

Laudato si': Continuity, Change, and Challenge

by Walter E. Grazer

Change and Contribution: New Frontiers

If the themes that Pope Francis addresses in *Laudato si'* resonate with and build upon the work of his predecessors and bishops' conferences from around the world, some might ask, "Is there anything new in Pope Francis's encyclical? What is the buzz about?"

The short answer is, "Yes, there is much that is new in *Laudato si'*." Although the following list is not exhaustive, there seem to be at least **nine innovative aspects of *Laudato si'*** with respect to Catholic ecological theology.

ONE

The pope is the message.

The encyclical is significant because of Pope Francis himself. In so many ways, Pope Francis is the message. This is a man who seeks to live the gospel in a visible and unmistakable way. He embraces the migrants who washed up on the shores of Lampedusa and Lesbos, he eschews the traditional Vatican trappings of luxury, he lives in the Vatican guest house rather than alone in the papal apartment, he traveled the United States in a small Fiat rather than a large SUV like other foreign dignitaries. In street parlance, he walks the talk.



TWO

The language is simple.

The pope's witness in *Laudato si'* is conveyed through language that is direct and easy to understand, without complicated images. Examples include the following:

"The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth" (21).

"Who turned the wonder world of the seas into underwater cemeteries bereft of color and life?" (41, quoting the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines).

"We are not meant to be inundated by cement, asphalt, glass and metal, and deprived of physical contact with nature" (43).

The encyclical is full of direct, pithy language that stirs our imaginations and consciences. This type of language is new in Catholic magisterial documents and teaching.



THREE

The pope uses his papal authority to address ecology.

Pope Francis addresses ecology with one of the most authoritative means of papal teaching authority—an encyclical—to date.¹ This is especially so with his treatment of climate science, wherein he recognizes that “a very solid scientific consensus indicates that we are presently witnessing a disturbing warming of the climatic system” (LS 23) and invokes the “precautionary principle”:

If objective information suggests that serious and irreversible damage may result, 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 to the environment or to those who inhabit it. (LS 186)

He has done this at a critical moment in history as the world faces the prospect of runaway, effectively irreversible climate change. Timing is everything, and Pope Francis’s choice to address ecology in his first major encyclical signals to all people of faith and goodwill the gravity with which he views present environmental challenges.²



FOUR

The pope goes further in promoting integral ecology.

Pope Francis seeks an integral ecology capable of promoting the common good and the flourishing of all life—of humans and of other creatures. He goes further than his predecessors in promoting integral ecology, a notion that is even more inclusive than the notion of integral development first proposed by Pope Paul VI in his 1967 encyclical *Populorum progressio* (14–21). Importantly, Pope Francis says we can no longer achieve integral human development without the simultaneous inclusion of concern for the environment in which we live. “We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather, with one complex crisis that is both social and environmental. Strategies for solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature” (LS 139).

FIVE

***Laudato si'* carries an unprecedentedly clear moral message about poverty and ecology.**

Its message is about global inequality and how the plight of those who live in poverty is intimately connected with the degradation of the earth. Pope Francis sees a direct link between these situations, and this is unsurprising given his own pastoral experiences with the poor. He believes we cannot divorce the human social condition from a deteriorating environment, particularly as it affects those who live in poverty. In particular, he recognizes that the poor are most affected by environmental harm despite often doing least to cause it, and thus recognizes that an “ecological debt” exists between rich and poor nations (LS 51).



SIX

***Laudato si'* is a view from the ground up and not from the top down.**

Pope Francis seeks a Church more in touch with the sheep whose pastors listen to their people and, in his words, “have the odour of sheep.”³ For Pope Francis, “collegiality” (that is, the pope governing the Church in partnership with the bishops) is a key reform goal of his papacy. He wants that style of governance to begin with him, and collegiality is thus on prominent display in this encyclical. *Laudato si'* reflects the local expression of the Church through more than twenty references to the ecological work of local episcopal conferences around the world.



SEVEN

Pope Francis is deeply concerned about the modern use of technology.

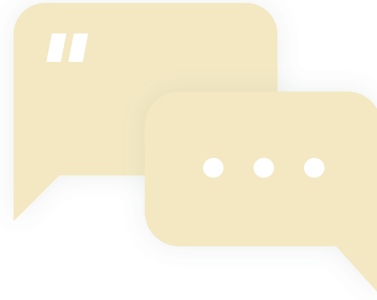
In *Laudato si'* he introduces a new term— “the technocratic paradigm”—to express his disquiet (LS 106). Concern about technology is not new for the Church. Francis, however, is sharper and more critical in his concern that humanity, through its technological prowess, has become “confrontational” with nature (LS 106). This is not to say that he is anti-technology. He praises its development and its contribution to the advancement of society and human wellbeing. In a memorable line, he emphasizes, “Nobody is suggesting a return to the Stone Age” (LS 114). He is worried, however, that the technocratic paradigm, which is rooted in power and control, “accepts every advance in technology with a view to profit, without concern for its potential negative impact on human beings” (LS 109). In response, he promotes a balanced approach to technology that does not subject humans or nature to a utilitarian experiment elevating technology or the market to a singular salvific role.



