

Laudato Si' – the new Encyclical from Pope Francis: a landmark in modern church teaching that will shape a new future

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When it appears tomorrow, *Laudato Si'* — “Praised Be You” — will captivate and divide the world by issuing the most robust challenge to the contemporary myth of progress in recent times.

Any other document this long discussed, anticipated and even in recent days leaked would normally be still-born. But this is no ordinary document. Pope Francis's eco-encyclical has a power, depth and beauty that will catch society unawares. Long after the headlines, it will be judged one of the landmark church documents of recent decades, and possibly the most radical and prophetic encyclical since *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 sparked the modern tradition of Catholic social teaching.

The analogy with that encyclical is striking. When Leo XIII issued his lament for the impoverishment of the working classes, blaming the idolatry of the market and the callousness of the industrial age, many influential Catholics believed he was insane. What possible competence could a pope have in the area of wages, unions, and the market? Surely this was a technical matter, in which popes are incompetent? Leo XIII's bold answer was that human dignity was a moral matter, because God's creatures deserved better than to live in slums and be treated as a less important commodity than material things and money.

Some leading Catholics in the United States are saying that the Church should stick to religion and leave science to the scientists (and yes, the economy to the capitalists). In the case of *Rerum Novarum* then and *Laudato Si'* now, the self-interested claim to an area of life as a religion-free zone is rejected by a pope speaking out of two millennia of personal and communal reflection and experience.

Laudato Si' is Pope Francis's signature document. It expresses his soul. If *Evangelii Gaudium* was his call to the Church to recover its mission, *Laudato Si'* is a letter to the whole of humanity, addressed not just to all people of goodwill but to all members of the globe. It is a

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call to conversion of minds, hearts, and lifestyles. It is urgent, compelling, and direct. It will be impossible to ignore.

It has been on the Pope's mind from the start of his pontificate, from the night of his election when he chose to name himself after St Francis of Assisi. Soon after, he mentioned to Cardinal Peter Turkson, who heads the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, that he was thinking of an encyclical on the environment. A month later, he asked Turkson: "how is it going?" The following time, he just said to him: "Write".

Turkson's team consulted widely. They did not want to make the mistake of allowing the encyclical to be identified too closely with particular groups of people, or individual thinkers: the widely reported influence of Professor Stefano Zamagni, the Bologna economics professor, on Benedict XVI's *Caritas in veritate* (2007), allowed some critics to undermine the encyclical's legitimacy. Yet it is clear that the longstanding work of the Pontifical Academy of Science in this area, as well as the conclusions of the reports by 800 scientists on the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), have been influential. *Laudato Si'* hears the conclusions of science, and allows itself to be affected by it; one of those presenting at tomorrow's press conference tomorrow at the Vatican will be Professor John Schellnhuber, the founding Director of the Postdam Institute for Climate Change, who has been active on the IPCC.

Yet while it acknowledges and reflects the overwhelming consensus that the globe is getting warmer because of a model of growth that rests on frenetic consumption and greed, *Laudato Si'* is not taking a position on complex scientific questions in which it has no competence. What the encyclical says will be unsurprising in this area, for it reflects what is already well known; and the science, as such, occupies relatively little space in the document. Just as important is the attention given to the experience of the poorest of the world of rising seas, unstable seasons, deforestation and pollution. The evidence in the encyclical of the deteriorating quality of life across the world will be hard to refute.

What *Laudato Si'* does is link that devastation and deterioration to a model of economic growth underpinned by compulsive consumerism, which both creates and is the fruit of a technocratic mentality that seeks to manipulate the world and its resources. At the heart of that mentality is a false idea of dominion. What it produces is vast waste, exploitation, and a throwaway attitude towards the planet and human life itself. It begins with addiction to consumerism, and ends in embryo experiments and abortion. It rejects life as gift, and even the gender of our bodies.

As cardinal archbishop of Buenos Aires, Jorge Mario Bergoglio was keenly aware of the way these issues interconnected. The Uruguayan paper mill at Fray Bentos which polluted the River Plate, the deforestation in Tartagal in northern Argentina that produced devastating floods, the shrinking rainforests of the Peruvian and Brazilian Amazon, and the people-trafficking that supplied the sweat shops and brothels of Buenos Aires — these were part of the same sickness.

His own integrity in this area is unquestionable. He traveled by public transport, recycled clothes, lived sparsely and simply and loved to be with the poor and the outcast. He lived as a bishop in a major modern city more or less as St Francis of Assisi did in medieval Umbria. If anyone can speak to us with authority on this issue, it is the Pope. He has walked the walk and talked the talk for decades.

