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# Ethics and Pope Francis's Encyclical Letter Laudato Si: A Teaching Module

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Markkula Center  
for Applied Ethics

# Ethics and Pope Francis's Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si*

## A Teaching Module

by David E. DeCosse and Brian Patrick Green

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This open-source teaching module consists of:

1. This Teaching Note for the instructor provides background on the Encyclical and specific discussion questions which the instructor can use to guide discussion in class. After each discussion question, this note identifies key points students or the instructor should make during the discussion. The teaching note concludes with "A Summary the Instructor May Use to Conclude Discussion."
2. "Excerpts from *Laudato Si* for Discussion in Class," is a separate document to be read by students *before class*. It can be reproduced and handed out, or sent electronically to students. It consists of a short description of five key themes in the Encyclical, the important question or questions raised by that theme, and selected paragraphs from the Encyclical addressing that theme. If read thoughtfully in advance, it should provide adequate preparation for the students to participate in the discussion outlined in this teaching note.

This teaching module is designed to be used in a single 50 to 60 minute class period, or a shorter period over several days. It can be used in several different types of courses, including a business ethics course, an environmental studies course, a religious studies course, among others. The type of course will determine which discussion questions and discussion points the instructor wishes to emphasize. The authors were particularly focused on providing a way to use the Encyclical in a business ethics class.

This module is designed to permit the students to discuss the encyclical by Pope Francis and its major themes, without having to read the entire encyclical. A link is provided in the "Excerpts" document to the full text of the Encyclical on the Vatican website. For several of the themes, additional paragraphs from the Encyclical are recommended which further develop the theme.

The authors ask that when you use this module, please send an email to the authors telling: 1) how you used the module, 2) how the students responded to the reading assignment and to the discussion, and 3) what changes you would recommend in this module and future similar modules. Please email [ddecosse@scu.edu](mailto:ddecosse@scu.edu) and [bpgreen@scu.edu](mailto:bpgreen@scu.edu).

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## **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.

## **The Five Themes**

In this teaching module 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

These themes will be supported by excerpts from the text to be read either during or before class. This module supplies questions for discussion which are based on the text, discussion points to make during question discussion, and a summary at the end to tie the entire module together.

In using this modules the teacher can decide to cover all of these themes or select particular themes and not others. Each theme can stand independently of the others. For each theme below we will include:

- A key guiding question or questions for the entire theme
- A brief background on the theme.
- Excerpts from key relevant paragraphs of the encyclical (each paragraph provided will include at its beginning its paragraph number in the encyclical) and further readings from the encyclical to potentially assign to the students
- Classroom discussion questions with teacher notes

### **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 the Text*

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.

See additional readings, paragraphs 62-64, 102, 105, 110, 114, 130-132, 199-201.

### *Discussion Questions to be Raised in Class by Instructor*

*What is the Pope's view of science?*

- The Pope is overall very positive towards science, while recognizing that it has a limited domain; science cannot answer all questions.

- Throughout the document the Pope asks for more research because we need to know more (in order to best know what to do) and science can gather that data for us. This is not to delay action until after the data are in, but rather to continually update ourselves the best course of action. This research is not only for exploring and solving environmental problems, but also social ones.
- The Pope accepts the reality of climate change, saying "A very solid scientific consensus indicates that we are presently witnessing a disturbing warming of the climatic system" (23, see also 20-26).
- To reduce the dangers of climate change, Pope Francis calls for a major change in the world energy system, saying "There is an urgent need to develop policies so that... the emission of carbon dioxide and other highly polluting gases can be drastically reduced, for example, substituting for fossil fuels and developing sources of renewable energy" (26).
- The Pope notes that some blame population for causing ecological and social problems, but he instead concentrates on the problem of consumption, stating "To blame population growth instead of extreme and selective consumerism on the part of some, is one way of refusing to face the issues. It is an attempt to legitimize the present model of distribution, where a minority believes that it has the right to consume in a way which can never be universalized, since the planet could not even contain the waste products of such consumption" (50). The average person in the developed world uses tens of times more resources than average person in the world's poorer nations.

