

The Catholic Church and human relationships with nature

In the opening sentence of the Second Vatican Council's *Gaudium et Spes* (Pope Paul VI, 1965), the Church recognizes the "joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties" of people in the world. In recent times the Church has been preoccupied by human relationships with the world around us – or what is referred to as 'nature'. These relationships have unlocked many comforts and much ease; nevertheless, they now also pose a great threat to our very existence. The Church lauds the achievement of human intelligence in fields such as medicine, technology, telecommunication, transportation and other scientific discoveries; however, it warns against the uncontrolled exploitation of nature.

The Church's intuitions concerning humanity's relationships with nature are amply presented and explicated in the social thought of the Church, especially in the recent encyclical of Pope Francis (2015), *Laudato Si'*. The Pope makes the critical assertion that, should nothing be done to repair the damages we are causing to nature, then our world will no longer be able to sustain the current pace of development. In his encyclical, Pope Francis discusses the damage that human activity has caused to the environment: pollution, climate change, degradation of land and water, and the loss of biodiversity.

The international community admits that we are facing an ecological crisis. Scientists have documented unprecedented increases in global temperatures, the melting of ice caps, toxic rains, wildfires and droughts. Pope Francis does not exonerate Christians from this crisis. They have misinterpreted an important portion of their mandate given by God. In effect, they have over-exploited nature, subjecting it to their inordinate whims and caprices. In *Laudato Si'*, Pope

Francis explains that human beings are rather stewards and caretakers of creation (§§116, 236). The Catholic Church teaches that, although the Earth and all it contains belongs to God, nature is entrusted to human beings, and hence human beings must be responsible to and for nature. The Church teaches that though the final destination of Christians is heaven, they have the responsibility of developing the Earth in a responsible manner.

The role of Christians in solving the present ecological crisis is to assume their responsibility for creation, as stewards and caretakers. Pope Francis teaches that we are not excluded from nature. The ways in which we relate to nature will always return to us for better or for worse. In the words of the Pope: "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" (§139). Nature is not only for the physical benefit of human beings; it is also clear from the Bible that Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ used nature – sea, fishes, crops, plants, birds and wind – to teach his gospel.

Many of the spiritual pillars of Christianity contemplated nature in order to communicate with God. Prominent among them was St Francis of Assisi. In a simple but profound manner, St Francis anticipated the current environmental crisis and prescribed an antidote: the concept of the universal family – *being together* with nature. For example, through his popular song, 'The Canticle of Creatures', St Francis taught us to relate to all creatures as brothers and sisters. One may ask, how then can we cut down a sister tree or kill a brother cow? The Franciscan answer is that we must take care of all

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creation with affection, and use it only to meet genuine needs. For the Franciscan, a house or city without parks and gardens – a world without clean streams and rivers, wild animals and birds – is an impoverishment of human life. Such a dwelling place lacks the joy and beauty that nature brings to our lives.

There are people who think human population growth is one of the major contributors to the ecological crisis, and therefore they prescribe birth control, especially for poorer countries. The Church does not condone irresponsible birth, such as birth outside wedlock, but does hold that “demographic growth is fully compatible with an integral and shared development” (§50). Pope Francis teaches that, instead of blaming population growth for the ecological crisis, we must blame extreme consumerism, greed and the present ‘throw away’ culture.

Laudato Si' has given birth to initiatives like the Global Catholic Climate Movement (www.catholicclimatemovement.global) and the ‘Season of Creation’ within the Catholic Church (www.seasonofcreation.org). As an encyclical addressed to the global

human family, *Laudato Si'* has received great attention from Catholics and non-Catholics alike. It affirms the widely accepted notion that human beings are capable of a sustainable development that meets their present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. But it also adds a crucial dimension of spirituality and ethics to that notion, and to the agreements enshrined in important UN documents (such as the *Earth Charter*, *Our Common Future* and *Agenda 2030*). In particular, it complements the Paris Agreement, which was produced in the same year as the publication of *Laudato Si'*, and which calls on all nations “to undertake ambitious efforts to combat climate change” (<https://is.gd/K1Entq>). ■

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