

August 2015:

Pope Francis on the Ecological Crisis

By Chandan Gowda*

During his just concluded tour of Bolivia, Ecuador and Paraguay, which are among the poorest countries of Latin America, Pope Francis called capitalism “the dung of the devil,” and “a subtle dictatorship,” and asked youth to rise up against it. He apologized to Bolivians for the wrongs done on the “native peoples” by the Roman Catholic Church during Spanish colonial rule.

Released last month, Pope Francis’ Encyclical letter on the “Care for our Common Home”, a sustained reflection on the modern ecological crisis and an exhortation to Western societies to mend their ways, shows substance in his concerns. The moral daring in them is obvious as well.

Believed to be the first Encyclical to focus squarely on the environment, its analytical and moral canvas however goes beyond it. (An Encyclical, which is a lengthy reflection on moral and social issues that the Pope offers to all the members of the church, is taken seriously and forms the basis of church discussions and scholarship).

Pope Francis argues that “a frank look at the facts” will let us see that “things are now reaching a breaking point, due to the rapid pace of change and degradation.” The latter reality is “evident in large-scale natural disasters as well as social and even financial crises, for the world’s problems cannot be analyzed or explained in isolation.” In what he terms “integral ecology,” ecological and social analysis must not be separate and the fundamental interests of the poor must always be in view.

Throughout the discussion, Pope Francis is firm that an “ecological debt” exists, especially between “the global north and south,” due to “the commercial imbalances... and the disproportionate use of natural resources by certain countries over long periods of time.” The responsibilities for dealing with climate change, he argues, have to be different across the rich and poor countries.

In drawing attention to the ecological mess, the Encyclical offers an exuberant analysis of the many flaws in modern civilization, including the uncritical faith in technology, the placing of human interests above those of other forms of life, the devaluing of manual work and the amoral pursuit of business profit. It views property as a socially shared good: “The Christian tradition has never recognized the right to private property as absolute or inviolable, and has stressed the social purpose of all forms of private property.”

He is eloquent in his alarm that “the media and the digital world...can stop people from learning how to live wisely, to think deeply and to love generously. In this context, the great sages of the past run the risk of going unheard amid the noise and distractions of an information overload.”

A striking feature of the Encyclical is its blending of modern radical thought with theological texts. It argues that law and political efforts can only be limited attempts at confronting climate change as the key problem of consumerism can be checked only through cultural means. Pope Francis indeed clarifies that “the Church’s thinking” has been enriched by “the reflections of numerous scientists, philosophers, theologians and civic groups.”

Issues that belong among the unmentionables in the world of realpolitik are hauled up: the export of solid wastes and toxic liquids to poor countries, the continued research on biological weapons, the hypocrisy of the multinational companies which have lower pollution control standards in the less developed countries and the like.

Pope Francis’s theological illustrations of problems are beautifully done. In denouncing the modern tendency to view the world as an external object fit for manipulation, he writes: “The poverty and austerity of Saint Francis were no mere veneer of asceticism, but something much more radical: a refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled.” He is also keen **to** rediscover nature for the Christian tradition that has stopped seeing it as divine and encouraged humans to dominate it.

He compels us, in another instance, to think of invisible violence: “... the New Zealand bishops asked what the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” means when “twenty percent of the world’s population consumes resources at a rate that robs the poor nations and future generations of what they need to survive.”

In elaborating his argument - a process he found both “joyful and troubling,” - Pope Francis acknowledges that his predecessors like Pope Benedict XVI and Pope John Paul II and Bishops from various countries

had shared his concerns. His work in effect is one of extending and renewing an ongoing theological conversation.

In 2013, Pope Francis became the first Latin American priest to head the Catholic Church. An Argentinian by birth, Jorge Bergoglio chose Francis as his papal name after Saint Francis of Assisi (1181-1226), the Italian saint known for his concern for the poor and the animals. His democratic leanings have to be understood **of course** within an older tradition of left-activism in the Latin American church.

The Church of England, the Dalai Lama, over three hundred Rabbis, and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, the top body of the Catholic Church in the country, have extended enthusiasm for Pope Francis' concerns. President Obama has welcomed his call to action. What these expressions of support really mean in practice will be good to see.

Utterly predictable and boring, the denials from conservative US politicians and business lobbyists have come swiftly too: "Let the Pope stick to religion, and leave economic policy alone," "Science should be left to scientists," "Why worry? Technology can fix the problems."

Theological reflections on social conditions, Pope Francis observes, can be "tiresome" unless they offer "a fresh analysis." While I cannot comment on the theological side of his discussion, his Encyclical does succeed fabulously as a document of ecological urgency.

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Click here for a short 5 page summary of Pope Francis's 2015 Encyclical letter prepared by Trent Schroyer, Emeritus Professor of Sociology-Philosophy, Ramapo College of New Jersey.