

CARE FOR OUR COMMON HOME - Laudato Si' **a summary for Worth Abbey Parish**

The second encyclical of Pope Francis is called, in Italian, *Laudato Si'*. His first encyclical was *Lumen fidei* (The Light of Faith) released in 2013. *Lumen fidei* was, however, largely the work of Francis' predecessor, Benedict XVI, so it is generally agreed that *Laudato Si'* better represents Pope Francis's own outlook.

This outlook includes urging an ecological spirituality whereby we find beauty in every moment and we are drawn towards a simpler life in which we find joy and peace. Indeed, the Italian title of the document *Laudato Si* means "Praise be to you" which is the first line of a canticle by St. Francis of Assisi praising God and his creation, "our sister, Mother Earth".

Yet there is much in the encyclical beyond lyrical recognition of the beauty of Creation. One key sign that the encyclical intends an analysis of social change as well as a call to individual conversion is that it is addressed to "all people". In this Pope Francis follows Pope St. John XXIII, in his social encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, whereas most papal documents are addressed only to the Church's bishops and/or the faithful.

The English Language title *Care for our Common Home* perhaps better signals, than does the Italian, the wish of Pope Francis to critique and combat the formidable pressures towards environmental and social destruction in our world. He makes a passionate call to all people of the world to take "swift and unified global action". Pope Francis writes that while humanity has made incredible progress in science and technology, this has not been matched with moral, ethical and spiritual growth. This imbalance is causing our relationships with creation and with God to break down and our hearts to become hardened to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor. We become arrogant and neglect creation and everyone that is part of it, forgetting what God has entrusted to our care.

Care for Our Common Home (Laudato Si') is located within the body of social encyclicals which began with *Rerum Novarum - Of New Things* - issued by Pope Leo XIII in 1891. These "new things" were the result of what was then recent rapid industrialisation. In its train came widespread poverty as a result of economic dislocation and also a growth in the power of trade unions and socialist movements. Pope Leo XIII argued that these "new things" required a renewed statement of Catholic moral teaching with emphasis on the protection of the rights of workers and of their free association by the state together with the defence, within limits, of private property.

In 1967 Pope Paul VI furthered the moral and spiritual analysis of changing economic and social conditions, sometimes known as "signs of the times", in *Populorum Progressio (The Progress of Peoples)*. He most famously stated that 'development is the new name for peace' and goes on to depict the dangers of conflict if inequalities grew. The whole area of human development is examined from an integral and holistic viewpoint rather than development just being based on economic factors.

Pope Francis takes a Catholic analysis of our own "signs of the times" further when, in *Care for Our Common Home* he calls the Church and the world to acknowledge the urgency of the environmental challenge. Poor nations are ill-prepared to adapt to the effects of climate change and will bear the brunt of its effects, he says. Developed nations are morally obliged to assist developing nations in combating the climate change crisis.

Care for Our Common Home marks the first time ecological issues have been the main focus of an encyclical; yet environmental concerns are not new to Catholic Social Teaching as there is a rich history of Christian thought about how we relate to creation, going all the way back to the foundation of the Church, as well as a tradition shared with Judaism that predates them. Pope Francis now holds up Saint Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of ecology, as an example of someone in communion and harmony with all of creation.

Pope Francis dedicates the first chapter of *Care for Our Common Home* to discussing the many ways we degrade our world. He does not offer a comprehensive list, but seeks to jolt us into action through recognition of the extent of the damage and acceptance therefore of our own and our children's suffering and that of our global neighbours. Pope Francis believes we can only understand how to remedy this suffering and damage when we look beyond the symptoms to the human origins of the ecological crisis. Many of the world's resources are being plundered because of short-sighted approaches to the economy and what he calls the "modern myth" of unlimited material progress. Short-termism allows the pursuit of profit to trump wider considerations of the common good and also masks damaging effects on the world's ecosystems. Critical is the need to address unsustainable levels of consumption. Pope Francis is not against material progress or profit; in fact, he emphasises that business is a noble vocation that can do much to contribute to the common good. But, true progress is one that has human dignity at its heart and profit must be earned responsibly.

