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What Precisely Did Pope Francis Contribute? Parsing Key Terms and Claims in *Laudato Si'*

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Abstract: With the 2015 publication of his encyclical letter *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, Pope Francis emerged as a leading religious voice (alongside Patriarch Bartholomew) advocating for ecological justice and environmental sustainability. This remarkable exercise of global leadership has demonstrably influenced subsequent discourse, activism and deliberations on the environment, including the Paris Agreement of the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP 21) in December 2015. In order to advance the collective understanding of the diagnosis of the environmental crisis and the prescriptions for change presented by Pope Francis in this teaching document, this essay examines key terms, claims and conceptual tools presented in its pages. This essay opens with a pointed analysis of the historical context within which this particular religious contribution to environmental justice proceeds. It closes by tracing certain key outcomes and ongoing impacts of the contribution of Pope Francis to this area of social concern.

Keywords: Pope Francis; *Laudato Si'*; Roman Catholic Church; climate change; structural analysis

1. Introduction

Any interdisciplinary endeavor to explore the contours of social justice and environmental sustainability would be incomplete without some treatment of religious belief, practice and ideation. Despite the effects of secularization and widespread disaffiliation from religious institutions in certain parts of the world, religion remains a vital force in global society, continuing to shape human relations and even public policy (Casanova 1994). Since a clear majority of the global population professes religious faith, religious convictions continue to shape key values and influence social priorities in most societies. Theological doctrines remain major resources for motivating people throughout the world to engage in admirable behavior and practice social responsibility, including making considerable personal sacrifices for the urgent cause of protecting the natural environment. Though its influence has not always been simple or unproblematic, as we shall see below, religion retains a key role in shaping a sustainable world and overcoming the most destructive climate change scenarios.

Among all the religious leaders active on the global scene, Pope Francis has emerged as perhaps the most prominent spokesperson for environmental concern. His constant appeals for caring for creation transcend the boundaries of any one religious tradition. Indeed, he repeatedly and deliberately reaches out to people of all faiths (or none at all) to heed the call to protect our common home (Irwin 2016). From the very first days of his pontificate (which started with his election on 13 March 2013), Francis has prioritized messages relating to the obligation to preserve our fragile ecosystem—as part of larger moral obligations to practice social justice and fulfill duties to God, neighbors and the natural world itself. The high point of his environmental advocacy was the June 2015 publication of his encyclical letter *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*¹ (Francis 2015). The analysis that follows, revolving around the text of that teaching document, proceeds in three parts, easily summarized as consisting of context, content and outcomes. First, it provides some insight into the historical *context* within which this particular religious contribution to environmental justice



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proceeds. Second, it examines the most important *content* of the document *Laudato Si'*, focusing on six of its most distinctive concepts and claims. These six, selected for their broad appeal and incisive analysis of the causes and implications of the ecological crisis, are integral ecology, intergenerational solidarity, the technocratic paradigm, tyrannical anthropocentrism, ecological conversion, and the challenge to hear both “the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor”. Third, it describes the key *outcomes* and ramifications of what Pope Francis contributes in this area of social concern, characterizing the ongoing impact *Laudato Si'* has exerted on the environmental movement so far. Indeed, this instance of religious leadership in support of an urgent agenda of broad-based social reform emerges as an illuminating case study in the potentially constructive role of “public theology” in the many urgent issues facing contemporary society.

2. Context

Before the veritable explosion of faith-based environmental concern and activism in recent decades, religious voices regrettably failed to be consistently supportive of ecological sustainability. Unfortunately, Western religious traditions too often justified and propped up the untrammled exploitation of natural resources by portraying the divine will as supportive of unfettered human dominion over created things (Schaefer 2009, p. 8). The final verses of the first chapter of the book of Genesis (appearing in the Hebrew Bible as well as the Christian Scriptures) depict a God who, at least on a superficial level, grants unlimited prerogatives to the first humans. They are instructed by God to “increase and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over. . . all the creatures” (Genesis 1:28). Whatever precise interpretation is placed on these words (and, of course, accounting for the particular social context in ancient Israel that shaped this text, in accord with responsible hermeneutical procedures) it is not hard to imagine how such a portrayal of the will of God, introduced at the very start of the Abrahamic faith traditions, leads to conclusions with disastrous ecological implications.

