

God's Earth – Our Home

This address was given by Matthew Bartlett, October 2015, as a kind of late St. Frances Day sermon (it had been the week before). It's a great summary of his first read through Pope Francis' encyclical on care for our world - [Laudato Si'](#).

Matthew took a clutch of texts as background to his comments: Psalm 24; Genesis 1:26–30; 2:15–17; 3:17–19; Romans 8:18–25; Matthew 6:25–27. Numbers in brackets (x) refer to marked paragraphs in the encyclical. Follow the coloured text hyperlinks to website references.



Recently Michael Brantley spoke about St Francis' impact on the world, and on his own life. In this address we will look at another person whose life has been shaped by that 13th century saint. Jorge Mario Bergoglio – Pope Francis as he is now called. In particular I want to give a brief 'first response' to my reading of his recent encyclical [Laudato Si'](#).

What's an encyclical?

An encyclical is a circular letter. Popes have been writing them for about the last three centuries. Usually papal encyclicals are addressed to the bishops of some particular area, or of the whole world. In this case, Pope Francis writes, 'Now, faced as we are with global environmental deterioration, I wish to address *every person living on this planet*... From the outset he declares, 'In this Encyclical, I would like to enter into dialogue with all people about our common home.' (3)

Columnist [Lindsay Abrams](#) sees the Popes encyclical as a "green Manifesto", cataloguing a litany of woes. Though not pulling his punches, especially in the opening two chapters, Pope Francis himself, I think, would see it as much more than that. He writes...

'The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change.' (13)

Why is it called Laudato Si' ?

Laudato Si' is medieval Italian. It's a line from St Francis's famous poem 'Canticle of the Sun', and means 'Praise be to you', or 'Be Praised', as in 'Be praised, my Lord, through all Your creatures, especially through my lord Brother Sun, who brings the day'. So the title is signalling that key to this letter is going to be Saint Francis, and about God.

What does it say?

Lots — it's about 180 small pages. It covers an enormous amount of ground and gets into all sorts of detail. Pope Francis discusses, for instance, urban planning, our industrial economies, how refugees are treated, grace at mealtimes. I found it a compelling and stimulating read. I'll give you one take on the document but there is a lot going on and there are other things you could take from it - this is just a slice through it, noting just six themes. I'll be quoting from the encyclical a lot. I'll end with some thoughts about ways Pope Francis could provide a model for us.



We're all connected - sin matters

The creation narrative we heard read from Genesis 1, 2 and 3 is foundational to Pope Francis' understanding of our human situation. We're made of the dust of the earth. It's a good world. It's God's world, and humans were made to care for it.

Frances writes:

‘Human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself. According to the Bible, these three vital relationships have been broken, both outwardly and within us. This rupture is sin. The harmony between the Creator, humanity and creation as a whole was disrupted by our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations.’ (66)

The result of this rupture is *violence*.

‘The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she “groans in travail” (Rom 8:22). 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 her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters.’ (2)

And again Francis laments for creation...

‘Other living beings have a value of their own in God’s eyes: “by their mere existence they bless him and give him glory” ’ (69) ‘Because of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God by their very existence, nor convey their message to us. We have no such right.’ (33)



Repent! Turn away from...

Because of sin, and sin's violent effects, Pope Francis is calling us to repent. He quotes Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, and calling us to repent from "our contribution, smaller or greater, to the disfigurement and destruction of creation" (8). They ask us to 'replace consumption with sacrifice, greed with generosity, wastefulness with a spirit of sharing, an asceticism which "entails learning to give, and not simply to give up. It is a way of loving, of *moving gradually away from what I want to what God's world needs*. It is liberation from fear, greed and compulsion."'

So repentance for Francis is turning away from over-consumption, obsession with appearances, distraction-technology.

This is more than joining a movement or championing a cause – it's something we become, embody. Francis dares us '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.' (19)

Throughout *Laudato Si'*, he asks us to see the connections Connectedness instead of indifference. Give up individualism. We're connected to the planet, to each other, to God, to them overseas. We give up indifference.

