

# The Joyful and Troubling *Laudato Si'*

Prof David Tombs

*Laudato Si': On care for our common home* is a landmark statement in public theology. It calls the church, and wider society, to attend to the ecological and ethical challenges of our global environmental crisis with a message that Pope Francis describes as both “joyful and troubling” (LS #246).

Whilst this message is firmly rooted in Catholic theology and Catholic social teaching, Francis crafted it with such skill and care that it has been recognised and affirmed by church leaders in many denominations. It has served for the last decade as a *de facto* ecumenical statement on the urgency of the climate crisis and has been a precious gift to the whole global church.

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The Encyclical’s tenth anniversary offers an opportunity to revisit the message and for churches to re-commit to its call. One feature that has been noticed and discussed is that Francis wishes to avoid a false binary between care for creation and care for the poor. As he puts it, “[w]e 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” (LS #139). A solution to the environmental problem cannot come at the expense of the poor.

Pope Francis credits Saint Francis as his guide and inspiration for this integral ecology (LS #11). Pope Francis writes that “[h]e shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace” (LS #10). The influence of Latin American liberation theology is probably an additional factor. The distinctive “Theology of the People”, that developed in Argentina after Vatican II, may also have had a role. Francis did not attend Vatican II, but as Rudolf von Sinner has observed, he took its teaching on “the People of God” especially to heart. The connection between the protection of the environment and the protection of people – and above all, the protection of the poor – is central to the message.

Another intersectional connection which is perhaps less prominent but no less important in the text is the link between environmental violence and family violence. This strand has not had as much attention, yet it is signalled from the very first lines.

The Encyclical subtitle “On care for our common home” makes the connection clear. The household, or *oikos* in Greek, is one of the root words for “ecological”. Francis frames the environmental problem as a problem that impacts on everyone,

since we are metaphorically all living in the same house. The word, *oikoumene*, from which “ecumenical” is derived, refers to the household of the whole world.

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The Encyclical is addressed to environmental violence rather than other forms of family violence but explicit connections to family violence are made in several places. For example, in the first paragraph, Francis cites the famous “Canticle of Creatures” written by Francis of Assisi in 1225. The Encyclical’s opening words and title, “*Laudato Si’, mi’ Signore*” – “Praise be to you, my Lord”, are taken from the canticle. Francis explains:

In the words of this beautiful canticle, Saint Francis of Assisi reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us. (LS #2)

In the next paragraph Francis makes clear that there is violence in this household.

This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. (LS #2)

The sister who now cries out, “because of the harm we have inflicted”, is a reminder of King David’s daughter, Tamar, raped by her brother Amnon. In 2 Samuel 13:19, Tamar is said to “cry aloud” following her abuse. The image brings home the level of violence the earth has experienced, she “groans in travail” (Romans 8:22).

The recognition of the earth as sister and mother in a common home thereby connects violence towards the earth with violence against sister and mother. This allows Francis to signal an additional message on his concern for family violence whilst keeping his primary focus firmly on environmental challenges.

On the tenth anniversary of publication, the Encyclical remains an extraordinary achievement that continues to repay careful study. The diagnosis of the environmental crisis as an existential crisis is as true now as it was ten years ago. The way that Francis connects these issues with poverty and with other forms of violence – including family violence – has much to teach the global church today.

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