*What is the proper relationship of science, religion, and ethics?*

- Science helps us to know what is empirically, observationally true. Religion helps us to know what is important in life, what our purposes and goals should be - it provides us with a view of human flourishing. Ethics helps us to know what we should do in order to move from what is the case now (based on science), to what should be the case in the future (based on our goals).
- Science and religion are complementary perspectives. There is a "respect owed by faith to reason" (132), but there are also limitations on what science can reasonably know or say about reality: "It cannot be maintained that empirical science provides a complete explanation of life, the interplay of all creatures and the whole of reality. This would be to breach the limits imposed by its own methodology" (199). Science and religion work best together, not separately: "with their distinctive approaches to understanding reality, [science and religion] can enter into an intense dialogue fruitful for both" (62).
- These perspectives should not compete against each other, they best work together to form a unified whole, because, as the Pope notes numerous

times “everything is connected” (e.g., 91, 117, also 16, 70, 92, 120, 137, 138, 142, 240, etc.)

*What is the proper relationship of science, technology, and ethics?*

- Science gathers information, technology applies that information as products for use, and ethics directs (both by encouraging and limiting) science and technology towards the good of human flourishing. Ethics can suggest research projects (e.g., researching ecosystems, 42, 140) as well as limit certain research projects (e.g. those which destroy embryos, 136).
- The Pope asserts that “a technology severed from ethics will not easily be able to limit its own power” (136). Technology without knowledge of the meaning of good ultimately cannot give us human development and flourishing. Instead, technology devoid of ethics and a clear sense of purpose can only devolve into the “technocratic paradigm” of objectification and control.

## **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 the Text*

### *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".<sup>[87]</sup> 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.

### Discussion Questions to be Raised in Class by Instructor

*What is the "technocratic paradigm"? Why is it dangerous or bad?*

- The technocratic paradigm is the tendency to reduce everything to a technological problem of control, to solve via science and technology, thus empowering a few elite humans and reducing nature and society to a formless mass awaiting manipulation by the elite.
- The technocratic paradigm is dangerous or bad because it encourages thinking of nature and humans as purely instrumental goods awaiting other (more powerful) humans to bend them to their will. It disrespects the intrinsic dignity of nature and humanity, and in so doing not only risks damaging them, but actually encourages exploitation.

*What is the Pope's view of technology? What is the purpose of technology?*

- Technology can do very good things, and we can all be thankful for the fruits of the labors of science and technology, and should encourage them further.
- However, technology also makes humans very powerful and thereby amplifies our abilities, both for good and for ill. When we transform technology into the technocratic paradigm we set ourselves up for failure, because ultimately we cannot control nature; nature is more powerful than we are, we are from it and part of it, and can only work cooperatively with it, not dominate it.
- Technology ultimately is meant to serve humankind in a way that both respects humanity and respects nature. Technology should solve problems in ways that aid everyone's human development (not just the elite) and generate sustainable utilization of natural resources.

### *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.

See additional readings, paragraphs 101-136.

### *Discussion Questions to be Raised in Class by Instructor*

*How does the technocratic paradigm express itself economically?*

- The technocratic paradigm expresses itself economically as wasteful consumerism among the rich and economic exclusion among the poor. Among the rich, economic interests are best served by simply catering to their every wasteful whim, thus maximizing profits and squandering resources as quickly as possible. Among the poor, who have few or no economic resources, goods are simply not supplied at all because there is no profit to be made - they are thereby excluded from economic activity.
- Economically, the technocratic paradigm also tends to concentrate power among those who control financial and political resources. Each further development of the economy under a technocratic paradigm generates new products and technological marvels, but only supplies them to the wealthy, while enriching the even wealthier elites who control the financial and political resources in the first place. The technological paradigm thus encourages social stratification and inequality.

