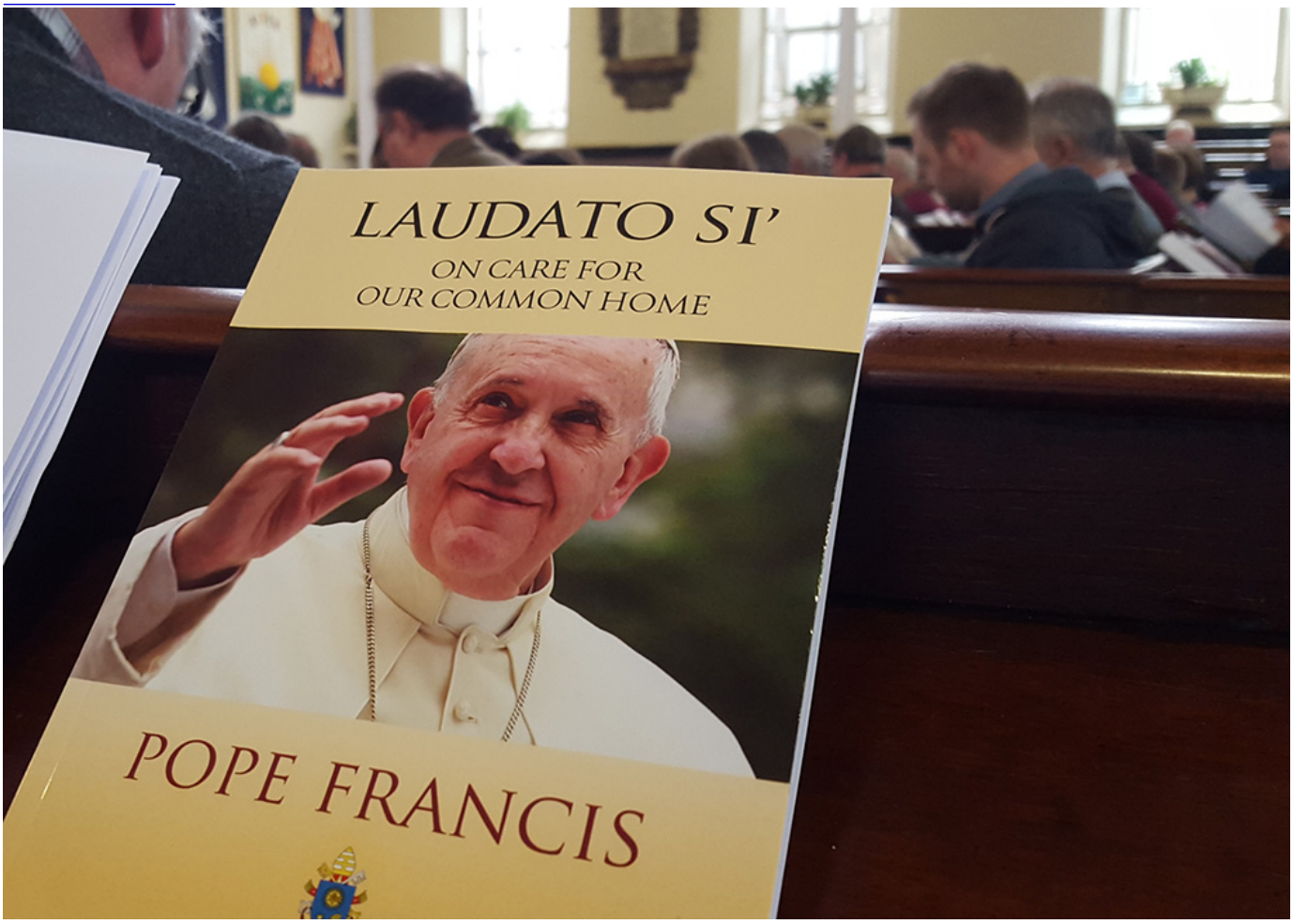
Opinion
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Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical on the environment, "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home," is seen during an ecumenical study day on the document in York, England, in 2016. (Flickr/British Province of Carmelites/Johan Bergström-Allen)



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In just about a month's time, Pope Francis is scheduled to release a new apostolic exhortation on the environment, which is being described as a follow-up to his 2015 encyclical letter, "*Laudato Si'*, on Care for Our Common Home." The publication of this document on Oct. 4 coincides both with the liturgical celebration of the feast of St. Francis of Assisi and the conclusion of this year's annual "Season of Creation."

The date will also happen to mark the opening of the first session of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, better known as the synod on synodality. Obviously, the first week in October will be a very busy time.

I don't know what specifically the new exhortation on the environment will contain, and so far there have been few details released about its contents, but there are some clues for what to expect in the pope's public comments in recent weeks.

For example, last week Francis referred to the condition of humanity's relationship to the environment in terms of war-like violence.

Referencing the start of the "Season of Creation" and alluding to his forthcoming document, the pope said: "Let us join our Christian brothers and sisters in the commitment to care for Creation as a sacred gift from the Creator. It is necessary to stand with the victims of environmental and climate injustice, striving to put an end to the senseless war on our common home, which is a terrible world war. I urge all of you to work and pray for it to abound with life once again."

