



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

Bishops Commission for Justice, Ecology and Development

Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*

18 June 2015

Briefing document | Australian context

Key themes

1. Climate change – warning about effects of global warming/finite resources
2. Intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet
3. Profound human responsibility for global problems/throwaway culture
4. Interdependence of all creation/everything is connected - the common good
5. Need a new dialogue/change of heart with leadership/action
6. Guidance for moving forward

1. Climate change – Warning about effects of global warming

Human activities have caused global warming (23). Climate change is a global problem with grave implications: environmental, social, economic, political and for the distribution of goods.

It represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day... a tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation (25).

Warming has effects on the carbon cycle. It creates a vicious circle affecting the availability of essential resources like drinking water.

'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. Until greater progress is made in developing widely accessible sources of renewable energy, it is legitimate to choose the lesser of two evils or to find short-term solutions' (165).

If present trends continue, this century may well witness extraordinary climate change and an unprecedented destruction of ecosystems, with serious consequences for all of us.

A rise in the sea level can create extremely serious situations, if we consider that a quarter of the world's population lives on the coast or nearby, and that the majority of our megacities are situated in coastal areas. (*Important for Australian audience*)

Urban chaos – 'disproportionate and unruly growth of many cities', 'unhealthy to live in', 'poor transportation, visual pollution and noise'. Many cities are huge, inefficient structures, excessively wasteful of energy and water.

Pope Francis criticizes our economic cycle and reliance on technology. 'It has become countercultural to choose a lifestyle whose goals are even partly independent of technology, of its costs and its power to globalize and make us all the same' (108).

The loss of biodiversity is a critical concern, 'each year sees the disappearance of thousands of plant and animal species which we will never know, which our children will never see, because they have been lost for ever. The great majority become extinct for reasons related to human activity. Because of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God by their very existence, nor convey their message to us. We have no such right' (33).

2. Intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet

The relationship between the poor (humanity) and our planet is clear, 'the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor'. (2)

We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis, which is both social and environmental.

Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature (129).

The voices of the poor are often excluded from international political and economic discussions, which 'can lead to a numbing of conscience' (49) and a 'globalization of indifference' (52).

Everything is connected. Concern for the environment thus needs to be joined to a sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society (91).

The work of the Church seeks not only to remind everyone of the duty to care for nature, but at the same time 'she must above all protect mankind from self-destruction' (79).

3. Profound human responsibility for global problems/throwaway culture

The encyclical is clear about 'the human roots of the ecological crisis'. There can be no renewal of our relationship with nature without a renewal of humanity itself (118).

'Worldwide there is minimal access to clean and renewable energy. Investments have also been made in means of production and transportation which consume less energy and require fewer raw materials, as well as in methods of construction and renovating buildings which improve their energy efficiency. But these good practices are still far from widespread' (26)

'A throwaway culture which affects the excluded just as it quickly reduces things to rubbish. To cite one example, most of the paper we produce is thrown away and not recycled' (22).

'Our industrial system, at the end of its cycle of production and consumption, has not developed the capacity to absorb and reuse waste and by-products. We have not yet managed to adopt a circular model of production capable of preserving resources for

present and future generations, while limiting as much as possible the use of non-renewable resources' (22).

'Never has humanity had such power over itself, yet nothing ensures that it will be used wisely, particularly when we consider how it is currently being used. We need but think of the nuclear bombs dropped in the middle of the twentieth century, or the array of technology, which Nazism, Communism and other totalitarian regimes have employed to kill millions of people, to say nothing of the increasingly deadly arsenal of weapons available for modern warfare. In whose hands does all this power lie, or will it eventually end up? It is extremely risky for a small part of humanity to have it' (104).

Governments need to take action in a 'global consensus' (164).

Cautioned against 'weak responses' including from those who dismiss the dangers of climate change... such evasiveness serves as a licence to carrying on with our present lifestyles and models of production and consumption' (59).

4. Interdependence of all creation/everything is interconnected – the common good

What kind of world do we want to leave behind us? Leaving an inhabitable planet to future generations is, first and foremost, up to us (160).

A global consensus is essential for confronting the deeper problems, which cannot be resolved by individual countries (164)... 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.

It cannot be emphasized enough how everything is interconnected. Time and space are not independent of one another, and not even atoms or subatomic particles can be considered in isolation. A good part of our genetic code is shared by many living beings (138).

Saint Basil the Great described the Creator as "goodness without measure", while Dante Alighieri spoke of "the love which moves the sun and the stars".

Consequently, we can ascend from created things "to the greatness of God and to his loving mercy".

