

Why Pope Francis is not an anti-capitalist Greenie

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23 October 2015

Address to the Catalyst for Renewal Conference.

I was visiting Canberra's splendid Arboretum the other day and I ran into an historian who is not one of us. He greeted me: "That new pope of yours is doing quite well, isn't he? I don't know that he will show us the road to paradise but he has definitely opened a few doors out of the wilderness."

I told him that I would use this line shamelessly but he insisted that I honour his anonymity - and I do.

I think Pope Francis is doing quite well. My thesis is that Francis makes no pretence to be the world's greatest theologian, economist, politician or climate scientist.

His humble boast is that he is a pastor with the smell of the sheep, not afraid of dialogue, aware that there is often a chasm between dogma and pastoral practice, knowing there is a place for prophetic utterance though it is for others with democratic legitimacy, professional competence and accountability to deliver the strategies and compromises which need to be tempered according to the culture of the people.

He knows there are all sorts of issues inside and outside the Church, where for too long people with power have tried to keep the lid on, in the hope that the problems and complexities will go away, often by parodying those who see the problems or complexities as ideologues, small "l" liberals or cafeteria Catholics.

Francis delights in being joyful and troubled while contemplating big problems, calling people of good will to the table of deliberation reminding them of the kernel of the Christian gospels. He has the faith and hope needed to lift the lid without fear and without knowing the answers prior to the dialogue occurring.

He faces criticism *inside* the Church for daring to insist on transparency and deliberation even about matters of pastoral complexity in relation to which the doctrine has been said to be well settled by enforcement during recent papacies.

He faces criticism *outside* the Church for daring to insist that the parable of the Good Samaritan resonates even with tens of thousands of persons pouring across national borders with 51 million people displaced in the world and for daring to insist that the universal destination of goods applies to big issues like climate change and inequality.

British art historian Kenneth Clark concluded his fine 1969 work, *Civilisation*, with these words:

"Western civilization has been a series of rebirths. Surely this should give us confidence in ourselves ... It is lack of confidence, more than anything else, that kills a civilization. We can destroy ourselves by cynicism and disillusion, just as effectively as by bombs ...

W.B. Yeats, who was more like a man of genius than anyone I have ever known, wrote a famous prophetic poem.

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

"Well, that was certainly true between the wars, and it nearly destroyed us. Is it true today? Not quite, because good people have convictions, rather too many of them. The trouble is that there is still no centre. The moral and intellectual failure of Marxism has left us with no alternative to heroic materialism, and that isn't enough. One may be optimistic, but one can't exactly be joyful at the prospect before us."

It is now 50 years since Vatican II. As Christians we are people of hope. As Catholics we believe that tradition, authority, dogma, ritual and community have a place in shaping the contours which sustain our hope and assist us to hand on that hope to the coming generations.

These are hard times for the Catholic Church in Australia, and they are times of profound change for everyone. Church attendance continues to decline. Those in the pews are not getting any younger. More of the able bodied priests are from overseas; they are missionaries who have come among us who are adapting to the concept that we are once again a mission land. The talent pool for future bishops is not what it was a generation or two ago. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse continues to fill us with dread that we have not yet adequately identified why the incidence of abuse reported in our institutions is higher than in other churches.

The divisions among our bishops, previously unreported and unknown to many of the faithful, are disheartening. Recently before the Royal Commission we heard Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, who was an auxiliary bishop to Cardinal Pell when he was archbishop of Sydney, telling the commission that His Eminence "had lost the support of the majority of his priests and that alone made him a most ineffective bishop." Cardinal Pell is the most promoted Catholic cleric in Australian history. The point is not whether Bishop Robinson is right or wrong. The point is that we are part of a social institution which is suffering an acute loss of institutional coherence when an auxiliary bishop sees a need to make such a public statement about his erstwhile archbishop.

We Catholics know that we need to step tentatively and a little more humbly in the public square in light of the revelations at the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. We still do not have credible compelling explanations for the disproportionate level of complaints levelled at our Church. The Royal Commission has received 16,361 allegations in relation to 3,566 institutions. Of the 11,988 allegations covered by the terms of reference, 7,049 allegations relate to faith based institutions while only 3,612 relate to government institutions. Of those 11,988

allegations, 4,418 of them relate to Catholic Church institutions, while only 871 relate to Anglican institutions, and 411 to Uniting Church institutions.