Focusing for now only on the Christian community, a number of subsequent theological developments exacerbated the unfortunate tensions between the Christian faith and environmental responsibility. The early centuries of Christian history witnessed a noticeable impulse on the part of some believers to “flee the world” (the Latin tag for this approach is *fuga mundi*), which gave rise to the traditions of the Early Desert Fathers (such as Saint Anthony the Great of Egypt in the third century) and the later establishment of Western Monasticism (following structures provided by the Rule of Saint Benedict and a variety of other inspirations). While the qualities of simplicity of lifestyle and ascetic self-denial associated with the monastic life may indeed in many ways cohere well with ecological sensibilities and a conservationist agenda, there is also the danger of legitimizing an attitude of *contemptus mundi*, or hatred of the world, that denigrates or outright denies the goodness of the created order. An austere and dualistic version of Neo-Platonism that long influenced many in the Mediterranean world and beyond tends to contrast sharply the categories of the natural and the supernatural (or the flesh and the spirit, or the earthly life and the afterlife) with dire consequences for the shaping of behaviors and cultural attitudes. A nearly exclusive focus on otherworldly realities constitutes a curious type of theological escapism and has a way of eclipsing inner-worldly concerns, such as the health of the habitats on which humans depend in the here-and-now. The resulting inclination to disregard the integrity of the earth gave rise to what has come to be known as “dominion theology”, a strand of theological ideology that justifies the wanton exploitation of nature. Not to be confused with more recent versions of political theology that sometimes go by the same moniker and support an agenda of crass domination of sectarian authorities over previously liberal democratic orders, thereby trampling the prudent boundaries of church and state, dominion theology in this sense constitutes a grave threat to the natural ecosystems upon which all creatures depend for survival.

The disastrous effects of an unregulated dominion theology were treated by the historian Lynn White, Jr., in a 1967 issue of *Science* magazine, in his influential article

“The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis” (White 1967).² White blamed the legacy of a distorted picture of God for many of the problems of pollution, environmental degradation and the loss of biodiversity that were just beginning to snowball a half-century ago. But of course, acknowledging a Creator God who places humanity at the top of a hierarchy of life does not necessarily justify the egregious rape of natural resources and the utter subordination of other species. A theistic worldview can also support a theological model of *stewardship*, one which understands humans as those called to be sensitive caretakers of the earth and all its resident species (Schaefer 2009, pp. 121–45; Scheid 2016, pp. 15–44). It can even inspire a “creation-centered spirituality” that emphasizes ecological co-responsibility and deep kinship with our fellow species—themes found in Franciscan spirituality and many venerable religious traditions.

After many missed opportunities, full-throated concern for the environment within official Roman Catholic teachings began to sprout around 1990 with the publication of several landmark teaching documents (though still rather brief ones) on sustainability, emanating from the Vatican and from local bishops’ conferences around the world.³ As welcome as this new attention to protecting the environment was after a long history of neglect, the Catholic response to the ecological crisis was still fragmentary and incomplete, much in need of further development and momentum. The words and deeds witnessed before the ascension of Pope Francis were simply too feeble a response to such an ominous situation, hardly capable of mustering a response displaying the urgency that would match the magnitude of the daunting challenge of ecocide. The advocacy consisted mostly of publishing a few paragraphs lamenting pollution and toxic over-consumption here, or a short pastoral letter encouraging energy conservation there. Even Pope Benedict XVI, who at the time earned the moniker “The Green Pope” for his many commendable words and deeds to protect the earth (Cahill 2010), was only barely catching up to the consciousness-raising commitments of other Christian communities.⁴ Eastern Orthodox Christians, especially under the visionary leadership of Patriarch Bartholomew (Chryssavgis 2011), and Protestants, particularly within denominations affiliated with the Geneva-based World Council of Churches, each enjoyed a major head-start in adopting the theme of “the Integrity of Creation” as a prominent social objective alongside justice and peace.⁵

Enter Pope Francis. From the very start of his papacy in 2013, he has signaled an eagerness to embrace a genuine spirituality of creation, has invited broad audiences to reimagine humanity’s place in the natural world and has proved himself “even greener than the Green Pope” who preceded him. In repeated interviews in the early months of his papacy, he explained that his choice of papal name had much to do with his intention to raise the profile of care for the environment in the Catholic community. Pope Francis was eager to honor Saint Francis of Assisi (Warner 2011), the beloved thirteenth-century Italian friar who was known especially for three things: his advocacy for peace, his closeness to the poor and his care for creation (thus, St. Francis has long been recognized as the patron saint of animals and of ecology itself). The Franciscan roots of the new pope’s ecological perspective became clear in the many homilies in which he went out of his way to praise his namesake’s acts of renunciation of his wealth and privilege, in addition to his mystical connection to nonhuman creatures. Vatican observers could hardly miss the signals he sent, even in his first week in office, regarding his resolve to advance ecological awareness. At his first papal mass (just six days after his election, which fell fortuitously on March 19, the Feast of St. Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus), Pope Francis focused on the vocation of all to be “a protector”. The new pope’s homily on that occasion dwelled on the point that, just as St. Joseph took up with seriousness the obligation he had received to protect the Holy Family (i.e., Jesus and Mary), so must we follow our duty to protect God’s creation (Francis 2013).⁶

