

Summary and Commentary on *Laudato Si'*: the Pope's encyclical on the environment and poverty

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The long-awaited encyclical letter of Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': on care for our common home*, was released on 18 June 2015. The title comes from the canticle of Saint Francis, "LAUDATO SI', mi' Signore" – "Praise be to you, my Lord", and sets the theme for a lengthy addition to Catholic Church teaching (248 paragraphs) that addresses both the environmental challenges facing the world and persistent poverty, weaving the two themes together as aspects of the same spiritual illness facing the world today. The letter is framed as an integrated systems perspective on the material and spiritual challenges, and the need for spiritual solutions. As Baha'is we can

welcome such a clear stand by the Catholic Church on issues where we share both the priority that they should be given, and the diagnosis of the fundamental spiritual illness behind both problems.

The encyclical letter, which has 246 paragraphs, opens with a sixteen-paragraph introduction. Then follow six chapters starting with where we are in our treatment of our planetary home and ending with the type of spiritual education needed to come to terms with environmental challenges and poverty. The chapter titles are: Chapter 1, "What Is Happening to Our Common Home"; Chapter 2, "The Gospel of Creation"; Chapter 3, "The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis"; Chapter 4, "Integral Ecology"; Chapter 5, "Lines of Approach and Action"; and Chapter 6, "Ecological Education and Spirituality." Each chapter has between three and nine subsections. The encyclical concludes with a prayer for our earth and a Christian prayer in union with creation.

The letter is addressed to all the peoples of the world, not just Catholics. It opens with a review of previous Catholic statements on the environment, going back to Saint Francis of Assisi, and citing also the initiatives of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of the Orthodox Church, as well as Protestant and Sufi sources. It summarizes the major environmental challenges as defined by science, and explores their deeper causes in a materialistic society of short-term selfish interests bent on profit without regard for the needs of the poor or the environment. The issues discussed include pollution and climate change, water (for which access is a basic human right), loss of biodiversity, decline in the quality of human life and the breakdown of society, global inequality, weak responses, and the variety of opinions. There are strong critiques of consumerism, the economy and multilateral corporations that are reminiscent of those in statements and publications of the Baha'i International Community (<https://www.bic.org/statements-and-reports/statements>; <https://www.bic.org/publications>) and "*One Common Faith*", among others.

Among the themes developed by the Pope are

the intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet, the conviction that everything in the world is connected, the critique of new paradigms and forms of power derived from technology, the call to seek other ways of understanding the economy and progress, the value proper to each creature, the human meaning of ecology, the need for forthright and honest debate, the serious responsibility of international and local policies, the throwaway culture and the proposal of a new lifestyle. (§16)

There are also proposals for dialogue and action. The following are some of the major themes of the encyclical letter.

RELATIONSHIP TO NATURE, TO GOD, AND TO FELLOW HUMAN BEINGS

Chapter 2 on the gospel of creation begins with a call for a dialogue between science and religion, and the light offered by religious faith on the challenges identified by science. Our relationship with God, with other human beings and with nature has been broken, and we must return to our obligation to use the earth's goods responsibly, and to respect other living beings and all of creation. "Everything is interconnected, and... genuine care for our own lives and our relationships with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice and faithfulness to others." (§70) The scriptures describe God as the creator, and depict the love of God for His creation. The Pope is critical of every tyrannical and irresponsible domination of human beings over other creatures.

If we acknowledge the value and the fragility of nature and, at the same time, our God-given abilities, we can finally leave behind the modern myth of unlimited material progress. A fragile world, entrusted by God to human care, challenges us to devise intelligent ways of directing, developing and limiting our power. (§78)

With respect to **nature**, each creature has its own purpose. The contemplation of creation allows us to discover in each thing a teaching that God wishes to hand on to us. We can better understand the importance and meaning of each creature if we contemplate it within the entirety of God's plan. As part of the universe, called into being by one Father, all of us are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family, a sublime communion that fills us with a sacred, affectionate and humble respect. The natural environment is a collective good, the patrimony of all humanity and the responsibility of everyone.

Throughout the letter, the Pope weaves together **ecological and social concerns**.

