

## Five years on, we're still trying to answer Pope Francis' call for a new relationship with creation

It is not wrong to say that *Laudato Si'* is an encyclical about ecology or climate change. But nobody gets full marks for that answer.

"People don't read encyclicals," points out Regina archdiocesan theologian Brett Salkeld. "They read about encyclicals. That means they are very subject to really superficial readings of them."

But there's nothing superficial about Pope Francis' reading of the Gospel, his relationship with Christ or his insistence on the reality of God. About three-quarters of the way through 40,000 passionate words, Pope Francis gets down to what he's really talking about in *Laudato Si'*.

There's no such thing as Christianity divorced from the physical world around us. There's no way to be a Christian that doesn't acknowledge Christ in creation. There's no relationship with God without a relationship with creation.



**Brett Salkeld**

As *Laudato Si'* marks its fifth anniversary on May 24, the Church is still digesting *Laudato Si'*. But the clock keeps ticking on the planet's climate emergency. Seventeen times in *Laudato Si'* the Pope calls the planetary ecological crisis "urgent."

We know he's right. Beaches are emerging along the Northwest Passage. Sea ice is disappearing, sea levels rising, glaciers retreating and we're losing species at a rate scientists estimate is 100 to 1,000 times higher than natural.

From the perspective of science, *Laudato Si'* makes a compelling and intense case and the Pope's crucial message comes as a relief and a revelation, said Veerabhadran Ramanathan.

Ramanathan is one of the world's leading scientists studying the global climate. He holds the Edward A. Frieman Endowed Presidential Chair in Climate Sustainability at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in San Diego and he is a member of the Pontifical Academy of Science.

"There's a lot there for Catholics to pay attention to, but it's also scientists – there's a lot there for scientists," Ramanathan said. "I think of *Laudato Si'* as the first document that really brought out the human dimension of climate change for the poor."

A year before *Laudato Si'*, at the end of a joint meeting of the Pontifical Academy of Science and the Pontifical Academy of Social Science, Ramanathan summarized the conference's findings for Pope Francis.

Then he pointed out that about one billion people use half the fossil fuels, while about three billion people haven't even discovered fossil fuels. The bottom three billion are responsible for just five per cent of the world's carbon emissions.

A year later, Pope Francis was admonishing the Church to open its ears "to hear both the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor."

"The genius of it was to link or couple the cry of the Earth with the cry of the poor," said Passionist Rev. Steve Dunn, founder of the University of Toronto St. Michael's College Elliott Allen Institute for Ecology and Theology.

"He does a marvelous job of articulating the cry of the Earth. In that sense it moves Catholic thought an enormous distance, I think."

Dunn wishes the Pope had gone further. The eco-theologian would rather see Catholics stop talking about caring for creation. Instead we should ask ourselves how we should behave as a part of the God-given natural world.

"We're a part of the Earth. We come from the Earth. We're going back (some of us faster than others)," Dunn explained.

But Francis stops just shy of that marker. "When push comes to shove, he's human centred," Dunn said.



In this file photo, Indigenous people are seen on the banks of the Xingu River in Brazil's Xingu Indigenous Park. Ricardo Moraes, Catholic News Service

From the perspective of the Indigenous people of the Amazon, it's clear that Pope Francis is picking sides – and he's chosen their side, anthropologist and missionary Gilmara Fernandes said in Portuguese via What'sApp.

"Davi Kopenawa, a Yanomami leader from Roraima (Brazil's northernmost state in the Amazon basin), calls us (Westerners) 'the people of the merchandise,' as we live to consume – to devastate," Fernandes said.

Maybe Pope Francis is human centred, but the humans he cares about most are the poor, the Indigenous, the excluded and the marginal. To get on the same page with Pope Francis will require us to change direction, said Fernandes.

"*Laudato Si'* invites us to a conversion, to an ecological conversion – not in part, but of the whole," said Fernandes, who is a member of CIMI, the Indigenous missionary council set up by Brazil's Catholic bishops and a longtime partner of Canada's [Development and Peace](#). "*Laudato Si'* points us to another lifestyle, to think about another paradigm of life."

"I think that's very frightening for a lot of people," said Development and Peace deputy director Luke Stocking.

