

# “Laudate Deum”: the Pope’s cry for a response to the climate crisis

Pope Francis has published an Apostolic Exhortation building on his 2015 encyclical. We’re not reacting enough, he says, we’re close to breaking point. He criticises climate change deniers, saying that the human origin of global warming is now beyond doubt. And he describes how care for our common home flows from the Christian faith.



Land devastated by drought

## By Vatican News

“‘Praise God’ is the title of this letter. For when human beings claim to take God’s place, they become their own worst enemies.”

That’s how Pope Francis ends his [new Apostolic Exhortation](#), published on the 4th October, the Feast of St Francis of Assisi.

It's a text in continuity with his 2015 encyclical *Laudato si'*, which is broader in scope. In six chapters and 73 paragraphs, the Successor of Peter tries to clarify and bring to completion that previous text on integral ecology, while at the same time sounding an alarm, and a call for co-responsibility, in the face of the climate emergency.

In particular, the Exhortation looks ahead to COP28, which will be held in Dubai between the end of November and beginning of December.

The Holy Father writes: "With the passage of time, I have realized that our responses have not been adequate, while the world in which we live is collapsing and may be nearing the breaking point. In addition to this possibility, it is indubitable that the impact of climate change will increasingly prejudice the lives and families of many persons" (2).

It's "one of the principal challenges facing society and the global community" and "the effects of climate change are borne by the most vulnerable people, whether at home or around the world" (3).

Laudate Deum

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## **Signs of climate change increasingly evident**

The [first chapter](#) is dedicated to the global climate crisis.

“Despite all attempts to deny, conceal, gloss over or relativize the issue, the signs of climate change are here and increasingly evident,” says the Pope.

He goes on to observe that “in recent years we have witnessed extreme weather phenomena, frequent periods of unusual heat, drought and other cries of protest on the part of the earth”, a “silent disease that affects everyone.”

Moreover, Pope Francis says, “it is verifiable that specific climate changes provoked by humanity are notably heightening the probability of extreme phenomena that are increasingly frequent and intense.”

Now, the Holy Father explains, if global temperature increases by more than two degrees, “the icecaps of Greenland and a large part of Antarctica will melt completely, with immensely grave consequences for everyone” (5).

Speaking of those who play down climate change, he responds: “what we are presently experiencing is an unusual acceleration of warming, at such a speed that it will take only one generation – not centuries or millennia – in order to verify it.”

“Probably in a few years many populations will have to move their homes because of these facts” (6).

Extreme colds, too, are “alternative expressions of the same cause” (7).

## **Not the fault of the poor**

“In an attempt to simplify reality,” Pope Francis writes, “there are those who would place responsibility on the poor, since they have many children, and even attempt to resolve the problem by mutilating women in less developed countries.”

“As usual, it would seem that everything is the fault of the poor. Yet the reality is that a low, richer percentage of the planet contaminates more than the poorest 50% of the total world population, and that per capita emissions of the richer countries are much greater than those of the poorer ones.”

“How can we forget that Africa, home to more than half of the world’s poorest people, is responsible for a minimal portion of historic emissions?” (9).

The Pope also challenges of those who say efforts to mitigate climate change by reducing the use of fossil fuels “will lead to a reduction in the number of jobs.”

What is happening, in fact, is that “millions of people are losing their jobs due

to different effects of climate change: rising sea levels, droughts and other phenomena affecting the planet have left many people adrift."

At the same time, "the transition to renewable forms of energy, properly managed" is capable of "generating countless jobs in different sectors. This demands that politicians and business leaders should even now be concerning themselves with it" (10).

## **Indubitable human origins**

"It is no longer possible to doubt the human – 'anthropic' – origin of climate change," the Pope says.

"The concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere ... was stable until the nineteenth century ... In the past fifty years, this increase has accelerated significantly" (11).

At the same time, global temperature "has risen at an unprecedented speed, greater than any time over the past two thousand years. In this period, the trend was a warming of 0.15° C per decade, double that of the last 150 years ... At this rate, it is possible that in just ten years we will reach the recommended maximum global ceiling of 1.5° C" (12).

This has resulted in acidification of the seas and the melting of glaciers.

"It is not possible to conceal" the correlation between these events and the growth of greenhouse gas emissions. Unfortunately, the Holy Father bitterly observes, "the climate crisis is not exactly a matter that interests the great economic powers, whose concern is with the greatest profit possible at minimal cost and in the shortest amount of time" (13).

## **Barely in time to avoid more terrible damage**

"I feel obliged," continues Pope Francis, "to make these clarifications, which may appear obvious, because of certain dismissive and scarcely reasonable

opinions that I encounter, even within the Catholic Church."

Yet, "we can no longer doubt that the reason for the unusual rapidity of these dangerous changes is a fact that cannot be concealed: the enormous novelties that have to do with unchecked human intervention on nature in the past two centuries" (14).

Unfortunately, some effects of this climate crisis are already irreversible, for at least several hundred years, and "the melting of the poles will not be able to be reversed for hundreds of years" (16).

We are, then, barely in time to avoid even more terrible damage. The Pope writes that "certain apocalyptic diagnoses may well appear scarcely reasonable or insufficiently grounded", but "we cannot state with certainty" what is going to happen. (17).

Therefore, "a broader perspective is urgently needed ... What is being asked of us is nothing other than a certain responsibility for the legacy we will leave behind, once we pass from this world" (18).

Recalling the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic, Pope Francis repeats that "Everything is connected and no one is saved alone" (19).

