

Catholic Social Thought in Pope Francis's *Laudato Si'*: *On Care for our Common Home*

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Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si': On Care for our Common Home* is not simply a reflection on "the environment" — it is a continuation and development of the modern Catholic social thought (CST) tradition that began in 1891 with Pope Leo XIII writing on the rights of workers in the new Industrial Age. The CST tradition is clearly reflected in Francis's 2015 encyclical, which explicitly uses CST's central themes to help us see "our common home" through the lens of the Church's social thought. A review of some of the Pope's main points (in bold below) in *Laudato Si'* can provide a basic overview of CST, which Francis affirms is an "essential" part of the faith (*Laudato Si'*, #64).

The Pope places his encyclical explicitly in the modern, ongoing CST tradition: this encyclical letter "is now added to the body of the Church's social teaching" (#15). He emphasizes the continuity of the tradition, referring, in substantial paragraphs, to earlier popes who called for attention to global challenges and ecological issues: Pope John XXIII (#3), Pope Pius VI in 1971 (#4), Pope John Paul II, from 1979 to 1991 (#5), and Pope Benedict XVI, 2007-2008 (#6). Francis also acknowledges that this is a developing tradition: the Church's social teaching is "called to be enriched by taking up new challenges" (#63). *Laudato Si'* is a part of the Church's affirmation of "Continuing Revelation" (#85) because "life and the world are dynamic realities" (#144).

"We lack an awareness
of our common origin,
of our mutual belonging...
a great cultural,
spiritual and educational
challenge stands before us
and it will demand
that we set out on
the long path of renewal."

~ Pope Francis

While constantly developing, the CST tradition firmly grounds its teachings in the context of **Scripture**, both Old and New Testament. Pope Francis explores the implications of the Creation story in Genesis, explaining that human life is grounded in relationship — with God, with our neighbor, and with the earth itself (#65-66).

He rejects the Scriptural interpretation that "dominion" over the earth gives humans a right to exploitation of nature; rather, humans are called to "till and keep" the garden of the world (#67), which remains God's garden. "The land is mine," God utters in Leviticus 25:23, and we must realize we are all just "sojourners" called to share and nurture this garden for the little time we are here.

REFLECTION

Francis makes it a point to focus on the theological reality that “everything is connected” (a phrase mentioned again and again in this encyclical) as he reflects on the biblical story of Cain and Abel. Cain is “cursed from the ground” because he has destroyed his brother: “Disregard for the duty to cultivate and maintain a proper relationship with my neighbor, for whose care and custody I am responsible [we are our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers], ruins my relationship with my own self, with others, with God, and with the earth” (#70).

In a section of the encyclical entitled “The Gaze of Jesus,” Pope Francis looks at the New Testament, finding an Incarnated God who “lived in full harmony with Creation,” in “constant touch with nature, lending it an attention full of fondness and wonder” (#97-98). “Though the Incarnation, the mystery of Christ is at work in hidden manner in the natural world as a whole,” and the Risen One continues to direct all the creatures of the world “towards fullness as their end” (#99-100).

As with all CST encyclicals, *Laudato Si’* also responds to the “**signs of the times.**” (In Matthew 16:3, Jesus challenges powerful groups, the Pharisees and Sadducees, to wake up and see what is happening because they are failing to recognize “the signs of the times.”) Just as Pope Leo XIII was responding to the signs of the new industrialization and as Pope John Paul II was responding to the new reality of globalization, Pope Francis speaks of the “new era” humanity has entered (#102) and about the scientific and cultural paradigm that has created the “modern myth of unlimited material progress” (#107-108). This myth promotes “super development of a wasteful and consumerist kind” that destroys natural resources at the

“What path does
the Lord want?
Always with the spirit
of intelligence with which
to understand
the signs of the times,
it is beautiful to
ask the Lord for this grace.”

~ Pope Francis

same time we have tremendous “dehumanizing deprivation” in our world. The problem is compounded by the “rampant individualism” (#167) that refuses to recognize the growing inequality in the global community and an unsustainable use of resources to benefit only a part of the human family, which is addicted to consumerism. Francis puts the environmental crises in a context of economic, technological, and cultural **systems and structures**, “the deepest roots” of present and past challenges (#109). Such unjust structures and systems create “social sins” (#8), which are sins of entire societies, not just individuals (the legal system of slavery formerly in the U.S. is one example of a social sin).

Francis wants us to reflect on the signs of our times to move us to conversion (see below), because “there can be no renewal with nature without a renewal of humanity itself” (#118), without a more global perspective which recognizes that people are more important than profits and that no one is refuse to be “thrown away” because they are not “productive” or able to be consumers. Pope Francis is responding to the signs of the times he is witnessing in the world today, including the wide-spread disrespect for the value of every human person.

