

Getting Our Praise On Track

As promised, Pope Francis released his follow-up message to his encyclical of eight years ago, “*Laudato Si’*,” “On Care of Our Common Home.” In “*Laudate Deum*,” “Praise God for all his creatures” (LD), issued this month on the Oct. 4 feast of his namesake, the Holy Father addresses not only Catholics, but all people of good will. He is increasingly alarmed that humans have not acted swiftly and seriously enough to alter the trajectory of global climate change. He calls for multilateral cooperation among nations and other bodies to enact “binding forms of energy transition that meet three conditions: that they be efficient, obligatory, and readily monitored.” Only then can restorative processes be set in motion that will be “drastic, intense, and count on the commitment of all” (LD n. 59).

There is too much in LD to elaborate and digest here, but I hope to offer readers a sample of the Holy Father’s main points and spur them to read and reflect upon the exhortation themselves:

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html.

In *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis made only passing mention of scientific data to further his case that we need lifestyle conversion from reckless consumption to more spare stewardship of earth’s natural resources. In *LD*, he adopts a more strident tone in the face of those who dispute and dismiss his argument that humans bear significant responsibility for disrupting the balance of ecosystems around the world. He counters with what he finds is a preponderance of scientific evidence to bolster his position.

This evidence supports what he calls the “anthropic principle” that humans are the cause for dramatic changes in temperature and weather phenomena that deviate from normal climatic patterns throughout history—changes that have accelerated since the advent of the industrial revolution in the nineteenth century and even since his last intervention eight years ago. More than once, he readily admits that not every local weather event can be attributed to climate change—he does not judge whether our Midwest experience of derechos results from human agency. But overall, he doesn’t pull any punches as he describes the position of those who reject human responsibility for the spiraling disruption of the global environment as “scarcely reasonable” (LD n. 14).

Unsurprisingly, the pontiff’s claims are provocative, prophetic, and in some instances, perplexing—at least to this reader. At the core of his exhortation are his familiar bedrock principles: “Everything is connected” among all living things in the material universe, and “No one is saved alone” (LD n. 19). The Holy Father speaks metaphorically of our “suffering planet” that harbors a “silent disease” (LD nn. 2, 5). He likens desertification of the soil to a “physical ailment,” and the extinction of species as a “painful disfigurement” (LD n. 68).

While he affirms that human beings hold a unique and primary role in the “concert of all God’s creatures,” we are not superpowers who stand over nature, but are immanently situated as participants with other creatures who “have stopped being our companions along the way and have instead become our victims” (LD n. 15; cf. nn. 25-26). He warns that if we do not embrace a “pilgrimage of reconciliation” (n. 69) and instead blithely maintain present practices that ignore

irreversible cosmic implications for future generations, we are like persons “pushing a snowball down a hill” (LD n. 57).

For weal or woe, the world is a “contact zone” in which diverse relations in ecosystems of various scale either lead to mutual flourishing or inevitable demise. Nature cannot stand the strain we have imposed upon it when we strip the world of a sense of wonder and mystery that should generate gratitude, reverence, and a humble sense of responsibility in the face of nature’s Author.

Pope Francis alternatively denies and affirms responsibility for different parties for the precarious state of our global ecology. He denies that poorer nations and their peoples are the primary culprits making our world less habitable: “In an attempt to simplify reality, there are those who would place responsibility on the poor, since they have many children, and even attempt to resolve the problem by mutilating women in less developed countries.” “Yet, the reality is that a low, richer percentage of the planet contaminates more than the poorest 50% of the total world population” (LD n. 9)

The United States is the special object of the Holy Father’s prophetic critique; in what is a sort of “coup de grâce” in the entire exhortation’s next-to-last section, he notes, “If we consider that emissions per individual in the United States are about two times greater than those of individuals living in China, and about seven times greater than the average of poorest countries, we can state that broad change in the irresponsible lifestyle connected with the Western model would have a long-term significant impact” (LD n. 72).

The Roman pontiff does not disparage technology in itself, but is especially wary and critical of a “technocratic” mindset that seeks and flexes power in the name of unbridled progress. In this respect, he echoes the late Pope Benedict XVI’s unfavorable analysis in *Spe Salvi* of what we might call a “gospel of progress” endemic to modernity that is often at cross-purposes with genuine Christian hope. Pope Francis contends, “Artificial intelligence and the latest technological innovations start with the notion of a human being with no limits, whose abilities and possibilities can be infinitely expanded thanks to technology. In this way, the technocratic paradigm feeds upon itself” (LD n. 21).

Unless we examine our consciences and ask ultimate questions such as, “What is the meaning of my life? . . . And what is the ultimate meaning of all my work and effort?” we risk letting our fascination with progress produce horrible natural consequences for the earth and humanity (see LD n. 24). One isn’t sure if the pope is only speaking ironically or apocalyptically as he suggests we might flirt the dire prospect that we become an “age which was so advanced as to be actually the last one” (LD n. 28).

Pope Francis honors Catholic social teaching with its emphasis on subsidiarity, the precept that those closest to situations should share authority to make decisions impacting themselves (LD n. 37). In his usual synthetic approach, he calls for a new form of multilateralism that will supersede the stasis of old multilateral bodies such as the United Nations—a “multilateralism from below” (LD n. 27).

But I am left scratching my head pondering the import and validity of his claim that “postmodern culture has generated a *new sensitivity* [sic] towards the more vulnerable and less powerful” (LD n. 39). I’m not so sure that a postmodern mindset which emphasizes autonomy, which is quick to claim victim status and seek redress as merited based on their construal of human rights—all the while showing blatant disregard for the preborn and persons with disabilities, as well as desensitizing or even exploiting young adults through media saturation to their need for real human connection—is to be affirmed for its sensitivity.

If anyone is truly sensitive it is Jesus. I am more readily inspired by the Holy Father is his initial mention of the “sensitivity of Jesus before the creatures of his Father” as displayed in Matthew 6:28-29 (LD n. 1). To be sure, Jesus is invoked only once at the beginning of the exhortation and once toward the end.

I wonder if these lean references to Christ might be intended to broaden the receptivity toward this message among “all people of good will,” particularly among those who will take part in the next Conference of the Parties (COP28) in Dubai from November 30-December 12. Curiously or providentially, these dates coincide with the beginning of Advent/the Feast of St. Andrew through the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. I pray that both St. Andrew and the Patroness of the Americas will intercede on behalf of all us who are presented with Pope Francis’ exhortation and anyone who might be given sufficient pause as we ponder what the Lord requires.

With religious assent of mind and will to the Universal Pastor of our Church, I believe it is incumbent on all of us to take the Pope’s words to heart in reflection and prayer. And as the Spirit convicts us, we can then be ever more potent advocates with leaders in various sectors of society to advance the needed changes in policy and practice that will save our planet, and allow God to save us from ourselves.