These are days of shame for the Catholic Church in Australia. But yes, we do have a spring in our step and we are fortified by a pope who is so at home in his own skin and so at ease in the public square calling all persons to constitute a better world.

Despite having a fine pope, things are not easy. They are not easy for me as a Catholic priest in the public square. They are not easy for those of you living your Christian vocation in the world and turning up to Church each week, praying in the pews. They remain wretched for many victims who doubt that the Church can again be trusted.

Last week, [Francis Sullivan](#), the CEO of the Truth, Justice and Healing Council, invoked Peter Steinfels, a leading American Catholic commentator, saying:

"that denial and secrecy happened because priests and superiors operated in this closed, self-protective culture, a culture not open to scrutiny, inquiry, interview or evaluation, with little or no accountability and even less transparency from Church leaders back to the Church community. This is despite the clear responsibilities of bishops to build up the faithful and to lead the Catholic community in facing its challenges around the child sex abuse crisis."

[Sullivan](#) reminded us, "We are the focus (at the Royal Commission) because our history of child sexual abuse is shameful, corrosive and complicit." Let's not use the goodness and boldness of vision of Pope Francis as a foil for the badness and timidity which still marks us as a social institution.

We are all used to the statistics about declining numbers of people joining the priesthood and religious life, but recently I had cause to check and to find that a quarter of those ordained priest in the Australian province of the Society of Jesus since I joined in 1975 had left the Society and/or the priesthood during that time. That's on top of the majority of entrants who left during the course of formation, never making it to ordination. Those who left after ordination are good men who have voted with their feet, having undergone at least a decade of formation together with annual retreats designed to discern their vocation and for life, prior to ordination. Are we sufficiently attentive to what these men have been saying as they walk another path?

[The Synod of the Family and the challenges for Pope Francis](#)

Before coming to consider the insights and challenges of Pope Francis's encyclical [Laudato Si'](#), I would like to set the context for assessing the enormity of the task confronting him, particularly with the now concluded Synod on the Family. The child abuse issue and the internal controversy over the synod highlight the problem with an institution which has long resisted the call to transparency, dialogue and deliberation in light of people's diverse lived experience.

Let's consider the [letter sent by the thirteen disaffected conservative bishops to Pope Francis](#) at the commencement of the synod. They wrote:

"The new synodal procedures will be seen in some quarters as lacking openness and genuine collegiality. In the past, the process of offering propositions and voting on them served the valuable purpose of taking the measure of the synod fathers' minds. The absence of propositions and their related discussions and voting seems to discourage open debate and to confine discussion to small groups; thus it seems urgent to us that the crafting of propositions to be voted on by the entire synod should be restored. Voting on a final document comes too late in the process for a full review and serious adjustment of the text.

"Additionally, the lack of input by the synod fathers in the composition of the drafting committee has created considerable unease. Members have been appointed, not elected, without consultation. Likewise, anyone drafting anything at the level of the small circles should be elected, not appointed.

"In turn, these things have created a concern that the new procedures are not true to the traditional spirit and purpose of a synod. It is unclear why these procedural changes are necessary. A number of fathers feel the new process seems designed to facilitate predetermined results on important disputed questions."

Now I am all in favour of due process and transparency. But let's give this letter of complaint some context. A reader without any historical context could be forgiven for thinking that these bishops are alleging that Pope Francis is being less transparent, less open to dialogue than his predecessors. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Pope Francis has opened up the synod process to make it far more transparent, consultative, and deliberative than it was under his predecessors Benedict and John Paul II. John Paul II became so controlling of the synod process that many bishops got to the stage of regarding attendance at a synod as a complete waste of time. The agenda was predetermined and the outcome was written by the pope and curial officials after the synod members had all returned home.

It is not being unfair to the thirteen hierarchs who have expressed their newfound concern for due process that none of them was prominent in expressing disquiet about the synod processes under John Paul and Benedict when the process was antediluvian, orchestrated and predetermined. Some of these 13 were among John Paul's strongest supporters, distinguishing real Catholics from cafeteria Catholics and insisting that those in the pews simply needed to follow the ever more certain, ever more definitive edicts published from Rome.

