"What is at stake is our own dignity". (#160) With these words, Pope Francis invites us to take a look at what kind of world we want to leave behind us. Will it be a universe which speaks of "God's boundless affection for us" or "an immense pile of filth"? In this first ever encyclical letter on the environment, Pope Francis returns on a number of occasions to the idea that created nature tends to open up in us a spirit of wonder and awe in God's presence (#11, #85) bringing with it the invitation to praise God, not only in prayer but also in the way in which we live in "our common home". The title of the encyclical, "Laudato Si" (Praised be You) is actually taken from the opening words of St Francis of Assisi's "Canticle of the Creatures". In the course of over a hundred pages of text, Pope Francis explores the essential connection between the ownership of natural resources, the regulation of banks, animal experimentation, unemployment, genetic modification, consumerism, abortion, poverty, prayer and politics.

The Pope begins by tracing the links between this new encyclical and the previous social teaching of the Church. An encyclical on the environment is essentially social, because the world of nature is the world in which we humans live, and in which we are called to live together in a communion which includes not only this generation but the generations to come. "A sense of deep communion with the rest of nature cannot be real, if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human beings" (#91).

The Pope acknowledges that "in the areas of politics and philosophy, there are those who firmly reject the idea of a creator, or consider it irrelevant" and who, as a result, think that religion has nothing to contribute to "an integral ecology". He argues, however, that "science and religion, with their distinctive approaches to understanding reality, can enter into an intense dialogue fruitful for both". (#62) He goes on the devote a whole chapter of the encyclical to exploring what the Scriptures have to say to us about the environment. Referring to the accounts of creation, he says: "we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God's image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures. The biblical texts are to be read in their context, with an appropriate hermeneutic, recognising that they tell us to 'till and keep' the garden of the world (Gen 2:15). 'Tilling' refers to cultivating, ploughing or working, while 'keeping' means care, protecting, overseeing and preserving."(#67)

Restating one of the core principles of Catholic Social Teaching, Pope Francis reminds us that, while "the Church does indeed defend the legitimate right to private property, ...she also teaches no less clearly that there is always a social mortgage on all private property, in order that goods may serve the general purpose that God gave them". (#93). In other words, we may legally own parts of the natural world but, from a moral point of view, we hold this in trust for the whole of humanity. This principle, among other things, applies to the ownership and use of land, which in turn is related to employment and the very survival or rural communities. "Economies of scale, especially in the agricultural sector, end up forcing smallholders to sell their land or to abandon their traditional crops. Their attempts to move to other, more diversified means of production prove fruitless because of the difficulty of
linkage with regional and global markets, or because the infrastructure for sales and transport is geared to larger businesses. (#129)

To the children in our primary schools who, year after year, undertake projects to earn Green Flags, it may seem unnecessary for the Pope to have devoted a whole chapter to identifying the key challenges facing the environment (pollution, climate change, water, biodiversity etc.). Pope Francis points out however that, while the young have a particular awareness of the problem and cry out for change, there is a real reluctance to accept that human behaviour is the cause of many of our environmental problems. "People may well have a growing ecological awareness, but it has not succeeded in changing their harmful habits of consumption which, rather than decreasing, appear to be growing all the more." (#55).

The late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago once defined Christian morality as being like the "seamless garment of Christ". By this he meant, that one cannot just have part of it. You either have it or you don’t. In a similar vein, Pope Francis quotes his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, who said "the world cannot be analysed by isolating only one of its aspects, since 'the book of nature is one and indivisible' and includes the environment, sexuality, the family, social relations and so forth." (#6). Francis rejects any attempt to isolate the environmental question from its human context, pointing out that, alongside a "green rhetoric" there is often a total lack of realism about how political and economic decisions, through their impact on the environment, so often have grave effects on those who depend most immediately on nature for their livelihood. (Cf #48-50)

