

A Guide to *Laudato Si*: A Section-By-Section Summary of Pope Francis' Encyclical on the Environment

by **JOE CARTER** • June 18, 2015

Pope Francis has released his eagerly anticipated encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si*. While the document deserves a close reading, its extreme length (80 pages/45,000 words) will make it difficult for many people to process. To help highlight some of the key points I've produced a section-by-section summary of the entire encyclical.

As with any summary, much of the meaning and context will be lost. But I hope this will provide you with a starting point for greater engagement with the latest edition to the social teachings of the Catholic Church.

(Note: Each of the various section headings are underlined.)

Introduction

“Laudato Si’, mi’ Signore” means “Praise be to you, my Lord” and is taken from a canticle by Saint Francis of Assisi which reminds us earth like a sister. “Our Sister, Mother Earth” is now crying out because of the way we humans have harmed her.

Nothing in this world is indifferent to us

Previous popes have also raised concerns about environmental degradation.

This encyclical is addressed to “every person living on this planet” with the hope of entering “into dialogue with all people about our common home.”

United by the same concern

Numerous scientists, philosophers, theologians, and civic groups also share this concern.

Many of these problems have “ethical and spiritual roots.”

Saint Francis of Assisi

Francis helps us to better see what is required for an integral ecology.

My appeal

The concern for the Earth includes a “concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development.”

We need a new dialogue, that includes everyone, about how we are shaping the future of our planet.

What this encyclical will cover:

1. Reviews the “present ecological crisis” based on the “results of the best scientific research available today.”
2. Considers “principles drawn from the Judaeo-Christian tradition” related to the commitment to the environment.
3. Considers the symptoms and causes of the crisis “to provide an approach to ecology which respects our unique place as human beings in this world and our relationship to our surroundings.
4. Offers broader “proposals for dialogue and action” for both individuals and international public policy.
5. Offers guidelines for human development based on the Christian spiritual experience.

CHAPTER ONE — WHAT IS HAPPENING TO OUR COMMON HOME

I. POLLUTION AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Pollution, waste and the throwaway culture

Pollution is tied to the “throwaway culture.” (The phrase “throwaway culture” appears five times in the encyclical.)

Climate as a common good

The climate is a common good that belongs to all of us.

Climate change is one of the “principal challenges facing humanity in our day.” The planet is warming and humans are the primary cause, particularly due to the use of fossil fuels (which cause greenhouse gases) and deforestation for agricultural purposes. Public policy should reduce carbon emissions and promote renewable sources of energy.

The quality of water available to the poor is a serious concern. Water is increasingly being polluted, privatized, and wasted, which leads to problems for the poor.

The earth's resources are being plundered because of "short-sighted approaches to the economy, commerce and production." Most species of animals and plant life are becoming extinct because of humans. Our interventions in nature—even our attempts to fix what we caused— further "aggravates the situation."

III. LOSS OF BIODIVERSITY

The earth's resources are also being plundered because of "short-sighted approaches to the economy, commerce and production." The majority of species of plant and animals that are becoming extinct are dying off for reasons related to human activity.

Even some of our interventions to help are causing greater problems with biodiversity. Caring for ecosystems demands far-sightedness and preemptive action.

Greater investment needs to be made in research aimed at understanding more fully the functioning of ecosystems and adequately analyzing the different variables associated with any significant modification of the environment.

IV. DECLINE IN THE QUALITY OF HUMAN LIFE AND THE BREAKDOWN OF SOCIETY

Environmental deterioration, current models of development and the throwaway culture have a detrimental affect on humans.

Cities are becoming to large — "We were not meant to be inundated by cement, asphalt, glass and metal, and deprived of physical contact with nature."

Our omnipresent "media and digital world" can prevent us from living wisely.

V. GLOBAL INEQUALITY

Deterioration of the human and natural environments are connected, and both disproportionately hurt the poor. To fix environmental problems we have to also fix "human and social degradation."

Imbalances in population density are a concern, but the primary problem is "extreme and selective consumerism on the part of some" rather than population growth.

Inequity affects not only individuals but entire countries and an “ecological debt” exists between the global north and south. Poor countries (which often have natural resources) fuel the development of richer nations. For this reason national have “differentiated responsibilities” when it comes to climate change.

VI. WEAK RESPONSES

The world needs an international legal framework to “set clear boundaries and ensure the protection of ecosystems” but, so far, the “international political responses” have been “weak.”

Depletion of natural resources will likely lead to new wars, “albeit under the guise of noble claims.”

Some countries provide positive examples of dealing with the environment but such efforts are not sufficient.

