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A readers' guide to *Laudato Si'*

By Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese





—Newscom/Mint Images/Frans Lanting
A reforestation nursery in Montes Claros, Brazil

One of the many marvelous things about Pope Francis' encyclical on the environment, "[Laudato Si', on Care for Our Common Home](#)," is that it is written in a very accessible style. It does not read like an academic tome as have many encyclicals of the past. Anyone who can read a newspaper can read this encyclical and get something out of it.

True, it is 190 pages and about 40,000 words, but the six chapters flow nicely. It is not a hard read.

The encyclical is great for individual reading, but even better for a book club, class or discussion group. Reading and discussing the encyclical in a group is exactly what is called for because throughout the letter, there are calls to dialogue. There is no need for people to wait while the bishops and pastors organize a response to the encyclical. Anyone can [download the encyclical*](#), call their friends and say, "Let's read and discuss the encyclical." Anyone part of a book club can recommend that the encyclical be their next read. The impact

of the encyclical is going to be significant even outside the Catholic church. Environmentalists and scientists have endorsed the document. Likewise, non-Catholic religious leaders are eager to discuss the encyclical, which will become a topic of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue.

So here is a readers' guide with study questions to help in reading the encyclical. Because of the richness of the content, I would suggest taking one chapter at a time for reading and discussion. There are lots of questions. Use the ones you find helpful for discussion; don't feel you have to answer them all.



*http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html



—NCR photo/Joshua J. McElwee
A statue of St. Francis looks out over Assisi, Italy.

The introduction

The pope begins the encyclical by summarizing his presentation and citing earlier popes and other religious leaders who have spoken about the environment. He says Sister Earth "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."

Questions:

1. Where have you seen harm inflicted on Sister Earth (Paragraph 2)?
2. Why do you think few people knew that Popes Paul VI, John Paul II and Benedict XVI spoke out on environmental issues (4-6)?
3. St. Francis of Assisi has been called the patron saint of the environment. What is attractive about him (10-12)?
4. Pope Francis concludes his introduction with an appeal (13-16). What is your response?

Chapter 1: What is happening to our common home

Pope Francis is a firm believer in the need to gather the facts in order to understand a problem. Chapter 1 presents the scientific consensus on climate change along with a description of other threats to the environment, including threats to water supplies and biodiversity. He also looks at how environmental degradation has affected human life and society. Finally, he writes about the global inequality of the environmental crisis.



—CNS/Paul Jeffrey

A girl fills a container with muddy water in April 2014 in the Ajuong Thok Refugee Camp in South Sudan.

Questions:

1. How has pollution affected you or your family personally?
2. What does the pope mean by a “throwaway culture” (22)? Do you agree with him? Why?
3. What does the pope mean when he says, “The climate is a common good” (23)?
4. What is the evidence that climate change is happening and is caused by human activity (23)? What will be its effects?
5. The pope says that “access to safe drinkable water is a basic and universal human right,” yet many poor people do not have access to it (27-31). Why is this? What can be done?
6. Why does the pope think biodiversity is important (32-42)? What

are the threats to biodiversity?

7. What are the effects on people’s lives of environmental deterioration, current models of development, and the throwaway culture (43-47)?

8. Why does the pope believe “we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation” (48)?

9. Why does the pope think that simply reducing birth rates of the poor is not a just or adequate response to the problem of poverty or environmental degradation (50)?

10. “A true ‘ecological debt’ exists, particularly between the global north and south,” the pope writes (51). What does he mean?

11. Why does the pope think the response to the world’s environmental crisis has been weak (53)?

Chapter 2: The Gospel of creation

The pope argues that faith convictions can motivate Christians to care for nature and for the most vulnerable of their brothers and sisters. He begins with the biblical account of creation and then meditates on the mystery of the universe, which he sees as a continuing revelation of the divine. “Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of his creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth.” He concludes, “The earth is essentially a shared inheritance, whose fruits are meant to benefit everyone.”

Questions:

1. According to Francis, the Bible teaches that the harmony between the creator, humanity, and creation was disrupted by our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations (66). What does it mean to presume to take the place of God?
2. How does Francis interpret Genesis 1:28, which grants humankind dominion over the earth (67)?
3. How does Francis use the Bible to support his view that the gift of the earth



—NASA

with its fruits belongs to everyone (71)?

4. In reflecting on the mystery of the universe, what does Francis mean by saying that “creation is of the order of love” (77)?

5. What is our role “in this universe, shaped by open and intercommunicating systems” where “we can discern countless forms of relationship and participation” (79)?

