

APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION *LAUDATE DEUM*  
OF THE HOLY FATHER FRANCIS  
TO ALL PEOPLE OF GOOD WILL ON THE CLIMATE CRISIS

## Overview

A new cry for the poor and our common home. Today, 4 October 2023, on the liturgical feast of the Saint whose name he chose, Pope Francis offers us *Laudate Deum*, an apostolic exhortation that specifies and completes the encyclical *Laudato si'*, published in May 2015.

Francis himself explains the title of the letter in the concluding paragraph of the apostolic exhortation. "Praise God" is the title of this letter. For when human beings claim to take God's place, they become their own worst enemies" (73).

Eight years after *Laudato si'*, and based on the reflections and events of this time, the Pope reiterates and further develops the themes from his second encyclical in which he expressed his "heartfelt concerns about the care of our common home". A decision taken because, he says, "I have realised that our responses have not been adequate, while the world in which we live is collapsing and may be nearing the breaking point." He also adds that "it is indubitable that the impact of climate change will increasingly prejudice the lives and families of many persons. We will feel its effects in the areas of healthcare, sources of employment, access to resources, housing, forced migrations, etc." (2).

The Pope does not fail to repeatedly emphasise how the poor and the most vulnerable suffer most from the consequences of climate change, even though they are less responsible for it. "How can we forget that Africa, home to more than half of the world's poorest people, is responsible for a minimal portion of historic emissions?" he says (9).

In the six chapters and 73 paragraphs of *Laudate Deum*, Pope Francis calls all of us, and especially those in power, to co-responsibility and to act before it is too late. The Pope emphatically reiterates that "It is no longer possible to doubt the human – "anthropic" – origin of climate change" (11) and observes an advancement of the "technocratic paradigm", that he already mentioned in *Laudato si'*, which "consists in thinking as if reality, goodness and truth automatically flow from technological and economic power as such" (20).

Faced with such a situation, the Pontiff emphasises the weakness of international politics, calling for a reconfiguration of multilateralism leading to a "multilateralism 'from below' and not simply one determined by the elites of power. The demands that rise up from below throughout the world, where activists from very different countries help and support one another, can end up pressuring the sources of power." The Pope adds that "unless citizens control political power – national, regional and municipal – it will not be possible to control damage to the environment" (38).

Referring to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Pope also says that it is "regrettable that global crises are being squandered when they could be the occasions to bring about beneficial changes" (36). The Pope dedicates a chapter to the climate conferences without hiding that there were poor results in some cases - he cites, for example, the "disappointment of COP25 in Madrid" but also highlights some progress, such as the step forward achieved at COP27 in Sharm El Sheikh in consolidating a system for financing "loss and damage" in countries most affected by climate disasters".

Today, he says, there is a need for new mechanisms because "the accords have been poorly implemented, due to lack of suitable mechanisms for oversight, periodic review and penalties in cases of noncompliance" (52).

The fifth chapter is focused on COP 28. Pope Francis believes this conference may "represent a change of direction, showing that everything done since 1992 was in fact serious and worth the effort, or else it will be a great disappointment and jeopardise whatever good has been achieved thus far" (54). He adds: "We must move beyond the mentality of appearing to be concerned but not having the courage needed to produce substantial changes" (56).

In the last chapter, the Pope reminds the Catholic faithful of "the motivations born of their faith. I encourage my brothers and sisters of other religions to do the same, since we know that authentic faith not only gives strength to the human heart, but also transforms life, transfigures our goals and sheds light on our relationship to others and with creation as a whole" (61).

## **Chapter-by-Chapter Summary**

### **First Chapter - The Global Climate Crisis**

In the first chapter of *Laudate Deum*, Francis speaks of The Global Climate Crisis, stating that "Despite all attempts to deny, conceal, gloss over or relativise the issue, the signs of climate change are here and increasingly evident". The Pope also highlights how it is "verifiable that specific climate changes provoked by humanity are notably heightening the probability of extreme phenomena that are increasingly frequent and intense" (5). He also replies to those who "have chosen to deride these facts", saying that we are "experiencing is an unusual acceleration of warming, at such a speed that it will take only one generation – not centuries or millennia – in order to verify it" [...] probably in a few years many populations will have to move their homes because of these facts" (6).

Among the theses refuted by Pope Francis are those who place responsibility on the poor, "since they have many children, and even attempt to resolve the problem by mutilating women in less developed countries. As usual, it would seem that everything is the fault of the poor. Yet the reality is that a low, richer percentage of the planet contaminates more than the poorest 50% of the total world population, and that per capita emissions of the richer countries are much greater than those of the poorer ones" (9).

Citing recent data and studies, the Pope strongly reaffirms the human origin of climate change, which can no longer be doubted. Over the past 50 years, a dramatic acceleration of greenhouse gases has been observed, "the temperature has risen at an unprecedented speed, greater than any time over the past two thousand years. In this period, the trend was a warming of 0.15° C per decade, double that of the last 150 years [...] At this rate, it is possible that in just ten years we will reach the recommended maximum global ceiling of 1.5°" (12).

The correlation is obvious to Pope Francis, who attributes the cause of the rapid and dramatic changes to "the enormous novelties that have to do with unchecked human intervention on nature in the past two centuries" (14). He states: "Regrettably, the climate crisis is not exactly a matter that interests the great economic powers, whose concern is with the greatest profit possible at minimal cost and in the shortest amount of time" (13).

