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ON BEING OPEN TO CHANGING OUR MINDS

A Response to *Laudato si’*

*Beth R. Crisp*

With the subtitle ‘On Care for Our Common Home’ and references to many different countries scattered throughout the text, *Laudato si’* is clearly aimed at people from across the globe. However, while the need to care for the environment globally is a concern shared by many Roman Catholics, and those of other faiths or none, to some extent each of us reads this encyclical from within our own contexts. For me, that context is Australia, a country which has undergone remarkable destruction of its biodiversity since European settlement commenced in 1788. In *The Bush: Travels in the Heart of Australia*, Don Watson chronicles the changing attitudes of Australians to their environment:

> If the history of the bush appalls us, it is not for the destruction alone, but also the wilfulness. Even as they laboured for their children and succeeding generations, the settlers were denying them the world they had found. Where trees could be exploited, or removed to make way for mining or agriculture, they were, and without regard to their intrinsic—as opposed to their commercial—value …. Across the country since Europeans first arrived, 92 per cent of old-growth forest has been destroyed.¹

The destruction of natural habitats was deemed essential in order to provide land for housing, industry, agriculture and leisure. Indeed the early European settlers were typically granted land for farming with the requirement that they remove the indigenous vegetation so that crops familiar to them could be planted and animals grazed on this reclaimed land. This was to varying degrees sanctioned, if not actively promoted,

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¹ Countries and regions mentioned include South Africa (n. 14), the Amazon (n. 38), Africa (n. 51), the United States (n. 52), Brazil (n. 88), New Zealand (n. 95) and Australia (n. 218).

by Churches and religious leaders. Consequently, it was hardly surprising that early settlers (known as selectors), including Watson’s own ancestors, often regarded their work on the land as fulfilling God’s will:

The selectors in the Big Scrub were … the founders of the new: the first of our people, our Genesis. The forest was destroyed so calves could be born and suckled, corn raised, the light allowed to shine on growing children …. The virtue was self-evident. They were ‘clearing’; the word comes from the Latin clarus, meaning light or brightness, which is the condition of seeing the truth and the way forward. They were letting in the light, even God’s light, letting it shine brightly. The word also suggests improvements—the removal of impurities and obstacles …. (206–207)

This imperative from the state was presented to the settlers as being not only morally correct, but also necessary in the eyes of God:

The faithful could set upon the most commanding and inscrutable gum with reasonable hope that the ring of their axes was music to His tremendous ear. The pagan, the sinful and the forbidden inhabit wildernesses, and people who go there are as if out of the sight of God. The sooner they clear the trees, the sooner God’s sight can be restored and His kingdom on earth realised. (186)

Such views predominated across religious groupings in Australia in the latter half of the nineteenth and earlier parts of the twentieth centuries. As well as establishing their farms, the selectors built churches, hospitals, schools and other community projects, providing the basis of the infrastructure still in use today in much of rural Australia (208). The work of the early settlers not only benefited their contemporaries, but continues to benefit urban Australians such as myself in the twenty-first century. Although we may be feel ambivalent about what the settlers did in the name of God or for the country,
what I eat and wear, and even where I live, to varying degrees, have been made possible by the clearing of land for agriculture and other industries. Moreover, whether or not I am comfortable with this truth, I benefit from the infrastructure built by the early settlers that allows those who grow the food I eat, and materials for the clothes I wear, to live in rural Australia.

While the details may differ, the experience of changed land use after foreign settlement is a reality in many countries where there is or has been colonial rule. Moving from a period of colonialism to one of post-colonialism may provide the impetus for reflecting on how the original owners understood their environment. For indigenous Australians,

The settlement of Australia involved profound violations—all the more profound because there were people who recognised them for what they were and protested at the destruction of what they held to be beautiful, precious, God-given. (118)

In *Laudato si’*, Pope Francis invites us to consider the environment, not as our religious forefathers did in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but in a way more akin to that of Indigenous Australians, dispossessed of their land by European settlement:

It is not enough, however, to think of different species merely as potential ‘resources’ to be exploited, while overlooking the fact that they have value in themselves. 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. (n. 33)

In the Australian context, Watson writes of needing new ways to understand the responsibility of land ownership, radically different from those demanded of the settlers in previous generations:

The land needs reclaiming again, if not from the people with title to it, then from the habits which have governed it for so long. Think about the word for a while, utter it under your breath, and sense the power ‘reclaiming’ had. It goes some way to explaining the unwavering belief, the grit and human strength that went into settlement. If that is what it took to wreck the bush, it will likely take as much to remake it, make it sustainable, *reclaim* it. (244)

Similarly, Pope Francis calls for a change from the attitudes towards land and its use of the past two hundred years and a need to value those aspects of our ecosystems which have too often been disregarded:
These situations have caused sister earth, along with all the abandoned of our world, to cry out, pleading that we take another course. Never have we so hurt and mistreated our common home as we have in the last two hundred years. Yet we are called to be instruments of God our Father, so that our planet might be what he desired when he created it and correspond with his plan for peace, beauty and fullness. The problem is that we still lack the culture needed to confront this crisis. We lack leadership capable of striking out on new paths and meeting the needs of the present with concern for all and without prejudice towards coming generations. The establishment of a legal framework which can set clear boundaries and ensure the protection of ecosystems has become indispensable; otherwise, the new power structures based on the techno-economic paradigm may overwhelm not only our politics but also freedom and justice. (n.53)

