POPE FRANCIS AND THE CULTURE OF CARE
By Sheila Read

Editor’s Note: To celebrate Pope Francis’ new encyclical “Laudato Si’”: On Care of Our Common Home, the Catholic Community of St. Francis of Assisi in Raleigh hosted an Interfaith Prayer Vigil on June 28, 2015. People from 20 different faith communities, including Jewish and Muslim leaders, participated in witness to willingness to work together to respond to Pope Francis’ call to be protectors of people and the Earth. “Laudato Si’” translates as “Praised be” and is the repeated phrase in St. Francis’ famous “Canticle of Brother Sun.”

The keynote talk for the prayer vigil, which we are publishing below, was given by Sheila Read, MA, MSW, LCSW. Ms. Read is a spiritual counselor who restores her connection to God and the natural world by gardening and taking long walks in the woods. She wrote a master’s thesis on Catholic social teaching on care for creation and leads the new Care of Creation & Climate Change ministry at her church community of St. Francis.

Four years ago, I proposed a topic for a master’s thesis in a journalism program. The topic was Catholic Social Teaching on Care of Creation, and how the church had communicated—or failed to communicate—that message.

The idea to research this topic came on a Florida balcony as I looked out over the bay, worrying over the sea-level rise that year by year was drowning mangrove trees at my favorite beach. I was concerned about the changing climate and the droughts, floods, and hurricanes that were becoming more frequent. But I wasn’t hearing anything at church about caring for the environment. I started to wonder if being a Catholic was compatible with being an environmentalist.

I was surprised when my secular thesis adviser accepted the topic. I was even more surprised when I learned that Pope Francis was writing an encyclical—the highest form of church teaching—urging people to care for Earth.

I want to begin by reading the opening paragraphs of Pope Francis’ encyclical, as an appetizer of sorts. I hope you leave tonight with the desire to read his letter in full, to digest it with others, and to begin to incorporate small changes in your life.

Pope Francis begins:

“LAUDATO SI’, mi’ Signore” – “Praise be to you, my Lord”. In the words of this beautiful canticle, Saint Francis of Assisi reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us . . . “Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs.”
This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. . . . The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. . . . We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth; our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters. (Pars 1 & 2)

At heart in “Laudato Si’” Pope Francis is inviting each one of us to participate in what he calls a “culture of care,” both for people and the earth. He asks the big question: “What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up?”

Change of Heart

Pope Francis is asking for a change of heart, and he touches on many ecological concerns such as pollution, deforestation and extinction of species. He also details most of the human injustices of our time. But he starts with climate change, which he calls one of the principal and most urgent challenges facing humanity in our day.

Pope Francis, like his predecessor Pope Benedict, has accepted the scientific consensus that the evidence for global warming is unequivocal, principally caused by humans, and that inaction carries great risks.

The great injustice of climate change is that poor people in developing nations who have contributed least to the burning of fossil fuels are suffering the most from weather-related disasters. The World Health Organization estimates that 150,000 people per year are already dying from the effects of climate change. War in Africa is frequently driven by shifts in climate and the growing deserts that rob communities of pastures. The devastation of the Philippines from Super Typhoon Haiyan shows how storms have intensified and how poorer countries with fewer resources suffer.

Poor people in other nations who make subsistence livings from farming, fishing and forestry have no resources to adapt when climate changes causes plants and animals to die or move. Unable to feed themselves in traditional ways, growing numbers of migrants flee from the poverty caused by environmental degradation.

The same mindset that promotes self-interest above the common good leads to degrading the earth and devaluing people. Pope Francis writes, “When we fail to acknowledge as part of reality the worth of a poor person, a human embryo, a person with disabilities—to offer just a few examples—it becomes difficult to hear the cry of nature itself; everything is connected.”

Pope Francis is like a doctor diagnosing the moral diseases that are causing so much suffering in our time. Pope Francis names these diseases the “throwaway culture” and the “globalization of indifference.” In the modern throwaway culture, the idolatry of profit, money and consumerism
lays waste to both the natural world and to people’s lives, especially the young, the elderly and people in developing countries.

The symptoms of our cultural sickness are environmental degradation, anxiety, a loss of the purpose of life and of community living, Pope Francis writes. I think most of us recognize these symptoms in the anxiety in our own families, in rampant violence, alcohol and drug use, broken marriages, and cutthroat workplaces.

The Pope also offers challenging and nuanced critiques of politics, technology, and multinational corporations. Though he challenges us, his message is always “both-and” and not “yes or no.” He praises the right use of politics, technology and business as noble when their first priority is human dignity and sustainable development.

