



## **Laudato Si: An Introduction**

1 Pope Francis presents an “urgent challenge to protect our common home ... to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change” [13].

Thus Pope Francis’s plea of *Laudato Si*, a text of such landmark significance that it may well become one of the most important sources of Catholic Social Teaching since the inception with Pope Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* in 1891. Both the title of the encyclical (“On Care for Our Common Home”) and its opening quote from St. Francis’s canticle establish the focus of this text.

### **It’s all about relationships.**

In the introductory section, Francis, following his thirteenth-century namesake, calls the earth our “common home,” which is like our sister and our mother. But we are damaging this familial relationship as we harm the environment. In so doing, we are damaging our relationship with other humans, particularly those least equipped to defend themselves: the poor and future generations. We are forgetting our interconnectedness with the earth and with those around and ahead of us who depend on our good stewardship of the gift of creation.

Given the universal nature of our common home, Francis makes it clear that the encyclical is addressed to not only members of the Church but is a vehicle to “enter into dialogue” with all people who are “united by the same concern” [3, 7].

Such a wide target audience explains the immense range of sources the encyclical draws on. The document looks to St. Francis of Assisi and St. Bonaventure, as well as St. Thomas Aquinas, but also to Eastern Christian traditions. It even quotes a Sufi Mystic. Twentieth-century thinkers Teilhard de Chardin and Romano Guardini deserve special mention. Secular documents such as the Rio Declaration from 1992 and the 2000 Earth Charter are referred to as well. The reader is also struck by the many references to previous papal writings, particularly those of St. John Paul II and Benedict XVI. The relationship and concern expressed between Francis and his predecessors on ecology issues is very evident and strong.

After a comprehensive introduction, the encyclical divides into six chapters, each examining different aspects of the rupture between humans and creation and the prospects for healing this relationship.

## Questions for thoughtful discussion and action:

1. Pope Francis calls for dialogue that includes “everyone.” Who should be included in the conversation who may currently not be? With whom are Catholics called to dialogue about the future of our common home?
2. The climate belongs to all and is meant for all, yet a disproportionate amount of the earth’s resources are consumed by the United States and other wealthy countries. What does Pope Francis propose must happen in order to address this?



## **Laudato Si': Chapter One**

"What Is Happening to Our Common Home" looks at the various symptoms of environmental degradation. The impacts of climate change are considered alongside issues of the depletion of freshwater and loss of biodiversity. There is no substantial discussion of the science of global warming; instead, it simply points to the overwhelming consensus concerning the negative impact of carbon-intensive economies on the natural world and human life: "Caring for ecosystems demands farsightedness, since no one looking for quick and easy profit is truly interested in their preservation" [36].

### **"What is happening to our common home"**

Our goal is not to amass information or to satisfy curiosity, but rather to become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it. (§19)

Why does what is happening in the world have to become personal suffering for others?

What kind of attitude toward the world would we have to have for it to become so?

Is there an attitude an antidote to, or the antithesis of, the "numbing of conscience" Francis talks about? Here are a few passages.

(1) Chapter 1 takes up pollution; the threat climate changes poses to biodiversity, the availability of water and the quality of life; global inequality of access to resources and the diversity of opinion about climate change.

(2) The teaching advocates a preference for the use of renewable energies (§26; see also §165)

(3) He contends that "access to safe drinkable water is a basic and universal human right, since it is essential to human survival and, as such, is a condition for the exercise of other human rights" (§30)

(4) It emphasizes a consideration for the physical proximity of dangerous situations and the poor in EV. In a lengthy discussion of global inequality, and of the impact of climate change on the poor, Francis writes: many professionals, opinion makers, communications media and centers of power, usually located in affluent urban areas, are far removed from the poor, with little direct contact with their problems.

They live and reason from the comfortable position of an elevated level of development and a quality of life well beyond the reach of most of the world's population. This lack of physical contact and encounter, encouraged at times by the disintegration of our cities, can lead to a numbing of conscience...

Today, however, we must realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor. (§49)

In Francis's view, the ecological crisis and the problem of economic inequality are connected.

(5) At the end of §59, a chilling passage in which, Francis seems to imply, self-deception abets the numbing of conscience: As often occurs in periods of deep crisis which require bold decisions, we are tempted to think that what is happening is not entirely clear. Superficially, apart from a few obvious signs of pollution and deterioration, things do not look that serious, and the planet could continue as it is for some time.

Such evasiveness serves as a license to carrying on with our present lifestyles and models of production and consumption. This is the way human beings contrive to feed their self-destructive vices: trying not to see them, trying not to acknowledge them, delaying the important decisions and pretending that nothing will happen.

## A MORAL AND SPIRITUAL ISSUE

"The universe as a whole, in all its manifold relationships, shows forth the inexhaustible riches of God." (no. 86)

"Whether believers or not, we are agreed today that the earth is essentially a shared inheritance, whose fruits are meant to benefit everyone." (no. 93)

"Disregard for the duty to cultivate and maintain a proper relationship with my neighbor, for whose care and custody I am responsible, ruins my relationship with my own self, with others, with God and with the earth. When all these relationships are neglected, when justice no longer dwells in the land, the Bible tells us that life itself is endangered." (no. 70)

## Questions for thoughtful discussion and action:

1. What does nature teach us about the Creator? Has your own experience of the created world helped you to pray or communicate with God?
2. When we fail to care for creation, what impact does this have on our relationship with ourselves, others, God and the earth?
3. Reflecting on the Creation Story in Genesis 1:1-2:3, as well as other Scriptural passages that Pope Francis mentions in Chapter 1 of *Laudato Si'*, how does Scripture call us to care for God's creation?
4. Pope Francis addressed his encyclical to "all people" (no. 3). Why do you think he did this?