



Markkula Center
for Applied Ethics

Excerpts from *Laudato Si* for Discussion in Class

Prepared by David E. DeCosse and Brian Patrick Green

Summary

The encyclical letter *Laudato Si* ("Praised Be") by Pope Francis is the most comprehensive Vatican document to date on environmentalism, ethics, and Christian faith. The document is intended for all people, not Catholics or Christians alone. Its arguments are founded on theological convictions. But these convictions are then put into a general philosophical language more accessible to the intended global Catholic and non-Catholic readership. *Laudato Si* covers vast intellectual territory and a multitude of themes in its 40,000 words. Many different categories of moral reasoning are deployed: human rights, natural law, character, justice, and consequences. Throughout the document, the twin pillars of ethical analysis remain, as in recent documents of Catholic social teaching, the concepts of human dignity and the common good. But in *Laudato Si* one of the striking ethical features is its focus on the intrinsic value and rights of non-human creatures and ecosystems. Another striking feature of the document's ethical content is how much it amplifies the notion of the common good: Everything human and non-human is connected, the document says repeatedly, and human moral failure in engagement with the natural world often occurs when this interconnectedness is forgotten or not seen or ignored. One kind of moral reasoning that comes in for special criticism in the encyclical is an arid utilitarianism associated with an economic and technological logic detached from broader moral concerns.

In these excerpts we will cover five main themes of particular ethical significance drawn from the encyclical:

1. The Relationship of Science, Religion, and Ethics
2. The Dangers of the Technocratic Paradigm
3. The Integral Ecology of Humankind and the Environment
4. The Call to Ecological Conversion
5. The Importance of Dialogue With Business

1. The Relationship of Science, Religion, and Ethics

Key Guiding Question

- How should science, religion, and ethics relate to each other? Should their relationship be antagonistic or can they work together?

Background

Science can - crucially - tell us what is experimentally and observationally true, but it cannot tell us the significance of that truth, or how we ought to respond to it or why. For example, science tells us that the Earth's climate is warming, and that humans are causing this warming through our production of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide. But science cannot tell us if this warming is good or bad. To know *that*, we need to morally evaluate the meaning of the scientific data, and religion, as a source of morals and ways of thinking about the world, can help. Religion also provides motivation to act on scientific data - if we understand that we are tasked by God to "till and keep" the garden that is the Earth, then we have very strong motivation indeed to preserve and sustainably utilize the Earth's resources.

Excerpts from Laudato Si (The numbers are used in the original document to identify specific paragraphs)

63. Given the complexity of the ecological crisis and its multiple causes, we need to realize that the solutions will not emerge from just one way of interpreting and transforming reality... If we are truly concerned to develop an ecology capable of remedying the damage we have done, no branch of the sciences and no form of wisdom can be left out, and that includes religion and the language particular 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.

200. Any technical solution which science claims to offer will be powerless to solve the serious problems of our world if humanity loses its compass, if we lose sight of the great motivations which make it possible for us to live in harmony, to make sacrifices and to treat others well. Believers themselves must constantly feel challenged to live in a way consonant with their faith and not to contradict it by their actions. They need to be encouraged to be ever open to God's grace and to draw constantly from their deepest convictions about love, justice and peace. If a mistaken understanding of our own principles has at times led us to justify

mistreating nature, to exercise tyranny over creation, to engage in war, injustice and acts of violence, we believers should acknowledge that by so doing we were not faithful to the treasures of wisdom which we have been called to protect and preserve. Cultural limitations in different eras often affected the perception of these ethical and spiritual treasures, yet by constantly returning to their sources, religions will be better equipped to respond to today's needs.

Additional readings, paragraphs 62-64, 102, 105, 110, 114, 130-132, 199-201.
(The full text of the Encyclical is available at [The Encyclical Laudato Si](#))

2. The Dangers of the Technocratic Paradigm

Key Guiding Question

- What is the "technocratic paradigm"? How does it influence our world?

Background

Pope Francis rails against the technocratic paradigm for its tendency to warp our perception of reality and thereby lead us towards making mistakes - both moral and technical - in our interactions with the world. The technocratic paradigm tends to see all of reality as a problem awaiting an application of scientific and technological power, thus deluding us into thinking we can become powerful enough and wise enough to apply our power to all things. The paradigm tends to see all of reality as raw material awaiting human use, rather than a living reality, intrinsically valuable in its own right and therefore worthy of our respect. The technocratic paradigm should not be confused with science and technology themselves, which the Pope encourages and is thankful for, but the paradigm is rather an abuse of science and technology and an application of them beyond their proper domains, raising them to being a totalizing worldview with no room for other forms of thought.

