

## **“Go Thou and Do Likewise”**

**Philip Clayton**

We need to strengthen the conviction that we are one single human family. There are no frontiers or barriers, political or social, behind which we can hide, still less is there room for the globalization of indifference.... These situations have caused sister earth, along with all the abandoned of our world, to cry out, pleading that we take another course. (*Laudato Si'*, pars. 52-53)

It's an age when many feel powerless. As the immensity of the environmental crisis sinks in—melting ice caps, disappearing water tables, polluted rivers, and the rising carbon levels that no one seems able to cap—the sense of powerlessness has continued to grow. If the species as a whole cannot stem the deadly tide of consumption, what can any single person do? What can I do? Is it even worth trying?

With “LAUDATO SI', mi' Signore” —“Praise be to you, my Lord” — Pope Francis begins his teaching on the environment, “On Care for Our Common Home.” The opening words are taken from the canticle of his namesake, Francis of Assisi, who prays to “our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us.” Prayer closes the Pope's document as well:

O God of the poor,  
help us to rescue the abandoned and forgotten of this earth,  
so precious in your eyes.  
Bring healing to our lives,  
that we may protect the world and not prey on it,  
that we may sow beauty, not pollution and destruction.

*Laudato Si* matters, first, because it signals what one person can do. For progressive people around the world, the Roman Catholic church over the last decades has not exactly stood out as the beacon of success. But almost from the beginning, Pope Francis has signaled that it would no longer be “business as usual” within the Church. The degree of change that he has brought about in less than two years is nothing short of unbelievable. To live with integrity, to speak the truth that you see, and to act prophetically in the ways that this truth demands—these steps are possible for all of us. If one in one hundred people acted with the courage and boldness in their particular

sphere that Francis has evidenced in his, we could begin to put the brakes on climate change.

*Laudato Si'* is a highly personal document in another sense as well. It is not shy about environmental science, politics and economics, philosophy, or Catholic doctrine for that matter. But its central message is not about any of these abstract topics. It is about selfishness and consumerism. The primary reason why the planetary system has been disrupted is that humans have taken far more for themselves than we needed, and we continue to choose our comfort and pleasure over the good of the whole. As much as the encyclical is a political and economic call to action, it is in the first place a moral critique:

[E]conomic powers continue to justify the current global system where priority tends to be given to speculation and the pursuit of financial gain, which fail to take the context into account, let alone the effects on human dignity and the natural environment. Here we see how environmental deterioration and human and ethical degradation are closely linked. (56)

The words are directed as much to the middle classes in the developed nations as they are to the super-rich and the multinational corporations. We are meant to squirm as we read them.

This both/and nature of the encyclical is significant in the context of Catholic as well as Protestant theology. Because conservatives have been in the dominant positions of power over the last decades, the world has come to identify the Christian worldview with concerns about morality and sexual ethics, above all abortion, homosexuality, birth control, and celibacy. Like all oppositions, these vociferous voices have driven many spokespersons on the religious Left to focus exclusively on social and political issues.

Pope Francis argues that *both* perspectives are necessary. Government laws and interventions by themselves will not be sufficient until the majority of citizens in the developed nations recognize their own complicity in the global climate crisis. We who write these essays, and those who read them, are not innocent. Kant argues that actions are only permissible if the principles that underlie them are generalizable to all agents. Our lifestyle, our carbon footprint, does not pass the test. Francis offers his own version of the Kantian argument: “extreme and selective consumerism [is] an attempt to legitimize the present model of distribution, where a minority believes that it has the right to consume in a way which can never be universalized, since the planet could not even contain the waste products of such consumption” (50).

But the Pope's response to religious conservatives is equally as devastating. The volume of their pronouncements on sexual ethics only highlights their silence on matters of economic injustice. We are the beneficiaries of a global economic system where the comfort of the wealthy comes at direct expense to the poor. The economic policies that produce these inequities do not lie outside the sphere of Christian concern; much less is our wealth of sign that God has blessed us and favored us above all others. Because Jesus directed his message preferentially to the poor, the oppressed, and the outcast, Christians are required to direct their attention to those on the bottom, the victims of economic injustice. It's not just that conservative Christians have put their primary attention in the wrong place; it's that they have been on the wrong side. As Francis writes in his closing prayer, "Enlighten those who possess power and money that they may avoid the sin of indifference, that they may love the common good, advance the weak, and care for this world in which we live" (246).

