



Monmouth Center for World Religions and Ethical Thought

On Care for our Common Home: Laudato Si' (Praise be to you!)

The Sixteenth Annual Shanti (Peace) Program [2015]

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Keywords: Pope Francis' encyclical, integral ecology, climate change and consumptive patterns, ideology and the common good

BEFORE I BEGIN I WANT TO THANK the Chaddha family, The Unitarian Universalist Community and the Monmouth Center for World Religions and Ethical Thought for affording me the honor of presenting this lecture. I'll do my best, but the problem is that this topic is enormous, even the Pope needed 128 pages, and he was pretty succinct. Which means - that I've had to make some choices, and one of these is, that I'm not going to spend a lot of time describing the scientific evidence of climate change and global warming. If you don't believe it's happening, I have a great handout for you from the Climate Reality Project.

(<http://www.climaterealityproject.org/blog/10-indicators>) Also, in case you are not aware of this, the pope had several well known environmental scientists advising him, and he accepts the scientific evidence that global warming is for the most part the fault of humanity. As Bill McKibben, one of the premier environmentalist of our day, put it in his very laudatory article on

the encyclical, in the New York Review of Books (Aug.16, 2015), “The rapid heating of the earth from the consumption of fossil fuels is truly the first planetary question we’ve ever faced, and scientists have done a remarkable job of getting the climate message out, despite some national political leaders, beholden to the fossil fuel industry.” And, I would add, despite some people who just don’t want to deal with it, because, and the Pope says this also, they are too busy. So - they don’t have time to think about it, much less address it. This breeds the attitude, it’s not happening to me, or there’s nothing I can do. Well, there’s plenty we can do to prevent this problem from escalating further, and we have a handout attached to the [end of this article](#).

Which brings us to Pope Francis’ main point that our environmental crisis is about much more than pollution and global warming (these are symptoms of the crisis). The true crisis he says, the heart of the problem, is a human and social one; and it’s not just about us; it’s a global problem - about connections between consumption patterns around the world and inequality. I’ll give you one quick example.

It’s about the love the French consumer has for peanut oil.... Back in the 80’s the peanut oil companies of France discovered that peanuts would grow very well in a certain part of Africa. So they brought all their equipment down there, cleared the land of its trees and planted thousands of acres of peanuts, and, in all fairness, they did employ a few Africans. But the problem is that peanuts grow underground, and when you harvest them you have to uproot the plant and the loosened soil is then dispersed often blown away by the wind. Well, after a number of years, the soil was depleted and so the companies left their equipment to rust into oblivion and moved on, leaving a desert behind with no work or food source for the Africans living there who had traditionally farmed this once fertile soil. Something similar happened to a staple of the African diet called manioc. Manioc, also known as Cassava, is a tuberous root rich in starch that can be made into bread and also a kind of porridge that Africans traditionally depended on to survive in times of drought. When coffee farmers from Europe, arrived in certain hilly parts of Africa, they uprooted the manioc to make room for their coffee plants, and then when the drought came, no manioc and so the Africans starved.

It is this type of connection between consumption in the first world, causing starvation in the developing world that Pope Francis had in mind when he said that environmental degradation is primarily a human and a social crisis, and the poor suffer the most.

And, because it is a global issue, Pope Francis addresses his encyclical to all people everywhere and asks us to meet the challenge of protecting our common home, by bringing the whole human family together to seek, “a sustainable and integral ecology”, and he adds to this challenge, the words, “for we know that things can change.”

This note of hope in the human ability to cooperate and work for the common good, that it’s not too late, pervades the whole encyclical and is basic to his discussion of what an integral ecology might look like, and how we can promote and develop one.

“Ecology studies the relationship between living organisms and the environments in which they develop.” An integral ecology is one that takes into consideration every part of the puzzle, every part of the complex web of interconnecting forces that we have to consider as we look for solutions. We can’t think of what’s good for us alone, because we will soon discover that what happens anywhere in the world might very well end up affecting us as well. (just look at the recent migrant issue, the melting of the polar ice caps, the destruction of the rain forests, which we call the lungs of the world..)

So now I’d like to give you a little background on the Pope which is relevant to understanding the encyclical and his approach to the issues.

