



Special Event

Caring for Our Common Home - the Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*

International Conference Centre Geneva, 15 January 2016

Introduction

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen:

First of all, I greet you all warmly on behalf of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, which is honoured to have been called to assist the Holy Father in his teaching ministry by helping to prepare the Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*.

Coming from every corner of the globe, your presence reminds us that, from the very beginning, the Encyclical *Laudato si'* brings into dialogue all persons and peoples, all institutions and organizations that share this same concern for *our common home* as the title of today's Special Event emphasizes. The world situation compels us to discover that different yet equally important perspectives are ever more intertwined and complementary: the riches of faith and of spiritual tradition, the seriousness of business and of scientific research, the concrete efforts at various levels of both government and civil society, all for an equitable and sustainable development.

This type of dialogue can be seen in the Encyclical itself, which relies on a wide range of contributions, many of them acknowledged in the text and the footnotes.

As is well known, the Encyclical takes its name from the invocation of St Francis of Assisi: "*Laudato si' mi' Signore* – Praise be to you, my Lord!" The *Canticle of the Creatures* calls to mind that the earth, our common home, "is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us" (§ 1). The voice of St Francis also expresses the attitude which the entire Encyclical conveys. Its prayerful contemplation invites us to look towards the "poor one of Assisi" as a source of inspiration. As the Encyclical affirms, St Francis is "the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically.... He shows us just how

inseparable is the bond between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace” (§ 10).

Midway through *Laudato si'*, we find this question: what kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up? The Holy Father continues, “This question does not have to do with the environment alone and in isolation; the issue cannot be approached piecemeal.” This leads us to ask ourselves about the meaning of existence and its values that are the basis of social life: “What is the purpose of our life in this world? Why are we here? What is the goal of our work and all our efforts? What need does the earth have of us?” “If we do not ask these basic questions” – says the Pope – “it is no longer enough, then, simply to state that we should be concerned for future generations” (§ 160).

The Holy Father’s deep questions arise from an observation: today, the earth, our sister, is mistreated, abused, and lamenting. Its groans join those of all the world’s forsaken and “discarded”. Pope Francis invites us to listen to them. He urges each and every one – individuals, families, local communities, nations and the international community – to an “ecological conversion” according to the expression of St John Paul II. Such a change of heart means to “change direction” by taking on the beauty and responsibility of the task of “caring for our common home”. Here are the words of Bartholomew, Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople: “For human beings ... to destroy the biological diversity ... by causing changes in its climate,” by contaminating “the earth’s waters, its land, its air, and its life – these are sins” (§ 8).

At the same time, Pope Francis welcomes the environmental awareness growing world-wide, along with concern for the damage that is being done. And in spite of the enormous threat, the Pope keeps a hopeful outlook on the possibility of reversing the trend: “Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home” (§ 13). “Men and women are still capable of intervening positively” (§ 58). “All is not lost. Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new start” (§ 205). Hopefully COP21 represents such a choice and new start.

So with hope for a renewed future, Pope Francis puts forward the concept of integral ecology as an inclusive, dynamic paradigm to articulate the fundamental relationships of each person with God, with other human beings including him- or her-self, and with creation:

“When we speak of the “environment”, what we really mean is a relationship existing between nature and the society which lives in it. Nature cannot be

regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it. Getting to the reasons why a given area is polluted requires a study of the workings of society, its economy, its behaviour patterns, the ways it grasps reality, and so forth. Given the scale of change, it is no longer possible to find a specific, discrete answer for each part of the problem. It is essential to seek comprehensive solutions that consider the interactions within natural systems themselves and with social systems. We are not faced with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather one complex crisis that is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the underprivileged, and at the same time protecting nature” (§ 139).