A sense of deep communion with the rest of nature cannot be real if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human beings.... Concern for the environment thus needs to be joined to a sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society. (§91)

Whether believers or not, we are agreed today that the earth is essentially a shared inheritance, whose fruits are meant to benefit everyone. For believers, this becomes a question of fidelity to the Creator, since God created the world for everyone. Hence every ecological approach needs to incorporate a social perspective which takes into account the fundamental rights of the poor and the underprivileged. 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.... (§93)

CRITIQUE OF THE PRESENT SYSTEM AND ITS VALUES

In chapter 3, the letter explores the **human roots** of the ecological crisis, with a focus on the dominant technocratic paradigm and the place of human beings and of human action in the world. The Pope's social conscience is particularly apparent.

We should be particularly indignant at the enormous inequalities in our midst, whereby we continue to tolerate some considering themselves more worthy than others. We fail to see that some are mired in desperate and degrading poverty, with no way out, while others have not the faintest idea of what to do with what they possess, vainly showing off their supposed superiority and leaving behind them so much waste which, if it were the case everywhere, would destroy the planet. In practice, we continue to tolerate that some consider themselves more human than others, as if they had been born with greater rights. (§90)

By cutting ourselves off from the reality of both nature and spirituality, we fall into the trap of the **consumer society**. Our excessive anthropocentrism stands in the way of shared understanding and of any effort to strengthen social bonds. "Once the human being declares independence from reality and behaves with absolute dominion, the very foundations of our life begin to crumble." (§117) We set ourselves at the centre, and give absolute priority to immediate convenience, with all else becoming relative. The result is rampant individualism, and many problems of society are connected with today's self-centred culture of instant gratification. The market tends to promote extreme consumerism in an effort to sell its products, so we easily get caught up in a compulsive consumerism of needless buying and spending. When people become self-centred, their greed increases.

The emptier a person's heart is, the more he or she needs things to buy, own and consume. It becomes almost impossible to accept the limits imposed by reality.... Obsession with a consumerist lifestyle, above all when few people are capable of maintaining it, can only lead to violence and mutual destruction. (§204)

Our freedom fades when it is handed over to the blind forces of the unconscious, of immediate needs, of self-interest, and of violence. In this sense, we stand naked and exposed in the face of our ever-increasing power, lacking the wherewithal to control it. We have certain superficial mechanisms, but we cannot claim to have a sound ethics, a culture and spirituality genuinely capable of setting limits and teaching clear-minded self-restraint. (§105)

The Pope frequently refers to problems of corruption. "When the culture itself is corrupt and objective truth and universally valid principles are no longer upheld, then laws can only be seen as arbitrary impositions or obstacles to be avoided." (§123)

The letter criticizes how the method and aims of **science and technology** are made an epistemological paradigm, with a reductionism in which technological products create a framework that ends up conditioning lifestyles and shaping social possibilities along the lines dictated by the interests of certain powerful groups. The technological paradigm has become so dominant that it would be difficult to do without its resources and even more difficult to utilize them without being dominated by their internal logic. Technological specialization makes it difficult to see the larger picture:

The fragmentation of knowledge proves helpful for concrete applications, but it often leads to a gradual loss of appreciation for the whole, for the relationships between things, and for the broader horizon, which then becomes irrelevant. This very fact makes it hard to find adequate ways of solving the more complex problems of today's world, particularly those regarding the environment and the poor; these problems cannot be dealt with from a single perspective or from a single set of interests. A science which would offer solutions to the great issues would necessarily have to take into account the data generated by other fields of knowledge, including philosophy and social ethics. (§110)

This reference to a science of great issues mirrors the calls in the scientific community for a new sustainability science integrated across the disciplines.

The critique extends to the **economic system**, and the easy acceptance of "the idea of infinite or unlimited growth, which proves so attractive to economists, financiers and experts in technology. It is based on the lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth's goods, and this leads to the planet being squeezed dry beyond every limit." (§106) The absolute power of the financial system will only give rise to new crises.

The financial crisis of 2007-08 provided an opportunity to develop a new economy, more attentive to ethical principles, and new ways of regulating speculative financial practices and virtual wealth. But the response to the crisis did not include rethinking the outdated criteria which continue to rule the world. (§189)

The technocratic paradigm also tends to dominate economics and political life. The economy accepts every advance in technology with a view to profit, without concern for its potential negative impact on human beings. Finance overwhelms the real economy. The lessons of the global financial crisis have not been assimilated, and we are learning all too slowly the lessons of environmental deterioration.... showing no interest in more balanced levels of production, a better distribution of wealth, concern for the environment and the rights of future generations.... We fail to see the deepest roots of our present failures, which have to do with the direction, goals, meaning and social implications of technological and economic growth. (§109)

