



PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE

Remarks on *Laudato si'* to Child-Focused Agencies

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Thank you for this opportunity to address you. I have prepared some brief remarks[1] to summarize the insights of *Laudato si'* into the choices we have to make today to leave future generations a better "common home." Then I will offer a child-focused interpretation of the encyclical. I hope this will stimulate your thinking as you contribute to the growing social movement to fight climate change.

A. How the Encyclical Talks about Children and the Future of our Common Home

You are probably aware of the broad vision of *Laudato si'*. Among the main points made by Pope Francis are that

- humanity is not separate from the environment in which we live; rather humanity and the natural environment are one;
- the accelerating change in climate is undeniable, catastrophic, worsened by human activities, but also amenable to human intervention;
- the grave errors that increase our disastrous indifference to the environment include a throwaway-culture of consumerism, and a naïve confidence that technological advances and undirected commercial markets will inevitably solve our environmental problems;
- we must address the ethical nature of our crisis, both through dialogue, and by recovering our fundamental spiritual dimension.

As Pope Francis said in an earlier document, *Evangelii Gaudium*,[2] "Realities are more important than ideas." *Laudato si'* is not an abstract document. It resonates with our lived human experience. And that includes the experience of family life.

The Holy Father's embrace of the multi-generational human family resonates very strongly with me as an African. Many African traditional cultures share a belief in the real presence among us of the generations who have gone before us and those who will be born later. Today's family contains more than just those who are alive right now.

So I sense the pain in his words when he laments the consequences for children when families are forced to migrate after local animals and plants disappear due to changes in climate; "this in turn affects the livelihood of the poor, who are then forced to leave their homes, with great uncertainty for their future and that of their children" (§25). What anguish

we should feel that thousands of plant and animal species are lost every year, so our children will never see them (§33).

The Holy Father is deeply critical of parents who selfishly waste resources on what is not really needed, leaving their children with less chance to build lives of their own later on (§162). He ties this in with the throw-away culture which not only allows the sexual exploitation of children but also the "abandonment of the elderly who no longer serve our interests... Is it not the same relativistic logic which justifies buying the organs of the poor for resale or use in experimentation, or eliminating children because they are not what their parents wanted?" (§123).

In contrast to these remarks, Pope Francis is confident that planning can improve when local populations are fully involved, because "they are concerned about their own future and that of their children, and can consider goals transcending immediate economic interest" (§183). Cooperatives can also attend to the needs of future generations while they generate "a greater sense of responsibility, a strong sense of community, a readiness to protect others, a spirit of creativity and a deep love for the land. They are also concerned about what they will eventually leave to their children and grandchildren" (§179).

Both the critical remarks and the avenues of solution cluster around the Pope's key question: what sort of world will we bequeath to future generations (§160). I will turn to this in detail in the next section.

B. The Encyclical through the Eyes of a Child

As I have shown, both in vocabulary and in topics, *Laudato si'* takes children into account. But we can go further. We can explore the perspective of a child as a key to understanding the encyclical.

Commentators have already noticed a simple elegance in the style of *Laudato si'* and even a child-like quality. For instance, there are similarities between important points in the encyclical and the insights of the popular 1988 book by American author Robert Fulghum called *All I Ever Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. Their sage advice is that we should recover the lessons we all learn as children, lessons like "Share. Be kind. Clean up after yourself. All things in moderation. Make time for wonder." [3]

Care is central; it is part of the title, "Care for our Common Home." It is repeated dozens of times. This is very important. Care goes further than "stewardship" (mentioned just twice in the English version). Good stewards take responsibility and fulfil their obligations to manage and to render an account. But one can be a good steward without feeling connected. If one *cares*, however, one is connected. To *care* is to allow oneself to be affected by another, so much so that one's path and priorities change. Children understand these bonds:

We're all connected. Plants and animals and human beings; strangers and friends and enemies; God and humanity and the world. Children's faith in things like magic or the impossible comes directly from that belief that everything is connected. So does their sense of morality. It's not only that hurting people is bad. It's also, when your sister is sad, your parents are sad or even your dog is sad, you get sad, too. We're all deeply connected. [4]

With his *integral ecology*, the Pope emphasizes that we are completely connected, integrated, with everything and everyone. Thus he invokes care for our children to formulate his pivotal question about the environment: "What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up?" (§160).

