**Laudato Si**

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World’s eyes are opened to creation

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When it became known that Pope Francis was writing the first papal encyclical ever to concentrate on environmental issues, the natural question to ask was what did this have to do with the Catholic Church. The answer is now available. Everything. On the one hand the Pope is writing entirely within the Catholic tradition. On the other hand, he is restating the truths of the Catholic faith to make them relevant to a modern world faced with an impending ecological catastrophe. The effect is revolutionary. He wants a revised Catholic spirituality that centres on respect and love for the totality of God’s Creation; and he wants the Church to become a major player in global environmental politics.

His encyclical Laudato si’ (“Praise be to you”), published on Thursday, acknowledges the debt Francis owes to his namesake, St Francis of Assisi, who greeted the sun and the moon, the birds and the wind, as brothers and sisters. This was not madness: this was a profound insight into the beauty of Creation and how it reveals the mystery of God. The grandeur of the Pope’s vision, following the thirteenth-century Francis, exposes the small-mindedness of those in the United States who have been pre-emptively dismissive of this encyclical. They have protested that the Pope cannot know for sure that global warming is caused by human activity, and therefore cannot base his moral teaching on what is a scientific hypothesis.

Pope Francis does accept the causal link between atmospheric change and so-called greenhouse gas emissions, but argues that even if the facts are scientifically uncertain, humanity cannot use that uncertainty as an excuse for inaction. “If objective information suggests that serious and irreversible damage may result,” he writes, “a project should be halted or modified, even in the absence of indisputable proof. Here the burden of proof is effectively reversed, since in such cases objective and conclusive demonstrations will have to be brought forward to demonstrate that the proposed activity will not cause serious harm …” He notes also that a willingness to risk damaging the environment is often part of a sinful mindset that elevates the pursuit of profit above every other consideration. It is not insignificant that those critical voices denying that climate change has a human cause are most often closely associated with a free-market ideology which is opposed to state regulation of almost any kind.

SINFUL MINDSET

Indeed, this is where Pope Francis merges his ecological analysis with the more traditional concerns of Catholic Social Teaching – the poverty, squalor and rank inequality that follow when market forces are unbridled. But he relates it not just to inequality and social injustice but to an exploitative attitude to nature. The need is to “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.” He refutes the argument that because humanity was given dominion over nature, as told in the allegory of Creation in Genesis, there are no limits to what use may be made of natural resources. Dominion has to be exercised responsibly. Nor is that responsibility limited to a utilitarian calculation. It requires an altogether different mindset – “a sense of deep communion with the rest of nature.” But this “cannot be real if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human beings”. This knits together the ecological, economic, political and social, which cannot be seen in isolation. He points out that those who pursue profit at any cost tend to pocket the gains but export the losses – in the form of environmental degradation – to others least able to afford them.

PRINCIPAL CHALLENGE

This is about many more things than global warming, which is nevertheless “a global problem with grave implications: environmental, social, economic, political and for the distribution of goods. It represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day,” Pope Francis declares. He refers to the so far rather hesitant steps taken by the international community to address it. This gives the encyclical its highly topical character, as it sets the stage for Pope Francis’ autumn visit to the United States – one of the the world’s worst atmospheric polluters – when he will address both US Congress and the UN General Assembly. World leaders will be invited to sign up to the UN’s new Sustainable Development Goals, of which environmental protection forms a part for the first time.

But even more significantly, at a summit in Paris at the end of the year the leaders will attempt to agree a new settlement aimed at limiting global warming to a manageable level and at fairly sharing the cost burden among nations. Pope Francis refers to the lack of visionary global leadership which has frustrated the search for agreement in the past. Clearly the encyclical is aimed at filling that vacuum, which explains why he has been at pains to include a wide range of sources – from the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to the Sufi mystic Ali al-Khawas, from Dante to Teilhard de Chardin – not usually encountered in papal encyclicals. Equally novel is the Pope’s willingness to quote from the statements of a very large number of national and regional bishops’ conferences. It is an impressive consensus, and shows a welcome willingness to allow bishops’ conferences to feed into the development of the papal Magisterium.

That in turn raises the question – how will the universal Church respond to this timely, resounding act of papal leadership, which touches life at every level, from turning off light switches and recycling paper, to major decisions regarding international investment, lobbying politicians and deciding how to vote? Local and national Churches will need to look to their lifestyles, bishops to their conference agendas, priests to their weekly preaching, schools to their textbooks, families to how they spend and what they enjoy. If this encyclical inspires adults to recapture the wonderment of children at the intricate mysteries of nature, at the “mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person’s face”, that will lead to a new spirituality but also a very ancient one. It will require a conversion of the soul. The ideal, says Pope Francis, is not only to discover the action of God in the soul, “but also to discover God in all things”. That is a profound shift.