"Relativism" according to Pope Francis, is at the root of the ecological crisis, as it is at the root of every moral disorder. Another word for this "relativism" which may be more familiar to us is "individualism". "When human beings place themselves at the centre" the Pope says, "they give priority to immediate convenience and all else becomes relative". (#122) "The culture of relativism" he says "is the same disorder which drives one person to take advantage of another, to treat others as mere objects, imposing forced labour on them or enslaving them to pay their debts." (#123)

Christian morality is not the monopoly of either the right or the left. As if to emphasise this fact, Pope Francis makes an essential connection between respect for the environment and respect for unborn human life. "Since everything is interrelated, concern for the protection of human nature is also incompatible with the justification of abortion. How can we genuinely teach the importance of concern for other vulnerable beings, however troublesome or inconvenient they may be, if we fail to protect a human embryo, even when its presence is uncomfortable or creates difficulties?" (#120) Similarly, it is unrealistic according to Pope Francis to attribute the problems of the environment to population growth. To suggest this, Pope Francis argues, "is an attempt to legitimise the present model of distribution where a minority believes that it has the right to consume in a way which can never be universalised, since the planet could not even contain the waste products of such consumption" (#50)

Pope Francis is quite nuanced in what he has to say about the impact of technology. Acknowledging that human intervention in nature is nothing new, he points out that, in previous generations, this meant bringing to fruitfulness the possibilities offered by things themselves. The new technologies have given us tremendous power. "More precisely, they
have given those with the knowledge, and especially the economic resources to use them, an impressive dominance over the whole of humanity and the entire world.  

He notes that, alongside the advance of technology, there is a tendency to devalue human work as a way of participating in society, something about which Pope John Paul II wrote extensively. "The orientation of the economy has favoured a kind of technological progress, in which the costs of production are reduced by laying off workers and replacing them with machines."  

Francis speaks of the "respect owed by faith to reason" and the need to pay attention to what the biological sciences have to tell us about biological structures and their possibilities. He argues, however, that "any legitimate intervention (i.e. genetic modification) will act on nature only in order 'to favour its development in its own line, that of creation, as intended by God'."  

In a Chapter entitled "An Integral Ecology", Pope Francis returns to the essential truth that human beings are part of the natural environment. "Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and this in constant interaction with it."  

"Human ecology is inseparable from the notion of the common good", the Pope says. In other words, it is impossible to talk of any real respect for the environment in the absence of respect for each human person and his or her inalienable human rights. This includes the rights of those as yet unborn. "Intergenerational solidarity is not optional, but rather a basic question of justice, since the world we have received also belongs to those who follow us."  

Pope Francis argues that the health of our social institutions has a direct effect on the environment. If the institutions are weak, then any legislation or regulation which is designed to protect or enhance the environment will, very likely, be ineffective. Neither can ecology be limited to protecting the air we breathe, or the water we drink, or the plants and animals which share our space. Since we are part of nature, there is a need to respect the cultural and artistic heritage of previous generations. An integral ecology also requires that we consider "the setting in which people live their lives."  

Speaking of the importance a home for personal dignity and family life as "a major issue for human ecology", Pope Francis comments that "In some places, where makeshift shanty towns have sprung up, this will mean developing these neighbourhoods rather than razing or displacing them." Invariably he points out, the difference is made, not just by the physical surroundings but by what he describes as "a commendable human ecology" which can be practised by the poor despite numerous hardships.  

Pope Francis also adverts to the fact that, it makes no sense to speak of respect for physical nature is we do not include in this the physical nature of our own humanity. Our bodies are the means of contact with the natural environment. Pope Francis acknowledges that distortion a of Christian thought have sometimes tended to disparage or devalue the body by contrast with the mind or spirit of man and woman, but this is not consistent with the message of the Scriptures. "Acceptance of our bodies as God's gift", the Pope argues, "is vital for welcoming and accepting the entire world as a gift from the Father. ....... Valuing one's own body in its femininity or masculinity is necessary if I am going to be able to recognise myself in an encounter with someone who is different".  


