Can we still believe in a future? Pope Francis' Laudato si' as a platform for action and hope

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(A lecture to the Severn Forum at the University of Gloucestershire's Cheltenham Park Campus, and live-streamed)

I feel like the monk who juggled before the statue of the Virgin, because he had none of the talents of the rest of his community. Unlike your usual speakers at this Forum, I have no theological training. My only qualification is that I'm very passionate about the importance of Laudato si' at this critical time for humankind. But many of you probably know a lot more of the theological background to the subject area than I do, so let me begin by asking your indulgence.

Last month there were a hundred or more of us at the big secondary school in Bishops Cleeve up the road to listen to the environmentalist Jonathon Porritt. In answer to a question, he said that about 15% of the world's scientists had given up on any future for humankind on Planet Earth. So, in what ways does Laudato si' (now more than six years from when it was published) offer us a platform for action and hope?

First, a brief reminder about its author. Jorge Bergoglio, born in Argentina nearly 85 years ago, who qualified and worked for some years as a chemical technician: he has a scientific background. After recovering from a severe illness, he sought to be ordained as a priest in the Society of Jesus. As has been much written about, and as those of you will know if you've seen the film, The Two Popes, his career was far from uncontroversial. Aged 55, he was appointed a bishop in his home city of Buenos Aires, and travelled around by public transport; and in 2013 he was elected bishop of Rome, head of the Roman Catholic Church. He became the first Jesuit Pope, the first from the Americas and the first from the Southern Hemisphere. He's also the first to have taken the name Francis, after St Francis of Assisi – the patron saint of animals and, not of the environment, but of ecology, which, as you all know, is the study of the relationships between living organisms, including humans, and their physical environment.

Popes exercise their teaching authority by writing encyclical letters from time to time. Traditionally they are known by their opening words in Latin, notable examples being Rerum Novarum of Leo XIII; Pacem in Terris of John XXIII, and Populorum Progressio and Humanae Vitae of Paul VI. These round robins have in the past almost always been addressed either to fellow bishops or to what is optimistically known as the Catholic faithful.

Francis' very first encyclical was a completion of one that his predecessor had written before his resignation. The first encyclical for which Francis was fully responsible was not addressed just to Catholics, but to "every person living on this planet" [LS #3]. And he gave it a title, not in Latin, but in the Umbrian dialect of Francis of Assisi. Laudato si' are words from St Francis' Canticle of the Sun, "Praise be to you, my Lord, with all your creatures". Based on the words of Psalm 148, the words are familiar from when we sing the hymn "All creatures of our God and King".

A few preliminary points: first, the encyclical was some 18 months in gestation, many theologians being consulted during this period. Secondly, Francis takes pains to demonstrate that the content of his teaching is rooted both in scripture and in tradition. He quotes extensively from the encyclicals of his predecessors; but also from other Christian and non-Christian writers. And he quotes from the recent pastoral letters and documents issued by bishops from many continents, bringing together the wisdom of the worldwide Church. Finally, Laudato si' was the longest encyclical ever written – which means that anything I say this evening can really only be seen as a rough sketch.

Francis gave Laudato si' a subtitle, "On care for our common home", and it is the spotlight he trains on "what is happening to our common home" [Ch. 1 and #17] that led to it being characterised (on its release at Whitsun 2015) as an environmental encyclical. He says, near the beginning, that "The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth" (#21)

Indeed, because Francis went fully along with the scientific consensus on global heating, it was also dubbed "the climate change encyclical".

As "ecology" or words derived from it appear 80 times in the text, it might better be described as an ecological encyclical, with as its watchwords "integral ecology" (an ecology which clearly respects its human and social dimensions) (#137); but Francis himself refers to Laudato si' as a social encyclical.

More immediately, he wanted it to be heard as his urgent appeal (#14).

I am going to touch on seven separate limbs of this appeal. Response to the Cry of the Earth, Response to the Cry of the Poor, Ecological economics, Adoption of sustainable lifestyles, Ecological education, Ecological spirituality, and Community engagement and participatory action. Though separate, they are linked (like in a body) each to the others, because, as Francis says more than once, "Everything is connected" (##91 & 117).

