

Talking Cents

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Talking Cents is an ecumenical group charged by the Auckland Anglican Diocesan Council to promote an alternative to current economic and political thought, and to encourage debate within the church. Ministry units are encouraged to distribute these articles. This article is contributed by David Tutty, Social Justice Commission Executive Officer, Catholic Diocese of Toowoomba, Queensland.

Reflecting on the Spirituality of *Laudato Si'*

Five years ago, Pope Francis released his encyclical '*Laudato Si'*: On Care of our Common Home'. In the same year as the Paris Climate Agreement, the pope, inspired by St Francis of Assisi, offered a holistic spirituality looking at our interconnectedness with all of creation. Pope Francis sees that this spirituality is what is needed to shape, motivate and educate for the changes required in order for us to sustainably live within our common home (#15).

Spirituality is not something that people find easy to name and discuss. Essentially, Christian spirituality is how we reflect on and respond to God's invitation to grow and change. Jesus' whole ministry is a call for us to be open to God's presence and action in the world and to 'repent and believe' so that we live the fullness of what God intends.

Laudato Si' is essentially a call to conversion. Pope Francis understands this conversion is necessary because our 'Sister, Mother Earth' (#1) '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' (#2). He draws on Pope St John Paul II's insight into the need for a global 'ecological conversion' (#5) and grounds this conversion 'in the convictions of our faith' (#216ff).

Yet this conversion is not simply environmental. Pope Francis stresses that 'everything is interconnected' (#138) and that 'a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*' (#49). This sense of interconnectedness, this 'integral ecology' (#137ff), requires we see ourselves as 'part of creation' with obligations to respond to the 'one complex crisis which is both social and environmental'

(#139). The pope names that this conversion requires that we also dialogue, especially with indigenous communities (#146) and be in solidarity with future generations (#159).

A common metaphor for conversion is journey. While some Christian traditions focus on a dramatic event like St Paul experienced on the road to Damascus, many others see conversion as a dynamic, ongoing experience that always feels unfinished. Conversion, and thus ecological conversion, from this perspective, is an unending call to new insights, awareness, growth and an openness to an ever deeper and humble life-giving relationship with God and with God's struggling creation.

Laudato Si' offers some clear steps along this journey. Pope Francis asks us to take reality seriously, to draw on the relational insights of our faith tradition, and to note God's call that we respond to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor. These three steps are interconnected and vital. More vital though is that we take these steps with a spirit of openness to God: a spirit of prayer and contemplation, a spirit of awe and wonder, and a spirit of discernment of how God calls us to act.

Pope Francis deliberately focusses on reality. He names that the ecological crisis of today has its roots in human behaviours (#101ff). To analyse this crisis, he draws on internationally respected climate and environmental science. Climate change, pollution, contaminated water, loss of biodiversity, the decline in the quality of human life and global inequality are all addressed. Yet these are but symptoms of a deeper crisis.

The true reality is that ‘our immense technological development has not been accompanied by a development in human responsibility, values and conscience’ (#105). Our continual interventions in nature have ‘become confrontational’ and the idea we have of ‘unlimited growth’ is ‘based on a lie’ (#106). We have allowed the ‘market’ to dominate (#109) and given our individual desires ‘absolute priority’ (#122).

In taking this reality seriously, Pope Francis has a sense of urgency. His analysis is a call to conversion and key to this conversion is a plea for a ‘bold cultural revolution’ (#114).

Laudato Si’ draws on our rich Christian tradition to name ways of relating that are more life-giving and healing for the earth and the poor of the earth. Seeking to live these ways is seeking to live shaped and motivated by an openness to conversion.

Pope Francis reminds us that ‘the word “creation” has a broader meaning than “nature”, for it has to do with God’s loving plan in which every creature has its own value and significance’ (#76). We are called to be open to God’s plan within all God has created. As the ‘entire material universe speaks of God’s love’, it is in and through God’s creation that we are invited to experience ‘the caress of God’ (#84).

The pope also reminds us that a ‘deep sense of communion with the rest of nature cannot be real if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human beings’ (#90). He emphasises that ‘the earth is essentially a shared inheritance, whose fruits are meant to benefit everyone’ (#93). The goods of the earth are a ‘collective good’ and it is God’s intention that we ‘administer it for the good of all’ (#95).

Pope Francis also calls us to practical actions that respond to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor. He names the critical importance of ‘cultivating sound values’ so that all see the importance in making ‘a selfless ecological commitment’ (#211).

Laudato Si’ challenges the lifestyles of the richer 20 percent of the planet (#95) as well as the economic powers that ‘continue to justify the current global system’ (#56). The pope sees that an ecological commitment requires that we develop a ‘capacity to be happy with little’, a ‘knowing of how to limit some needs’ alongside a humility of life based on wonder and gratuitousness (#222ff). He sees that this type of ‘change in lifestyle could bring healthy pressure on those who wield political, economic and social power’ as purchasing is ‘always a moral – and not simply economic – act’ (#206).

This ecological commitment also involves having a ‘love for society and a commitment to the common good’ that ‘moves us to devise larger strategies to halt environmental degradation and to encourage a “culture of care” which permeates all of society’ (#231). It is from this motivation that concrete actions arise seeking to dramatically reduce ‘the emission of carbon dioxide and other highly polluting gases’, to protect existing fresh water sources, biodiversity and the quality of human life (#26ff). It is from this motivation, also, that we challenge global wealth inequality, the ‘structurally perverse’ international commercial relationships and the injustices of foreign debt and ‘ecological debt’ (#52).

Concretely, Pope Francis speaks of the importance of dialogue seeking a ‘global consensus ... for confronting the deeper problems’ (#164) and calls us to work together within non-governmental organisations and cooperatives ‘to put pressure on governments’ (#179) so that we achieve change.

Laudato Si’ reminds us that we experience God in and through the reality of our world today. God is mediated not just in the beauty and the relational dynamic of creation but also amidst the cries of the suffering earth and of those treated unjustly. Mystical experiences of awe and wonder and an openness to listen to the cries of pain cannot be separated.

We also experience God mediated through the sacraments of the Church. Through material elements – water, oil, light and the fruits of the earth, bread and wine – ‘nature is taken up by God to become a means of mediating supernatural life’ (#235). These sacraments call us to conversion and send us out to be God’s presence as we ‘go in peace to love and serve’. Experiences of Eucharist are ‘a source of light and motivation for our concerns for the environment, directing us to be stewards of all creation’ (#236).

Finally, Pope Francis draws on St Francis of Assisi to guide the spirituality of Laudato Si’. Ecological conversion requires role models. The pope sees ‘that St Francis is the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically’ (#10). He also sees that St Francis’ commitment to ‘poverty and austerity’ witnesses to a ‘refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled’ (#11). St Francis shows us what spirituality in action looks like. St Francis’ ‘Praise be to you, my Lord’ connects us to what we have forgotten and calls us to an ever deeper ecological conversion.