Just over two years later, Francis would publish his social encyclical *Laudato Si’* (aptly translated as “Praise Be to You, Lord”, and subtitled “On Care for Our Common Home”). Without a doubt, this has been the most important landmark to date in the unfolding development of constructive Roman Catholic teachings on the environment. Even prior to

examining the content of this authoritative teaching document, it is important to recognize how Francis framed and timed this encyclical. First, he consistently hastened to portray it as anything but a narrowly cast position paper aimed at the debate over a single issue. Rather, Francis invited his audiences to view it as a decidedly holistic contribution to the overall social mission of the Church (DiLeo 2020a), which includes many inter-related dimensions of justice and elements that comprise the common good, of which the environment is an integral feature and concern. Like certain previous social encyclicals, this document was addressed not narrowly to Roman Catholics but to “all people of good will”, furthering signaling the pope’s intentions to engage the broadest possible audience.

Second, Pope Francis deliberately timed the release of the encyclical, the writing process of which took well over a year to complete, for June 2015, a full six months before the convening of the Paris Climate Conference (or COP 21, that is, the twenty-first meeting of the Conference of Parties in United Nations parlance) in the final weeks of that same year. This publication timetable felicitously allowed the document to exert maximum effect on the international community and its climate change deliberations, granting adequate lead time for dissemination but not excessive time that would render it stale or outdated by December 2015. Indeed, several other world religions (including leaders of Islam, Judaism and Buddhism) wrote and released their own climate change documents that followed *Laudato Si’*, though each of these was much briefer and of course had its own distinctive message and tone (Scheid 2016, pp. 119–62). Nevertheless, Francis emerged at that time as a preeminent voice of faith-based environmental concern, and, alongside his good friend Patriarch Bartholomew, continues to play exactly that role.

3. Content

Pope Francis’s encyclical letter *Laudato Si’* contains about 40,000 words in 246 numbered paragraphs, with 172 footnotes citing the work of previous popes, local bishops’ conferences, philosophers, spiritual writers and the international community, with especially frequent reference to the 1992 Rio Declaration on the Environment and Development and subsequent U.N. climate change documents. The overlap of its aspirations with such United Nations initiatives as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is impossible to miss. The encyclical is available for free on the Vatican website in over a dozen major languages and has been printed in many formats throughout the world. Its six chapters bear titles such as “What Is Happening to Our Common Home”, “The Gospel of Creation”, “The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis” and “Ecological Education and Spirituality”.

The overall methodology of the document follows the “see-judge-act” paradigm common in documents of Catholic social teaching. A word about each of the three steps: Pope Francis first surveys the damage done to the environment by pollution and resource depletion, observing in paragraph 21 that “The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth”. The second (or judging) phase includes pointed analysis of the human-induced causes of global warming, forthrightly confirming the general consensus among scientists and making no concessions to climate change deniers. Fully cognizant of his role as a moral teacher, Francis does not shy away from drawing stern ethical judgments regarding the selfishness and myopia that have long supported the crass exploitation of God-given natural resources. Francis seems especially concerned about the damage inflicted upon vital rain forests, such as those in the Amazon and the Congo basins, which the pope (in paragraph 38) dubs as the two vital “richly biodiverse lungs of our planet”. When he reaches the third phase, the action stage of the paradigm, Francis strongly recommends a thorough about-face in human approaches to and interactions with the natural environment and our fellow creatures on earth. The recommended actions, including abrupt changes in lifestyle, economic practices and public policies, all depend upon an underlying change in consciousness regarding our place in the universe and our relationships with all the creatures we encounter and the ecosystems we inhabit.

Over the course of the pope’s ethical analysis in *Laudato Si’*, several motifs arise that had rarely or never before appeared in papal writings. The numbered list of six items

that follows provides only the briefest glimpse of these noteworthy themes and concepts, selected for their particularly outstanding contribution to the advancement of a constructive ecological agenda.