Excerpts from Laudato Si

The Technocratic Paradigm I

106. The basic problem goes even deeper: it is the way that humanity has taken up technology and its development *according to an undifferentiated and one-dimensional paradigm*. This paradigm exalts the concept of a subject who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an

external object. This subject makes every effort to establish the scientific and experimental method, which in itself is already a technique of possession, mastery and transformation. It is as if the subject were to find itself in the presence of something formless, completely open to manipulation. Men and women have constantly intervened in nature, but for a long time this meant being in tune with and respecting the possibilities offered by the things themselves. It was a matter of receiving what nature itself allowed, as if from its own hand. Now, by contrast, we are the ones to lay our hands on things, attempting to extract everything possible from them while frequently ignoring or forgetting the reality in front of us. Human beings and material objects no longer extend a friendly hand to one another; the relationship has become confrontational...

107. It can be said that many problems of today's world stem from the tendency, at times unconscious, to make the method and aims of science and technology an epistemological paradigm which shapes the lives of individuals and the workings of society. The effects of imposing this model on reality as a whole, human and social, are seen in the deterioration of the environment, but this is just one sign of a reductionism which affects every aspect of human and social life. We have to accept that technological products are not neutral, for they create a framework which ends up conditioning lifestyles and shaping social possibilities along the lines dictated by the interests of certain powerful groups. Decisions which may seem purely instrumental are in reality decisions about the kind of society we want to build.

108. The idea of promoting a different cultural paradigm and employing technology as a mere instrument is nowadays inconceivable. The technological paradigm has become so dominant that it would be difficult to do without its resources and even more difficult to utilize them without being dominated by their internal logic. It has become countercultural to choose a lifestyle whose goals are even partly independent of technology, of its costs and its power to globalize and make us all the same. Technology tends to absorb everything into its ironclad logic, and those who are surrounded with technology "know full well that it moves forward in the final analysis neither for profit nor for the well-being of the human race", that "in the most radical sense of the term power is its motive – a lordship over all".^[87] As a result, "man seizes hold of the naked elements of both nature and human nature".^[88] Our capacity to make decisions, a more genuine freedom and the space for each one's alternative creativity are diminished.

The Technocratic Paradigm II

109. The technocratic paradigm also tends to dominate economic and political life. The economy accepts every advance in technology with a view to profit, without

concern for its potentially negative impact on human beings. Finance overwhelms the real economy. The lessons of the global financial crisis have not been assimilated, and we are learning all too slowly the lessons of environmental deterioration. Some circles maintain that current economics and technology will solve all environmental problems, and argue, in popular and non-technical terms, that the problems of global hunger and poverty will be resolved simply by market growth... They... [show] no interest in more balanced levels of production, a better distribution of wealth, concern for the environment and the rights of future generations. Their behaviour shows that for them maximizing profits is enough. Yet by itself the market cannot guarantee integral human development and social inclusion.[89] At the same time, we have "a sort of 'superdevelopment' of a wasteful and consumerist kind which forms an unacceptable contrast with the ongoing situations of dehumanizing deprivation",[90] while we are all too slow in developing economic institutions and social initiatives which can give the poor regular access to basic resources. We fail to see the deepest roots of our present failures, which have to do with the direction, goals, meaning and social implications of technological and economic growth. Additional readings, paragraphs 101-136.

3. The Integral Ecology of Humankind and the Environment

Key Guiding Questions

- Do ethics pertain only to the way that we ought to treat individuals?
- Or only to the way that we ought to treat human beings, both individually and in groups or institutions?
- Do we have duties of justice to the earth itself?

Background

Throughout the encyclical, Pope Francis emphasizes the interconnectedness of all things. Science demonstrates this. A theological doctrine of creation sees in such interconnectedness a sign of God's wisdom. Ethics also inhabits such an interconnected world and must be understood accordingly. The primary way that the encyclical does this is through its concept of integral ecology, which requires that human beings consider duties of justice in terms of three relationships: to God; to human beings (and especially the poor); and to the earth itself. But there are other ways the encyclical connects ethics and interconnectedness. For instance, it speaks of the intrinsic (if not absolute) value of non-human creatures and ecosystems. It also says that the "environment" properly understood never means

something standing apart but always implies a relationship between nature and society. And it notes that the poor are the ones who bear the greatest burdens from the degradation of nature. Thus the Pope proposes, as a counter to the technocratic paradigm, the paradigm of integral ecology. Integral ecology is a holistic perspective on reality which seeks not only to promote human flourishing, but also the flourishing of the natural world.