### **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 the Text*

### *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.

See additional readings, paragraphs 62-100 and 137-162

### *Discussion Questions to be Raised in Class by Instructor*

*What is "integral ecology"? Why is it important?*

- Terminology is very important and it is significant that throughout the document the pope strongly favors the word "ecology" over the word "environment." The former evokes more clearly the interconnectedness of all things.
- The word "integral" here refers more to the way that human beings are to regard an ethical approach to the world: Not in terms of unrelated spheres of life like "religion" in one corner, "politics" in another, and "nature" in still another -- with each sphere having pretty much nothing to do with another.

Instead, the encyclical is insisting that to live with integrity men and women ought to think in terms of a constant integration (hence the word “integral”) of our relationships to the divine, to others, and to nature.

- The pope emphasizes that the protection of the poor and of the earth are connected: The poor suffer most when the earth is abused; our indifference to the poor is reflected in our mistreatment of nature. “Solidarity” should be re-imagined to extend both to the poor and to the earth.

*How does integral ecology understand the relationship of humans and nature? What does it mean to have a “relationship with the earth”? What does it mean to have duties of justice to non-human creatures and to natural systems for their own sakes?*

- One criticism of religion in the past has been that it commanded worship of God but didn’t appear to care too much about the well-being of human beings. Now Pope Francis has insisted on an even broader way to understand such things: That true religion requires justice toward God, others, and even the natural world.
- Of course, we commonly think of being in relationship with others. But we don’t tend to think of having a relationship with the earth. It might be helpful here to consider the history of our proximity to the earth in the places we’ve lived: What the land or sea has provided for us in terms of sustenance or pleasure or beauty or cruelty. It might also be helpful to consider here evocative religious classics like the “Canticle of the Sun” by Francis of Assisi (quoted in its entirety in the encyclical at paragraph 87) or works of fiction or poetry in which the human relationship with the earth is constantly imagined anew.
- It is important to note, too, that the encyclical both affirms the intrinsic value of non-human creatures and systems but not does accord absolute value to such things. The best way to consider the approach of the document on such matters is in light of its larger criticism of the technocratic paradigm. Because of that paradigm, we have come habitually to regard the things of the earth as for our use and domination. By contrast, we need to recover a much better sense of balance: respecting the intrinsic value of non-human things and only using them in a manner consistent with their dignity and for the sake of important values.

### *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”.<sup>[124]</sup> An integral ecology is marked by this broader vision.

### *Discussion Questions to be Raised in Class by Instructor*

*What does the encyclical mean by the “common good”? What are the different “common goods” in which we live? Do you think it makes sense to say we are always accountable to the common good? Do you think it makes sense to say that we have duties of justice to the common good of the future?*

- The common good is a comprehensive term in social ethics, meant in general to refer to those common conditions that affect all individuals and groups in a society. Thus while each person pursues his or her own good, each person at the same time shares with everyone else the pursuit of a common good affecting all people.
- Also, it is important to note that the common good is the “sum” of all of those common conditions. In part, this means that when we consider the common good we are always challenged both to identify what these common conditions are and to prioritize how to address them.
- There may be a common good of a city or of a country or indeed of the whole world -- the global common good. The challenge of climate change, the encyclical argues, is in fact to this global reality.
- There also is a common good that belongs to the future: not the social conditions affecting everyone now but the social conditions that will affect everyone in the future. This future-oriented sense of the common good is also especially implicated by the time of climate change and by the demand of justice to hand on a sustainable world to the next generation.

- The pope also emphasizes that the key global, structural problem of justice in the time of climate change is that the developed nations are generating disproportionate amounts of gases that are making the earth warmer, a fact which especially burdens the poor of the developing nations.

#### **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 the Text*

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.

See additional readings, paragraphs 1-12 and 202-246

### *Discussion Questions to be Raised in Class by Instructor*

*Why does the encyclical say that an interior change of character and a change in personal habits are essential aspects of the response to the challenge of climate change?*

- Pope Francis is seeking to effect change at all levels, from the international to the personal.
- One of his great concerns is that we are all so immersed in a current system of production and consumption that we have lost the capacity to feel both the



agony of others and of the earth itself. Our conscience has been dulled and needs to recover its sensitivity to what is real.