This sense of a "terrible world war" being waged is a stark yet apt description. The antagonist in this war is, of course, the human community. As a species, we continue to inflict a disproportionate degree of harm on the more-than-human world, which affects not only nonhuman creation but also the most vulnerable within the human family.

The impacts of the ongoing and increasing climate crisis affects everyone and every creature that shares "our common home." These communities are interconnected. As Francis said in *Laudato Si'*, "We have to realize that a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*."

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It would be helpful to return to *Laudato Si'* in preparation for receiving the pope's forthcoming magisterial teaching. Since what has been mentioned by the pope and others has focused on both the human toll (think climate refugees) and human cause (think unbridled capitalism and the decadent life of wealthy nations), it seems to me wise to revisit Chapter 3 of *Laudato Si'*, titled "The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis."

At the time of the encyclical's publication, this was the most controversial section of the document, at least in the United States where climate denialism and political polarization was on the rise.

In addition to the contentious civil political landscape, which led to the politicization of this magisterial teaching, most American church leaders have been shamefully quiet on the teaching in the eight years since the encyclical's promulgation. It is no wonder that Francis feels the need to address the climate "signs of the times" yet again, especially following unprecedented heat, wildfires and floods around the globe this summer.

Chapter 3 is organized into three parts: "Technology: Creativity and Power," "The Globalization of the Technocratic Paradigm," and "The Crisis and Effects of Modern Anthropocentrism." I would venture to guess that these three themes will again make an appearance in some way in the pope's "updating" of *Laudato Si'*.

The first part focuses on the role of human technology over the course of history for both positive development and catastrophic destruction. Regarding the former use, the pope explains, "Technoscience, when well directed, can produce important means of improving the quality of human life."

But, as he quickly notes, "it must also be recognized that nuclear energy, biotechnology, information technology, knowledge of our DNA, and many other abilities which we have acquired, have given us tremendous power. ... Never has humanity had such power over itself, yet nothing ensures that it will be used wisely, particularly when we consider how it is currently being used."

Here we find Francis' warning that uncritically embracing technology is problematic both on practical and moral fronts. Indeed, there are many positive things for which

technological development is responsible, but we should never lose sight of the shadow side of unchecked technology.

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The pope points to some of the most egregious examples, including the use of nuclear bombs by the United States, and the technology used by Nazis and communists to exterminate millions of people.

The same drive to create such advancements, which have deleterious effects on the human family, likewise has driven our species to blindly embrace technologies and activities that have harmed, and continue to harm, the environment. The warning Francis presented eight years ago still rings true today: "Our immense technological development has not been accompanied by a development in human responsibility, values and conscience."

The second section of the chapter builds on the first, calling out the way technological developments have informed a widespread global ideology motivated by financial profits.

One of the hidden consequences of this "technocratic paradigm" is the belief that "current economics and technology will solve all environmental problems, and ... that the problems of global hunger and poverty will be resolved simply by market growth." As with the poor and vulnerable in the human family, so too the rest of creation suffers the consequences of reckless economic and technological policies.

Francis calls us to "broaden our vision," to expand our way of thinking beyond the limitations of economic and technological development at any cost.

"There needs to be a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies, an educational program, a lifestyle and a spirituality which together generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm," says the pope before adding, "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."

Herein lies one of the major problems to persist since the promulgation of *Laudato Si'*. We have not done enough to "broaden our vision," or to invest in another paradigm such as the "integral ecology" that Francis has been advocating. Instead, most people in power have treated each ecological hurdle as a discrete problem with a potential technological or economic solution. And things are only getting worse.

Related: Pope Francis' new environmental exhortation to be released on Oct. 4

Finally, the last section, the largest of the three, focuses on "modern anthropocentrism," that erroneous way of thinking that places the human species at the heart of the universe and suggests the only thing that matters is our comfort, safety, success and future.

Francis notes: "Once the human being declares independence from reality and behaves with absolute dominion, the very foundations of our life begin to crumble."

Indeed, we have deluded ourselves into thinking that we are all that really counts, and the consequences have been devastating not only for the nonhuman world, but for the human family too.

Francis describes this anthropocentric worldview as a form of relativism. "When human beings place themselves at the center, they give absolute priority to immediate convenience and all else becomes relative. Hence we should not be surprised to find, in conjunction with the omnipresent technocratic paradigm, and the cult of unlimited human power, the rise of a relativism which sees everything as irrelevant unless it serves one's own immediate interests."

This is a kind of "culture of relativism" that is more realistic and relevant than what the culture warriors decry in their battle against modernity and social progress. It is an attitude that arises from anthropocentrism and results in alienation of humanity from itself, from the rest of creation and from God.

Like many others, I eagerly await this new exhortation, expecting that the pope will build on these themes and expand on them to address the current post-pandemic climate catastrophe.

At the heart of whatever the particular shape the document may take is sure to contain a strong call for a new way of thinking and living, rooted in the call to "integral ecology." In the meantime, we would all do well to revisit *Laudato Si*' to prepare for what is to come.