

Laudato Si in Action

Not Just an Encyclical for the Environment

Papal encyclicals take their name from the latin *encyclius*, or circle. Originally, the name came from the fact that an encyclical was a letter that circulated from the Holy Father to bishops, and then to priests, and finally to all members of the Holy See. The term encyclical is used today to refer to a document that clarifies Catholic doctrine.

The Italian title of Laudato Si takes its name from the beginning of the document, “Laudato Si, Mi Signore” or in English, “Praise be to you, my Lord,” which in turn comes from Saint Francis of Assisi’s beautiful Canticle of the Sun.

Most of you have learned -- from this column or elsewhere -- that Laudato Si is Pope Francis’ environmental encyclical, his plea for us to take care of the environment, our “common home.” But Laudato Si is also very much a document about taking care of our neighbor, especially the poor and the vulnerable:

Many of the poor live in areas particularly affected by phenomena related to warming, and their means of subsistence are largely dependent on natural reserves and ecosystemic services such as agriculture, fishing and forestry. They have no other financial activities or resources which can enable them to adapt to climate change or to face natural disasters, and their access to social services and protection is very limited.

As our world continues to degrade because of climate change, the poor will be affected first and foremost. Unlike many of us, the chronically poor cannot the poor cannot easily replace their meager rations of food and water when they become scarce. And again unlike many of us with insurance and money in the bank or investments, the poor cannot simply buy their way out of their flood, fire, and hurricane-ravaged neighborhoods. So what is left but for them to try and leave their homes for a better life:

There has been a tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation.

Yes, climate change and concern for the environment are intractably linked to poverty, inequality, and migration. **These are not separate issues, but different sides of the same issue, our impending climate crisis!** Yes, Laudato Si is as much a document about the mistreatment of people as it about mistreatment of our ecosystems.

Today, however, we have to realize that 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.

Working together, we can help take care of our common home.

Paul Litwin