Turn to... the human task, with human dignity

Pope Francis offers us St. Francis as a model for a better way of being human. '...if we feel intimately united with all that exists, then sobriety and care will well up spontaneously. The poverty and austerity of Saint Francis were no mere veneer of asceticism, but something much more radical: a refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled.' (11)

Our Matthew 6 makes passage stands behind these ideas - listen to what Pope Francis says...

'Such sobriety, when lived freely and consciously, is liberating. It is not a lesser life or one lived with less intensity. On the contrary, it is a way of living life to the full.' (223) Contentment. Give thanks at meals. Be happy within our limits, and receive the gifts God's good world has to offer.

'The best way to restore men and women to their rightful place, putting an end to their claim to absolute dominion over the earth, is to speak once more of the figure of a Father who creates and who alone owns the world.' (75) God needs to be God, if humans are to be truly human.

Dignity of the human task...

‘Never have we so hurt and mistreated our common home as we have in the last two hundred years. Yet we are called to be instruments of God our Father, so that our planet might be what he desired when he created it and correspond with his plan for peace, beauty and fullness.’ (53, c.f. 14)

‘Many things have to change course, but it is we human beings above all who need to change. We lack an awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone’ (202)



Cultural revolution

But Pope Francis is not only after individual repentance and action. He's calling for a global cultural revolution. This is an aspect of the document I didn't really get on first reading.

‘Self-improvement on the part of individuals will not by itself remedy the extremely complex situation facing our world today ... Social problems must be addressed by community networks and not simply by the sum of individual good deeds.’ (219)

Francis is asking our societies, particularly those in the wealthier parts of the world, to fundamentally change direction. He says we have ‘a sort of ‘super-development’ of a wasteful and consumerist kind which forms an unacceptable contrast with the ongoing situations of dehumanizing deprivation”, [90] while we are all too slow in developing economic institutions and social initiatives which can give the poor regular access to basic resources. We fail to see the deepest roots of our present failures, which have to do with the direction, goals, meaning and social implications of technological and economic growth.’ (109)

It's more of the 'we're all connected' stuff. Our technology, and our economies have their own logic, which tends to make us indifferent.

'...developing countries, where the most important reserves of the biosphere are found, continue to fuel the development of richer countries at the cost of their own present and future ... We need to strengthen the conviction that we are one single human family. There are no frontiers or barriers, political or social, behind which we can hide, still less is there room for the globalization of indifference.' (52)

Connecting the dots...

I came across a fascinating news headline this week.

FONTERRA PKE BOMBHELL BEWILDERS FARMERS

Two weeks ago Fonterra signalled it will penalise farmers who use too much of a substance called Palm Kernel Expeller (PKE). Many New Zealand farmers feed PKE to their animals when food stocks are low. Apparently New Zealand imports around a quarter of the world's PKE.



Much of the PKE comes from Indonesia, where they chop down ancient forests and replace them with oil palm plantations. Greenpeace made a fuss about it in 2009, '10 & '11. They opposed the use of PKE because of the climate change implications of chopping down loads of old forests, because of the biodiversity losses, and because it leaves charismatic megafauna like orangutans with nowhere to live.

What was really interesting, was the response of various farmers' groups. One said, 'we are not getting any particular push back from the market re PKE.' Another group said: 'If

Fonterra wants us to farm a certain way then it needs to put price signals in front of us.' In other words — if you want us to consider the global picture, you'll need to pay us.

I'm reporting this as someone who's family eats around 15 kilograms of milk products a week. I think the cultural revolution Francis is calling for would let us see beyond what our local immediate economics are telling us, to the big picture. We have all sorts of people here... men and women, young and older, civil servants, business people, teachers, parents, academics, what can we do — where we serve — to help reorient this culture?

There is hope

One last thing about the content of *Laudato Si'*. Despite squarely facing up to the realities of our present environmental situation, it's actually quite hopeful. The hope Pope Francis offers is grounded in the character of God — namely God's righteousness:

'The Creator does not abandon us; he never forsakes his loving plan or repents of having created us.' (13)

There is also the interesting idea that God works through all the peoples of the earth - not just the church. This is particularly striking when coming from the head of the *Catholic* church with its particular ecclesiology. Perhaps Francis is influenced by Latin liberation theology when he says: 'God, who wishes to work with us and who counts on our cooperation, can also bring good out of the evil we have done... The Spirit of God has filled the universe with possibilities and therefore, from the very heart of things, something new can always emerge' (80).