The grounding principle of Catholic social thought is respect for the life and **human dignity** of every individual, that “immense dignity” (#65), Francis refers to in various parts of the encyclical, reminding us of the “inalienable worth of a human being” (#136). Francis contributes to the CST focus on human dignity with his emphasis on **encounter**, which helps us recognize the human dignity of others. Using Martin Buber’s terms, the Pope describes encounter as a genuine meeting between two subjects — the “I and the Thou” (#81).

REFLECTION

Rather than experiencing ourselves as subjects who view others only as objects without the same dignity, complexities, and rights, the Pope calls us to seek an authentic and deep meeting with the other, as he has modeled so often in his encounters with prisoners, migrants, the homeless, and people with disabilities. No matter what their circumstances, everyone is created in the “image of God,” with immeasurable value, CST has always taught. The value of the human person demands that they never be used for others’ ends or profits: Francis quotes the German Bishops’ statement (as he quotes from many other bishops’ groups from around the world): we must recognize the “priority of being over that of being useful” (#69). Life itself is more important than productivity, and the marginalized must be included in a truly human community.

Encounter with those on the margins has led to the Church’s **Option for the Poor**, a special concern that models Christ’s care for the poor and suffering. Pope Francis mentions those in poverty over and over again in this encyclical, recognizing they suffer the most from environmental degradation: they are the ones losing farm plots to rising sea levels and increased flooding in Bangladesh, they are the ones without air conditioning dying on the streets in the recent record heat wave in India, they are the ones without access to clean water in Africa, they are the ones losing land and livelihood as the rain forests are being destroyed in South America.

It is the poorer countries in our world (#172) that lack resources to deal with environmental issues, often dealing with unjust development debt (#52), a crushing burden that Pope John Paul II, in the Jubilee Year 2000, called the developed countries to forgive, a call echoed by Francis. Pope Francis connects the lack of concern for the environment with the lack of concern for the rights of the poor (#196), sensing a common attitude of disrespect and dismissal. We must include all those on the margins in the dialogue and in processes that will create a new sense of our one “common home” (#64) and bring renewal to the earth.



To be involved in this dialogue that CST calls us to, we must recognize and reflect on the **Common Good**. *Laudato Si'* has an entire section on “The Principle of the Common Good,” which “has to do with the overall welfare of society” (#157). *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us that there is a universal common good resulting from the increasing interdependence of the global community. Francis sees our climate as “a common good” belonging to all and meant for all (#23). To build such a common good, CST promotes **rights and responsibilities in society** (#157).

Pope Francis mentions various **human rights** in his encyclical, including the universal right to clean water (#30) and the right of poor *campesinos* to possess land (#94). He discusses the **rights of workers**, an ongoing concern of CST, and the need to create and protect jobs (#124-129), by such means as supporting small-scale food production systems.

Echoing John Paul II’s theology of work, Francis sees human work as necessary for human flourishing (see below) and thus the right to work contributes to human dignity. **Economic rights** and economic justice are also central in Catholic social thought, and Pope Francis repeats in this encyclical, and in many of his homilies and other writings, the CST perspective on economic



REFLECTION

structures and systems that have been developed for the last six decades by previous popes. He reminds us that there should be a “common destination” of the goods of Creation (#93) so all may share in the resources God has created. Like his predecessors, Francis posits that unregulated capitalism has promoted economic gain over the welfare of all human beings and over the integrity of Creation (#190). The primacy of short-term profit-making has blinded too many to the long-term results of unsustainable plunder of the earth’s resources and to the consequences this will have on the human community (#187).

Pope Francis recognizes that **responsibility** for renewal of the earth must be shared by all: “society as a whole” is obliged to defend and promote the common good (#157). He encourages individuals and families to assume their responsibilities to be better stewards of Creation with lifestyle changes and with discernment about purchases: “purchasing is always a moral act” (#146). Francis also recognizes that individual efforts are not enough. We must work as communities to ensure long-term change: “social problems must be addressed by community networks and not simply by the sum of individual good deeds” (#219). Countries have responsibilities to stop environmental degradation and climate change, as do corporations, corporate entities, and international networks: change must be reflected in international agreements as well as in local and national legislation (#52, #67, #70, #170).

The Pope reminds us that **human flourishing** is the goal in CST; while the rights of humans to food, shelter, security, etc. must be respected, we are made for more than bodily well-being. We all seek “depth in life” (#113), to live life “to the full” (#223) in a way that the “quality of human life” is more important than material things (#147). Humans need a “prophetic and contemplative lifestyle, one capable of deep enjoyment, free of the obsession with consumption” (#222). Relationships are central to human flourishing (#148), as is human creativity (#131). Creative actions taken together help us to live more fully (#212) and to develop all that God has given us, so we can flourish, as God intended Eve and Adam to flourish in an earthly garden. And the creative changes we need to make to save the earth must be based on interior conversion.

The 1971 CST document *Justice in the World* noted that the authentic quest for justice must begin with a



conversion of the heart, not simply an intellectual understanding of social issues. Pope Francis emphasizes an “ecological conversion” (#216) is a “profound interior conversion” and helps us see that care of Creation is a form of spirituality. It is part of the spirituality of **solidarity** that will give us the wisdom to realize that “everything is connected” (#138), and that “we are always capable of going out of ourselves towards the other” (#20). Indeed, the world that God created is “a sacrament of communion” (#9), a sacrament we are all called to cherish and to share.

