

**The Encyclical Launch, an Appeal to be Heard**  
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The long awaited encyclical on human ecology promulgated on 18 June is entitled [LAUDATO SI'](#), i.e., "BE PRAISED...my lord through all your creatures."

*This*, in itself, is a splendid tribute to St. Francis of Assisi. Encyclicals are usually published with a title in Latin. Here, this reference to the Canticle to All Creatures is inscribed in Umbrian, the dialect in which Francis sang his joyful hymn to the universe in those hours when his body was racked with pain, his eyes cauterized and his mind fully aware that brother death awaited him.

In a sense, this title so enunciated allows his words to echo down to us through the centuries to recapitulate for our own time and in our own lives his unique presence to the natural world. He addressed the cosmos as brothers: wind, air, cloud and storm and to sisters: moon and water, humble and pure.

For Francis, the natural world was addressed not as a collection of objects to be commodified, used and consumed but as a community of beings to be entered.

It has been well proposed that for Francis the natural world was a gospel, i.e., the proclamation of essential truth and a guidance as to how to live the finite faithfully.

"Nature became his gospel because in it he could see with uncommon clarity the essence of his vision. It was to re-assert man's temporality in the wake of the illusory belief in a manufactured eternity."<sup>i</sup>

We who live in this 21<sup>st</sup> century have in a significant manner built our world view on the composed notions of unlimited growth and endless resources. Presently we are all being called to reflect on the relatively brief period of the last two hundred years of human development and to rethink our guiding principles and strategies for an innovative future. It is nothing less than the natural world itself that presently imposes upon us the imperative of such a reevaluation under its instructive rubric of climate change. In terms of the overarching history of earth emergence and of human existence, the challenge is "to preserve a planet similar to that on which civilization developed and to which life on Earth adapted."<sup>ii</sup>

Hence, at this time, it is proper for the Church to appeal to all humanity with a voice from its own treasured traditions. We have all entered a millennium in which resource competition in a climate constrained world threatens to dissolve the fabric of human society and devastate the very order of creation of which Francis of Assisi so beautifully sung. It is an appropriate time for the human community to receive a letter entitled: *LAUDATO SI' - Praise Be To You: On Care for Our Common Home*.

## Comments and Commentary

Since the issuance of the encyclical we have all experienced the maelstrom of response and reaction mediated by specific interests and designed for determined effect. They have ranged in their genre from political cartoons such as a depicted scroll descending from the heavens emblazoned with the title: “Inconvenient Encyclical” reminiscent of Vice President Al Gore’s documentary: “Inconvenient Truth” to newspaper op-ed articles such as “The Pope’s Climate Error” which presented a vigorous and subtle defense of business as usual.<sup>iii</sup> In our age of instant media, all these expressions would constitute “commentary” on the encyclical. Such written impressions have little to do with the type of detailed analysis and interpretation reserved in former times for a commentary as such. Indeed, a proper commentary is a vintage document of considerable retrospect.

The focus of this writing is not the encyclical as such but the presentations of the speakers at the actual launch of the encyclical in Paul VI Hall at the Vatican. The encyclical is seen through the lens of these experts and my writing might best be considered the notes of an informed auditor. As in any note taking, it is in the margins that one scribbles the “take home” insights, the connections bridging concepts with experience, the impressions that resonant with a wider comprehension of things.

This select panel was composed of an agnostic scientist, an Orthodox theologian, a CEO business expert, and a concerned teacher whose presentations covered the fields of science, theology, business and education respectively. The prelate presenter, H.E. Peter Cardinal Kodwo Apiah Turkson, President of the Pontifical Council of Justice and Peace offered a comprehensive outline of the encyclical that would best be referenced in a commentary focused on the encyclical text as such.

