

Book Reviews



ENVIRONMENT

LAUDATO SI': On Care for Our Common Home by Pope Francis. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2015. 176 pages. Paperback; \$12.95. ISBN: 9781612783864.

During the summer of 2016, the world's attention was riveted on Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, host of the Olympics. Summer of 2016 also marked a year after the release of Pope Francis's encyclical, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*, named after a song of St. Francis of Assisi. This book forced the world to talk about Christian belief and its intersection with poverty and environmental degradation.

The timing of the encyclical was purposeful and effective. It was released at the end of the UN's Millennium Development Goals of 2000–2015 and before the Paris, France, climate talks in December 2015. The Millennium Development Goals were an ambitious attempt to alleviate dire poverty. Most of these goals have not been achieved completely, but important strides have been made. Millions of people gained access to sewage treatment, clean drinking water, health care, and schooling. Humans have benefitted from power plants, medicines, and increased crop yields. However, the goal of achieving environmental sustainability has not been met. Ocean pollution, soil loss, biodiversity loss, and climate change worsened over the same period. In the midst of this dilemma, Pope Francis released *Laudato Si'* and brought the voice of religious authority to the current environmental crisis.

Laudato Si' contains an introduction and six chapters (with numbered paragraphs). While an encyclical is a Roman Catholic theological document, this one is addressed to "all people of good will." The first chapter overviews the state of the world, lamenting environmental changes such as water scarcity and pollution woes, and observes that "our home is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth" (p. 19). Francis also depicts a number of social changes such as "rapidification" (the increasing pace of life), social breakdown, waste, and immense gaps between rich and poor. Chapter two covers a Christian theology of stewardship, referring to several biblical passages which show that sin has disrupted human relationships with God, our neighbors, and the earth. However, God's ownership of all of creation and the commandments to "till and keep" the garden (p. 49) mean that humans have a responsibility to care for the earth.

Subsequent chapters relate the human roots of the ecological crisis, ecology and the common good, and a call to action for all. First, Francis describes the downside of rapid technological progress. Technology itself represents creativity and has remedied countless evils (p. 70). Unfortunately, the book states, "we cannot claim to have a sound ethics, a culture and spirituality genuinely capable of setting limits and teaching clear-minded self-restraint" (p. 72). Francis denounces a "technocratic paradigm" based on the "lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth's goods ..." (p. 73).

Much of the book is about connections. Environmental problems cannot be studied scientifically without also understanding economic and social factors; this means that we must have "integral ecology." He explains, "We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather one complex crisis which is both social and environmental" (p. 94). To solve these problems, we need internal changes and social changes. It will take a radical shift in mindset and international and national commitments to fight such large-scale problems as climate change and poverty.

Finally, Francis calls for a simpler, less commercial life. "Disinterested concern for others, and the rejection of every form of self-centeredness and self-absorption are essential if we truly wish to care for our brothers and sisters and the natural environment" (p. 136). Throughout the book, Francis invokes a rich contemplative tradition, stating, "Christian spirituality proposes a growth marked by moderation and the capacity to be happy with little" (p. 144).

Laudato Si' was released to worldwide acclaim. It built on the tradition of a Christian stewardship ethic developed by others, such as Loren Wilkerson, Calvin B. DeWitt, Francis Schaeffer, Popes John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI. Nonetheless, the encyclical was a step forward. Scientists, religious leaders, and environmentalists all praised the work. The Dalai Lama, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Conference of Catholic Bishops hailed it as historic. An editor lauded it in the scientific journal *Nature*. There were numerous articles in the mainstream press.

The encyclical is a powerful text. As the head of the Roman Catholic Church, Pope Francis leads a church of 1.2 billion and has an opportunity to change the world. By writing to the whole globe, but speaking from within the Roman Catholic social teaching, Pope Francis represents a prophetic voice for profound

change in the way we view others and nature. The book describes the way humans approach wealth as radically wrong. Some passages sound much like the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7), with its calls to care for all creation; to honor the weak, poor, and powerless as much as the powerful and rich; and to be joyful and grateful while choosing a slower, less consumptive life. In addition, the encyclical accurately represents the current scientific consensus. Several scientific groups and individuals have made supporting statements, in part because Pope Francis invited scientists to the Vatican and included them in discussions during the writing process. This book also has the capacity to affect international agreements. The timing of its release, before the December 2015 Paris climate talks, was critical in attracting attention from the press and thus encouraging widespread discussion.

In spite of these strengths, there are a number of weaknesses. The encyclical is full of generalizations but gives few specific details. How many species are going extinct? When and where are people most viewed as objects? How, specifically, will we make the radical changes Francis suggests, if individuals are sinful and institutions are driven by short-term gains? Francis makes some suggestions, but they are not well spelled out. Furthermore, the encyclical does not discuss population growth as a contributor to any environmental issues. While this was unsurprising given the Roman Catholic Church's position on birth control, it was a glaring omission. Many of the major criticisms of the encyclical came from those in the fields of politics and economics. For example, the encyclical dismisses cap-and-trade systems, which proved successful with sulfur emissions, but it gives no clear alternatives for economically and politically viable mechanisms to lower carbon emissions.

Laudato Si' reminds us that the current state of affairs in which brutal poverty and overconsumption co-occur is damaging to both humans and the rest of creation. The specifics of solutions to the need for both development and environmental protection are left to the international community, as we attempt our next global undertaking with the new Sustainable Development Goals of 2015–2030. By then we will have had three more Olympics, and hopefully they will be held in a world that is more moral, better cared for, and more sustainable. I recommend the book, both to individual readers and to groups that will find the included discussion questions helpful as a guide to conversation.

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ETHICS

THE END OF SEX AND THE FUTURE OF HUMAN REPRODUCTION by Henry T. Greely. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016. 381 pages. Hardcover; \$35.00. ISBN: 0674728963.

With a title that is sure to catch a reader's eye, this book draws us in to think of a world in which sexual intercourse will no longer serve a role in reproduction. In this book, Stanford University law professor Henry Greely examines a putative world in which sperm and egg cells could be made from skin cells to produce embryos that would be genetically screened before given a chance to develop fully. In his writing, Greely coins the term "easy preimplantation genetic diagnosis" (EPGD) and predicts that this will be a standard tool used in producing offspring in the relatively near future.

Based on our current knowledge of genetics and stem cells, and the rate at which we have acquired such knowledge, Greely outlines what is needed with regard to scientific advancements and predicts that a world as portrayed in the movie *Gattaca* or read about in *Brave New World* is merely twenty to forty years away. He describes a future in which children can be born from parents who never existed, gay and lesbian couples can have biological offspring together, disease-causing mutations could be wiped out in a generation, individuals could have offspring with themselves, and parents could discard embryos based on the lack of desired traits.

In predicting this future world, Greely writes so that the topic is accessible to a broad audience. He begins by giving "a nonscientist guide" to readers so they can understand the scientific foundation that will allow EPGD to become a reality. He then discusses what will be needed by way of scientific advancement to make EPGD an affordable reality. As one digests the advancements that will be needed, one begins to see the benefits and complications of such a world. In the third part of his book, Greely walks the reader through several implications for society of genetically screening embryos in order to select for certain traits.

I find it interesting that the author begins his book by discrediting his authority. He admits that he "last took a biology course at the age of fifteen" and concedes that his book "gives a nonscientist a guide," as he is a lawyer not a scientist.