

Seven Statements on Pope Francis's encyclical "Laudato Si"

by

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Statement 1: The encyclical highlights climate change, poverty and inequality as the key ethical challenges of the 21st century. For this reason, it is inappropriate to reduce the encyclical to an "environmental" or "climate encyclical."

With his new encyclical, the Pope continues a tradition initiated by the encyclical "Pacem in Terris" of Pope John XXIII in 1963, addressing not only Catholics but all people of good will. With "Pacem in Terris", Pope John XXIII also sent out a warning to a world population at the brink of nuclear war, following the construction of the Berlin Wall and the Cuban Missile Crisis. Today, Pope Francis similarly turns to all people of good will and independent of his or her religious beliefs to warn against another global crisis - one that may still be averted.

Climate change is the global crisis of our time. The Pope accepts that climate change is caused mainly by the burning of coal, oil and gas and by deforestation. Climate change primarily affects the poor and exacerbates the inequality of our global society. Of the many impacts of dangerous climate change, Pope Francis views the lack of availability of water for the poor, the loss of biodiversity, the collapse of societies and the intensification of inequality as those of highest concern. In the encyclical, the Pope laments the possible mass migrations, refugees and the lack of access to clean drinking water that may result from climate change. The encyclical also addresses the curtailment of the sovereignty of nations, such as in the Amazon or the Congo, which occurs mainly at the expense of indigenous peoples. The

mitigation of climate change is critical to protect those most vulnerable to its impacts – the poor. The global community has agreed on a maximum target level of warming of 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, which reflects the available disposal space in the atmosphere. Reaching this target poses both practical and ethical challenges.

Statement 2: The encyclical refers to the atmosphere as a common property of humanity, a common good of all and for all.

With this statement, the common dedication of earthly goods is - for the first time in the history of Catholic social teaching - applied to global carbon sinks, which include the oceans and the atmosphere. The use of these commons is a basic human right: the distribution of their use is to be achieved according to the principles of justice. This delegitimizes the actions of countries that use the atmosphere based on the principle of “might makes right” for the storage of carbon. In other words, the rights to the combustion of coal, oil and gas must comply with the notion of social responsibility in line with the tradition of Catholic social teaching.

*“The principle of the **subordination of private property to the universal destination of goods**, and thus the right of everyone to their use, is a **golden rule of social conduct** and ‘the first principle of the whole ethical and social order’ [71]”, No. 93*

*[71] JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens* (14 September 1981), 19: AAS 73 (1981), 626.*

It is clear what this means for global climate policy. With the aim of avoiding dangerous climate change and a temperature increase of more than 2°C above pre-industrial levels, the capacity of the atmosphere and the oceans to absorb carbon is limited – only 1000 GtCO₂ can be released into the atmosphere. With such aims, the extraction of coal, oil and gas must be reduced, even if their extraction would in principle still be profitable. For this reason, around 70% of the world’s economically useful coal, 30% of the gas and 30% of the oil must remain in the ground when carbon capture and storage is available. If this is not the case, even 90 % of coal and two-third of gas and oil has to remain underground. Even if the encyclical quantifies neither the absorptive capacity of the atmosphere nor the fossil fuel reserves that are still in the ground, it does call for a rapid and permanent reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. In this way, the encyclical applies the understanding of private property from the Catholic social teaching to a new object – the atmosphere. From this perspective, denial of climate change is no longer a quest for scientific truth, but is an effort to protect private interests against those of the common good. The financial interests of these few cannot be prioritized over the common good.

Statement 3: Pope Francis argues that the problems of poverty and climate change must be solved together – if we fail in one instance, we fail in the other.

Some observers are trying to play climate policy and poverty against one another. They argue that the use of cheap fossil fuels is required to escape poverty, and that climate change may be addressed as a second priority at a later date. Of course there are other imminent global problems that need to be tackled. It is also true that universal access to affordable energy is an important objective. However, if climate change is not addressed, there is a risk for its impacts to eclipse any gains in economic growth that have been made. If poverty is not addressed, it will be impossible to convince poorer countries to adopt low-carbon technologies necessary for climate change mitigation as long as these are more expensive than fossil fuels. “Laudato Si” does not provide technical guidance, but rather highlights the ethical dimension of the climate problem and provides fundamental ethical principles that may be applied as solutions: the preferential option for the poor, inter- and intra-generational justice, common but differentiated common responsibility, orientation to the common good.

