

Laudato Si – Five Years On Revisited in a Time of Covid-19

Introduction

The experience of the current Covid-19 Pandemic has forced people across the world to re-evaluate every aspect of their lives. Suddenly, without much warning, everything changed. In these weeks of lockdown we have been challenged in all kinds of ways and, even as those in authority seek to find a way out of the restrictions brought on by the pandemic, it is perfectly clear that things will never, for the foreseeable future at least, return to “normal”. As Christians we are being challenged to reflect on how our faith might help us address what is being referred to increasingly as “the new normal” in which we will find ourselves. How might we worship together again under the new strictures that will, necessarily, be imposed as the lockdown is lifted? How will we be able to share the message of the Good News in a time of restricted travel and social contact? What has our faith to say to people about where God might be in all of this? Alongside such questions, and underlying our responses to this massive, natural disaster is one about God in the midst of creation and the call on humankind to use that gift wisely and well – certainly rather better than we have done up to now. At such a moment it is opportune to revisit Pope Francis’ Encyclical *Laudato Si – On Care for Our Common Home*, issued in 2015, issued in fact exactly five years ago this week.

As someone who has been engaged in the study of theology in a Catholic context for over forty years now, I find it amazing how the tables have turned. For much of that time the merest whisper of dissent from something a pope said or wrote threatened the wrath of prominent voices in high office, and in influential positions, across the Church. The accusations of “disloyalty” – the cardinal sin for theologians in the eyes of these people – were frequent, as time and again the voices of many leading intellects in the Church were drowned out, ignored, or pounced upon. How times have changed! Pope Francis, more or less since his election, has been at the centre of severe criticism for his words and actions by some of the very same people who made those accusations of disloyalty under the previous two popes.

Since we are dealing here solely with the understanding of creation and ecology, we need only to look at the hue and cry against the Pope’s words coming from sources accusing him of Marxism or Communism, or else meddling in affairs like business and economics that are outwith the remit of a pastor. From this perspective the Church should be concerned only with spiritual matters: prayer, the sacraments, sin and forgiveness but only in the narrowest understanding of individual morality, usually involving sex. To be fair such criticism is also made from outside the Church by people who consider that such matters as climate change and business ethics are not the business of believers.

Because of these criticisms coming from all sides Pope Francis opens his encyclical letter by situating his reflections in the tradition of his predecessors of the modern era. He cites the encyclical of John XXIII, *Pacem in terris*, written not long before he died in 1963. He goes on to show how each of the popes who followed John also wrote about concerns for what was happening to the planet. He also recounts at length, in a quite remarkable ecumenical gesture, the thoughts of the Patriarch of Constantinople, of the Eastern Orthodox Communion of Churches, on these same matters. Finally, citing the example of the man

whose name he took when he became pope, Francis of Assisi, he evokes his great hymn of creation, from which the title *Laudato Si* comes. Towards the end of this introduction to the letter he reaches out to all when he writes,

I urgently appeal, then, for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all... All of us can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation, each according to his or her own culture, experience, involvement and talents. (*L.S. §14*)

Notice that his encyclical is a call for further dialogue between all interested parties. He is not claiming to make any definitive statement on the issue, though he will set out some reflections from a uniquely Christian perspective.

Chapter 1 – What is Happening to Our Common Home?

Having set out his Catholic credentials in the introductory section he now looks for common ground with all people – believers and unbelievers alike. Once again, he is standing firmly in a longstanding tradition in Christian thought. We are currently marking the 6th Week of Easter and the celebration of the Ascension. On the day before the Feast the First Reading at Mass comes from St Paul's address to the men at the Areopagus in Athens, as recounted by St Luke in the Acts of the Apostles (ch.17). This was the place where the freemen of Athens gathered to debate and to pass intellectual and, at times, legal judgements on various matters brought to their attention. It was a place of debate.