Pope Francis ends his encyclical with the hope that the grace given in the Eucharist, “a fragment of matter that holds the mystery of the Incarnation” (#236), will be a source of “light and motivation for our concerns for the environment, directing us to be stewards of all Creation.” This is a stewardship that comes from conversion of the heart, is rooted in solidarity, and respects human dignity. This is a stewardship that displays a concern for the civil, social and economic rights of all, especially those in poverty, and calls us all to carry out our responsibilities for the common good of our earthly home, a sense of stewardship shaped by the Catholic social thought and articulated so beautifully by Pope Francis.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think Pope Francis was very explicit about telling us his new encyclical is in the Catholic social thought? Why does he mention other popes?
2. Why is it so important to our modern Popes to ground its social teaching in Scripture? What perspective does Francis offer on the Creation story in Genesis? On the Cain and Abel story in Genesis?
3. What are the implications of an Incarnated God, who lived on the earth and in relationship with Creation? How does the Pope see the mystery of Christ today?
4. What are some “signs of the times” mentioned in *Laudato Si’*? What are other signs of our times that contribute to the degradation of our earth and its people?
5. Pope Francis reminds us that people, human beings, all have “inalienable worth” and “immense dignity,” because all are created in the image of God, a central theme of CST. Where do you see humans beings treated with respect for their dignity in your community, your country, and the global community? Where do see the dignity of human beings being ignored?
6. Have you seen examples of the Pope’s encounters with others? How does he model how we should encounter other human beings? Why is it difficult to always be fully present to others and see them as God’s beloved children?
7. The Pope reminds us that humans must be valued not on the basis on their productivity (or success), but on their very being in the world. What message does secular society promote about productivity, and how and why is this different from a faith perspective?
8. How do those in poverty suffer more today from environmental problems? Why does Pope Francis see a connection between lack of concern with the environment to lack of concern for certain people?
9. Why is it difficult for us to see everyone in the world as a valued member of a global community, sharing a “common home,” as Francis calls Creation? Why is it difficult to recognize a “common good” in our society?
10. What are some of the rights of all human beings that the Pope mentions in this encyclical and how does he see these connected with the environment?
11. We all have rights, and we all have responsibilities, CST teaches us. What are some of the ecological responsibilities of individuals, families, local communities, nations, the international community, and all businesses and corporations? Why are these responsibilities often ignored?
12. What is the final goal of Catholic social thought for all human beings on this earth? How does CST envision “quality of life” and “human flourishing.” Why is this so different from the secular culture’s promotion of the “good life?”
13. Why will it take “a conversion of the heart” to change the way we relate to others and to God’s Creation? Why is this challenging, and necessary, if we are to be in authentic solidarity with Creation, where everyone and everything is connected?” What are some ways we can develop a spirituality of solidarity with the earth and all its people?



A PRAYER FOR OUR EARTH

All-powerful God, you are present
In the whole universe
And in the smallest of your creatures.
You embrace with your tenderness
All that exists.

Pour out upon us the power of your love,
That we may protect life and beauty.

Fill us with peace, that we may live
As brothers and sisters, harming no one.

O God of the poor,
Help us to rescue the abandoned
And forgotten of this earth,
So precious in your eyes.

Bring healing to our lives,
That we may protect the world
And not prey on it,
That we may sow beauty,
Not pollution and destruction.

Touch the hearts
Of those who look only for gain
At the expense of the poor and the earth.

Teach us to discover
The worth of each thing,
To be filled with awe and contemplation,
To recognize that we are profoundly
United with every creature
As we journey towards your infinite light.

We thank you for being with us each day.
Encourage us, we pray, in our struggle
For justice, love, and peace.

~ Pope Francis
Saint Peter's Square, May 24, 2015

FAITH IN ACTION

1. Commit, with one or more people, to study *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* and to reflect on and pray with Pope Francis's words. Study guides for the entire encyclical are available on the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops website (www.usccb.org) and at the National Catholic Reporter website (www.ncronline.org). Decide together on what actions you will take in response to the Pope's challenges to us and how you will support one another in following through. What can you do daily, and who can you call or write to weekly, to grow in the spirituality of solidarity in order to renew our common home?

2. Visit www.catholicclimatecovenant.org for more information on how to be involved in caring for our common home. Also see the www.usccb.org website for more news on the U.S. Catholic Bishops announcements and action agendas on environmental issues.

***Note:** This reflection is certainly not a definitive summary of the richness and depth of Pope Francis's entire encyclical, nor does it go into the details on the ecological issues he covers. It is meant to provide an understanding how Francis has grounded his encyclical in the key concepts of Catholic social thought and how he affirms and develops the CST tradition. The full encyclical is available at: <http://bit.ly/1Gi1BTu>.*

