

For every living creature on earth



Pope Francis is not the first pope to address environmental issues but he is the first to devote an encyclical to them. Tackling climate change is not only an issue of justice and human survival, but an act of faith in God's creation of the world. *Laudato Si* is the most eagerly awaited papal encyclical for decades. You would think from some advance commentary that Pope Francis is the first pope to place care for creation at the centre of the life of the Church. Not so.

His two predecessors had much to say on the subject. Pope John Paul II spoke in 2001 of humanity's need for an "ecological conversion", while Pope Benedict XVI's regular utterances on the subject were so common that he was dubbed "the green pope".

But these messages were buried in lesser documents, allowing Catholics who would rather not notice them to avert their gaze. That won't be possible any longer. By devoting an entire encyclical to humanity's troubled relationship with God's creation, Pope Francis is breaking with precedent. It comes as no surprise. His choice of the name "Francis" and repeated observation that "people occasionally forgive but nature never does", suggested that the environment would be a safe bet as the focus for a major encyclical.

And its timing is no coincidence. Francis has publicly stated that he wants the world to take note of its content before the crucial make or break UN climate change summit in Paris this December. His intervention will be music to the ears of Catholic bishops in parts of the world already suffering from environmental degradation. As long ago as 1988, bishops in the Philippines issued a pastoral letter which condemned "an assault on nature which is sinful and contrary to the teachings of our faith".

When you consider that half of the parishes in Manila lie below sea level, you can understand why care of creation has consistently been high on the agenda of the bishops of the Philippines. But the truth is, the institutional Church has rarely been at the cutting edge of protest at man-made damage to the

environment. Too many Catholics believed that “the Church came to save souls, not seals”.

An anthropocentric approach has cast the subject largely in terms of: “Can humankind survive the worst effects of climate change?” So, Cafod casts the growing threat of droughts, famine and floods as primarily an issue of justice. It points out that the perpetrators live in the protected industrialised world, while the victims live in societies with historically low carbon emissions.

Raising the justice issue is a laudable aim, but it is not the full picture. Consider these words of Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*: “Thanks to our bodies, God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement.”

We must cast our net wider than human survival and a call for justice between the developed and the developing world or between this generation and generations to come. Look at the Living Planet Report compiled every year by the World Wildlife Fund and other international agencies. It makes for uncomfortable reading. In merely two generations, the population sizes of more than 10,000 vertebrate species have dropped by half. The background rate of extinction and habitat loss among hundreds of thousands of other species of animal and plant is at higher rate than at any point on record.

No surprise then that the new encyclical will carry the following words as its subtitle: “*Sulla cura della casa comune*”, which translates as “On the care of our common home”.

Is there any way to reverse the juggernaut? As Catholics our first priority should be to see the environment as an urgent theological priority. Some have expressed fears of “eco-centrism”, making the earth itself the focus of worship. In contrast a theocentric approach holds that God is mirrored in his creation, and that in the Genesis account, “ruach”, divine “breath”, is the force that holds fragile ecosystems together.

Resisting a Manichaean dualism between spirit and matter – one good, the other bad – we should keep foremost in our minds the phrase at the end of every day of the biblical account of creation: “God saw all that he had made and it was very good.” After the flood, we are told that God made his covenant with not only men and women but with “every living creature on the face of the earth”.

This is why some, such as Dom Enemesio Angelo Lazzaris, Bishop of Balsas in north-east Brazil, have mooted the idea that we may have to extend the notion of “rights” to natural resources such as rivers, forests and threatened species. Before being tempted to mock, remember we have been exhorted to nothing less than “ecological conversion”.

An initiative set up in 2002 by the Australian Bishops’ Conference, “Catholic Earthcare” does not focus only on the issue of justice between rich nations and poor communities. It sets out a broader vision in the opening words of its mission statement, with the proclamation: “The planet is sacred.” The Catholic Church in England and Wales has no equivalent agency.

And from the land that gave birth to the Industrial Revolution, what signs of leadership? Had the bishops in this country devoted a quarter of the energy to the subject of the forthcoming papal encyclical as they have in the past to gay marriage or to new translations of the missal, we might have

made some progress towards that ecological conversion.

It's a fact, some might say a sad fact, but often bishops lead and parishes tend to follow. As of June 2015, only 19 of more than 3,000 Catholic parishes have received Cafod's "Live Simply Award" for introducing sustainable measures such as solar energy, restricting car use, fair-trade practices and the use of creation theology in liturgical practice.

We should not fool ourselves into thinking that "deckchair re-arranging" activities such as giving up plastic bags and changing light bulbs will be enough to put the tanker that is environmental degradation off course.

A prophetic religious leader is needed to do for the protection of the environment in the UK what Trevor Huddleston did for the apartheid movement in the 1960s and 1970s. I suspect many fear to speak out boldly lest the media begin to shine a light on ecclesiastical lifestyles and, to paraphrase St Augustine, make it a case of "Lord make me carbon neutral – but not just yet". After making the film *An Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore suffered an embarrassing energy audit of his huge home in Tennessee at the hands of the press. But as Bishop James Jones, the former Anglican Bishop of Liverpool, has said, "You don't have to be a total saint to have the right to express valid opinions on virtue."

Other bishops may dread the raising of the P-word – population. While it's true that a planet of four billion humans will exert less demand on the planet than eight billion, the projected global figure for 2050, there is a convincing riposte – the C-word, namely, consumption. An average US family with two children will consume as much of the world's resources as an extended Kenyan family of thirty or more.

At a recent dinner in London, the former chair of Shell, Sir Mark Moody-Stuart, who spent 39 years at the oil company, advocated divesting from fossil fuel companies as the most rational way forward. "If you think your money can be used somewhere else, you should switch it," he said. "Selective divestment or portfolio-switching is actually what investors should be doing." Hundreds of institutions have already started, including major educational outfits such as Stanford and Glasgow universities. Is it not time for our church leaders to disinvest from oil, coal and gas and to encourage their flock to do likewise?

The commodification of nature has become an accepted part of the human narrative, but we are rapidly consuming the very womb that sustains us. The Canadian Jesuit theologian, Bernard Lonergan, once wrote: "The Church often arrives a little breathless and a little late." *Laudato si* will be published next week at what may be humanity's eleventh hour. Let us hope and pray that the leader of the smallest nation-state on the earth may yet make a decisive contribution.

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