VII. A VARIETY OF OPINIONS

Two extremes of opinion fixing the environment: (1) Ecological problems will be solved by new technology, and (2) population should be reduced to prevent ecological harm. We need a dialogue that finds “viable future scenarios” between these extremes.

CHAPTER TWO — THE GOSPEL OF CREATION

Although they take different approaches to understanding reality, science and religion can enter into an “intense dialogue fruitful” for solving environmental problems.

I. THE LIGHT OFFERED BY FAITH

Although simply being human is “ample motivation” to care for nature and vulnerable human communities, faith also motivates Christians to care for the environment and the poor.

II. THE WISDOM OF THE BIBLICAL ACCOUNTS

The biblical narratives have much to say about the relationship of human beings with the world.

Human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships—with God, with our neighbor and with the earth itself—yet these relationships have been broken, both outwardly and within us, by sin. As a result, the originally harmonious relationship between human beings and nature became broken and conflicted.

The earth was here before us and it has been given to us by God. “Dominion” over the earth is not an excuse for “unbridled exploitation” but rather a command to be stewards of natural resources.

III. THE MYSTERY OF THE UNIVERSE

The word “creation” has a broader meaning than “nature”, for it has to do with God’s loving plan in which “every creature has its own value and significance.”

The ultimate destiny of the universe is in the fullness of God, which “has already been attained by the risen Christ, the measure of the maturity of all things.” All creation is thus moving toward a “common point of arrival”—back to the Creator.

IV. THE MESSAGE OF EACH CREATURE IN THE HARMONY OF CREATION

Each creature has its own purpose. The Spirit of life dwells in every living creature and calls us to enter into relationship with him.

V. A UNIVERSAL COMMUNION

Humans are “linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family.” Concern for the environment needs to be joined to a “sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society.”

VI. THE COMMON DESTINATION OF GOODS

Every ecological approach needs to incorporate a social perspective that takes into account the fundamental rights of the poor and the underprivileged.

Private property is not absolute or inviolable. The principle of the subordination of private property to the universal destination of goods, and thus the right of everyone to their use, is a golden rule of social conduct and “the first principle of the whole ethical and social order”

The natural environment is a collective good. We break the commandment “Thou shall not kill” means when “twenty percent of the world’s population consumes resources at a rate that robs the poor nations and future generations of what they need to survive.”

VII. THE GAZE OF JESUS

Jesus was able to invite others to be attentive to the beauty of creation because he himself was in constant touch with nature. “From the beginning of the world, but particularly through the incarnation, the mystery of Christ is at work in a hidden manner in the natural world as a whole, without thereby impinging on its autonomy.”

CHAPTER THREE — THE HUMAN ROOTS OF THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

A certain way of understanding human life and activity— the dominant technocratic paradigm—has gone awry, to the serious detriment of the world around us.

I. TECHNOLOGY: CREATIVITY AND POWER

Technology can be good, but it is also powerful and increases our power. Not every increase in power is an increase of progress. We need a “culture and spirituality genuinely capable of setting limits and teaching clear-minded self-restraint.”

II. THE GLOBALIZATION OF THE TECHNOCRATIC PARADIGM

Humanity has taken up technology and its development according to an “undifferentiated and one-dimensional paradigm.” But science and technology is not neutral. Many environmental problems stem from the tendency to make the method and aims of science and technology an “epistemological paradigm” which shapes the lives of individuals and the workings of society.

We need to “slow down and look at reality in a different way,” so that we can “appropriate the positive and sustainable progress which has been made” and “recover the values and the great goals swept away by our unrestrained delusions of grandeur.”

III. THE CRISIS AND EFFECTS OF MODERN ANTHROPOCENTRISM

Modern anthropocentrism prizes technical thought over reality by seeing creation as mere raw material for our use. This has affected many areas of life: “When we fail to acknowledge as part of reality the worth of a poor person, a human embryo, a person with disabilities – to offer just a few examples – it becomes difficult to hear the cry of nature itself; everything is connected.”

“Since everything is interrelated, concern for the protection of nature is also incompatible with the justification of abortion.”

Practical relativism

A misguided anthropocentrism—particularly our culture of relativism—leads to a misguided lifestyle. When human beings place themselves at the center, they give absolute priority to immediate convenience and all else becomes relative.

The need to protect employment

An integral ecology needs to take account of the value of human labor and a correct understanding of work. Civil authorities have the right and duty to adopt clear and firm measures in support of small producers and differentiated production. To ensure economic freedom from which all can effectively benefit, restraints occasionally have to be imposed on those possessing greater resources and financial power.