Excerpts from Laudato Si

Integral Ecology I

66. The creation accounts in the book of Genesis contain, in their own 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. The harmony between the Creator, humanity and creation as a whole was disrupted by our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations. This in turn distorted our mandate to "have dominion" over the earth (cf. Gen 1:28), to "till it and keep it" (Gen 2:15). As a result, the originally harmonious relationship between human beings and nature became conflictual (cf. Gen 3:17-19)...

69. Together with our obligation to use the earth's goods responsibly, we are called to recognize that other living beings have a value of their own in God's eyes: "by their mere existence they bless him and give him glory",^[41] and indeed, "the Lord rejoices in all his works" (Ps 104:31). By virtue of our unique dignity and our gift of intelligence, we are called to respect creation and its inherent laws, for "the Lord by wisdom founded the earth" (Prov 3:19). In our time, the Church does not simply state that other creatures are completely subordinated to the good of human beings, as if they have no worth in themselves and can be treated as we wish...

137. Since everything is closely interrelated, and today's problems call for a vision capable of taking into account every aspect of the global crisis, I suggest that we now consider some elements of an integral ecology, one which clearly respects its human and social dimensions...

138. Ecology studies the relationship between living organisms and the environment in which they develop. This necessarily entails reflection and debate about the conditions required for the life and survival of society, and the honesty needed to question certain models of development, production and consumption. It cannot be emphasized enough how everything is interconnected....It follows that

the fragmentation of knowledge and the isolation of bits of information can actually become a form of ignorance, unless they are integrated into a broader vision of reality.

139. When we speak of the “environment”, what we really mean is a relationship existing between nature and the society which lives in it. Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it... It is essential to seek comprehensive solutions which consider the interactions within natural systems themselves and with social systems. We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature.

Additional readings, paragraphs 62-100 and 137-162

Integral Ecology II

156. An integral ecology is inseparable from the notion of the common good, a central and unifying principle of social ethics. The common good is “the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfilment”...

159. The notion of the common good also extends to future generations. The global economic crises have made painfully obvious the detrimental effects of disregarding our common destiny, which cannot exclude those who come after us. We can no longer speak of sustainable development apart from intergenerational solidarity. Once we start to think about the kind of world we are leaving to future generations, we look at things differently; we realize that the world is a gift which we have freely received and must share with others. Since the world has been given to us, we can no longer view reality in a purely utilitarian way, in which efficiency and productivity are entirely geared to our individual benefit. Intergenerational solidarity is not optional, but rather a basic question of justice, since the world we have received also belongs to those who will follow us. The Portuguese bishops have called upon us to acknowledge this obligation of justice: “The environment is part of a logic of receptivity. It is on loan to each generation, which must then hand it on to the next”.^[124] An integral ecology is marked by this broader vision.

4. The Call to Ecological Conversion

Key Guiding Questions

- What are the cardinal or essential virtues called for in the encyclical in response to this time of climate change?
- Do we consider the protection of the natural world to be an essential aspect of what it means to be a person of good character?
- Of what it means to be a “man or woman for others,” as the Jesuit tradition of education says?

Background

There is no doubt that the encyclical understands that the world is at a moment of profound crisis brought on by the challenge of climate change. Action now is needed from successful international climate change negotiations to bold policy changes at every level of government. But the pope’s idea of action is much broader than matters of law or policy alone. Action must get at the roots: at matters of motive (why care about climate change and nature at all?) and at a capacity to respond to the present challenge. Thus he is calling for new processes of education that would foster changes in the most fundamental expectations we have about the meaning of good character. Too often, he says, ecological education fails to foster a sense of wonder; the possibility of hope; and a transformation of feeling and habit so that we not only, for instance, “feel the desertification of soil almost as a physical ailment” but also are disposed to heal this wound of the earth (89).

