

Laudato Si – An engineer's, farmer's and father's perspective on Caring for our Common Home

The week that Pope Francis' encyclical on the environment was released I was in the middle of Southeastern, Ohio and West Virginia cleaning up coal ash ponds. As a father of four, a part-time organic farmer and environmental engineer I was excited about what the encyclical on the environment or Laudato Si could mean for our world and our children. As a practical engineer, I know it is not easy or possible to address most environmental impacts quickly. Contamination or sins against the environment take time to remediate.

In the months after Laudato Si was released I found myself very troubled and hopeful at the same time. Troubled because I witnessed the longterm impact of environmental degradation. As an optimistic farmer and father, I thought, "Maybe there is a chance that this encyclical on the environment could help the world to see that our planet is really struggling, and needs us to listen and learn from what is happening."

Any farmer who cares for the land and works hard to raise healthy food, realizes that we are not truly in control. Farmers know that their success and livelihood is highly dependent on interpreting the signs and messages provided by weather, soil, bugs and plants. A good father has similar qualities. Raising healthy, holy and happy children is not easy. It requires adapting to circumstances, and carefully listening to the needs of your wife and your children. Success as a farmer and father requires being strong enough to work hard, while also being patient. It requires wisdom to adapt quickly and respond to a wide variety of potentially negative influences that could hurt "the soils or the crops" of life that are essential for your family.

Laudato Si is carefully and thoughtfully addressed by Pope Francis to "all men and women of good will". Like a good father expressing an urgent message to his children, the Pope is telling us that we can no longer ignore the environmental problems in our world. Laudato Si, like many of Pope Francis' writings, has several layers of meaning. In a world that rapidly interprets sound bites of information, the deeper message of Laudato Si can easily be missed or taken out of context. Understanding and benefitting from the message requires listening with a patient heart.

One of the deeper or more important messages of Laudato Si is that our Common Home is being substantially damaged by our "lifestyles, models of production and consumption, and the established structures of power which govern our societies" (quote from Pope John Paul II by Pope Francis). Another equally important message is that the primary reason for pollution or damage to our world is **widespread indifference**, and **human selfishness**. Throughout Laudato Si there is a message of hope that a change of heart and a "bold cultural revolution" can make a positive and sustainable difference.

The encyclical examines the conflict and quandary in political and social circles that the damage is being caused by climate change or human induced global warming. The concern is that rising sea level or an increased number of storms can cause significant impacts on our societies and the poor. As an environmental engineer and farmer I know that environmental impact is much bigger than climate change or rising sea levels. Pope Francis suggests that regardless of our political perspective that we know enough to stop denying the problem and start the "human family conversation" about environmental degradation. It is a call to action to make a positive and lasting change.

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“A very solid scientific consensus indicates that we are presently witnessing a disturbing warming of the climatic system. In recent decades this warming has been accompanied by a constant rise in the sea level and, it would appear, by an increase of extreme weather events, even if a scientifically determinable cause cannot be assigned to each particular phenomenon.”

Pope Francis is careful to wrap the political “hot buttons” on climate change into a chapter on Pollution and Climate Change, subtitled, *Pollution, refuse and the culture of waste*. This chapter explains that the wealthy or rich have the greatest opportunity to make a change in the cause of pollution, while the poor are the most vulnerable and least able to influence the causes. Laudato Si provides a *call to action* for those in leadership of multi-national companies and nations to make decisions that provide lasting change. Even though few specifics are offered, what is clear is that *a change of heart* is necessary when it comes to protecting the environment of our Common Home.

No Easy Solutions, Except to Live a Simpler Life. As a farmer and engineer I know that quick or simplistic solutions will have little long-term impact. Things will not change until we deal with the root causes of pollution. New laws and global agreements alone are not enough to make a difference unless people have an interior conversion about caring for our Common Home. Excess waste, uncontrolled emissions to the air are directly connected to our throwaway culture, and a lack of concern for the earth and the more vulnerable human beings closest to us.

To be able to respond properly requires listening and learning to develop the best solution instead of a reactionary approach. For example, quickly eradicating all coal combustion energy without considering a balanced energy portfolio can do little to improve the global environment, and result in a substantial loss of jobs for blue collar workers. Even though there is a critical need to discover cleaner ways to extract and use fossil fuels, our societies must also consider the lifecycle impact of all forms of energy. Wealthier countries consuming less resources, and offering practical assistance with emission controls and environmental management to poorer countries can curb climate change and reduce pollution. All of these solutions are consistent with the ecological spirituality outlined in Laudato Si.

Is there a chance that one cause for the indifference about damage to our Common Home is our inability to connect and listen to those who have different views?

Many of the interpretations of Laudato Si are either from a religious and social science perspective. Could there be a more pressing need for a technical and spiritual perspective to bridge the gap between social science and the science of energy production? Does the ecological spirituality in Laudato Si have practical applications for those working in energy production, transportation design and waste management? It is unlikely that there will be lasting change until the leaders of energy companies, multi-national corporations, and the largest producers of waste materials see how the spirituality of Laudato Si applies to their business. Is the ecological spirituality of Laudato Si only meant for those in the “green movement” or does it have meaning or application in the fields of business and engineering? If so who will build these bridges of communication?

So what can an individual, family or small business do in the mean time to start their own “bold cultural revolution” outlined in Laudato Si? A few practical ideas:

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1. **Take the time to read Laudato Si** and/or recent summaries by Fr. James Martin, SJ, and other practical Catholic and Christian business leaders.
2. **Plant a garden and get in touch with the earth.** Like his namesake, Pope Francis plants seeds of hope and action through and with Laudato Si. Working in the soil is cleansing and a vocation that is “ordained by the Most High”. Taking a few key phrases, and working and praying by gardening is a great way to get in touch with the deeper message in Laudato Si
3. **Learn about where your energy comes from.** Energy production, heating and cooling tend to be some of the largest users of energy and produces approximately 30 percent of the industrial waste that impacts our world. Using less energy and living more simply is a great way to create more peace and care for our Common Home.
4. **Recognize that environmental impacts are much bigger than carbon emissions.** Even though governmental organization are vigorously debating the negative impacts of carbon emissions, how to address these impacts is much more difficult. Environmental impacts can be measured in many ways. Destruction of habitat and impacting rivers and water resources are near term indicators of impacts to our earth that are often more damaging. Looking at these other environmental impact indicators often guides us to practical, local and near term problems and solutions.
5. **Learn to live with less.** One of the best ways to care for the earth, love God's poor and obtain greater peace in one's life is to learn to live with less. Laudato Si explains the evils of our “throwaway culture” and “consumption lifestyles” and how it makes us less human. Living with less, causes us to *s l o w d o w n* and allows us to sense the peace of Christ more often.
6. **Learn to work with someone who has a different view of protecting the earth.** Many of us live and work with people who have the same political, technical or social view of caring for the earth. The more we work together with people to solve the problems, the more we are working to solve the root cause of damage to our Common Home -- human selfishness.
7. **Take time to pray and spend time in nature.** This is a common theme throughout Laudato Si, and something that can easily be missed. Pope Francis and St. Francis of Assisi are “connected” to God with and through nature. Seeing and sensing God through prayer and nature, makes us happy and more human.
8. **Take the time to get to know a friend who is poor, or a farmer or understands the earth.** People who are poor and/or farmers who live close to the land are more grounded and uniquely dependent on God for daily life.