A Long Tradition

Some of the public debate over Pope Francis’ encyclical is almost laughable, especially the attacks on his valuing a society based on love of God and neighbor and concern for the common good. It’s as if some commentators are surprised to learn the Pope is Catholic.

Catholic teaching on the relationship between God, humans and nature originates in the Bible in Genesis. God made creation and sees it as very good. God also gave humans a special responsibility to care for creation and exercise “dominion” over it.

The word dominion has been problematic, to say the least. Pope Benedict and now Pope Francis have clarified that dominion does not mean license to destroy the natural world for the material gain of a few people. We are called to care for the earth in a balanced way, taking what we need for sustenance but ensuring its preservation for future generations.

Early Christian theologians often referred to the natural world as a gift from God. They said God is revealed in two books: the book of Scripture and the book of nature. Nature, in its abundance, beauty, majesty, and the wondrous variety of plant and animal life, teaches us about the goodness of God. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told his disciples to learn from nature how to trust in God, telling them to let go of their daily anxieties and “look at the birds in the sky; they do not sow or reap, they gather nothing into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them.”

Many early saints described the interconnected relationship between God, humans and nature. St. Augustine wrote about the ways in which all elements of nature and all creatures give praise to God. St. Thomas Aquinas taught “that God created living and nonliving entities in an orderly relationship with one another to achieve their common good.” In St. Francis’s well-known “Canticle of Brother Sun,” all of creation praises God, and the sun, moon, wind and water are our brothers and sisters.

In the modern era, Pope Francis’s talk of the sin of consumerism and climate change as a moral
issue is not new in Catholic teaching.

Twenty-five years ago, Pope John Paul II wrote: “Modern society will find no solution to the ecological problem unless it takes a serious look at its lifestyle. In many parts of the world, society is given to instant gratification and consumerism while remaining indifferent to the damage which these cause.”

The US Bishops in 2001 described climate change as a serious problem that requires action motivated by prudence. Pope Benedict was dubbed the “Green Pope” for his writings on the environment and his program to reduce carbon emissions at the Vatican. Benedict emphasized “human ecology,” and made explicit the connection between the way people treat each other and the way they treat the Earth.

An Urgent Call for People of Faith

So what’s different now? First, Pope Francis is so popular that people all over the world are paying attention. Second, he is emphasizing the urgency of making lifestyle changes and taking collective action now. Third, Pope Francis has addressed his message to all people and is calling us to work together as we build a new culture.

People of faith have a special role to play in social action to address climate change. As we see in the stalemate over action on the climate, scientific, technological, and economic entities fail to adequately spur action because they don’t address the values that guide people’s behavior. He writes:

Any technical solution which science claims to offer will be powerless to solve the serious problems of our world if humanity loses its compass, if we lose sight of the great motivations which make it possible for us to live in harmony, to make sacrifices and to treat others well. Believers themselves must constantly feel challenged to live in a way consonant with their faith and not to contradict it by their actions. They need to be encouraged to be ever open to God’s grace and to draw constantly from their deepest convictions about love, justice and peace. If a mistaken understanding of our own principles has at times led us to justify mistreating nature, to exercise tyranny over creation, to engage in war, injustice and acts of violence, we believers should acknowledge that by so doing we were not faithful to the treasures of wisdom which we have been called to protect and preserve. (Par. 200)

Confronting global warming will involve a fundamental change in lifestyles and a collective global move to sustainable development, Pope Francis emphasizes. We must relearn to value people above things. We must rediscover the value of the common good in shaping economic policies and build a future for the entire human family.
Pope Francis calls for dialogue and an “ecological conversion” of both individuals and communities to new attitudes of gratitude and giving, loving awareness, creativity and enthusiasm for solving the world’s problems.

Pope Francis’ message is full of hope, as he reminds us of God’s grace, love and power to heal us. He asks us to adopt a lifestyle of “less is more,” where we practice gratitude for small daily joys and true presence to each other. A simpler lifestyle motivated by care leads us to true freedom and spirituality.

He says, "those who enjoy more and live better each moment are those who have given up dipping here and there, always on the look-out for what they do not have. They experience what it means to appreciate each person and each thing, learning familiarity with the simplest things and how to enjoy them."

I encourage you to read Pope Francis’s encyclical for yourself. No summary can do justice to the comprehensive vision, challenge and beauty of Pope Francis’s message. His writing style is down to earth and full of concrete examples and well-chosen images.

I will conclude with one of the last lines in the letter. “Let us sing as we go. May our struggles and our concern for this planet never take away the joy of our hope.”