Pope Francis's 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 - but also 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.

He is going to great pains to demystify his office. 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. He is putting a spring in our step and providing us with a new sense of direction and purpose as Church in the World. Recently on his visit to the United States, Francis told the bishops gathered at Baltimore: "A Christianity which 'does' little in practice, while incessantly 'explaining' its teachings, is dangerously unbalanced. I would even say that it is stuck in a vicious circle."

I am more and more convinced that Francis is not afraid to throw open the windows of the Church. He has the humility to accept that he does not hold a candle to Benedict as a theologian, nor to John Paul. But he knows the game is up with Roman authorities spouting dogma without being attentive to the lived experience of people and to the pastoral experience of those priests who carry with them "the smell of the sheep." He is committed to collegiality. He is not going to take a synod where it does not want to go; and he is not going to represent the findings of a synod as being anything other than the diversity of viewpoints expressed and hopefully the emerging consensus under the action of the Spirit.

The letter of the thirteen worried bishops is premised on the notion that synods under John Paul and Benedict were more perfect than the present exercise under Pope Francis. Nothing could be further from the truth. Francis is desperately trying to drag the Church back to Vatican II's vision of the synod process - a vision which was systematically stifled during the 27 year pontificate of John Paul II. [Massimo Faggioli](#) writes in the latest *Theological Studies*:

"The style of John Paul II was very different from a 'conciliar' style - consider, for example, the absence of episcopal collegiality in his style of governing the Church, especially in how he treated the synod of bishops and the national bishops conferences ... Clearly John Paul II lacked interest in reforming structures of the Church's central government, which in his 27-year pontificate became more centred on the person of the pope and the papal apartment and its far-from-transparent entourage."

Faggioli concludes:

"the frequent celebrations of bishops' synods in Rome (six ordinary synods, the extraordinary synod of 1985, and eight special continental or national assemblies) and the new series of 'extraordinary consistories' of cardinals (1979, 1982, 1985, 1991, 1994, and 2001) never really challenged the supremacy of a Roman curia that the pope seemed uninterested in controlling."

Hence:

"[Francis's] decision in October 2013 to celebrate an extraordinary synod in October 2014 and an ordinary synod in 2015 (both on the topic of family), signaled a change in the hierarchy of institutions of church government: pope, curia, episcopate. In the April 2014 message to Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisserri, secretary general of the synod, Francis spoke about the synod in terms of collegiality that is both 'affective' and 'effective' - with

a significant shift in the use of these two adjectives referring to collegiality when compared with previous decades."

Archbishop John R. Quinn who was 30 years a bishop, one time Pontifical Delegate for Religious Life, Archbishop of San Francisco and a past president of the USCCB wrote in his 1999 book [The Reform of the Papacy](#): "The Synod of Bishops was intended to be another manifestation of episcopal collegiality. But it has been a great disappointment to many bishops from all parts of the world." Here is Quinn's description of the synod process under John Paul II during which time the present 13 synod objectors remained silent and were promoted:

"The tendency since the council would appear to be to restrict the synod as much as possible. For instance, the synod is called by the Pope; its agenda is determined by the Pope; preliminary documents of episcopal conferences are not permitted to be shared with other conferences or made public but must be sent directly to Rome; the synod is held in Rome; prefects of the Roman curias are members; the Pope, in addition to the curial members of the synod, appoints an additional fifteen percent of the membership directly; the synod does not have a deliberative vote; its deliberations are secret, and its recommendations to the Pope are secret; the Pope writes and issues the final document after the synod has concluded and the bishops have returned home."

The control of the process and the lack of transparency reached a climax with the Asian synod in 1998. Quinn writes, "An indication of the extent of curial intervention and control is the published story that the report on the speeches at the Asian synod in the spring of 1998 was written on Friday April 24, though the speeches did not end until April 28."

