

*LAUDATO SI'S CHALLENGE TO SOCIAL
CONSCIENCE:
SOCIETY AND NATURE TOGETHER*

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Introduction

Your Excellency Archbishop Thomas Wenski, President Monsignor Franklyn Casale, Father Alfred Cioffi and Dr. Roza Pati, reverend Clergy, distinguished Scientists, Faculty, Staff, Students and Neighbors of St. Thomas University, dear friends:

Let me first thank for the invitation and congratulate the organizers of this important conference on climate, nature and society. Yesterday, three distinguished speakers, and two more today, have explained many of the natural, social, economic and political complexities of our topic.

I am delighted to contribute by focusing now on the Encyclical *Laudato si'*. Pope Francis himself offers us the core message of *Laudato si'* in a short video. Let us watch it now.¹ Here are some key takeaways from the video and *Laudato si'* itself:

- Our nature is created by God and surrounded by the gifts of creation.
- Our failures are that we over-consume and that we do not share the gifts of creation. We have tilled too much and kept too little, with dire consequences for the poor and the planet.

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¹ *The Pope's Video About Care for Creation*, GLOBAL CATHOLIC CLIMATE MOVEMENT (Feb. 2016), <http://catholicclimatemovement.global/pope-video/>.

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- And so it is urgent that we change our sense of progress, our management of the economy, and our style of life.

Pope Francis seeks essentially to do three things in *Laudato si'*:

a) to propose a social teaching of the Church that creates awareness about the *immensity and urgency of the challenge* of the present situation of the world and its poor: the two fragilities which lie at the heart of Pope Francis' *integral ecology*.

b) to make an *urgent appeal* for a new dialogue about how to shape the future of our planet, especially through an *ecological conversion, an education in ecological citizenship and an ethical and spiritual itinerary to reduce our footprint and reverse the deterioration of the natural and social environment*.

c) to *encourage humanity* to respond to the urgent appeal with his *profound faith and trust in humanity's ability* to work together to build a common home.

To make such changes is going to require major shifts in our thinking and commitments—indeed, a *conversion* of every individual and of groups and institutions at every level, from local communities to global humanity.

My remarks will explore several chapters of *Laudato si'*. First, what is happening to our *common home*? Let's ask this question, the title of the 1st chapter of the Encyclical, about your home state of Florida. Next, we shall examine *integral ecology*, following Pope Francis especially in the 4th chapter of *Laudato si'*. This leads up to the main features of *ecological conversion* as portrayed in the 6th chapter. After looking briefly at how such conversion is played out in the U.S.A., we conclude by reflecting on the role of the Church and of a Catholic university like St. Thomas.

I. *What is Happening to Our Common Home?*

“What is happening to our common home?” is the question with which Pope Francis begins the 1st chapter of *Laudato si'*.

Humanity, he says, has been prone to “irrational confidence in progress and human abilities,” but now people are more sensitive “to the environment and the need to protect nature, along with a growing concern, both genuine and distressing, for what is happening to our planet.”² And what about the troubling situation in Florida? The reason for asking is “[n]ot to amass information or to satisfy curiosity, but rather to become painfully aware, to dare 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.”³ Please notice the steps: to see—to make the suffering our own—to act.

Quoting the U.S. government’s National Climate Assessment, a recent issue of *National Geographic* predicts that Florida will be battered in the coming decades by rising seas and by extreme weather. For example, the huge agricultural industry: heat and drought in the dry season “could undermine the three mainstays of Florida farming—tomatoes, sugarcane, and citrus. The rainy season will be stormier, with fiercer hurricanes and higher storm surges.”⁴ With these worries, “more and more businesses, and local officials, are factoring climate change into their decisions about the future. They’re focused . . . on adapting to severe weather and flooding, which is already occurring as seas rise.”⁵

A recent article in *The New Yorker* called “The Siege of Miami” reports that in the Miami area, for the past several years, “the daily high-water mark . . . has been racing up at the rate of almost an inch a year, nearly ten times the rate of average global sea-level rise.”⁶

² Pope Francis, *Encyclical Letter Laudato si'*, LIBRERIA EDITRICE VATICANA ¶ 19 (May 24, 2015) [hereinafter *Laudato si'*].