3.1. *Integral Ecology*

This signature phrase, which serves as the fitting title of chapter 4 of *Laudato Si'*, captures the holistic perspective Francis is so eager to emphasize regarding the entire topic of environmental justice, including climate change abatement.⁷ In order to fashion a response that may emerge as at all adequate to the momentous challenges at hand, members of contemporary society need to see and appreciate “the big picture” regarding the climate crisis, where its many dimensions come together into an underlying unity. On a dozen occasions throughout the text, Francis invites the reader to recognize the insight, worded in various ways, that “everything is interconnected” or that “all things are inter-related” or that “nothing can be considered in isolation”.⁸ More than an idiosyncratic verbal tick of this particular Church leader, this repeated insistence on recognizing the unity of all things reflects a recurring theme in the literature of Christian mysticism, a spiritual heritage that Pope Francis receives from the thirteenth-century Saint Francis of Assisi, whose Canticle of the Creatures beautifully portrays the kinship among all parts of creation, including even such inanimate things as the sun and the moon and the wind. For all its great diversity and complexity, the universe displays an essential unity that must inform our approach to resolving urgent ecological challenges.

This pivotal fourth chapter of the encyclical also advances an argument regarding the connection between the environmental crisis on one hand, and the social crisis of injustice and inequality (rightly considered diseases of social ecology) on the other hand. To foreground the phrase *integral ecology* as Francis does is to insist on a unified response to these social and ecological crises; we cannot solve one without addressing the other, since they are two faces of the same pathology. The relationships we share with the earth and with our fellow creatures can only be healthy in the aggregate, conditioned upon assuming an integrated approach to discovering and implementing strategies for successful resolution (Conlon 2017). Injustice and dysfunction in any relationship poisons all other relationships, and such serious disorder manifests in exploitative attitudes and practices towards other people and things.⁹ In short, the phrase *integral ecology* says everything Pope Francis seeks to affirm about the centrality of a comprehensive and socially responsible approach to living virtuously in our times.

3.2. *Intergenerational Solidarity*

This is another term rarely heard in previous Catholic social teaching, though it represents a logical extension of the Church’s long advocacy for the virtue of fellow-feeling and commitment to the greater good of society. Paragraphs 159–62 of *Laudato Si'* treat the seminal concept of “justice between generations”, which is a creative adaptation of familiar religious notions (especially prominent in many Indigenous religions with heightened awareness of long-term future wellbeing) regarding universal benevolence and social responsibility. One of the master concepts of Catholic social thought is the common good, which emphasizes our obligations to attend to needs, defined more broadly than by our own individual interests. *Laudato Si'* challenges us to cease “disregarding our common destiny, which cannot exclude those who come after us” (par. 159). Pope Francis here is expanding the perception of the common good to include not just the needs of currently living people, but even those yet to be born—both humans and even members of other species. If current wasteful practices and profligate lifestyles disadvantage future persons and other beings by harming their ecosystems and exhausting available resources, then contemporary individuals and societies are acting in seriously irresponsible ways. Further, they would not only be harming future beings, but also dishonoring God, who creates all beings for the purpose of their flourishing. To frustrate the intentions of God in this way is to sin grievously. We must not, the pope entreats here, ignore our solemn obligations to

preserve the earth and to safeguard the sustainability of the planet that Francis repeatedly calls “our common home”.

3.3. *The Technocratic Paradigm*

Francis is far from the first commentator to launch a critique of how the indiscriminate reliance on technology threatens key human values.¹⁰ It is not technology itself that is objectionable—Francis is no crass Luddite—but rather the myopic and self-centered employ of technologies that introduces distortions in human relations, including in our interactions with the natural environment. This danger grows especially vivid when humans foolishly imagine that the introduction of new technologies will provide quick fixes to deeply rooted social and cultural problems. As Francis writes in paragraph 109: “The technocratic paradigm tends to dominate economic and political life. . . Some circles maintain that current economics and technology will solve all environmental problems”. The illusion of easy progress through cutting corners has indeed far too often driven approaches to climate change abatement. This conviction has prompted Francis to question (in paragraphs 23–26 and 171 of *Laudato Si'*) the adequacy of cap-and-trade and carbon credit tax policies as a sufficient response to global warming. It is not that such market-based public policies will necessarily fail, but rather that they invariably fall short of inspiring and enacting the comprehensive change of approach that would be the true game-changer so desperately needed in the struggle against climate change. Francis has no interest in disparaging such incremental approaches or technological advances as carbon capture and creating carbon sinks, but as a moral leader he is primarily intent on overcoming the distortion of genuine priorities and the eclipse of socially responsible behaviors that reflect humble self-restraint and simplicity of lifestyle.

3.4. *Tyrannical Anthropocentrism*

Like the technological paradigm, this multisyllabic label represents a brand of reductionism that Pope Francis seeks to refute (especially in paragraphs 115–21) and urges us to resist. This particular distortion prevents us from viewing ourselves honestly, as fully a part of creation, rather than imagining ourselves towering over or astride it in a posture of arrogance, as if we were somehow its rightful and undisputed master. Committing offenses akin to those of political tyrants, humanity comes to engage in collective acts of abuse of power, much to the detriment of other creatures, their habitats and eventually with deleterious effects that boomerang back upon ourselves. We thus haughtily displace God and unduly exploit other species and our entire shared planet. Just as the technocratic paradigm boils down to an exaggerated reliance on a scientific model, tyrannical anthropocentrism places humans so firmly at the center of our perception of the universe that all other beings and values are eclipsed. Together, these two attitudes threaten to stunt the moral imagination and render impossible the transformations required for people to rise to the occasion of the ecological crisis.