The various issues treated in the Encyclical are placed within this framework. In the different chapters, they are picked up and continuously enriched starting from different perspectives (cf. § 16):

- * the intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet;
- * the conviction that everything in the world is intimately connected;
- * the critique of the unrestrained alliance between finance and technology and, arising from it, the dominant “technocracy”;
- * the value proper to each creature;
- * the human meaning of ecology;
- * the need for forthright and honest dialogue;
- * the serious responsibility of international and local policy;
- * the throwaway culture;
- * the proposal for a new style of life; and
- * the invitation to search for other ways of understanding economy and progress.

The encyclical is divided into six chapters.

Chapter I (§ 17-61) asks “What is happening to our common home?” It provides a spiritual listening to the best scientific conclusions on environmental matters available today. “Our goal is not to amass information or to satisfy curiosity, but rather to become painfully aware, to dare 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). Extremely complex and urgent issues are addressed. Some of them – such as climate changes and especially their causes – are the subject of heated debate. The aim of the Encyclical is not to intervene in what is the responsibility of scientists, and even less to establish exactly in which ways the deteriorating climate is a consequence of human action. In the perspective of the Encyclical – and of the Church – it is sufficient to say that human activity is one of the factors that explain climate

change. With that, we have a serious moral responsibility to do everything in our power to reduce our “footprint” and reverse the deterioration of the natural and social environment.

The second step in the Encyclical (ch. II, § 62-100) is a review of the riches of Judaeo-Christian tradition, above all in biblical texts and theological reflection. This expresses the “tremendous responsibility” of human beings for creation, the intimate link between all creatures, and the fact that “the natural environment is a collective good, the patrimony of all humanity and the responsibility of everyone” (§ 95).

The analysis then deals in ch. III (§ 101-136) with “the roots of the present situation, so as to consider not only its symptoms but also its deepest causes” (§ 15). One cause is the technocratic mentality which perceives all of reality as an object that can be manipulated limitlessly and which the economy globalizes. Other roots include modern anthropocentrism, relativism, and disrespect for life, all of which dehumanize human beings.

Ch. IV (§ 137-62) goes on to lay out integral ecology. It comprehends “our unique place as human beings in this world and our relationship to our surroundings”, in the varied aspects of our life, in economy and politics, in various cultures, in particular those which are most threatened, and in every moment of our daily lives.

On this basis, ch. V (§ 163-201) addresses what we can and must do. Practical proposals should not be developed in ideological, superficial or narrow (reductionist) ways. Instead, dialogue is essential, a term present in the title of every section of this chapter. Pope Francis expresses his concern “to encourage an honest and open debate, so that particular interests or ideologies will not prejudice the common good” (§ 188). Thus, dialogue must go on for the renewal of international, national and local politics, of decision-making processes in the public and business sectors, of the relationship between politics and economy and of the relationship between religion and science. I think that this is what we are doing in today’s Special Event.

Finally, based on the conviction that “change is impossible without motivation and a process of education, ch. VI (§ 202-46) proposes “some inspired guidelines for human development to be found in the treasure of Christian spiritual experience” (§ 15). Pope Francis offers two prayers, the first to be prayed with believers of other religions and the second among Christians. The Encyclical concludes, as it opened, in a spirit of prayerful contemplation.

In its relationship with the environment, humanity is faced with a crucial challenge that requires the development of adequate policies that continue to be discussed on the global agenda. The challenges of true commitment and real implementation are even greater, as all

of you know. Is *Laudato si'* relevant to that agenda? Yes. In the lead-up to COP21, the world community needed to hear that we inhabit a common home, that every decision in that home carries an ethical dimension, and that our hope lies in profound conversion. At Paris, solidarity needed to pervade COP21, and thanks be to God we have an agreement which provides a framework for action at every level. Henceforth, the vision of *Laudato si'* continues to be relevant, because the next, more difficult stages of continuous, concerted and effective action require true ecological conversion. May all joyfully learn to care for all.

I very much look forward to our two panels on the content, impact and call-to-action of *Laudato si'*.

Thank you!

Cardinal Peter K.A. Turkson
President