

Living Our Common Vocation: A Response to *Laudato Si, On Care for Our Common Home*

In 2015, Pope Francis wrote the Encyclical Letter, *On Care for Our Common Home*. The title of the letter is often simply referred to as *Laudato Si'*, the first two words in the original. This important work is an appeal to humanity for a new dialogue among all persons about how we are shaping the future of the planet (LS 14), and the need to acknowledge and face with action the magnitude and urgency of the challenges we face as a species.

In a previous article, Bishop Geoffrey Woodcroft has given us a helpful overview of this important message to the world-wide Church, and to all persons. I am focussing on the introduction and the first chapter.

The Introduction

The Encyclical Letter begins with the opening phrase from the *Canticle of the Creatures*, a prayer of Francis of Assisi: *LAUDATO SI, mi' Signore* - "Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs".¹ Drawing on these images, Pope Francis reminds us that we cannot live as though we are somehow separate from our environment, and that we are living dust of the earth, made of the elements of the earth.

Pope Francis writes that over multiple decades, Roman Catholic Pontiffs have written on the dangers of nuclear weapons and war, global ecological exploitation, and the deterioration of the environment; and more recently, they have been calling for authentic moral human development in line with technical and scientific advancement, especially where it relates to the environment. Benedict XVI proposed removing dysfunctional economic structures and unrealistic models of growth which cannot ensure respect for the environment.² International church leaders are united by the same concern for the environment and echo scientists, philosophers, theologians, and civic groups. Francis takes care to show the biblical and spiritual roots of a genuine Christian ecology, one that is based on love.

This pope chose the name Francis, because Saint Francis is a good model to help teach us what it means to be human, how to care for vulnerable people, and how to live out joyfully and authentically an ecology based on relationship with the environment.

What Is Happening to Our Common Home

¹ Canticle of the Creatures, in Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, vol. 1, New York-London-Manila, 1999, 113-114.

² Encyclical Letter of the Holy Father Francis, On Care for Our Common Home, *Laudato Si*, paragraphs 3-6.

The encyclical was published in 2015. In the first chapter, Pope Francis offers an analysis of the most pressing issues for theological and philosophical reflection in the context of the global situation. These topics continue to be problems facing our planet's ecosystems, humanity, and the future of our species.

The Pontiff observes that pollution, waste and a “throwaway culture” are rooted in an economic system based on greed (LS 20-22). We have yet to learn a method of circular production which mirrors the natural order, and so preserve resources for present and future generations.

He argues that the climate is a “common good, belonging to all, and meant for all,” and that climate warming creates a trend toward a tipping point of global warming with grave implications for society, economies, politics and the availability and distribution of goods and services (LS 23-26). Climate change and drought affect the availability of water. Francis reminds us that safe drinking water is a fundamental human right, the basis for all other human rights. Therefore, it should not be commodified (LS 27-31).

The loss of biodiversity has short and long-term negative implications, particularly related to the loss of great forests (the lungs of the planet) and the pollution, acidification and warming of oceans (LS 32-42). The oceans are the lifeblood of the planet. Loss of ecosystems in oceans and lakes have wide-ranging impacts for the food chain.

Francis teaches that we humans are “creatures of this world, enjoying a right to life and happiness, and endowed with unique dignity;” and therefore, we must consider the “deterioration of the environment, current models of development and the throwaway culture,” and what effect they have on the lives of people around the globe (LS 43). The Pope gives examples and draws our attention to ways this plays out in the decline in the quality of human life and the breakdown of society (LS 44-47).

Global social and economic inequality and environmental degradation are closely linked in this encyclical. Human and social degradation need to be addressed, so that environmental problems can be solved. The poorest peoples suffer the most where the environment is exploited, degraded, and polluted. Experience and scientific research make this clear (LS 48). The world needs to be made aware of the problems of people who are poor, vulnerable, and excluded, and the inequality that affects entire countries as well as individuals (LS 48-52, 56).

