



Laudato Si' and Catholic Health Care

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“**L**audato Si' isn't really about the environment.” That's what Willis Jenkins, one of the country's leading environmental ethicists, asserted during a 2015 conference at Boston College about Pope Francis' encyclical letter. Jenkins is associate professor of religious studies at the University of Virginia, and though his remark might seem confusing — if not startling — he is, in many ways, right. *Laudato Si'* is a document about what it means to be fully human, and it recognizes ecological degradation as the symptom of humans' failure to live up to that ideal. This is a powerful insight that can inspire the Catholic health care ministry to deeper care for creation.

There is a delicate balance between the health of the Earth and the health of human beings. The vast majority of top climate scientists around the world — from the Nobel Prize-winning Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in Switzerland to the National Academy of Sciences in the U.S. — warn that human activities are causing global environmental crises, including climate change. Since humans are part of the planetary ecosystem, as Pope Francis points out, such environmental degradation compromises human health, life and dignity — especially for the poor, vulnerable and future generations.

THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Throughout *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis addresses the most pressing contemporary socio-ecological challenges: pollution and climate change, availability of clean water, the loss of biodiversity, decline in the quality of human life, the breakdown of society and global inequality. Although Pope Francis is deeply concerned about these issues, he recognizes that they are external symptoms of humanity's failure to live in accord with God's vision for all persons. The pope writes:

Human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbor and with the Earth itself. According to the Bible, these three vital relationships have been broken, both outwardly and within us. This rupture is sin. The harmony between the Creator, humanity and creation as a whole was disrupted by our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations. This in turn distorted our mandate to “have dominion” over the Earth (cf. Gen 1:28), to “till it and keep it” (Gen 2:15). As a result, the originally harmonious relationship between human beings and nature became conflictual (cf. Gen 3:17-19).¹

In other words, the sin of human pride allows us to live in an ethic of selfishness that is deformed from the relational way God created and calls humans to live. This ethic, Pope Francis says, blinds humanity to the interconnectedness of all creation and leads to actions and systems — economic, political, scientific and technological



Curtis Parker

— that exploitatively dominate creation rather than live in harmony with it.

AWE AND WONDER

In his encyclical, the pope seeks to catalyze environmental sustainability through internal conversion. He explains how “awe and wonder” about God’s creation led St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of ecology, to a deep feeling of interconnectedness that inspired an ethic of care. Pope Francis believes that when people are inspired by a deep sense of awe and wonder about the world, they will be moved instinctively to care for God’s good gift of creation.

But such care extends beyond individual actions. In their pastoral resource, “The Two Feet of Love in Action,” the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops points out that Catholic social teaching calls for both charity and justice in response to social challenges.² Charity focuses on discrete actions to “meet basic needs and aid individuals,” the bishops said, and justice “removes root causes” of social problems and “improves structures” in society. Although each is important, we need both in order to adequately address complex sociopolitical, economic and ecological challenges.

CATHOLIC HEALTH CARE

Animated by awe and wonder for creation and equipped with the framework of charity and justice, the Catholic health care ministry can help humanity restore relationships with God, oth-

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ers and all creation and so better care for both human health and our common home. Taking into account the ecological impact of operational and health care decisions is a holistic approach closely tied to Pope Francis’ concept of “integral ecology.”

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of their community benefit activities, Catholic health care providers can engage in a multitude of discrete, short-term projects to improve a community’s environmental health and, by extension, help the most vulnerable. Efforts might include helping to remove lead in community housing, taking back unused pharmaceuticals that would otherwise end up in landfills or water supplies and developing plans of community care such as setting up cooling centers for the elderly during heat waves and warming centers during frigid temperatures.

CATHOLIC HEALTH CARE AND JUSTICE

Catholic health care professionals can take the lead in helping to improve societal structures as well as to eliminate some of their own in-house causes of ecological problems. Activities should include institutional sustainability assessment and benchmarking, revising hospital and system policies and procedures to improve sustainability and reduce carbon footprint, and advocating in support of ecologically minded public policies.³

Partnership with community and government organizations in strategic initiatives can help broaden the environmental vision as well as the results.⁴ Examples include:

- Reducing or eliminating the use of persistent, bio-accumulative toxicants, carcinogens or other high hazard chemicals that pollute the Earth and can lead to a wide range of diseases
- Increasing the use of sustainable, energy-efficient, renewable energy and materials and “climate-friendly” operations that can help create green and healthy jobs and mitigate the adverse health effects of climate change
- Purchasing and providing healthy, sustain-



ably grown food, supporting local economies and farming practices that reduce harm to people and the environment

- Purchasing environmentally safe products and technologies to reduce waste and pollution
- Increasing availability of green space

ADVOCACY

Catholic health care has provided leadership on a wide range of advocacy efforts for state and federal policies that support care for creation. Such initiatives have brought about changes that embrace the fair treatment of all people with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies.

Advocating for policies and promoting practices that will help to restore relationships with God, others and all creation will, in turn, help heal the Earth and, ultimately, help heal humanity. We must have the courage to build on past successes and continue to transform health care to one that embraces awe and wonder for creation. As Pope Francis observes:

It is essential to seek comprehensive solutions which consider the interactions within natural systems themselves and with social systems. 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.⁵

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NOTES

1. Francis, *Laudato Si'*, paragraph 66. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.
2. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "The Two Feet of Love in Action," www.usccb.org/about/justice-peace-and-human-development/upload/two-feet-handout-color.pdf.
3. Laura Anderko, Stephanie Chalupka and Brenda Afzal, *Climate Change and Health: Is There a Role for the Health Care Sector?* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Health Association, 2012).
4. Ted Schettler, *Connecting Health Care with Public & Environmental Health* (St. Louis: Catholic Health Association, 2013). www.chausa.org/docs/default-source/general-files/connecting-health-care-with-public-and-environmental-health-pdf.pdf?sfvrsn=0.
5. Francis, *Laudato Si'*, paragraph 139. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

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