

## Addressing an Ecological Urgency

By Rev. James H. Kroeger, MM

Pope Francis has issued a passionate call “to all people of good will on the climate crisis” that humanity is facing. Releasing his apostolic exhortation *Laudate Deum* (LD) on October 4, the feast of Saint Francis of Assisi (and the opening of the worldwide synod), the Pope enunciates a prophetic call to seriously address the contemporary environmental and ecological crises humanity is experiencing.

**Current Context.** This present document arrives eight years after Pope Francis published his *Laudato Sí* (LS), which bore the subtitle “On Care for Our Common Home” [2015 / 2023]. Francis says that he wants to share his “heartfelt concerns about the care of our common home” and “our suffering planet” (LD 2). Francis feels a deep sense of urgency because “our responses have not been adequate” and that “it is indubitable that the impact of climate change will increasingly prejudice the lives and families of many persons” (LD 2).

Various statements from around the world express the reality of the crisis. For example, Francis quotes the bishops of the United States who have stated that “our care for one another and our care for the earth are intimately bound together. Climate change is one of the principal challenges facing society and the global community. The effects of climate change are borne by the most vulnerable people, whether at home or around the world” (LD 3).

The bishops who assembled for the Synod for Amazonia (2019) succinctly stated: “Attacks on nature have consequences for people’s lives” (LD 3). This present crisis is “a drama that harms us all” or as the African bishops stated: climate change manifests “a tragic and striking example of structural sin” (LD 3). Thus, in this present document Francis seeks to gather together the information and reflection that has surfaced over the past eight years—and to spark a serious examination of conscience with a concomitant commitment to decisive action!

**Describing the Reality.** In the first of six sections of LD, entitled “The Global Climate Crisis,” Francis notes that “despite all attempts to deny, conceal, gloss over, or relativize the issue, the signs of climate change are here and increasingly evident” (LD 5). Francis offers a realistic analysis, neither a pessimistic or optimistic reading of the state of affairs. The evaluation is based on solid science and accurate statistics. For example, it is a fact that a small richer percentage of the planet contributes more contaminants than the poorest 50% of the total world population.

It is no longer possible to doubt the “human origins” of climate change; some of the effects of the climate crisis are already irreversible. Francis cites “the reduction of ice sheets, changes in ocean currents, deforestation in tropical rainforests, and the melting of permafrost in Russia” (LD 17). Facing these harsh realities, Francis asserts that “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” (LD 18). Francis repeatedly states two of his convictions: “Everything is connected” and “No one is saved alone” (LD 19).

**Critiquing a Paradigm.** In *Laudato Sí* the Pope presented the “technocratic paradigm” that underlies the current reality of environmental decay; this paradigm continues to advance. It is based on a false vision that idolizes technology and economic profit over human responsibility, values, and

conscience. The human family needs “a sound ethics, a culture and spirituality genuinely capable of setting limits and teaching clear-minded self-restraint” (LD 24).

Francis believes that we have much to learn from the indigenous cultures and their experience over centuries in various regions of the earth; an example would be “healthy and harmonious relationships” with all of created reality. This demands that humans must “rethink among other things the question of human power, its meaning and its limits” (LD 28). The Pope proposes these specific questions to everyone: “What is the meaning of my life? What is the meaning of my time on this earth? What is the ultimate meaning of all my work and effort?” (LD 33).

**International Politics and Climate Conferences.** These two areas are covered in sections three and four of *Laudate Deum*. Pope Francis readily admits that “goodness, together with love, justice and solidarity, are not achieved once and for all; they have to be realized each day” (LD 34). Genuine progress will require “effective world organizations, equipped with the power to provide for the global common good, the elimination of hunger and poverty, and the sure defense of fundamental human rights” (LD 35). Unfortunately, the reality is that such effective cooperation is painfully slow in emerging!

Climate conferences have been held for several decades, wherein representatives of more than 190 countries have met to address climate change issues. Some conferences proved successful, like the 1992 Rio de Janeiro Conference which led to the adoption of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Those countries that have joined the UNFCCC are popularly referred to as “COP” (Conference of the Parties); subsequent conferences are popularly designated by “COP” and the number of the conference.

COP21 in Paris (2015) witnessed significant forward movement. COP26 in Glasgow (2021) successfully relaunched the Paris Agreement which was put on hold by the overall effects of the pandemic. Unfortunately, others were failures. Francis continues to state that “the accords have been poorly implemented, due to lack of suitable mechanisms for oversight, periodical review and penalties in cases of noncompliance. The principles which they proclaimed still await an efficient and flexible means of practical implementation” (LD 52).

**COP28 in Dubai in 2023.** The most recent COP is in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) from November 30 to December 12, 2023. This country in the Persian Gulf is known as “a great exporter of fossil fuels, although it has made significant investments in renewable energy sources” (LD 53).

It is noteworthy that on October 18, 2023 Pope Francis received in a private audience the Secretary General of the Council of Muslim Elders, Mohamed Abdel Salam, who wished to inform him about the preparations for the Faith Pavilion at the Dubai gathering. This special pavilion aims to serve as a global platform for dialogue among leaders of various religions and their representatives, engaging them in efforts to address climate change.

Clearly, many questions remain, 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” (LD 53). Progress has been made, for example, in the protection of the earth’s ozone layer. Pope Francis remains realistically hopeful, noting we must have “the courage needed to produce substantial changes,”

recognizing that “although the measures that we can take now are costly, the cost will be all the more burdensome the longer we wait” (LD 56).

**Motivation for Action.** The sixth and final section of *Laudate Deum* presents “spiritual motivations” for commitment and engagement in climate action. Francis begins by noting that “responsibility for God’s earth means that human beings, endowed with intelligence, must respect the laws of nature and the delicate equilibria existing between the creatures of this world” (LD 62). This imperative emerges from the conviction that “the universe as a whole, in all its manifold relationships, shows forth the inexhaustible richness of God” (LD 63).

Francis notes that Jesus himself was acutely sensitive before the creatures of his Father, speaking of the lilies of the field (cf. Mt 6:28-29) and many sparrows (Lk 12:6). Truly, Jesus “was able to invite others to be attentive to the beauty that there is in the world because he himself was in constant touch with nature, lending it an attraction full of fondness and wonder” (LD 64). All are invited to see a mystical meaning “in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person’s face” (LD 65).

Specific challenges are laid out by the Pope: “Let us stop thinking, then, of human beings as autonomous, omnipotent and limitless, and begin to think of ourselves differently, in a humbler and more fruitful way” (LD 68). “I ask everyone to accompany this pilgrimage of reconciliation with the world that is our home and to help make it more beautiful” (LD 69). We must “realize that there are no lasting changes without cultural changes, without a maturing of lifestyles and convictions within societies, and there are no cultural changes without personal changes” (LD 70).

Various Filipino bishops have lent their voices to the call for action on environmental and climate issues. Archbishop Gilbert Garcera of Lipa stated: “I hope many people will have a conscience about what is happening in the world today and respond to it. The important thing is that there is a response to it.” Cardinal Jose Advincula of Manila views Pope Francis’ call as integral to the Church’s mission: “Let us remember that our mission is not limited by borders for the love of Christ knows no boundaries.”

**Concluding Synthesis.** It is noteworthy that Pope Francis begins and ends *Laudate Deum* with the imperative to “Praise God,” to recognize the divine in all of creation and the entire universe. Why is this perspective so pivotal? “For when human beings claim to take God’s place, they become their own worst enemies” (LD 73). Praise God! Only God! Always God!

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