The group of 13 say they are particularly concerned about the fate of propositions proposed from the floor of the synod under Francis's revised process. Yet Quinn reminds us that under John Paul II, "Usually the Pope prepares and publishes a document on the theme of the synod a year or so after its ending. Some bishops stated that their proposed propositions were not represented at all in the final line-up of propositions." At the Asian synod, a high curial official told the bishops they were not even to use the time-honoured Catholic term "subsidiarity."

Adolfo Nicolas is the present superior general of the Jesuits. He was blackballed from being appointed rector of the Gregorian University under the papacy of John Paul II. Nicolas is a former director of the East Asian Pastoral Institute in Manila and was head of the Jesuit Conference of East Asia and Oceania. He was particularly close to the Church in Japan, being a trusted adviser to the Japanese bishops in the lead up to the Asian Synod. Nicolas has a theological outlook associated with the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, with emphasis on inter-religious dialogue, advocacy for justice and peace, and inculturation of church teachings and practices. Back in those days, Rome had many devices in the toolbox for determining the outcome of a synod and for maintaining Roman orthodoxy.

Archbishop Quinn delivered an [Oxford lecture on papal primacy](#) on 29 June 1996 following upon John Paul II's 1995 encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*. He said: "[T]he synod has

not met the original expectations of its establishment." He asserted, "Many bishops feel that issues which they would like to discuss responsibly cannot come up" - issues "such as divorce, remarriage and the reception of the sacraments." Though not wanting to take a personal position on any of these issues, he made these prescient remarks about process:

"My point is simply to underline that issues of major concern in the Church are not really open to a free and collegial evaluation and discussion by the bishops, whose office includes being judges in matters of faith. A free discussion is one in which loyalty to the pope and orthodoxy of faith of those who discuss these issues is not called into question. In subtle and sometimes in very direct ways, the position of the curia on these issues is communicated to bishops at synods and intimidates them. In addition it is made clear that certain recommendations should not be made to the pope at the conclusion of a synod.

"Responsible for unity, bishops do not want to create an appearance of rebellion and so, perplexed, they keep silence. The bishops also have great faith and a personal reverence for the pope and do not wish to embarrass him by appearance of conflict.

"The procedures of the synod are outdated and are not conducive to collegiality in its fuller sense. They would, in fact, prove alien to many of those seeking unity who are used to parliamentary procedures and more free exchange and debate on issues. A new way of structuring and holding these synods could have a significant effect on the search for unity and the exercise of true collegiality.

"It would make the synod a more truly collegial act if the synod had a deliberative vote and not merely a consultative one. And this, too, would be a greater incentive to unity and a more authentic embodiment of collegiality."

Suffice to say, we did not hear a word of support for Quinn from any of the 13 signatories to the recent letter to Pope Francis. It has taken another 17 years and a bold pope from Argentina to place these matters like divorce and remarriage on the agenda and to encourage the messy debate which is necessary if the Church is to be true to tradition and to the lived experience of God's people. It was the great scripture scholar [Joseph Fitzmyer](#) who wrote:

"If Matthew under inspiration could have been moved to add an exceptive phrase to the saying of Jesus about divorce that he found in an absolute form in either his Marcan source or in 'Q', or if Paul likewise under inspiration could introduce into his writing an exception on his own authority, then why cannot the Spirit-guided institutional Church of a later generation make a similar exception in view of problems confronting Christian married life of its day or so-called broken marriage?"

For too long, theological conservatives have tried to maintain dogma by stifling discussion within contours which competent theologians craft consistent with the tradition. By invoking authority to close down debate and to disguise the tension between dogma and practice, the hierarchy have contributed to a corrupted culture which has exacerbated problems which alienate people increasingly from the Church.

On 22 November 1997, the American Academy of Religion convened a symposium to further discussion of the matters raised in Archbishop Quinn's 1996 Oxford lecture. Professor [Scott Appleby](#) from the University of Notre Dame made the astute observation:

"To Catholic professionals of my generation (last Boomers) and younger, the ongoing debate over these questions seems increasingly irrelevant, and the principals almost scandalous in their self-absorption. The teachers among us are painfully aware that younger Catholics, victims of the post-conciliar breakdown in effective catechesis and spiritual formation, hardly know what is meant by the term 'Vatican II', much less 'papal primacy'. By 'younger' I mean just about everyone under forty [*now read 60*], not merely the college age Catholics. The older generations of Catholic leaders - be they conservative, moderate, liberals, whatever - share an abiding faith in the church and its permanence and relevance to their lives. Their internecine feuding is bitter because so familial and familiar. But they *believe*. A younger generation, by contrast, is confronting a challenge far more radical than ever imagined by the 'revolutionaries' of Vatican II. They are asking: Can we place faith in the existence of an objective moral order? In this light church politics as usual seems scandalous."