6. Francis says, “Creating a world in need of development, God in some way sought to limit himself in such a way that many of the things we think of as evils, dangers or sources of suffering, are in reality part of the pains of childbirth which he uses to draw us into the act of cooperation with the Creator” (80). How do you understand this?

7. If the ultimate purpose of other creatures is not to be found in us, how do we and other creatures fit into God’s plan (83)?

8. Alongside revelation contained in Scripture, “there is a divine manifestation in the blaze of the sun and the fall of night” (85). How have you experienced God in creation?

9. What is your reaction to the hymn of St. Francis of Assisi (87)?

10. “The Christian tradition has never recognized the right to private property as absolute or inviolable, and has stressed the social purpose of all forms of private property” (93). When can the right to private property be subordinated to the common good?

11. What was the attitude of Jesus toward creation (96-100)?



—CNS/EPA/Narendra Shrestha
A Nepalese man hugs a tree while celebrating World Environment Day at the forest of Gokarna, on the outskirts of Kathmandu, in 2014.



—CNS/Reuters/Romeo Ranoco
A volunteer picks up trash at Freedom Island, a marshland considered to be a sanctuary for birds, fish and mangroves, in the Philippines in April 2015.



—CNS/Tyler Orsburn
A mound of coal after being processed near Whitesville, W.Va., in August 2014

Chapter 3: The human roots of the ecological crisis

Although science and technology “can produce important means of improving the quality of human life,” they have also “given those with the knowledge, and especially the economic resources to use them, an impressive dominance over the whole of humanity and the entire world.” Francis says we are enthralled with a technocratic paradigm, which promises unlimited growth. But this paradigm “is based on the lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth’s goods, and this leads to the planet being squeezed dry beyond every limit.” Those supporting this paradigm show “no interest in more balanced levels of production, a better distribution of wealth, concern for the environment and the rights of future generations. Their behavior shows that for them maximizing profits is enough.”

Questions:

1. What is Francis' attitude toward technology? What does he mean by the technocratic paradigm (101, 106-114)?

2. How does Francis argue that "technological products are not neutral," (107, 114) that "the technocratic paradigm also tends to dominate economic and political life" (109)?

3. Francis says, "We are all too slow in developing economic institutions and social initiatives which can give the poor regular access to basic resources" (109). What does he mean? Why does this happen?

4. Francis asserts that "by itself the market cannot guarantee integral human development and social inclusion" (109). Why does he say this? Do you agree?

5. Francis argues, "To seek only a technical remedy to each environmental problem which comes up is to separate what is in reality interconnected and to mask the true and deepest problems of the global system" (111). What are the true and deepest problems of the global system in Francis' mind?

6. Francis calls for a broadened vision (112), "a bold cultural revolution" (114). What would that look like?

7. What does Francis mean by "modern anthropocentrism" (115)?

8. For Francis, "the present ecological crisis is one small sign of the ethical, cultural and spiritual crisis of modernity" (119). What does Francis mean by "practical relativism" (122) and cultural relativism (123)?

9. Why does Francis argue that any approach to integrated ecology must also protect employment (124)?

10. What does Francis see as the positive and negative aspects of biological technologies (130-136)?



—CNS/Reuters/
Ricardo Moraes
A woman holds her child at the entrance of her house in a slum area of Rio de Janeiro in April 2013.

Chapter 4: Integral ecology

Recognizing the reasons why a given area is polluted requires a study of the workings of society, its economy, its behavior, and the ways it grasps reality. We are not faced with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis that 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.

Questions:

1. Why does Francis argue that "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" (139)?

2. What would it mean to have "an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature" (139)?



—CNS/Reuters/Borja Suarez
A man collects fuel oil from rocks in April 2015 following an oil spill along Veneguera beach in Spain's Canary Islands.

3. Why does Francis think it is important for us to understand ecosystems and our relationship

to them (140)?

4. Why do “we urgently need a humanism capable of bringing together the different fields of knowledge, including economics, in the service of a more integral and integrating vision” (141)?

5. Francis speaks of an “integral ecology” that combines environmental (138-140), economic (141), social (142), and cultural (143) ecologies. What does that mean? How does it work?

6. How does the environment of our homes, workplace, and neighborhoods affect our quality of life (147)?

7. How does poverty, overcrowding, lack of open spaces, and poor housing affect the poor (149)? Why are these environmental issues?

