

Pope Francis' encyclical, *Laudato si': On Care for Our Common Home*, the first papal document devoted entirely to ecology, has generated considerable interest and debate since its publication in June 2015. The encyclical is at once an exploration of the various environmental crises facing the world, a radical critique of current economic models, a call to action, and a reminder of the values which underpin Christian concern for the environment.

In the opening article of this issue of *Working Notes*, Donal Dorr writes that at the heart of the transformation which Pope Francis calls for, in response to the ecological crisis, is the replacement of present-day economics – in which the market and the pursuit of profits dominate – by an 'economic ecology', which takes proper account of ecological considerations. Donal Dorr suggests there are three particularly strong statements in the encyclical. These are: the need to reconsider the assumption of continuing economic growth and even to acknowledge that 'the time has come to accept decreased growth in some parts of the world'; the need to move away from reliance on fossil fuels; the need to recognise the global inequity inherent in the environmental crisis, such that the developed world now owes an 'ecological debt' to the developing world, because it is the former which has played the predominant role in generating ecological problems but it is the latter which is forced to bear the greatest impact, though least able to do so. Donal Dorr suggests these statements pose a significant challenge to political leaders, who for the most part have been unwilling to face up to, and to act upon, the issues involved.

Writing about the UN Climate Change Conference in Paris in December 2015, John Sweeney notes the high expectations for what may be achieved at these negotiations. He says that the preparatory work for the Paris conference has been strengthened by the publication of the 2013 Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which set out the scientific evidence on global warming and emphasised the role of human activity in generating this. He highlights the significance of Pope Francis' encyclical in terms of making

'the moral and ethical case' for international action on climate change. However, John Sweeney also points to the reality that annual climate conferences over the past twenty years have failed to produce a global agreement capable of achieving the reduction in carbon emissions necessary to avoid dangerous climate change. He concludes that the most likely outcome of the Paris conference will be 'an agreement that will be marketed as a political triumph, but fall short of the radical change of hearts and minds necessary to protect the world from 2°C warming over the next four decades'.

An important feature of Pope Francis' encyclical is its call to individuals and civil society organisations to do whatever they can to respond directly to the environmental crisis. In this issue of *Working Notes*, six church communities in Ireland outline the ecology work they have been carrying out for several years. These articles reflect a commitment to taking practical action – for example, minimising the use of resources; reclaiming and replanting garden areas; incorporating environmentally friendly features into building projects – and to including environmental concern in prayer and liturgy. The articles also describe education and awareness-raising aimed not only at encouraging changes in lifestyles, but developing greater consciousness of the political dimensions and global justice aspects of the environmental crisis.

In the final article of this issue, Gerard Doyle suggests that social enterprises – that is, enterprises which have as their core aim the realisation of a social objective, rather than the maximisation of profit – can make an important contribution to addressing environmental issues. Focusing on social enterprises engaged in the production of renewable energy, he argues that the experience of other countries shows how such enterprises have the potential to play a significant role in meeting the energy needs of local communities and in assisting the transition to a low carbon economy. He suggests that the Irish State needs to place greater value on the role of social enterprises in providing renewable energy and that it should prepare an overall strategy for the development of this sector.

# Ecological Economics and Politics in the Ecology Encyclical

Donal Dorr

The ecology encyclical, *Laudato si': On Care for Our Common Home*, issued by Pope Francis in June 2015, is a very wide-ranging document. It is a call for 'an ecological conversion' in the areas of economics and politics – and also in the spheres of spirituality, theology, culture, and education. In this article, I shall focus only on the pope's challenge to governments and to all of us to establish an ecologically oriented economics and politics.<sup>1</sup>

## Ecological Economics

At the heart of the transformation called for in the encyclical is the replacement of the present-day market-dominated economics by a truly ecological economics – or what Francis calls an 'economic ecology' (§ 141). He is calling for a rejection of the 'deified market' (§ 56). This is a term which he later explains by referring to 'a magical conception of the market, which would suggest that problems can be solved simply by an increase in the profits of companies or individuals'. (§ 190)