"Human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself." (66) Pope Francis uses the Book of Genesis to show us that if this harmony is broken by treating others as objects and by behaving like "lords and masters" we harm our relationships with the environment, with God, with others and with our own self. Creation is not just our background or an object to be studied but, rather, "it has to do with God's loving plan in which every creature has its own value and significance". (76) This interconnectedness means that our care for the environment is only one part of an integral ecology. The more we put the care of others and the care of the whole of creation before our own selfish interests, the more we grow. As we do, we become more fully human and live in closer communion with our Creator. Pope Francis argues "The entire material universe speaks of God's love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God." (84)

In the encyclical Pope Francis calls us to an ecological conversion and puts forward proposals for an ecological spirituality. He recommends a way of understanding and living out our relationships with God, creation and all people. Our fast-paced world - characterised by busyness, increased consumption and distractions - can prevent us from cherishing the beauty in every moment. Pope Francis' ecological spirituality draws us towards a simpler life in which we find joy and peace. It is this joy and peace that, in the Christian tradition, Jesus exemplifies. Francis of Assisi is Pope Francis' saintly model for this spirituality - St Francis approached the world as a joyful mystery to be adored with praise and thanksgiving. In cultivating this spirituality we can resist a mentality of consumption and exploitation. It is through this spirituality that Pope Francis wants to do what doctrine alone cannot - to "motivate us to a more passionate concern for the protection of our world". (216)

The change of heart needed to tackle the challenges facing the planet is not only for individual believers. Politicians must be courageous enough to take decisions that might outlast their government. Long-term international agreements are essential and the political

solutions related to climate change and environmental protection will take time. The healthy politics needed is one based on love. Love applied to our social, political and economic choices is the only route to authentic development. We must not let this be pushed aside as an irrelevant motivation in our political discourse, but rather let love be the thing that shapes our politics. *Care for Our Common Home* repeatedly calls for a conversion and conversation that includes everyone. We must “regain the conviction that we need one another, that we have a shared responsibility for others and the world, and that being good and decent are worth it”. (229)

The social teaching of the Catholic Church shows us Jesus in the flesh of the poor and vulnerable and takes, as a key theme, “the Preferential Option for the Poor”. *In Care for our Common Home* Pope Francis advances this teaching by writing not only out of concern for them, but by bringing their voices and suffering to the heart of the encyclical. To actually help and love the most vulnerable means, for Pope Francis, **being close to them**. Throughout the document, the fate of the poor and the planet are repeatedly linked. This is because the poor are the ones who most closely share in the pain of the earth. They cry out as it cries out, yet have done so little to cause it. In the footnotes to the encyclical the Pope asks us us to hear the voice of the Church in the poorest and least developed parts of the world. The process of putting this document together involved consultation with people from all corners of the world.

Pope Francis talks of hope in a better future while, at the same time, challenging us all. This document remains, however, just text on a page if we do not take it to heart, accept its challenges and live it out in the everyday of our lives. As Pope Francis himself says, “The poor and the earth are crying out”; so, do something about it.

Signs of the Times for Catholic Social Teaching Today

If the encyclical is not just to remain a text on a page how can parishioners actually “do something about it” in terms of the following examples of apparent social and environmental disharmony:

1. A group of geologists is assessing whether or not humanity’s activities have tipped the planet into a new geological epoch, called *the Anthropocene*, which ended the *Holocene* that began around 12,000 years ago. The chairman of the group has argued that the humble plastic bag and plastic drink container play a far greater role in changing the planet than has been realised. “Just consider the fish in the sea,” he said. “A vast proportion of them now have plastic in them. They think it is food and eat it, just as seabirds feed plastic to their chicks. Then some of it is released as excrement and ends up sinking on to the seabed. The planet is slowly being covered in plastic.” The total amount of plastic produced since the second world war is around 5 billion tonnes and is very likely to reach 30 billion by the end of the century. It is spreading. In 2014, researchers found “significant” amounts of plastic granules frozen in the Arctic Sea, having been swept there from the Pacific Ocean. The impact will be colossal. Plastic may be becoming “a Stratigraphic Indicator of the Anthropocene.” Is this of any immediate concern in the parish or are we still at a distance from any danger? What are the dangers? What, if anything, can we do in our communities, shopping and political action?

2. The Natural Resource Economist [Peter Edward](#) has argued that instead of pushing poorer countries to “catch up” with rich ones, we should be thinking of ways to get rich countries to “catch down” to more appropriate levels of development. We should look at societies where people live long and happy lives at relatively low levels of income and consumption not as basket cases that need to be developed towards western models, but as exemplars of efficient living. It is calculated there are enough resources for each of us to consume 1.8 “global hectares” annually – a standardised unit that measures resource use and waste. This figure is roughly what the average person in Ghana or Guatemala consumes. By contrast, people in North America consume about 8 hectares per person, while Europeans consume 4.7 hectares. Is this fair and is it sustainable? If sustainable “How”? Interventions such as banning advertising, a shorter working week and a basic income have all been advocated to improve our lives while reducing consumption. Are any of these proposals realistic? Where might they be realistic - in Irundu Uganda, in Sussex, in Worth Abbey Parish?

3. Can parishioners be of any help when Pope Francis asks “let love be the thing that shapes our politics”? Do parishioners even see a politics of love as a sensible goal or are we faced here with papal poetry for the vision in the encyclical and people’s prose for the everyday practice of government and opposition? What are parishioners’ experiences of politics and environmental protection?