What does this mean for me as an individual who lives in a large city? What can or should I, as one of more than 23 million Australians, be doing? To be honest, I do not really have a clue. Nevertheless, perhaps Pope Francis is addressing people like me when he writes:

Here we see how environmental deterioration and human and ethical degradation are closely linked. Many people will deny doing anything wrong because distractions constantly dull our consciousness of just how limited and finite our world really is. (n.56)

To some extent, I am relieved when Pope Francis admits there are no easy solutions and that there is no consensus as to how ecological problems can be solved in an ethical way (nn.58–61). Notwithstanding the need for humans to take responsibility for their collective actions (nn.67–69), Francis then reminds us of the importance of believing in the power of God, something I know I readily disregard:

A spirituality which forgets God as all-powerful and Creator is not acceptable. That is how we end up worshipping earthly powers, or ourselves usurping the place of God, even to the point of claiming an unlimited right to trample his creation underfoot. The best way to restore men and women to their rightful place, putting an end to their claim to absolute dominion over the earth, is to speak once more of the figure of a Father who creates and who alone owns the world. Otherwise, human beings will always try to impose their own laws and interests on reality. (n.75)

For those of us with work, family or other responsibilities in which others expect us to be all-powerful and able to solve whatever problem arises, the temptation to feel equal, if not superior, to God is ever present even if we choose to ignore it. Nevertheless, in our prayer, we should
be constantly seeking to discern the will of God in making the right
decisions, which are ethical both for those who live on this earth and for
the earth itself. Moreover, as we gain further information, what may once
have seemed to be the right decisions may no longer seem so, and different
actions may be taken (n.135). Indeed Pope Francis has advocated that

… when significant new information comes to light, a reassessment
should be made, with the involvement of all interested parties. The
outcome may be a decision not to proceed with a given project, to
modify it or to consider alternative proposals. (n.187)

One person for whom this was the case was St Ignatius. For example,
during the months he spent at Manresa, he sought to emulate the lives
of various saints by taking on extreme penances, especially those that
involved fasting. Ultimately, he had to accept that this was damaging
his health and adopt more moderate habits. Furthermore, while it was
common practice for religious orders to have prescribed penances, Ignatius
did not stipulate any when establishing the rules for the new Society of
Jesus. Ignatius had his own views as to the works in which the new order
should be involved and yet, from its earliest days, Jesuits have taken part
in apostolates far removed from those Ignatius expected. Among the
types of work which Ignatius did not consider to be the calling of Jesuits
was to be bishops. Clearly Ignatius could not have imagined that in the
twenty-first century a member of the Society of Jesus would even be Pope,
and that the emphasis of his second encyclical would be the environment. Yet somehow I imagine he would have come to see this as being ‘for the
greater glory of God’. 5

Laudato si’ is a complex document, with some aspects with which I feel
more inclined to agree than others. I guess the first challenge for me, like
many readers, is to consider how we can respond locally—as individuals
and as members of Christian communities and broader societies—to a
global statement about the environment. Taking time to discern and act
upon what is possible, even if a seemingly minute gesture, is far more positive
than becoming paralyzed and doing nothing because the magnitude of
the issues facing the environment seems just too overwhelming. Some
things become easier over time. For example, when recycling was first

5 ‘Ad majorem Dei gloriae’ or, as it is often shortened, ‘AMDG’. 
introduced in Australia, many years ago, as part of household rubbish collections it was not uncommon to hear remarks about the hassle of having to sort rubbish into recyclables and refuse destined for landfill. Now, sorting rubbish has become routine—but new environmental concerns arise to challenge our complacency.

Responding to these concerns has many similarities with prayer. When I find myself in situations which are overwhelming, it can be easy to find excuses not to pray. Or I can settle into routines in which I pretend to myself that I am open to hearing the call of God, and confuse complacency with consolation to justify my decisions. Conversely, as *Laudato si’* calls us to rethink our relationship with the environment, perhaps even more importantly it also asks us to rethink our relationship with God and with each other and, through discernment, to be willing to change our minds.

Being able to change one’s mind is often not easy. Apologies may be required. In the public sphere we have seen great reluctance by Churches, governments and other public organizations to say ‘sorry’, that they got it wrong and now recognise their actions wronged others, wronged the world and/or wronged God. Similarly, at an individual level, making a sincere apology can be one of the most difficult things we are called to do, and something we may try to avoid doing it. Even if changing one’s mind does not require an apology, there can still be a fear of ridicule, of being thought indecisive or too willing to seek approval by embracing a more popular point of view.

Finally, *Laudato si’* calls us to reconsider what a papal encyclical might be. Is this encyclical primarily a pronouncement of the Pope, or is it a call to us, as the people of this earth, to work together for the good of the environment? As the former, it is a historical document whose level of relevance is to be determined over time. As the latter, it represents a commitment to ongoing discernment, debate and the endeavour to act justly, seek mercy and live humbly with our God and with each other (Micah 6:8).

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