As a consequence,

Doomsday predictions can no longer be met with irony or disdain. We may well be leaving to coming generations debris, desolation and filth. The pace of consumption, waste and environmental change has so stretched the planet's capacity that our contemporary lifestyle, unsustainable as it is, can only precipitate catastrophes, such as those which even now periodically occur in different areas of the world. The effects of the present imbalance can only be reduced by our decisive action, here and now. We need to reflect on our accountability before those who will have to endure their dire consequences. (§161)

SOLUTIONS

Having diagnosed the illness, much as Baha'u'llah, the Founder of the Baha'i Faith, did in the nineteenth century and the international Baha'i institutions have done more recently, the encyclical describes the **fundamental transformation** that will be needed to solve these problems. It will not be sufficient to undertake a series of urgent and partial responses to the immediate problems of pollution, environmental decay and the depletion of natural resources. "There needs to be a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies, an educational programme, a lifestyle and a spirituality which together generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm." (§111)

If the present ecological crisis is one small sign of the ethical, cultural and spiritual crisis of modernity, we cannot presume to heal our relationship with nature and the environment without healing all fundamental human relationships.... Our relationship with the environment can never be isolated from our relationship with others and with God. (§119)

"There can be no renewal of our relationship with nature without a renewal of humanity itself" (§118).

All of this shows the urgent need for us to move forward in a bold cultural revolution. Science and technology are not neutral; from the beginning to the end of a process, various intentions and possibilities are in play and can take on various shapes. Nobody is suggesting a return to the Stone Age, but we do need to slow down and look at reality in a different way, to appropriate the positive and sustainable progress which has been made, but also to recover the values and the great goals swept away by our unrestrained delusions of grandeur. (§114)

The beginnings of that change are already apparent. "An authentic humanity, calling for a new synthesis, seems to dwell in the midst of our technological culture, almost unnoticed" (§112). This theme has also been developed in Baha'i International Community statements at the United Nations, such as "*Rethinking Prosperity: Forging Alternatives to a Culture of Consumerism*" (2010) <https://www.bic.org/statements/rethinking-prosperity-forging-alternative...>

The encyclical, in chapter 4, calls for an **integral ecology**, one that clearly respects its human and social dimensions:

Ecology studies the relationship between living organisms and the environment in which they develop. This necessarily entails reflection and debate about the conditions required for the life and survival of society, and the honesty needed to question certain models of development, production and consumption. It cannot be emphasized enough how everything is interconnected. (§138)

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.... It is essential to seek comprehensive solutions which 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 which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature. (§139)

"We urgently need a humanism capable of bringing together the different fields of knowledge, including economics, in the service of a more integral and integrating vision" (§141). "Human ecology also implies another profound reality: the relationship between human life and the moral law, which is inscribed in our nature and is necessary for the creation of a more dignified environment" (§155). It is heartwarming to see the Pope develop themes to which I and many others have devoted our lives, and that reflect the Baha'i approach.

There is also an acknowledgement of the need for approaches that reach to the **local community** level and that make science more accessible. Ecology calls for greater attention to local cultures when studying environmental problems, favouring a dialogue between scientific-technical language and the language of the people. Culture is more than what we have inherited from the past; it is also, and above all, a living, dynamic and participatory present reality, which cannot be excluded as we rethink the relationship between human beings and the environment. This includes the important contribution of indigenous cultures, and the need for more participation in urban planning.

There is a focus in the letter on the principle of the **common good**:

Underlying the principle of the common good is respect for the human person as such, endowed with basic and inalienable rights ordered to his or her integral development. It has also to do with the overall welfare of society and the development of a variety of intermediate groups, in applying the principle of subsidiarity. Outstanding among those groups is the family, as the basic cell of society. Finally, the common good calls for social peace, the stability and security provided by a certain order which cannot be achieved without particular concern for distributive justice; whenever this is violated, violence always ensues. Society as a whole, and the state in particular, are obliged to defend and promote the common good. (§157)

The notion of the common good also extends to future generations.... We can no longer speak of sustainable development apart from intergenerational solidarity. Once we start to think about the kind of world we are leaving to future generations, we look at things differently; we realize that the world is a gift which we have freely received and must share with others. Since the world has been given to us, we can no longer view reality in a purely utilitarian way, in which efficiency and productivity are entirely geared to our individual benefit. Intergenerational solidarity is not optional, but rather a basic question of justice, since the world we have received also belongs to those who will follow us. (§159)