3.5. *Ecological Conversion*

This motif, developed by Pope Francis in some detail in paragraphs 216–21 of the final chapter of *Laudato Si'*, represents the antidote to much of what has gone wrong up to this point in human history. The blame for current ecological precarity cannot be attributed to natural processes or disasters nor be laid at the feet of any species except humans. The primary carrier of hope for a better and more sustainable future, then, is *changed people*. Before those people will ever imaginably exhibit more responsible external behavior, both in their private lives and in their collective public policies, they must adopt new interior attitudes and orientations. The holistic transformation required is at root a matter of a renewed *spirituality*. In paragraph 216, Pope Francis affirms that “spirituality can stir up a more passionate concern for the protection of our world”. To move the needle or bend the arc in the direction of true ecological progress, we must resolve to transcend the level of mere tinkering. As with so many of his teachings in other areas of social

justice, Francis is proposing and endorsing a culture-based approach rather than merely a market-based or policy-based approach to urgent change. Those sincerely desiring a healthier earth must become healthier people. If we wish to witness improvement in our external environment, we must first bring about improvement in the interior environment within each of us, through efforts that nurture our souls in such activities as prayer and contemplation (Cloutier 2018). This is the central and profound challenge of ecological conversion. In the final chapter (titled “Ecological Education and Spirituality”) of *Laudato Si’*, Francis adds a stunning rhetorical flourish to heighten the salience of this point. He cites an evocative sentence from the very first papal homily given by his predecessor Benedict XVI: “The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast”.¹¹

3.6. The Challenge to Hear Both “the Cry of the Earth and the Cry of the Poor”

This stirring phrase from the world of liberation theology,¹² quoted in paragraph 49 of the encyclical, illuminates the linkage between the suffering of under-resourced people and the egregious exploitation of the natural world, which exacerbates social inequalities (Cox 2011). Francis calls attention to the many ways in which abuses of the environment in the past have systematically damaged the life prospects of the least privileged; continued inaction in addressing the ecological crisis will further disadvantage those already harmed (Boff 1995). The best example here may be climate change refugees—vulnerable “people on the move” whose ancestral lands have been rendered infertile by the effects of desertification or rising sea levels that wipe out their customary farming and herding activities, as Francis explains in some detail in paragraph 25. Millions of those who formerly scratched out a modest living through subsistence farming have lost their livelihood to drought or coastal flooding or many varieties of severe weather events. All too often, these displaced people become refugees, fleeing through perilous itineraries for new havens that might hold the promise of a more secure life. The “cry of the earth” for relief from this human onslaught and the “cry of the poor” (Boff 1997) for relief from grave injustice are closely linked and impossible to ignore by people of conscience, who will see, judge and act in justice and mercy.

By no means is Pope Francis the only prominent advocate for raising consciousness of the urgent issues of global poverty, of environmental degradation and, particularly, of the linkage between them. Dramatic public demonstrations undertaken by climate change activists across the globe have awakened millions from the slumber of indifference regarding precisely these issues. Research conducted by scholars in all corners of the world increasingly highlights the myriad pernicious and interrelated effects of ecological degradation. More and more, theologians demonstrate a commitment to marshal the data of science to build the case for promoting ecological sustainability, for drawing rich connections to resources of diverse religious traditions and for sparking creative energies to reverse the vicious circle of ecocide. Within Christianity alone, prominent voices such as the South African Ernst M. Conradie (2011) and the ecofeminist Celia Deane-Drummond (2017) provide rich guidance supporting initiatives to address the inordinate suffering of the already marginalized at the hands of climate change. For his part, Pope Francis has continued to expand the scope of his calls for new ways of thinking and acting to reverse cycles of victimhood caused by underlying social and ecological dysfunction. Five years after *Laudato Si’*, he released the social encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (Francis 2020), which probes even deeper into the landscape of these challenges and promotes principles (such as universal solidarity) and practices (such as ever-expanding social dialogue and mitigating the worst effects of uncontrolled technology) that hold promise for resolving the severe crises plaguing global society. The confluence of advocacy by scholars, activists and religious leaders serves as encouragement for those who hope for a just and sustainable future for all.