*What are some of the virtues or good habits that the encyclical identifies as crucial for the transformation of character needed now and for the future?*

- The encyclical here is turning to an ethics of virtue or character in which our virtues (or good habits) have the capacity to transform who we are, both in terms of our inner dispositions and our outward actions.
- The document consistently rejects the doomsday concerns of some environmentalists. Instead, it both identifies a great crisis confronting us but also repeatedly affirms a sense of hope about addressing this crisis.
- One of the reasons the document affirms a sense of hope is because of its underlying conviction that people really can change by adopting habits that affect both the contemplative and active aspects of their lives.
- It's important, though, to say again that the encyclical calls for both structural and personal change, not just one or the other. These are not two options, one of which to take and one to leave aside.

*Thomas Aquinas argued that the cardinal or essential virtues of a good person are justice, prudence, courage, and self-control. What do you think are the cardinal or essential virtues called for today? Can you be an Ignatian man or woman for others without also having a profound commitment to protect the earth?*

- Aquinas in effect said that to be a good person meant that you had an integrated practice of these four core virtues: justice (or giving to each its due); prudence (identifying how in a situation to do the good); courage (steadfastness in pursuit of the good); and self-control (a keen capacity to find the mean in one's emotions and actions).
- The encyclical speaks often of justice and prudence. Justice especially is considered anew in light of a response of gratitude for the gift of the earth and of a responsibility to future generations.
- Francis speaks often of such virtues as gratitude, wonder, and reverence.

## **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 the Text*

### *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".

## *Discussion Questions to be Raised in Class by Instructor*

*What does the document say about the tendency of business -- and especially the business of finance -- to set its own concerns against the interests of the common good? Does the description in the document match the experience in your own country?*

- The encyclical argues that a utilitarian logic driven by technology and economics has left little room for the moral claims of the poor and of the natural world.
- The document also singles out finance as an especially problematic area of business in part because it is far removed from the concrete concerns of the poor and of ecosystems.
- The encyclical notes as well that very often in business ecological concerns are regarded as romantic, when they are regarded at all. But this view of such concerns as romantic reflects the iron grip of a utilitarian logic incapable on its own of acknowledging the actual importance of such values.

### *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.

For additional readings, see paragraphs 163-201.

## *Discussion Questions to be Raised in Class by Instructor*

*Is profit maximization alone incompatible with a correct understanding of economics? And is profit maximization incompatible with the integration of ecological ethics into business concerns? Is a business responsible to the future, not only of its customers but also of the common good?*

- Pope Francis argues here that business ethics necessarily includes attention to ecological ethics.
- Furthermore, he argues that businesses, in fully assessing costs, must look at the costs to the natural world and at all stakeholders, both those far away in distance and in time.
- The document argues here that the chief culprit is an instrumental, utilitarian logic too focused alone on profit and incapable of incorporating a wider range of values.

## **A Summary the Instructor May Use to Conclude Discussion**

*Laudato Si* is a landmark document in the teaching of the Catholic Church. While the Church has issued encyclicals before on social teaching, and briefly mentioned the environment in previous encyclicals, this is the first time that social teaching has been put deeply into the context of an encyclical devoted primarily to the environment.

In summary:

- Science, religion, and ethics are complementary disciplines not opposed to each other, but rather dependent upon each other, and all must be utilized if we are to confront the ecological crisis before us.
- The technocratic paradigm is a worldview that is endangering life on Earth through its tendency to distort our perception of reality towards power, exploitation, and consumption.
- Integral ecology is one way of thinking which can help to counteract the technocratic paradigm and restore a more realistic sense of the universe to us, one in which “everything is connected,” and human and natural flourishing are prioritized over exploitation and consumption.
- This movement away from technocracy and towards integral ecology requires a conversion of the human heart to being in closer solidarity with nature and the poor, from which should flow actions that will protect both, and help create a more sustainable world.
- Business is a noble profession and has a crucial role in the promotion of the common good, but business needs ethics to guide it away from mere profit maximization and towards the promotion of the flourishing of humanity and the natural world.

## **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 Guide to \*Laudato Si\* \(also in pdf\)](#)