The fifth chapter develops lines of approach and **action**, the major paths of dialogue that help us to escape the spiral of self-destruction that currently engulfs us. Central to this is the concept of the oneness of humankind so important in the Baha'i teachings:

There has been a growing conviction that our planet is a homeland and that humanity is one people living in a common home. An interdependent world not only makes us more conscious of the negative effects of certain lifestyles and models of production and consumption which affect us all; more

importantly, it motivates us to ensure that solutions are proposed from a global perspective, and not simply to defend the interests of a few countries. Interdependence obliges us to think of *one world with a common plan*. (§164)

The concept of the oneness of humankind and of the planet as our common home has obvious implications for international approaches to **governance**, so pertinent with the coming UN summit on the post-2015 agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, and the December Climate Change Conference (COP21) in Paris.

International negotiations cannot make significant progress due to positions taken by countries which place their national interests above the global common good. Those who will have to suffer the consequences of what we are trying to hide will not forget this failure of conscience and responsibility. (§169)

"Halfway measures simply delay the inevitable disaster. Put simply, it is a matter of redefining our notion of progress." (§194)

There are some very specific comments on issues central to the **environmental** debate.

Politics must not be subject to the economy, nor should the economy be subject to the dictates of an efficiency-driven paradigm of technocracy. Today, in view of the common good, there is urgent need for politics and economics to enter into a frank dialogue in the service of life, especially human life. (§189)

Environmental protection cannot be assured solely on the basis of financial calculations of costs and benefits. With respect to genetically-modified organisms (GMOs) the Pope notes that "a technology severed from ethics will not easily be able, by itself, to limit its own power." (§136). He refers to the need for common and differentiated responsibilities, speaks out against carbon credits, and calls for help with less polluting forms of energy. There is a need for enforceable international agreements, global regulatory norms, environmental impact assessment, and the precautionary principle. On ocean governance, there is a need for an agreement on systems of governance for the whole range of so-called "global commons" (§174). We witness a weakening of the power of nation states, chiefly because the economic and financial sectors, being transnational, tend to prevail over the political. Given this situation, it is essential to devise stronger and more efficiently organized international institutions, with functionaries who are appointed fairly by agreement among national governments, and empowered to impose sanctions:

The myopia of power **politics** delays the inclusion of a far-sighted environmental agenda within the overall agenda of governments.... True statecraft is manifest when, in difficult times, we uphold high principles and think of the long-term common good. Political powers do not find it easy to assume this duty in the work of nation-building. (§178)

What is needed is a politics which is farsighted and capable of a new, integral and interdisciplinary approach to handling the different aspects of the crisis. Often, politics itself is responsible for the disrepute in which it is held, on account of corruption and the failure to enact sound public policies. (§197)

The letter calls for an **economic system** that is a worthy expression of our most noble human qualities, striving intelligently, boldly and responsibly to promote a sustainable and equitable development within the context of a broader concept of quality of life. As in the Baha'i writings, it emphasizes the importance of work:

We were created with a vocation to work. The goal should not be that technological progress increasingly replace human work, for this would be detrimental to humanity. Work is a necessity, part of the meaning of life on this earth, a path to growth, human development and personal fulfilment. (§128)

Business is a noble vocation, directed to producing wealth and improving our world. It can be a fruitful source of prosperity for the areas in which it operates, especially if it sees the creation of jobs as an essential part of its service to the common good. (§129)

With respect to **growth**,

a decrease in the pace of production and consumption can at times give rise to another form of progress and development. Efforts to promote a sustainable use of natural resources are not a waste of money, but rather an investment capable of providing other economic benefits in the medium term. If we look at the larger picture, we can see that more diversified and innovative forms of production which impact less on the environment can prove very profitable. (§191)

If in some cases sustainable development were to involve new forms of growth, in other cases, given the insatiable and irresponsible growth produced over many decades, we need also to think of containing growth by setting some reasonable limits and even retracing our steps before it is too late. (§193)

The letter contains a section on **religions** in dialogue with **science**:

It cannot be maintained that empirical science provides a complete explanation of life, the interplay of all creatures and the whole of reality. This would be to breach the limits imposed by its own methodology. If we reason only within the confines of the latter, little room would be left for aesthetic sensibility, poetry, or even reason's ability to grasp the ultimate meaning and purpose of things. (§199)

The majority of people living on our planet profess to be believers. This should spur religions to dialogue among themselves for the sake of protecting nature, defending the poor, and building networks of respect and fraternity. Dialogue among the various sciences is likewise needed, since each can tend to become enclosed in its own language, while specialization leads to a certain isolation and the absolutization of its own field of knowledge. This prevents us from confronting environmental problems effectively. (§201)

The emphasis on the need for religions to be in dialogue with science logically leads in chapter 6 to a discussion of **ecological education** and spirituality. The letter refers to the Earth Charter (§207), and calls for a sense of social responsibility on the part of consumers (§206).