³ *Id.*

⁴ Laura Parker, *Treading Water*, NAT'L GEO., Feb. 2015, <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2015/02/climate-change-economics/parker-text>.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Siege of Miami*, NEW YORKER, Dec. 21, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/12/21/the-siege-of-miami>. “According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, sea levels could rise by more than three feet by the end of this century. The United States Army Corps of Engineers projects that they could rise by as much as five feet; the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration predicts up to six and a half feet.” *Id.*

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While those in coastline mansions have the money to move if needed, the worst suffering will hit the poorest areas, where residents are barely getting by. They are likely to lose their homes and livelihoods and become internally displaced. So, if *Laudato si'* may first have given the impression of talking about the Amazon rainforest or about desertification in Africa and Asia, we now realize that the Encyclical is also about the endangered shorelines of Miami Beach.

II. Integral Ecology

The Encyclical proposes “an approach to ecology which respects our unique place as human beings in this world and our relationship to our surroundings.”⁷ This is *integral ecology*.

Integration is the opposite of fragmentation and isolation: “nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live.”⁸ Rather than think of our relationship with the natural environment as separate from other spheres of human interest and activity, let us see nature as an integral part of a greater whole which includes the social, political and spiritual, material goods, the economic sphere and so on.

St. Francis of Assisi “shows us just how inseparable is the bond between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace.”⁹ He is “the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically.”¹⁰

Our integration with the universe is inbuilt: “we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. Gen 2:7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters . . . We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant

⁷ *Laudato si'*, *supra* note 2, ¶ 15.

⁸ *Id.* ¶ 139.

⁹ *Id.* ¶ 10.

¹⁰ *Id.*

interaction with it.”¹¹ From conception to the moment of death, the life of every person is integrated with and sustained by the awesome panoply of natural processes. Humanity must reciprocate—we must nourish and sustain the earth that nourishes and sustains us.

The biblical narrative teaches us that “human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbor and with the earth itself.”¹² When one of these relationships is broken, the others are broken too, and our insertion in the universe is no longer integral—it is fractured and partial.

St. Francis of Assisi points to integration of the human and the natural, and so does the word *care* in the encyclical’s title. The terminology of *stewardship* appears only twice, but *care* comes up dozens of times. This bespeaks an intimate relationship that goes beyond jobs and accountability. Stewards can work within the boundaries of their responsibilities, and not deal with what falls outside those boundaries. This is to operate within a silo. But if I *care*, I look to the objects of my care—my children, my community, my world—and I see no absolute boundaries to my engagement. I might even die for them, as Jesus says of himself: he is the Good Shepherd who does not flee when the wolf threatens the flock.¹³

“Everything is closely interrelated,” says the Holy Father, “and today’s problems call for a vision capable of taking into account every aspect of the global crisis.”¹⁴ When we *embrace integral ecology*, we avoid silo thinking in favor of interconnection and holism. Only interconnection will let us “find adequate ways of solving the more complex problems of today’s world, particularly those regarding the environment and the poor; these problems cannot be dealt with from a single perspective or from a single set of interests.”¹⁵ No branch of science, no form of wisdom—including culture, religion and spirituality—should be neglected.¹⁶ “Today, the

¹¹ *Id.* ¶¶ 2, 139.

¹² *Id.* ¶ 66.

¹³ *John* 10.

¹⁴ *Laudato si'*, *supra* note 2, ¶ 137.

¹⁵ *Id.* ¶ 110.

¹⁶ *Id.* ¶ 63.

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analysis of environmental problems cannot be separated from the analysis of human, family, work-related and urban contexts, and of how individuals relate to themselves.”¹⁷

Building on this core idea, Pope Francis explores integral ecology in several areas of application, notably the common good and justice:

In the contemporary world, where “injustices abound and growing numbers of people are deprived of basic human rights and considered expendable,” working for the common good means to make choices in solidarity based on “a preferential option for the poorest.”¹⁸ We must not forget the poor of today “whose life on this earth is brief and who cannot keep on waiting.”¹⁹

The common good also regards future generations: “we can no longer speak of sustainable development apart from intergenerational solidarity.”²⁰ Here, in the context of integral ecology, Pope Francis invokes *care for our children* to formulate his pivotal question about the environment: “What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up?”²¹

Here is how these ideas can apply to business. Clearly, corporations must acknowledge the earth’s finite resources and respect our shared common goods. Companies must account for all externalities, measure their footprints on the planet, and restore harmony to the environment for future generations.²² “Where profits alone count, there can be no thinking about the rhythms of nature, its phases of decay and regeneration, or the complexity of ecosystems

¹⁷ *Id.* ¶ 141.