Excerpts from Laudato Si

211. Yet this education, aimed at creating an “ecological citizenship”, is at times limited to providing information, and fails to instil good habits. The existence of laws and regulations is insufficient in the long run to curb bad conduct, even when effective means of enforcement are present. If the laws are to bring about significant, long-lasting effects, the majority of the members of society must be adequately motivated to accept them, and personally transformed to respond. Only by cultivating sound virtues will people be able to make a selfless ecological commitment. A person who could afford to spend and consume more but regularly uses less heating and wears warmer clothes, shows the kind of convictions and attitudes which help to protect the environment. 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. Education in environmental responsibility can encourage ways of acting which directly and significantly affect the world around

us, such as avoiding the use of plastic and paper, reducing water consumption, separating refuse, cooking only what can reasonably be consumed, showing care for other living beings, using public transport or car-pooling, planting trees, turning off unnecessary lights, or any number of other practices. All of these reflect a generous and worthy creativity which brings out the best in human beings. Reusing something instead of immediately discarding it, when done for the right reasons, can be an act of love which expresses our own dignity....We must not think that these efforts are not going to change the world....

215. In this regard, "the relationship between a good aesthetic education and the maintenance of a healthy environment cannot be overlooked".[150] By learning to see and appreciate beauty, we learn to reject self-interested pragmatism. If someone has not learned to stop and admire something beautiful, we should not be surprised if he or she treats everything as an object to be used and abused without scruple. If we want to bring about deep change, we need to realize that certain mindsets really do influence our behaviour. Our efforts at education will be inadequate and ineffectual unless we strive to promote a new way of thinking about human beings, life, society and our relationship with nature. Otherwise, the paradigm of consumerism will continue to advance, with the help of the media and the highly effective workings of the market.

217....Living our vocation to be protectors of God's handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience.

Additional readings, paragraphs 1-12 and 202-246

5. The Importance of Dialogue With Business

Key Guiding Questions

- How should business and ecological ethics be in dialogue with one another?
- Is profit maximization necessarily incompatible with the full range of ecological values that ought to inform business conduct?

Background

The encyclical is clear: "We need a conversation which includes everyone" (14) and business must be one of the key participants in this urgently needed global dialogue about climate change. But the document lays down a special challenge for business. On the one hand, Pope Francis is unequivocal: business in itself is a "noble vocation, directed to producing wealth and improving our world" (129). On the

other hand, what makes business noble -- what gives it its true sense of value -- is the pairing of the skill to run a business with the commitment to the common good. Moreover, the document insists, no business today can consider itself isolated from the global challenge of climate change. Attempts to respond to this challenge with market-based solutions alone will not suffice. Nor will appeals alone to an economic logic that either never or just occasionally integrates the values of ecological ethics.

Excerpts from Laudato Si

Business and the Common Good I

54. It is remarkable how weak international political responses have been. The failure of global summits on the environment make it plain that our politics are subject to technology and finance. There are too many special interests, and economic interests easily end up trumping the common good and manipulating information so that their own plans will not be affected. The Aparecida Document urges that "the interests of economic groups which irrationally demolish sources of life should not prevail in dealing with natural resources".[32] The alliance between the economy and technology ends up sidelining anything unrelated to its immediate interests. Consequently the most one can expect is superficial rhetoric, sporadic acts of philanthropy and perfunctory expressions of concern for the environment, whereas any genuine attempt by groups within society to introduce change is viewed as a nuisance based on romantic illusions or an obstacle to be circumvented.

129. ...Business is a noble vocation, directed to producing wealth and improving our world. It can be a fruitful source of prosperity for the areas in which it operates, especially if it sees the creation of jobs as an essential part of its service to the common good.

156. An integral ecology is inseparable from the notion of the common good, a central and unifying principle of social ethics. The common good is "the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfilment".

Business and the Common Good II

195. The principle of the maximization of profits, frequently isolated from other considerations, reflects a misunderstanding of the very concept of the economy. As long as production is increased, little concern is given to whether it is at the cost of future resources or the health of the environment; as long as the clearing of a

forest increases production, no one calculates the losses entailed in the desertification of the land, the harm done to biodiversity or the increased pollution. In a word, businesses profit by calculating and paying only a fraction of the costs involved. Yet only when “the economic and social costs of using up shared environmental resources are recognized with transparency and fully borne by those who incur them, not by other peoples or future generations”, [138] can those actions be considered ethical. An instrumental way of reasoning, which provides a purely static analysis of realities in the service of present needs, is at work whether resources are allocated by the market or by state central planning.

Additional readings, see paragraphs 163-201.

Useful Links

[The Encyclical *Laudato Si*](#)

[Vatican Press Guide to *Laudato Si*](#)

[United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Guide to *Laudato Si*](#)

[Fr. Thomas Reese’s Readers’ Guide to *Laudato Si* \(also in pdf\)](#)