

A trinity of questions about Laudato Si'

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05 August 2015

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I have no doubt that the Anglican bishop and social critic Ernest Henry Burgmann after whom this college is named would be delighted that we are gathered this evening at the invitation of the ANU Chaplaincy to discuss a papal encyclical labelled by the Murdoch press as a 'papal prescription for a flawed economic order' with the subtitle of their editorial, 'The church should not belong to the green-left fringe'. I commend the staff and students of the college for your abiding interest in social justice highlighted by your ongoing Doomadgee project in which my niece Clare was involved and from which she derived great fruit, firing her passion for social justice and meaningful structural change in society.

Three of us have been asked to address three questions about Pope Francis's first encyclical *Laudato Si'* which is 'on care for our common home'. It's a joy to participate in such an event. With this audience, I commence with the observation by Francis:

In those countries which should be making the greatest changes in consumer habits, young people have a new ecological sensitivity and a generous spirit, and some of them are making admirable efforts to protect the environment. At the same time, they have grown up in a milieu of extreme consumerism and affluence which makes it difficult to develop other habits. We are faced with an educational challenge.

We're all on a learning curve here.

Why would Pope Francis write to everyone?

Pope Francis is not the first pope to address a social encyclical to everyone. Pope John Paul II addressed his 1988 encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* to members of the Church and to 'all people of good will'. Pope Benedict XVI did the same with his 2009 encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*. In comparison with his predecessors however, Francis has been more inclusive in the process of writing the encyclical and in the final content of the document. He quotes from 17 different conferences of Catholic bishops. This was rarely done by his predecessors. He is at pains to indicate that he is collaborative and that he takes the principle of subsidiarity very seriously. He convened meetings of various types of experts including scientists, economists and political scientists. He is not afraid to indicate that the final product is something of a committee job, with various authors. He notes, 'Although each chapter will have its own subject and specific approach, it will also take up and re-examine important questions previously dealt with ... [Q]uestions will not be dealt with once and for all, but reframed and enriched again and again.' Being the final redactor of the text, he has felt free to interpolate some very folksy advice from time to time — from the need to use less air conditioning, to the appropriateness of consumer boycotts on certain products, to the desirability of saying grace before and after meals. He has also taken the liberty of inserting some very blunt, evocative images of environmental and economic devastation: 'The earth, our home, is

beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth. In many parts of the planet, the elderly lament that once beautiful landscapes are now covered with rubbish.' He gives pride of place to Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, the leader of 300 million Orthodox Christians. For the first time in a papal encyclical there is a reference to his fellow Jesuit the paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin — although he could not quite bring himself to quoting him. He does quote the Protestant Paul Ricoeur who wrote "I express myself in expressing the world; in my effort to decipher the sacredness of the world, I explore my own'. Encyclicals characteristically end with a prayer composed by the Pope. We are given two prayers: one for Christians and one for all believers. This is a pope wanting to reach out to all persons who have a care for the environment and for the poor, regardless of their religious affiliations. Remember this is the pope who when meeting with the international press corps after his election as pope, said:

I told you I was cordially imparting my blessing. Since many of you are not members of the Catholic Church, and others are not believers, I cordially give this blessing silently, to each of you, respecting the conscience of each, but in the knowledge that each of you is a child of God. May God bless you!

Now that is what I call a real blessing for anybody and everybody — and not a word of Vaticanese. Respect for the conscience of every person, regardless of their religious beliefs; silence in the face of difference; affirmation of the dignity and blessedness of every person; offering, not coercing; suggesting, not dictating; leaving room for gracious acceptance.

His concerns are not narrowly dogmatic or pedagogical but universally pastoral. He knows that millions of people, including erstwhile Catholics, are now suspicious of or not helped by notions of tradition, authority, ritual and community when it comes to their own spiritual growth which is now more individual and eclectic. He wants to step beyond the Church's perceived lack of authenticity and its moral focus on individual matters, more often than not, sexual. He thinks the world is in a mess particularly with the state of the planet — climate change, loss of biodiversity and water shortages, and with the oppression of the poor whose life basics are not assured by the operation of the free market, and with the clutter and violence of lives which are cheated the opportunity for interior peace. At the conclusion of the encyclical he describes the document as a 'lengthy reflection which has been both joyful and troubling'. He is going to great pains to demystify his office and to demystify papal documents. Clearly he wants all people of good will to emulate him and to be both joyful and troubled as they wrestle with the problems of the age.