In the same paragraph, he points out that, 'Where profits alone count, there can be no thinking about ... the complexity of ecosystems which may be gravely upset by human intervention.' In that situation, he adds, 'biodiversity is considered at most a deposit of economic resources available for exploitation ...'. (§ 190)

An important account of one crucial aspect of an ecological economics comes in the following passage:

*Environmental impact assessment should not come after the drawing up of a business proposition or the proposal of a particular policy, plan or program. It should be part of the process from the beginning, and be carried out in a way which is interdisciplinary, transparent and free of all economic or political pressure. It should be linked to a study of working conditions and possible effects on people's physical and mental health, on the local economy and on public safety. Economic returns can thus be forecast more realistically, taking into account potential scenarios and the eventual need for further investment to correct possible undesired effects.* (§ 183)

Another fundamental aspect of the converted economics which Francis calls for is that it puts a high value on employment – ensuring that people are not put out of work (§ 129; cf. §51, 127, 189). He says, 'In order to continue providing employment, it is imperative to promote an economy which favours productive diversity and business creativity.'

He goes on to point out that most of the peoples of the world are engaged in 'a great variety of small-scale food production systems ... using a modest amount of land and producing less waste, be it in small agricultural parcels, in orchards and gardens, hunting and wild harvesting or local fishing.' This type of economy, he says, provides adequate employment, whereas modern systems which seek economies of scale 'end up forcing smallholders to sell their land or to abandon their traditional crops'. (§ 129)

Further crucially important aspects of a renewed economics are the adoption of more ecologically respectful methods of production and consumption (§ 23, cf. § 5, 138, 191). So too is a great reduction in the amount of waste we generate and the way we deal with it (see § 44, 50, 51, 90, 129, 161). For instance, the encyclical refers to the possibility of 'developing an economy of waste disposal and recycling'. (§ 180)

## Three Key Challenges

Francis makes three very strong statements which are probably the most challenging in the encyclical. The first is this passage:

*... given the insatiable and irresponsible growth produced over many decades, we need ... to think of containing growth by setting some reasonable limits and even retracing our steps before it is too late. We know how unsustainable is the behaviour of those who constantly consume and destroy, while others are not yet able to live in a way worthy of their human dignity. That is why **the time has come to accept decreased growth in some parts of the world**, in order to provide resources for other places to experience healthy growth.* (§ 193, emphasis added)

The second blunt statement of Francis is:

*We know that technology based on the use of highly polluting fossil fuels – especially coal, but also oil and, to a lesser degree, gas – needs to be progressively replaced without delay.* (§ 165)

These statements focus attention on two issues which are emphasised time after time, not only by ecological campaigners but by the majority of scientists studying these questions. And they are, of course, issues which politicians in both the developed and the developing world are very reluctant to face up to and act upon.

The third strong statement of Francis which poses an enormous challenge – and one that the leaders of the developed countries have been most unwilling to accept fully and act upon – is the following:

*Inequity affects not only individuals but entire countries; it compels us to consider an ethics of international relations. A true ‘ecological debt’ exists, particularly between the global north and south, connected to commercial imbalances with effects on the environment, and the disproportionate use of natural resources by certain countries over long periods of time.* (§ 51)

Francis goes into some detail on this issue of *ecological debt*. He refers to the loss of valuable raw materials exported from South to North, to deforestation, and to the environmental damage done to poor countries by mining of gold and copper, by the dumping of toxic wastes, and by lack of adequate controls on pollution by companies operating in the South; he also mentions the global warming caused by the excessive consumption in rich countries which causes particular problems in the South, especially in Africa (§ 51).

By way of driving home his challenge to the leaders of the rich countries, Francis goes on to say: ‘The foreign debt of poor countries has become a way of controlling them, yet this is not the case where ecological debt is concerned.’ (§ 52)

#### **Intergenerational Equity**

Pope Francis leaves us in no doubt that his concept of a truly ecological economics is one which takes full account of the potential impact of present-day economic decisions on future generations of people and on other inhabitants of our world. He insists that, ‘The notion of the common good also extends to future generations’ (§ 159); and his concern for

future generations is expressed in no less than eight other paragraphs of the encyclical (see: § 22, 95, 109, 160, 162, 169, 190, 195).

