

Talking Cents

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Talking Cents is an ecumenical group charged by the Anglican Diocesan Council to promote an alternative to current economic and political thought, and to encourage debate within the church. Ministry units are encouraged to distribute these articles. This article is contributed by Mary Betz from the Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Diocese of Auckland.

Laudato Si: On Care for our Common Home

A few months ago, the Vatican released the long-awaited encyclical letter from Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*. The Latin title means 'Praised be' and is taken from the Canticle of St Francis, in which he gives praise to God for our sister, Mother Earth. The subtitle points simply and directly to the subject matter at hand: earth is the common home of many diverse creatures including humanity, and we share responsibility for the planet which has provided everything necessary for us to flourish.

Pope Francis waits no longer than the second paragraph to speak of *this sister [who] now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her*. He draws the first of many parallels between how humans treat earth and how they treat one another: *This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor.* (#2)

In his introduction, Francis also speaks of the ancient understanding of nature as God's first book, another theme he returns to several times: *Saint Francis, faithful to Scripture, invites us to see nature as a magnificent book in which God speaks to us and grants us a glimpse of his infinite beauty and goodness.* (#12) Francis sees creation as revelation of God's own self, and this teaching is part of his key to helping humans take more of an interest in caring for the home they share with the rest of creation. If we continue to harm the atmosphere, soils and the ecosystems and creatures they support, we show that we care neither for God's creation, nor for coming to know God better through that creation.

Francis acknowledges that many efforts to address environmental issues have been ineffective, *not only because of powerful opposition, but also because of a more general*

lack of interest. (#14) He quotes Patriarch Bartholomew's call *for each of us to repent of the ways we have harmed the planet.* (#8) His hope is that each person will change, for *everyone's talents and involvement are needed.* (#22)

In the first of six chapters, Francis focuses on the current illnesses of our environment: pollution and climate change, growing water scarcity, loss of biodiversity, decline in the quality of human life and society, and inequality. He perceives the climate as a *common good* to be protected by lowering carbon emissions and developing renewable energy. In the light of powerful corporate attempts to privatise water, he calls for the recognition of a safe, sufficient water supply for all as a basic and universal human right.

As he addresses biodiversity, Francis acknowledges creation as not simply for the use of humanity: *It is not enough, however, to think of different species merely as potential 'resources' to be exploited, while overlooking the fact that they have value in themselves.* (#33) While he still speaks of the need to use ecological resources wisely to protect them for human use, Francis returns at other times to repeat his belief in the *inherent* worth of all of creation.

Throughout the letter, Francis links environmental exploitation with its effects, particularly on the poor of developing countries, where legislation protects neither environment nor people – whom he says are often treated as *collateral damage*. He faults global inequality, and the fact that the centres of power are far removed from the lives of the people who are affected, a distance that easily numbs our consciences. Thus, *a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.* (#49)

In Chapter 2, Francis speaks of the Gospel of Creation, using the scriptures of both testaments and the teachings of popes (a usual practice), but also conferences of Bishops world-wide, the Catechism, and writings of Dante, Thomas Aquinas, Teilhard de Chardin, Paul Ricour and Justin Martyr. (It is MOST unusual for a Pope to quote mere bishops, a still suspect Chardin, and especially a Protestant philosopher!) Francis manages an amazing integration of a mystical understanding of creation with a call to action on human rights and environmental responsibility: *The entire material universe speaks of God's love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God. We can discover in each thing a teaching which God wishes to hand on to us, since 'for the believer, to contemplate creation is to hear a message, to listen to a paradoxical and silent voice.'* (#85, quoting John Paul II)

Francis acknowledges the human roots of the ecological crisis in Chapter 3, recalling the technology which began with the industrial revolution. He warns that *technological products are not neutral, for they create a framework which ends up conditioning lifestyles and shaping social possibilities along the lines dictated by the interests of certain powerful groups.* What we really need now, he says, is a conversation *about the kind of society we want to build.* (#107)

Talk of *promoting a different cultural paradigm*, being counter-cultural, and his questioning of economic growth, power and consumerism has gained Francis both disregard and scorn in business and conservative circles. Says Francis, *Nobody is suggesting a return to the Stone Age, but we do need to slow down and look at reality in a different way.* (#114)

In Chapter 4 on Integral Ecology, he returns to his conviction that we need to re-look at what the global failings in economics, social and environmental well-being are telling us. We have to ask ourselves, *What kind of a world do we want to leave to those who come after us?* (#160)

After taking stock of the state of the world, Francis offers some possible approaches and action in Chapter 5. He calls for especially those countries which have benefited from the release of greenhouse gases to take a greater responsibility for solving the problems of climate change. He renews the call of John XXIII and Benedict XVI for a *world political authority*

(#175) to better manage economies, bring about disarmament, food security and peace, to protect the environment and regulate migration.

Francis cautions again about consumer culture and saving banks at any price (warnings that do not particularly endear him to business and financial interests). He criticises the financial community for daring to absorb ecological terms like 'sustainable growth', with the result that *the social and environmental responsibility of businesses often gets reduced to a series of marketing and image-enhancing measures.* (#194) The ecological crisis – this symptom of our *throw-away culture* and a lack of real care for poor and indigenous peoples and those in future generations – *demands that we all look to the common good.* (#143)

Chapter 6 is my favourite – Ecological Education and Spirituality. Francis looks to the heart of consumer culture and understands how the present market system promotes needless buying and selling, and how the instability in our world causes us to look out for oneself rather than the common good. *The emptier a person's heart is, the more he or she needs things to buy, own and consume.* (#204) He believes that human beings are capable of *choosing again what is good, and making a new start.* (#205) His hope is that concern *for our brothers and sisters and for the natural environment* will prompt us to assess *the impact of our every action and personal decision on the world around us.* (#208)

Francis reminds us that the small efforts like car-pooling and recycling do make a difference. He echoes Benedict's call for ecological conversion, a change of heart, a recognition that we are all *in one splendid universal communion* (#220) with all creatures. We can then begin to cultivate a spirituality which understands that *there is mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person's face* (Sufi mystic Ali al-Khawwas). Through contemplation we learn to *discover God in all things* (#233) and *to live in communion with God, with others and with all creatures.* (#240)

Let us hope that this radical and foresighted pope with a heart for creation and the poor can soften hardened hearts in Aotearoa and throughout the world, and that his words and example bring us to true care for our common home.