

Laudato Si – environmental theology and social justice

At the Environmental Footprint Group meeting on 7 December, Steve McCarthy reviewed the Pope's recent encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si*, which he described as potentially 'one of the most influential documents of our time'. This text is about much more than the environment, which was apparent from Steve's first slide, a Banksy cartoon illustrating the inequality between rich and poor countries (see below). Indeed, someone from a rich, developed country flying to and from, say India, puts as much carbon dioxide into the atmosphere as an average Indian emits in a whole year. A striking passage in the encyclical expresses indignation that some people are 'mired in desperate and degrading poverty' at the same time as others have no idea what to do with all their possessions and pollute the planet with their waste.

The encyclical is the latest in a long series of communications from popes on social issues, and this one, written in a simple, readable style, is addressed to the whole world and not just to Catholics. Naturally it refers frequently to biblical passages, and it is clear that these are fundamental to the document and not just 'sprinkled on' after it was written. Pope Francis takes a nuanced view of Genesis 1:28, in which God instructs human beings to 'have dominion ...over every living thing ...' according to the Authorised Version in English. He interprets this as implying 'a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature'. Plants and animals have a value in themselves and not in relation to how useful they can be to humans. People can take what they need from the bounty of the earth, but they also have a duty to protect it and keep it in good shape to pass on to future generations. He also distinguishes between the idea of nature – natural phenomena that can be studied – and that of creation, which implies a relationship between God and the world he has created.

The encyclical covers not just climate change, but also biodiversity, water resources and the preservation of cultures, and makes clear that all of these are under threat. It leaves the issue of technical solutions open – the Pope does not advocate any particular mitigation measures, leaving that for people to work out for themselves. For him the key to preserving the planet is for people – especially those in the rich, developed countries – to stop believing in the myth of unlimited material progress and to live more simply. 'The mere amassing of things and pleasures is not enough to give meaning and joy to the human heart'. Not only has people's attachment to things damaged the environment, but it has also brought about an ethical and cultural decline. Those who are ruled by the false gods of self-interest and the market lack the freedom to live life to the full. Yet Pope Francis also expresses hope. People are capable of doing good. Even small gestures can play a part in 'strategies to halt environmental degradation and to encourage a “culture of care” that permeates all of society'.

Steve picked out two particular points, albeit minor in the whole context of the encyclical, for discussion: the role of work, and the 'myth' of material progress. The Pope considers work an essential component of human dignity, and worries that too much reliance on technology is putting people out of work. He seems to hanker after a pre-industrial economy of generally small-scale enterprise. But Steve argued that, although small-scale agriculture may be better for the environment than industrial farming, in general humankind has 'progressed' through people working co-operatively together in one way or another. Historically, the kind of jobs that technology has rendered obsolete have generally involved drudgery and not enhanced human dignity. The problem with his analysis is that Pope Francis makes no distinction between paid and unpaid work. Throughout most of history, only a minority of people have engaged in paid work. Most of us in the group thought it important that work should contribute to the common good and enhance the dignity of the person doing it, which both paid and unpaid work could do. What is not functioning well at present is the distribution of the products of the economy; inequality continues to increase; and people without paid work are largely excluded. As economic growth slows down, as it surely

must, this problem will get worse. The group thought that the world is not yet ready for a direct transfer from rich to poor, though the idea of a universal basic income is making some progress and Finland is planning to introduce one.

This discussion led naturally into the question 'Do Christians believe in progress?' We pointed out that not all progress is bad, though one thing we noted that has greatly changed since pre-industrial times is that we are now aware that the material world and its resources are limited. In his comments on the encyclical, former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams has said that we should start to think about the size of population the world can sustain – a topic which Pope Francis scarcely mentions. We also need progress on changing people's values and social attitudes so that inequality – which has greatly increased since the 1960s – is seen as unacceptable. We wondered whether politicians might be more successful than church leaders in persuading people to change their values, but since politicians tend to reflect social attitudes rather than guide them, we felt this was unlikely.

The group was fairly hopeful that a change of values could be brought about, citing recent changes in the attitude to smoking, or to homosexuality in many countries. Some thought that values were more likely to shift after a large shock such as a massive natural disaster. But we should not underestimate the role of small groups, such as ours, getting together to discuss these questions. This encyclical has been widely discussed in and beyond the Catholic Church and apparently has already shifted opinions in Catholic circles in the USA, which is one sign of hope.

Philippa Seymour

Further reading - Links to three articles on *Laudato Si*:

- Rowan Williams' excellent article: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/embracing-our-limits>
- A review by Bill McKibben: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/08/13/pope-and-planet/>
- Steve McCarthy's own contribution written for a secular readership: <http://www.dantemag.com/2015/09/how-the-virtue-of-greed-is-destroying-our-common-home/>



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