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Laudato si': the beauty of Pope Francis' vision

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Comments

Laudato si': the beauty of Pope Francis' vision.

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*Disclaimer: This document does not represent the point of view of the European Commission. The interpretations and opinions contained in it are solely those of the author.

Abstract *The Encyclical Letter of Pope Francis, "Laudato si'", addresses for the first time in the Church's history the subject of the protection of the environment, "the care of our common home". This rich and complex document analyses the causes of today's ecological challenges, acknowledging the scientific consensus but adding an original analysis of the social, cultural, ethical and spiritual dimensions that are associated with the degradation of the environment. The Pope's vision is that the ecological crisis is ultimately linked to a crisis of values, a spiritual void that permeates today's technocratic society. In the authors' analysis, what makes this document particularly innovative is the Pope's appeal to action that, acknowledging the urgency and the immensity of the challenge we face, sees also its beauty, being a unique occasion for humankind to show what it is capable of doing, and that is capable of taking responsibility. This positive narrative has the potential to mobilise people and governments towards a joint action that cannot however be limited to technological fixes, but should be broadened to consider new development models capable of addressing the deep roots of this crisis.*

Keywords: encyclical, Pope Francis, climate change, ecological crisis, ethics, responsibility

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"In the history of the human spirit I distinguish between epochs of habitation and epochs of homelessness. In the former, man lives in the world as in a house, as in a home. In the latter, man lives in the world as in an open field and at times does not even have four pegs with which to set up a tent." — Martin Buber, *"Between man and man"*, 1947.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Encyclical Letter "Laudato si': on care for our common home"¹ is addressed — probably for the first time in history, as Edenhofer et al. (2015) remind us — not only to Christians or to "all people of good will", but to "every person living on this planet" [§3]².

This Encyclical Letter is the most innovative among the many proposals put forward by world leaders in recent years on the road that should lead us to take common decisions on climate change and on the road that recently led the United Nations to agree on the Post 2015 Sustainable Development Goals.

Pope Francis has raised the level of the debate, forcing secular leaders to do the same. The Encyclical struck a chord across the denominations³, and policy-makers and civil society welcomed it.

The Pope's message, coming from the highest authority of a religion counting more than one billion followers, has the potential to generate a tremendous impact worldwide. His message, also thanks to Pope Francis' moral standing and communication capacities, is heard by many more people, believers of all religions and non-believers.

What may attract all readers is that Pope Francis has with this document shown leadership, and the ability to draw a new and very powerful narrative. He has affirmed the beauty of the challenge in front of us, which gives humanity a unique occasion of showing what it is capable of doing. Because

humankind has developed outstanding capabilities in science and technology — as well as in societal and institutional settings — it can also prove itself capable of using its huge capacities for the greater good and healing the planet, acting as a "co-operator(s) of God in the work of creation" [§117].

This approach reverses the current narratives, such as the catastrophist one of several environmentalist movements, which may lead to surrender, or the fear of global recession preached by the fossil fuel lobbies, or the blind faith in technology as being capable of solving every problem. Pope Francis recognises that it presents huge economic and ecological challenges, but considers that it is good that mankind can be challenged at such a high level that it has to show its best. This reversal of the discourse is capable of giving enthusiasm and encouragement to people.

We are no longer discussing whether and to what extent climate change or resource depletion is due to human activities. This has been thoroughly assessed by science. We have to decarbonise the planet and we have to do it rapidly. We have to stop the destruction of the planet's natural capital. Let us do it, says Pope Francis, with the joy of knowing that it will be a beautiful collective effort that beyond saving our common home will make all of us become better human beings.

This is because the ecological challenge is also a social one and a challenge of values, and the way out requires an engagement of responsibilities that will lead to a deep change not only in our relationship with the natural environment, but also in our social relationships, in our solidarity towards the less well off, and ultimately in the awareness of the meaning of our life.

2. THE ENCYCLICAL'S PREAMBLE

It is here that Pope Francis gives us the deep roots of his thought: his recalling of Saint Francis' view of beauty and fraternity with all creatures, his profound spiritualism that sees the social, but more fundamentally the ethical and spiritual roots of environmental problems and calls for a spiritual change of humankind in order to solve them, and his openness to listening to and learning from science and to entering into a dialogue with all, starting with a reflection that we all have been part of the problem and shall all be part of the solution.

The key to Pope Francis' Encyclical rests in his plea to "acknowledge the appeal [in the Spanish text, which is probably the original, it reads "hermosura", beauty], immensity and urgency of the challenge we face".

