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## ***Laudato Si'*: A Prophetic Message**

Agbonkhianmeghe E Orobator<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** A mounting body of evidence demonstrates that our generation and our civilization teeter on the brink of a man-made disaster of global scale. Climate change stands as the defining question of our century. Calls to global action are as strident and passionate as the enormity of the situation is grave and consequential. Of particular significance is Pope Francis' encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* on the care for our Common Home. This article discusses some of the main messages from *Laudato Si'* including its call for pedagogical models of "ecological education" or "environmental education". The article is adapted with minor modifications from an address at the opening session of the OIEC World Congress held in New York in June 2019.

Long before the advent of Pope Francis as visionary and prophetic global champion of environmental justice, the late Kenyan Nobel Laureate for Peace, Wangari Muta Maathai (2010), alerted the international community to "the deep ecological wounds visible across the world" (p. 43). Planet Earth, our Mother, she warned, groans under the burden of global warming, pollution of air, water and land; and destruction of biodiversity and ecosystems. Maathai was a prophetic voice amidst a cacophony of climate change naysayers, deniers, cynics and skeptics who, sadly, seem impervious to reason and ethics.

Since the pioneering work of Wangari Maathai, a mounting body of evidence demonstrates that our generation and our civilization teeter on the brink of "a man-made disaster of global scale. Our greatest threat in thousands of years," to quote naturalist Sir David Attenborough (2018, p. 1). Climate change stands as the defining question of our century. For this reason, the calls to global action are as strident and passionate as the enormity of the situation is grave and consequential.

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One such call, familiar, I believe, to many in this room, is the encyclical letter, *Laudato Si'* (Francis, 2015), of Pope Francis, on the care for our Common Home. In the words of one commentator,

[*Laudato Si'*] is a love poem to the world. It is a beautiful, heartfelt and far-reaching plea for action. It speaks straight to our souls and it is rooted in St Francis.... It demands a rethink of Catholicism's attitude to the Earth and the creatures who live alongside us. (Colwell, 2019, p. 4)

With prophetic urgency, Pope Francis laments that "Never have we so hurt and mistreated our common home as we have in the last two hundred years" (no. 53). The consequence, he continues, is glaring and incontestable: "The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth" (no. 21). When the pope declares that we are damaging the Earth we do not have to take his word for it. After all, Francis is neither an environmental scientist nor an atmospheric physicist; but, his analyses and teachings in *Laudato Si'* are corroborated by countless independent studies, UN and government reports, conclusions from scientific studies, and the profound wisdom of indigenous peoples, as well as agrarian, pastoral, riparian and coastal communities.

These findings recount the same narrative: that this Earth, our Common Home, labors under the weight of pollution and global warming and can no longer carry its burden – that the phenomenon of climate change "threatens the continuing survival of human societies." There is no gainsaying who is to blame: we are the culprit. "Human activities, including industrialization, urbanization, and globalization, are all drivers of pollution" (Das & Horton, 2017, p. 407). In the words of atmospheric scientist Robert Watson, "We are eroding the very foundations of our economies, livelihoods, food security, health and quality of life worldwide" (United Nations, 2019, n.p.). And in plain language, it means we are hurting the Earth and hurting ourselves.

Against the backdrop of this existential threat to life on Planet Earth, *Laudato Si'* proposes a prophetic manifesto for our world and appeals passionately to our global conscience about the vital and inseparable nexus between human ecology and environmental ecology, between anthropology and ecology.

Pope Francis tells us that Planet Earth comprises an integral tapestry of life woven from the collective strands of human life, a biodiversity of flora and fauna and an ecosystem of natural phenomena. Again and again, he reminds us that "We are all related..."; "everything in the world is connected"; we are dependent on one another; we are a "universal family"; "We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it" (Francis, 2015, nos. 16, 42, 89, 91, 92, 117, 120, 138, 141, 142, 240, 139). I believe that such a vital connection underscores the fundamental solidarity that ought to exist between human beings and our natural environment.

The agony of the Earth is the anguish of humanity. For, as an African proverb says, “a chicken develops a headache when it sees another chicken inside the cooking pot.” In other words, says Francis, “Our relationship with the environment can never be isolated from our relationship with others and with God. Otherwise, it would be nothing more than romantic individualism dressed up in ecological garb, locking us into a stifling immanence” (no. 119).