This list of six motifs developed in the pages of *Laudato Si’* could easily be extended. The encyclical touches upon many other important topics in ways that expand the previous

coverage in any Church teaching document. Two prime examples are the treatment here of threats to the preservation of biodiversity (paragraphs 32–42) and the universal right to potable water (paragraphs 27–31). What Pope Francis affirms on each of these topics represents significant advances in how the Catholic Church addresses ecological priorities in this pivotal moment in human history.

Linking together all these components of the content of the encyclical *Laudato Si'* is a distinctive methodological turn employed by Pope Francis in this and other social teaching documents. While previous popes had utilized to good effect the see-judge-act methodology mentioned above as being characteristic of this document, no pope had engaged in such thoroughgoing *structural analysis* of social injustices, much less of ecological concerns. Structural analysis proceeds by identifying root causes of social injustices, especially in evaluating the role of powerful institutions in perpetuating systemic injustices and establishing linkages among issues that disadvantage particular social groups. The skillful use of this variety of social analysis advances the project of revealing hidden patterns of institutional dysfunction and allows observers of social relations to diagnose the presence and extent of serious social pathology. Catholic social teaching documents since the 1970s had occasionally invoked the language of “social sin” or “structural evil” to capture the systematic nature of human wrongdoing, which so often perpetuates itself by creating distorted patterns of behavior and interaction that come to be imbedded in social and economic structures.

Before Francis, the most prominent example of such social analysis in Catholic social teaching was the 1987 encyclical of John Paul II called *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (John Paul II 1987), which mentions structures of sin and injustice a dozen times. Pope Francis has revived and foregrounded the tools of social analysis in his many social teachings. Identifying and unveiling ingrained patterns of social injustice accords his arguments with great insight and explanatory power. Whether he is treating the plight of refugees, the social factors that disrupt healthy family life, the root causes of spiraling economic inequality or the global arms trade and other patterns of aggression that frustrate efforts at peacemaking, Francis is committed to conducting a thoroughgoing structural analysis when confronted with social disorder. The foregoing examination of the contents of *Laudato Si'* establishes that environmental injustice is yet another arena of social concern in which Francis displays his acumen for this type of analysis. Especially when he links the exploitation of vulnerable people with concurrent ecological degradation, the structural approach of Pope Francis is on full display, as he trains his well-honed “structural eye” on systematic distortions that exact lethal damage upon the environment, including prompting the massive challenge of climate change.

4. Key Outcomes and Effects of *Laudato Si'*

By advancing Catholic teachings on ecology and specifically by placing the Church on the record as a strong advocate for the strict limitation of greenhouse carbon emissions, Francis and his document *Laudato Si'* provide us with valuable resources for establishing a more just and sustainable world. There is certainly no dearth of evidence that his 2015 document has delivered considerable results. Many first-hand observers of the global climate change debates have testified to the positive impact of Vatican voices and interventions in recent international deliberations, including in the negotiating process leading up to the 2015 Paris Climate Accords (McKibben 2023). Opinion polling within the U.S. context, including a Pew Research Center survey released 9 February 2023,¹³ consistently finds that Roman Catholics are increasingly familiar with their Church’s developing environmental teachings and (when compared to other groups of religious adherents) exhibit both elevated consciousness regarding this issue and marked commitment to engage in climate change activism (Agliardo 2018). Repeated analyses of the available data regarding attitudes and levels of activism confirm the existence of these encouraging trajectories (Roewe 2023), even while one of the closest observers of these trends nevertheless concludes that “U.S. Catholics

have not done enough . . . to prudently and sufficiently incorporate *Laudato Si'* into the U.S. Catholic community in fidelity to the Church's evangelical mission" (DiLeo 2020b, p. 12).

While the publication of *Laudato Si'* emerges as the pivotal development in his effort to promote sustainability, Pope Francis has taken further ambitious steps to maintain this momentum of deepening environmental concern. His many acts of moral leadership regarding ecological justice include launching a number of initiatives that have unfolded primarily within Catholic Church circles, such as establishing a liturgical "Season of Creation" that begins annually with the observance of a new "World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation" on September 1 and runs through October 4, the feast day of Saint Francis of Assisi, fittingly enough.¹⁴

Perhaps most impressively, in 2022, the Vatican rolled out the ambitious and creative "*Laudato Si'* Action Platform" geared toward engaging and sustaining the energies, especially among young people, already generated on a worldwide basis to address and reverse climate change and environmental degradation.¹⁵ This Action Platform is an attempt, with initiatives spread out over the course of seven years, to operationalize the ecological teachings of the pope and to raise awareness and implement practical steps for change on a personal, local and society-wide level simultaneously. The agenda of transforming the encyclical's words into action proceeds especially prominently, of course, at the parish and diocesan levels, where the true vitality of Catholicism is found. It takes the form of many practical programs to recycle, conserve energy, introduce sustainable alternatives to fossil fuels and reduce carbon footprints in every way possible.

