

On the Five Year Anniversary of *Laudato Si'*

The year 2020 brought with it a significant anniversary for environmentalists around the world, as fifty years had passed since the celebration of the first Earth Day in 1970. This golden anniversary was accompanied by the five year anniversary of Pope Francis' *Laudato Si': On Care for our Common Home*, an encyclical letter that meets issues of global warming and environmental catastrophe head-on and calls for an urgent and all-encompassing global response to issues that have long been in need of serious attention. As such, 2020 presented an opportunity to not only celebrate the environmental progress we have made in the last half century, but to reflect on and rededicate ourselves to the work that still needs to be done.

That, anyway, was how things looked back in January. By March, however, the Covid-19 pandemic had taken hold worldwide, effectively putting an end to, or at least significantly transforming, celebrations of any kind. Yes, Earth Day still took place in April, but it was a largely subdued affair, confined at best to virtual gatherings, and certainly lacking in the fanfare or attention that it might have otherwise received. And yet, the present crisis may bring about a much-needed change in perspective that connects in essential ways to the primary message of *Laudato Si'*. In early April, Pope Francis reminded us that “This is not humanity’s first plague,” and while the others have become “mere anecdotes,” we might take this opportunity to learn from our shared past and reassess the ways we approach, not only the peril that we now face, but our collective futures as well.¹ In the same address, Francis quotes a famous line from Virgil’s *Aeneid*: “Perhaps one day it will be good to remember these things too.” In this spirit, we might challenge ourselves to take the teachings of *Laudato Si'* more seriously with a shared purpose that looks to enact real and significant global change.

A Bold New Message

To say that the message of *Laudato Si'* (LS) is entirely new is neither fair nor accurate. Indeed, when Francis speaks to the ways in which our technological prowess should be checked by moral principles that respect all living beings, his encyclical is largely in line with the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace’s “Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church,” issued in 2004.² In a certain sense, then, Francis is expanding upon a position that has, to a certain extent, been established. And yet, that expansion itself should not go unnoticed. The fact that he makes the environment – our common home – the focal point of his first fully-authored encyclical should make us take notice. Environmental degradation is not just one problem among others. It is instead a problem that demands our utmost and immediate attention.

The Catholic Church has generally adopted a stewardship model when it comes to the natural world whereby human beings are the stewards, or caretakers, of God’s creation. Francis assumes such a position on several occasions in *Laudato Si'*, cautioning against any reading of Genesis that lends itself to a “tyrannical” (LS, 68) or “excessive” (LS, 116) anthropocentrism which looks to dominate the natural world and utilize its resources solely to

¹<https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/09/830759485/this-is-not-humanity-s-first-plague-pope-francis-says-of-coronavirus>

²http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html

our own advantage. God has instead entrusted the world to us (LS, 5), a privilege imbued with the expectation of a “responsible stewardship” (LS, 116) that does not simply ask that we do as little damage as possible, but that we instead recognize the inherent value in nature and foster its own ends even as we look to secure our own well-being. On this point, I believe Francis takes his readers beyond a straightforward stewardship model. Though God’s creative act alone may lend value to nature, Francis – very much in line with his namesake – often speaks of nature in more intimate terms as “brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth” (LS, 91). While a stewardship model is evident in descriptions of the Earth as a “caress of God” (LS, 84) or a “precious book” (LS, 85), Francis does not hesitate to use stronger language from the very start when he speaks of the Earth as a “sister” who “now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her” with “symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life” (LS, 2). This anthropomorphizing of nature makes it easier to speak of animals (LS, 33) and ecosystems (LS, 140) as having value in themselves apart from any perceived usefulness. And perhaps, above all, it allows Francis to characterize our mistreatment of the environment as an act of sin (LS, 2, 66).

These dimensions combine to make *Laudato Si’* a powerful and in many ways original message, and yet the most important aspect may be Francis’ appeal to an *integral ecology*. In the past, false dichotomies have far too often been made between our moral obligations to each other and to the natural world. Pointing out that our present crisis is both “social and environmental” (LS, 139), Francis affirms that “Today . . . we have to realize 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). Continuing later in the encyclical, he writes that “Everything is connected. Concern for the environment thus needs to be joined to a sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society” (LS, 91). In short, we do not need to choose between caring for the Earth and caring for our fellow human beings as the suffering, and consequently the fulfillment, of each proceeds hand-in-hand. Put another way, social justice and environmental justice are two sides of the same coin, something that I believe connects well with the five Critical Concerns of the Sisters of Mercy: the earth, immigration, nonviolence, racism, and women.³ Though we might prioritize any one of these concerns at a given time, their intersection is unavoidable, meaning positive change on one front cannot help but affect positive change on others. Here, we might think of Saint Francis as being far ahead of his time as “He shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace” (LS, 10).