¹⁸ *Id.* ¶ 158.

¹⁹ *Id.* ¶ 162.

²⁰ *Laudato si’*, *supra* note 2, ¶ 159.

²¹ *Id.* ¶ 160.

²² Rev. Seamus P. Finn, OMI, *Why Laudato si’ Should be on the Reading List of Every CEO*, HUFFINGTON POST, July 15, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rev-seamus-p-finn-omi/why-laudato-si-should-be-_b_7797194.html.

which may be gravely upset by human intervention.”²³ There is more to business than financial profit and loss.²⁴

III. *Ecological Conversion*

So *integral ecology* (rather than fragmented exploitation and conservation) is key to assuring a more healthy world for our children. Pope Francis calls next for *ecological conversion*, an expression introduced by St. John Paul II.²⁵ Our conscience is the seat and home of this conversion. Let us care for our common home, let us care for our consciences.

Ecological conversion calls us to embrace integral ecology—understand it, believe it, act upon it. This will not occur automatically. Our habits run counter to integral ecology. But we can transform ourselves, we can experience ecological conversion. In the final chapter, the Pope affirms that faith and Christian spirituality offer profound motivations toward “a more passionate concern for the protection of our world.”²⁶ The example of St. Francis of Assisi is again a wonderful beacon. But individual change is not enough. “Social problems must be addressed by community networks.”²⁷ The conversion will be easier when starting with a contemplative outlook that comes from faith: “as believers, we do not look at the world from without but from within, conscious of the bonds with which the Father has linked us with all beings. By developing our individual, God-given capacities, an ecological conversion can inspire us to

²³ *Laudato si'*, *supra* note 2, ¶¶ 56, 190.

²⁴ Cardinal Peter K.A. Turkson, President, Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Address at the Archdiocese of Toronto: *Laudato si'*: Let's Redefine “Progress” (Mar. 21, 2016), *available at* http://www.iustitiaepax.va/content/giustiziaepace/en/attivita1/presidente/2016/laudato-si_-lets-redefine-progress---toronto--21-march-2016.html.

²⁵ Saint Pope John Paul II, *General Audience*, LIBRERIA EDITRICE VATICANA ¶ 4 (Jan. 17, 2001) “ ‘Ecological conversion’ . . . has made humanity more sensitive to the catastrophe to which it has been heading.”

²⁶ *Laudato si'*, *supra* note 2, ¶ 216.

²⁷ *Id.* ¶ 219.

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greater creativity and enthusiasm.”²⁸

The Pope urges each and every one of us—individuals, families, local communities, nations and the international community—to “ecological conversion”; to a change of heart and a change of direction where we take on the beauty and responsibility of caring for our common home. Let us return to ancient wisdom—still enunciated and practiced by some indigenous peoples—that everything is interconnected. The “human” and “natural” facets of the environment should never have been opposed to each other.

Pope Francis urges Christians to be *leaven* for the *renewal of humanity*: articulate ideals, demonstrate the motivation to act, and be models of generosity and sharing. To be this leaven, Christians call on the rich heritage of twenty centuries of faith and spirituality, “a spirituality capable of inspiring us . . . , an ‘interior impulse which encourages, motivates, nourishes and gives meaning to our individual and communal activity.’”²⁹

Several attitudes and virtues contribute to ecological conversion and to answering the Conference question: where is God in all this?:

- *gratitude* for God’s *gratuitous* gift of the world, whence we know “that we are called quietly to imitate his generosity in self-sacrifice and good works.”³⁰

- *integral awareness*, “a loving awareness that we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures, but joined in a splendid universal communion. As believers, we do not look at the world from without but from within, conscious of the bonds with which the Father has linked us to all beings.”³¹

- *compassion*. Allan Farago, president of Friends of the Everglades, wrote beautifully: “The best way to face massive uncertainties on the climate . . . is with an open heart and empathy

²⁸ *Id.* ¶ 220.