Communities of Catholics in all parts of the world have been encouraged to develop their own specific programs of action, adapted to local or regional circumstances. On the national level in the U.S. context, a few large and well-established nonprofit organizations such as Catholic Climate Covenant have led the way.¹⁶ On a more local level, individual dioceses and even educational institutions have spearheaded progress in raising awareness and implementing carbon-reduction measures. Fordham University, by way of example, adopted its own *Laudato Si'* Action Plan supported by its students, faculty and administration, focusing on reducing waste, energy usage and carbon footprints across both its urban campuses.¹⁷ The overarching goal of mobilizing Catholics to put their faith into action to fight climate change is inspired by two observations that Francis offered in paragraph 14 of *Laudato Si'*: "All of us can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation, each according to his or her own culture, experience, involvements and talents," and "Everyone's talents and involvement are needed".

It is worth noting that, while Pope Francis (in *Laudato Si'* and through other vehicles and activities) has made many distinctive contributions, his messages often echo those of other responsible voices, both religious and secular, regarding environmental sustainability.¹⁸ For example, the most recent climate assessment report from the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change made this familiar point: "We actually have all the knowledge we need, all the tools we need. We just need to implement it" (United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2022). Pope Francis would agree entirely with the implicit message offered by this panel of distinguished climate scientists: the pressing need to muster the political will to make progress with caring for the environment. Whether this conclusion is voiced by someone with the expertise and portfolio of a moral leader or that of a scientific leader, it remains an undeniable truth of our present dire situation.

This point about commonality of message notwithstanding, the constructive engagement of Pope Francis with this urgent issue serves as a reminder of the distinctive role of religious traditions and faith communities as catalysts for social change. The realm of religion is the locus where humanity most often raises and pursues the most important ethical questions of any age. Simply put, religion is the domain of human life where people form and stir up their moral consciences; confront whatever inertia or despair they might be feeling; and overcome indifference, apathy and resistance to change. It is within the context of their faith lives that many people so often articulate their ethical values,

find hope and energy for fostering social change and develop virtues that will motivate and empower them to challenge injustices and face up to dire threats like climate change. Religion plays an indispensable and irreplaceable function in human affairs—one that comes into play especially strongly and vividly when people consider the challenge of environmental degradation.

Bold and prophetic religious leaders like Pope Francis strive to revitalize the constructive contributions of faith traditions. Nevertheless, it is, of course, up to each member of humanity to play their particular role in the transformation required to sustain our world—which is indeed our irreplaceable common home—as a hospitable place of beauty and abundant life for all creatures.

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Notes

- ¹ Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, 24 May 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html (accessed on 17 September 2023). The text is available in 17 languages on the Vatican website. Although dated on the Solemnity of Pentecost, the letter was actually released on 18 June 2015.
- ² Lynn White, Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis”, *Science* vol. 155, no. 3767 (10 March 1967): 1203-07. The author, a professor of history at UCLA at the time, had delivered an earlier version of this same essay as an address to the December 1966 meeting of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences held in Washington, D.C.
- ³ The most prominent Vatican document of this sort was the Message for World Day of Peace issued by (John Paul II 1990) and titled “Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation”, found at https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19891208_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html (accessed on 17 September 2023). One prominent document from a local bishops’ conference during this same era is “Renewing the Earth: An Invitation to Reflection and Action on Environment in Light of Catholic Social Teaching”. This pastoral statement from the American bishops was published by the United States Catholic Conference (1991) and is available online at: <https://www.usccb.org/resources/renewing-earth> (accessed on 17 September 2023).
- ⁴ During his reign, Pope Benedict XVI famously ordered the installation of thousands of photovoltaic cells on the roofs of Vatican buildings, in an effort to move Vatican City closer to carbon neutrality. He also dedicated several long and insightful paragraphs of his 29 June 2009 social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (Charity in Truth) to the ecological crisis (Benedict 2009). See esp. pars. 48–52 of the full text available online at: https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html (accessed on 17 September 2023).
- ⁵ The World Council of Churches represents 352 distinct member churches in most countries of the world. Its website (<https://www.oikoumene.org/>, accessed on 17 September 2023) continues to feature a prominent place for “Integrity of Creation” resources, alongside common initiative of its member churches (mostly in the Protestant community of denominations) to support economic and social justice of many varieties.
- ⁶ For details, see Homily of Pope Francis at the Inaugural Mass of the Pontificate, 19 March 2013, available at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130319_omelia-inizio-pontificato.html (accessed on 17 September 2023). The homily, delivered to tens of thousands gathered outdoors in St. Peter’s Square, includes the admonition: “Let us be protectors of creation, protectors of God’s plan inscribed in creation, protectors of one another and of the environment”.
- ⁷ The phrase “integral ecology” had on a few occasions appeared in previous documents issued by the International Theological Commission, a Vatican working group whose members are appointed by the pope.
- ⁸ A version of each of those three phrases appears in par. 138, near the start of chapter 4 of *Laudato Si’*.
- ⁹ For an intriguing comparison, consider the work of the public intellectual, poet and land-protector Wendell Berry. Throughout his long and impressive career as a cultural critic, Berry has articulated parallel arguments regarding the linkage between social and ecological issues, with a distinctive emphasis on the category of alienation (which Pope Francis rarely evokes). In his recent work (Berry 2022), Berry explores historical developments and social forces in the United States, most pointedly in his native Kentucky, that shed light on the interplay of misuse of the land and racial exploitation, particularly in the aftermath of Emancipation and the Civil War.

