

Laudate Deum – A Plea to “All People of Good Will on the Climate Crisis”

John Kleinsman

On the 4th of October 2023, the feast of St Francis of Assisi, Pope Francis released *Laudate Deum*, a follow-up document (Apostolic Exhortation) to his 2015 Encyclical, *Laudato Si’*.

Much has been written about this Exhortation. American writer Michael Wright fears that “In US, ‘Laudate Deum’ won’t make it into many homilies or prompt any marches,” a function of under-prioritising care for creation for many years. (Wright, 2023) ‘Will that also be the case in Aotearoa parishes and schools?’ I wonder.

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The document is accessible and easy enough to read, but it’s definitely not an easy read. In fact, it’s extremely confronting. *Laudate Deum* delivers a clarion wake-up call and Pope Francis does not mince his words. “Some effects of the climate crisis are already irreversible, at least for several hundred years” and there are so “many signs that the other creatures of this world have stopped being our companions along the way and have become instead our victims (n. 15) ... we have not realised that ... we have turned into highly dangerous beings, capable of threatening the lives of many beings and our own survival”. (n. 28)

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This doesn’t mean that he is not speaking as the leader of a major world religion whose perspective is informed by the Catholic faith tradition. For Catholics, the Pope’s words are a sharp reminder that our faith makes demands on the *entirety* of our lives. A robust and mature faith does not allow us to ignore what is happening with the climate and environment because caring for our common home is not some optional add-on for Christian disciples.

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In a move that is consistent with this stance, Pope Francis has revealed he will be personally attending the upcoming UN Dubai climate summit (COP28), a first for any Pope. Interestingly, his decision to attend takes place against the backdrop of highly critical comments in *Laudate Deum* about the failures of global climate conferences to date. Thus, in paragraph 52 he writes: “... the accords have been poorly implemented, due

to lack of suitable mechanisms for oversight, periodic review and penalties in cases of noncompliance. The principles which they proclaimed still await an efficient and flexible means of practical implementation”. We must “move beyond the mentality of appearing to be concerned but not having the courage needed to produce substantial changes.” (n. 56). Pope Francis rightly identifies that “international negotiations cannot make significant progress due to positions taken by countries which place their national interests above the global common good.” (n. 52)

In other words, we must adopt a global ethical position rather than one based primarily on local or nationalist interests.

Pope Francis is equally critical of those who “seek only a technical remedy to each environmental problem”, (P. 57) something he describes in terms of a “mindset of pasting and papering over cracks, while beneath the surface there is a continuing deterioration to which we continue to contribute”. The Pope adds: “To suppose that all problems in the future will be able to be solved by new technical interventions is a form of homicidal pragmatism, like pushing a snowball down a hill.” Why? Because, as the Bishops of Aotearoa noted in their recent teaching document, *Te Kahu o te Ora – A Consistent Ethic of Life*, “the crisis [is] a symptom of a deeper human and spiritual crisis based on humankind’s fractured relationship with God’s creation, with each other and ultimately with God”. (NZ Catholic Bishops, 2023)

In addition, the Pope calls out all those people who are still climate doubters or deniers (nn. 11, 14) or, if not deniers, promoters of what he calls an “irresponsible derision that would present this issue as something purely ecological, “green”, “romantic”; an approach that means the issue is “frequently subject to ridicule by economic interests.” (n. 58). The Pope notes that these are attitudes he continually encounters “even within the Catholic Church”. (n. 14). For him, there is no room any more for climate deniers because “It is no longer possible to doubt the human – ‘anthropic’ – origin of climate change.” (n. 11) The “unusual rapidity of these dangerous [climate] changes is ... unchecked human intervention on nature in the past two centuries”. (n. 14)

Commenting on this while reflecting on *Laudate Deum*, Michael Wright (2023) acknowledges the difficulty for many in changing their views about the climate crisis:

Conservative media’s disinformation campaigns about climate change have been effective at sowing doubt ... There is a cognitive dissonance associated with admitting that climate change is a serious problem after years of believing it is a hoax, a normal earth cycle or just a low-priority issue. Devout members of any institution who have believed something for a long time can be psychologically blind to failures or misleading from their institutions or

leaders. This includes information about climate change: its existence, causes, environmental harm, economic impact and existential threat to life.

