News
EarthBeat



Pope Francis speaks during a Sept. 12, 2020, meeting with members of the "Laudato Si'" Communities in the Paul VI audience hall at the Vatican. "Everything is interconnected," Francis said in the encyclical, "Laudato Si', on Care for our Common Home." (CNS/Vatican Media)

Carol Glatz

View Author Profile

Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Vatican City — May 23, 2025
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Pope Francis, who took his name from the patron saint of ecology — St. Francis of Assisi — died the day before Earth Day and about five weeks before the 10th anniversary of his landmark encyclical on care for creation.

Dated May 24, the solemnity of Pentecost in 2015, the document, "Laudato Si', on Care for Our Common Home," presented the core of his teachings on integral ecology, its principles and practical applications.

Integral ecology recognizes the interconnectedness and interdependence between human beings and the earth, he said, and how the values, mindsets and actions of people affect all human endeavors and the planet.

Francis insisted social, economic, political and environmental issues are not separate problems, but are the many dimensions of one overarching crisis. The flora and fauna, the heavens and seas and all human beings are not objects to be used and controlled, but are wondrous reflections of the divine; they are God's creations and are gifts to be protected, loved and shared.

It was the first papal encyclical on the environment; however, it came out of a long theological tradition that sees the natural world as a form of divine revelation that "must also lead us to rediscover our fraternity with the earth, to which we have been linked since creation," as St. John Paul II said.

Francis "built on 'integral human development' from Benedict XVI and 'human ecology' from John Paul II," Celia Deane-Drummond, director of the Laudato Si' Research Institute at Campion Hall at England's Oxford University, told Catholic News Service in late April.

So while his 2015 document "wasn't dropping out of the sky," she said, there was a notable "change of tone and a change of emphasis and a much greater stress on dialogue with people from other traditions and openness to the world."

Laudato Si' also showed "a pastoral heart" with a clear awareness of the suffering of people and the world "that we need to incorporate in how we live and act as Christians," Deane-Drummond said.

Francis, with his long experience in the global South, also brought a unique perspective that propelled him to embrace the topic of environmentalism, which had been "marginalized as a fringe concern of the left," and to link it with social justice, Erin Lothes, a theologian and climate educator, told Catholic News Service in late April.

"His own conversion to ecology, I believe, is born out of the soil of Latin America and him being a pope for the poor," who saw the impact ecological crises had on the people there, said Lothes, who is a visiting scholar at the Center for Earth Ethics in New York and an "ecclesial affiliate" at the Laudato Si' Research Institute.

Many of the main themes of his pontificate, including the need to address the looming ecological crisis can be found in the 2007 Aparecida document then-Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio of Buenos Aires helped draft with bishops from Latin America in Aparecida, Brazil — the home of the Amazon and the "lungs" of the Earth.

"We can see the seeds of Laudato Si' in Aparecida," Lothes said, including the need for an "alternate development model, a new ethic based on justice and solidarity and attention to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor. I think that was very influential and that led him to focus" on the issue in a major papal document.

At the same time, she said, "the global world was seeing more ecological crises," and many in civil society were pushing for action, especially at international conferences sponsored by the United Nations, showing "there was that readiness for these seeds of his teaching to take root."

With Laudato Si', Deane-Drummond said, Francis "appealed to the world in a way that was incredibly ambitious," and, consequently, the encyclical had an "astonishing" influence on the world of science.

Advertisement

Deane-Drummond first worked as a scientist and then as a theologian, and she has been connecting ecology and theology since the late 1980s. She said she knew

scientists and others who had never read an encyclical before, "but they read Laudato Si'." An article about Laudato Si' in one biological journal garnered "more hits that year than any other article."

"I've really never seen anything quite like it," she said. "Suddenly he's blown open Catholic social teaching to the globe and in a remarkable kind of way that's completely fearless."

Also, "it wasn't a passive recipient document," Deane-Drummond said, since it fostered networking and action on multiple levels.

The encyclical even influenced the U.N. Climate Change Conference that was held several months later, and the resulting Paris Agreement "may not have happened if he hadn't released it then," she said.

Eight years later, on St. Francis of Assisi's feast day, Francis released a follow-up document, Laudate Deum ("Praise God"), ahead of the U.N. Climate Change Conference in the United Arab Emirates. The exhortation presented an even stronger critique of global inaction and indifference to climate change.

Deane-Drummond said it wasn't because Laudato Si' was not enough or had gaps to fill. Laudate Deum was "much more blunt in terms of telling people what they need to do and also pointing the finger, really, at Catholics and others who still denied climate change."

"It was as if the message of Laudato Si' hadn't been absorbed sufficiently and it was another cry of anguish," as well as "saying what needed to happen in Dubai ... in a way that wasn't quite as clear in Laudato Si'," she said.

Both Deane-Drummond and Lothes believe the message and appeals of Laudato Si' are here to stay and did not die with Francis' death April 21.

"I think it's a little bit like Vatican II," Deane-Drummond said. Even if some people in the church have tried to push back against Vatican II, the council made changes "that are irreversible."

"It's similar with Laudato Si'. Those changes have come in; they're part of Catholic social thought," she said.

Lothes said, "I think it's absolutely embedded in the global church" so that "this mission will go forward and flourish," especially with so many initiatives and institutions supporting it.

"And in those places where that conversion is still ongoing," she said, "I believe that the people of God know that we are facing an ecological crisis and are looking for that guidance, and they sense the dissonance when we are not bringing it into our liturgical life, our catechetical life, our ethical life."

In his two weeks as pope, Pope Leo XIV repeatedly has mentioned the same themes of climate change, exploitation of the poor and of Earth's resources, and the importance of protecting the planet.

Lothes said the only thing missing in Laudato Si' and Laudate Deum is "a clear guide" for how everyone can concretely live out their message.

Francis "invited us, in a very beautiful and spiritual way to ecological conversion, to proclaim and live the Gospel of creation," and to respond immediately "via governmental action, via policy responses, via our civic and consumer life to the scale of the crisis because our responses have not been adequate."

"What's needed now for the person in the pews is a clear expression of what each of us absolutely needs to do: A sort of 'Ten Commandments' for care of creation," she said.

"We have the intellectual message, we have the spiritual message," Lothes said. "Now we need to break it down for the life of the church and I think that's what the next wave of magisterial teaching can really offer to allow this seed and the beautiful tree of Laudato Si' to just reforest throughout the world."

This story appears in the **Laudato Si' at 10: Impact on the church and world** feature series. View the full series.