- ¹⁰ One prominent proponent of arguments along these lines is Romano Guardini (1885–1968), a European philosopher whose prescient volume *The End of the Modern World*, is footnoted a half dozen times in chapter 3 (“The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis”) of *Laudato Si’*. Long before he became Pope Francis, the Argentine Jesuit Jorge Mario Bergoglio intended to write a doctoral dissertation on Guardini, even relocating to Europe to conduct research that was eventually abandoned (Guardini [1965] 2001).
- ¹¹ This quote begins par. 217 of *Laudato Si’*. The internal citation is to Pope Benedict XVI, “Homily for the Solemn Inauguration of the Petrine Ministry” (24 April 2005). The full text of Benedict’s homily on that occasion is available online at: https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2005/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20050424_inizio-pontificato.html (accessed on 17 September 2023).
- ¹² See Leonardo Boff (1997), *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, trans. Phillip Berryman, Ecology and Justice Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997). This groundbreaking work linking ecology and social justice was originally published in Portuguese in 1995 by a prominent Brazilian priest (b. 1938) who is a leading liberation theologian. The title of this book is indicative of a broad sensitivity within Latin American liberation theology to the ecological consequences of social injustices and the structures that perpetuate them.
- ¹³ An unsigned news article (Do Catholics Care about Climate Change? 2023, p. 14) that appeared shortly after the release of this Pew survey contains an excellent single-page summary of the findings, including helpful data tables supporting the claim that Catholic opinion about global warming bears distinctive marks of recent church teachings in this area. While there is naturally quite a bit of variability in Catholic attitudes depending upon their demographic features and political affiliations, the causal links between church teachings and aggregate attitudes appear strong. Nevertheless, it remains true, in the words of the report itself, that “Catholics who are Democratic, younger or Hispanic are far more likely than those who are Republican, older or White to say the earth is mostly warming due to human activity”. For the full report, see Pew Research Center (2023).
- ¹⁴ The Orthodox Church had been observing a parallel observance since 1989, and the Season of Creation has subsequently come to be observed by many Christian denominations and the umbrella group the World Council of Churches. For resources on this topic, see the ecumenical website <https://seasonofcreation.org/resources/>, accessed on 17 September 2023.
- ¹⁵ The Platform includes seven component areas of focus, most of which have been treated above: (1) Response to the cry of the earth; (2) Response to the cry of the poor; (3) Ecological economics; (4) Adoption of sustainable lifestyles; (5) Ecological education; (6) Ecological spirituality; and (7) Community resilience and empowerment. Each of these seven foci receives ample treatment at a central website established by the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development (which oversees the Platform) at: <https://laudatosiactionplatform.org/>, accessed on 17 September 2023. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has authorized Catholic Climate Covenant, a faith-based nonprofit organization, to serve as lead organizer spearheading the implementation of the Platform in the United States.
- ¹⁶ See its impressive website at <https://catholicclimatecovenant.org/>, accessed on 17 September 2023.
- ¹⁷ The Fordham University initiative, including a profile of the membership of its central steering committee, was announced in a 16 April 2023 email communication from President Tania Tetlow. It is described in some detail in Emma Kim (2023).
- ¹⁸ There is no dearth of literature assessing the remarkable overlap of messages regarding ecological concern that emanate from the wide array of distinct religious traditions. Perhaps the single best example is the collection of essays in Cain (2012), which survey the strikingly similar positions staked out by authoritative representatives of the following faith communities and spiritual traditions that circle the globe: Judaism, Orthodox Christianity, Roman Catholicism, Islam, Native American religion (as a reflection of a broader range of Indigenous cultures and spiritualities), Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism, Taoism and Confucianism.

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