

On June 18, 2015, Pope Francis released his highly-anticipated encyclical on the environment with the Italian title *Laudato Si'* taken from the beginning of the *Canticle of Creatures* by St. Francis of Assisi, "Praise be to you, My Lord." Much of the early secular reaction to the 138-page document centered on the pope's unambiguous statement on the controversial issue of global warming: "a number of scientific studies indicate that most global warming in recent decades is due to the great concentration of greenhouse gasses (carbon dioxide, methane, nitrogen oxides and others) released mainly as a result of human activity." *The New York Times*, for example, reported that Francis placed most of the blame for climate change on "fossil fuels and human activity" with industrialized countries "mostly responsible." The *Times* article noted that the pope blames the "destruction of the environment" on "apathy, the reckless pursuit of profits, excessive faith in technology, and political shortsightedness."

Defenders of Francis point out that he based his position on the work of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, composed of 80 respected scientists from 36 countries with 48 Nobel Prizes to their credit. The Academy held a series of conferences on global warming and issued a final report which concluded "human-induced climate change is a scientific reality." The pope does not claim that the church has the power to decide disputed scientific questions, but his dialogue with climate experts convinced him that there is "a very solid consensus" on "disturbing warming of the climatic system."

Although global warming has drawn the headlines, the enduring heart of the encyclical, subtitled *On Care for Our Common Home*, is an ecological spirituality drawn from the Bible, inspired by St. Francis of Assisi, and grounded in solid theology, which serves as a radical response to the contemporary ecological crisis. Following a pattern endorsed by Vatican II, Pope Francis begins by reading the signs of the times, which reveal a serious world-wide environmental crisis. In the first chapter of the encyclical, Francis offers a cursory review of the degradation of our planet, not "to amass information or satisfy curiosity," but "to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it." Our "throw-away culture," which "quickly reduces things to rubbish," has not sufficiently developed "the capacity to absorb and reuse waste and by-products," causing our earth "to look more and more like a pile of filth." Our supplies of safe drinking water are diminishing. Each year thousands of plant and animal species are lost forever. Tropical forests are burned down or levelled for cultivation, destroying valuable eco-systems. Uncontrolled fishing in rivers, lakes, seas, and oceans is leading to "a drastic depletion" of certain species of marine life. Many of the world's coral reefs are "already barren or in a state of constant decline."

Dismayed by the weak responses of political institutions to the environmental crisis, Pope Francis wants to promote a dialogue among all people of good will based on "a new and universal solidarity" so that all of us can cooperate in "the care of creation, each according to his or her own culture, experience, involvements, and talents." The Pope is convinced that the Church can make an important contribution to that dialogue and cooperative effort.

As one response to the environmental crisis, Francis presents a theology of creation drawn from the Bible and placed in a contemporary evolutionary framework. In "symbolic and narrative language," the creation accounts in the book of Genesis teach us that God is the creator of all that exists, that every creature possesses a fundamental goodness and that creatures give praise to God by their very existence. Creation is a gift from God, whose love is "the fundamental moving force in all created things." In poetic language, Pope Francis describes creation as a "caress of God," and "a precious book" which manifests "the inexhaustible riches of God."

The first creation account in the book of Genesis teaches that "every man and woman is created out of love and made in God's image and likeness." We are blessed with "an infinite dignity." Francis comments: "How wonderful the certainty" that we are "not adrift in the midst of hopeless chaos," but are sustained by "the special love of the Creator for each human being."

For Francis, Genesis suggests that we humans have "three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbor, and with the earth itself." As the story of Cain killing his brother Abel indicates, sin distorts these fundamental relationships. In that context, the Pope recognizes that Christians have distorted the biblical injunction that man has "dominion" over the earth, using it to justify "unbridled exploitation of nature," as critics of biblical religion have argued. Responding to the critics, Francis insists that we must "forcefully reject" the notion that human beings have "absolute domination over other creatures." We are not God; we do not own the earth; and we have no right to exploit and degrade God's creation.