New biological technologies

We can't make general judgments about genetic modification (GM), whether vegetable or animal, medical or agricultural. Still, there are a number of significant difficulties with GM that should not be underestimated (e.g., destroying the complex network of ecosystems).

Those concerned about GM should also be concerned when it is applied to human embryos.

CHAPTER FOUR — INTEGRAL ECOLOGY

Since everything is closely interrelated we need an integral ecology, one that clearly respects its human and social dimensions.

I. ENVIRONMENTAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL ECOLOGY

Ecology studies the relationship between living organisms and the environment in which they develop. When we speak of the “environment”, what we really mean is a relationship existing between nature and the society that lives in it. We ourselves are a part of nature. Therefore, the social and environmental crises are intertwined.

We need an “economic ecology” capable of appealing to a broader vision of reality. The analysis of environmental problems cannot be separated from the “analysis of human, family, work-related and urban contexts, nor from how individuals relate to themselves, which leads in turn to how they relate to others and to the environment.”

Every violation of solidarity and civic friendship harms the environment.

II. CULTURAL ECOLOGY

Ecology also involves protecting the “cultural treasures of humanity in the broadest sense.” But our consumerist vision of human beings, encouraged by the mechanisms of today's globalized economy, has a leveling effect on cultures, diminishing the immense variety that is the heritage of all humanity. We must look for solutions that include local people from within their proper culture.

We must show special care for indigenous communities and their cultural traditions.

The disappearance of a culture can be as serious as the disappearance of a species of plant or animal. The imposition of a dominant lifestyle linked to a single form of production can be just as harmful as the altering of ecosystems.

III. ECOLOGY OF DAILY LIFE

Authentic development must take into consideration the settings in which people live their lives. We must keep this in mind when designing buildings, cities, public spaces, etc.

Human ecology also includes the relationship between human life and the moral law. Also, we must value our “own body in its femininity or masculinity.” It is not a healthy attitude which would seek “to cancel out sexual difference because it no longer knows how to confront it”.

IV. THE PRINCIPLE OF THE COMMON GOOD

Human ecology is inseparable from the notion of the common good, a central and unifying principle of social ethics. Because current injustices, the common good requires solidarity with and a preferential option for the poor.

V. JUSTICE BETWEEN THE GENERATIONS

The notion of the common good also extends to future generations. Our approach to environmental problems must take this into account.

CHAPTER FIVE — LINES OF APPROACH AND ACTION

An outline of the major paths of dialogue to stem the crisis.

I. DIALOGUE ON THE ENVIRONMENT IN THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

The interdependence of humanity obliges us to think of “one world with a common plan.” We need a global consensus to fix the problem.

Fossil fuels must be phased out as soon as possible. The international community needs to find a way to make this happen.

Buying and selling “carbon credits” is not the right solution.

Enforceable international agreements and global regulatory norms are urgently needed.

We need to develop “more efficiently organized international institutions” to address global warming and poverty. There is urgent need of a true world political authority to address these issues.

II. DIALOGUE FOR NEW NATIONAL AND LOCAL POLICIES

These issues need to be addressed not only at the international level, but at the local and national level as well. Political and institutional frameworks need to promote best practices and avoid bad practices. Political activity on the local level could also be directed to modifying consumption, developing an economy of waste disposal and recycling, protecting certain species and planning a diversified agriculture and the rotation of crops.

However, there are no uniform recipes, because each country or region has its own problems and limitations.

III. DIALOGUE AND TRANSPARENCY IN DECISION-MAKING

We need greater transparency to assess the environmental impact of business ventures and projects. Environmental impact assessment should be included in the planning stages. A consensus should always be reached between the different stakeholders, who can offer a variety of approaches, solutions, and alternatives. The local population, though, should have a special place at the table.

In any discussion about a proposed venture, a number of questions need to be asked in order to discern whether or not it will contribute to genuine integral development: What will it accomplish? Why? Where? When? How? For whom? What are the risks? What are the costs? Who will pay those costs and how? Profit cannot be the sole criterion to be taken into account.

Reaching consensus is not easy and the Church does not presume to settle scientific questions or to replace politics.

IV. POLITICS AND ECONOMY IN DIALOGUE FOR HUMAN FULFILMENT

“Politics must not be subject to the economy, nor should the economy be subject to the dictates of an efficiency-driven paradigm of technocracy.” Politics and economy should serve human life.

The financial crisis of 2007-08 provided an opportunity to develop a new economy and new ways of regulating speculative financial practices and virtual wealth. But the response to the crisis did not include rethinking the outdated criteria that “continue to rule the world.” Production does not always fairly assign value.

