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## The Papal Plea

Pope Francis is coming closer to the end of his momentous life. He has taken extraordinary advantage of his position as head of the Catholic Church and its global community, and also as a world leader, to encourage humanity to come to its senses. His mission is to safeguard all life on Earth. He follows his namesake in revering all living species in their cosmic setting as manifestations of the everlasting divine.

Here we look at two of his recent addresses on this topic. One is his *Laudate Deum*, given on the Feast of St Francis on October 4, 2023. The second is his opening remarks to the 28th Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention on Climate Change in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, on December 2, 2023. These follow his Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si'*,<sup>1</sup> published on May 24, 2015. *Environment* devoted a special issue to that statement (Volume 57, Issue 6, 2015). In the accompanying editorial, the executive editors emphasized the Pope's championing of "theology of ecological and social integrity—of loving, sharing, and caring as a human manifestation of virtue." They also praised the Pope for castigating "the character of political power and hubric technology in channeling individual outlooks and behavior toward the unsustainable." And they appreciated his extolling the common good. "Pope Francis rests his case on poverty alleviation, on new forms of redistribution, on the rights of all humans to a decent life, on fully responsible business, and on a renaissance of the dispossessed into effective members of a shared humanity."

Eight years later, in his *Laudate Deum*,<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis realizes that his admonitions and encouragement have not been attended to. "With the passage of time, I have realized that our responses have not been adequate, while the world in which we live is collapsing and may be nearing the breaking point."<sup>3</sup> Technology by itself cannot be the means to salvation. Technology carries lots of dangers. One peril is simply to provide a false sense of escape from calamity. We are led to believe that we can have all our comforts and yet retain all life on the planet. The rise of the personal electric vehicle is the epitome of this delusion. Technology also leads to the throttling of supply chains of the critical materials essential for guaranteeing a low-carbon future. This dependence of a seemingly welcome but essentially Faustian bargain of addictive technology continues our fixation with a continuation of the same. We are not learning, just reformulating. "We stand naked and exposed in the face of our ever-increasing power, lacking the wherewithal to control it. We have certain superficial mechanisms, but we cannot claim

to have a sound ethics, a culture and spirituality genuinely capable of setting limits and teaching clear-minded self-restraint."<sup>4</sup>

In his Apostolic Exhortation of *Laudate Deum*, the Pope calls for a permanent shift to multiple-centered governance and multilateralism. He does so to redouble the drive to people and community-empowered transformations, with the local replacing the global as the scene of action. He takes this perspective for two reasons. "The demands that rise up from below throughout the world, where activists from very different countries help and support one another, can end up pressuring the sources of power."<sup>5</sup> He visualizes a locally active society becoming more egalitarian and hence more far-seeing.<sup>6</sup> Damage to the home is less likely if the home is connected into its full-blooded sustaining neighborhood. "In this framework, there would necessarily be required spaces for conversation, consultation, arbitration, conflict resolution and supervision, and, in the end, a sort of increased 'democratization' in the global context."<sup>7</sup>

For the Pope, this process of expansive containment brings with it a transformation in consumption and the culture of care. "Efforts by households to reduce pollution and waste, and to consume with prudence, are creating a new culture. The mere fact that personal, family and community habits are changing is contributing to greater concern about the unfulfilled responsibilities of the political sectors and indignation at the lack of interest shown by the powerful."<sup>8</sup> A self-realizing citizenry will become a politically reforming agency.

Here the Pope is addressing the global elites. They hold the power, and they create envy of privilege and overconsumption. The Pope is all too aware that the poor do not contribute to the escalating planetary stresses, even though they are a multitude. "The poor are the real victims of what is happening: we need think only of the plight of indigenous peoples, deforestation, the tragedies of hunger, water and food insecurity, and forced migration."<sup>9</sup> He points toward a new economics of survival where the poor are granted not only effective means for resistance to oppression, but resilience to destitution.

In his address to COP 28,<sup>10</sup> he was even more forthright. Here we sense the cry of a man in the winter of his life and identifying with the expiring Francis, almost 800 years ago. This is an exceptionally brave and translucent appeal. "Francis composed his 'Canticle of the Creatures.' By then Francis was completely blind, and after a night of physical suffering, his spirits were elevated by a mystical experience.

He turned to praise the Most High for all those creatures that he could no longer see, but knew that they were his brothers and sisters, since they came forth from the same Father and were shared with other men and women. An inspired sense of fraternity thus led him to turn his pain into praise and his weariness into renewed commitment.” At COP28 Pope Francis called directly to world leaders to turn the ecosystem’s painful-to-see state into commitment through covenant. “Now is the time no longer to postpone, but to ensure, and not merely to talk about the welfare of your children, your citizens, your countries and our world ... In the end, the purpose of power is to serve.”<sup>11</sup>

Here we are reminded of the poem by Cardinal Thomas Henry Newman expressing the dying dreams of Gerontius. Newman expressed healing that could come through “the redemption of suffering.” Pope Francis challenges the world, through the assembled delegates. He was forbidden by his doctors to travel to Dubai. But his words tell us all: “Sadly, I am unable to be present with you, as I had greatly desired. Even so, I am with you, because time is short. I am with you because now more than ever, the future of us all depends on the present that we now choose. I am with you because the destruction of the environment is an offense against God, a sin that is not only personal but also structural, one that greatly endangers all human beings, especially the most vulnerable in our midst ... I am with you to raise the question which we must answer now: Are we working for a culture of life or a culture of death? To all of you I make this heartfelt appeal: Let us choose life!”<sup>12</sup>

Here we see the twinning of Francis: the Saint and the Pope united in a plea to change the nature of the human soul into a transcendental encompassing of all life that came before humans evolved, and that will surely outlast the human presence on the planet. In our frenzied world it is doubtful that these two extraordinary messages will be fully appreciated. We should stop our cacophonous clamor and pause in peaceful contemplation. The Pope and his forefather are arguing for a process of transformation of the individual, the community that nurtures and provides identity for every person, and the caring by each nation that guides collective responsibility and destiny.

Maybe the Pope is right. Maybe there is an emerging survival economics that can uplift the disposed, the sufferers, and the destitute, and shed light on near-death for continued life on Earth. We are reaching a point where the costs of continuation of the current basis of economic performance cannot be met from growth as we have come to understand it. Survival economics is the economics of perpetuation for all life on Earth. Survival economics may become the economics of joyful sharing and personal responsibility for a planet that is truly wondrous to behold and inhabit. Maybe this is truly the Pope’s theological legacy.

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## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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## NOTES

1. [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)
2. [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html)
3. *Laudate Deum*, section 2.
4. *Laudate Deum*, section 24.
5. *Laudate Deum*, section 38.
6. The principle of subsidiarity, *Laudate Deum*, section 37.
7. *Laudate Deum*, section 43.
8. *Laudate Deum*, section 71.
9. <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2023/december/documents/20231202-dubai-cop28.html>
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.

For an exploration of *Laudato Si’* see “Our Common Home, A Guide to Caring for Our Living Planet,” a joint initiative of the Stockholm Environment Institute and the Vatican, available at <https://www.sei.org/publications/ourcommonhome>.