The theologian Elizabeth Johnson, who recently published the marvellous book [Ask The Beasts](#), contributed to [that symposium](#), saying: "I kept thinking: if [John Quinn], an active archbishop, has felt so locked out, how much more the present governance of the Church has alienated so many of the rest of us, especially women." She contrasted the patriarchal model with various models of church described by feminist theologians. She catalogued:

- a pluralistic church that walks as an egalitarian, fully inclusive community of pilgrim people in solidarity with God and each other on their journey towards God's future;
- a church in the round with diverse charisms encouraging and supporting all as partners within a household of freedom;
- a church that tries to cohere with that strand of the early Jesus movement that lived as a community of the discipleship of equals;
- a church as a community redeemed from sexism.

She said:

"In every instance the model calls for a model of governance that respects the wisdom and commitment of the local *ecclesia*, gives voice to the insights of even its marginalized members, and galvanizes cooperation from the ground up rather than seeing the main function of bishops or church members as obeying or carrying out orders."

Johnson concluded her contribution to the symposium with a simple question and a cheeky answer:

"The ultimate question that faces the church is 'what is the will of God ...? What is God's will for Peter?' I would respectfully suggest an answer. God's will for Peter is that he stop going fishing and that for once, finally, he listen to Mary Magdalene."

John Kane, author of *Pluralism and Truth in Religion*, told the 1997 Quinn symposium held in the latter years of the John Paul II papacy:

"The Vatican's 'aggressive recentralization of authority' is in large part its response to what it correctly sees as a deep and complex crisis of authority not only in the Catholic Church but in the 'new situation' of our world.

"While the news image of a sternly vigorous young pope lecturing the world has been replaced by that of an aged man of suffering, driven to continue his journeys even as he clings to his processional crucifix for support, both images embody the same almost univocal and monolithic image of sacral authority ... a fundamental vision of authority expressed and developed in virtually every aspect of the doctrinal, disciplinary and administrative program of this papacy."

Recalling Francis's words at the St. Charles Borromeo Seminary, we know that we are all called to restore the balance. And we are to do it, immersed in our local cultures and situation. Think only of the brilliance of Francis [addressing the U.S. Congress](#) quoting four noted Americans, two of whom were not Catholic, one of whom was a woman who had an abortion and was a single mum, and the other of whom was a monk who had an affair, a peace activist who was silenced by his superiors. They were Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton. Francis commenced his address going in their door with the words:

"I am most grateful for your invitation to address this Joint Session of Congress in 'the land of the free and the home of the brave'. I would like to think that the reason for this is that I too am a son of this great continent, from which we have all received so much and toward which we share a common responsibility."

He praised the American people for their culture and their history despite its many blemishes:

"A nation can be considered great when it defends liberty as Lincoln did, when it fosters a culture which enables people to 'dream' of full rights for all their brothers and sisters, as Martin Luther King sought to do; when it strives for justice and the cause of the oppressed, as Dorothy Day did by her tireless work, the fruit of a faith which becomes dialogue and sows peace in the contemplative style of Thomas Merton."

The challenge of [Laudato Si'](#)

With this background to Francis's woes inside the Church, let's come to consider his papal encyclical [Laudato Si'](#), 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" (*The Weekend Australian*, 27-28 June 2015). This encyclical - which is "on care for our common home" - could not be written by an anti-capitalist greenie. 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."

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 palaeontologist 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.

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.

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 lyric, "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."

