

Laudato Si': a personal reflection

By Kathy McVay

Praise be to you, my Lord

Laudato Si' is a paean to God's creation: humankind, other forms of life on earth, the earth itself, our whole planet. And it is a plea to all people to stop destroying it.

Like the majority of scientists (Pope Francis has a background in chemistry), the Holy Father fears that we are destroying our planet, chiefly by creating climate change. He believes that it is a very real threat to poorer countries who are trying to develop, and also to our children and grandchildren. I think it is worth quoting from the first two paragraphs, as they set the tone for the greater part of the encyclical:

1. "*LAUDATO SI', mi' Signore*" – *Praise be to you, my Lord*". In the words of this beautiful canticle, St Francis of Assisi reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us. "Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs".

2. This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. Gen 2:7). Our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe air, and we've received life and refreshment from the waters.

This interconnectedness between humankind and the elements is a theme that runs throughout the encyclical.

A wealth of teaching

In case some people think that Pope Francis is jumping on the bandwagon of a popular theme, as you read through the encyclical, you realise that this cannot

possibly be the case. Even in the introduction he refers to documents by previous Popes, including his predecessor, Benedict XVI, reflections of numerous scientists, philosophers, theologians and civic groups and, to crown them all, the works of St Francis of Assisi.

"I do not want to write this encyclical without turning to that attractive and compelling figure, whose name I took as my guide and inspiration when I was elected Bishop of Rome. I believe that St Francis is the example, *par excellence*, of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically. He is the patron saint of all who study and work in the area of ecology, and he is also much loved by non-Christians. He was... in wonderful harmony with God, with others, with nature and with himself. He shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace. He refused to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled" #10.

Returning to today, Pope Francis says that young people demand change. They wonder how anyone can claim to be building a better future without thinking of the environmental crisis and the sufferings of the excluded. Francis says that we need a conversation which includes everyone: "a new and universal solidarity" #14, and he wants to find other ways of using technology and of understanding economy and progress.

The climate is a common good

Chapter one is partly a factual account of what is happening to the earth; pollution and climate change, waste and the throwaway culture, the issue of water, the loss of biodiversity. He links these issues with a decline in the quality of human life, the breakdown of society, and global inequality. Amidst all of these negative activities shines through the thought of climate as a common good. "The climate is a common good, belonging to all, and meant for all. At the global level, it is a complex system linked to many of the essential conditions for human life." #23

It is clear that Pope Francis has sent out for and read the most important and relevant books for setting out these facts. Over and above the facts, however, the main messages of this letter re-emerge from time to time. We are told that "we have to realise that a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must

integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *"both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor"* #49.

Francis reminds us that inequity affects not only individuals, but entire countries. "We need to strengthen the conviction that we are one single human family" #52. Just as elsewhere, we are reminded that we are part of the earth itself, so the earth is personified by Francis. He says that "these situations have caused sister earth, along with all the abandoned of our world, to cry out, pleading that we take another course. Never have we so hurt and mistreated our common home as we have in the last two hundred years" #53.

The failure of global summits and international political responses, together with vested economic interests end up trumping the common good, says Pope Francis. Those who are given to speculation and the pursuit of financial gain are the last people to accept just how limited and finite our world really is. Depletion of resources has often led to wars, even though other causes have been cited. International agreements prohibiting the development of certain types of warfare are often ignored.

Amongst all this cheerless information, it is good to be reminded that some countries have cleaned up their rivers, restored their woodland, improved their landscapes, buildings and public transport.

The Gospel of Creation

In chapter two, entitled 'The Gospel of Creation', Pope Francis acknowledges that many people believe they could face the problems created by climate change without religion. However, Francis explains that if we have to remedy the damage we have already done, "no branch of the sciences and no form of wisdom can be left out" #63. Many Catholics have educated themselves to see that faith is not opposed to reason.

In the Book of Genesis, we are told that God gave man "dominion" over the earth. Too often this has been interpreted that humanity had complete power over the earth and all its goods, and one could do with them what one wished. This resulted

in humanity becoming domineering and destructive, exploitative and tyrannical in the relationship with God, other people and oneself. For what tyrant has a correct view of his or herself?

We should learn from Genesis that we are not God, that the earth was here before us and it has been given to us. We “can take from the bounty the earth”, but we also have a duty to protect it and “ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations” #67.

As well as having a right relationship with the earth, we must respect and care for other creatures. “You shall not see your brother’s donkey or his ox fallen down by the way, and withhold your help... If you chance to come upon a bird’s nest in any tree or on the ground, with young ones, or eggs; and the mother sitting upon the young or upon the eggs; you shall not take the mother with the young”. (Deuteronomy 22:6). Pope Francis himself says “disregard for the duty to cultivate and maintain a proper relationship with my neighbour, for whose care and custody I am responsible, ruins my relationship with my own self, with others, with God, and with the earth” #70.

The chapter continues with a wealth of quotations from the Old Testament which support the idea of God the Creator. “God’s love is the fundamental moving force in all created things:” #77 and we are drawn “into the act of cooperation with the Creator” #80.

Francis then looks outward towards the universe. Again the Bible offers much: “By the word of the Lord, the heavens were made” (Psalms 33:6). God has written a precious book, whose letters are the multitude of created things present in the universe”. (John Paul II). Again, he emphasises the interdependence of creatures. We should have a sense of deep communion with the rest of nature, but we cannot do that if we continue to tolerate that some people consider themselves more human than others, as if they had been born with greater rights.

Personal insights

I will leave you to discover the delights of the Pope’s choice of references in the New Testament, which show that Jesus lived in full harmony with creation. And now I will add two incidents of my own choice, which show the same thing.

The first is the cure of the man who had been blind from birth. In this miracle Jesus draws on two elements, earth and water. After telling his disciples that neither the man nor his parents had sinned, Jesus "spat on the ground, made a paste with the spittle, put this over the eyes of the blind man, and said to him, 'Go and wash in the Pool of Siloam' (the name means 'one who has been sent'). So he went off and washed and came back able to see" (John 9:6-7).

Another insight is after the Resurrection, when Mary of Magdala saw the empty tomb (John 20:11-18). Admittedly, Mary was weeping and that would diminish her eyesight. But it still seems strange that she thought Jesus was the gardener. I think he must have picked up some gardening tools and started to use them when he emerged from the tomb, or maybe he was bending down, looking at some plants when Mary first saw him. Maybe he had his back to her when she first saw him, which was why she didn't recognise his voice. I wonder what you think?

The remainder of *Laudato Si'* is devoted to forward-looking strategies and plans for dialogues with a variety of bodies and organisations. In fact, the Pope said that he was writing this letter to everybody on the planet. I have really enjoyed reading this encyclical, and would put it in my top five books that I always have near me.

Kathy McVay is a CAFOD supporter from Sacred Heart parish, Bristol.