As a Christian philosopher of orthodox origin, Nikolai Berdyaev, said, and the Pope recalls more than once in the text, "...our mission is to be co-operators with God in His continuing creation of the world" (Berdyaev, 1916). That is, it is good that humankind can test its capability of "co-operating with God in creation", and can show how it can respond to the huge responsibility of having developed the capacity to modify

1 http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

2 The numbers in square brackets refer to the numbered paragraphs of the Encyclical Letter.

3 See in particular the Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change that was released in August 2015 (<http://islamicclimatedeclaration.org/islamic-declaration-on-global-climate-change/> [Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6cjfUzwnl>], mirroring the content of the Encyclical.

the world. Humankind has in fact developed huge capabilities, and therefore has huge responsibilities.

This sets the framework in which the long Encyclical is written. The following is an analysis of its discourse.

3. THE BODY OF THE ENCYCLICAL

The first chapter of the Encyclical draws a picture of the problem, namely what is happening to “our common home”. The changes affecting humanity and the planet are accelerating. After a period of “irrational confidence in progress and human abilities” [§19] we have to ask ourselves whether this is the right way to go. The “throwaway culture” [§22] is shown as opposite to how nature works in sustainable cycles; this label does not refer only to material goods, but to human beings as well, which are discarded as waste when they are no longer useful to support the needs of the dominating technocratic paradigm⁴.

The Letter then offers the reader a simple and well-drawn depiction of climate change, recognising that it “represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day” [§25] and that it mainly affects developing countries and the poor and more vulnerable populations, which are more dependent on natural capital and ecosystem services, and have less capacity to adapt.

The Encyclical then presents, in correct but non-scientific language, other essential elements of the environmental crisis, such as the pressure on water resources or the loss of biodiversity.

The great novelty of this framing of the problem is its endorsement of the scientific consensus. The Church has made a long journey in its relationship with science, and it is not just from today that it recognises science and technology as “wonderful products of a God-given human creativity” [§102]. But the breadth of the use of arguments from science is a peculiar character of this Encyclical.

The second part of the first chapter addresses the human and social dimension of the ecological crisis. Considering that the human and the natural environment deteriorate together, it turns the discussion to the poor, the most vulnerable, and the excluded, as those who suffer first and foremost from the effects of environmental degradation. It recognises that “a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach” and therefore that issues of justice have to be integrated in environmental debates, “so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” [§49].

The second chapter addresses issues in relation to the convictions of believers. Why? The Letter says that science and religion have the potential to enter into a profitable dialogue that may be mutually enriching, because the solution does not

only lie in the realm of science, but also relies on the buy-in of all of us, with our own religious values.

What is however the coherence among the Biblical texts concerning the relationship between God, humankind and nature? In Genesis God grants humankind “dominion” over the Earth, while it also invites us to cultivate and care, “till and keep” [§67], the garden of the world. If the first statement can be interpreted as the freedom to exploit, the second implies a relation of reciprocal responsibility between man and nature. The Bible contains similar contrasts, and does not have to be read literally. It must also be recognised that the reading of some parts of the Bible may lead to the view that our living world is bad because man ruined it through sin. This view is somewhat opposed to Saint Francis’ view of the brotherhood of humankind with all creatures and the planet. His famous hymn “Laudato Si” (be praised my Lord), which gives the Encyclical Letter its name, is reported in its entirety in the text, showing the importance that Pope Francis attributes to the Franciscan message in proposing his vision of the world.

Saint Francis wrote his hymn in 1226, a quite different time with respect to today. Humanity in fact has entered into a new era of technological development that is progressively overcoming our material limitations. Technoscience, when well directed, is not only capable of producing useful tools for improving the quality of human life, but is also capable of producing “beauty” [§103], says the Pope. However, it has brought humankind to a crossroads.

In fact, modern technological capacity gives humankind a tremendous power, but this has not been accompanied by “a development in human responsibility, values and conscience” [§105]. This lack in the ethical and spiritual dimension may lead to a lack of limitations to human acts. From this, it is easy to arrive at the idea of an infinite or unlimited growth, supported by the “false notion” [§106] that resources are unlimited.

The technocratic paradigm “has become so dominant that it would be difficult to do without its resources and even more difficult to utilise them without being dominated by their internal logic” [§108]. And this paradigm “also tends to dominate economic and political life” [§109], expressing profit as the main logic behind technological development.

We are faced with the urgency “to move forward in a bold cultural revolution” [§114], but for this we need to start from analysing what man is.