EIGHT

The encyclical contains a call for education, spirituality, and conversion.

Pope Francis calls for rich “ecological education ... spirituality... [and] conversion” in response to contemporary ecological challenges (LS 202–221). He decries rampant consumerism that impedes and threatens “a genuine sense of the common good” that is “inseparable from” integral ecology and warns that the “obsession with a consumerist lifestyle, above all when few people are capable of maintaining it, can only lead to violence and mutual destruction” (LS 156, 204). This is very strong language in a Church statement, arguably the strongest thus far regarding these topics. In response, he emphatically calls for a robust program of education, spirituality, and conversion in individuals and society. In particular, he highlights the need for civic and religious institutions to raise awareness of modern environmental issues and cultivate personal virtues—good habits that can catalyze widespread, lasting care for our common home.



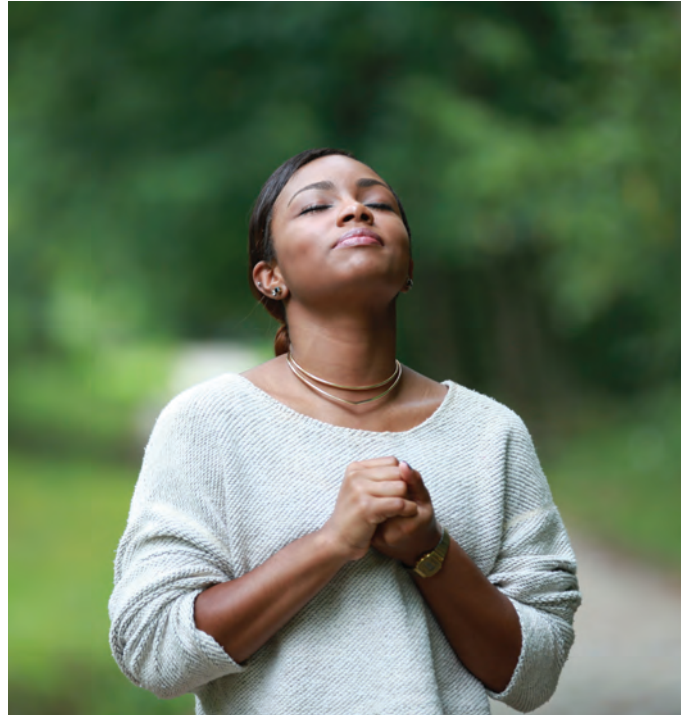
NINE

There is a call for dialogue.

Perhaps most notably, Pope Francis makes an unprecedented call for dialogue. Dialogue with other Christians, other religions, and all people of goodwill is key to his pastoral vision. Francis thus frames *Laudato si'* in an entirely dialogical motif. He begins the encyclical by “address[ing] every person living on this planet” and expresses his desire to enter into dialogue with all people about our common home (LS 3). He then celebrates not only the work of other Christians and religions but also “the reflections of numerous scientists, philosophers, theologians and civic groups, all of which have enriched the church’s thinking on these questions” (LS 7). In particular, the pope, for the first time in a papal encyclical, uplifts the prophetic leadership and witness of an ecumenical leader, Patriarch Bartholomew I (LS 7–9). Moreover, Francis urges dialogue between science and religion (LS 62) and, especially, among and between religions and religious believers (LS 201).

Conclusion

At the end of the open dialogue that defines *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis offers two prayers—one for the earth itself with all who believe in God, and another specifically for Christians to pray in unity with creation. In a spirit of collaboration and prayer, people of faith and goodwill are thus invited to take up the common work to “hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” (*LS 49*, italics in original), to care for our common home, and to honor the opening words of the encyclical, “*Laudato si', mi Signore,*” “Praise be to you, my Lord.”



This article is an excerpt from “Laudato si’: Continuity, Change, and Challenge” by Walter E. Grazer, in All Creation Is Connected, edited by Daniel R. DiLeo (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic 2018), 31–43. Copyright © 2018 by Anselm Academic. All rights reserved. www.anselmacademic.org



Walter E. Grazer teaches in the Catholic Studies Program at Georgetown University, focusing on ecology and Catholic social thought. Grazer holds a BA in philosophy, an MA in international relations, and an MSW in social work.

1. For more on this, see Daniel R. DiLeo, “Papal Authority and Climate Change: Preparing for Pope Francis’ Encyclical,” *U.S. Catholic*, May 20, 2015, <http://www.uscatholic.org/articles/201505/papal-authority-and-climate-change-preparing-pope-francis-encyclical-30117>.
2. Pope Francis published the encyclical *Lumen fidei* in 2013. That document, however, was largely authored by his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, and did not receive nearly as much public attention as *Laudato si'*.
3. Pope Francis, “Homily of Pope Francis: Chrism Mass,” March 28, 2013, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130328_messa-crismale.html.