1: Response to the Cry of the Earth

"The entire material universe speaks of God's love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God." (#84)

There is much beautiful imagery in Laudato si', alongside its urgent message. Chapter 1 begins with a presentation of the then (in 2015) most recent scientific findings on the environment as a way for us to listen to the cry of creation, the cry of the Earth, and "to become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it" (#19). As well as pollution and the effects of climate change, Francis laments the loss of biodiversity. "Each year sees the disappearance of thousands of plant and animal species which we will never know, which our children will never see, because they have been lost forever" (#33).

They are not just any exploitable "resource", but have a value in and of themselves.

Francis articulates the "tremendous responsibility" (#90) of humankind for creation, the intimate connection among all creatures and the fact that "the natural environment is a collective good, the patrimony of all humanity and the responsibility of everyone" (#95). In the Bible, he reminds us, "the God who liberates and saves is the same God who created the universe, and these two divine ways of acting are intimately and inseparably connected" (#73).

The story of creation is central for reflecting on the relationship between human beings and other creatures: the Genesis "accounts suggest that human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself. According to the Bible, these three vital relationships have been broken, both outwardly and within us. This rupture is sin." (#66)

And he goes on in one of the most arresting passages of the encyclical: "we Christians have at times incorrectly interpreted the Scriptures – nowadays we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God's image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures" (#67). Human beings have the responsibility to "till and keep" the garden of the world (cf. Gen 2:15)" (#67), knowing that "…the ultimate purpose of other creatures is not to be found in us. Rather, <u>all</u> creatures are moving forward, with us and through us, towards a common point of arrival, which is God" (#83). [my emphasis]

That the human being is not the master of the universe "does not mean to put all living beings on the same level and to deprive human beings of their unique worth and the tremendous responsibility it entails. Nor does it imply a divinization of the earth which would prevent us from working on it and protecting it in its fragility" (#90).

“Called into being by the one Father. All of us are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family, a sublime communion which fills us with a sacred, affectionate and humble respect” (#89). We are in other words a community of creation. And the appeal Francis makes to us is to face up to the “immensity and urgency of the challenge” (#15) of the climate and ecological crises.

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Before I move on, I need to repeat a question that Francis himself poses: why should a document that’s addressed to all people of good will deal with the convictions of believers?

He answers it as follows: “I am well aware that in the areas of politics and philosophy there are those who firmly reject the idea of a Creator, or consider it irrelevant, and consequently dismiss as irrational the rich contribution which religions can make towards an integral ecology and the full development of humanity. Others view religions simply as a subculture to be tolerated. Nonetheless, science and religion, with their distinctive approaches to understanding reality, can enter into an intense dialogue fruitful for both.” (#62)

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2: Response to the Cry of the Poor

“The deterioration of the environment and of society affects the most vulnerable people on the planet.” (#48)

Francis is very aware of the danger of us fixing only on the threats to the natural world. “A sense of deep communion with the rest of nature cannot be real if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human beings”. (#91) His calling Laudato si’ a social encyclical derives from his determination that we “hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” (#49). and that we respond to them both.

It is the poor who suffer most from pollution, from diminishing supplies of drinking water and above all from global heating.

Francis writes, “Changes in climate, to which animals and plants cannot adapt, lead them to migrate; this in turn affects the livelihood of the poor, who are then forced to leave their homes, with great uncertainty for their future and that of their children. There has been a tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from the growing poverty caused by

environmental degradation. They are not recognized by international conventions as refugees; they bear the loss of the lives they have left behind, without enjoying any legal protection whatsoever. Sadly, there is widespread indifference to such suffering, which is even now taking place throughout our world. Our lack of response to these tragedies involving our brothers and sisters points to the loss of that sense of responsibility for our fellow men and women upon which all civil society is founded." (#25)

As well as migrants, Francis draws particular attention to vulnerable groups such as indigenous communities.

The challenges are to promote ecological justice, to defend life from beginning to end, and to safeguard the living prospects of the generations yet to come.

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3: Ecological economics

"It is a matter of redefining our notion of progress. A technological and economic development which does not leave in its wake a better world and an integrally higher quality of life cannot be considered progress." (#194)

I find in Chapter 3 of the encyclical some of the hardest paragraphs to get to grips with. Francis seems to be questioning the ability of capitalism to provide any longer for our wellbeing, and yet there is no mention of that word.

