Laudato Si' arrives

Michael Sean Winters | Jun. 18, 2015 Distinctly Catholic
Francis: The Environment Encyclical

Laudato Si' indeed! On one of the most important issues of the day, our Holy Father has blessed the Church with a document that is accessible to virtually anyone, rich in the collected wisdom of the Catholic faith, attuned to the signs of the times, forceful in its call to urgent action on behalf of our sister, Mother Earth. Here are five things that jump out at me based on a first reading of the text.

1. The theology is very traditional.

As predicted, the issue may be new, but the theology is very traditional. The quotes from Saint Pope John Paul II remind us that there was more to John Paul than what his neo-conservative “interpreters” in the U.S. chose to highlight. Pope Francis quotes from his encyclical Centesimus Annus, writing, “Every effort to protect and improve our world entails profound changes in ‘lifestyles, models of production and consumption, and the established structures of power which today govern societies.’” Likewise he quotes Pope Benedict XVI, who so far from the caricature of a reactionary, called for “eliminating the structural causes of the dysfunctions of the world economy and correcting models of growth which have proved incapable of ensuring respect for the environment.”

Interestingly, having cited his predecessors, Pope Francis gives even more attention to the writings of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, who wrote, “For human beings… to destroy the biological diversity of God’s creation; for human beings to degrade the integrity of the earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the earth of its natural forests or destroying its wetlands; for human beings to contaminate the earth’s waters, its land, its air, and its life – these are sins.” And, he cites the Patriarch on the call “to accept the world as a sacrament of communion, as a way of sharing with God and our neighbours on a global scale. It is our humble conviction that the divine and the human meet in the slightest detail in the seamless garment of God's creation, in the last speck of dust of our planet.” I do not recall any previous papal document devoting such attention to a Christian leader who is not a Roman Catholic in an official document such as this. I think it is important to remember on all issues that Francis is always thinking in terms of ecumenical relations, that his commitment to restoring full communion within the Body of Christ is at the top of his list of commitments. Noteworthy, too, are the frequent quotes from episcopal conferences.

2. The spirituality of St. Francis has touched Pope Francis deeply.
Francis’ reflections on his namesake, St. Francis of Assisi, almost bring one to tears:

*He shows us just how inseparable is the bond between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace.*

*Francis helps us to see that an integral ecology calls for openness to categories which transcend the language of mathematics and biology, and take us to the heart of what it is to be human. Just as happens when we fall in love with someone, whenever he would gaze at the sun, the moon or the smallest of animals, he burst into song, drawing all other creatures into his praise. He communed with all creation, even preaching to the flowers, inviting them “to praise the Lord, just as if they were endowed with reason”. His response to the world around him was so much more than intellectual appreciation or economic calculus, for to him each and every creature was a sister united to him by bonds of affection. That is why he felt called to care for all that exists. His disciple Saint Bonaventure tells us that, “from a reflection on the primary source of all things, filled with even more abundant piety, he would call creatures, no matter how small, by the name of ‘brother’ or ‘sister.’”*

What follows in this encyclical, all of it, the commentary on science, the analysis of socio-economic structures, the call for political action, all flow from these spiritual insights into the relationship between the human person as creature, Creation and the Creator. These insights lead the Holy Father to make his urgent call for protection of the environment: “The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change….Regrettably, many efforts to seek concrete solutions to the environmental crisis have proved ineffective, not only because of powerful opposition but also because of a more general lack of interest. Obstructionist attitudes, even on the part of believers, can range from denial of the problem to indifference, nonchalant resignation or blind confidence in technical solutions. We require a new and universal solidarity.”

3. For Pope Francis, there is no controversy about the science.

The heart of the Holy Father’s handling of the issue that has caused such controversy, at least in the US, the issue of how he would deal with science, is found in Paragraph 23 and it is remarkably straightforward:

*A very solid scientific consensus indicates that we are presently witnessing a disturbing warming of the climatic system. In recent decades this warming has been accompanied by a constant rise in the sea level and, it would appear, by an increase of extreme weather events, even if a scientifically determinable cause cannot be assigned to each particular phenomenon. Humanity is called to recognize the need for changes of lifestyle, production and consumption, in order to combat this warming or at least the human causes which produce or aggravate it….The problem is aggravated by a model of development based on the intensive use of fossil fuels, which is at the heart of the worldwide energy system. Another determining factor has been an increase in changed uses of the soil, principally deforestation for agricultural purposes.*

We cannot overstate the degree to which these sentences are unremarkable outside the US. It is only here, where think tanks and pseudo-think tanks, and some political candidates, are so dependent on extraction industries, they are loathe to accept what is, in fact, virtually common knowledge. Yes, science is never really “settled” and we will know more about our
environment in ten years than we know now. But now, right now, we know enough to recognize there is a problem and that we are contributing to that problem.

