



Laudato Si': Chapter 5 – Lines of Approach and Action

The fifth chapter, “Lines of Approach and Action”, sets out various international collective actions needed. It highlights the imperative to switch from fossil fuels to renewables, with the use of government subsidies where appropriate. It identifies the need for international agreements and legislation not only in relation to climate change but also biodiversity and the oceans. Carbon credits are criticized as “an expedient which permits maintaining the excessive consumption of some countries and sectors.” [171].

Chapter 5 – “Lines of Approach and Action”

a. Note that in §171, the Pope condemns “cap and trade” - On what grounds does he do so? Is he right to do so, or is this a case in which his animus toward financial speculation has gotten the better of him?

b. §175 – “The twenty-first century, while maintaining systems of governance inherited from the past, is witnessing a weakening of the power of nation states, chiefly because the economic and financial sectors, being transnational, tends to prevail over the political.”

This is an interesting observation; is it right?

One of the reasons it is of interest, and that we will want to keep thinking about it, is that Rawls frames a theory of justice for a closed nation-state, and so he be said to focus on a “system[] of government inherited from the past”. We will want to ask whether he is right to do so, since one critic accused him of making “rules for a vanished Westphalian world”.

c. A long-standing principle of Catholic thought is subsidiarity (see §196), according to which problems should be handled at the lowest or most local level competent to handle them. Note that in §175, Francis seems to say that the lowest level is global.

d. In §178, Francis criticizes the short-sightedness of much political decision-making. Isn't short-sightedness the price we pay for democracy?

e. In §189, the Pope is highly critical of the world's response to the financial crisis of 2008. Is he right to be so critical? His criticism seems to depend upon a distinction between the real economy and the financial one.

What is this distinction? Is it tenable?

f. In §193, Francis seems to suggest that economic growth be contained or reversed in order to achieve “sustainable development”. Here, Rawls and the Pope are on the same page, since Rawls insists that justice does not demand continual economic growth.

But there are real perils to reining in growth. Economic growth in the developing world has lifted millions into the “global middle class” in recent decades. In the developed world, low growth probably means stagnating or falling wages for the middle class the working poor. If Thomas Piketty is right, it also means greater inequality, since those who inherit wealth will pull away from those who don’t.

What do we do? Francis suggests redefining what we mean by ‘progress’ (§194) but is that realistic or desirable?

g. §195, Francis says “The principle of the maximization of profits, frequently isolated from other considerations, reflects a misunderstanding of the very concept of the economy.”

Is the Pope right about this?

Consider, in this connection, that the word ‘economy’ comes from the Greek ‘οἰκονομία’, meaning ‘household management’. If the earth is, as Francis says, our “common home”, then maybe economics – taken literally or at least etymologically -- is about stewardship of the earth.

h. In §199, the Pope says: It would be quite simplistic to think that ethical principles present themselves purely in the abstract, detached from any context. Nor does the fact that they may be couched in religious language detract from their value in public debate. The ethical principles capable of being apprehended by reason can always reappear in different guise and find expression in a variety of languages, including religious language.

- The last line suggests that ethical principles are merely “translated” from one language to another. But consider what the Pope thinks about the spiritual value of proximity to the poor. Can that really be “translated” into secular language?

- How, if at all, would a secular argument for the preferential option for the poor go?

- When the Pope addresses the US Congress (where 31% of the House and 26% of the Senate are Catholic), he couched his ethical principles in religious language. Do you think this is more effective than putting his principles in other terms? Would it be OK for Catholic members of Congress to treat his address as authoritative? How have our American voters reacted to the principles outlined in the text so far?

Chapter 5 Reflections:

TIME TO ACT—AS INDIVIDUALS AND COMMUNITIES of Faith

"Believers themselves must constantly be challenged to live in a way consonant with their faith and not to contradict it by their actions." (no. 200)

"All Christian communities have an important role to play in ecological education." (no. 214)

"Local individuals and groups can make a real difference. They are able to instill a greater sense of responsibility, a strong sense of community, a readiness to protect others, a spirit of creativity and a deep love for the land." (no. 179)

Questions

1. How are you individually called to participate in caring for God's creation?
2. How can we encourage a serious dialogue in the Catholic community—in our parishes, schools, colleges, universities and other settings—on the significant ethical dimensions of the environmental crisis?
3. What efforts are happening in our local community that individuals, families, and Catholic communities can participate in?