Disinterested concern for others, and the rejection of every form of self-centeredness and self-absorption, are essential if we truly wish to care for our brothers and sisters and for the natural environment. These attitudes also attune us to the moral imperative of assessing the impact of our every action and personal decision on the world around us. If we can overcome individualism, we will truly be able to develop an alternative lifestyle and bring about significant changes in society. (§208)

Environmental education has broadened its goals. Whereas in the beginning it was mainly centred on scientific information, consciousness-raising and the prevention of environmental risks, it tends now to include a critique of the "myths" of a modernity grounded in a utilitarian mind-set (individualism, unlimited progress, competition, consumerism, the unregulated). It seeks also to restore the various levels of ecological equilibrium, establishing harmony within ourselves, with others, with nature and other living creatures, and with God. Environmental education should facilitate making that leap towards the transcendent which gives ecological ethics its deepest meaning. It needs educators capable of developing an ethics of ecology, and helping people, through effective pedagogy, to grow in solidarity, responsibility and compassionate care. (§210)

"Only by cultivating sound virtues will people be able to make a selfless ecological commitment" (§211). This is close to the focus of the Partnership for Education and Research about Responsible Living (<http://livingresponsibly.org>) and a research programme I have helped to lead on values-based learning and indicators (<http://esdinds.eu>).

The encyclical calls for an **ecological conversion**, in which spirituality can motivate us to a more passionate concern for the protection of our world. The ecological crisis is a summons to profound interior conversion to bring about lasting change, which also should be a community conversion. The letter discusses how humility helps to overcome the ego, the need for interior peace, and how a balanced lifestyle united with a capacity for wonder can take us to a deeper understanding of life. We should not understand our human superiority as a reason for personal glory or irresponsible dominion, but rather as a different capacity that, in its turn, entails a serious responsibility stemming from our faith.

Christian spirituality proposes an alternative understanding of the quality of life, and encourages a prophetic and contemplative lifestyle, one capable of deep enjoyment free of the obsession with consumption. We need to take up an ancient lesson, found in different religious traditions and also in the Bible. It is the conviction that "less is more"... Christian spirituality proposes a growth marked by moderation and the capacity to be happy with little. It is a return to that simplicity which allows us to stop and appreciate the small things, to be grateful for the opportunities which life affords us, to be spiritually detached from what we possess, and not to succumb to sadness for what we lack. (§222)

Even living on little, they can live a lot, above all when they cultivate other pleasures and find satisfaction in fraternal encounters, in service, in developing their gifts, in music and art, in contact with nature, in prayer. Happiness means knowing how to limit some needs which only diminish us, and being open to the many different possibilities which life can offer. (§223)

We must regain the conviction that we need one another, that we have a shared responsibility for others and the world, and that being good and decent are worth it. We have had enough of immorality and the mockery of ethics, goodness, faith and honesty.... When the foundations of social life are corroded, what ensues are battles over conflicting interests, new forms of violence and brutality, and obstacles to the growth of a genuine culture of care for the environment. (§229)

The letter concludes with a discussion of community actions, the relation of these themes to Catholic beliefs, and an interfaith prayer for our earth and a Christian prayer in union with creation.

It is apparent in this summary how much all those who accept that human purpose is ultimately spiritual come to similar conclusions about the nature of our environmental and social crises, the spiritual solutions that are called for, and the urgency of a fundamental transition in our society away from materialism and excessive consumption. So many sentences in the Pope's letter resonate with Baha'i texts about the connections between all things and the impossibility of separating the inner environment from that outside, that it is not practical to cite them all. The encyclical provides a strong basis for interreligious collaboration in laying the spiritual foundations for positive solutions to the environmental and social crises that threaten us with catastrophe. It also invites a dialogue between science and religion that Baha'is have been pursuing for over a century. We can only hope and pray that governments will now rise to their responsibilities in the months ahead, while already we advance as rapidly as we can at the level of civil society.

The full encyclical letter is available at <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-fra...>

[the § numbers following quotes refer to paragraphs in the encyclical]