A key reflection of the Encyclical Letter is expressed in the statement that “there can be no ecology without an adequate anthropology”. The human person cannot be seen just as one living organism among others. If we wish human beings to engage in taking care of the planet, we have to recognise and value “their unique capacities of knowledge, will, freedom and responsibility” [§118].

⁴ This theme evokes the “human waste” of Zygmunt Bauman in *Wasted lives: modernity and its outcomes* (1993).

The narration then evolves considering that there are not “two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather one complex crisis which is both environmental and social” [§139]. The “integral ecology”, which Pope Francis proposes, requires the integration of the economic, social and cultural dimensions.

An integral human ecology, says the Letter, cannot be separated by the notion of the “common good”, “a central and unifying principle of social ethics” [§156]. This notion opens deep reflections on justice, which go beyond the relationships of today, implicitly including the “rights” of future generations, with the qualification that intergenerational justice should be accompanied by intra-generational justice.

But which kind of world do we want to leave to future generations? We leave the words of the Pope unchanged, because they are touching in their comprehensiveness: “It is no longer enough, then, simply to state that we should be concerned for future generations. We need to see that what is at stake is our own dignity. Leaving an inhabitable planet to future generations is, first and foremost, up to us. The issue is one which dramatically affects us, for it has to do with the ultimate meaning of our earthly sojourn” [§160].

Recently John Schellnhuber⁵ said that the “implosion” of the fossil fuel society will result from 3 D’s: Disasters, Discoveries, but more and foremost — agreeing with the Pope — it will be a matter of Decency, because humankind cannot show itself to be incapable of finding solutions for its own survival.

When finally proposing solutions, the Letter makes a plea for a hierarchical role of politics over the economy, because, as Jeffrey Sachs commented, “He’s calling on us to come back to the idea that the economy is to serve human well-being, not human well-being serving the economy”⁶.

The solution cannot lie just in the application of technological fixes: in order to build a sustainable future which does not repeat the errors of today, a deep change in the current development model is requested.

Humanity needs to change. Consumerism is the reflection of the technocratic paradigm. “We have too many means and only few insubstantial ends” [§203], says the Letter, and continues: “the emptier a person’s heart is, the more he or she needs things to buy, own and consume” [§204]. But human beings are capable of doing more and rejecting such a poor paradigm.

5 John Schellnhuber, Director-General of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, adviser of the German Chancellor Angela Merkel on climate change, member of the Pontifical Academy, participated in the preparatory work of the *Laudato si'* Encyclical Letter; the reference made in the text is the author’s synthesis of the position expressed by John Schellnhuber at a discussion panel at the Paris Conference “Our Common Future under Climate Change”, July 2015.

6 See the comment to the visit of the Pope to the US by Jeffrey Sachs—economist, UN adviser and Director of the Earth Institute of Columbia University—interviewed by Chris Mooney in: https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/social-issues/how-pope-franciss-visited-nations-could-help-the-world-fix-the-climate-change-problem/2015/09/21/e42a8000-608d-11e5-b38e-06883aacba64_story.html

The core and conclusive element of the Encyclical rests in the suggestions of “ecological spirituality” [§216] that are offered, which build on the conviction that beyond ideas, we also need a mystical move, “an interior impulse” which motivates our individual and communal action. The ecological crisis calls for a deep interior conversion, which implies “gratitude and gratuitousness” [§220], sobriety and humility.

Pope Francis proposes love as the overarching paradigm, a “civilisation of love” [§231], making it the “constant and highest norm of all activity”. This will encourage a “culture of care” to permeate all society, an assumption of responsibilities to take care of the planet and of the quality of life of all, and in particular to take care of the poorest members of society.

4. FOR AN ASSUMPTION OF RESPONSIBILITIES

What will trigger this assumption of responsibilities? The development of a new ethics is necessary, which implicitly requires the recognition of our planet as a common good and that the unique scientific and technological capacities of man, together with his capacities of will and freedom, have impacted on the earth with consequences that extend into the future, but can also be used to heal the planet. We cannot leave an uninhabitable planet to the future generations: it is fundamentally a matter of dignity for us, who know and who have the means to act, a matter of minimal decency that we cannot fail to respect. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1953) said, it is time for the adulthood of humankind; it is time for taking responsibilities.

The ethical proposal of Pope Francis approximates the responsibility ethics of Jonas (1979), even if they are built on rather different assumptions. Both consider that humankind has huge capabilities and responsibilities. Both trust man to be capable of using this capacity and responsibility for the greater good. Jonas thinks that ethical wisdom is a necessary value to contrast the blind faith in technology. Pope Francis says something very similar when he calls humanity to search for values and for an inner conversion.

