

Laudato Si': Fresh challenges, fresh methodologies

By Dr Ann-Marie Mealey

Pope Francis' encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, opens by acknowledging that the earth is much like people living in poverty: neglected, exploited and uncared for (#2). In order to address some of the most pressing ecological questions of our time, the Pope wishes to address "every person living on this planet" (# 3). This is a bold and brave statement, especially given that when a similar phrase ("all persons of good will") was used in *Gaudium et Spes*, some felt that the then Pope was pandering to the demands of secularism. But such a charge cannot be made here, since part of the encyclical has as its main focus an attempt to bring the religious voice into dialogue with the world concerning care for the environment. Since the earth is shared, it makes sense to attempt a solution in dialogue and in communication with everyone.

The Pope draws upon rich theological resources and statements that have been made by his predecessors and emphasises that we ought to approach care for the environment with awe and wonder (# 11). He states that "if we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs" (#11).

In terms of its methodology, what is perhaps very new in this encyclical is the stress on finding solutions to the cry of planet in the local, in the cultural, and in the specific. As Pope Francis points out, "all of us can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation, each according to his or her own culture, experience, involvements and talents" (# 14). This sentiment is also repeated elsewhere in the encyclical several times. The challenge that this presents to the Church and the world is the stress on finding local solutions to universal problems. A hermeneutic of the specific, of the local and cultural is being espoused here, which might be adopted and used in other areas of Theology, too.

A further challenge presented to us by this encyclical is the 'throw away' culture which the Pope is seeking to address. We see things as disposable or as having only market/economic value. We must refrain from treating things as 'rubbish' – either human or non-human. There is a call in the encyclical to adopt a new framework or a new horizon of interpretation that sees human life as sacred and that moves us away from a consumerist mentality, towards one that reveres and respects nature, and invites a kind of sincere simplicity in relations to the web of life. The encyclical challenges us to find a way of using resources and reusing them again, moderating consumption of non-renewal resources and making their use efficient (# 24). This kind of cycle of reusing resources presents a huge challenge to the current society which is, as the Pope points out, used to discarding certain things as rubbish.

Another key challenge presented to us by *Laudato Si'* is the need to combat a kind of "mental pollution" (#47) that is brought about by the media and the information overload which comes with much of our mechanisms of communication. The Pope calls for the 'voices of the sages' to be heard amidst the frenzy of modern technological communications. And he is right. "Real relationships with other, with all the challenges they entail, now tend to live replaced by a type of internet communication which enables us to choose or eliminate relationships at a whim..." (# 47) Although the Pope is not saying that the media is without virtue, he is stressing that the key to right relationships is not to be found in mechanisms that allow us to dismiss the other at our convenience. If we are to address the environmental crisis as a common world, right relationships are central. This presents the Church and the world with yet another challenge: how can we find ways of allowing the voices of wisdom to emerge amidst the busy and claustrophobic world in which we live? Parishes, governments and communities of all kinds will have to address this issue if we are to find sustainable ways of living together as part of a shared world, earth and community.

What is both challenging and compelling about this encyclical is that it stipulates that "on many concrete questions, the Church has no reason to offer a definite opinion" (# 61) and that "honest debate amongst experts is required to address the ecological challenges which we face" (# 61). The sense of humility shown here is quite a new methodological approach to questions of truth, understanding and human living in relation to each other and the earth, but it is also encouraging.

There is a sense that the Pope is extending a genuine invitation to the people of world (and particularly those with expertise, power and influence) to dialogue concerning questions of climate change, pollution, water, human life, plant life, and so on. “No branch of the sciences and no form of wisdom can be left out” (#62), says Pope Francis, as all sources of wisdom must be considered in the face of the environmental crises.

This is a huge challenge for humanity and for those engaged in the search for truth concerning the environment. However, it is also compelling and motivational that the Church is calling on ‘everyone’ (as seems to be the methodological approach of the document) to be a part of the solution, and of the restoration of relationships needed to heal the earth, its habitats, its waters, and its preferential people: our sisters and brothers living in poverty.

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