Five Years On

Laudato Si’ did well in establishing Pope Francis’ platform for Catholics and non-Catholics alike, and sent a clear message to delegates at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris (or COP 21) later that year, in December 2015. Mindful of the weak political responses and empty rhetoric of many past such conferences (LS, 53-59), Francis called for “one world with a common plan” (LS, 164) that nevertheless takes into account the “differentiated response” required of individual nation states in accordance with their economic power and contributions to climate change (LS, 170). Whereas the stated goals and

³<https://www.sistersofmercy.org/files/documents/resources/Justice/CriticalConcerns-1Pger-FINAL.pdf>

objectives of past conferences were noble enough, they were undermined by poor implementation (LS, 167) and a political “myopia” that lacked the far-sightedness required of any effective environmental policy (LS, 178). Here, the inclusion of all peoples and voices becomes important as well. Since attacks upon nature tend to simultaneously be attacks upon culture, indigenous communities should be especially respected (LS, 146), as should urban populations when it comes to city planning (LS, 150). This mindfulness of all people extends to future generations as well, who presently stand to bear the brunt of our past and current misdeeds. Indeed, “intergenerational solidarity” can act as both a stimulus and a goal for long-term environmental change (LS, 159-160).

The 196 parties that attended COP 21 produced the Paris Agreement, a resolution to limit the global increase in temperature to 1.5 degrees Celsius.⁴ 174 countries signed the agreement on Earth Day in 2016, and early reactions were positive. It did not take long, however, for things to sour. The first major crack emerged a year later when President Donald Trump declared that the United States, a major global player and heavy contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, would withdraw from the accord.⁵ And while full withdrawal cannot be immediate (the earliest it could come is in November of 2020), the United States’ commitment to do so makes it clear that the agreement is non-binding, that compliance is voluntary, and that political resolve with regard to the environment remains as fickle as ever. Perhaps even more telling, beyond this one example, is the fact that most nations are already falling far short of their emissions goals.⁶ Of course, we might note that it is still early in the process, but the scientific evidence indicates that we have very little time to lose. The five years between us and *Laudato Si’* and the four years between us and the Paris Agreement are years that we cannot get back. In fact, they are years that we will have to make up for if we are to avoid an environmental and social catastrophe.

Our World, Reimagined

Do we have reason to hope? On this point, Pope Francis may well remind us that faith is as important as science, and that our best chance may be a conversion to an “ecological spirituality” (LS, 216-217) that goes well beyond resource management and technological development, engendering instead a “universal fraternity” that recognizes our “shared responsibility for others and the world” (LS, 228-229). On the 50th Anniversary of Earth Day in April, Francis returned to this idea of an “ecological conversion” which would allow us to live in greater harmony with both the Earth and one another. Here, amidst the horrors of Covid-19, we might – oddly enough – take heart. “As the tragic coronavirus pandemic has taught us, we can overcome global challenges only by showing solidarity with one another and embracing the most vulnerable in our midst,” stated Francis in his Earth Day address.⁷ Even the most difficult times have lessons to bestow, and I tend to think that this one in particular is one that we were very much in need of.

There are many important messages and teachings in *Laudato Si’*, but if I were to identify the most important one it is the connection between human suffering and the

⁴<https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/the-paris-agreement>

⁵<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-40127326>

⁶<https://climateactiontracker.org/>

⁷<https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2020/04/22/50th-anniversary-earth-day-pope-francis-calls-ecological-conversion>

suffering of the Earth. Francis' integral ecology does away with the notion that we must focus on one or the other, making it clear that they are inexorably linked. But even if we accept that truth, there is one more thing required: imagination. To bring about real change and enact the measures that will ease the suffering of the world and ourselves, we need to imagine a world that is 2, or 3, or 5 degrees Celsius warmer. A world where the ice caps have melted and coastal towns, cities, and nations no longer exist. A world where species die off at a rate not seen in over 65 million years. That is the kind of imagination that will prompt us to change. To change our lifestyles. To change our policies and politicians. To change our attitudes toward each other and the natural world. We have seen, in short order, how quickly and drastically our world can change during the current pandemic. And while many of these changes are not ones that we would have otherwise opted for, the individual sacrifices that we have proven both capable of and willing to make should give us hope for what we can do to combat climate change and environmental destruction. The signs have been there: reductions in air pollution in major cities within a few weeks' time; less of a reliance on fossil fuels as millions of people began working from home; cleaner waterways in countries around the world; animals repopulating areas that they had long since abandoned. If all of this is possible in such short order, we might rightfully hope that our shared resolve can generate the change necessary to literally save the world.

A few weeks ago, I drove past a local beach whose parking lot had been closed off for several weeks to discourage crowds from gathering there. I was delighted to see a doe and her young fawn playfully running through an area that, in another year, at another time, would be filled with cars. This image gave me hope that, with enough will and mindfulness on our part, we can live up to the challenge that Pope Francis sets for us in *Laudato Si'*. Just as we might imagine a world ruined by corruption, negligence, and greed, we might just as readily imagine a verdant and bountiful one built upon harmonious relationships between all living things, a shared and expansive vision of the good life, and a recognition of the beauty of God's creation.

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