One critical remark advanced in some of the recently published commentaries on the Encyclical is that the powerful and pervasive technocratic paradigm cannot be defeated just through a cultural change. The argument has only limited validity. First, the Encyclical, with its power to reach millions of people at every level of decision-making capacity, may have both a direct and an indirect influence on policy-making. Secondly, changes in history have always had their roots in ideas, and in the digital era ideas circulate faster and are a very powerful means of transforming society. Thirdly, individual behaviour increasingly has a systemic impact, which is already evident in the transformation of consumers into ‘prosumers’⁷.

Other commentaries have looked at sectoral aspects of the

7 Neologism from the fusion of “producers” (of energy) and “consumers”, relating to the diffusion of self-produced photovoltaic energy that, when in excess, may be sold to the grid.

Encyclical, and in particular its sometimes explicit economic and political anti-capitalistic discourse — which is not new in the social doctrine of the Church — its opposition to (blind) market values⁸ and its view of finance as a perverse force.

It cannot be denied that financial markets work for maximising profits, and are mostly unethical. However, they are also precursors of change. There are plenty of financial actors today that are strongly engaged in orienting the choices of corporations towards actions that guarantee the longterm security of their assets, and are very concerned by the risks of dangerous climate change or of the depletion of natural resources. Those asset managers are acting in the right direction, and it is imperative to create an alliance with them.

5. SOME CONCLUDING CONSIDERATIONS

The Encyclical “Laudato si’” is a complex document, probably resulting from the writing of several different authors⁹, and the presence of some contradictory statements, the raising of issues of lower relevance with respect to the main subject may well be the result of compromises reached between different orientations. However, we do not think that sectoral aspects can be extracted and seen in isolation. What we have proposed here is the reading of what we see as a coherent whole: the Pope’s view that the ecological crisis is just one of the symptoms of the throwaway culture and of the technocratic paradigm which looks to the continuation of its internal logic. His analysis leads to the conclusion that this socio-ecological crisis can only be steadily defeated if its deep roots are addressed, namely the desert of values that permeates modern societies.

The Encyclical offers some replies to this. For believers, it says that it is in the recognition of the presence of a Creator to whom everything belongs that we may better respond to and care for our common home. However, the paradigm of love and brotherhood that Pope Francis proposes can be shared by many more than just believers. It also makes sense in a secular context. It means addressing, together with the care for the environment, fundamental issues of social justice and of north-south equity.

Many economists today, including those from liberal schools of thought, are fully aware that the dramatic increase of inequalities needs to be reversed. It is not sustainable even within capitalism, and it is a sign that markets have several failures and require corrective actions that can only be offered by policy-making. Even the proposal of global governance based on more trust among people, communities and nations is not utopia. It is certainly a very hard and difficult task. Gandhi and Mandela have shown such trust to be possible,

so why shouldn’t the same be true in the face of the risks of survival of the planet?

The importance of the relationship of this Encyclical to science has already been underlined. The critical words aimed at those who manipulate information [§54 and elsewhere] show that the Church does not question the scientific consensus. The high consideration of science, combined with the reference to a wide number of thinkers of other religions and even to philosophers, are signs that what is proposed here is a new humanism, in which all creative capacities of humankind, including religions and spirituality, can contribute to the “bold cultural revolution” that is proposed, which can provide the arguments and the moral push that may help women and men living on this planet to become actors of change. A change that may help humanity to “feel again at home” — as Buber (1947)¹⁰ would have said, in his common home.

There is a spiritual and ethical void, an absence of scope in today’s technocratic society that needs to be filled, and this Encyclical contributes to fill this void.

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⁸ See, for example, the interesting article of William Nordhaus. The Pope & the Market. *New York Review of Books*. URL:<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2015/oct/08/pope-and-market/>. [Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6cjbX10pk>]

⁹ See the declaration of Pope Francis mentioned at the press event for the presentation of the Encyclical at: <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/fr/bollettino/pubblico/2015/06/18/0480/01050.html> [Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6cjmztzsn>]

¹⁰ “In the history of the human spirit I distinguish between epochs of habitation and epochs of homelessness. In the former, man lives in the world as in a house, as in a home. In the latter, man lives in the world as in an open field and at times does not even have four pegs with which to set up a tent.” — Martin Buber, “Between man and man”, 1947.