At the same time, Francis emphasizes the imminence of God who sustains the created world and calls human beings to participate in the ongoing process of creation. God is intimately present to all creatures. The divine presence "continues the work of creation," insuring "the subsistence and growth of each being." The Spirit of God has filled the universe with possibilities so that "something new" can always emerge from "the very heart of things." God created "a world in need of development," thereby "in some way" limiting the divine power. The Creator has chosen to share the work of creation with human beings. The Father of all has entrusted to us care for "a fragile world,"

challenging us “to devise intelligent ways” of using our own power to help the material world evolve in a positive direction so that “freedom, growth, salvation, and love can blossom.” Endowed with intelligence and love, we are called not only to protect creation, but to “lead all creatures back to their Creator.”

This outline of a theology of creation presented by Francis establishes a solid foundation for an ecological spirituality that appreciates the beauty of the material world and accepts responsibility for protecting the earth. In developing this spirituality, we find inspiration and guidance in Jesus Christ, who lived in harmony not only with God and fellow human beings but also with the created world. Jesus used familiar elements of the natural world (for example, birds and flowers, seeds and harvests) to teach us about the reign of God. He assured us that God is our Father who has special care for each and every creature. Far from being an ascetic who “despised the body, matter and the things of this world,” Jesus worked with his hands and was “in constant touch with nature, lending it an attention full of fondness and wonder.”

Pope Francis reminds us that “the destiny of all creation is bound up with the mystery of Christ.” As the Divine Word, “all things have been created through him and for him” (Col 1:16). Through the incarnation, the Word made flesh shared completely in our material evolving world, living “in full harmony with creation.” As the risen Lord, “he holds the creatures of this world to himself, directing them toward fullness as their end.” An ecological spirituality inspired by Christ appreciates the beauty of creation, learns from nature, treats the world with loving care, and cooperates in the task of leading creatures to their proper end.

The spirituality of *Laudato Si'* is thoroughly Franciscan. It begins with a line from the *Canticle of Creatures* composed by St. Francis of Assisi: “Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs.” Other references to the saint from Assisi are scattered through the encyclical. In one place, Pope Francis describes St. Francis in glowing terms: an “attractive and compelling figure;” “my guide and inspiration;” “the example par excellence” of an “integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically;” “a mystic and a pilgrim who lived in simplicity and in wonderful harmony with God, with others, with nature and with himself.” Saint Francis invites us “to see nature as a magnificent book in which God speaks to us and grants us a glimpse of his infinite beauty and goodness.” The pope also raises up the figure of St. Bonaventure, a major architect of Franciscan spirituality, who invites us to be on alert for vestiges or footprints of the triune God in our own inner life and in the world of nature. We can also detect the influence of the great Franciscan theologian, John Duns Scotus, who taught that God loves each creature in its unique individuality. An ecological spirituality, steeped in the Franciscan tradition, resists the temptation “to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled,” while approaching nature with a sense of “awe and wonder,” ready to protect and care for God’s gift of creation.

Reflecting advances in contemporary moral theology and spirituality, Pope Francis puts great emphasis on developing “ecological virtues,” which incline us to simplify our lifestyle and to live in harmony with the created world. The pope speaks of “an attitude of the heart” which “approaches life with serene attentiveness,” is “fully present” to other people, and “accepts each moment as a gift from God to be lived to the full.” A balanced lifestyle combines work, which serves as “a path to growth, human development and personal fulfilment,” and proper leisure and rest, which renews our spirits and “opens our eyes” to the true meaning of life. For Francis, the Eucharist, which is “an act of cosmic love” joining heaven and earth, inspires and nourishes an eco-spirituality, serving as “a source of light and motivation for our concerns for the environment, directing us to be stewards of all creation.”

The ecological virtues incline people to make environmentally healthy decisions. Francis lists some examples: “avoiding the use of plastic and paper, reducing water consumption, separating refuse, cooking only what can reasonably be consumed, care for other living beings, using public transport or car-pooling, planting trees, turning off unnecessary lights.” This kind of simple activity, “done for the right reason,” can be “an act of love” and can, he believes, “directly and significantly affect the world around us.” Thus Pope Francis assures ordinary people that we can make a difference and offers us hope that our political leaders can achieve the kind of institutional reforms and international agreements needed to save and protect our common home, our Sister, Mother Earth.