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BR. KEITH WARNER, OFM

*Laudato Si': the most
Franciscan papal
encyclical ever!*



Laudato si'
REVOLUTION

Have you ever thought about how our Father St. Francis feels looking down from heaven on Pope Francis? Don't you think he is feeling overwhelming joy? Do you share that joy? I hope you do!

We are in a truly Franciscan moment in the church. Fr. Michael Perry OFM, the minister general of the Friars Minor, describes Pope Francis' encyclical "The Joy of the Gospel" as a Franciscan vision of the Church. I would certainly agree, and point to "Laudato Si" as a Franciscan vision of Catholic engagement with society and the environment.

We are fifty years out from Vatican II, and this is the most Franciscan moment in that period. I would argue that we have to go back to before the Protestant Reformation to find a more Franciscan moment in the church! Now this is exciting!

Now here's the question: are we as a Franciscan family alert to the present moment? Are we able to follow the Holy Spirit's lead? I am convinced that the future of Franciscan life – religious or lay – looks less like the Little Flowers of St Francis and a lot more like the spirituality of Laudato Si.

The Most Franciscan Encyclical Ever!

First, Francis and Franciscans are held up as authorities and examples - more than in any prior papal encyclical. St. Francis is promoted as an example for Christian living today, in the 21st Century. He was a mystic and a pilgrim who lived in simplicity and in wonderful harmony with God, with others, with nature and with himself." Francis is presented an example par excellence of Integral ecology, a concept introduced and emphasized in Laudato Si.



A most famous Franciscan theologian, Bonaventure is given prominence. Laudato Si paragraph 239 describes Bonaventure's vision of the Holy Trinity as divine communion, and how all of created reality reflects this Trinitarian structure of reality.

Second, care for the poor and care for the Earth are presented as inter-related, together, necessarily and always. Again, from paragraph 10: "He (Francis) shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace." This approach is not new in the Church, but it is presented more forcefully and concretely in this encyclical. It is not really accurate to say this is "the environmental encyclical." Yes, Laudato Si emphasizes that theme, but when we use the word "environment" in the US we generally assume that does not include questions of human wellbeing or social justice. Laudato Si integrates all of these themes.

Third, Laudato Si uses a Franciscan approach to doing ethics, exemplified by the following points:

- Creation is morally significant. Nature has dignity, value. These are not uniquely Franciscan ideas, but our tradition has emphasized them.
- Laudato Si does not start with abstract ideas or ideals, but with reality. Chapter 1 is an environmental science primer. It describes what is.
- Laudato Si emphasizes virtue ethics, specifically ecological virtue ethics. It proposes we adopt a global consciousness and an ecological responsibility.
- Laudato Si proposes an ethic of care. This means living in relationship with others, and practicing respect for the dignity of all. This is an approach to living the moral life that is not "law following." Rather, it



challenges us to live out loving relationship of the common good of everyone and all creation.

Some of the Franciscan values embedded in this encyclical that the pope is calling everyone to live in the 21st-century

The encyclical offers a vision for human beings living together in harmony with each other and with creation. Ecological common good means good for everyone and everything everywhere! The term “common good” is mentioned 22 times. Laudato Si proposes collaborative approaches, worked out in dialogue between many different sectors of society, to pursue a vision of protecting the planet and human flourishing. Efforts for economic justice and environmental protection have to work hand in hand.

We are called to recognize beauty as a path to God. Laudato Si presents love of beauty as a spiritual practice. St. Augustine claimed that beauty is a name for God, and many Franciscans throughout history have sought the face of God through natural beauty. Francis spent considerable time in hermitages, practicing contemplation surrounded by natural beauty. Laudato Si mentions the spiritual dimension of beauty 26 times.

We are called to ecological conversion (paragraph 216). Since we are brothers and sisters of penance, we should be particularly alert to this dimension of our vocation as Franciscans. Paragraph 220 reads: “an ecological conversion can inspire us to greater creativity and enthusiasm in resolving the world’s problems and in offering ourselves to God ‘as a living



sacrifice, holy and acceptable.”” Penance is not a stance that inspires dread in us, but rather, joy! For we Franciscans know that it leads us in to greater intimacy with God.

Living the Spirituality of Laudato Si

What does ecological conversion look like? For Franciscans, it means living out the values of Laudato Si in our own lives with our local fraternities. But it also means giving witness to these in local, national and global communities through:

- Prayer
- Dialogues
- Education
- Ecological virtue

Laudato Si gives us lots of examples. This section highlights a few recommended actions and then suggests how to live them out with your local fraternities.

First, we are called to live out an ecological spirituality, ecological conversion and prayer. We are invited to grow in awareness of other creatures and their needs, and to act in such a way that reflects that other creatures reflect God. Chapters 2 and 6 explain how Sacred Scripture, reflection on the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, Mary as Queen of Creation, and the sacraments can help us live an ecological spirituality.

Second, Laudato Si proposes a whole series of dialogues about the direction of humanity and its relationship with nature. One of these dialogues would be conducted at the global scale, about energy, climate and sustainable development. Pope Francis retains his faith in diplomacy even in the face of repeated political failures in crafting a climate treaty. He is in favor of treaties, but not naïve enough to believe that they alone are sufficient. He



calls for a global energy transition to begin immediately. These dialogues would be geopolitical, and result in a common plan, and this would require a world political authority. Dialogue should also take place at the national and regional scales. These might better be understood as national and regional sustainability initiatives. Here are some specific recommended themes:

- Renewable energy coops.
- New forms of industrial ecology, with greater emphasis on energy efficiency.
- Improving building technologies to make them more sustainable.
- Political activity to foster all these kinds of sustainable practices.
- Dialogue with other religions, religious leaders.
- New models of economic development, such as social entrepreneurship.

Third, *Laudato Si* calls for more and better education. This vision of education for social transformation is much broader than classroom activities. It should take place in schools, homes, communities, catechesis, and the media. It should result in “a new lifestyle,” one that is moderate, sober, and ecological. This kind of education should help us escape from consumerism, selfishness, hyper-individualism.

Fourth, consider the practice of ecological virtue. *Laudato Si* challenges us to make alternative, specific lifestyle choices, such as: avoiding plastic and paper, reducing energy and water usage, separating refuse, cooking only what can be eaten, showing care for other living beings, using public transport or carpooling, and planting trees (see paragraph 211).



Franciscan fraternities can be great places for initiating dialogues, but the conversation should not end there. These dialogues should go public, in keeping with the intended audiences of *Laudato Si*. I would like to challenge fraternities to devise activities that engage youth. The themes of this encyclical are ideal for being able to present Franciscan values to a new generation.

We must seize this Franciscan moment in the Church! This is an occasion for joy, but also a challenge to us, as a Franciscan Family, to raise our voice. I am convinced that the future of Franciscan life – religious or lay – looks a lot less like the Little Flowers of St Francis and a lot more like the spirituality of *Laudato Si*. May we live it!

