

A companion to Pope Francis's
historic encyclical on
care for the environment



READING, PRAYING, LIVING
POPE FRANCIS'S
**LAUDATO
SÌ**

**DAVID
CLOUTIER**

A Faith
Formation Guide

1 What Is Happening to Our Common Home

The blind man replied to him, "Master, I want to see."

—Mark 10:51

Be a pedestrian along a busy road. Or do one of those “adopt-a-highway” clean-ups. You’ll be appalled by all the trash. Once for Earth Day, I participated in a tree planting along a stream off a busy four-lane state highway. Even that far off the road, we found the endless fast-food containers, beverage bottles, cigarette packets, grocery bags, and other “disposables” that people just tossed. What were they thinking? That the trash would just “disappear”?

I’m assuming that most people reading this book don’t litter like this! Yet, when Pope Francis says that we are turning the planet into “an immense pile of filth” (21), I can’t help but think of those roadsides. What we don’t always understand is this: we are *all* throwing out waste by the side of the road, pretending it has just gone away. We’ve created a throwaway culture—and we keep speeding along in this lifestyle at 50 mph, which is a big part of the reason we don’t see it. We also don’t see it because it’s happening gradually, like the clutter that just seems to accumulate in our houses. And we don’t see it because we’re not always knowledgeable about how “everything is connected” in the natural world.

Let's take a different example, but one that is in some ways like roadside trash: the plight of the bees. Have you heard? Several years ago, beekeepers worldwide discovered large numbers of their hives just dying. In many areas, over half of all hives had collapsed. The cause was so mysterious that the phenomenon was named "colony collapse disorder"—as in, "we know something is really wrong, but we don't quite know what."

While you might not want bees on your back porch, bees are really important for the world. For example, they pollinate about a third of the fruits and nuts we consume in the United States. Beekeepers who harvest honey year-round also truck their hives off to the west coast every year and set the bees loose in apple orchards and almond plantations—so that all these plants can actually produce their fruit. Doing this by hand would be virtually impossible. "Everything is connected"—even if you don't eat honey, you probably rely on bees most days.

Why the collapse? Well, no one knows for sure, but the culprit many suspect is a class of chemicals called neonicotinoids. These new pesticides do not kill the bees outright, but weaken their resistance to disease and disorient their homing mechanisms. Previously restricted, many of these chemicals were allowed starting in the late 1990s, and their use has increased. Some European countries have banned their use, but debates over a ban continue in the United States.

No one *intends* the death of the bees, and it's important to understand that there is not just one cause. Just like some forms of human illness, there are multiple factors that converge. Some hives were invaded by parasites that the bees failed to resist, but the question of why the bees are not able to fight off the parasites needs answering. There is considerable evidence that the (new) waste from the use of pesticides is endangering the system. Of course, the good news is that professional beekeepers have found a solution: just create more bees to replace the dead ones.¹ But we

may still be troubled by this industrial approach to the problem, and many other environmental issues cannot be solved by a “just make more” mentality. Natural systems are very complicated, and *the wastes from one process often affect others in ways we don't always see*. For example, did you know . . .

. . . that the Chesapeake Bay and the Mississippi Delta are full of dead zones because of fertilizer pollution from lawns and farms hundreds of miles away?

. . . that the fish from “pristine” northern lakes are filled with poisonous mercury because of coal burning?

. . . that we are living through an era called “the sixth great extinction,” because species are disappearing at a rate 100 to 1000 times higher than natural?²

. . . that the chickens who laid the eggs in your fridge were probably debeaked, because without that their lives are so confined and awful that they would have pecked each other to death?

. . . that as much as 40 percent of the food America produces (with the help of so much fertilizer and pesticides) is never eaten and just goes to waste?

. . . that old televisions and computers end up in massive waste dumps outside third-world cities, where children pick through the toxic waste to recover small amounts of metals for recycling?

In all of these cases, notice that you probably don't *intend* the awful effects of the waste. But they are there, nonetheless.

