

Pope Francis' Encyclical Letter Laudato Si' – Praise be to You On Care for Our Common Home Fr. Varghese Paul, SJ

LAUDATO SI' is a most comprehensive document on ecology and environment. Pope Francis authoritatively treats the subject not only from a Christian perspective but also from a scientific and technological point of view covering practically everything connected with the topic.

I would like to describe LAUDATO SI' as an epoch-making document. The Encyclical is a landmark document of the 21st century.

LAUDATO SI' also establishes Pope Francis as an eminent environmentalist, who thinks about the whole natural and human creation. LAUDATO SI' may be compared with two other Classical documents:

The two other classical documents are: (1) Pope Leo XIII's Encyclical "Rerum Novarum" (New Things, 1891) is the landmark document of the 19th century. It is about labour and capital especially on the workers' right during industrial revolution.

(2) Pope St Pope John XXIII's Encyclical "Pacem in Terris" (Peace on Earth, 1963) is the landmark document of the 20th century. This enduring Encyclical is a world-class document warning about the dangers of Nuclear War during the height of Cold War.

Similarly, Pope Francis' Encyclical LAUDATO SI' is a unique and significant document of the 21st century. It addresses every man and woman on earth on the environmental issues. "I wish to address every person living on this earth", he says.

Perhaps, I need to explain that usually an Encyclical letter is considered the official teaching of the Pope addressed to the Bishops of the Catholic Church. But as you will see, LAUDATO SI' is much more than that.

The name LAUDATO SI' – "Praise be to You" is unique and significant in many ways. It is a very Franciscan Encyclical. The Italian title instead of usual Latin title is from a poem or hymn of St Francis Assisi (1181-1226).

Francis Assisi is a world-renowned saint beyond the confine of the Catholic Church. With awe and wonder Francis loved and respected God's whole creation.

St. Francis Assisi's hymn "Canticle of Creatures" is considered the first Italian classical poem. Pope Francis' predecessor, St Pope John Paul II has proclaimed Francis Assisi as the Patron of Environment.

Pope Francis took his name from St Francis Assisi. He has also taken the title LAUDATO SI' from the opening line of the Saint's Canticle of the Creatures and has quoted The whole Canticle.(#86)

In tune with Francis Assisi Pope Francis says: “If we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, then our attitude will be that of masters, consumers and ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs.”

Perhaps, a very important thing to note about LAUDATO SI' is that the voice of religion has now decisively entered the climate change debate.

Pope Francis has portrayed an ambitious vision for protecting the environment and safe-guarding of life in all its forms. He has warned against reckless pursuit of development for profit of a few people.

I have no doubt that LAUDATO SI' will have an inalienable impact on the forthcoming international meet on environment and ecology at Paris in December 2015.

We also need to note that LAUDATO SI' has already created much opposition, controversy and polarization. The Encyclical has also received much acclamation and appreciation from around the world.

LAUDATO SI' is very critical of global capitalist system and the Encyclical also challenges the absolutist notion of private property. Pope Francis holds that the whole creation belongs to God for the good of the whole people.

LAUDATO SI' is emphatic on the fact that God's whole creation is in the urgent need of common care and protection by everyone - by individuals, Churches and governments. You have a sort of summary of LAUDATO SI' in my article on the Encyclical in WEC, September 2015 issue. So instead of repeating what I have written in it, here I would like to highlight the practical aspects of the document, which concerns all of us.

Having read and studied the Encyclical in depth, I see LAUDATIO SI' as Pope Francis' greatest contribution to environmental dialogue as it presents to us an overview of the crisis facing the whole creation, our sister/mother earth. (#62)

The focus on the poor is one of the central themes of LAUDATO SI' and every section of the encyclical refers to the poor in one way or other. Pope Francis repeatedly calls for an appreciation of the immense dignity of the poor. (#158)

We need to heed to Pope Francis' critique of our reliance on the market forces without considering how they will affect the environment and their potential negative impact on human beings. (#109 & 110) Pope Francis says that with extreme consumerism “the earth is despoiled, and billions are left impoverished.” (#203)

There is no doubt that LAUDATO SI' is very much in tune with the social teachings of the Catholic Church. The Church's theology of common good is combined with the findings of experts in a variety of fields to reflect on modern problems.

But LAUDATO SI' is not just a document of social teachings. Its position on ecology is very much grounded in the Bible and Church Traditions. Pope Francis' references to Bible and Tradition are such that nonbelievers too can understand and be inspired to care for nature and environment.

Pope Francis' teaching that everything is connected is a revelation for me. Pope Francis links everyone to the whole creation. "We are part of nature, included in it, and thus in constant interaction with it," he says. (#139)

LAUDATO SI' appeals to the learned as well as to the simple because much researched scientific truths on environment are presented in simple lucid style of Pope Francis. The Encyclical combines well the Church's social teaching and the contemporary findings of various fields.

LAUDATO SI' condemns unambiguously widespread indifference and selfishness about environmental problems. "Many of those who possess more resources seem mostly to be concerned with masking the problems or concealing their symptoms", says Pope Francis.

Pope Francis calls for global dialogue and international solidarity to face the environmental problems. LAUDATO SI' calls for debate among all people about the care of our common home; because the solution which works for one region may not work in another region.

LAUDATO SI' calls for personal conversion leading to bold Cultural Revolution. As Pope Francis says, we need to listen to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor (#49). This is possible only with individual and collective ecological conversion.