As I see it, the most poignant message of *Laudato Si'* is this notion of “interdependence of forces” (Bénézet Bujo) between the human person and the cosmos, which allows each to influence and affect the other. Such is the intensity of this vital connection – or, in Francis’s terms, “integral ecology,” (no. 137) – that “one can only save oneself by saving the cosmos” (Bénézet Bujo).

This ecological interdependence is rooted in the principles of the common good and social justice. Hence, Francis declares, “The human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation” (no. 48).

From 4 to 21 March 2019, Cyclone Idai tore through coastal towns and cities of Mozambique, leaving a trail of death and destruction. Far be it from me to pronounce on whether or not occurrences like Idai are consequences of anthropogenic climate change.

Yet, like other extreme meteorological events, such as heat waves, droughts, forest fires and floods witnessed in recent times, in some instances with unprecedented ferocious intensity, the tragedy of Idai evokes the “intimate relationship between the poor [of this world] and the fragility of the planet” (Francis, 2015, no. 16). Such calamities expose the skewed logic of climate change, namely that while the poor are the least responsible for global warming and environmental degradation, it is they who bear disproportionately the brunt of its effects. Thus as we damage our planet we also blight the lives of poor and vulnerable people and their communities.

To anyone who perceives and understands that there is no injustice quite so appalling and alarming as that visited on Planet Earth by human beings, *Laudato Si'* offers a prophetic proclamation of faith: that this Earth, our Mother, is a gift; it is the outcome of an intentional act by a loving God who is deeply involved and invested in the destiny of the Earth (nos. 67, 220). Our moral response to this gift includes a duty of care and a practice of “stewardship” that seeks not solely to exploit the resources of nature and extract value at all cost, but desires primarily to care for and preserve creation.

Whether we profess religious faith or not, Planet Earth is not the product of an act sequestered in an impenetrable and irretrievable cosmic past. This Earth, our Common Home, represents an enterprise continually being fulfilled, in mutuality and reciprocity. Therefore, according to Francis, for us, today, the focus need not dwell on how the Earth came into being but on how “to ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations” (2015, no. 67).

The antithesis of the ecological faith professed by Pope Francis is a “globalization of indifference” (2015, no. 53) and a “collective selfishness” that only aggravate the crisis. If *Laudato Si'* is right, such indifference and selfishness pose the greatest challenge to any initiative to mitigate and reverse the damage inflicted on our Common Home.

For it is of the nature of indifference to dispense with “... that sense of responsibility for our fellow men and women upon which all civil society is founded” (no. 25) and it is characteristic of selfishness and greed for “some [people to] consider themselves more human than others, as if they had been born with greater rights” (no. 90). Either way, Pope Francis’ teaching is clear and decisive: if we capitulate to indifference and selfishness, we become what he calls culpable “silent witnesses to terrible [ecological] injustices” (no. 36).

Yet there is some hopeful news. *Laudato Si'* testifies to the truth that individually and collectively we are not bound inexorably to a practice of ecological violence. We can chart a different course, we can embark on a path of care, healing and protection of Mother Earth.

Protecting, caring for and healing the earth is primarily about protecting, caring for and healing humanity, because how we treat Mother Earth is a reliable measure of how we treat ourselves. In the context of the present ecological crisis, the commitment to healing the earth must now shift the narrative from threat of destruction to the promise of survival and action towards the flourishing of the biosphere.

The ecological crisis of our times does not leave us bereft of ideas and initiatives. *Laudato Si'* reassures us that we can all do something. We can all make a difference. As Wangari Maathai once said, “It’s the little things citizens do. That’s what will make the difference. My little thing is planting trees.”

We are all part of the unfolding drama of climate change and Pope Francis encourages us to become protagonists of “small everyday things” (Francis, 2018, no. 143) and “little everyday gestures” (Francis, 2015, no. 231); practitioners of “simple daily gestures” (no. 230) and “small gestures of mutual care” (no. 231).

