



Homeward bound? Committing to *Laudato Si'* 10 years on

On the 10th anniversary of the release of Pope Francis' 'letter on ecology', Laudato Si': On Care for our Common Home, two of Aotearoa's Catholic agencies reflect on its impact and continuing relevance for us today as we respond to the challenging call to care for creation and care for the poor.

Ten years after it was first published, Pope Francis' groundbreaking Encyclical to the world, *Laudato Si'*: "On Care for our Common Home", continues to speak to urgent global issues. Noting that the environmental crisis affects us all, Pope Francis expressed his wish to "enter into dialogue with all people about our common home" (# 3) on issues such as consumerism, irresponsible economic growth, and the destruction of other species—issues that attend to some of the "deepest roots of our present failures" (# 109). What is required of us is nothing less than a change in the way we view our relationship to "our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us" (# 1), who "now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her" (# 2).

"Everything is connected." These words from *Laudato Si'* heralded a watershed moment in Catholic teaching. While concern for creation has long been part of the Catholic Church's doctrine — expressed in the affirmation that every creature reflects in its own way a ray of God's infinite wisdom and goodness — the theology of *Laudato Si'* signals a definitive shift in how the Church believes human beings should relate to other creatures and to the world itself. This is clear from the Encyclical's sub-title, "On Care for our Common Home." The world that human beings inhabit is not a possession that belongs to them; rather, the world "belongs" to everyone as a common good, and every creature "belongs" in this world as someone that is at "*home*."

The implications of this message are far-reaching. Because the world is a “common home”, all human beings are a “family” that must live together in this shared abode. It also means that we need to consider the well-being of all created life, whom Pope Francis (following St. Francis of Assisi) also identifies in familial terms as our “brothers” and “sisters.”

From its opening paragraphs, *Laudato Si'* calls attention to the damage humanity is wreaking upon the earth, to the extent that it “is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth” (# 21). In accord with the best scientific research available, *Laudato Si'* affirms that humanity’s unchecked exploitation is affecting not only our common home’s thermostat (through anthropocentric climate change), but also the ability of its soil, air and water to sustain various forms of life (# 2).

The effects of this degradation are not external to human beings but directly affect our constitution as embodied creatures. Citing *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), Pope Francis goes on to observe how, through our physical bodies, “God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement” (# 89). These remarks may be said to carry particular resonance for us in Aotearoa New Zealand today. We are currently experiencing the highest rate of species extinction in the world, and over 75% of our remaining indigenous species are endangered. If, as human beings, our wellbeing is so inextricably joined with the rest of creation that we experience “the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement” (to quote Pope Francis), then our political failure to prioritise the conservation of our most vulnerable “brothers” and “sisters” in creation amounts to an act of profound self-harm.

In its approach and analysis of the current crisis we are experiencing, and which is arguably still worsening, *Laudato Si'* promotes an ‘integral ecology’; one which recognises “a relationship existing between nature and the society which lives in it”. Thus, Pope Francis writes: “We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature” (# 139). This requires a cooperative, communal and intergenerational approach towards the earth and its resources, drawing wisdom from many sources.

Insightfully, *Laudato Si'* notes that this approach is already evident in the “responsibility”, “sense of creativity” and “deep love for the land” exemplified by indigenous peoples (# 179), whom Pope Francis further identifies as “not merely one minority among others,” but as “principal dialogue partners,” communities towards whom we must show special care, including respect for their cultural traditions (# 146). In *Laudato Si'* as well as elsewhere in his teachings, Pope Francis stressed that human beings can never be wholly detached from the environment, cultural, and historical contexts that inform our lives. Consequently, our need to care for our “common home” requires an approach that recognises and incorporates “the history, culture and architecture of each place” (# 143). The voices of indigenous peoples, in other words, are invaluable in helping us to look after the special character of particular rooms within our common home.

Although the recognition in *Laudato Si'* that everything is connected is not a new idea, we owe much to Pope Francis for bringing this conviction to the forefront of our ethics and spirituality. In so doing, he has now placed this teaching firmly within the body of our Church’s social teaching, effectively adding to that teaching.

For those of us in Aotearoa, New Zealand’s Catholic Bishops anticipated the development of Pope Francis’ notion of integral ecology —i.e., the close connection between the environmental crisis and human flourishing — when, in 2006, they wrote that “[o]ur world is facing an ecological crisis, which could equally be called an economic crisis, or a poverty crisis. Its public face is the suffering of the poor and the degradation of our environment.”

This brings us to another central dimension of *Laudato Si'*’s message: the idea that the harms inflicted upon the environment by those with disproportionate resources and power often go hand-in-hand with *economic* injustices towards the poor and marginalised. As *Laudato Si'* observes, an “ecological debt” exists that is “connected to commercial imbalances” between the global North and global South and intrinsically connected to richer countries’ long-term “disproportionate use of natural resources.”

This important message resonates with the Church’s proclamation, as part of the current Year of Jubilee, that our call to be “Pilgrims of Hope” involves redressing the imbalance between rich and poor. Responding to the call to address both financial and ecological debt, the

Caritas Jubilee Year campaign, ‘Turn Debt into Hope’, pleads for the cancellation of unjust financial debt on poor countries. Among other things, this will free up much needed – and long overdue – resources for climate resilience and sustainable development without adding to the already intolerable debt burden for the poor.

Furthermore, while much of our economic and social thinking continues to be focussed on the immediate and short-term, *Laudato Si’* calls for longer-term thinking that orientates itself towards a sustainable and just future for all, including “and without prejudice towards coming generations,” something that requires “leadership capable of striking out new paths” (# 53).

“Eternal life,” *Laudato Si’* teaches, “will be a shared experience of awe, in which each creature, resplendently transfigured, will take its rightful place” (# 243). In his concluding “Prayer for our Earth” (for all who believe in a Creator), Pope Francis returns to this belief in a petition for God to “[t]each us to discover the worth of each thing, to be filled with awe and contemplation, [and] to recognize that we are profoundly united with every creature as we journey towards [God’s] infinite light” (# 246). Not only do we all belong together within a common home, according to Francis, we are also fellow travellers towards a common destination in God.

It is therefore in caring for other creatures, and for the earth itself, *Laudato Si’* teaches, that we are called to be, in a fundamental sense, homeward bound.

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