

# The Pope's Revolution. The Implications of *Laudato si'*

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*Laudato si'* (LS) is a truly revolutionary encyclical, possibly the most radical papal document in the last 220 years. Here I include encyclicals like *Rerum Novarum* (1891) of Leo XIII, *Divino afflante Spiritu* (1943) on biblical studies and *Mediator Dei* (1947) on liturgical renewal written by Pius XII, *Pacem in terris* and *Mater et magistra* (1963) of John XXIII and *Populorum progressio* (1967) of Paul VI.

LS is revolutionary because it is much more than a theological, moral and spiritual reflection on ecological issues, but a challenging reflection on the whole structure of life, culture and morality in the contemporary world. Conservative Catholic columnist, Ross Douthat has critically but correctly understood that LS is far more than as an attack on climate change deniers. He sees the encyclical a complete repudiation of 'the whole "technological paradigm" of our civilization, [on] all the ways (economic and cultural) that we live now' (*New York Times*, 20 June 2015). Spot on!

Pope Francis doesn't let Christianity and theology off the hook either. LS confronts that deeply held, but profoundly compromised (I really want to say 'toxic') Christian tradition, anthropocentrism. Since Neo-Platonism infected Christian theology with the body/soul distinction almost 1750 years ago, the church has been anthropocentric, that is it has promoted the notion of the priority of spirit over matter and human dominance over nature with the idea that we humans somehow constitute the ultimate meaning of the natural world, that the earth exists for us, to be used at will by us. Francis radically questions anthropocentric human dominance over nature and he reintegrates humankind back into the biological matrix from which we first emerged by emphasising the intimate inter-connectedness of all reality. He is critical of thinking 'of different species merely as potential "resources" to be exploited, while overlooking the fact that they have value in themselves' (33). He also strongly agrees with Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew that the 'to commit a crime against the natural world is a sin against ourselves and a sin against God' (8), that is evil in the strict sense.

The word 'anthropocentrism' occurs eight times in LS in a negative context. He reinforces this negativity by saying that 'nowadays, we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God's image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures...[Rather] this implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature' (67). For most of its history Christianity denigrated the body and matter; materiality was seen the 'vale of tears,' antithetical to spiritual growth and a hinderance in the search for God.

Francis is particularly critical of the loss of biodiversity. 'The great majority [of plants and animals] become extinct for reasons related to human activity. Because of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God by their very existence, nor convey their message to us. We have no such right' (33). Francis is critical of thinking 'of different species merely as potential "resources" to be exploited, while overlooking the fact that they have value in

themselves' (33), and he points out that we are biologically intimately interconnected with the world because 'a good part of our genetic code is shared by many living things' (138). 'Nature,' he says, 'cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves, or as a mere setting in which we live. *We are part of nature*' (139). '*We are part of nature*': this is the message that runs right through the encyclical as Francis radically re-situates and re-roots humankind in the biological structure of the natural world. Commenting on LS, the French philosopher and sociologist, Edgar Morin says: 'We have in us cells that have been multiplying since the origin of life...If we go back to the history of the universe, it means that we carry the whole cosmos in ourselves' (*La Croix*, 23/6/15). This was an emphasis that the Australian theologian Denis Edwards often highlighted.

Two Catholic thinkers have written deeply about the issue of our relationship with nature. One is acknowledged in an LS endnote: Pierre Teilhard de Chardin who resituated theology within the context of evolution. The other, Thomas Berry, is not mentioned. Berry says that anthropocentrism is rooted in 'our failure to think of ourselves as a species, interconnected with and biologically interdependent on the rest of reality.' He says that we have become besotted with 'the pathos of the human' and take ourselves and our needs as the focus, norm, and final arbiter of all that exists.

Nowadays we are besotted with technology. As futurist Kevin Kelly puts it: 'The solution for technology problems, will be more technology; and if that causes other problems, the solution for those will be the same, more technology.' There is techno-fix for everything. While he is no techno-Luddite, Francis mounts a profound critique of technology in LS which sounds very much like that of the German philosopher, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). However, it's not Heidegger he quotes, but theologian Romano Guardini (1885-1968). He is quoted six times in LS. Even before Heidegger's *The Question Concerning Technology* was published in 1955, Guardini had written in the 1920s about the way technology cuts us off from nature creating an artificial, abstract, one-dimensional, mass, de-personalized and manipulative world. Following Guardini the pope says: 'The gadgets and technics forced upon [us] by the patterns of machine production and of abstract planning, mass man accepts quite simply; they are the forms of life itself. To a greater or lesser degree mass man is convinced that his conformity is both reasonable and just' (203).