Paul's ultimate message to these people is the same as he preaches elsewhere - the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ and the call to faith. However, the way he presents his case is markedly different from his previous arguments in synagogue at Thessalonica, only a few verses earlier,

(F)or three sabbaths he spoke to them, expounding the scriptures, interpreting and explaining that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the dead. (17:2)

This Messiah, he goes on to say, is Jesus. By contrast, at Athens, there is no mention whatsoever of the scriptures (the Old Testament) his audience did not know the Jewish scriptures and quite probably held the Jewish faith in contempt. Here he has to argue from reason to find common ground. Although not hugely successful he did manage to convince some people of his message. The point is that, in order to be understood, the message has to be adapted to the language and idiom of each audience. This has been recognised down the ages and articulated by the Fathers at Vatican II in *Gaudium et Spes*,

The Church learned early in its history to express the Christian message in the concepts and language of different peoples and tried to clarify it in the light of the wisdom of their philosophers: it was an attempt to adapt the Gospel to the understanding of all men and women, and the requirements of the learned, insofar as this could be done. Indeed, this kind of adaptation and preaching of the revealed word must ever be the law of all evangelisation. (*GetS §44*)

This call to adaptation of the message is clear but it is not a simple and straightforward pathway. In the 1970s the great Protestant theologian, Jurgen Moltmann¹, wrote about two

¹ **The Crucified God**, SCM, London, 1974, pp.7-31.

opposite poles in the presentation of the Christian message: identity and relevance. The message could be presented in such a way that, although identifiably Christian in its content, the language and imagery used might be so far removed from those of the audience that nothing would be actually communicated by the presentation. At the other extreme the message might be expressed in ways that an audience could easily latch onto but, at the same time, be devoid of any meaningful, Christian content: relevant but with no particular identity. Straying too far towards identity is the natural tendency of a more conservative mind, while straying towards relevance would be that of a liberal one. The task of preachers and theologians is to navigate a route between those two opposing poles and offer material that is both. This is the task that the Pope has set himself, and in this first chapter he attempts to make common ground with all peoples, not only Christians.

Pope Francis cites the common factors that rear their heads in any discussion of ecology in our time: “Pollution, waste and the Throwaway Culture”, Climate Change, access to clean water for all, the loss of biodiversity, breakdown in society, Global Inequality and the poor response of humankind to these issues. He acknowledges differences of opinion on these matters ranging from outright denial that anything need be done, to the idea that we need to reduce the human population drastically and to let nature take over (§60). In the midst of such a minefield he invites dialogue,

On many concrete questions, the Church has no reason to offer a definitive opinion; she knows that honest debate must be encouraged among experts, while respecting divergent views. But we need only take a frank look at the facts to see that our common home is falling into serious disrepair. (§61)

Having tried to establish common ground with people of all faiths and none, he is now ready to explore the specific ideas of the Judaeo-Christian Tradition.

Chapter 2 – The Gospel of Creation

As this chapter opens the Pope acknowledges that the question of whether the Church should be involved in discussions on topics like ecology is disputed but, of course, he insists that the Church does have **A** voice on these matters,

If we are truly concerned to develop an ecology capable of remedying the damage we have done, no branch of the sciences and no branch of wisdom can be left out, and that includes religion, and the language that is peculiar to it. The Catholic Church is open to dialogue with philosophical thought; this has enabled her to produce various syntheses between faith and reason. The development of the Church’s social teaching represents such a synthesis with regard to social issues; this teaching is called to be enriched by taking up new challenges. (§63)

Once again, he places what he is saying firmly in the Tradition of Church teaching on social issues and its unique methodology. So, now he is ready to set out for Christians the roots of their concerns about creation in the Scriptures.