1. The first point is that Francis’ primary training was as a scientist, not a theologian, meaning his first interest is always in the facts (a little like the famous paleontologist priest, Teilhard de Chardin, who supported the theory of evolution, long before that was acceptable in Catholic circles, because he was present at the unearthing of Peking man.) So also, Francis’ theological understanding of the environmental crisis evolved as he studied the scientific evidence... and therefore, he begins his Encyclical with the facts , - about global warming, carbon emissions, atmospheric pollution, toxic waste, the depletion of safe drinkable water, deforestation and the resulting loss of biodiversity. He doesn’t say it, but we might wonder as we read Laudato Si’ and the many articles on our environmental crisis that appear daily in our newspapers and magazines, if we are not also an endangered species. As we have found out, most species, if you destroy their habitat, don’t last very long.

If necessary, I have my bottled or filtered water, but that is not the case for the millions of poor people of this world, who die daily from our polluted streams, rivers and wells or maybe from thirst, because the waters have dried up as a result of the warming of the lower atmosphere, which is happening because of excessive carbon emissions, which are happening because we can't control our excessive consumerism. Again an integral ecology has to address all these connections.

2. The Pope comes from the developing South, in particular from the Argentine, and is one of many South American clergy persons who have been immersed in the reality faced by the poor in ways that are foreign to those of us in the USA and Europe. And they see us as partly to blame for the condition of the poor in their countries, by our past conniving with their often corrupt governments in the development of local agribusinesses, and for our support of so many of their dictators, such as Noriega, who we trained at the School of the Americas in Georgia, Pinochet in Chile whose democratic rival, Allende, we helped to disappear, our former support of the oppressive regime in El Salvador that murdered Oscar Romero, the 8 Jesuits and the nuns, and our mining, paper and cattle companies still actively logging in the rain forests of Brazil: those same rain forests that absorb carbon and supply a large portion of the world's oxygen.

In each of these countries state and local governments supported the oppression of the poor by driving them off the arable land that used to feed them or, in the case of the rain forests, simply destroyed their habitat. And so, multi-nationals and agribusinesses, such as United Fruit (now United Brands) in El Salvador, took over and made the wealthy elites, wealthier, and we have our bananas.

These Latin American church leaders' special interest in the poor and oppressed is central to Pope Francis' message that basically, business and political leaders in both the developed and the developing world are partially responsible for the environmental degradation that large parts of the Southern hemisphere are suffering from and for the fact that the air we breathe is becoming continually more polluted. I think we are all aware that asthma, allergies, COPD, etc. are on the rise in our country.

The Pope speaks eloquently about the pollution in the cities of the world, the margins of which he describes as becoming piles of filth. How has this happened? Let me give you an

example. It's about Brazilian Soya beans, a big export product of theirs, and a much used product in our country. Over the years, agribusinesses planted thousands of acres of soya beans on land that was once farmed in small plots by local farmers. When the land was taken from the local peasants (and if you want to know how its' done I can tell you), the big companies hired some of them, as promised, but with mechanization, they didn't need many, and so millions of peasants drifted to the cities, making up the giant slums, the hovels, that in Brazil are called favelas. The 70's and 80's saw the largest migration to the cities in the history of the world. And there were no jobs. And it is still that way to this day. Sometimes, some of the slack has been taken up by sweatshops, not much of an alternative, but sweatshops are going out of fashion thanks to grassroots protests, and many companies have left the poorer cities, so today they remain teaming sewers full of pollution and unemployment, ripe for violence.

In this way in the Philippines, in Africa and in Latin American and sometimes in India, multi nationals originating in the developed world have exploited the land and caused the migration to the cities and the inevitable suffering that happens when there are no jobs to be had.

I remember the story of an American missionary who came to the saintly Dom Helder Camara, Archbishop of Recife, Brazil, and asked how he could help... to which Dom Helder replied, "Go home and convert your people."

So, Laudato Si' insists that the first victims of the environmental crisis are the poor, and that therefore it is a moral issue... and, as the Pope puts it,

"We of the developed world have succumbed to a technocratic paradigm which leads us to believe that every increase in power (every new iphone, every new drone, every sterile new GMO seed, every new oil well) means an increase in progress, as if reality, goodness and truth automatically flow from technological and economic power."

He goes on to write, "With the great power technology has afforded us, it has become easy to accept the idea of infinite or unlimited growth, which proves so attractive to economists, financiers and experts in technology. This idea, the idea of infinite and unlimited growth, is

based on the lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth's goods, and this then leads to the planet being squeezed dry beyond our limits."

