

Introduction to Pope Francis encyclical: On care for our common home

The Encyclical Letter

Pope Francis, the spiritual leader of 1 billion Catholics, has issued an encyclical letter titled “Laudato si’ – on care for our common home” on 18 June 2015 (“*Laudato si’*” means *Praise the Lord in old Italian*). In it he calls on the world to act to stop climate change, protect the environment and improve conditions for the Poor, the main victims of environmental destruction.

Letters from the Pope to church officials are written in the old Latin language. Papal encyclicals have a high authority in the church, and were traditionally in complicated academic style, but the new encyclical is highly readable and was published in 8 languages including English, Portuguese, Spanish, French and Arabic so as to reach many people. In the early July, Francis hosted a conference about the encyclical where he also invited UN leaders, scientists, people from other religions and Naomi Klein, the author of the book “This Changes Everything – Capitalism vs. the Climate”. In September Pope Francis will visit USA for the first time and speak to the US Congress and to the UN General Assembly in New York where he will further his message.

You may divide the encyclical into two parts.

The first part lays out the issues facing humanity in three chapters:

1. What is happening to our common home
2. The gospel of creation
3. The human roots of the ecological crisis.

The second part turns to what must be done, what needs to change:

4. Integral ecology
5. Lines of approach and action
6. Ecological education and spirituality.

The encyclical starts with an introduction where we find this appeal:

“The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change...”

Regrettably, many efforts to seek concrete solutions to the environmental crisis have proved ineffective, not only because of powerful opposition but also because of general lack of interest...

We require a new and universal solidarity.”

The Pope tells us that capitalism is not the solution. That in fact the greed inspired by capitalism is part of the problem:

“Once more, we need to reject a magical conception of the market, which would suggest that problems can be solved simply by an increase in the profits of companies or individuals. Is it realistic to hope that those who are obsessed with maximizing profits will stop to reflect on the environmental damage, which they will leave behind for future generations? Where profits alone count, there can be no thinking about the rhythms of nature, its phases of decay and regeneration, or the complexity of ecosystems, which may be gravely upset by human intervention.”

He points out that climate change is for real:

“A very solid scientific consensus indicates that we are presently witnessing a disturbing warming of the climatic system. In recent decades this warming has been accompanied by a constant rise in the sea level and, it would appear, by an increase of extreme weather events, even if a scientifically determinable cause cannot be assigned to each particular phenomenon. Humanity is called to recognize the need for changes of lifestyle, production and consumption, in order to combat this warming or at least the human causes which produce or aggravate it.”

And he reminds us that the poor are the main victims of environmental destruction:

“The human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation. In fact, the deterioration of the environment and of society affects the most vulnerable people on the planet: ‘Both everyday experience and scientific research show that the gravest effects of all attacks on the environment are suffered by the poorest’.”

The whole document ends with a prayer for the earth with this passage:

*“Touch the hearts of those who look only for gain at the expense of the poor and the earth.
Teach us to discover the worth of each thing,
to be filled with awe and contemplation,
to recognize we are profoundly united with every creature.”*

About the Catholic Church and the election of Pope Francis

Pope Francis has adopted a new style as a pope. He prefers simplicity over pomp and wealth. When he gave outdoor mass in Bolivia in July to

hundreds of thousands, he changed into ceremonial garment not in a fine hotel, but in a Burger King fast-food restaurant. While in Bolivia he apologized to indigenous people for past crimes by the Catholic Church. When he became pope he took the name after Francis of Assisi, the son of a 13th century rich Italian merchant, who dedicated his life to live and preach among the poor and became patron saint of the environment. Before he was Pope Francis, he was bishop in Argentina, and became known for preaching to the poor, and for support to indigenous communities.

The Church has over its 2000-year history had shifting relations to the rich and powerful. In early days, the church was in opposition to the Roman slave empire. It was a religion for the poor. In 313, the Roman Emperor declared Christianity state religion and persecuted non-believers. During the Middle Ages, the Church was immensely rich and owned one third of all farmland in Europe. When the Spanish colonized Latin America many crimes were committed in the name of the Church. Local priests, however, often sided with indigenous communities against the colonial state. For this reason the Jesuit priests were expelled by the Spanish king in 1767 as he opposed their social work. In 1929, the fascist dictator of Italy made Catholicism state religion and got papal support for fascism. In the 1960s, some Latin American priests began to preach “liberation theology”. The Vatican saw this as an attempt to sneak Marxism into the church. Several priests were suspended. In 1980, Bishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador was assassinated during mass because he told the military government to stop killing people. While the poor regarded Romero as a martyr saint, the Vatican disagreed. But in January 2015, Pope Francis beautified Romero, the first step towards making him a saint.

In the 1980s, the media began to write stories of child abuse committed by priest. Many examples from all over the world were revealed. In worst cases priests abused scores of victims over decades. The two past popes were both implicated in covering up the sex crimes. This greatly reduced respect for the church. Many see the election of Pope Francis, the first ever Latin American pope, as an effort to turn a new page for the church.

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Pope Francis most recent actions

Since June-July 2015, when the encyclical was presented to the world, Pope Francis has continued his untraditional diplomatic work. In September he traveled to America to visit Cuba and USA and chose to go to Cuba first. Here he spoke at the Revolution Square in Havana to a large crowd, walked through the streets side by side with Raul Castro and met with Fidel Castro. The Vatican and the Pope himself had been part of the secret negotiations between USA and Cuba that reestablished diplomatic ties and the beginning of the lifting of US sanctions against Cuba. In USA, he as the first Pope ever spoke at Capitol Hill to a joint session of the Senate and House of Representatives. He talked about climate change, the plight of the poor and against the death penalty. He visited a prison in Philadelphia where he washed the feet of prisoners so as to show his respect for 2.5 million people in prison in USA.

In New York, he was the first Pope to speak at the UN General Assembly, where he addressed the annual summit of heads of state. He again spoke out against greed and on the need for the world to change its ways.

Here are a few excerpts from his speech:

"The ecological crisis, and the large-scale destruction of biodiversity, can threaten the very existence of the human species. The baneful consequences of an irresponsible mismanagement of the global economy, guided only by ambition for wealth and power, must serve as a summons to a forthright reflection on man."

"The poorest are ... cast off by society, forced to live off what is discarded and suffer unjustly from the abuse of the environment. They are part of today's widespread and quietly growing 'culture of waste.'

"... it must be stated that a true "right of the environment" does exist, for two reasons. First, because we human beings are part of the environment. We live in communion with it, since the environment itself entails ethical limits which human activity must acknowledge and respect."

"Any harm done to the environment ... is harm to humanity."

"Man is not authorized to abuse it [the environment], nor is he authorized to destroy it."