The ecological crisis is a moral issue, we saw, because it has much to do with what Francis calls the "ecological virtues" (88)—with how we actually live. It's a justice issue because the poor of the world—the people whose lifestyles have not created climate change—are already the first victims of polluted air, undrinkable water, desertification, and dying soil. North Americans saw this inequity up close and personal as we watched the devastation of Hurricane Katrina unfold on our television screens. Wealthy (mostly white) people made it safely out of New Orleans, while poor (mostly black) people suffered and died for days without assistance. The *Washington Post* recently (July 6, 2015) reported on the primary victims of the California drought: poor rural farmers and residents. Far more extensive suffering is occurring in sub-Saharan Africa, in India, and in fact across the global South as climate change continues its relentless destruction of their homes and their livelihoods.

To comprehend the depth of the inequity requires a synthetic perspective. The first step is to synthesize ecological science with a justice-based ethic: "Today ... we have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor" (49). But inevitably, the movement toward the broadest perspective brings us to metaphysics. Without some instance of Value that transcends the interests and desires of human agents in the here and now, all too many will adopt a "take what you can get" attitude. By contrast, life lived before a higher Value calls actors to self-limitation (kenosis): "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).

Quickly the metaphysics circles back around to the world again: “The establishment of a legal framework which can set clear boundaries and ensure the protection of ecosystems has become indispensable; otherwise, the new power structures based on the techno-economic paradigm may overwhelm not only our politics but also freedom and justice” (53). Chapter 3 of the encyclical (101-36) details the human roots of the ecological crisis: technology, the globalization of the “technocratic paradigm,” and the effects of modern anthropocentrism. Chapter 4 (137-62) defends an “integral ecology,” expanding the ecological perspective to include its environmental, economic, social, and cultural dimensions, as well as “the ecology of daily life.” All is driven by the principle of the common good, for in the end “human ecology is inseparable from the notion of the common good,” which is the “central and unifying principle of social ethics” (156).

In short, Francis’s first major social teaching is tightly argued yet poetic: scientifically informed, politically savvy, philosophically rich, and spiritually moving. Although it seeks to have interreligious appeal (see “Religions in Dialogue with Science,” 199-201), it’s also a deeply Catholic document. It’s a sobering document, as is appropriate given the unprecedented global crisis we now face. But it is also a hopeful document: “Yet all is not lost. Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves” (205).

In the end, the encyclical is groundbreaking for multiple reasons. First, it correctly identifies climate change as simultaneously about morality and justice. Second, in order to respond to the climate crisis, it draws on the resources of both science and faith. Without science we would not be able to draw the links between human actions and the rapidly changing climate, and we would not be able to extrapolate the trends outward into the future. Because of science we know that an immediate leveling off of carbon emissions would still have global consequences that will persist for many centuries to come, whereas “business as usual” will produce a “Sixth Great Extinction” of up to 90% of the species that currently inhabit this planet.

Science tells us what will happen, but faith (religion) is far better at motivating action. We look to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) to convey the scientific consensus on the causes and effects of climate change. We look elsewhere for moral insight and spiritual inspiration. The papal encyclical shows how powerful a religious tradition can be when it brings its full collection of moral and ethical resources to bear on the scientific data: “Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God” (84). The Abrahamic family of religions is not alone in this regard; Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, and Sikh motivations are equally as powerful, and the indigenous

traditions of the world are perhaps unrivaled in their testimony that, when we lose or destroy our homeland, we have lost everything.

Finally, the encyclical is groundbreaking because of the urgency of its call to action, here and now. No small fixes, no fortunate breakthroughs in technology will get us out of this mess; after all, it was techno-absolutism that got us here in the first place. Nothing less than an “ecological conversion” (216-21) will suffice. Religion and science must now join hands in an integral ecology that serves “the full development of humanity” (62)—and, I would add, all living things. One does not need to be Catholic to pray with Francis his closing prayer:

Teach us to discover the worth of each thing,  
to be filled with awe and contemplation,  
to recognize that we are profoundly united  
with every creature  
as we journey towards your infinite light.