Now, the Pope does not want us to do without our computers or our cell phones, nor does he naysay technological progress. In fact, he's very admiring of all the good things technology has done for the world, he speaks in particular of the beauty of a skyscraper or an aircraft, but he does say that "any technological progress must serve the Common Good" – the good of all – including the 795 million people in the world who go to bed hungry every night, and that this technological progress must provide that everyone's basic human need for food, clothing, shelter, and fairly compensated employment, are met. If that doesn't happen, because we're too selfish, we're just going to have more violence. He also points out that, yes, there is a right to private property, but it is not an absolute right in relation to the environment. "The natural environment is a collective good, the patrimony of all humanity and the responsibility of everyone. If we make something our own, it is only to administer it for the good of all."

Toward this goal, he asks us to imagine a world in which technology has been liberated to serve the poor, to preserve the created world and, indeed, to liberate the rest of us who pay our own price even amid our temporary prosperity.

So now I'd like you to take a minute and consider, are we paying our own price, even amid our temporary prosperity? And if so, how?

So, I don't know what you think, but the Pope thinks we are paying a price... He writes, "This present ecological crisis is one small sign of the ethical, cultural and spiritual crisis of modernity... it is dangerous to the dignity of us all." So again I ask you are we too busy, or too overworked to address this issue and therefore, we either pretend it isn't so, or just say "there's nothing I can do."

So now, as an introduction to the third thing you have to know about the pope... I'd like to tell you a story. It's a true story.... and it is about the experience of one of our first astronauts, Rusty Schweikart. Rusty Schweikart was the first astronaut to go into space and step outside of his spacecraft in one of those space suits which was attached to the spaceship by a sort of umbilical cord. He was sent out to do a minor repair, but while he was out there a communication problem developed between the spaceship and earth, and he was left out in space to hang for a

while as it was being fixed. And he tells us that as he was floating out there, he saw something that no one had ever seen before.... He saw an earthrise... and as he watched this beautiful blue green shimmering orb rise above the horizon, his first thought was..."that can't be the earth" and then he realized that everything he held dear and loved the most, was down there on that shining, spinning planet... and his next thought was... "they can't be fighting down there, and building fences to keep each other out... Can't they see that they are all one."

Rusty felt that this was a religious experience, and he determined when he got back to earth, he was going to spend the rest of his life, sharing this insight with others.. And that's what he did...

That's the story of a mystical insight.. Can't we see that we are all one....

I told you this story because the Pope besides being a scientist is also somewhat of a mystic, despite the fact that he goes to some lengths to hide this and despite the fact that he took the name of the famous nature mystic, St. Francis of Assisi.

One of Pope Francis' favorite phrases that he repeats throughout the encyclical is that "we are all interdependent"... occasionally he says "interconnected." Neither word is exactly mystical the way he uses it, and as far as I can remember he never says, we are all one, but it is certainly implied, and the encyclical has a certain urgency about it that says, can't you see that we are all one, that we are all dependent on each other to survive, and if we don't love and care for each other and for our beautiful planet, and all of its body and parts, we won't survive... at least not in any life giving, healthy, way.. .

As many of you know, saying we are all one, implies in theological circles union with God, nature and each other in a sort of mystical bond... and suggests that the transcendent is part of everything that is That all of creation, both humanity, nature and in fact the whole universe, are in a mysterious way infused with the energy of creation, the energy of the transcendent... and therefore we are all one, we are all in the pope's words "interdependent and interconnected" in ways that we can't quite fathom.. ways that might be called a mystery.

Now those of you who are scientists know that scientists and mystics are developing a much closer bond since the advent of Quantum physics.. When Einstein first heard of the findings of quantum theory at the subatomic level, he insisted it had to be wrong, and for a time he did all

he could to disprove it, because, --- it put scientists back in the abyss of not knowing the abyss of mystery. Nevertheless, in the end, Einstein was a bit of a mystic himself. According to a quote in a book by Albert Nolan, Einstein once said,

“The most beautiful experience we can have is of the mysterious. The person to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead.” (Nolan p.123). That is what the Pope is calling us to do. Stand rapt in awe at the beauty of creation and become responsible stewards of our planet and the universe because we care.... That’s what conversion means in environmental or if you like ecological, terms.

So how do we develop an integral ecology? How do we achieve sustainable development? What can we do to move us towards this goal? The Pope begins this discussion by saying “partial responses are no longer adequate.” (recycling isn’t enough, there needs to be further dialogue). Today, says the pope, there needs to be a distinctive way of looking at things. We have to look at things differently... for instance, we need... besides a different way of thinking...