8. What does Francis mean by “the common good” (156)?

9. What are the consequences of seeing the earth as a gift that we have freely received and must share with others and that also belongs to those who will follow us (159)?

10. “What is the purpose of our life in this world? Why are we here? What is the goal of our work and all our efforts? What need does the earth have of us” (160)?

11. Why does Francis say, “Doomsday predictions can no longer be met with irony or disdain” (161)?

12. What does Francis mean when he says, “An ethical and cultural decline ... has accompanied the deterioration of the environment” (162)?

Chapter 5: Lines of approach and action

What is to be done? Francis calls for dialogue on environmental policy in the international, national and local communities. This dialogue must include transparent decision-making so that the politics serve human fulfillment and not just economic interests. It also involves dialogue between religions and science working together for the common good.



—CNS/Barbara Fraser
Valerio Mendoza, 83, joins a Nov. 30, 2014, vigil for climate change on the eve of the U.N. climate summit in Lima, Peru.

Questions:

1. The word “dialogue” is repeated throughout this chapter. What does it mean and why does Francis think it is important?

2. Francis speaks of the need for a global consensus for confronting problems. Why is it needed, and how is it going to be achieved (164)?

3. Why does he think that “the post-industrial

period may well be remembered as one of the most irresponsible in history” (165)?

4. What does Francis see as the successes and failures of the global response to environmental issues (166-169)?

5. What international strategies does Francis oppose in responding to the environmental crisis (170-171), and which does he support (172-172)?

6. Francis argues, “The same mindset which

stands in the way of making radical decisions to reverse the trend of global warming also stands in the way of achieving the goal of eliminating poverty” (175). What is this mindset?

7. “Given the real potential for a misuse of human abilities,” Francis argues, “individual states can no longer ignore their responsibility for planning, coordination, oversight and enforcement within their respective borders” (177). What does that mean for the United States?

8. “The Church does not presume to settle scientific questions or to replace politics,” Francis says. “But I am concerned to encourage an honest and open debate so that particular interests or ideologies will not prejudice the common good” (188). What is the proper role of the church in

political, economic and environmental issues?

9. Francis is critical of many business practices, has no faith in the marketplace to safeguard the environment, and sees a robust role for government in the regulation of the economy and protecting the environment. How will Americans respond to this? How do you?

10. What does Francis mean when he says, “There is a need to change ‘models of global development’ ” (194)? What is wrong with the current models? What would the new models look like?

11. What are the separate roles of religion and science, and how can they dialogue and work together (199-201)?

Chapter 6: Ecological education and spirituality

We need to change and develop new convictions, attitudes and forms of life, including a new lifestyle. This requires not only individual conversion, but also community networks to solve the complex situation facing our world today. Essential to this is a spirituality that can motivate us to a more passionate concern for the protection of our world. Christian spirituality proposes a growth and fulfillment marked by moderation and the capacity to be happy with little. Love, overflowing with small gestures of mutual care, is also civic and political, and it makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world.

Questions:

1. Throughout this encyclical, Francis links concern for the poor with the environment. Why does he do that?

2. Francis is critical of a consumerist lifestyle (204). Why? What would a new lifestyle look like?

3. What could be the political and economic impact of a widespread change in lifestyles (206)?

4. What does Francis see as the role of environmental education in increasing awareness and changing habits (210-211)?

5. What does Francis mean by an ecological spirituality, and how can it motivate us to a passionate concern for the protection of our world (216)?

6. Self-improvement on the part of individuals will not by itself remedy the extremely complex situation we face today, according to Francis. What is the role for community networks? Governments?



—CNS/Nancy Wiehac

A sign greets visitors to the meditation garden at the Franciscan Renewal Center in Scottsdale, Ariz., in October 2014.



—Newscom/CQ Roll Call/Tom Williams

Kids participate in a “play-in” in support of the EPA’s Clean Power Plan in July 2014 in Washington, D.C.

For additional reading on the encyclical, see [Francis: The Environment Encyclical](#) at [NCRonline.org/feature-series/francis-environment-encyclical](#).

- 7. What are the attitudes that foster a spirit of generous care (220-221)?
- 8. Granted all of the problems we face, what gives Francis joy and peace (222-227)?
- 9. Love must also be civic and political, according to Francis. “Social love moves us to devise larger strategies to halt environmental degradation and to encourage a ‘culture of care’ which permeates all of society.” How can we encourage civic and political love in the United States?
- 10. Francis proposes that the natural world is integral to our sacramental and spiritual lives (233-242). How have you experienced this?
- 11. How is this encyclical going to change your life?

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