We care about our children; we care for our children, so much so that parents will sacrifice enormously – even their lives – to ensure the safety and flourishing of their children. (Remember the beautiful lesson in *Le Petit prince* of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry: the fox teaches the boy that the flower has meaning in relation to his care for it.) With caring, the hard line between self and other softens, blurs, even disappears.

So when we cast aside anything precious in the world, we destroy part of ourselves too because we are completely connected. This helps to explain why the Church promotes the greatest respect for human life, from conception to natural death. Destruction of human life at any stage violates the absolutely fundamental human dignity upon which all human rights and responsibilities rest.

The Pope could have asked his pivotal question ("What kind of world...") in a different manner. His chosen formulation – care for and about our children and the world that future generations will inherit – is how he conveys the seriousness of the looming catastrophe. It is almost parable-like: "There once was a society that forgot to care for its children..."

Thinking about the needs and the world of children now and yet to be born is also an index of justice. The common good is not just horizontal (the good of everyone now) but vertical (the good of future generations). Indeed, some North American indigenous peoples insist on thinking about seven generations onwards: today's decisions must consider consequences for the next seven generations. Some might say that this would eliminate all innovation because it sets too high a demand for predicting the unpredictable. But look at it this way: knowing that processes have cumulative effects, the seven-generation requirement would make us react quickly to modest measurements – for instance, a small amount of pollution in the first few years of a new process – rather than wait until the negative consequences are much larger, affecting our grandchildren and their children. Pope Francis agrees; "The burden of proof" on the latest advancements, he writes, "is effectively reversed", our immediate responsibility "to demonstrate that the proposed activity will not cause serious harm to the environment or to those who inhabit it" (§187).

Laudato si' brings us back to basics, to the fundamentals of human existence. Often children approach these basics innocently, yet profoundly, when they ask "Why?" Pope Francis is unafraid of this and other huge questions that children also ask: "What is the purpose of our life in this world? Why are we here? What is the goal of our work and all our efforts? What need does the earth have of us?" (§160). Indeed, in *Laudato si'* he rejoices in such questions as the beginning of the dialogues our world so desperately need.

The Holy Father wishes to inspire a change of minds and hearts. Through our children's eyes we can discover once again the beauty, the wonder, the majesty of our planet and our existence, the dazzling panoply of life. Through their questions and challenges we are brought face to face with our hypocrisies, the compromises we have made to our values, the choices we need re-examine in light of what we know in our hearts to be right and true.

This child-like lens turns us to who we are as the adults of today: "It is no longer enough, then, simply to state that we should be concerned for future generations. We need to see that what is at stake is our own dignity. Leaving an inhabitable planet to future generations is, first and foremost, up to us. The issue is one which dramatically affects us, for it has to do with the ultimate meaning of our earthly sojourn" (§160).

C. A Common Home for All

In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis invites us into a very similar meditation. What will make us real, he says, what will make us the people we were born and called to be, is our dedication to one another, our willingness to sacrifice for our children and all the children that will ever

walk on this world, whether today or in the future. "Even the fleeting life of the least of beings is the object of God's love," says Pope Francis (§77), and should be objects of human love too.

As the Pope acknowledges, the path before us is a challenging one, one that demands-- particularly from the developed world—humility, sobriety and sacrifice, that all may share in the boundless wonders and blessings that God has intended for us in his creation, and for many millennia to come.

Your organizations focus on children. I hope you feel inspired to bring your understanding and profound experience with children into the growing social movement to fight climate change. I know you will have many opportunities to do so. Children and youth are yearning to make a difference in many countries. Your organizations – and the Church too – must collaborate with them and enhance their efforts. Their stake in the climate change battle is greater than ours! The UN Climate Change Conference (COP21) in Paris, from 30 November to 11 December of this year, is a key moment. But let us not focus only on that event. We are all brothers and sisters – the adults of today, our children, those who have gone before and those who will come after. We are one family. I pray for God to bless us as we strive to take care of our common home. Thank you.

[1] In the preparation of this text, I am very happy and grateful to acknowledge the writing and editing generously undertaken by Fr. Jim McDermott S.J. (Los Angeles) and Mr. Robert Czerny (Ottawa).

[2] Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013.
http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html

[3] <http://americamagazine.org/content/dispatches/our-kids-can-help-us-understand-laudato-si>

[4] *ibid.*

