



POPE FRANCIS' *LAUDATO SI* AND THE NEW CONSCIOUSNESS .

Toward a New Consciousness

Several years ago, when Pope Francis decided to write an encyclical on the environment, he knew he had a big problem, the biggest of all problems —climate change. It was a civilization problem. It was especially a problem for poorer countries where millions of climate refugees were on the move seeking water, or fertile ground for their crops, or escaping wars that were being fought over the impacts of climate change.

For the most part, climate change is the poster child for Anthropocene. Unlike other natural catastrophic events that led to five Great Extinctions, this one is man-made. We are changing the chemistry of Earth, destroying its life-support systems, wiping out species, poisoning the oceans, polluting the atmosphere, and so forth. Scientists are very clear about what we are doing. But they are not very good at explaining the impacts of climate change on Earth in words that we can understand. And they are even less clear about how to deal with it.

Climate change presents a real challenge for faith groups. They have always been involved in social issues—slavery, racial integration, prison reform, hospitals, labour unions, care for the poor. But in terms of climate, the greatest of all impacts on the poor throughout the world, there has been a deafening silence.

In deciding to address this issue perhaps Francis recalled Einstein's famous observation, "*We cannot solve problems with the same thinking we used to create them.*" Undoubtedly he realized that we needed a new way of thinking about our environment, a way of thinking that would provide a new context and consciousness for dealing with climate change.

He realized that religions and faith groups were established and emerged out of a totally different age. They all appeared in the Holocene period that began some 11,000 years ago with the receding ice shields. It was a period of great stability that saw the creation of cultures, cities, farming, and major religions. When people got up in the morning they saw the same world they saw when they went to bed the night before.

But, as the scientists tell us, the Holocene age came to an end at the start of the industrial revolution. We have now entered the Anthropocene Age. Unlike the natural eras that preceded it, we have seen the emergence of a new consciousness based upon irreversible transformations. When we get up on the morning we think we see the same world that we saw the night before, but we don't. Everything is changing. So, we have a new context.

This new context requires a new way of thinking about who we are in relation to the world in which we live—a new consciousness. Francis describes this consciousness in *Laudato Si*. It has three defining characteristics.

First, Earth is not just something “out there”—our environment, home. It is part of us. We are earthlings. Earth is what Thomas Berry called “our greater self.”

Second, we live in a totally integrated Earth. Everything is linked and connected with everything else. So we can't deal with a single element, say the environment, without showing how changes in environment affect the economy, cultures, governance, and so forth.

Third, because we are earthlings living in an inter-connected world we have a moral and ethical responsibility to care for Earth. We must hold ourselves accountable for what we are doing to it. This responsibility must be directed especially to the poor.

Francis develops these three themes in great detail. As I read through the 180 pages I couldn't help thinking of the irony in all of this. I remembered the words of the poet Robert Haas, “*We are the protectors, and we are the thing that needs protection, and we are what it needs to be protected from.*”

Laudato Si-The Encyclical

To get his message across, Francis used the most powerful tool he had at his disposal.—a papal encyclical.

In some respects, *Laudato Si* is similar to other papal encyclicals. Its audience is the bishops, the clergy, the religious orders and the faithful. (But interestingly, and unlike other encyclicals, it is not specifically addressed to the Church in the opening paragraph.) It includes frequent references to the Old and New Testaments, to various Christian mystics and saints, particularly to St. Francis of Assisi, to the three popes that preceded him, and to the rituals of the church. He weaves references from these various sources into his need for a new consciousness. In this sense the encyclical is very Catholic. But it is also very different from other encyclicals.

Typically, encyclicals provide an interpretation of Church teachings that serve as guidelines for helping church members in their task of evangelizing the world. But in this case Francis realizes that the Catholic Church does not have a home field advantage. It is as confused about the Anthropocene as everyone else is. Francis was very aware that he had to break new ground. In a very real sense it seems he was not only using this encyclical to bring the church to the world. He was also using it to bring the world to the church.

One of the most interesting and valuable aspects of the *Laudato Si* is its emphasis on practical applications. Francis deals with these in Chapter Four (*Integral Ecology*) and in Chapter Five (*Lines Of Approach and Action*).

To use an example from my own life, many people in our local communities are fighting the development of fossil fuel projects. Governments make secret deals with multinational corporations and then, in some cases, ask the community for its opinion. And if and when we are “consulted” it is not to ask us whether the project affecting our community should proceed but, rather, how it should proceed. It is usually a given that it will proceed. But we wanted to be consulted at the very beginning of every project that may change the nature of our community

In a section on Dialogue and Transparency (paragraph 183) I read these words:

“Environmental Impact Assessment should not come after the drawing up of a business proposition or the proposal of a particular policy, plan or programme. It should be part of the process from the beginning, and be carried out in a way which is interdisciplinary, transparent and free of all economic or political pressures... The local population should have a special place at the table.”

I never expected to find a statement like this in any papal encyclical, even one 180 pages long.

Looking Beyond *Laudato Si*

What will be the reaction to *Laudato Si* and to Francis?

There will be a great deal of negative reaction from those who feel that they were unjustly targeted. It is happening already. There will be many accusations that Francis has wandered outside his area of expertise. Of special concern to Catholics will also be the reaction of the whole church, particularly the bishops. Will they follow Francis’ lead or will they fight against him?

The Second Vatican Council initiated by Pope John XXIII split the church into two groups—those who wanted change and those who didn’t. That problem still exists. I remember reading what one of the American bishops said upon his return to the U.S. after a session of the council. He was asked by a reporter what he thought about the Council. He responded: “I don’t see why we are trying to break up a winning team.” I’m sure we will see much more of that kind of reaction to *Laudato Si*.

The second thing I wonder about is whether people will recognize and follow the example Francis has set. He is speaking not as a theologian but, to use Thomas Berry’s term, as a “geologist”—a student of Earth. He has decisively moved into an area where many feel he has no particular expertise. It is almost sacrosanct among many academics that people should not wander into areas outside their particular area of expertise. Supposedly, if everyone sticks to their own knitting some kind of magic will happen that links things together. But Francis has demonstrated that climate change is the mother of all “wicked problems.” We now live in an integrated world of interlocking systems. It is hard to anticipate in advance how a single action in one area will affect all other linked together areas and systems.

Academics, scientists, politicians, religious leaders must do what Francis has done—dare to move outside their particular disciplines into the morass of complicated but related realities that we call the Anthropocene and provide us with practical approaches.

Finally, I found *Laudato Si* to be a great source of hope. It is not a *Deus Ex Machina* sort of hope. It is a very practical, down to earth hope that St. Augustin of Hippo described many centuries ago.

“Hope has two beautiful daughters; their names are Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are, and Courage to see that they do not remain as they are.”

I think *Laudato Si* will be Francis’ legacy. He will be remembered as the pope who really knew how to pope.