We need to reject a magical conception of the market, which would suggest “problems can be solved simply by an increase in the profits of companies or individuals.” We can’t rely on those focused on “maximizing profits” to fix the problem.

Efforts to promote a sustainable use of natural resources are an investment capable of providing other economic benefits in the medium term.

For new models of progress to arise, there is a need to change “models of global development”

The principle of the maximization of profits reflects a misunderstanding of the very concept of the economy.

We need a politics that is “capable of a new, integral and interdisciplinary approach to handling the different aspects of the crisis.”

Politics and the economy tend to blame each other when it comes to poverty and environmental degradation. They need to own up to their mistakes and find ways to join together to promote the public good.

V. RELIGIONS IN DIALOGUE WITH SCIENCE

Empirical science can’t explain the whole of reality. We need also to look at the ethical and spiritual resources produced by the world’s religions.

The majority of people living on our planet profess to be believers, and they need to dialogue with each other and with science on these issues.

CHAPTER SIX — ECOLOGICAL EDUCATION AND SPIRITUALITY

Many things have to change course—most of all, we humans.

I. TOWARDS A NEW LIFESTYLE

The market tends to promote extreme consumerism, and compulsive consumerism is an example of how the “techno-economic paradigm affects individuals.” This paradigm leads people to believe that they are free as long as they have the supposed freedom to consume. But those really free are the minority who wield economic and financial power.

This leads to self-centeredness, which increases greed. We buy stuff to fill the emptiness within ourselves. This causes us to lose focus on the common good.

The effect will be social unrest. Obsession with a consumerist lifestyle, with increases inequality, will lead to violence and mutual destruction.

The problem isn't hopeless, however, since humans have the ability to change. A change in our lifestyle could positively influence those who "wield political, economic and social power."

II. EDUCATING FOR THE COVENANT BETWEEN HUMANITY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Environmental education shouldn't only be focused on scientific information and consciousness-raising. It should help us how the transcendent gives "ecological ethics its deepest meaning."

Education in environmental responsibility can encourage us to act in way that promote the common good, such as "avoiding the use of plastic and paper, reducing water consumption, separating refuse, cooking only what can reasonably be consumed, showing care for other living beings, using public transport or car-pooling, planting trees, turning off unnecessary lights, or any number of other practices."

We shouldn't worry that such efforts won't "change the world." They benefit society by "calling forth goodness."

Ecological education can take place in a variety of settings: at school, in families, in the media, in catechesis and elsewhere.

Political institutions and various other social groups are also entrusted with helping to raise people's awareness. All Christian communities have an important role to play in ecological education.

III. ECOLOGICAL CONVERSION

Spirituality can motivate us to a more passionate concern for the protection of our world. The ecological crisis is thus also a summons to profound interior conversion. Some people need an "ecological conversion", whereby the effects of their "encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them." A healthy relationship with creation is one dimension of overall personal conversion.

Individual conversion, though, is not enough. The ecological conversion needed to bring about lasting change is also a community conversion.

IV. JOY AND PEACE

Christian spirituality proposes an alternative to our obsession with consumption. We need to adopt the mindset that "less is more." Christian spirituality proposes a growth marked by moderation and the capacity to be happy with little.

The change of attitude will help us develop a “serene attentiveness.” One expression of this attitude is when we stop and give thanks to God before and after meals: “I ask all believers to return to this beautiful and meaningful custom.”

V. CIVIC AND POLITICAL LOVE

Care for nature is part of a lifestyle which includes the capacity for living together and communion.

Love—“overflowing with small gestures of mutual care”—is also civic and political. Love for society and commitment to the common good affects everyone.

VI. SACRAMENTAL SIGNS AND THE CELEBRATION OF REST

The Eucharist is a “source of light and motivation for our concerns for the environment, directing us to be stewards of all creation.” The day of rest, centered on the Eucharist, “sheds it light on the whole week, and motivates us to greater concern for nature and the poor.”

VII. THE TRINITY AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CREATURES

The Trinity has left its mark on all creation. Everything is interconnected, and this invites us to “develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity.”

VIII. QUEEN OF ALL CREATION

Mary, the mother of Jesus, is also the Mother and Queen of all creation. We can ask her to enable us to look at this world with eyes of wisdom.” Saint Joseph too can “inspire us to work with generosity and tenderness in protecting this world which God has entrusted to us.”

IX. BEYOND THE SUN

God offers us the light and the strength needed to continue on our way and carry our the task of caring for our “common home.”

Francis concludes with two prayers, “A prayer for our earth” and “A Christian prayer in union with creation.”

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