

## ***Laudato Si'*: integral liberation for the poor and the planet**

Paul L Younger

“Creation still retains the hope of being freed, like us, from its slavery to decadence, to enjoy the same freedom and glory as the children of God”  
(*Romans 8: 21*).

The first social encyclical of Pope Francis has been widely mis-reported as being “on climate change”. While that issue does indeed receive accurate coverage and is mentioned some 14 times, the words ‘poor’ and ‘poverty’ are mentioned 73 times. As such, *Laudato Si'* is rooted firmly in the evolving tradition of Catholic social teaching. However, it goes beyond earlier formulations by responding comprehensively to contemporary challenges of environmental degradation, as revealed by the latest evidence and scientific understanding. For Pope Francis, environmental degradation and poverty are two sides of the same coin.

This is particularly evident in developing countries, of course, where large proportions of the population still live by subsistence agriculture and are thus especially vulnerable to the vagaries of climate, pollution of air, soil and water, soil erosion and depletion of water resources. Non-human beings are even more vulnerable to such changes, and thus the dramatic losses of biodiversity in many parts of the world are not only tragic in themselves; like the miner’s canary of old they indicate the degradation of the life-support systems on which humans also ultimately depend. Nor are city-dwellers immune: for instance, poor urban air quality is a major cause of premature death worldwide, as the most vulnerable pay the ultimate price for the burgeoning addiction of so many of us to private car travel.

But is a concern with the environment not merely a distraction from the traditional foci of Catholic social action, on economic injustice and the lack of access to resources and services that leave the poorest so vulnerable to disease and premature death? No. A recent report in the magazine of the Institution of Chemical Engineers highlighted that environmental pollution is now the single greatest cause of premature death in developing countries, accounting for 8.9 million mortalities annually. This compares with 1.5m due to HIV/AIDS, and 1m to each of malaria and tuberculosis. Globally, more than one death in seven is now due to environmental pollution. So there is no longer a legitimate commitment to the poor that does not include a commitment to combat environmental pollution.

As he himself notes, Pope Francis is not the first pontiff to highlight these issues. As early as 1971, Pope Paul VI commented that “due to an ill-considered exploitation of nature, humanity runs the risk of destroying it and becoming in turn a victim of this degradation”. It hardly need be stated that if everyone on the planet lived in accordance with the example of Jesus, St Francis, St Ignatius of Loyola and many other saints, exploitation of nature would never reach the ill-considered levels that lead to degradation. Thus, at one level, a call to live as Jesus lived is in itself a call to a life more in keeping with a true “human ecology” (a

term Pope Francis explores at length, but which actually entered the lexicon of Catholic social teaching from the lips of Pope St John Paul II). This echoes Dorothy Day's insight that "the greatest challenge of the day is: how to bring about a revolution of the heart, a revolution which has to start within each one of us?"

Yet Pope Francis is absolutely adamant that personal conversion is insufficient: the "problems must be addressed by community networks and not simply by the sum of individual good deeds". Hence *Laudato Si'* is a call to "ecological conversion" - not just personal, but social and political conversion too. Nor is Pope Francis simply appealing to practising Catholics: in a departure from most earlier encyclicals, *Laudato Si'* is addressed to "every person living on this planet", seeking "dialogue with everyone so that together we can seek paths of liberation". Pope Francis acknowledges that "we Christians have at times incorrectly interpreted the Scriptures" and thus contributed to attitudes towards nature that range from apathy to "obstructionist attitudes, even on the part of believers, [ranging] from denial of the problem to indifference, nonchalant resignation or blind confidence in technical solutions".

Specific solutions are not offered in *Laudato Si'*; rather, Pope Francis comments that "on many concrete questions, the Church has no reason to offer a definitive opinion; she knows that honest debate must be encouraged among experts, while respecting divergent views". However, *Laudato Si'* is rich in principles, such as the inalienable human right of access to water, which Pope Francis emphasises is simply incompatible with privatisation of water services. Indeed, Pope Francis unequivocally states that "the market cannot guarantee integral human development and social inclusion. At the same time, we have "a sort of 'superdevelopment' of a wasteful and consumerist kind which forms an unacceptable contrast with the ongoing situations of dehumanizing deprivation".

Countering these dehumanizing forces is not something Christians can do alone; rather, we must make common cause with "other Churches and Christian communities – and other religions" as well as "civic groups" and all "those who tirelessly seek to resolve the tragic effects of environmental degradation on the lives of the world's poorest". Nevertheless, Pope Francis warns against the misanthropic attitudes of certain environmental extremists "who view men and women and all their interventions as no more than a threat, jeopardizing the global ecosystem, and [who] consequently [argue that] the presence of human beings on the planet should be reduced and all forms of intervention prohibited".

*Laudato Si'* is thus both a powerful call to personal conversion and a manifesto for profound social and political change. The richness of insights it offers deserve concerted study and urgent translation into practice. We will require much grace to live up to the challenges we are called to face. Seeking this grace, the encyclical closes with two prayers: one explicitly Christian, the other suitable for use with co-workers from other religions. This is a real innovation in a papal encyclical; its inclusion underlines the importance of seeking truly global solutions to global problems.