On Care for Our Common Home

A brief synopsis of Pope Francis’ Encyclical Letter

We face 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].

This is how Pope Francis summarises the situation faced and the solution suggested in *Laudato Si* his letter to the whole of the world community.

It will surely take its place as one of the most urgent and significant papal documents of Catholic Social Teaching. The title of the encyclical (“On Care for Our Common Home”) and its opening quote from St. Francis’s *Canticle of Creation* establish the focus of this text.

At its heart is the insight that our approach has to acknowledge, nurture and protect relationships.

The Pope echoes Saint Francis’ familial imagery in the introductory section, where he names the earth “our common home”, which is like our sister and our mother. Our negligence, apathy, ignorance and deliberate greed are damaging this relationship as we harm the environment. We are simultaneously damaging those least equipped to defend themselves: the poor and future generations. We are ignoring the essential interconnectedness of the planet and failing to exercise good stewardship of creation.

Pope Francis makes it clear that the encyclical is addressed not only to Church members. It aims to provide a vehicle to “enter into dialogue” with all people who are “united by the same concern” [3, 7].

This all embracing target audience is highlighted by the choice of sources the encyclical draws on. As might be expected the document makes many references to previous papal teaching, particularly those of Saint John Paul II and Benedict XVI. This demonstrates continuity and the developing nature of papal teaching. Not surprisingly, there are liberal references to Saint Francis of Assisi and the wider Franciscan mind-set. Saint Thomas Aquinas also features, as well as the Eastern Christian traditions.

But the Pope looks beyond the usual sources; he even quotes a Sufi Mystic. Some twentieth-century thinkers who were not always regarded with such esteem such as Teilhard de Chardin and Romano Guardini deserve special mention.

That documents generated outside the faith tradition are also quoted as authorities is another important development of approach. The *Rio Declaration* from 1992 and the 2000 *Earth Charter* are each referred to.

Following the comprehensive introduction, the encyclical divides is arranged into six chapters, each takes a different aspect of the damaged relationship between humans and creation and proposes some suggestions for healing these wounds.

Chapter One, “What Is Happening to Our Common Home”, surveys the symptoms of environmental degradation. These include climate change, the depletion of freshwater and an accelerating loss of biodiversity. The encyclical does not pretend to offer a substantial discussion of the science of global warming; rather it endorses the evident scientific consensus regarding 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].

The encyclical proposes a truly ecological approach which is inherently social – one that hears and responds to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor. The impact of mining is quoted as a real life example with it many negative outcomes both social and environmental. Francis regularly points to and praises the achievements of the environmental movement. But he also critiques some of its elements. He does not adhere to the doctrine that population growth is to blame for environmental damage; he points out how this is too easily used as a smokescreen to excuse the affluent of their acquired habits of overconsumption. Likewise, the encyclical states that the protection of nature can never be viewed as a justification for abortion.

Chapter Two, “The Gospel of Creation”, surveys the richness and complexity of the scriptural tradition to illustrate that there can be no biblical justification for “a tyrannical anthropocentrism unconcerned for other creatures.” [68]. Neither can it be used to support misanthropic versions of environmentalism. Reverence for nature is only authentic when it embraces compassion for fellow humans. Someone truly concerned about the trafficking of endangered species is surely equally concerned with the trafficking of humans.

Chapter Three, “The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis”, examines the impact of approaches to environmentalism which deny its spiritual or transcendental dimension. Notions such as “technocratic paradigm” and a “modern anthropocentrism” are borne out of a view that sees nature as a mere given. These have led to the misplaced ideas that the earth’s resources can be regarded as infinite and that economic growth and technology alone can solve global hunger and poverty. The Church takes a different view. Recent history suggests that taking a purely materialistic view of reality has not only resulted in disregard for the environment, it has also undermined any shared sense of the worth of a human life, when it is viewed as having little or no utility – human embryos, the poor, people of advanced age or those impaired by disabilities.

Consumerist and profit-driven economic ideologies represent a flawed idea of dominion. Its consequences include widespread exploitation, and a throwaway attitude towards nature and human life itself. To counter this the encyclical proposes a bold cultural revolution in our attitude to development and progress in rather stark terms: “Nobody is suggesting a return to the Stone Age, but we do need to slow down and look at reality in a different way, to appropriate the positive and sustainable progress which has been made, but also to recover the values and the great goals swept away by our unrestrained delusions of grandeur.” [114].

Chapter, “Integral Ecology”, charts a positive path to recapture awareness of the interconnectedness of creation. It is essential to recognise the impact of environmental degradation on our “cultural ecology”, including the type of social networks and ways of life that are bound up with the environment in which communities are placed. The experience of indigenous peoples is specifically referred to in this regard.

Chapter Five, “Lines of Approach and Action”, identifies the requirement for international collaboration and collective action. It endorses the imperative to switch from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources, using of government subsidies where required. It supports the need for international agreements and legislation not only in relation to climate change but also biodiversity and the oceans. Carbon credits however, are criticized as “an expedient which permits maintaining the excessive consumption of some countries and sectors.” [171].

Chapter Six, “Ecological Education and Spirituality”, brings our attention to the responsibilities of the individual believer, families and communities, inviting us to make our own contributions in small but tangible ways. Consumer choices, the cultivation of ecological virtues such as reducing wastefulness, and environmental education for the young are explained as practical steps leading to a deeper, spiritual “ecological conversion” through which the follower of Christ recognizes the true worth of all created entities.

The statement “God created the world, writing into it an order and a dynamism that human beings have no right to ignore” [221] reminds us of the hallowed natural law tradition expounded in the writings of Aristotle and Aquinas that every creature has in its nature an end, a telos, which humans should respect and honour. The intrinsic value of non-humans is noted when the encyclical states that the “ultimate purpose of other creatures is not to be found in us” but rather in the Risen Christ who embraces all things [83].