A different lifestyle and spirituality

Different Policies and

Different Educational programs

“which together generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm”.

So point 1, A different lifestyle and spirituality. I think with the Rusty Schweikart and the Einstein stories I just covered the spirituality point which actually infuses the whole encyclical, and he doesn't say too much about different lifestyle, because I think he knows we can figure that out for ourselves, if we can grasp the seriousness of the problem. But he does give us briefly two lifestyle guidelines. He warns us against excessive consumerism (which breeds what he calls the throwaway culture) and individualism. I don't think I need to say anything about excessive consumerism... just go to a mall and look at all the stuff they are trying to sell us that we don't need, and as we know, manufacturing all that stuff creates a lot of carbon emissions and a lot of garbage.

But about individualism - how can we only think of ourselves, when the world we have received also belongs to those who will follow us. We just have to think of those coming after us and what kind of world we are leaving them.

Point 2 – Different Policies... One of the problems the Pope identifies in regard to different policies is the collusion at state, national and local levels between the financiers, the politicians and big business.

Because of this collusion, the Pope says different responsibilities have to be identified. And I quote, “Given the real potential for a misuse of human abilities, individual states can no longer ignore their responsibility for planning, coordination, oversight and enforcement within their respective borders.” He asks “how can a society plan and protect its future amid constantly developing technological innovations?” I think that’s a good question. I ask you.... Doesn’t technology always seem to be a little ahead of the public’s ability to process the implications and put controls in place? It seems to the Pope that, “Contemporary humanity has not been trained to use power well, because our immense technological development has not been accompanied by a development in human responsibility, values and conscience.”

In a further answer to the question “how can a society plan and protect its future amid constantly developing technological innovations, the pope comments that, “one authoritative source of oversight and coordination is the law which can lay down rules for admissible conduct in the light of the common good. For instance, there is a growing jurisprudence dealing with the reduction of pollution by business activities...” Now we know that in Europe and the USA, and no doubt in other countries, we are developing legal guidelines for clean air, the reduction of carbon emissions, protection of endangered species, etc. to a certain extent, but is it enough? Think of the oil companies now destroying aboriginal land in order to mine Canada’s tar sands or the controversy about fracking that releases dangerous methane into the air.

Could the over 700 deaths caused by Katrina been avoided had the policies that were in place in relation to the upkeep of the levee system and pumping stations been enforced? As Douglas Brinkley who was in New Orleans at the time, wrote recently in the Smithsonian Magazine, “This was not an unavoidable act of nature, it was an avoidable one”, just as the excessive release of carbon emissions into the air and the resulting global warming, melting of ice caps, etc..were avoidable to a large extent and can still be addressed if there is the will.. Law can be used responsibly, but clearly the grassroots has to keep after our lawmakers.

So what about the Pope’s third point that an integral ecology requires different educational programs? Small example, when I was in grammar school in the 1940’s I learned about crop

rotation. I can still remember standing by my desk in my 8th grade classroom (we were studying South America) and looking down at my geography book at a chapter on the importance of crop rotation. Do you think the peanut oil companies in Africa and the soya bean companies in Brazil and the pineapple growers in the Philippines missed that lesson? In fact, is it still taught in school? And who educated the politicians who allowed these desecrations?

Obviously, education about “Care for our Common Home”, is absolutely necessary at all levels; at the most basic level of our society the family, at school, from kindergarten to university to senior citizens who pass on their wisdom to their grandchildren, and it will have to be a national effort..

Let me give you an example... In the last 4 years a group of Haitians whose work we, at St. Joseph support by giving microcredit loans, have planted an average of 7,000 trees a year in Pignon, Haiti, but this didn't start three years ago... It started 21 years ago when we first visited Pignon. We had been invited by the pastor of the Catholic Church there to become their sister parish, so when we got there we asked what we could do, and he said the most urgent need that Haiti has, is for reforestation. So I said, great let's get started, and he said wait a minute... The first step is education. So for a very small sum we paid the salary of a local Haitian agronomist to speak about reforestation to families, in the schools, in adult classes, to groups of farmers and market women. He did this for two years before they planted a single tree...