²⁹ *Id.* ¶ 216.

³⁰ *Id.* ¶ 220.

³¹ *Id.*

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for our neighbors who are less well-off and less secure than we are, even here in Miami.”³²

- *respect* for each creature’s value. “Each creature reflects something of God and has a message to convey to us, and the security that Christ has taken unto himself this material world and now, risen, is intimately present to each being, surrounding it with his affection and penetrating it with his light.”³³

- *awe* for the intrinsic order and perfect dynamism with which God created everything. In the Gospel, “Jesus says of the birds of the air that ‘not one of them is forgotten before God’ (Luke 12:6). How then can we possibly mistreat them or cause them harm?”³⁴

Let us look at how ecological and communal conversion is played out at the national level, as we consider how, in the light of *Laudato si'*, the United States is responding to the great challenges of climate.

IV. Laudato si' and Climate in the U.S.A.

Last March, the United States submitted its Intended Nationally Determined Contribution (INDC) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). It expressed its strong commitment “to reducing greenhouse gas pollution.”³⁵ It set “an economy-wide target of reducing its greenhouse gas emissions by 26-28 per cent below its 2005 level in 2025, and [it

³² Alan Farago, *Sea Level Rise: The Siege of Miami*, HUFFINGTON POST, Dec. 14, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alan-farago/sea-level-rise-the-siege_b_8804672.html.

³³ *Laudato si'*, *supra* note 2, ¶ 221.

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ U.S. COVER NOTE, INDC AND ACCOMPANYING INFORMATION, UNFCCC 1 (Mar. 25, 2015), *available at* <http://www4.unfccc.int/submissions/INDC/Published%20Documents/United%20States%20of%20America/1/U.S.%20Cover%20Note%20INDC%20and%20Accompanying%20Information.pdf>.

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intends] to make best efforts to reduce its emissions by 28%.”³⁶ It called the target “fair and ambitious.”³⁷

When Pope Francis arrived in the United States on September 23, 2015, his first public words—delivered at the White House—included the following:

Mr. President, I find it encouraging that you are proposing an initiative for reducing air pollution. Accepting the urgency, it seems clear to me also that climate change is a problem which can no longer be left to our future generation. When it comes to the care of our common home, we are living at a critical moment of history. We still have time to make the change needed to bring about a sustainable and integral development.³⁸

In December 2015, the nations of the world signed the Paris Agreement, promising to peak global greenhouse gas emissions as soon as possible, with the goal of reaching net-zero emissions in the second half of the century. This goal requires, as Pope Francis urged in *Laudato si'*, a “new and universal solidarity.”³⁹ The United States, as one of the world’s largest carbon emitters—especially in per capita terms—has a special responsibility to act. The U.S. exercised leadership in the run-up to Paris, as evidenced by bilateral agreements with both India and China. Building on its own 26-28 percent commitment, leadership was also shown during the negotiations at COP21. Yet, as Pope Francis realistically warns, economic and other special interests can “easily end up trumping the common good and manipulating information so that their own plans

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ *Remarks by President Obama and His Holiness Pope Francis at Arrival Ceremony*, WHITE HOUSE (Sept. 23, 2015) <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/23/remarks-president-obama-and-his-holiness-pope-francis-arrival-ceremony>.

³⁹ *Laudato si'*, *supra* note 2, ¶ 14.

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will not be affected.”⁴⁰ Your Supreme Court recently stayed implementation of the administration’s Clean Power Plan to reduce emissions from power plants.⁴¹ Let me only comment that greenhouse gas pollution affects every man, woman, and child on the planet now, and more so in future generations. I know that the great majority of Americans fully support plans to reduce emissions and protect our common home. Let’s make sure that the dynamic set in motion by COP21 in Paris is not derailed. In this regard I heartily applaud the strong position of the U.S. Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, led by your own Archbishop of Miami, Thomas Wenski.⁴²

By now, over 160 parties have produced their own INDCs to reduce emissions. Please familiarize yourselves with the U.S.’s INDC—it’s only 4 pages—and reflect on how your University community can follow what happens to it and indeed push for even more “fair and ambitious” targets to avoid or reverse environmental degradation and harm to all God’s people. And what about the challenges on this campus, in its neighbourhood, in the Miami area and throughout Florida? How will you respond to the plea of Pope

⁴⁰ *Id.* ¶ 54.