Actually, Heidegger's analysis of technology is much deeper. He argues that it so dominates the horizon of our being and so impregnates our attitude to everything that we cannot avoid being unconsciously immersed in it and manipulated and controlled by it. It creates a cultural and intellectual *Ge-stell* (an 'en-framing') that determines the way we think. And, says Heidegger, *how we think* is much more important than *what we think*. He says that since the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century technology enframes nature not as a reality in itself, but as something to understood and then used and exploited by us for our own purposes.

Pope Francis links into this in his critique of technology as an extractive mentality that presupposes that 'there is an infinite supply of the earth's goods, and this leads to the planet being squeezed dry beyond every limit', an idea which, he says, 'proves so attractive to economists, financiers and experts in technology' (106). LS says 'technology tends to absorb everything into its ironclad logic' (108) and promises 'quick fixes' which favour 'the interests of certain powerful groups' (107).

I called LS ‘revolutionary’, and it is. But that doesn’t mean it’s perfect. I have three interconnected difficulties with it. The first centres on Francis’ claim that that social justice and equity for the world’s poor and care for the natural world and ecological integrity are equally important. While most Catholics and Christians would agree with him, I’m not sure that holding these two priorities together on an equal footing is as easy as he says. LS says that it is a both/and issue, but I would argue that it is instead a question of where you place your emphasis and I would say that ecological integrity is more important. For me, in the present world situation we must place our emphasis on nature which must come before all human considerations. That is not to say that social justice be ignored; it is vitally important, but in the end, a world to live in must come before all else. It is essentially a question of emphasis.

Interconnected with this is the question of world overpopulation. LS simply dismisses this. ‘Some can only propose a reduction in the birth-rate...To blame population growth instead of extreme... consumerism...is one way of refusing to face the issues’ (50). For sure, consumerism is a terrible problem, but that simply side-steps that the impact of human numbers in developing countries puts on food production, water supplies and natural resources, which in turn leads to hunger and famine, as well as dire environmental consequences. I would simply refer Pope Francis to West Africa, specifically to Chad, northern Nigeria and Niger. Only 15% of the land surface of Niger is habitable—a country the size of France—with superficial soils, recurrent drought, water shortages and a current population of 22 million which, with a fertility rate of 7.1, will increase to 52 million in 2050. This sets the scene for a catastrophic human struggle for ever diminishing basic resources.

There is a note of unreality in LS. The pope fails to take into account that as people move out of poverty in countries with enormous populations like India and China, their expectations and demands increase with the result that the pressure on the environment becomes unsustainable. There is a sense in which the encyclical bypasses these questions, or says they are irrelevant. The encyclical also ignores the exponential increase of human numbers: in 1804 there were one billion people in the world, in 2009 there were seven billion, in 2021 there will be eight billion, in 2035 there will be nine billion. These increases cannot be simply dismissed. There is a limit to what the earth can carry; it is not infinite and, pope or no pope, we can’t pretend that this is not a fact.

Perhaps we see here the influence of Professor Hans Joachim Schellnhuber of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research and of the Pontifical Academy of Science on the formulation and presentation of the encyclical, who says that ‘contrary to what some have claimed, it is not the mass of poor people that destroys the planet, but the consumption of the rich.’

Another unfortunate reference in LS (50) is the dismissive use of the term ‘reproductive health’, casting it as a kind of UN-inspired, Western plot to stop the poor having children. Although Francis doesn’t say so, it harks back to the old-style clerical attack on the ‘evils’ of ‘feminism’. Presumably the pope’s criticism of reproductive health is to remain consistent with Paul VI’s 1968 condemnation of contraception in the encyclical *Humanae vitae* and to support the Philippines bishops who have been in conflict with the successive governments over reproductive health legislation, and to bolster various African bishops’ conferences, such as the Kenyan bishops, who claim it is ‘cultural’ for Africans to have big families.

Dismissing reproductive health is particularly unfortunate because all the evidence shows that it is precisely when women have access to primary and secondary education, security from family or spousal violence, a legal status independent of tribal and patriarchal cultural systems and a genuine access to reproductive health care that living standards increase and population numbers begin to decline because women then have control of their fertility. This maintains their freedom to decide on the number and spacing of births and gives them some quality of life beyond fertility.

Criticisms notwithstanding, *Laudato si'* is still a genuinely revolutionary papal document, probably the most far-reaching and important of all encyclicals, especially in terms of its radical re-situating of theological anthropology. For that we owe Pope Francis a genuine and deep debt of gratitude.

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