Why would Pope Francis have something to say about climate change?

Francis thinks the planet risks going to hell in a basket. He says he is 'pointing to the cracks in the planet'. Perhaps we should take heart from Leonard Cohen's observation, 'There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in'. This is the only home we have got. And the science is in. It indicates that climate change is real. The loss of biodiversity is real. Human activity continues to contribute adversely to both changes, though of course there are other causes. We cannot undo the other causes. We do have the power to change and to address some of the human causes. An untrammelled free

market will not provide the solution, neither will untrammelled governments whether they be self-seeking and corrupt or populist and short sighted. Francis sees an urgent need for people to be well educated, to be concerned about future generations, and to be focused beyond their national borders. He sees an urgent need for governments to abide by the rule of law. He sees an urgent need for markets to be regulated so that self-interest and economic imperatives can be better aligned to pay dividends for the planet and for future generations. He doesn't see how this can be done unless more people, especially those designing laws and regulations for government and economic actors, are integrated in themselves finding completion in a deep interior life marked by concern for neighbour and for creation as well as self. Francis calls us to consider the tragic effects of environmental degradation especially on the lives of the world's poorest. He says:

The problem is that we still lack the culture needed to confront this crisis. We lack leadership capable of striking out on new paths and meeting the needs of the present with concern for all and without prejudice towards coming generations. The establishment of a legal framework which can set clear boundaries and ensure the protection of ecosystems has become indispensable, otherwise the new power structures based on the techno-economic paradigm may overwhelm not only our politics but also freedom and justice.

Developing the culture, the leadership, and the legal framework. These are the challenges to those of us who want to be intelligent believers responding to the call of the Spirit. Having noted, 'There are certain environmental issues where it is not easy to achieve a broad consensus', he concedes that 'the Church does not presume to settle scientific questions or to replace politics. But I want to encourage an honest and open debate, so that particular interests or ideologies will not prejudice the common good'.

Hailing from Argentina, he puts his trust neither in ideological Communism nor in unbridled capitalism. Like his predecessors Benedict and John Paul II he is unapologetic asserting, '[B]y itself the market cannot guarantee integral human development and social inclusion.' His concern is not to settle arguments about politics, economics or science. He makes no pretence to give the last word on anything. He is not even much concerned to give the last word on scriptural interpretation or theological insights into topics such as anthropocentrism. He is wanting to enliven the passion and the spiritual commitment of his readers who, grasping the link between care for the earth, care for the poor, and care for the personal interior life, will be motivated to work for real change.

What new ideas are to be found in Pope Francis' letter?

Francis calls everyone to engagement in an honest and open debate, respecting the competencies of all, and inspired by the vision of St Francis of Assisi who is the model of the inseparable bond 'between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace'.

There are probably no genuinely new ideas in the encyclical. Like many, he is convinced that we need to phase out our reliance on fossil fuels - coal, oil, 'and to a lesser degree, gas' - progressively and without delay. He thinks any scheme for buying and selling carbon credits is deeply flawed. He is a great advocate for solar energy. But what is new

is the integration of the scientific, the political, the sociological, the spiritual and the theological — an integration given the stamp of approval of the leader of one of the world's most significant religious communities. Granted that the Judeo-Christian tradition has done much to inculcate the notion that we humans are to subdue the earth, it is heartening that a pope has been able to say:

The best way to restore men and women to their rightful place, putting an end to their claim to absolute dominion over the earth, is to speak once more of the figure of a Father who creates and who alone owns the world. Otherwise, human beings will always try to impose their own laws and interests on reality.

