

Ecological conversion: Called to hope and spurred to action

A response to *Laudato Si'*

Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns

In this Encyclical, I would like to enter into dialogue with all people about our common home. (3)

With these words, Pope Francis begins his momentous letter, “*Laudato Si'* – On the Care of Our Common Home.” While a significant teaching for all Catholics on our responsibility to care for God’s creation, the Holy Father addresses the encyclical to “every living person on this planet” and invites all people of good will to act urgently on behalf of Earth, on behalf of future generations, and especially on behalf of justice for poor and marginalized people who are most impacted by the destructive power of climate change and environmental destruction.

We require a new and universal solidarity. As the bishops of Southern Africa have stated: “Everyone’s talents and involvement are needed to redress the damage caused by human abuse of God’s creation.” I urgently appeal, then, for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. (14)

Building a consensus for concrete action

Maryknoll missionaries have been privileged to serve God’s people in many corners of the earth, most often on the margins with the people who are excluded from tables of power and whose lives are considered expendable in the dominant economic system. This lived experience of our missionaries informs all the statements of Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns, such as our 2009 reflection “Global economy imperils Earth, humanity” which parallels the message of Pope Francis: *At the heart of the current global social and ecological crises is an economic system that tries to lock interconnected societies into unsustainable patterns of production, overconsumption and waste generation, all driven by the mandate to grow.*

In preparation for this encyclical, a survey on the impact of climate change was sent to Maryknollers around the world; more than 100 missionaries, Affiliates and staff responded, sending in their



“Last year the monsoons were nowhere near as abundant as they usually are and since they are delayed this year, people are worried. ... [but as we] experience a shortage of water in the major cities, the big rivers ... and many of the tributaries are flowing full speed (from the melting snows in the Himalayas?) and gouging out great swaths of farm land, threatening a whole way of life for millions of people. Those who lose everything flock to Dhaka to seek work. This city of approximately 16 million is already crowded beyond belief. There is truly no room to spare, and still they come...”

Sr. Claudette LaVerdiere, MM, Bangladesh

observations on issues ranging from access to water, access to food, air quality, sea levels and migration.

The encyclical acknowledges the “solid consensus” of the scientific community – that without immediate and sustained action, we are headed towards disaster. Pope Francis offers an urgent warning about the current state of our world: “[E]ach year hundreds of millions of tons of waste are generated, much of it non-biodegradable, highly toxic and radioactive....The earth, our home, is beginning to look more like an immense pile of filth.” (21) He challenges us to be attuned to “the moral imperative of assessing the impact of our every action and personal decision on the world around us” (208) and to let our actions reflect a sincere care and respect for all of God’s creation.

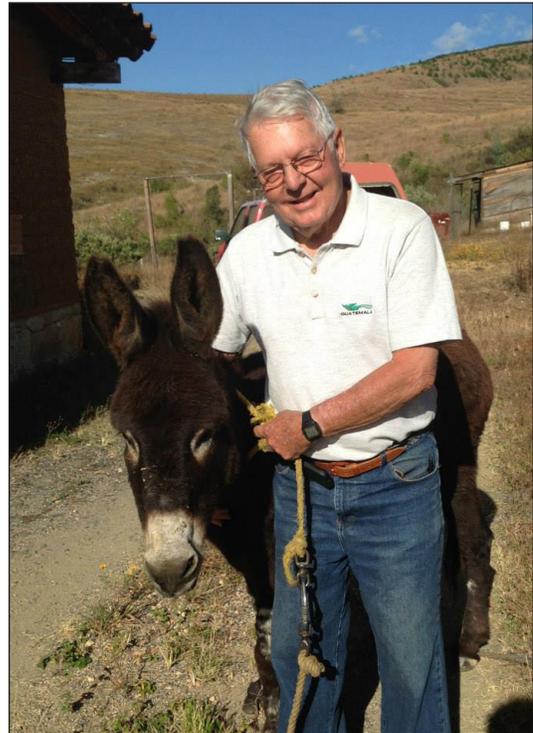
But all is not lost – Pope Francis clearly conveys his hope that change is possible and his belief in our potential: “Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new start, despite their mental and social conditioning. We are able to take an honest look at ourselves, to acknowledge our deep dissatisfaction, and to embark on new paths to authentic freedom.” (205) Furthermore, “by developing our individual, God-given capacities, an ecological conversion can inspire us to greater creativity and enthusiasm in resolving the world’s problems...” (220)

Abundant living through ecological solidarity

Laudato Si’ is a clarion call for a personal conversion within each of us, as building blocks, to shape a world governed by sustainable economic policies and environmental protections. Pope Francis emphasizes that it is not enough for us to go through the motions of change – we are in need of a cultural overhaul and a spiritual revolution. Individualism and rampant consumerism have led to decisions based on short-term gains and private interests rather than sustainability or the common good.