**Science: Dr. Hans Joachim Schellnhuber, Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, Germany; Santa Fe Institute for Complex Systems Research, USA**

The presentation of Professor Schellnhuber, founder of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research (PIK) offered an overview of the paleoclimate evidence of on-going climate change and earth adaptation that accompanied the emergence and journey of the human. In this, he referenced the Sumatran Toba eruption/extinction of 74,000 years ago. He did so in part to illustrate the tenuous relationship of life on earth and climate change impacts. This reference illustrated his major point that in contrast to other periods of geologic time, the post glacial Holocene Epoch of the last 11,700 years offered life on earth and its florescence, a relatively stable climate and congenial milieu for development. He goes on to caution us on the impending climate change effects disruptive of earth systems caused by current and sustained anthropogenic emissions. In explaining a power-point graft which illustrated climate change projections, he stated:

“While for many millennia, human civilization has had the privilege to relish a largely stable Earth temperature (in blue), we now are on the track to abandon this climate paradise, as can be seen by the sharp increase in temperature (in black). Depending on the choices we make today, in our future we may follow the green path, respecting the 2 degree C guardrail, or—if we continue with business as usual—greenhouse gas emissions will lead us along the red path, past 4 degrees C by the end of this century and with even higher warming levels in store after that.”

An interesting corollary to this presentation came during the question and answer period with particular regard to his reference to “the 2 degree C guardrail” as the preferred action plan forward “to avoid the most dangerous effects of climate change” as mandated in Article 2 of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UN FCCC).

In view of the fact that a most recent June 1-11, 2015 UN FCCC inter-session’s Structured Expert Dialogue (SED) stated: “The ‘guardrail’ concept, in which up to 2 degree C of warming is considered safe, is inadequate and would therefore be better seen as an upper limit, a ‘defence line’ that needs to be stringently defended, while less warming would be preferable.”<sup>iv</sup>—Dr. Schellnhuber was questioned in regard to his 2 degree C guardrail recommendation. He replied that to achieve a 1.5 degree C limit to global warming as petitioned by the most vulnerable nations would be presently possible but its probability would hinge on “an act of the will” by humanity. This response seemed to me to emphatically state the importance of this encyclical’s promulgation at this precise time in history.

**Theology: H.E. Dr. Professor John Zizioulas, Eastern Orthodox Metropolitan of Pergamon**

The intervention of His Excellency, offered a myriad of themes significant for the ecumenical environmental dialogue. Some of which themes such as the role of the Holy Eucharist in the apostolic traditions and its central place in the cultivation of an “ecological ethos” would take attentive reflection and considerable time to express adequately. One might best quote one such cited insight. “As Gregory Palamas and other Greek Fathers would put it, the whole of creation is permeated by God’s presence...the human being leads this cosmic chorus...as a priest of creation.”

This is but a glimpse of Patristic sensitivity to human life as designed for an intimate relation to the phenomenal order of things in the very process of its divinization. It is significant that the varied and culturally diverse Fathers of the Church were determined in their efforts to discount dichotomies which would have fractured spirit from matter, divinity from humanity and Word from cosmos. It is enough for our purposes to confirm that our tradition is one which consistently confirms Divine intimacy to the natural world, human integration in that world and above all the integrity of the order of creation as revelatory of God.

In this regard, it is important that we ourselves “think again” and recognize how germane is our tradition of thought and how unique is its potential to contribute to environmental reflection

and ecological resolve. It may well be said that the problematique of climate change poses unprecedented challenges for the revision of thought in an age similar to the Patristic Period plagued with dichotomies that distorted the meaning and purpose of the universe and the role of the human within it.

**Education: Valeria Martano, historian, educator and member of the community of Sant'Egidio**

Valeria Martano's presentation was dramatic in its depictions of currently experienced distortions of the life and its meaning consequent to a human-contrived "distance" from the natural world. In this, Ms. Martano reiterates the encyclical's refrain: "Ambiente umano e l'ambiente naturale si degradano insieme." The ambiance of the human is intimate to the milieu of natural world. Denigration of the environment is a diminishment of human existence. This well echoes the theme of "integral ecology" wherein earth systems, the interrelated intricacies of the natural world and our social systems, the relations born of the human mode of conscious awareness are seen as intimate in their origin and destiny.