Two weeks ago, the *New York Times* columnist Andrew Revkin spoke in Brisbane at the [Global Integrity Summit](#). He has been writing about science and the environment for more than three decades. Through his hard-hitting coverage of global warming he has earned most of the major awards for science journalism. He is no papal groupie but he reported on being one of the experts called to Rome for consultations when the encyclical was being drafted. In his Brisbane presentation, Revkin particularly emphasized this paragraph from the encyclical:

"[W]e need to acknowledge that different approaches and lines of thought have emerged regarding this situation and its possible solutions. At one extreme, we find those who doggedly uphold the myth of progress and tell us that ecological problems will solve themselves simply with the application of new technology and without any need for ethical considerations or deep change. At the other extreme are those who view men and women and all their interventions as no more than a threat, jeopardizing the global ecosystem, and consequently the presence of human beings on the planet should be reduced and all forms of intervention prohibited. Viable future scenarios will have to be generated between these extremes, since there is no one path to a solution. This makes a variety of proposals possible, all capable of entering into dialogue with a view to developing comprehensive solutions."

Revkin was impressed at Francis's willingness to listen attentively to all views and to weigh the evidence. Hailing from Argentina, Francis 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.

In the most recent *New York Review of Books*, Yale economist [William Nordhaus](#) does lament that Francis is too critical of the market. Nordhaus argues that environmental problems are caused by market distortions rather than by the market *per se*. Francis is very critical of carbon credits claiming that they disadvantage the poor and allow the rich to continue polluting with impunity. Francis thinks the strategy of buying and selling carbon credits "may simply become a ploy which permits maintaining the excessive consumption of some countries and sectors." Nordhaus welcomes Francis's acknowledgement of the soundness of the science and the reality of global warming, but thinks it "unfortunate that he does not endorse a market-based solution, particularly carbon pricing, as the only practical tool we have to bend down the dangerous curves of climate change and the damages they cause."

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. Admittedly, the encyclical was written before the Australian government's latest [moral argument in favour of coal mining](#). Minister Josh Frydenberg told *ABC Insiders* last week:

"Over a billion people don't have access to electricity. That means that more 2 billion people today are using wood and dung for their cooking. The World Health Organisation said this leads to 4.3 million premature deaths. That's more people dying through this sort of inefficient energy than malaria, tuberculosis and HIV/Aids combined, so there's a strong moral case that the green activists sometimes don't comprehend."

Pope Francis 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."

We might garner the same sense by recalling the stuttering 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 United States, 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.

The challenge for us

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."

Speaking [to the U.N. last month](#) about the sustainable development goals, Francis demonstrated his canniness and his avoidance of glib solutions to big economic and social questions. He was even prepared to challenge the U.N. for being too idealistic and starry eyed. He told them:

"The number and complexity of the problems require that we possess technical instruments of verification. But this involves two risks. We can rest content with the bureaucratic exercise of drawing up long lists of good proposals - goals, objectives and statistics - or we can think that a single theoretical and aprioristic solution will provide an answer to all the challenges. It must never be forgotten that political and economic activity is only effective when it is understood as a prudential activity, guided by a perennial concept of justice and constantly conscious of the fact that, above and beyond our plans and programmes, we are dealing with real men and women who live, struggle and suffer, and are often forced to live in great poverty, deprived of all rights.

"To enable these real men and women to escape from extreme poverty, we must allow them to be dignified agents of their own destiny. Integral human development and the full exercise of human dignity cannot be imposed. They must be built up and allowed to unfold for each individual, for every family, in communion with others, and in a right relationship with all those areas in which human social life develops."

These are the insights of someone who knows more than his prayers. This is the wisdom of someone who cannot be parodied as an anti-capitalist greenie. We are blessed to have a pope who speaks to all the world about the prudence, justice and empathy required to that more people on our planet might enjoy integral human development. He invites us to live the ecological vocation of justice. He provides big challenges for all of us. I jested with a Catholic from one of the conservative think tanks recently, "With this pope, we're all cafeteria Catholics now" because none of us can deliver on the broad sweep of challenges he puts to us in trying to live the Christian life.

In her book [Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love](#), Elizabeth Johnson, writes: "Living the ecological vocation in the power of the Spirit sets us off on a great adventure of mind and heart, expanding the repertoire of our love." Let's live accordingly. Let's make sure we talk to Mary Magdalene before we go fishing again. Together we can walk through the doors the Risen One has opened for us out of the wilderness, and together we can discern the path to Paradise.

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