Reflections on technology are an initial focus: the great contribution to the improvement of living conditions is acknowledged with gratitude. However as Francis says, all the spinoffs from technology give "those with the knowledge, and especially the economic resources to use them, an impressive dominance over the whole of humanity and the entire world" (#104). It is precisely the mentality of technocratic domination, he argues, that leads to the destruction of nature and the exploitation of people and the most vulnerable populations.

What he calls "The technocratic paradigm also tends to dominate economics and political life" (#109), keeping us from recognizing that "by itself the market cannot guarantee integral human development and social inclusion". (#109) We overestimate the capacity of the market to regulate itself.

This part of the Encyclical goes on to address two crucial factors in today's world. Above all work: "any approach to an integral ecology, which by definition does not exclude human beings, needs to take account of the value of labour" (#124), because "to stop investing in people, in order to gain greater short-term financial gain, is bad business for society" (#128).

The second factor is what limits should be placed upon scientific progress, with clear reference to genetically modified organisms (GMOs), a "complex environmental issue" (135), covered in five dense paragraphs. Even though "in some regions their use has brought about economic growth which has helped to resolve problems, there remain a number of significant difficulties which should not be underestimated" (#134), starting from the "productive land being concentrated in the hands of a few owners" (#134). Pope Francis thinks particularly of small producers and rural workers; of biodiversity, and of the network of ecosystems. Therefore "a broad, responsible scientific and social debate needs to take place…" starting from "lines of independent, interdisciplinary research". (#135)

Some of the challenges we need to take up are ethical investment; sustainable production and consumption; support for the circular economy, and protection of the dignity of workers.

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4: Adoption of sustainable lifestyles

"Since the market tends to promote extreme consumerism in an effort to sell its products, people can easily get caught up in a whirlwind of needless buying and spending." (#203)

"Many people know that our current progress and the mere amassing of things and pleasures are not enough to give meaning and joy to the human heart, yet they feel unable to give up what the market sets before them." (#209)

We think of addiction, don't we, in reference to drugs, alcohol and gambling, but not so much in relation to shopping, when all we need is to click on our virtual trolley and wait for the Amazon delivery van.

Francis writes: "A change in lifestyle could bring healthy pressure to bear on those who wield political, economic and social power. This is what consumer movements accomplish by boycotting certain products. They prove successful in changing the way businesses operate, forcing them to consider their environmental footprint and their patterns of production.

When social pressure affects their earnings, businesses clearly have to find ways to produce differently." (#206)

In talking of "the moral imperative of assessing the impact of our every action and personal decision on the world around us", (#208) Francis seems to be calling upon us to follow his own example and to become leaders in modesty.

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5: Ecological education

"It is possible that we do not grasp the gravity of the challenge now before us." (#105)

Ecological education has to form its own limb on the body of the encyclical in order to meet the challenge to bring about deep change. Francis argues that, "we need to realize that certain mindsets really do influence our behaviour. Our efforts at education will be inadequate and ineffectual unless we strive to promote a new way of thinking about human beings, life, society and our relationship with nature." (#215)

This is the only way to counteract media-led consumerism and "the highly effective workings of the market". (#215)

Once again, everything is connected.

So, it's necessary to rethink and redesign the curricula in schools and universities in order to foster ecological awareness and transformative action. He says, "It is my hope that our seminaries and houses of formation will provide an education in responsible simplicity of life, in grateful contemplation of God's world, and in concern for the needs of the poor and the protection of the environment." (#214) But beyond this, "All Christian communities have an important role to play in ecological education" (#214) – and especially families.