From the perspective of an educator, we are offered vivid insights into the effects of our environmental crisis which at its heart is best understood as the alienation of the human community from the earth community. We are informed of the "fatigue of life," weariness in facing a conflicted and fragmented world. There is anger and exclusion in the elderly expelled from the social fabric and in youth whose lives confront violence and alienation from which they readily escape into virtual reality. Signs of our times! There are also signs that we can reverse these trends. In the urban landscape, the Community of Sant'Egidio has created spaces of natural beauty for the elderly and for children. The effort is to retrieve again the intimate relationship between the natural world and our human mode of being. This essential human relationship to the natural world has been powerfully described in the words of Thomas Berry: "In a special manner, humans have not only a need for but a right of access to the natural world to provide not only the physical need of humans but also the wonder needed by human intelligence, the beauty needed by human imagination, and the intimacy needed by human emotions for personal fulfillment."

**Business: Dr. Carolyn Woo, CEO and President of Catholic Relief Services and former Dean of the Mendoza College of Business, University of Notre Dame**

Dr. Woo stated that "the encyclical is asking business to embrace the idea of sustainable development." The concept of sustainable development can be defined in various ways. One such definition would state that sustainable development is achieved when social development and environmental protection are seen as integral to human development. This, I believe, was captured in the author's reference to the adoption of the "triple bottom line" current in some business practices. The central role of the business community in creating a new sense of human development is defined in efforts to incorporate economic feasibility, environmental integrity and social equity in promoting alternative pathways for sustainable development over-against business as usual models based on carbon intensive development.

Her presentation notes that business as a noble enterprise finds a particular role in “the creation of jobs as an essential part of its service to the common good.” Today more people are presently employed in solar energy production and service than in the fossil fuel industry. Hence, the sense of business transition and economic transformation has already begun significantly with particular reference to the energy sector.

The truth is that those countries whether developed or developing which reach the age of renewable sources of energy that will not denigrate the common legacy of the earth’s atmosphere will be those who offer their people better lives. They will be free from the cost of and dependence on fossil fuel. Poverty alleviation and development will be supported by a new paradigm of progress. There will be no conflicts over sun, wave and wind energy resources. The challenge posed by climate change is at the same time an opportunity for the world as a whole to prepare and move toward sustainable pathways of development supported by environmentally sound technologies based on renewable resources.

However one should not underestimate the change in human awareness that such a transition will demand. Hence, the encyclical calls the faithful and invites humanity to live life on the basis on which life has been granted to us. It does so with the assurance that in this endeavor, a sense of the sacred will sustain us. Resonant with the Pontiff’s reassurance that divine light and wisdom will accompany us are the words of Thomas Berry which profoundly confirm the depth of the challenge and the difficulties of the task before us.

“The deep psychic change needed to withdraw us from the fascination of the industrial world, and the deceptive gifts that it gives us, is too difficult for simply the avoidance of its difficulties or the attractions of its benefits. Eventually only our sense of the sacred will save us.”<sup>v</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> *Francis: A Saint’s Way*, James Cowan (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2001) p. 100.

<sup>ii</sup> The voice of science could not be more precise. Yet we are persuaded not to take heed. “If humanity wishes to preserve a planet similar to that on which civilization developed and to which life on Earth has adapted, paleoclimate evidence and on-going climate change suggest that CO<sub>2</sub> will need to be reduced from its current 385 ppm (The measurement as of March 2011 was 392.4 ppm. And is currently 400 ppm) to at most 350 ppm.” *Target Atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>: Where Should Humanity Aim?* James Hansen, Makiko Sato, Pushker Kharecha, et alia. [Open Atmospheric Science Journal](#), vol. 2 (2008).

<sup>iii</sup> Joseph Heath, *The New York Times*, Saturday, June 20, 2015, p. A19.

<sup>iv</sup> Report on the structured expert dialogue on the 2013-2015 review—document FCCC/SB/2015/INF.1, p.18.

<sup>v</sup> Kathleen Deignan, *When the Trees Say Nothing: Writings on Nature* (Sorin Books, Notre Dame, IN, 2003) pp.18-19.