Regarding many climate-related phenomena, it will not be possible to "halt the enormous damage we have caused. We barely have time to prevent even more tragic damage" (16). The Pope urges for a broader perspective that "can enable us to esteem the marvels of progress, but also to pay serious attention to other effects that were probably unimaginable a century ago." What is being asked of us is nothing other than a certain responsibility for the legacy we will leave behind once we pass from this world" (18). Furthermore, the Pope reiterates the two lessons learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic: 'Everything is connected' and 'No one is saved alone'.

## **Second chapter - A Growing Technocratic Paradigm**

In this chapter, Pope Francis returns to talk about the technocratic paradigm, which unfortunately continues to advance. "The greater problem is the ideology underlying an obsession: to increase human power beyond anything imaginable, before which nonhuman reality is a mere resource at its disposal" (22). The Pope also warns of how humanity has never "had such power over itself, yet nothing ensures that it will be used wisely, particularly when we consider how it is currently being used" (23). He also says that "The ethical decadence of real power is disguised thanks to marketing and false information, useful tools in the hands of those with greater resources to employ them to shape public opinion" (29). This happens when plans are made to undertake a project involving significant changes in the environment or high levels of contamination, "one raises the hopes of the people of that area by speaking of the local progress that it will be able to generate [...] Yet in reality there does not seem to be any true interest in the future of these people, since they are not clearly told that the project will result in the clearing of their lands, a decline in the quality of their lives" (29).

The "mentality of maximum gain at minimal cost disguised in terms of reasonableness, progress and illusory promises, makes impossible any sincere concern for our common home and any real preoccupation about assisting the poor and the needy discarded by our society" (31).

## **Third Chapter - The Weakness of International Politics**

The weakness shown by international politics in the face of the current situation calls for a revision of the dynamics that govern it. Pope Francis reiterates that "preference should be given to multilateral agreements between States". However, multilateralism should not be seen as a "world authority concentrated in one person or in an elite with excessive power". The possibility of some form of world authority regulated by law, should include, above all "more effective world organisations, equipped with the power to provide for the global common good, the elimination of hunger and poverty and the sure defence of fundamental human rights" (35).

The Pope states that multilateralism must take into account the new global situation and also recognises that "many groups and organisations within civil society help to compensate for the shortcomings of the international community, its lack of coordination in complex situations, and its lack of attention to fundamental human rights" (37). What is needed is a multilateralism "from below and not simply one determined by the elites of power". We need to have also a "different framework for effective cooperation", as it is urgent to respond to new problems and to react with global mechanisms to the environmental, public health, cultural and social challenges" (42).

"All this presupposes the development of a new procedure for decision-making and legitimising those decisions" and "spaces for conversation, consultation, arbitration, conflict resolution and supervision, and, in the end, a sort of increased "democratisation" in the global context, so that the various situations can be expressed and included" (43).

## **Fourth chapter - Climate Conferences: Progress and Failures**

The Pope analyses the progress and disappointments related to the various climate conferences, starting from the 1992 Rio de Janeiro Conference, which led to the adoption of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), to the COP27 in Sharm El Sheikh.

According to the Pope, during these years, there was an abundance of "recommendations" whose actual effect was hardly foreseeable. Proposals tending to ensure "a rapid and effective transition to alternative and less polluting forms of energy made no progress" (49). The Conference held last year in Egypt "was one more example of the difficulty of negotiations". Despite the steps forward in consolidating a system for financing "loss and damage" in countries most affected by climate disasters, "too, many points remained imprecise, above all the concrete responsibility of the countries that have to contribute" (51).

Therefore, Francis urges for new and improved mechanisms: "Today we can continue to state that the accords have been poorly implemented, due to lack of suitable mechanisms for oversight, periodic review and penalties in cases of noncompliance" (52).

## **Fifth Chapter - What to Expect from COP28 in Dubai?**

The Pope begins this chapter by noting how the upcoming COP28 will be hosted by such great exporters of fossil fuels as the United Arab Emirates. But "to say that there is nothing to hope for would be suicidal, for it would mean exposing all humanity, especially the poorest, to the worst impacts of climate change" (53). The Pope says that this conference can be a "change of direction", but at the same time he underlines how "we must move beyond the mentality of appearing to be concerned but not having the courage needed to produce substantial changes" (56).

"To seek only a technical remedy to each environmental problem which comes up is to separate what is in reality interconnected and to mask the true and deepest problems of the global system". He states: "we risk remaining trapped in the mindset of pasting and papering over cracks, while beneath the surface there is a continuing deterioration to which we continue to contribute. To suppose that all problems in the future will be able to be solved by new technical interventions is a form of homicidal pragmatism, like pushing a snowball down a hill" (57).

Therefore, the Pope hopes that COP28 will bring "binding forms of energy transition that meet three conditions: that they are efficient, obligatory and readily monitored" (59).

## **Sixth Chapter - Spiritual Motivations**

The apostolic exhortation concludes with a chapter in which he reminds "the Catholic faithful of the motivations born of their faith. I encourage my brothers and sisters of other religions to do the same" (61).

The Pope invites everyone "to accompany this pilgrimage of reconciliation with the world that is our home and to help make it more beautiful because that commitment has to do with our personal dignity and highest values" (69). "Every little bit helps, and avoiding an increase of a tenth of a degree in the global temperature would already suffice to alleviate some suffering for many people" (70).

Pope Francis concludes by recalling 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 the poorest countries. "We can state that a broad change in the irresponsible lifestyle connected with the Western model would have a significant long-term impact. As a result, along with indispensable political decisions, we would be making progress along the way to genuine care for one another" (72).