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Review: Laudato Si': Love of God, Love of Neighbour, Love of Creation

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Review: Laudato Si': Love of God, Love of Neighbour, Love of Creation

Review: *Laudato Si'*

Love of God, Love of Neighbour, Love of Creation

Rev. Peter Smith

It is forty-one years since Karl Rahner wrote “Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love of God.”¹ He wrote:

There is no love for God that is not, in itself, already a love for neighbor; and love for God only comes to its own identity through its fulfillment in a love for neighbor. Only one who loves his or her neighbor can know who God actually is. And one who ultimately loves God...can manage unconditionally to abandon himself or herself to another person, and not make that person the means of his or her own self-assertion.²

This now well accepted interrelationship between God and the human person, whereby Rahner equates loving the neighbour with loving God has just been given a radical new re-orientation. In the encyclical *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, Pope Francis has located creation at the heart of the relationship between God and women and men. “This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her,”³ calling for a new covenant⁴ a universal communion.⁵ “As believers, we do not look at a world from without but from within, conscious of the bonds with which the Father has linked us to all beings.”⁶ Hence “...each creature reflects something of God and has a message to convey to us....”⁷ Thus in a sense we now perceive that there is “no love of God that is not, in itself, already a love for God’s creation.” To give an analogy, last week on returning home from my office, my little goddaughter, Madeleine, who was visiting, greeted me at the door with a plate of cupcakes she had made. I am not one for cupcakes at the best of times, but with a three-year-old’s choice of decoration, anyone would be less than enthused. However, this was the best cupcake ever! I loved it because I love its creator, and her joy in her creation was increased by my appreciation. In loving the creation, I loved the creator.

Laudato Si' is Pope Francis’ first encyclical that is entirely his own. It is unsurprising that it takes its name from the prayer of 1225 written by his namesake. It is surprising that the title departs from the traditional Latin and retains the Umbrian Italian of the time. But this is not a pope who worships at the shrine of tradition. Having said that, the encyclical draws on the statements of, not only previous popes, but also episcopal conferences worldwide and even contributions from outside the Catholic West. To call this document “inclusive” is no overstatement, for it not only gathers together the main themes of Catholic Social Teaching over the last century and a half, but elucidates them in the light of many of our most contentious

¹ Karl Rahner, “Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and Love of God”, in *Theological Investigations*, Vol 6, (New York: Crossroad, 1974), 232.

² Karl Rahner, “Preliminary Considerations,” in *Theological Investigations*, (New York: Crossroad, 1974), 71.

³ Francis, *Laudato Si'*, Encyclical, Vatican Website, 24 May 2015,

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html#_ftnref77, sec. 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, sec. 209-215.

⁵ *Ibid.*, sec. 220.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, sec. 221.

and urgent contemporary issues: poverty, housing, indigenous, refugees, population growth among others in addition to its core environmental concerns. *Laudato Si'* is, indeed, a comprehensive document.

To see this encyclical as a statement of Catholic beliefs expressed for Catholics is to diminish the scope and, hopeful impact of the work. Francis states “I urgently appeal, then, for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of the planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all.”⁸ Thus, the document is a call to action for all humanity on behalf of our common home. This one statement typifies Francis’s Papacy to this point; dialogical, inclusive, challenging and practical. Cardinal Joseph Cardijn of Belgium, in establishing the Young Christian Workers Movement, gave them and the world a method that calls us to examine the world we live in, think about how it relates to us (especially as Christians) and how we can bring about change. The method of *See, Judge, Act* appears to have become a model the Pope uses in *Laudato Si'*. Even a cursory glance at the contents of the encyclical indicates a connectedness to this method. Chapter One, “What is happening to our Common Home”, and Chapter Two, “The Gospel of Creation”, examines (*See*) the current concerns of our global home. Chapter Three, “The Human Roots of the Ecological Crises”, and Chapter Four, “Integral Ecology”, offer a commentary (*Judge*) on causes and connections. Chapter Five, “Lines of Approach and Action”, and Chapter Six, “Ecological, Education and Spirituality”, are the ‘call to arms’ (*Act*) of the encyclical. In short, *See* – God’s Creation is in a parlous state; *Judge* – we human beings are the cause; *Act* – we can, we must, modify our behaviour now in order for us to repair and reconnect with our world.

