic and political life... Some circles maintain that current economics and technology will solve all environmental problems.” The illusion of easy progress through cutting corners has indeed far too often driven approaches to climate change abatement. This conviction has prompted Francis to question (in paragraphs 23-26 and 171 of *Laudato Si'*) the adequacy of cap-and-trade and carbon credit tax policies as a sufficient response to global warming. It is not that such market-based public policies will necessarily fail, but rather that they fall short of inspiring and enacting the comprehensive change of approach that would be the true game-changer we so desperately need in the struggle against climate change. Francis has no interest in disparaging such incremental approaches or technological advances as creating carbon sinks, but as a moral leader, he is primarily intent on overcoming the distortion of deeply-rooted priorities and socially responsible behaviors such as humble self-control and simplicity of lifestyle.

Tyrannical anthropocentrism. Like the technological paradigm, this multisyllabic label represents a brand of reductionism that Pope Francis seeks to refute and urges us to resist. This particular distortion prevents us from seeing ourselves honestly, as part of creation rather than as its rightful and undisputed master. Much like political tyrants, humanity comes to engage in collective acts of abuse of power, to the detriment of other creatures, their habitats, and eventually with boomerang evil effects on ourselves. We thus arrogantly displace God and unduly exploit other species and our shared planet. Just as the technocratic paradigm boils down to an exaggerated reliance on

a scientific model, tyrannical anthropocentrism places humans so firmly at the center of our perception of the universe that all other beings and values are eclipsed. Together these two attitudes threaten to stunt the moral imagination and render impossible the transformations required for people to rise to the occasion of the ecological crisis.

Ecological conversion. This motif, developed by Pope Francis in some detail in paragraphs 216-21 of the final chapter of *Laudato Si'*, represents the antidote to much of what has gone wrong up to this point in human history. The primary carrier of hope for a better and more sustainable future is *changed people*. Before those people will ever imaginably exhibit more responsible external behavior, both in their private lives and in the public policies that they collectively determine, they must adopt new interior attitudes and orientations. The transformation required is at root a matter of a renewed spirituality. In paragraph 216, Pope Francis affirms that “spirituality can stir up a more passionate concern for the protection of our world.” To move the needle or bend the arc in the direction of true ecological progress, we must resolve to transcend the level of mere tinkering. As with so many of his teachings in other areas of social justice, Francis is proposing and endorsing a culture-based approach rather than merely a market-based or policy-based approach. If we sincerely desire a healthier earth, we need to be healthier people. If we wish to see improvement in our external environment, we must first foster improvement in the interior environment within each of us, nurturing our souls in prayer. This is the profound challenge of ecological conversion.

The challenge to hear both “the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor”. This stirring phrase from the world of liberation theology,⁷ quoted in paragraph 49 of the encyclical, illuminates the linkage between the suffering of under-resourced people and the egregious exploitation of the natural world which exacerbates social inequalities. Francis is right to call attention to the many ways in which abuses of the environment in the past have most often damaged the life prospects of the least privileged; continued inaction to address the ecological crisis will further disadvantage those already harmed. The best example may be climate change refugees – vulnerable “people on the move” whose ancestral lands have been rendered infertile by the effects of desertification or rising sea levels that wipe out their customary farming and herding activities, as

⁷This phrase indeed provides the title of an influential work from a prominent liberation theologian from South America, the home continent of Pope Francis; see Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, trans. Phillip Berryman, Ecology and Justice Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997).

Francis explains in some detail in paragraph 25. Those who formerly scratched out a modest living through subsistence farming have become highly vulnerable to drought and coastal flooding, all too often becoming refugees, fleeing through perilous itineraries for new havens that might hold the promise of a more secure life. The “cry of the earth” for relief from this human onslaught and the “cry of the poor” for relief from grave injustice are closely linked and impossible to ignore by people of conscience, who will see, judge and act in justice and mercy.

This list of six motifs in the pages of *Laudato Si'* could easily be expanded. Many other important topics are covered in the encyclical, for example, advocacy to preserve biodiversity and the right to potable water, both of which represent significant advances in how the Catholic Church has spoken about ecological priorities in the age of Pope Francis.

Key Effects and Implications of Laudato Si'

By further developing Catholic teachings on ecology and specifically by going on record as a strong advocate for the strict limitation of greenhouse carbon emissions, Francis has provided us with valuable resources for establishing a more just and sustainable world. There is certainly no dearth of evidence that his 2015 document has delivered considerable results. Many first-hand observers of the global climate change debates have testified to the positive impact of Vatican voices and interventions in recent international deliberations, including in the negotiating process leading up to the 2015 Paris Climate Accords. Opinion polling, including several recent Pew surveys, consistently find that Roman Catholics are increasingly familiar with their church’s developing environmental teachings and exhibit elevated consciousness and marked commitment to engage in climate change activism, although a certain amount of backsliding has also been documented.⁸ Pope Francis has taken ambitious steps to maintain this momentum of deepening environmental concern, most recently by rolling out a creative “*Laudato Si'* Action Platform” geared toward engaging and sustaining the energies, especially among young people, already generated on a worldwide basis to address and reverse climate

⁸ The Pew data immediately after the release of *Laudato Si'* recorded a particularly strong effect of the encyclical on Catholic opinion. Subsequent surveys have called into question certain aspects of this “Francis effect” on the attitudes of the Catholic faithful, at least in the United States, regarding climate change and activism to counter it. A particularly insightful account of the mixed picture presented by serial Pew data is Aleja Hertzler-McCain, “Pew Study: U.S. Catholics More Motivated by Climate News than Other Americans,” *National Catholic Reporter*, 1 Nov. 2023, <https://www.ncronline.org/earthbeat/politics/pew-study-us-catholics-more-motivated-climate-news-other-americans>

change and environmental degradation.⁹ This is just one of many initiatives, at both local and global levels, to mobilize Catholics to put their faith into action to fight climate change.

While Pope Francis, in *Laudato Si'* and through other vehicles and activities, has made many distinctive contributions, his messages often echo other responsible voices, both religious and secular, regarding environmental sustainability. For example, the most recent climate assessment report from the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change made this familiar point: "We actually have all the knowledge we need, all the tools we need. We just need to implement it."¹⁰ Pope Francis would agree entirely about the pressing need to muster the political will to make practical progress on care for the environment. His constructive engagement on this urgent issue serves as a reminder of the role of religious traditions and faith communities as the locus where humanity so often raises and pursues the most important ethical questions of any age.

In the end, religion is the realm of human life where people stir up their consciences, confront whatever despair they might feel, and overcome indifference, apathy and resistance to change. In their faith lives, people find hope and energy for fostering social change, articulate values and develop virtues that will motivate and empower them to challenge injustices and threats like climate change. Bold and prophetic religious leaders like Pope Francis revitalize the constructive contributions of faith traditions, but it is of course up to each of us to play our role in the transformation required to sustain our world, which is indeed our common home, as a hospitable place of beauty and abundant life for all God's creatures.

⁹ The landing page for the *Laudato Si'* Action Program, maintained by the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development (the Vatican office charged with environmental concern) is <https://laudatosiactionplatform.org/>

¹⁰ United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Sixth Assessment Report, 19 March 2022, <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/sixth-assessment-report-cycle/>