In this chapter, Pope Francis tries to help us see what is happening overall to the natural world. Studies have shown that *scientific literacy* is one of the most important motivators for

environmental action. You don't have to be a scientist; you just have to have some sense of the connections. The pope is not a scientist (although he did have some training as a chemist in his early years), but in assembling the encyclical, much care was taken by the papal team, assisted by the Political Academy of Sciences, to be careful, critical, and clear on this presentation of how the natural world works—and is breaking down.

When reading this section, especially if you are new to these issues, it's helpful to divide the material into two sections. The beginning and end of the chapter (17–22, 43–59) find the pope sounding like a raging biblical prophet: he's sending the message that the situation is serious and we can't avoid it. He calls it “unprecedented,” and warns of the spread of technology “linked to business interests” which “is supposed to solve a problem, but only creates others” (20). In particular, the pope notes how conversations lack “a clear awareness of the problems which especially affect the excluded” because people live “far removed from the poor” and so cannot hear “both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” (49). He also criticizes political leaders: it is “remarkable how weak international political responses have been,” limited to “superficial rhetoric, sporadic acts of philanthropy, and perfunctory expressions of concern” (54). Then he criticizes ordinary citizens in rich countries: “many people will deny doing anything wrong because distractions constantly dull our consciousness of just how limited and finite our world really is” (56). Notice how the pope connects the dots: the environmental crisis and our lack of response is due to a whole range of problems, from abandonment of the poor to the pervasive power of money to simple distractedness because of technological overload. But in all this, the pope's bottom line is: we need to wake up! He criticizes those who say “things do not look that serious,” saying that such “evasiveness” is how “human beings contrive to feed their self-destructive vices: trying not to see them, trying

not to acknowledge them, delaying the important decisions and pretending that nothing will happen" (59).

Sobering. But also potentially overwhelming. When faced with these sizeable interconnected problems, we may retreat in despair. But the pope insists on hope: "For all our limitations, gestures of generosity, solidarity and care cannot but well up within us, since we were made for love" (58). We can change.

One way to get a handle on the crisis is to ask where the central problems lie. This is the middle part of the chapter (23–42), where Francis highlights *three particular crises*: climate change, water, and biodiversity. These are the core of the problem, he says, and if we can better see how these work, we can better understand how our lives need to change.

The pope starts with the problem of climate change (global warming), which "represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day" (25). While nonhuman factors may be involved, the pope says that the enormous increase in the human burning of fossil fuels, human-caused deforestation, and agricultural expansions contribute decisively to the "greenhouse effect." The increase of carbon and other heat-trapping gases in the atmosphere throws off the "breathing cycle" of the planet, which maintains its temperature and climate patterns. What will happen is difficult to predict, except that (a) it is likely to be very disruptive, and (b) these disruptions will most affect the poorest people and countries, who lack the resources to adjust. The pope importantly points out that the atmosphere is a "common good," and so international cooperation is absolutely necessary to deal with this problem.

Climate change is sometimes controversial. Some of the confusion rests on our tendency to want to see problems as simply black-and-white—either fossil fuels are polluting, or they are not. But the problem with the atmosphere is a different kind of problem: we are not introducing something toxic, but rather overloading a natural cycle that maintains many systems on

the planet, like temperature, sea level, glacier melt, and weather tracks. The problem is not like a disease outbreak; it's more like the health problems that come with obesity or high blood pressure. Slowly but surely, excessive pressure is put on the whole system, until things start breaking down.

And we need to be clear: the laws of physics and chemistry cannot be changed. Francis is fond of saying: "God always forgives, men and women sometimes forgive, but nature never forgives."³ An example vividly illustrates Francis's point: estimates suggest that there is an overall limit to the amount of carbon humans can put into the atmosphere without large changes in temperature. Over the course of the last two centuries, we've already gone over halfway, and we are currently on a pace to max out the limit within fifty years.⁴