The beauty of LAUDATO SI' addressed to every person on planet earth is that there are dozens of practical suggestions for you and me to do in the care of our sister/mother earth. Let me highlight a few of them from the Encyclical.

1st Suggestion of LAUDATO SI' is get involved in the care of mother earth. Quoting South African bishops Pope Francis says: "Everyone's talent and involvement are needed to redress the damage caused by human abuse of God's creation." (#14)

2nd Suggestion of LAUDATO SI' is to reduce, reuse and recycle, as many environmental problems are connected with throw away culture (#14). Pope Francis says that sensible and profitable ways of reusing, revamping and recycling could improve the energy efficiency of cities (#192).

3rd, LAUDATO SI' calls everyone to reduce and replace use of highly polluting fossil fuels specially coal, oil and gas and replace them with renewable energy sources without delay (#26, 165)

4th, LAUDATO SI' wants everyone to protect clean, safe drinking water and ensure universal access to drinking water. "Access to safe drinkable water is a basic and universal human right,

since it is essential to human survival.” (#27-29, 164)

5th, LAUDATO SI' warns us against the destruction of ecosystem leading to the extinction of mammals, birds, fungi, algae, worms, insects, reptiles and a variety of microorganisms due to the use of synthetic pesticide, herbicides, etc. (#34)

6th, LAUDATO SI' wants us to promote smart growth creating livable communities with plenty of green spaces. The Encyclical also calls to tackle noise and “visual pollution” and create space for people to connect and trust each other. (#44-45, 113, 143, 147)

7th, LAUDATO SI' warns us against mental pollution when the mass media and the digital world is omnipresent. So the Encyclical calls us “to live wisely, to think deeply and to love generously” (#47)

8th, LAUDATO SI' calls us to know personally the suffering of poor, the vast majority of the world. The aloofness of the rulers and decision makers from the poor led to the present reality. The Encyclical affirms that “true ecological approach always becomes a social approach”. (#49)

9th, LAUDATO SI' calls for sharing with the poor instead of blaming the population growth. Pope Francis says that food discarded and thrown away is like food stolen from the table of the poor. (#50)

10th, LAUDATO SI' affirms that “we were made for love” (#58) and we need “to wonder about the purpose and meaning of everything” (#113) and our actions should be such as to create self-esteem and “enable us to live and feel that life on earth is worthwhile.” (#212)

11th, LAUDATO SI' calls us repeatedly to get back to nature and experience “God’s love” and “a caress of God”. (#84) The Lord is “in constant touch with the nature”. (#97) We need “to promote new way of thinking about life and our relationship with nature”. (#215)

12th, LAUDATO SI' repeatedly tells us that everything is connected. Pope Francis says that love for human being is inconsistent with trafficking in endangered species and destroying human beings deemed unwanted including the unborn. (#91, 120)

13th, LAUDATO SI' calls us “to wonder about the purpose and meaning of everything.” (#113) And the Encyclical says that “a capacity to wonder takes us to a deeper understanding of life.” (#225)

14th, LAUDATO SI' says that any approach to an integral ecology needs to take account of the value of labour. (#124) For, “Work is a necessity, part of the meaning of life on this earth, a path to growth, human development and personal fulfillment.” (#128)

15th, LAUDATO SI' calls for protecting the land and the culture of indigenous peoples. Pope Francis says that the disappearance of a culture can be even more serious than the disappearance of species of plant or animal (#145)

16th, Speaking on the ecology of daily life LAUDATO SI' stresses on the importance of proper environment. Pope Francis writes, "In our rooms, our homes, our workplaces and neighborhoods, we use our environment as a way of expressing our identity." (#147)

17th, LAUDATO SI' stresses "on the need to give priority to public transportation," (#153) and providing essential services to rural population (#154)

18th, LAUDATO SI' says that though the people were concerned with environmental problems from the middle of last century "recent World Summits on the environment have not lived up to expectations due to lack of political will." (#164, 166)

19th, LAUDATO SI' says, "There is a nobility in the duty to care for creation through little daily actions; and it is wonderful how education can bring about real changes in lifestyle." Pope Francis' suggestions are avoid use of plastic and paper, use public transport or car pooling, plant trees, etc. (#211)

20th, LAUDATO SI' deplores "the behaviour of those who constantly consume and destroy, while others are not yet able to live in a way worthy of their human dignity." (#193) Pope Francis says that Christian spirituality of "less is more" "lived freely and consciously is liberating." (#222, 223)

21st, LAUDATO SI' ends with two beautiful prayers of Pope Francis entitled "A prayer for our earth" and "A Christian prayer in union with creation". They summarize, so to say, the whole Encyclical letter. (#246)

Finally, taking an over view of the Encyclical LAUDATO SI' I would like to call your attention to two things: First, our origin and our final rest; second, the solid connection between Social Justice and Environment.

First, we should not forget from where we came. Pope Francis says: "We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth; our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters." (#2)

Second, LAUDATO SI' establishes solid connection between Social Justice and Environment. Pope Francis says: "We realize that the world is a gift which we have freely received and must share with others." (#159)

Who are the others? They are the poor, the needy, the displaced, the refugees, the victims of persecutions and wars. So our question is what is our personal response to this Encyclical? How you and I can care for our Sister/Mother Earth? (60 paragraphs & 2343 words)

Francis, Pope. *Encyclical Letter LAUDATO SI': ON CARE FOR OUR COMMON HOME.* Bangalore: Claretian Publications, June 2015. Print.

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