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6: Ecological spirituality

"The universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely. Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf…The ideal is not only to pass from the exterior to the interior to discover the action of God in the soul, but also to discover God in all things." (#233)

When we do this, we find ourselves stopping to give thanks. And for example Francis urges us to do this especially before and after we eat. “That moment of blessing, however brief, reminds us of our dependence on God for life; it strengthens our feeling of gratitude for the gifts of creation; it acknowledges those who by their labours provide us with these goods; and it reaffirms our solidarity with those in greatest need.” (#227)

Again and again Francis calls for a conversion: “An ecological conversion can inspire us to greater creativity and enthusiasm in resolving the world’s problems and in offering ourselves to God.” (#220)

Francis quotes Bartholomew, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, as saying that each of us needs to repent of the ways we have harmed the planet, for we are called to acknowledge “our contribution, smaller or greater, to the disfigurement and destruction of creation”. “For human beings… to destroy the biological diversity of God’s creation; for human beings to degrade the integrity of the earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the earth of its natural forests or destroying its wetlands; for human beings to contaminate the earth’s waters, its land, its air, and its life – these are sins” (#8) – against ourselves and against God.

He reminds us that the Church has always recommended the regular practice of an examination of conscience. This should now include a new dimension, considering not only how one has lived with others and with oneself, but also with all creatures and with nature.

There is a whole further dimension to this limb of the encyclical, particularly its impact on the way we do our liturgy. As Professor Elizabeth Johnson has written, “It will be necessary for church liturgy and eucharistic prayers, religious art and music, preaching and teaching, to take account of the ecological challenge.” And there’s much more on this in Dermot A. Lane’s book on the Wisdom of Laudato si’, “Theology and Ecology in Dialogue”, published last year.

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7: Community engagement and participatory action

Pope Francis knows that action needs to start at the grass roots. He speaks approvingly of cooperatives – for instance to exploit renewable sources of energy. “While the existing world order proves powerless to assume its responsibilities, local individuals and groups can make a real difference. They are able to instil a greater sense of responsibility, a strong sense of community, a readiness to protect others, a spirit of creativity and a deep love for the land. They are also concerned about what they will eventually leave to their children and

grandchildren… Public pressure has to be exerted in order to bring about decisive political action. Society, through non-governmental organizations and intermediate groups, must put pressure on governments to develop more rigorous regulations, procedures and controls. Unless citizens control political power – national, regional and municipal – it will not be possible to control damage to the environment. Local legislation can be more effective, too, if agreements exist between neighbouring communities to support the same environmental policies." (#179)

"There are no uniform recipes… New forms of cooperation and community organization can be encouraged in order to defend the interests of small producers and preserve local ecosystems from destruction. Truly, much can be done!" (#180)

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So, there we have the seven limbs making up the Laudato si' Action Platform.

But do they give us hope that we can still believe in a future? An article by Theodora Hawksley in this week's Tablet quotes a clergyman: having listened to her on the theme of theology and ecology, he says, "We just have to be grateful that Christ is going to come again to sort it all out". It sounds very much like waiting for the rapture. And there is nothing of that in Laudato si'.

In the words of Paul Ricoeur, the French philosopher: "Hope is a protest against the premature closure of all systems of thought, especially religious and political fundamentalisms…" Hope keeps thought and action open, and reacts against claims to absolute knowledge.

And Francis himself says: "The Spirit of God has filled the universe with possibilities and therefore, from the very heart of things, something new can always emerge." (#80) "Hope would have us recognize that there is always a way out, that we can always redirect our steps, that we can always do something to solve our problems." (#61)

And at the very end of his letter, he writes: "Let us sing as we go. May our struggles and our concern for this planet never take away the joy of our hope." (#244) "God, who calls us to generous commitment and to give him our all, offers us the light and the strength needed to continue on our way. In the heart of this world, the Lord of life, who loves us so much, is always present. He does not abandon us, he does not leave us alone, for he has united himself definitively to our earth, and his love constantly impels us to find new ways forward. Praise be to him!" (#245)

After all this, some of you will be asking, with Stalin: where's the beef? "The Pope? How many divisions has he got?"

In the same year as Laudato si' appeared, there was set up, for the purpose of bringing Laudato si' to life (of living Laudato si'), the Global Catholic Climate Movement, with a tiny secretariat. Renamed the Laudato Si' Movement, it now has some 700 member organisations, and there are more than 24,000 Animators in 160 countries, and 800 Laudato si' Circles. Some circles, including ours in Cheltenham, I'm happy to say are ecumenical.

Can we still believe in a future? Yes.

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