The first thing to note about what Pope Francis writes about in this section is that he refers to the Scriptures in a much more sophisticated manner than we were used to in the Catholic Church up till fifty or so years ago. After the Reformation, when the Catholic Church emphasised sacraments and doctrine, rather than the more strictly scriptural approach of the protestant churches, the study of scripture was pushed to one side in favour of a strictly dogmatic approach to teaching. As a result, when the study of the Scriptures as historical

and literary texts, grew in the Protestant and Anglican Churches from the late Nineteenth Century, the Catholic Church was left behind in this and only began to recover from the middle of the Twentieth Century. This began with Pius XII's encyclical on the study of scripture (*Divino Afflante Spiritu*) of 1944, which gave the green light to Catholic scholars to use the resources of the historical-critical method in their work. This bore fruit ultimately in the Vatican II Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*), since which time church documents have had a much more solidly scriptural base. This has matured over the years. To be honest in the early years after Vatican II Church documents tended to be peppered with Scriptural references without much awareness of what scholars were saying about them.

If we think for a moment about the popes of the modern era, beginning with John XXIII, it is only with the election of Pope Francis that we have someone trained in theology after the historical-critical methods and their findings became part of seminary studies. From Pope John, up to and including Pope John Paul II, through no fault of their own, they were trained and ordained before the effects of Pius XII's 1944 Encyclical were to be found in the system of priestly formation. This holds true also for Benedict XVI. However, in his academic life in the German university system in the 1960s and 70s he did come to know and to use the modern works of Catholic exegetes and his use of Scripture was also much more mature than that of his predecessors. Nonetheless, Pope Francis is the first pope whose whole training and background have been imbued with this modern approach, as we can see in this encyclical.

Most of the Pope's reflections on creation are based on the Hebrew Scriptures. Referring to the first account of Creation in Genesis 1 the Pope notes the essential goodness of creation, how the human person is created out of love in God's image and likeness, and how the dignity of each person derives from this fact. He goes on to note that these early texts are not historical accounts per se,

The creation accounts in the book of Genesis contain, in their symbolic and narrative language, profound teachings about human existence and its historical reality. They suggest that human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour, and with the earth itself. According to the Bible, these three vital relationships have been broken, both outwardly and within us. This rupture is sin. (§66)

He acknowledges that this observation was made by people such as Francis of Assisi and Bonaventure in the past, but it is also something which modern biblical scholarship has helped us to identify. For centuries the Church seemed to be obsessed only with "The Fall" in chapter 3 (thanks mainly to St Augustine) – the man and the woman eating the forbidden fruit, through which it was taught that (Original) sin entered the world. It is clear, however, that the following stories in Genesis about Cain and Abel, Noah and the Tower of Babel are also stories of "fall" which add further dimensions to the rupture between we human beings, God, and the rest of creation.

Pope Francis is well aware of this. He notes how the call to "have dominion" over the earth (Gen. 1:28) and the call to "till it (the earth) and keep it" (Gen. 2:15) were distorted, especially with the onset of the Industrial Revolution. Referring to other books of the Jewish Law, and to the Psalms praising the Creator, he points out that we are called to be

responsible stewards of creation not absolute owners, “Clearly, the Bible has no place for a tyrannical anthropocentrism unconcerned for other creatures.” (§68). In fact, we find in the Scriptures a demand for a more responsible approach to gift of Creation. Within that responsibility there is also a call to share the fruits of the earth with “widows, orphans and foreigners in your midst.” (Lev.19:9-10)

Going through the developing history of the Jewish people as seen in the pages of the Bible, Pope Francis notes both the call of many of the Psalms to praise the Creator, and of the prophets to act justly in our dealings with each other and with creation itself. Before moving on to outline further development on the theme of creation in Christian thought Pope Francis summarises the contribution of Scripture in this way,

... Judaeo-Christian thought demythologised nature. While continuing to admire its grandeur and immensity, it no longer saw nature as divine. In doing so, it emphasises all the more our human responsibility for nature. This rediscovery of nature can never be at the cost of the freedom and responsibility of human beings who, as part of the world, have the duty to cultivate their abilities in order to protect it and develop its potential. (§78)

Contributions to Christian thinking of theologians ancient and modern (even Teilhard de Chardin, condemned by church authorities for many years, is referred to with approval), and of bishops’ conferences and recent popes all build up to a long quotation from Francis of Assisi’s *Canticle of the Creatures* which is the inspiration for the Pope’s thinking.