Pope Francis the model

So that's my first take on Pope Francis' encyclical. Personally, I find its theology realistic. It fits and satisfies. By acknowledging God as creator and the sole owner of the earth, it gives humans their proper place. Not too high, not too low. It is human nature to change the world. We have the capacity to do it well or poorly. This compares with a strand of green thinking which would rather, like God at the Flood, wipe humanity off the face of the earth. But it's also a real challenge, particularly to societies like ours who wish to dominate the earth. He's asking us to '*hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*'.

Lastly, I also think it's worth our considering whether in addition to listening to the content of what Francis saying, we could learn something from the way he's saying it.

Somehow he is proving a really attractive figure to many. He is able to say critical things, but still be heard. He is difficult to write off. He is clearly not simply a predictable liberal. When he was the Archbishop of Buenos Aires he both led anti-abortion initiatives^[ii] and doubled the number of priests appointed to work in Buenos Aires' slums,^[iii] and he seems to be continuing in roughly the same vein.

Something in particular that stands out about Francis' approach, is that he seems to ignore any split between a secular public realm on the one hand, and a private religious realm on the other. He gives religious reasons.

Here's an example of the very concrete implications Francis draws from theological reasons: 'Our world has a grave social debt towards the poor who lack access to drinking water, because they are denied the right to a life consistent with their inalienable dignity. This debt can be paid partly by an increase in funding to provide clean water and sanitary services among the poor.' (30)

Pope Francis models to us that we can be quite religious and quite public in our discipleship – "...as followers of Jesus we are deeply concerned for these reasons..."

Francis is interested in *conversion* - of the church as well as the world – about calling people to orientate themselves to God, to 'see' as God sees and so and so to act differently. he's into conversation - genuine conversation he sees as 'dialogue'.. He's been listening. 'I would like to enter into dialogue with all people about our common home'.

Yet he is also forthright about where he is coming from...

The Creator does not abandon us; he never forsakes his loving plan or repents of having created us. Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home.'
(13)

In a 'must read' [article](#), [lapsed Catholic columnist Andrew O'Hehir](#) notes that, in contrast to others, Pope Francis has 'made an effort to step outside the internal politics of his institution, and to view it in terms of its global and historic mission.'

The challenge of *Laudato Si'*, is for us to do the same.

^[i] [Jesuit Argentine Cardinal Bergoglio elected pope, takes name Francis](#) (13 March 2013), [Jesuit.org](#)

^[ii] [Slum Priests: Pope Francis's Early Years](#) (20 March 2013), *Atlantic Monthly*

^[iii] [John Boehner's tears and Pope Francis' radical challenge: A spiritual leader rises as a political nonentity falls](#) (27 September 2015), [Andrew O'Hehir, Salon](#)

Laudato Si' outline

General Introduction

1. What is happening to our common home

1. Pollution and climate change
2. The issue of water
3. Loss of biodiversity
4. Decline in the quality of human life and the breakdown of society
5. Global inequality
6. Weak responses
7. A variety of opinions

2. The Gospel of Creation

1. The light offered by faith
2. The wisdom of the biblical accounts
3. The mystery of the universe
4. The message of each creature in the harmony of creation
5. A universal communion
6. The common destination of goods^[iv]
7. The gaze of Jesus

3. The human roots of the ecological crisis

1. Technology: creativity and power
2. The globalisation of the technocratic paradigm
3. The crisis and its effects on modern anthropocentrism

4. Integral ecology

1. Environmental, economic and social ecology
2. Cultural ecology
3. Ecology of daily life
4. The principle of the common good
5. Justice between the generations

5. Line of approach and action

1. Dialogue on the environment in the international community
2. Dialogue for new national and local policies
3. Dialogue and transparency in decision-making
4. Politics and economy in dialogue for human fulfilment
5. Religions in dialogue with science

6. Ecological education and spirituality

1. Towards a new lifestyle
2. Educating for the covenant between humanity and the environment
3. Ecological conversion
4. Joy and peace
5. Civic and political love
6. Sacramental signs and the celebration of rest

7. The Trinity and the relationship between creatures

8. Queen of all Creation

9. Beyond the sun