At the same time, the Pope is critical of those who, while recognising the true seriousness of the issue, promote an approach that relies on a “denial of the human being”, (n. 27) by which he means a denial of the proper identity and dignity of the human person. Theologically speaking, Pope Francis’ position on this is a great example of the *via media* – literally ‘the way between’ that avoids two extreme positions. Importantly, his stance rejects the concept of ‘human exceptionalism’ which lies at the heart of the problematical anthropocentrism which has led us to the situation in which we currently find ourselves; a situation largely based on our slavish embrace of the “technocratic paradigm” (nn. 20-23) which isolates us from the world and deceives us (n. 66), leading to a denial of our shared creaturehood while seeing the world as an object of exploitation and nature as a mere setting (n. 25).

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In Pope Francis’ mind “the Judaeo-Christian vision defends the unique and central value of the human being [but only] amid the marvellous concert of all God’s creatures ... [recognising] ... that human life is incomprehensible and unsustainable without other creatures”. (n. 67)

Three insights from *Laudate Deum* are particularly poignant for those of us living in Aotearoa New Zealand:

1. The Exhortation emphasises that the way forward is not a blind acceptance and continuation of the idea of infinite or unlimited growth, which the Pope notes still proves so attractive to economists, financiers and experts in technology. (n. 20) This idea, unfortunately, features all too often in the rhetoric and arguments of our New Zealand politicians and others, including those who are industry leaders.
2. If an important part of the problem is overcoming the technocratic paradigm which shapes us to look at the world from without and prevents us from recognising that we are part of nature, (nn. 25-26), then, Pope Francis writes, it is to the “indigenous cultures” that we should look for a healthy ecology. (n. 27) Or, as Pope Francis writes in *Laudato Si’*: “... 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 ... [are] values [that] are deeply rooted in indigenous peoples” (n. 179) who offer alternatives to “the irresponsible lifestyle connected with the Western model”. (n. 72). *Laudate Deum* enjoins us to listen more carefully to, and learn from, the original inhabitants of our country, Māori. This should help us think differently and positively about the notion of ‘co-governance’, a concept that is all too quickly derided by so many people. In addition, we in Aotearoa New Zealand can benefit from the perspectives

of other cultures who have migrated here especially the peoples of the Pacific whose homelands are amongst the most vulnerable to rising sea levels.

3. Many people, including New Zealand politicians, have commented on the fact that, because of our size and population, our contribution to the overall global emissions is miniscule – a fact that is often promoted as a reason to keep on with ‘business as usual’. While in real terms that may be the case, it is morally weak, if not immoral, to use that fact as a reason for us to ignore the climate crisis. What the world needs more than ever now is courageous, moral leadership, the sort of leadership Aotearoa New Zealand showed in our recent past with respect to nuclear disarmament. Recalling the Pope’s argument that the most effective solutions will come, “above all from major political decisions on the national and international level” (n. 69) focuses us on the importance of attitudinal, social and cultural conversion. If there can be “no lasting changes without cultural changes, without a maturing of lifestyles and convictions within societies,” (n. 70) this means that our ‘tiny’ country can make a *significant* difference on the global stage.

To fail to act in ways that will bring about the environmental change we need means we continue to be part of the indifference shown by so many people, including Catholics, towards the reality “that so many species are disappearing, and that the climate crisis endangers the life of many other beings,” (n. 63) including our own species.

The world sings of an infinite Love: how can we fail to care for it?

I hope and pray that the messages of *Laudato Si’* and *Laudate Deum* will make it into the homilies of Catholic Parishes and inspire marches. More than that, however, I hope and pray that Pope Francis’ messages will make it into the speeches of politicians and the policies of the incoming 54th New Zealand Parliament. More than ever, this is the time for multiparty political discourse and consensus for positive action through courageous legislation and regulation.

Pope Francis talks about having “an eye to the children who will pay for the harm done by [our] actions” or lack of them. (n. 33). I think about my four mokopuna, all under 3 years of age and I wonder what the world will be like for them and others of their generation. But I also know it is no longer enough to wonder – we all need to act with an urgency underpinned by a well-developed sense of mysticism and transcendence and love for the dignity of all God’s creation.

To give the last word to Pope Francis: “If the universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely... there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person’s face. The world sings of an infinite Love: how can we fail to care for it?” (n. 65)

Dr John Kleinsman is director of the Nathaniel Centre for Bioethics