And I think it paid off... The trees are doing pretty well. And then the other day I received an email, from our friend, Dr. Moussanto Dantil, whom our program at St. Joseph's sent to university to become an agrovet. He is now the veterinarian in the Pignon area and also in charge of reforestation. In this email, he wrote that the drought in the last two years has been so bad for the subsistence crops that most of them died, and the farmers had to switch to drought resistant crops like plantains and cassava. So they know better than we do. Also, as we can see from their small plot farming methods, they know that, in the words of EF Schumacher, that Small can be Beautiful. By the way - Did you know, that the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization has in the last few years published one study after another showing that small farms in fact produce more calories per acre than agribusinesses?

When we first went to Haiti 21 years ago, the pastor of our sister parish, a very wise man, used to say to me when we would visit, and I would come up with one of my wonderful ideas, “Tonie,

that's not our custom. You must learn to listen to the people." It was a good lesson, and I'm working on it.

So to conclude, a final quote from the pope's encyclical. "The Church does not presume to settle scientific questions or to replace politics. But I am concerned to encourage an honest and open debate so that particular interests or ideologies will not prejudice the common good. Politics must not be subject to the economy, nor should the economy be subject to the dictates of an efficiency-driven paradigm of technocracy."

"Today in view of the common good, there is an urgent need for politics and economics to enter into a frank dialogue in the service of life, especially human life," and it is the responsibility of all of us to foster this dialogue..

And again in the Pope's words, "This does not mean being opposed to any technological innovations, which can bring about an improvement in the quality of life, but it does mean that profit cannot be the sole criterion to be taken into account."

So once again in the words of the Rigveda,

**O Lord, let your Wisdom shine on our minds,
Like the rays of the morning sun
So that we can do your good works.**

From Rigveda (3.62.10) 5000 years ago.. The Rigveda is the oldest book known to humanity.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

Promote the use of renewable energy alternatives – solar power, wind power...

Put solar panels on our houses and businesses and assist the developing world to do the same. Costs for renewable energy are declining, making them competitive with oil, gas and coal. The solar industry already employs twice as many Americans as coal mining does, so now is a good time to do this.

Consider the size of our houses and the extent to which we use energy efficient appliances and heating and cooling systems. Are our homes sustainable?

Consider the efficient use of water in our homes and businesses. Plant trees that =preserve the water supply, rather than deplete it.

Make sure that education on the present environmental crisis is taught in all schools (kindergarten to University), in adult education classes, in our houses of worship, in our clubs, etc. Basic science must include an understanding of ecosystems and how to protect them. There is a lack of consciousness of the severity of the problem. People are too busy. We should worry about the air we breathe causing asthma, allergies and other severe health issues (for all species).

Support conversion of land used for coal mining, etc. to use for renewable projects so as to preserve jobs.. This is being done in some places already and could be helpful in places like Appalachia.

Converse about the environmental crisis around the dinner table....

- a) Be grateful for food (Say grace before meals)
- b) Consider the origin of our food.. (eat local products). We need to be aware of the chain behind the products we consume.
- c) Consider how our decisions about global warming will affect future generations.

Work nearer home: encourage businesses to move out of cities... thereby cutting down on carbon emissions from cars, busses etc.

Businesses (corporations)s need to push for public policies toward sustainability.. Among Fortune 500 businesses there is a large support at the CEO Level..

Take the divest/invest pledge. We can divest from investing in fossil fuels and invest in climate solutions. It is possible to make a profit and have a sustainable business, look at Ben and Jerry's, Patagonia, Stonyfield, Seventh Generation. Divestment is taking place in churches, schools and some endowments already.

We need to actively work toward solutions because they are obtainable today.. This is one of the jobs of the grassroots.. Consider joining Citizens Climate Lobby.

Embrace innovation – Develop sustainable products, electric cars, clean batteries, See The Spotted Door - everything they sell is made of recycled content.. we need to capture the stuff we send to landfills.

Support Obamacare 13693 executive order... 4 pillars..

Reduce carbon emissions by 40%

Reduce water consumption on Federal lands and in federal buildings

He ordered education of over 2 million Federal governments employees.

Eliminate tax loopholes and handouts to those promoting use of fossil fuels.

Support incentives for clean energy

Support Carbon Fee and Dividends. This is being proposed in Congress.

www.ASBConsul.org

See www.climate.uu-uno.org

See article by Bill McKibben - The Pope and the Planet..

<http://nybooks.com/articles/archives/2015/aug/13/pope-and-planet/?>

See Ten Clear Indicators Our Climate is Changing - excellent resource

http://www.climaterealityproject.org/blog/10-indicators-that-show-climate-change?utm_so