The second problem the pope highlights is water. Like the atmosphere, water is essential for life. But in some places, the well is simply running dry. The most dire consequences might not come for a "few decades," but let's remember that a few decades is not very long at all. In the summer of 2015, we have heard many news stories about the chronic drought gripping the American West, especially California, where tens of millions of people live in a desert and where we grow a great deal of our food (also in a desert!). A similar tale is happening in Chile, another place where conditions are ideal for growing lots of rich crops—except for the minimal rainfall. Water problems are increased by climate change, which means less snowfall in mountains and the receding of glaciers, the seasonal melting of which provided the water. The deficit is made up by pumping up underground water, but these aquifers too are running out. Without water, the land dies, and the people cannot be sustained. Even current water crises demonstrate Francis's point that "we all know that it is not possible to sustain the present level of consumption in developed countries and wealthier sectors of society" (27).

Finally, the third problem discussed is the loss of biodiversity. This is less well-known, not so much the subject of news stories. But scientists have long warned that, due to the large-scale destruction of ecosystems, especially in remote areas like the rain forests of South America and Indonesia, we are witnessing the unprecedented extinction of many species. The pope puts this in theological perspective: "Because of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God . . . nor convey their message to us" (33). Species require habitats, and if we destroy that habitat, we will extinguish the species. Nature preserves are important for this reason, but they are not really enough, given the scale of destruction. Worse, all this destruction happens for "quick and easy profit"—to make cheap, throwaway furniture or grow a few seasons of crops on marginal soil.

If climate change is a problem of a *cycle running too fast*, and water is a matter of *running out*, biodiversity is more like humans *running over* other creatures. These extinctions are the roadkill of the "rapidification" of our society and economy (18). Francis calls us to recognize the intrinsic value of nature for its own sake. We look at "unused" natural land, and we think it is "useless" unless we make it into something we can sell.

Running too fast, running out, and running over. In all three of these cases, the pope is keen to accentuate his message about waste, as well as the "human waste" when we neglect the special plight of the poor, which is sometimes "brought up as an afterthought" and "in a tangential way" (49). Not only have the poor *not* been the major consumers of the planet, but they also face bigger difficulties in adapting to changes. Poor regions and nations cannot compensate for failing water supplies by luxuries like bottled water, nor can "impoverished coastal populations" afford to move away or construct defenses. Francis is especially frustrated that people "blame population growth instead of extreme and selective consumerism" for our environmental problems (50).

This is wrong. The primary problem is not the births of the poor, but the lifestyles of the rich. He states a message he will repeat throughout the encyclical: "a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach" (49). He means that genuine care for the environment will always be connected to the problems in society that create and sustain poverty.

In this first chapter, the pope has only skimmed the surface of the environmental excesses we face, and we have only skimmed the surface of his text! But hopefully he has communicated enough to help us see that we all need to be paying more attention to our relationship with the Earth. We've all heard

about "going green," but the pope wants those in wealthier countries especially to step it up. It's serious. This is the only "common home" we all have, and we need "to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it" (19).

The primary problem is not the births of the poor, but the lifestyles of the rich.

Questions for Life

1. What is your personal reaction to the crises Pope Francis describes? Is it urgency? Despair? Frustration? Talk about these reactions with others. It is important to acknowledge our initial responses. What do you think Pope Francis would say if he were to respond to what you are feeling?
2. What do you know about your own "carbon footprint," the sources of water in your life and the plants and animals that are (or were) native to your place? Who can take out their phone and check these out? It is great to start where you are, beginning to understand the nature of your own place and what distortions impact it.

3. What can you do each day to remind yourself of Pope Francis's call to feel this suffering and be encouraged to do something about it? Daily practices, however small, are a place where we begin to notice more and more connections and see more and more creative ways forward.

For Prayer

When Jesus tells the disciples to find food for the crowds, they scoff at him (John 6:1-15). It is a deserted place, and they do not have enough food. But a young boy comes forward to give five loaves and two fish, even though the disciples say: "What good are these for so many?" Through Jesus's blessing, the young boy's offering is multiplied to feed the crowd and do the impossible. Meditate on what it must have been like for the boy to offer his food, even though he knew it wasn't enough. Ask God for the grace to multiply the loaves and fishes you bring to seemingly impossible problems.