What *Laudato Si'* is concerned with is not the science of global warming, but the mentality that has created it and the moral failure that lies behind humanity's inability to act. As the Global Catholic Climate Change Movement puts it: "Until the moral implications of anthropogenic climate change are clearly established and accepted, it is unlikely that societies can or will transition in an appropriate timeframe to sustainable technologies, economies, and lifestyles." *Laudato Si'* makes ecology a moral matter.

Also at tomorrow's press conference will be Metropolitan John Zizoulas of Pergamon, one of the outstanding theologians of the Orthodox world, representing the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. The encyclical's debt to longstanding Orthodox reflections on the environment give the theology a broad flavour. But it is to the great monastic and conventual traditions typified by St Benedict of Nursia and above all St Francis of Assisi that the encyclical looks for its profound spirituality and theology.

Laudato Si' is a moving lament for a lost connectedness, and a passionate plea for the restoration of relationships: with God, with each other, and with the earth. It hears the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor as a joint summons to conversion, and in its core idea of "integral ecology" it charts a pathway back to healing and renewal. Along the way, it both hails and critiques the ecological movement, seeking to connect it with the transcendent.

The encyclical divides into six chapters. The first, "What is happening to our common home?" is a broad and alarming look at the symptoms of sickness in the world. The second, "the Gospel of Creation", considers the world as it should be, in the way that God intended it. The third, "The human roots of the ecological crisis", sees in what it calls the "technocratic

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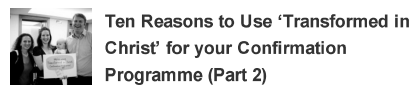
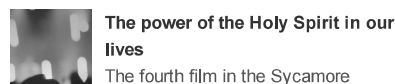
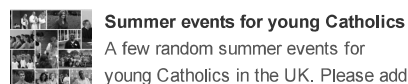
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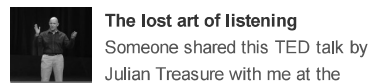
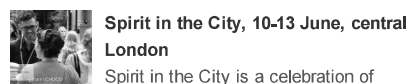
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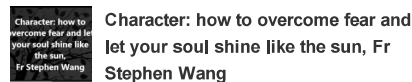
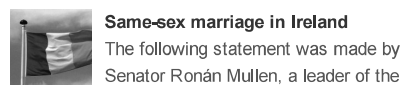
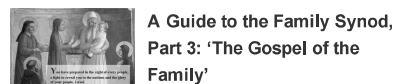
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paradigm” the origins of the degradation. The fourth chapter, “integral ecology”, charts a way back: a new (because lost) way of seeing and understanding the word, the recovery of an awareness of the interconnectedness of Creation. The fifth chapter, “Lines of approach and action”, suggests ways forward — concrete steps that can be taken by nations and leaders — while the sixth chapter, “Ecological education and spirituality”, focusses on the individual believer and their families and communities, and what he and she can do in their daily lives. It is a chapter that will form the basis of many future retreats and days of recollection for parishes and schools.

Laudato Si' has the potential to create a movement of action and ideas that will last long after this pontificate. It will profoundly challenge the western world, cutting across the polarities of left and right, liberal and conservative, exposing the individualism at the heart of contemporary elite narratives. It will challenge free-market libertarians to care for the earth, and liberal ecologists to care for the unborn. It will trigger a new kind of orthodoxy, one defined as much by the way we live as what we think.

It will not be universally welcome. Like *Humanae vitae* in 1968, it will provoke some to say that this is a matter for conscience, not papal authority; like *Rerum Novarum*, it will cause many to declare the pope meddlesome and incompetent. Like the prophets of all time, it will be greeted in some quarters with derision and contempt.

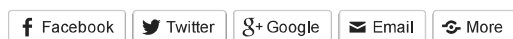
Yet to most Catholics, and to most people of goodwill, it will ring clear and true. It will speak to the hearts and minds of our generation, and prick millions into prayer and into action.

It will help shape a new future, and bring new hope.

(See backgrounders by [Crux](#) and [Reuters](#), [Financial Times](#), [Washington Post](#) and article by [George Monbiot](#) in today's *Guardian*.)

[By Austen Ivereigh]

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Richard Ashton says:

June 17, 2015 at 10:13 pm

I await with great trepidation, not entirely confident that the Holy Father has not conceded too much ground to the left-liberal-green consensus.
Lord, send us brave and faithful leaders.

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Tim says:

June 18, 2015 at 6:59 am

What influential Catholics thought Leo XIII had lost his mind? Laudato Si is not even published yet and still you are telling us what is in it?

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