

Abstract

The Environmental Ethics of Pope Francis: Parsing Key Terms and Claims in Laudato Si'

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When the enormously influential environmental encyclical *Laudato Si'* appeared in 2015, public reactions to the ecological analysis of Pope Francis were swift and numerous. Words of appreciation came from climate scientists and social activists who applauded this religious leader for his accurate diagnosis and bold prescription for change. Conversely, certain detractors faulted the pope for being excessively alarmist or alternatively for dismissing such favored public policy directions as cap-and-trade approaches to reducing carbon footprints. Sometimes lost in the controversy generated by this unprecedented papal foray into climate change analysis are the substance of the pontiff's many contributions in providing communities of faith with conceptual tools and resources that advance their comprehension of the gravity and the main features of the environmental crisis. This paper highlights and explains six of the main claims and concepts driving the pope's 2015 document. The section devoted to each item will contextualize the origin of the claim or concept within the long and growing tradition of Catholic social teaching and then explore the relevant connections and applications to the

larger environmental justice concerns of this conference, with its interreligious focus. What follows is a brief outline of the content of the six areas to be explored:

1. Integral ecology: This phrase provides the title of the fourth of the encyclical's six chapters and captures the holistic perspective of this teaching document regarding climate justice. Francis repeatedly reminds the reader that "everything is connected," and more specifically that humanity is currently experiencing not two separate crises but a single one, with both social and environmental dimensions.

2. Intergenerational solidarity: The notion of "justice between generations" (treated in par. 159-62) is an extension and creative expansion of a central guiding concept of Catholic social theory, namely the common good. The ethical claim that current inhabitants of the earth hold solemn obligations to preserve natural resources for the benefit of future living beings challenges customary exploitative approaches to what Francis repeatedly calls "our common home."

3. Technocratic paradigm: The selfish and myopic use of technology to provide illusory quick fixes to deeply rooted social problems reflects a lamentable type of rationality that distorts genuine priorities and enables further exploitation of the environment.

4. Tyrannical anthropocentrism: Francis identifies as a key distortion in human relations the tendency of our species utterly to dominate the environment and all other creatures. An abrupt about-face is urgently required to reorient humanity toward a stance of valuing other living beings and their ecosystems in appropriate ways.

5. The challenge to "hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor": Quoted in par. 49 of the encyclical, this phrase (drawn from such Latin American liberation theologians as

Leonardo Boff) illuminates the linkage between the suffering of under-resourced people and the egregious exploitation of the natural world which exacerbates social inequalities.

6. Ecological conversion: This notion (developed in pars. 216-21), with noteworthy spiritual as well as epistemological significance, constitutes a key proposal of Pope Francis regarding the transformations necessary to change the equation in the direction of ecological progress.

Building upon the venerable tradition of Catholic social thought, Pope Francis thus provides valuable resources for establishing a more just and sustainable world. This presentation will draw linkages to parallel contributions in other world religions, mindful of the noteworthy eagerness of Pope Francis to engage in interreligious dialogue and cooperation on a wide range of topics, of which the global environmental crisis is perhaps the most prominent and surely the most urgent.