To give a brief overview of *Laudato Si'* is not an easy task given its comprehensiveness. Paragraph 15 maps out the direction the encyclical will take. Commencing with the ecological crises as a concrete foundation for the ethical and spiritual itinerary that follows; moving on to the wisdom of the Judaeo-Christian tradition to the present situation: “not only its symptoms but its deepest causes” to the proposal for a new dialogue and “some inspired guidelines for human development to be found in the treasure of Christian spiritual experience.” A fundamental question put to us all is, “What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up?”⁹ This question has greater resonance in our modern age as we are, since the Industrial Revolution, more able to influence our physical environment for good or ill. This has led to a “technocratic paradigm”¹⁰ whereby we recognise a scientific imperative to be able to *deal with* the problems technology itself and often its abuse, has created; our technical prowess has brought us to a crossroads. We believe in infinite or unlimited growth,¹¹ and despite our past and present exploitation of the planet, we hold an innate belief that we can just as easily redress it. But this epistemological paradigm amounts to a reductionism which sees technology as neutral—something the document denies. Aligned with this is an overemphasis on market forces whereby large multinational corporations have vested interests in maintaining the *status quo*. Clearly the most effected are the poor and vulnerable, especially the new class of environmental refugees who fall prey to the degradation of fishing and farming sites, destroying their native livelihoods. Francis describes the situation here:

⁸ *Ibid.*, sec. 14.

⁹ *Ibid.*, sec. 160.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, sec. 101.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, sec. 100.

(W)e are faced, not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature.¹²

By itself the market cannot guarantee integral human development and social inclusion.¹³ A substantial cause of our attitude to the natural world has arisen due to a Promethean vision of mastery over the world. Excessive anthropocentrism has failed to see the connectedness of all things, and indeed humans, as part of creation. “Instead, our ‘dominion’ over the universe should be understood more properly in the sense of responsible stewardship.”¹⁴ Francis’s exegesis of Gen 1:28 sees *dominion* as an incorrect interpretation, and instead, an appropriate hermeneutic recognises that we are to “till and keep the garden of the world”¹⁵ Thus, *Laudato Si’* paints:

(an) intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet, the conviction that everything in the world is connected, the critique of new paradigms and forms of power derived from technology, the call to seek other ways of understanding the economy and progress, the value proper to each creature, the human meaning of ecology, the need for forthright and honest debate, the serious responsibility of international and local policy; the throwaway culture and the proposal of a new lifestyle.¹⁶

Laudato Si’ is replete with references to rights and corresponding responsibilities; especially in regard to the poor and the needy. This document does not appear as an optional extra but is a product of justice—what is owed to not only human creation but indeed all God’s world. This includes the imperative to manage the world’s ecosystem in a sustainable way as is its right in and of itself and not as a means to any human end.¹⁷ “God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement.”¹⁸ Human beings are considered the crown of creation and that crown must nurture its fellow creatures.

Even before it was promulgated, *Laudato Si’* had its dissenting voices. Post release, many of those voices became more vociferous. The attacks have claimed that the Church has no right to speak on scientific matters; that the Pope is creating a recipe for unemployment and poverty; and that anthropogenic climate change is unproven amongst other claims. In response, I believe the Church is happy to take up the Holy Father’s challenge and engage in dialogue around these and other issues with detractors. What is required, of course, is honesty in the debate and openness to the Gospel. What the encyclical does is challenge all of us in regards

¹² Ibid., sec. 139.

¹³ See Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, Encyclical Letter, Vatican Website, June 29, 2009, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html, sec. 97.

¹⁴ Francis, *Laudato Si’*, sec. 16.

¹⁵ Gen. 2:15 as cited in Francis, *Laudato Si’*, sec. 67.

¹⁶ Francis, *Laudato Si’*, sec. 67.

¹⁷ Ibid., sec. 34ff.

¹⁸ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Apostolic Exhortation, Vatican Website, 24 November 2013, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, sec. 215.

to how we are to care for our common home, while pointing out that those whose actions count most are those degrading the planet most for their own commercial gains. This requires not only commitment by individuals, as the document suggests, but also policy change such as that promoted by the Paraguayan Bishops: “Every *campesino* has a natural right to possess a reasonable allotment of land where he can establish his home, work for subsistence of his family and a secure life. This right must be guaranteed so that its exercise is not illusory but real. That means that apart from the ownership of property, rural people must have access to means of technical education, credit, insurance, and markets.”¹⁹ With these challenges in mind, it is little wonder why certain people would oppose Francis’ call for reform.

When I first read an advanced copy of *Laudato Si’*, I completed it in the early hours of the morning, not because I was forced by circumstances entirely, but rather it was, and is, an engaging read. The encyclical continues to excite me with its possibilities and challenges. However, this encyclical, above all makes me feel uncomfortable in a way few papal documents have because Pope Francis has written this to every person on the planet. If we are honest, it challenges our thinking and our actions, especially for us who benefit from prosperity, which is often garnered from the earth. This encyclical calls me to change, remembering that every part of God’s creation is special and loved by its Creator, and we, who love the Creator, must love and care for God’s creation.

¹⁹ Paraguayan Bishops’ Conference, *El campesino paraguayo y la tierra*, Pastoral Letter, (June 12, 1983): 2, 4, d, quoted in Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, sec. 94.