The notion of the common good also extends to future generations. "The environment is part of a logic of receptivity. It is on loan to each generation, which must then hand it on to the next" (124)

5. Need a new dialogue/change of heart with leadership/action

A moral imperative of assessing the impact of our every action and personal decision on the world around us (208).

We need forthright and honest debate (135).

An awareness of the gravity of today's cultural and ecological crisis must be translated into new habits. Many people know that our current progress and the mere amassing of things and pleasures are not enough to give meaning and joy to the human heart, yet they feel unable to give up what the market sets before them (209).

It is essential to seek comprehensive solutions. We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis, which is both social and environmental.

Calls for a revolution of our hearts and minds, challenges 'the modern myth of unlimited material progress' and asks us to redefine our notion of progress to include: energy efficiency, moving beyond our throwaway culture, economic and personal change.

Pope Francis is not afraid to judge international dynamics severely: 'Recent World Summits on the environment have failed to live up to expectations because, due to lack of political will, they were unable to reach truly meaningful and effective global agreements on the environment' (166). What is needed is an agreement on systems of governance for the whole range of the so-called global commons' (174).

The Pope has quoted from various bishops conferences including the Australian Bishops Conference and he has built on the work of previous popes.

6. Guidance for moving forward

- There is always **hope** "All is not lost. Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new start" (205). **All it takes is one good person to restore hope! (71).**
- We must continue to value people and their work 'any approach to an integral ecology, which by definition does not exclude human beings, needs to take account of the value of labour" (124), because "to stop investing in people, in order to gain greater short-term financial gain, is bad business for society' (128).
- Invites all to "ecological conversion", "to aim for a new lifestyle" (203-208), which also opens the possibility of "bringing healthy pressure to bear on those who wield political, economic and social power" (206). We must move past this throwaway culture and embrace a new lifestyle

If asked what practical measures the Bishops/Australian Church will be taking, you might like to consider the following response.

In Australia we encourage practical actions such as:

- Enabling ecological education and formation programs
- Joining NEEN (Catholic Earthcare Australia's 'National Energy Efficiency Network') to reduce energy use and model energy efficiency
- Moving to renewable sources of energy where practicable
- Considering where our investments are placed
- Signing the Catholic Climate Petition, recently endorsed by Pope Francis

Most referenced terms in the encyclical

Environment – 166

Poor - 61

Ecology – 37

Creation – 70

Earth – 69

Nature – 82

References of interest to Australian audience

Indigenous communities (146 & 179)

Quotes Australian Bishops (218)

Sexual identity (155)

Abortion (although this word is not used) (123 & 136) Please note para 120 explicitly names abortion.

Reproduction (140)

Farming/drought (51)

Migrants & refugees (25)

Home ownership (152)

Drug trafficking (46)

Talking points for media spokespeople

Same-sex Marriage

Marriage is an important institution which helps ensure children remain connected to both their mother and their father.

Maintaining the definition of marriage does not discriminate against anyone but recognises the essential biological connection between children and their natural parents.

Equality is about treating like as like and different as different. There is a fundamental biological difference between couples of the same sex and couples of the opposite sex.

Children have a fundamental right to know and be cared for by their natural parents.

Not all marriages result in children, but all children deserve the chance to be raised by their natural mother and father.

Any meaningful definition of marriage will exclude some people, so we need to make sure the distinctions are not arbitrary. If all relationships are considered equal, there are no relationships that would not qualify for marriage.

Human ecology

Pope Francis has spoken of the fragile nature of the family and marriage as a crisis in "human ecology", similar to the challenges facing the natural environment.

The Pope has said that we are slower to recognise the damage to our social environments than our natural environments.

Royal Commission

The Royal Commission public hearings over the past few months have been a distressing experience for everyone involved but particularly the survivor witnesses who give evidence.

We have learnt much about the abuse that the victims suffered and the failings of the church leadership to respond with compassion and justice.

Together the church needs to fully acknowledge the failures of the past and to work towards putting in place fair and compassionate responses to abuse survivors and policies and procedures within church institutions that as far as possible will ensure the abuse of the past will never happen again.

While it is extremely difficult for Catholics across Australia to hear the horrors that are revealed during the Commission process, we must all accept that as part of the Catholic Church we need to understand the failures of the past and be part of the solutions for the future.

Recently Pope Francis has:

- established a high level Vatican Child Protection Commission in 2013.
- appointed 8 new members to the Commission, including a prominent Australian woman, Kathleen McCormack from Wollongong in December 2014 and;
- established a Vatican department to ensure that all Bishops are held fully accountable for their handling of allegations of child sex abuse.