This personal conversion encompasses a reevaluation of our personal priorities and actions, and branches out to a renewal of our commitment to our families, our communities, our faiths and all of God’s creation: “We must regain the conviction that we need one another, that we have a shared responsibility for others and the world, and that being good and decent are worth it.” (229)

The Holy Father makes concrete suggestions for changing our lifestyle through “little daily actions,” such as using less heating and instead wearing warmer clothes, cooking only enough food to eat without wasting, separating trash from recycling, using public transportation options or carpooling, planting trees, turning off lights that are not being used, each of these things reflecting the “nobility in the duty to care for creation,” (211) Such choices, according to Pope Francis, “reflect a generous and



“The people in our pueblo are very much aware of these changes in the patterns of the rains and increased temperatures because it affects so much their crops and daily lives.”

*Pat Denevan, Maryknoll Affiliate,
returned Maryknoll lay missionary, Oaxaca, Mexico*

worthy creativity which brings out the best in human beings.” He notes that we need not be afraid of having less and living a simpler lifestyle because it “is not a lesser life or one lived with less intensity. On the contrary, it is a way of living life to the full.” (223)

Political leadership

Laudato Si' highlights the importance of courageous political leadership at the local, national, and international level to address climate change and other environmental degradation. Pope Francis in particular underscores how our economic policies contribute to poverty and environmental degradation and that we must consider a new vision of the economy that recognizes Earth's limits. The encyclical emphasizes the often overlooked principle of subsidiarity: as much as possible, political decisions should be made at a local level by the people who are most affected. Around the world, Maryknoll missionaries see how families, communities and the environment suffer due to choices made in faraway places, often by people who have never even visited the affected locations. “There is a need to respect the rights of peoples and cultures” and include “the constant and active involvement of local people from within their proper culture.” (144)

The conventional wisdom of political elites celebrates economic growth as an end in itself and has laid the foundation for the current environmental crisis the world faces. The excesses of unrestrained free markets have exposed the fundamental flaws in an economic system that prioritizes private property over the common good. But, as Pope Francis writes, there is a need for “a circular model of production capable of preserving resources for present and future generations, while limiting as much as possible the use of nonrenewable resources, moderating their consumption, maximizing their efficient use, reusing and recycling them.” (22)

Policy solutions

The current crisis demands real solutions that put impoverished people and creation at the center. The Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns, via our Faith Economy Ecology project, works with faith-based, environmental, labor, community groups and other organizations to establish the foundation for comprehensive change covering a number of key issues:

International climate policies

We seek a **robust climate agreement** that is binding, ambitious, and that can keep the planet below a 2 degrees C increase. Climate financing for least developed countries, island nations, and Sub-Saharan Africa with a 50/50 split between adaptation and mitigation funding is critical to preventing and



“The rain patterns are not the same. The people cannot depend on the rains being as they were in the past. Some of the past months are the hottest that I can remember. The fishermen on Lake Victoria are experiencing a general downturn in their traditional catch of fish, and typhoid is very much in evident because of the lessening quality of the water.”

Fr. Jim Eble, MM, Tanzania
Photo: Adam Jones, Ph.D., CC BY-SA 3.0

adapting to climate-related events. The **Green Climate Fund (GCF)**, if fully funded, can be a powerful driver of finance to the most vulnerable countries. It has a strong focus on gender, and affected countries have a powerful seat at the table. We also need strong **national level policies** in place such as a carbon tax or cap with a 100 percent dividend to favor low-income residents.

By **expanding the definition of refugees** to include climate refugees, the UN can ensure aid for communities displaced by catastrophic weather events from climate change.

Alternative energy

It is time for **heavy investment in alternative energy that does not harm creation or vulnerable communities**. We need to move away from subsidizing the exploration, extraction and development of fossil fuels and instead promote alternative energy sources, mass transportation, agro-ecological farming and similar approaches designed to reduce energy use.

An economy of right relationship

We can build an **economy of thriving and resilient communities** through promotion and protection of local economies. Communities should have a voice in how investments are structured. Greater attention must be given to developing cooperatives, local businesses and food systems, and to ensuring access to a social safety net. We call for an **end to excessive financial speculation**. A financial transaction tax would both help curb excessive speculation that destabilizes markets and generate much-needed revenue to fund the GCF and related initiatives.

Global economic policies need reform to be in right relationship with communities and creation. Investments need to be at the service of creation and people, not corporations. Trade and investment agreements have contributed to climate change and a degradation of public health and the environment, yet it is corporations that are given legal tools to protect their profit while communities and governments lack the tools to enforce environmental and public health laws.

A new path ahead

It is difficult to read *Laudato Si'* and not be inspired to become an even more active participant in changing the way humanity treats and cares for Earth, God's beautiful creation. The encyclical will be studied for many years to come, and serve as a manual on how to engage our spiritual and material selves in this essential transformation. The Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns looks forward to engaging in a dialogue over the coming months on critical policy changes as well as individual actions suggested by *Laudato Si'*. We must begin to bring the transformational change needed to protect the sacredness of all life on our common home. As Pope Francis encourages us: "Truly, much can be done!"

Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns: Peace, social justice and integrity of creation

Maryknoll Fathers & Brothers Maryknoll Sisters Maryknoll Lay Missioners

200 New York Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20001

202-832-1780 ogc@maryknoll.org

www.maryknollogc.org