In angry corners of the Internet, there's no shortage of voices warning that Pope Francis is trying to change the Gospel, or change Catholic doctrine. Such a change simply can't be found in the text of *Laudato Si'*, Stocking said.

"Those who fear the change think we're becoming Mother Earth worshippers, or that we are becoming essentially pagan. That's not the change that is happening or needs to happen," he said.

The change can only happen in our hearts and in our lives.

"If we're not serious about our relationship with God, we're never going to get our relationship to the planet right. In the same way, if we're not serious about our relationship to the planet, we're not going to get our relationship with God right," Stocking said. "People often miss that. They stay on the surface."

Along with Anglicans, Presbyterians, Mennonites and others, Development and Peace, the Canadian Religious Conference and a number of religious orders have launched a multi-year project called For the Love of Creation.

As an effort by Christian churches to influence the culture and the politics of Canadians, For the Love of Creation demonstrates how *Laudato Si'* has galvanized ecological thinking beyond the Catholic world.

"Finally a Church leader who understands what us lonely green Christians have been banging on about for decades," said Church of England activist Ruth Jarman, of the United Kingdom-based Operation Noah.

E-mailing from London, Jarman is grateful for *Laudato Si'* and all the ecumenical coalitions it has inspired. But she doesn't think it's enough.

"Churches are not responding with anything like the urgency and prophetic passion that is required for these times," she said. "Our worship of Baal (the economy) is killing life on Earth."



Archbishop Donald Bolen

There's no reason for ordinary Catholics not to fully embrace *Laudato Si'*, Regina Archbishop Don Bolen said.

"It is a beautifully written and accessible document about how to live on this planet, how we're not doing a good job of it, and what we could start to do differently," Bolen wrote in an e-mail.

"It is indeed written to everyone, and tries to speak to the whole world. It speaks a word the world needs to hear at this moment in time, a word we need to hear during this pandemic."

When *Laudato Si'* was published in 2015, many thought the kind of economic change the Pope was proposing would be simply impossible. The global economic system was too big to turn around. But our national and international response to COVID-19 shows that we can put the brakes on the economy and change direction on a dime, said University of St. Michael's emeritus professor Dennis Patrick O'Hara.

"Perhaps such a collective and purposeful response could become a rehearsal for addressing Earth's ecological challenges," he said.

O'Hara wishes he saw more ambition in how Church leaders have responded to *Laudato Si'*.

"The contrast between the analyses and aspirations of the encyclical and the anemic responses and sclerotic leadership still too often seen shows that while the encyclical has had significant impact, the conversion it prescribes is far from realized," O'Hara wrote in an e-mail.

"Respect for creation is part of Christian faith, not separate from it," said

Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops spokesperson Lisa Gall in an e-mail. "(It is) at the heart of all sacramental theology, in addition to being a fundamental tenet in Catholic social doctrine. *Laudato Si'*, however, has given new impetus, fresh appreciation, a broader context and a contemporary emphasis to this teaching."

"It should be and will be a touchstone of Catholic life," said Global Catholic Climate Movement – Canada co-ordinator Agnes Richard.

"We're often called to a preferential treatment of the poor, but do people understand what that means? Do people understand that our lifestyle requires sacrifice right now? Significant sacrifice," she said.

The growth of the Global Catholic Climate Movement – more than 900 organizations worldwide – shows that Catholics are moved by *Laudato Si'* and are looking for a way to incorporate it into their lives, she said.

"The dots have to be connected. People's attention has to be drawn to this in a positive way – not in a way that piles the guilt on," Richard said.

Catholics who experience the joy of the Incarnation at Christmas, who mourn on Good Friday, who celebrate every Sunday, cannot fail to understand Pope Francis and *Laudato Si'*, said Sr. Margot Ritchie of the [Sisters of St. Joseph](#).

"What's more Christian than the Incarnation?" she asked. "What other spiritual tradition holds so closely to the fact that God takes flesh, takes body, becomes human, becomes material? To me, that has nothing to do with pantheism. It actually has to do with taking the world more seriously."

Five years on, *Laudato Si'* continues to resonate around the world.

"Encyclicals are supposed to have a long shelf life," said the theologian Salkeld. "I expect this one will because it articulates a Christian vision on a question that will be pressing for the rest of our lives and beyond."