In the same vein, teenage climate activist Greta Thunberg complements the message of *Laudato Si'* with her simple yet inspiring mantra: “no one is too small to make a difference.”

Perhaps, then, for those who explicitly self-identify as Catholic educators, or as educators simple, the global ecological crisis doubles as “an educational challenge” (Francis, 2015, no. 209) to rethink the shape of education in the age of climate change. *Laudato Si'* outlines pedagogical models of “ecological education” or “environmental education” consisting of wide-ranging goals.

What, you may wonder, is the profile of this ecological education? First, ecological education prioritizes “ecological equilibrium [that strives to establish] harmony within ourselves, with others, with nature and other living creatures, and with God” (Francis, 2015, no. 210). Second, ecological

education teaches “ecological citizenship” and cultivates “sound virtues” that enable people “to make a selfless ecological commitment” in their local communities (no. 211). Third, ecological education empowers people to overcome the paradigm of unbridled consumerism and promotes “a new way of thinking about human beings, life, society and our relationship with nature” (no. 215). Finally, ecological education helps people learn “to see and appreciate beauty [and] ... learn to reject self-interested pragmatism” (no. 215).

For this ecological education to transform our present crisis, a new kind of educator is needed. In the words of Pope Francis, “It needs educators capable of developing an ethics of ecology, and helping people, through effective pedagogy, to grow in solidarity, responsibility and compassionate care” (2015, no. 210).

*Laudato Si'* summons educators in the Catholic tradition to become creators of a new pedagogy of ecology – one that nurtures and inculcates “ecological virtues” (no. 88) in those whom we teach.

Let us interrogate ourselves: how many students leave our educational establishments converted and transformed as stewards of environmental integrity? To what extent do our educational establishments enhance knowledge and awareness of present global crisis and deepen commitment to ethical responsibility and duty to care for and protect our Common Home? How many of our educational institutions teach not only in words but more especially and intentionally in practice the critical significance of environmental responsibility? In how many of our educational institutions do we teach our students, according to the prayer of *Laudato Si'*, “... to discover the worth of each thing, to be filled with awe and contemplation, to recognize that we are profoundly united with every creature as we journey towards [God’s] infinite light” (no. 246)?

Such are the prophetic interrogations addressed to us by Pope Francis for our collective examination of conscience. Like Greta Thunberg, “What kind of world,” asks Pope Francis, “do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up?” (2015, no. 160). “Young people demand change” (no. 13). This interrogation about the future of our children contains a moral imperative to protect and care for our Common Home.

We are called to be educators of a whole new world of women, men and children imbued with a renewed attitude to our Common Home, to one another and to the creatures who live alongside us.

According to the ecological gospel of *Laudato Si'*, “an integral ecology [founded upon] a serene harmony with creation (no. 255)” invites us to replace “the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness” (no. 230) and “a tyrannical anthropocentrism unconcerned for other creatures” (no. 70) with a genuine ecology of gratitude – “the gratitude we ought to feel for what the earth gives us” (Maathai, 2010, p. 10).

Ecological gratitude is akin to gratitude for what a mother gives a child. An African proverb says that “a child can never (re)pay for its mother’s milk.” Ecological gratitude manifests as respect and

reverence, empathy and solidarity, mutuality and reciprocity, generosity and compassion towards Mother Earth and towards one another.

So, as ancient forests continue to fall around us and plastic bags and bottles clog the bellies of whales and dolphins; as irreplaceable animal and plant species disappear from the face of Planet Earth; as carbon emissions raise global temperatures, melt glaciers, damage coral reefs, and raise sea levels; as lethal effluents kill our lakes and rivers; and as marginalized communities lose their livelihoods and the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor grow agonizingly weaker and fainter, *Laudato Si'* invites us to respond with hope and courage; and, like Saint Francis of Assisi, to see with eyes of faith 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” (no. 1).

In our time, our Sister, Mother Earth, thirsts for new life and yearns to hear anew the Franciscan Canticle of the Creatures: “Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs” (Francis, 2015, no. 1).

Let us raise our hearts to echo the prayer of Pope Francis: that we may “be ‘protectors’ of creation, protectors of God’s plan inscribed in nature, protectors of one another and of the environment” (Francis, 2013, para. 8).

Amen!

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