#### **Cooperative Enterprises**

The encyclical has words of praise for ‘cooperatives of small producers’ who adopt less polluting means of production (§ 112). It refers also to the potential role of cooperatives in producing energy, noting that there are places where ‘cooperatives are being developed to exploit renewable sources of energy which ensure local self-sufficiency and even the sale of surplus energy’ (§ 179). Francis sees these cooperatives as models of an alternative economics – one which does not follow the dominant ideology of subordinating ecological concerns to the making of short-term profit.

#### **Genetic Modification**

The encyclical includes a significant treatment of the issue of genetic modification (§ 131–5), including a strong but carefully nuanced warning about its dangers. A key passage is the following:

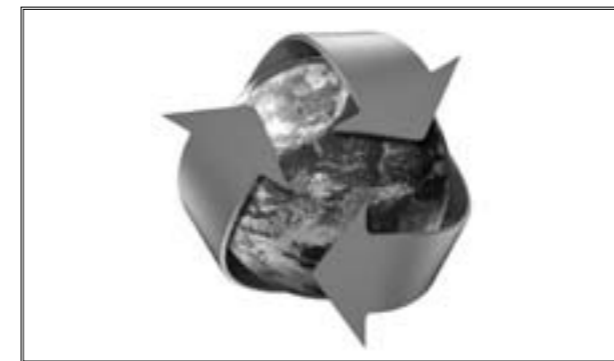
*In various countries, we see an expansion of oligopolies for the production of cereals and other products needed for their cultivation. This dependency would be aggravated were the production of infertile seeds to be considered; the effect would be to force farmers to purchase them from larger producers.* (§ 134)

#### **Alternative Forms of Energy**

On the question of alternative forms of energy, Francis says, ‘How could we not acknowledge the work of many scientists and engineers who have provided alternatives to make development sustainable?’ (§ 102). He also maintains that ‘poor countries ... are ... bound to develop less polluting forms of energy production.’ He points out that this ‘will require the establishment of mechanisms and subsidies which allow developing countries access to technology transfer, technical assistance and financial resources’, but he adds, ‘... to do so they require the help of countries which have experienced great growth at the cost of the ongoing pollution of the planet’. (§ 172)

However, he has chosen not to give detailed references to different alternative energy sources. Although noting that developing countries can take advantage of ‘abundant solar energy’ (§ 172), he does not mention wind power, tidal power or thermal energy from deep in the Earth (§ 172).

The encyclical offers no support at all to those who maintain that nuclear energy is the solution to the issue of global warming. Furthermore, Francis does not even bother to mention the more bizarre technological ‘solutions’ which are sometimes proposed – for instance, shooting billions of reflectors into or above the atmosphere in order to lessen global warming, or sucking huge amounts of carbon out of the atmosphere.<sup>2</sup>



*Protecting our common home through recycling*  
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#### **Political Aspects of an Ecological Conversion**

Francis is under no illusion that small-scale alternatives undertaken on a voluntary basis can, on their own, constitute the economic conversion that is required to safeguard the Earth and its more vulnerable inhabitants. He sees an urgent need for decisive *political* action to eliminate abuses or ‘free-loading’ by individuals or companies. So he says:

*Civil authorities have the right and duty to adopt clear and firm measures in support of small producers and differentiated production. To ensure economic freedom from which all can effectively benefit, restraints occasionally have to be imposed on those possessing greater resources and financial power.* (§129)

This applies at both the national and the international levels. Focusing first on the national level, he insists that when any policy, plan, programme, or business proposition is being drawn up it is important that all the different stakeholders should be involved and should reach consensus. He insists that, ‘The local population should have a special place at the table; they are concerned about their own future and that of their children, and can consider goals transcending immediate economic interest.’ (§ 183)

However, adequate protection of the environment is an issue which goes beyond individual countries. There is urgent need for international binding agreements, since otherwise there will be a continuation of the present situation where countries compete with each other in regard to which of them can get away with doing the least to prevent further global warming and more pollution. Francis insists that, ‘... it is essential to devise stronger and more efficiently organized international institutions, with functionaries who are appointed fairly by agreement among national governments, and empowered to impose sanctions.’ (§ 175)

He has harsh words of criticism for political leaders who fail to respond adequately to ecological problems. He maintains that this happens because ‘too many special interests, and economic interests easily end up trumping the common good and manipulating information so that their own plans will not be affected’ (§ 54). He points out that the Conference of the United Nations on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro in 2012 (Rio+20) ‘issued a wide-ranging but ineffectual outcome document’ (§ 169).