Last night, I set my alarm so that I could rise with the sun. Of course, science tells us that the sun does not really rise. The earth turns on its axis and so we turn towards the sun. Maybe, someday, this process by which the earth turns will be understood more deeply than it is today. But, I know enough, and know it surely enough, I will continue to set my alarm based on when the newspaper tells me the sun will rise. Another example: If nothing is ever "settled" in science, should we still put warnings on cigarettes, that they cause cancer?

Unsurprisingly, the Holy Father calls special attention to the consequences of global climate change on the poor, writing that "the poor live in areas particularly affected by phenomena related to warming, and their means of subsistence are largely dependent on natural reserves and ecosystemic services such as agriculture, fishing and forestry. They have no other financial activities or resources which can enable them to adapt to climate change or to face natural disasters, and their access to social services and protection is very limited.” As Catholics, the poor always have a moral claim upon us. And, if we are to be Catholics first, we must be shareholders second, or fifth, and if we are shareholders in a US fossil fuel company, maybe we should ask them why they have not, like their energy counterparts in Europe, led the way in developing renewable energy sources? Or, are we to wait until every last profitable drop of oil and nugget of coal is to be taken from the earth before these large corporations become responsible? The Holy Father goes on to consider other environmental issues, such as water use and bio-diversity, similarly relying on the scientific consensus and urging us to moral vigilance.

4. *Laudato Si*’ is from the same pen, red or gold I do not know, that wrote Evangelii Gaudium.

The section on Global Inequality develops some of the themes Pope Francis articulated in *Evangelii gaudium*, and applies those themes specifically to the issue of environmental degradation. Our laissez-faire friends will be gnashing their teeth, of course, over these words of his: 

*In the meantime, economic powers continue to justify the current global system, where priority tends to be given to speculation and the pursuit of financial gain, which fail to take the context into account, let alone the effects on human dignity and the natural environment. Here we see how environmental deterioration and human and ethical degradation are closely linked. Many people will deny doing anything wrong because distractions constantly dull our consciousness of just how limited and finite our world really is. As a result, “whatever is fragile, like the environment, is defenceless before the interests of a deified market, which become the only rule”.*

He goes on to an extensive analysis of the modern, technological mindset and its limits. On Monday, I suggested that I wished Benedict XVI had written an encyclical on this issue because we would have certainly gotten some of von Balthasar’s trenchant critique of the Cartesian cogito and its progeny. Pope Francis delivers his critique via the theology of Guardini, who, of course, had a profound effect on von Balthasar and Benedict, and was the intended subject of Pope Francis’s never completed doctoral dissertation. I will leave it to the theological pro’s to explain how Guardini differs from Balthasar on this point, but the essential critique is the same: The modern, technological mindset tends to see human persons
as commodities, and replaceable commodities at that, it presents a truncated vision that pushes out the transcendent and, just so, makes authentic relationships impossible, and, in the context of the environment, it prevents us from seeing Creation as a gift. Creation is, like everything else, a tool. The next time a free marketer says that capitalism is merely a tool, to be used well or badly, as Arthur Brooks did at the Poverty Summit conversation with President Obama and Robert Putnam hosted by John Carr’s Initiative on Catholic Social Thought in Public Life, ask them about this passage. You see, the choice of tool precludes certain options, in this case, the humanization of the economy and the protection of the environment. The Holy Father is calling us to a deep, deep examination of the premises so many of us accept as a given, especially our economic premises, and we fail to see how the exclude the poor and damage the environment and so not contain, within themselves, the capacity for change. We must change the “economic laws” by which we organize our societies.

Later in the text, Francis picks up this theme, writing:

*Politics must not be subject to the economy, nor should the economy be subject to the dictates of an efficiency-driven paradigm of technocracy. Today, in view of the common good, there is urgent need for politics and economics to enter into a frank dialogue in the service of life, especially human life. Saving banks at any cost, making the public pay the price, foregoing a firm commitment to reviewing and reforming the entire system, only reaffirms the absolute power of a financial system, a power which has no future and will only give rise to new crises after a slow, costly and only apparent recovery. The financial crisis of 2007-08 provided an opportunity to develop a new economy, more attentive to ethical principles, and new ways of regulating speculative financial practices and virtual wealth. But the response to the crisis did not include rethinking the outdated criteria which continue to rule the world.*

My late uncle used to say, “People vote their pocketbooks.” I do not think he was entirely right, but he was not entirely wrong. It has always seemed strange that we credit or punish a politician based on the state of an economy over which that politician may have some influence, but only amidst thousands of other influences. Francis’ ringing call for attention to the common good is an ethical call. It questions not just the current pro-market ideology of both parties in the US, but some of the basic assumptions of Madison and Hamilton in the Federalist Papers, where the competition among self-interested individuals and groups is seen as the guarantor of liberty. Society is about more than liberty, Francis is telling us, better to say, liberty is about more than a lack of government interference. The Holy Father calls us to the freedom of the children of God, not to the negative freedoms ordained by our Founding Fathers.