Statement 4: The global upper- and middle classes are primarily responsible for rapidly filling the atmosphere by consuming products whose production entails vast greenhouse gas emissions. At the same time, climate change will primarily impact the poor, further exacerbating global inequality.

The Pope highlights that the planetary boundary conditions have already been exceeded, while at the same time poverty remains prevalent – an unacceptable fact. The Earth’s capacity has been exceeded because of overconsumption by the rich and an insufficient sharing of the wealth with the poor. Importantly, the Pope adopts an Anti-Malthusian perspective in that he does not see population growth as the cause of the climate problem: the problem is rather the current disparate distribution of resources.

However, this perspective has to be complemented by the positive evaluation of technological progress. While the Pope strongly warns of the problematic side effects of modern technology, he also acknowledges its potential to improve the human condition. The encyclical suggests that developing low carbon technologies, energy efficiency measures and other response options offers promising avenues to pair technology and human ingenuity in the most useful and humane way. As the recent IPCC reports have shown, life-style changes are insufficient to decarbonize the world economy. However, life-style changes can foster the transformation of the energy system and can prevent societies from up-scaling what may be risky mitigation technologies, like bio-energy.

Statement 5: Carbon Pricing can help to finance Sustainable Development Goals.

Pope Francis seems to be critical of carbon credits and emissions trading, as he casts some doubt on the fairness and justice of these tools. On the other hand, he has not applied the same skepticism to carbon taxes: he explicitly refers to the “polluter pays principle” in a positive light when he writes: “Yet only when ‘the economic and social costs of using up shared environmental resources are recognized with transparency and fully borne by those who incur them, not by other peoples or future generations’, can those actions be considered ethical.” Importantly, carbon pricing may be implemented in a way that can help address both climate policy and poverty reduction. If atmospheric access were to be regulated by levying a price on emissions (such as by emissions trading or carbon pricing), novel revenues would be raised. This introduces the question of who would legitimately own these revenues and how they should be spent. Using the revenues for investments in infrastructure could enable minimum access levels to clean water, electricity, mobile phones, sanitation and roads particularly for the poor. The Pope highlights the importance of access to clean water for the world’s poor and even argues for a human right to clean water access. More broadly, carbon pricing revenues could be used to contribute to financing the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are to be adopted at the UN Summit New York in December this year.

Statement 6: The encyclical suggests that the solution to this global crisis lies in international cooperation, action by the nation states and at local, family and individual levels.

The encyclical does not consider the current political systems or leaderships as capable of avoiding a global crisis. The Pope also questions our present economic system, which he associates with a throwaway culture that is incompatible with the stewardship of creation. The encyclical views movements by civil society as a lever by which to pressure political action. Such movements include political protest actions, but also and importantly, empowered consumers and investors who can and should exert pressure on markets through boycotts and resistance. The Pope calls on all non-governmental organizations, cooperatives and intermediate groups to find an equitable solution.

Statement 7: The encyclical urges dialogue between science, politics, economics and religion.

The encyclical views the current global crisis in the light of the biblical stories of creation, fall, redemption and consummation. The destruction of nature is an expression of a distorted relationship between man and God. This distorted relationship causes violence among people. If humankind cannot affirm itself as a creature of God, it is condemned to exploitation, war, murder and destruction of the Earth. The biblical stories should remind Christians that God wants the consummation of humanity. Humanity is not doomed to tragic failure. However, averting such failure requires repentance as well as acknowledgement of reality.

If humankind understands that it is not doomed to fail, it can deal with ethical dilemmas in new and creative ways. From this perspective, the Pope counts on humankind's creativity and drive to take action. The encyclical emphasizes dialogue between science and religion in order to clearly identify and to resolve ethical dilemmas. These dilemmas only become truly visible and palpable when embedded in an overarching and all-inclusive interpretation of reality, one that encompasses science, politics, economics and religion. If we fail to mitigate climate change, we will also fail to reduce poverty. However, human history is not a tragedy – it is a drama. Solving the poverty problem will help us to solve the climate problem, and vice versa. “Laudato Si” helps us to understand that the problems of poverty and climate change can and should be solved in synergy.