Perhaps the pope saw himself as contributing to the agenda of the up-coming UN Climate Change Conference (COP21) in Paris, from 30 November to 11 December 2015, when he wrote the following passage:

*A global consensus is essential for confronting the deeper problems, which cannot be resolved by unilateral actions on the part of individual countries. Such a consensus could lead, for example, to planning a sustainable and diversified agriculture, developing renewable and less polluting forms of energy, encouraging a more efficient use of energy, promoting a better management of marine and forest resources, and ensuring universal access to drinking water.* (§ 164)

#### **Water**

From his experience in Latin America, the pope knew how the poorest people suffer when the water supply is privatised. So his emphasis in the above quotation on the right to universal access to drinking water is particularly significant.<sup>3</sup> Earlier in the encyclical he had said: ‘Fresh drinking water is an issue of primary importance, since it is indispensable for human life ...’ (§ 28). A little later he said: ‘... access to safe drinkable water

is a basic and universal human right, since it is essential to human survival and, as such, is a condition for the exercise of other human rights.

Our world has a grave social debt towards the poor who lack access to drinking water, because they are denied the right to a life consistent with their inalienable dignity' (§ 30, emphasis in the original; see also § 185<sup>4</sup>).

By insisting on the universal right to clean water, Francis shows how aware he is of the need to protect what are called 'the global commons,' a term which refers to resources such as the oceans and the air, as distinct from *local* commonages of land or forest. He says, 'What is needed, in effect, is an agreement on systems of governance for the whole range of so-called "global commons"' (§174). The argument against the privatisation of commons is put forward very effectively by David Bollier in his book, *Think Like a Commoner: A Short Introduction to the Life of the Commons*.<sup>5</sup> (Bollier also emphasises the significance of *new* kinds of commons, such as Wikipedia and the Linux open-source software.)

#### **Carbon Credits**

Francis adopts a very controversial position when he puts forward a quite strong criticism of the system of 'carbon credits' which is widely used at present. He describes this arrangement as appearing at first sight to be 'a quick and easy solution, under the guise of a certain commitment to the environment', but he maintains that 'in no way does it allow for the radical change which present circumstances require'. Instead, carbon trading can 'lead to a new form of speculation', and actually enable rich countries and sectors of society to increase their carbon emissions (§ 171).

#### **Population Growth**

Responding to those who maintain that part of the solution to the environmental crisis is a reduction in the birth rate, Francis says bluntly:

*To blame population growth instead of extreme and selective consumerism on the part of some, is one way of refusing to face the issues. It is an attempt to legitimize the present model of distribution, where a minority believes that it has the right to consume in a way which can never be universalized, since the planet could not even contain the waste products of such consumption.* (§ 50)

He does, however, qualify his statement by adding

the rather vague comment that 'attention needs to be paid to imbalances in population density' (§ 50). We must hope that a later Vatican statement – perhaps a statement emerging from the October 2015 Synod of Bishops in Rome on the theme, 'The vocation and mission of the family in the Church and contemporary world' – will address the population issue in a more thorough and nuanced manner.

#### **Ecological Conversion at Social and Community Level**

Francis is keenly aware that we dare not leave everything to the initiative (or lack of it) of our political leaders. He holds that '... while the existing world order proves powerless to assume its responsibilities, local individuals and groups can make a real difference.' So he insists that: 'Society, through non-governmental organizations and intermediate groups, must put pressure on governments to develop more rigorous regulations, procedures and controls'. (§ 179)

Such civil society groups could be expected to include trade unions; NGOs including development groups; credit unions, and the whole range of business enterprises. All need to become far more ecologically aware, and to be willing to take effective action. One of these civil society organisations is, of course, the Church itself. Francis says that all Christian communities have an important role to play in ecological education (§ 214). This education can take place not only through words but also through a wide variety of committed actions.

