

## Francis calls for a 'drastic' response to climate change

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Pope Francis concludes *Laudate Deum*, his apostolic exhortation on the climate crisis, by pointing to runaway per-capita emissions in the United States and condemning the 'irresponsible lifestyle connected with the Western model.' Let us, then, engage in an examination of conscience, calling to mind some elements of the American lifestyle.

Think of those little daily actions that rarely inspire deep reflection: flipping a light switch, picking up a coffee, flushing a toilet, refrigerating your leftovers. Behind all these actions is a web of interdependence. A cup of coffee is the result of cultivation, packing, shipping, brewing, and service—the work of human hands enlisting the fruit of the earth: coffee beans, soil, water, fuel. When these processes come at an environmental cost—and they usually do—those costs are very often concealed from view.

How often do we encounter those who bear the special burdens of environmental degradation, the people who live, in Pope Francis's disquieting phrase, 'at the bottom of the pile'? Even those of us with firm ecological commitments find that we contribute, in countless little and mostly unconscious ways, to the destruction of our common home. And we are damaged by our participation in these processes, even when it's unintentional—and even if we struggle to find alternatives. (Try, on your own, to decarbonize an electric grid.) As the effects of our actions are hidden from view, we become increasingly numb and thoughtless.

New structures needed to protect our relationships with all creation

The human species, as Francis repeatedly reminds us in his two ecological writings, has acquired for itself awesome and terrifying powers. Yet, what Francis calls the 'technocratic paradigm' is very often experienced as powerlessness, even for relatively privileged Westerners. Every individual is, in fact, radically dependent on the whole of Creation, but the practices associated with the technocratic paradigm allow us to imagine ourselves as autonomous. This is alienation; it is also sin. In *Laudato si'*, Francis insisted that human beings are created for relationship: with God, with the earth, and with our neighbors, especially the poor. 'These three vital relationships,' Francis writes, 'have been broken, both outwardly and within us. This rupture is sin.' Social and economic structures that contribute to the rupture of these three fundamental relationships can be properly described as sinful.

*Laudate Deum* is an urgent cry for us to create new structures that will foster and protect these relationships. Francis calls for coordination on a massive scale and the erection of a true world political authority. He demands a response to the climate crisis that is 'drastic, intense, and counts on the commitment of all.' In the face of technologies and economic institutions that appear to have escaped human control, he insists that human beings

must 'control political power,' subjecting new technologies to some conscious plan. Yet at the same time, Pope Francis warns against the assumption that human power is limitless and asks us to rediscover the virtues of humility and restraint. In this latest exhortation, Francis quotes this critical passage from *Laudato si'*:

We stand naked and exposed in the face of our ever-increasing power, lacking the wherewithal to control it. We have certain superficial mechanisms, but we cannot claim to have a sound ethics, a culture and spirituality genuinely capable of setting limits and teaching clear-minded self-restraint.

Ultimately, Francis is seeking nothing less than a revolution in how human beings relate to their own capacities. We are creatures capable of creatively refashioning nature to meet our needs, but we have forgotten our obligation to take responsibility for Creation, to 'till and keep' the garden of the world. Instead of viewing fellow creatures as companions on our earthly sojourn, we view them as adversaries. Confrontation and mastery replace friendship and stewardship.

Francis, in his ecological writings, is a virtue theorist. 'Only by cultivating sound virtues,' Francis insists, 'will people be able to make a selfless ecological commitment.' Virtues are excellences of character that emerge when we learn to perceive reality in a particular way and engage in activities that produce certain sustaining dispositions. I cannot be genuinely courageous, for example, if I am not practiced in courage, so that it has become a kind of habit. While Francis makes it clear that effectively repairing our common home will require 'major political decisions' at the highest levels of power, he worries that such large-scale efforts at transformation are unlikely to be sustained if we are not practiced in ecological care. 'It is we human beings above all who need to change.'

In *Laudato si'* and *Laudate Deum*, Francis describes a whole host of ecological virtues: care, love, gratitude, humility, sobriety, solidarity. None of them have any hope of getting off the ground if we do not first learn to see properly. We need to perceive that Creation is a sacrament, a material manifestation of God's love, which is, Francis writes, 'the fundamental moving force in all created things.' Jesus Christ models praiseworthy ecological attention, inviting his followers to see God's love in the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. How can we learn to see that Creation is a web of interdependence? Only once we do that can we react with the proper dispositions to ecological destruction.

Francis urges us to feel 'the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement,' the sickness of the earth as our own ailment. Christ, once again, models the habits of ecological virtue. Francis reminds us that Christ spent the vast majority of his life as an anonymous carpenter 'in daily contact with the matter created by God,' endowing human labor with sacred significance. His example shows us the close connection between work and relationship. 'Underlying every form of work,' Francis writes, 'is a concept of the relationship which we can and must have with what is other than ourselves.' If our activity is not animated by care—a desire to preserve and repair—we will come to see ourselves as masters rather than servants.

Virtue, the saying goes, is its own reward. The exploitative and extractive practices on which our way of life now depends estrange us from God, the earth, and ourselves. They have turned us into anxious, aimless creatures. In his call to construct a political-ecological order sustained by the ecological virtues, Francis offers the promise of internal peace and a 'serene attentiveness' that joyfully accepts every moment, and every creature, as a gift from God. What's required to restore our common home, it turns out, is also what's required to restore our own peace of mind.

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