Further contributions to our understanding of shared responsibility for creation for the poor follow before a short, final section in this chapter looking at the Christian Scriptures, and especially at Jesus in the Gospels. Up to this point almost all the references have been to the Hebrew Scriptures. Now Pope Francis emphasises Jesus’ references to the Father and for the Father’s care of all creatures, his use in many of the parables to examples from nature, as well as his own enjoyment of the fruits of creation,

His appearance was not that of an ascetic apart from the world, nor of an enemy to the pleasant things of life... He was far removed from philosophies which despised the body, matter and the things of the world. Such unhealthy dualisms, nonetheless, left a mark on certain Christian thinkers in the course of history and disfigured the Gospel. Jesus worked with his hands, in daily contact with the matter created by God, to which he gave form by his craftsmanship (as a carpenter). (§98)

Finally, the Pope refers to the *Logos* theme that St John uses in the Prologue to his Gospel who is instrumental from the beginning in creation, and St Paul’s meditation on the cosmos in his writings. In the writings of Paul and John creation and the life, death and resurrection to new life of Jesus Christ are all intertwined. So it is that the Pope can conclude from this survey,

From the beginning of the world, but particularly through the incarnation, the mystery of Christ is at work in a hidden manner in the natural world as a whole, without thereby impinging on its autonomy. (§99)

In that single sentence Christian thinking is brought alongside that of other approaches to questions of how we humans address the challenges put before us by the state of the world around.

Conclusion

At this point we are roughly one third of the way through the full text of the encyclical. Pope Francis has laid the foundations for his reflections on ecology and how the problems we all face may be addressed. Once he has laid them there are very few (3 in total) references to the Scriptures in the rest of the text, until towards the end when, once again, he addresses the specific contributions Christians can make to the challenges facing all humankind. What the Pope exemplifies in this encyclical is Catholic Social Teaching at its best and most engaging: engaging with as many people from as many different backgrounds, of faith and none, to try to promote an effective dialogue with a view to finding solutions to those challenges.

In 2016, the year after *Laudato Si* was published, Pope Francis published his Apostolic Letter on Marriage and Family Life, *Amoris Laetitia*. I was asked to give a talk to clergy firstly in my own diocese (Hexham and Newcastle) and then for the Middlesbrough Diocese. On the day for the Middlesbrough clergy the “master of ceremonies” was Deacon Vincent Purcell – a deacon of my own diocese but working at that time as Adult Education Advisor for Middlesbrough. In the exchanges that followed my talk he came up with an image that struck me as very helpful, and which has stayed with me ever since. Although said specifically in connection with *Amoris Laetitia* the image holds true of *Laudato Si*, and indeed all church documents. He said that what we are given is not a SatNav telling us at every twist and turn of our journey precisely when and where to turn: “at the next roundabout take the third turn off... In three hundred metres take the next turn right...” and so on.

What we have is much more akin to an old-fashioned map and compass with which we navigate our way forward by regular sightings of features on the horizon and using these tools to determine the best way ahead. The Scriptures and the teaching of the Church as expressed in encyclicals like *Laudato Si* provide us with a map and a compass. With each new step forward a new vista of the horizon is offered. Our task is to note the features on the horizon and use our map and compass to determine our current path. Today on that horizon looms the Covid-19 pandemic. Our faith is challenged by what we witness in reaction to what is happening. We are seeing some extraordinary acts of love – evidence of God’s work – all around us. There are huge opportunities for new approaches to our care of creation as outlined by Pope Francis, but there are also obstacles in the way: myopic, selfish, and incompetent leadership in many countries; opportunists looking to make (literally) a killing on the back of what is happening; calls for overruling previous steps on limiting carbon emissions, and so on. A commitment to the common good of all, the promotion of justice for all humankind, and of a new relationship with creation, all based on open and honest dialogue – and all set out by Pope Francis in this encyclical – will offer a way forward and an offer of hope in these dark times.

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18th May 2020