It could be even more helpful for us to move beyond the patriarchal view of God. It is not only the Church that has been complicit, but it has been complicit especially in ventures of colonisation aimed at plundering the resources of indigenous peoples. Francis notes, 'Modernity has been marked by an excessive anthropocentrism.' The New Testament treatment in the encyclical is a little light-on. I think evangelical Protestants would do better there. But he does draw a good simple lesson from the Old Testament creation accounts noting:

The sheer novelty involved in the emergence of a personal being within a material universe presupposes a direct action of God and a particular call to life and to relationship on the part of a 'Thou' who addresses himself to another 'thou'. The biblical accounts of creation invite us to see each human being as a subject who can never be reduced to the status of an object.

Those of you who are not religious might garner the same sense by recalling Gemmy in the opening of David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* when he calls out, 'Do not shoot. I am a B-b-british object!' Where I find Francis truly prophetic, and this is where he grates the Murdoch press and the conservative Catholic think tanks in the USA, is in his bold declaration:

If we acknowledge the value and the fragility of nature and, at the same time, our God-given abilities, we can finally leave behind the modern myth of unlimited material progress. A fragile world, entrusted by God to human care, challenges us to devise intelligent ways of directing, developing and limiting our power.

Of course, the real heresy of this pope in the eyes of the free marketeers who long presumed that the anti-Communist Polish Pope John Paul II was their unswerving ally is that he speaks of the need first to 'reject a magical conception of the market' and then to redefine 'our notion of progress'. He proceeds to utter the unthinkable, that 'the time has come to accept decreased growth in some parts of the world, in order to provide resources for other places to experience healthy growth'. I suspect Pope Francis had some of our Jesuit educated Australian Cabinet ministers in mind when he wrote:

A politics concerned with immediate results, supported by consumerist sectors of the population, is driven to produce short-term growth. In response to electoral interests, governments are reluctant to upset the public with measures which could affect the level of consumption or create risks for foreign investment. The myopia of power politics delays the inclusion of a far-sighted environmental agenda within the overall

agenda of governments. Thus we forget that 'time is greater than space', that we are always more effective when we generate processes rather than holding on to positions of power. True statecraft is manifest when, in difficult times, we uphold high principles and think of the long-term common good. Political powers do not find it easy to assume this duty in the work of nation-building.

In his folksy style, Francis notes that 'sobriety and humility were not favourably regarded in the last century'. He calls us back to a 'serene attentiveness', reminding us in a grandfatherly way 'that being good and decent are worth it'. Following the lead of the Australian bishops, he calls us to an 'ecological conversion', having a go at those 'committed and prayerful Christians (who), with the excuse of realism and pragmatism, tend to ridicule expressions of concern for the environment.'

The encyclical would be all the stronger if it conceded that the growth in the world's human population — from 2 billion when Pius XII first spoke of contraception to 3.5 billion when Paul VI promulgated *Humanae Vitae* to 7.3 billion and climbing as it is today — points to a need to reconsider the Church's teaching on contraception. The pope is quite right to insist that the reduction of population growth is not the only solution to the environmental crisis. But it is part of the solution. It may even be an essential part of the solution. Banning contraception in a world of 7.3 billion people confronting the challenges of climate change and loss of biodiversity is a very different proposition from banning it in a world of only 2 billion people oblivious of such challenges. I don't think you would find any papal advisers today who would advocate that the planet's situation with climate change, loss of biodiversity, and water shortages would be improved if only all people of good will had declined to use artificial birth control for the last 50 years.

Joy filled and troubled, let's do something to change the market settings and political settings here in Australia to modify the behaviour of all Australians in the future, and let's attend to our own Franciscan interior ecological conversion with our care for the vulnerable and 'an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically'. For starters, I should probably start rejoicing each time I catch the Murrays coach rather than the Qantas jet, regardless of who's paying. In the middle of this Canberra winter, I should also take to heart the Pope's observation, 'A person who could afford to spend and consume more but regularly uses less heating and wears warmer clothes, shows the kind of convictions and attitudes which help to protect the environment.' No doubt you will welcome the decision of the college authorities to turn down the heating tonight. This is where the rubber hits the road.

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