Creation is groaning and the abandoned peoples cry out, “pleading that we take another course” (LS 53). The political response to the crisis is weak. Francis observes that the global summits on the environment have failed because politics is subject to technology and finance (LS 54). While some countries are making significant progress (LS 55, 58) others are not: “economic powers continue to justify the current global system where priority tends to be given to speculation and the pursuit of financial gain, which fail to

take the context into account, let alone the effects on human dignity and the natural environment” (LS 56). There are grave risks of conflict over depleted resources and war always has a negative effect on the environment and the cultural riches of peoples (LS 57).

Francis shines the light of hope on countries and people of good will who have made great strides in cleaning up pollution, restoring rivers and woodlands, creating environmental renewal projects, and advancing renewable energy sources and public transportation (LS 58). On their own, these efforts do not solve the global problems, but they show that people are more than capable of positive intervention.

Notwithstanding these positive signs of hope, the Pontiff warns of a superficial ecology which permits complacency and recklessness, and the continuation of present unsustainable lifestyles and models of consumption (LS 59).

In the final section of the first chapter, Francis paints, in broad strokes, a spectrum of possible solutions: on one end there are “those who uphold the myth of progress, that ecological problems can be solved with technology” without “regard to for deep change or ethical considerations;” and on the other extreme, some hold that humans are “a threat that jeopardizes the global ecosystem,” that the population must be reduced, “and all forms of intervention prohibited” (LS 60). Realistic solutions must be developed between these extremes. Church leaders understand that the Church is not in a position to offer a definitive opinion (LS 61); and yet the Church is called to respond to the present situation, given the signs that we (the world) are reaching a breaking point.

A Response: Living Our Common Vocation

The world-wide Anglican Communion has many gifts of our wisdom tradition to share, notably our approach to scripture, tradition, and reason; but the most important gift we can bring to this ongoing dialogue is ourselves and an attitude of *metanoia* or repentance, an open heart, and an open mind with a willingness to change our ways. Part of our culture is to see the shades of colour in any given issue, not just an either-or black or white approach, but a both-and approach. A middle way, a methodology of inclusion.

I believe we can bring this approach to help deal with the issues of the climate crisis, social and economic inequality, both locally and globally. We are part of the problem and part of the solution. Caring for the environment and loving and caring for the “least” of our human brothers and sisters is both a local and global issue. We share a large percentage of our DNA with all living creatures. Like Saint Francis, can we recognize our brothers and sisters in the least of these living beings? Can we love them? Can we enter into and experience communion with them and the land?

In baptism, we are plunged into the Communion of Giving Love: the Holy Trinity. We are immersed in the mystery of love. Creation reflects this communion and is a beautiful

complex of interrelated and multifaceted organic ecosystems and inorganic systems. We are part of the land; we are in relationship with the land, with creation and with each other. May that relationship be founded on genuine love and care.

Have you had the opportunity to renew your baptismal vows with this promise?
“Will you strive to safeguard the integrity of God’s creation, and respect, sustain and renew the life of the Earth?”

“I will, with God’s help.”

In September of 2013, the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada passed a resolution adding this promise to the baptismal covenant in the *Book of Alternative Services*. The promise is a direct quote from the Marks of Mission of the worldwide Anglican Communion and reflects the grassroots movement in the church.³ I believe that this promise is a helpful way for us to focus on our response to the needs of creation. It is an open door to new possibilities and hope.

As one part of the baptismal covenant, we make the promise as individual disciples, to safeguard the integrity of God’s creation, and to respect, sustain and renew the life of the Earth; but we need each other to live this out with greater faithfulness. I will, with God’s help. We will, with God’s help.

May the love poured out in Creation and Redemption fill our hearts to overflowing, and so may we enter more deeply into loving communion with Creator, creation and all created beings; through Jesus the Risen Messiah. Amen.

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³ Anglican Journal and <https://www.anglican.ca/news/covenant-and-care-a-baptismal-promise-to-safeguard-creation/3006799/>