Francis follows his critique of the modern technological mindset with a beautiful meditation on human work. He is again building on the writings of his predecessors, but his style is so accessible and so obviously rooted in experience. Reading that section, you know that this pope really has spent time with people who work hard to earn their daily bread, that he has the smell of the sheep. He writes, “Helping the poor financially must always be a provisional solution in the face of pressing needs. The broader objective should always be to allow them a dignified life through work. Yet the orientation of the economy has favoured a kind of technological progress in which the costs of production are reduced by laying off workers and replacing them with machines. This is yet another way in which we can end up working against ourselves.” He knows that even a humble worker finds dignity in his labor. I have watched wealthy or influential people treat waiters or housekeepers like dirt. We all watched
the wonderful movie “The Help.” The pope’s respect for working people shines through as the exact opposite of this dismissive attitude some take to those who do jobs many would find demeaning.

5. Integral Ecology and the call to a new lifestyle.

Any fears that Pope Francis is nothing but a member of the Green Movement in a cassock are disproved by his treatment of integral ecology. He is not going to ignore the need to protect baby humans because he wants to protect baby seals. His ethics extend not just to markets and political ideologies, but to movements and other manifestations of ideological determination. He counters ideology with the human person, made in the image and likeness of God, in right relationship with other persons and with the whole of Creation. There is not a sentence of this document which is not rooted in the spiritual, magisterial and scriptural texts that are found throughout.

Our consumer lifestyles have made us slaves. Our wants become needs. When I was growing up, the magazine *Architectural Digest* was a great magazine, with articles about school design and important new airports. Now, it is interior design porn. People get new cars when the old ones work perfectly well. Happiness, it is claimed, is found when one purchases this new product, or that new gizmo. The transcendent is shunted aside, or never acknowledged in the first place. Our advertisers throw a steady stream of enticements our way, always highlighting what is “new” and then we are surprised when people are incapable of long-term commitments to one another. People advertise in the *Harvard Crimson* for sperm donors with the correct, desirable attributes.

Pope Francis calls us back to our Christian sense of what is important, not just in the next life, but in this life. He has done this throughout his pontificate, indeed, the most convincing explanation of his popularity is also the most unsurprising: This man is obviously a follower of Jesus. He lives the beatitudes in simple gestures, calling attention to the poor and the disabled, and not to himself, whenever he makes a public appearance, presiding at Mass with all the self-assertion and fuss of an altar cloth, aware that he is a mere instrument in the Lord’s hand when Christ’s own Body and Blood come down upon the altar, verbally throwing the money changers out of the temple. Pope Francis writes like he lives. His call for a conversion of lifestyles is not new; previous popes have done the same. But, it rings true with him because his language itself is so unpretentious, so accessible, and the language coheres with the image we have of him, reaching down from the popemobile to caress a man who is deformed, washing the feet of a prisoner, calling on those with power to remember that the first will be last in the Kingdom of God.

Let’s be honest. The calls of previous popes for a conversion of lifestyles went unheeded if not unheard. Will it be different this time? I do not know. I fear that things must get worse in our culture before we learn again to acknowledge our God with humility, just as the human body, towards the end of its time on earth, breaks down, reminding us of our dependence upon our Creator. I may be doubtful, but the pope is hopeful. “Yet all is not lost. Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new start, despite their mental and social conditioning,” he writes.

When the issue is the environment, it is not only our lives or our souls that are at stake. It is the planet. It is future generations. The evidence of the danger is all around and the cure will
require more than a successful round of agreements at Paris this autumn, although we need
them too. Pope Francis does not cite Abraham Kuyper in his text, but last night, reading
James Bratt’s biography, I came across Kuyper’s most famous line: “There is not a square
inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over
all, does not cry, Mine!” That sense of God’s presence permeates the text of *Laudato Si’*, and
the Holy Father extends the cry to the whole domain of Creation. He wants us to look at
Creation and see the handiwork of the Creator, at all times and in all our decisions. He is
brutally frank about the entrenched ways of thought and powerful interests that hope we will
do nothing of the sort. But, I am betting Pope Francis can and will change the conversation.
At a time when the leadership of the world seems so unequal to the challenges, there is a
giant in our midst, who took the name Francis. Some will be upset by this encyclical. No one
should be surprised.