

opinion piece

Bishop Michael Kennedy

Not everyone is happy about what Pope Francis has had to say in *Laudato Si'*, his encyclical letter on the environment. One critic described the document as “a mixture of junk science, junk economics and junk ethics” which, if followed, would prevent the world’s poor escaping poverty.

But there was widespread praise as well, from world leaders among others. President Obama said he deeply admired Francis’s “decision to make the case - clearly, powerfully, and with the full moral authority of his position - for action on global climate change”.

Unsurprisingly, Green parties here and overseas also welcomed the encyclical, although it is unclear whether they picked up the pope’s criticisms of some of their own approaches in the document.

Francis’s endorsement of the scientific consensus on climate change grabbed most of the headlines. This was widely anticipated and for the pope, support for the consensus from his own scientific advisory body, the Pontifical Academy of the Sciences, which has 21 Nobel Prize winners among its 74 eminent scientists, obviously gives the science some credibility.

Another media focus was the provocative language he used to argue that the earth is looking “more and more like an immense pile of filth”, that “the present world system is certainly unsustainable”, and that we need “a bold cultural revolution” if we are going to find a way forward.

Francis has also continued the modern papal tradition of calling for stronger international institutions to address global problems. “Because the stakes are so high, we need institutions empowered to impose penalties for damage inflicted on the environment” and “enforceable international agreements”.

This was not to everyone’s liking either, and a number of responses made the point, politely or otherwise, that no one is required to agree with the pope’s opinions on science, economics or politics.

Francis says as much himself. “The Church does not presume to settle scientific questions or to replace politics”, he writes. “But I am concerned to encourage an honest and open debate so that particular interests or ideologies will not prejudice the common good”.

The concern for the common good is at the heart of this document, and on this question the pope speaks with real authority. Catholics and other people are free to agree or disagree with his analysis and the suggestions he offers for practical action, but this does not make *Laudato Si'* just another point of view. As an encyclical, it is one of the highest forms of papal teaching authority.

Because they apply enduring principles to contemporary problems, papal social encyclicals like *Laudato Si'* have to be read on two levels. They rely on the expert knowledge of the day

to understand the problems they address, and so to some extent their successful application into the future depends on how knowledge and ideas about the best responses continue to develop.

All the same, papal social encyclicals have a pretty good track record of retaining their relevance and importance because of the principles they apply in analysing and rethinking a problem. The common good is one of these principles, and it refers to what is good for everyone, the duty we have to promote this, and the right we have to share in it. As Francis formulates this principle in *Laudato Si'*, the common good means “that everything is interconnected, and that genuine care for our own lives and our relationships with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice and faithfulness to others”.

Francis speaks about the way ideologies or interests can prejudice the common good, and he identifies a number of them: out-of-control consumerism; “a magical conception of the market”; an approach to business (in itself “a noble vocation”) which avoids transparency and proper engagement with local communities; a belief in technology as the only way of solving problems; and an approach to the environment which opposes trafficking endangered species but is unconcerned about the poor, the unwanted, or the child in the womb.

There is something in this list to annoy almost everyone, which is part of the point Francis wants to make. Whatever our particular approach to the environment, we can all cling so strongly to certain ways of thinking and behaving as right or normal, that we no longer really see the world around us or encounter the person in the people we meet. We can end up treating both the world and each other simply as things to use or problems that have to be dealt with.

Interconnectedness is a major principle of this encyclical. Because we are so used to living in a fragmented world, a world where so much of our life together and even our personal lives is separated into silos, Francis’s insistence throughout *Laudate Si'* “that everything is connected” may well be its most challenging and enduring contribution.

On the environment specifically he highlights two re-connections that need to be made. Firstly, human beings are part of the created world, not standing apart from it like aliens. This means our idea of ecology needs to incorporate social and human ecology if it is really going to be effective. As Francis puts it, “human beings too are creatures of this world, enjoying a right to life and happiness, and endowed with unique dignity”.

Secondly, for all the undoubted blessings which technology and markets have brought for development and growth, too often we fall into the trap of treating them as the solution to everything. We ignore the deeper causes of environmental and social problems and focus on managing the symptoms. This approach owes much to the blindness caused by an engaged consumerism and a destructive idea of individualism which equates freedom and creativity with the absence of any limit on the human will.

Francis believes strongly in human freedom and our capacity to change how we think, act and relate to the environment and each other. It is not a bad idea. We should put aside

whatever initial irritations or objections people might have about *Laudato Si'* and take a deeper, calmer look. The cultural shift that Francis invites each of us to make is up to us.

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