⁴¹ The U.S. Clean Power Plan would establish state-level targets for emissions reductions, ultimately reducing national electricity sector emissions by an estimated 32 percent below 2005 levels by 2030. The Supreme Court has stayed implementation of the plan until the Federal Appeals Court hears arguments, in early June, whether the Clean Air Act does indeed provide the Environmental Protection Agency with the required authority. *Chamber of Commerce, et al. v. EPA et al.*, No. 15A787 (U.S. Feb. 9, 2016) (order granting stay of implementing legislation). If the latter ruling is appealed, the Supreme Court’s final ruling is not expected until June 2017. If the plan is reversed, the next President will have to craft a new plan. Historically, it is not unusual for the EPA’s authority to be questioned by various interests. Though the Clean Power Plan is central to the U.S.’s INDC, still, other laws and regulations are in place through which the federal government can act. The federal administration has also taken a number of steps to engage local levels of government, the private sector and organizations of civil society.

⁴² Letter from Thomas G.. Wenski, Archbishop of Miami, to the United States Senate (Feb. 3, 2016) *available at* <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/environment/upload/wenski-ltr-energy-policy-modernization-act-2-3-16.pdf>.

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Francis: “That we may take good care of creation—a gift freely given—cultivating and protecting it for future generations.”⁴³

*Conclusion: What Role for the Church
and for St. Thomas University?*

Guided by *Laudato si'*, we have reviewed the environment in this country and state. We have sensitized ourselves to integral rather than fragmented ecology, and seen its implication in ecological conversion. Conversion is a path of return to the Father from whom we have strayed by sin.⁴⁴ “Sin is the active principle of division,” St. John Paul II wrote.⁴⁵ Accordingly, “only conversion from sin is capable of bringing about a profound and lasting reconciliation wherever division has penetrated”⁴⁶ Such a first step requires recognizing one’s own sins, followed by heartfelt repentance and desire to change.⁴⁷

For twenty centuries, the Church has accompanied the daily efforts of conversion of hearts. It accompanies each sinner in turning back to the fundamental and full reconciliation of humanity carried out by Redemption. Today the Church fulfils the same role with regard to humanity. It now touches in a special way on the fourth division produced by sin identified by St. John Paul II, that between humanity and nature created by God. We must reconcile ourselves with “our sister the Earth, our Mother Earth.”⁴⁸ It is exactly here that the Church and St. Thomas University are called to contribute.

⁴³ *The Pope’s Video About Care for Creation*, *supra* note 1.

⁴⁴ CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, LIBRERIA EDITRICE VATICANA § 1423 (May 2016).

⁴⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation Reconciliatio et Penitentia*, LIBRERIA EDITRICE VATICANA ¶ 23 (Dec. 2, 1984).

⁴⁶ *Id.*

⁴⁷ *Laudato si'*, *supra* note 2, ¶ 218.

⁴⁸ Pope Francis, *Message to the 2d International Conference on Nutrition* ¶ 4 (Nov. 20, 2014), available at https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/november/documents/papa-francesco_20141120_visita-fao.html.

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Pope Francis speaks to Christians and non-Christians, the religious and non-religious. He appeals for “dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet” —a dialogue that is open to everyone, a dialogue to which science and religion, with their different approaches to reality, are invited.⁴⁹

As the Archdiocesan Catholic University, St. Thomas is committed to developing leadership in justice, science, business and ministry. In prayer and dialogue, let the entire St. Thomas community seek conversion. Let us form our consciences, let us care for our common home. *We have received the world as a garden-home. Let us not bequeath a wilderness to future generations!*

⁴⁹ *Laudato si'*, *supra* note 2, ¶ 62.