Pressure has to be put not only on governments but also more directly on business interests. Francis spells out one way in which this can be done. He points out that consumer movements bring healthy pressure to bear on those who wield political, economic, and social power by using the tactic of boycotting certain products. In this way, 'They prove successful in changing the way businesses operate, forcing them to consider their environmental footprint and their patterns of production.' (§ 206)

As far as I know, this is the first time that a pope has come out in favour of boycotting the products of companies which fail to take seriously their ecological responsibilities. This support for a boycott of consumer goods can also be extended to the present campaign for divestment in fossil fuel companies; we must hope that this will be acted

on by all the agencies which have investments – including trade unions, philanthropic foundations, and a wide variety of church and religious agencies.

As already noted, Francis praises the initiative at local level of cooperatives of small producers who use renewable sources of energy and foster local self-sufficiency (§112 and §179). He also recommends a whole series of practical actions which each of us can take: '... avoiding the use of plastic and paper, reducing water consumption, separating refuse, cooking only what can reasonably be consumed, showing care for other living beings, using public transport or car-pooling, planting trees, turning off unnecessary lights ...' (§ 211).

#### **Conclusion**

It is clear that in *Laudato si'* Pope Francis has put forward a quite detailed account of what is required at the economic and political levels if there is to be an adequate response to the ecological problems of our world. His encyclical poses very serious challenges not only to governments but also to each one of us in our daily lives.

Is the programme he puts forward unrealistic? That depends on how we define the word 'realistic'. If 'realistic' is understood to mean what is objectively required to avoid an ecological catastrophe then one must say that what Francis proposes is fully realistic. But if it is understood to mean what is likely to emerge by way of a binding agreement from the UN Climate Change Conference in Paris in December 2015 then there are serious grounds for pessimism. This, however, is not a reason for despair but rather for renewed commitment to put pressure on our governments to make truly realistic commitments, and for each of us 'on the ground' to devote all our energies to campaigning for ecological responsibility – and to bringing about a significant ecological conversion in our everyday living.

#### **Notes**

1. For an account of the encyclical's treatment of an ecological culture see my article, 'Ecological Conversion and Cultural Transformation', in *Thinking Faith*, the online periodical of the English Province of the Society of Jesus, 20 July 2015 ([www.thinkingfaith.co.uk](http://www.thinkingfaith.co.uk)).
2. Perhaps Francis or somebody who helped him to draft the encyclical had been reading Naomi Klein's book, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs The Climate* (New York: Simon and Schuster; London: Allen Lane, 2014) in which Klein argues quite convincingly (pp. 256–8) that reliance on this kind of 'geoengineering' is not merely futile but is part of the problem rather than a solution. So perhaps it is not

so surprising that she was invited to take part in a Vatican conference on the encyclical in early July 2015.

3. We may presume that Francis is not suggesting that the water supply must always be provided entirely free; it is more likely that what he is condemning here is a type of privatisation of the water supply which has occurred in some parts of Latin America – one where poor communities were left short of water because they were deprived of access to traditional sources of water, or because their area was not provided with an adequate water supply, or because the price was set at a level they could not afford.
4. Pope Francis writes: 'In any discussion about a proposed venture, a number of questions need to be asked in order to discern whether or not it will contribute to genuine integral development ... In this discernment, some questions must have higher priority. For example, we know that water is a scarce and indispensable resource and a fundamental right which conditions the exercise of other human rights. This indisputable fact overrides any other assessment of environmental impact on a region.' (§ 185)
5. David Bollier, *Think Like a Commoner: A Short Introduction to the Life of the Commons*, Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2014.

**Donal Dorr is a theologian and a member of St Patrick's Missionary Society. He is the author of numerous books and articles on spirituality, social justice and Catholic social teaching, including Option for the Poor and for the Earth: Catholic Social Teaching (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2012). A new edition of this book, reflecting the contribution of Pope Francis, is in preparation and will be published early in 2016.**