It is a fundamental principle of Catholic Social Teaching that the Church does not see it as her role to propose specific technical strategies or socio-economic policies. With this clearly in mind, no doubt, Pope Francis does, however, examine in general terms what might be done to bring about a resolution of the economic crisis. He argues not only that global and regional consensus must be sought regarding what ought to be done to protect the environment, but that there must be concerted action to actually implement what has been decided. In some cases, he points out, this has been done very successfully, but in other cases - e.g., the limitation of greenhouse gases - progress has been relatively poor. He argues that the possibility of buying carbon credits can only lead to greater ecological imbalance between the rich countries and the poorer countries; it is most unlikely to bring about a long-term improvement in the situation. (cf #171) The Pope argues that legislation should not be limited to preventing pollution, but should seek to promote best practice, and he comments that, where governments are weak, individuals and non-governmental agencies can contribute greatly to advocacy for action in favour of the environment. He suggests, quite reasonably, given the time scales involved in bringing about change, that environmental policy cannot change with every change of government.

In a comment which might almost seem to have been written for Ireland, but which in reality has a much more global significance, Pope Francis argues that "there is urgent need for politics and economics to enter into a frank dialogue in the service of life, especially human life. Saving banks at any cost, making the public pay the price, forgoing a firm commitment to reviewing and reforming the entire system, only reaffirms the absolute power of a financial system, a power which has no future and will only give rise to new crises after a slow, costly and only apparent recovery." (#189)

The Pope argues that, since the majority of the world’s population profess faith in God, there is a case to be made for religions to engage together in dialogue for the sake of protecting nature. In much the same way he comments, there is a need for dialogue among the various sciences, since each can tend to become enclosed in its own language. (cf #201)

The final section of the document carried the title Ecological Education and Spirituality. In this section the focus moves away from strategies to what might be described as "ecological conversion". "Many things have to change course", Pope Francis remarks "but it is we human beings above all who need to change. We lack the awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of the future to be shared with everyone. Francis warns against the kind of discouragement which asks, like the disciples just before the multiplication of loaves and fish, "what can I do?" Even the small gestures of saving, recycling and doing-without can make a difference, not only in the world around us, but in restoring our own self-esteem. "Sobriety and humility were not favourably regarded in the last century" the Pope remarks. "And yet, when there is a general breakdown in the exercise of a certain virtue in personal and social life, it ends up causing a number of imbalances, including environmental ones. That is why it is no longer enough to speak only of the integrity of ecosystems. We have to dare to speak of the integrity of human life." (#224) Further on, the Pope remarks that not everyone is called to engage in political life, but many do as much by showing concern for a public place in their own environment.
The Pope points to the constant distraction and frenetic activity of contemporary life and how it can sometimes lead people to "ride rough-shod" over everything around them. He contrasts this with the attitude of serene attentiveness, which was so much a part of the personality and ministry of Jesus. "One expression of this attitude is when we stop and give thanks to God before and after meals. I ask all believers", he says, "to return to this beautiful and meaningful custom". (#227)

As one might imagine, Pope Francis draws attention to the symbolism of the Sacraments, oil, bread, wine, water, fire and colours, "by means of which nature is taken up by God to become a means of mediating supernatural life. (#235). What might be less obvious to some, is the way in which he goes on to write of "rest" as if it were also a kind of sacrament. "We tend to demean contemplative rest", he says, "as something unproductive and unnecessary, but this is to do away with the very thing which is most important about work, its meaning. We are called to include in our work a dimension of receptivity and gratuity, which is quite different from mere inactivity. Rather, it is another way of working, which forms part of our very essence."(#237)

As we ourselves prepare to rest, at the end of this long document! Let me just say that, in keeping with the normal practice for such documents, the Pope concludes with a prayer; or rather with two prayers, one to be prayed by all who believe in God and one to be prayed by Christians.

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