## **The technocratic paradigm: the idea of a human being without limits**

In the second chapter, the Pope speaks of the technocratic paradigm which consists in thinking that "reality, goodness and truth automatically flow from technological and economic power as such" (20) and "monstrously feeds upon itself" (21), taking its inspiration from the idea of a human being without limitations.

"Never has humanity had such power over itself," the Holy Father continues, "yet nothing ensures that it will be used wisely, particularly when we consider how it is currently being used ... It is extremely risky for a small part

of humanity to have it" (23).

Unfortunately – as demonstrated, too, by the atomic bomb – “our immense technological development has not been accompanied by a development in human responsibility, values and conscience” (24).

The Pope reaffirms that “the world that surrounds us is not an object of exploitation, unbridled use and unlimited ambition” (25). He reminds us that we, too, are part of nature, and that this “excludes the idea that the human being is extraneous, a foreign element capable only of harming the environment. Human beings must be recognized as a part of nature” (26); “human groupings have often ‘created’ an environment” (27).

## **The ethical decadence of power: marketing and fake news**

We have made “impressive and awesome technological advances, and we have not realized that at the same time we have turned into highly dangerous beings, capable of threatening the lives of many beings and our own survival” (28).

“The ethical decadence of real power is disguised thanks to marketing and false information, useful tools in the hands of those with greater resources to employ them to shape public opinion.”

Through these mechanisms, people in areas where polluting projects are to be implemented are deceived, convinced that economic and employment opportunities will be generated, but “they are not clearly told that the project will result in ... a desolate and less habitable landscape” (29) and a clear decline in quality of life.

“The mentality of maximum gain at minimal cost, disguised in terms of reasonableness, progress and illusory promises, makes impossible any sincere concern for our common home and any real preoccupation about

assisting the poor and the needy discarded by our society ... astounded and excited by the promises of any number of false prophets, the poor themselves at times fall prey to the illusion of a world that is not being built for them" (31).

There exists, then, "rule by those born with greater possibilities and advantages" (32). Pope Francis invites these individuals to ask themselves, "with an eye to the children who will pay for the harm done by their actions" (33), what the meaning of their life is.

## **Weak international politics**

In the next chapter of the Exhortation, the pope addresses the weakness of international politics, insisting on the need to foster "multilateral agreements between States" (34).

He explains that "when we talk about the possibility of some form of world authority regulated by law, we need not necessarily think of a personal authority" but of "more effective world organizations, equipped with the power to provide for the global common good, the elimination of hunger and poverty and the sure defence of fundamental human rights".

These, he says, "must be endowed with real authority, in such a way as to provide for the attainment of certain essential goals" (35).

Pope Francis deplores that "global crises are being squandered when they could be the occasions to bring about beneficial changes. This is what happened in the 2007-2008 financial crisis and again in the Covid-19 crisis", which led to "greater individualism, less integration and increased freedom for the truly powerful, who always find a way to escape unscathed" (36).

"More than saving the old multilateralism, it appears that the current challenge is to reconfigure and recreate it, taking into account the new world situation" (37), recognising that many civil society aggregations and



organizations help compensate for the weaknesses of the international community. The Pope cites the Ottawa process on landmines, which, he says, shows how civil society creates efficient dynamics that the UN does not achieve.

## **Useless institutions that preserve the strongest**

What Pope Francis is proposing is a "multilateralism 'from below' and not simply one determined by the elites of power ... It is to be hoped that this will happen with respect to the climate crisis. For this reason, I reiterate that "unless citizens control political power – national, regional and municipal – it will not be possible to control damage to the environment" (38).

After reaffirming the primacy of the human person, Pope Francis explains – speaking of the defense of human dignity in all circumstances – that "It is not a matter of replacing politics, but of recognizing that the emerging forces are becoming increasingly relevant".

"The very fact," he says, "that answers to problems can come from any country, however little, ends up presenting multilateralism as an inevitable process" (40).

Therefore, "a different framework for effective cooperation is required. It is not enough to think only of balances of power but also of the need to provide a response to new problems and to react with global mechanisms"; it is a matter of "establishing global and effective rules" (42).

"All this presupposes the development of a new procedure for decision-making"; what is required are "spaces for conversation, consultation, arbitration, conflict resolution and supervision, and, in the end, a sort of increased "democratization" in the global context, so that the various situations can be expressed and included. It is no longer helpful for us to support institutions in order to preserve the rights of the more powerful without caring for those of all" (43).

# Climate conferences

In the following chapter, Francis describes the various climate conferences held to date.

He recalls the one in Paris, the agreement resulting from which came into effect in November 2016. Although “a binding agreement, not all its dispositions are obligations in the strict sense, and some of them leave ample room for discretion” (47). Moreover, there are no sanctions for failure to meet obligations, and there is a lack of effective tools to enforce the agreement, as well as no real sanctions, and no effective tools to ensure compliance.

Additionally, “work is still under way to consolidate concrete procedures for monitoring and to facilitate general criteria for comparing the objectives of the different countries” (48).

The Pope mentions his disappointment with the Madrid COP and recalls that the Glasgow COP revived the Paris goals, with many “recommendations”, but “proposals tending to ensure a rapid and effective transition to alternative and less polluting forms of energy made no progress” (49).

COP27, held in Egypt in 2022, was “one more example of the difficulty of negotiations”, and even though it “marked a step forward in consolidating a system for financing ‘loss and damage’ in countries most affected by climate disasters”, this remained “imprecise” (51) on many points.

International negotiations, the Pope concludes, “cannot make significant progress due to positions taken by countries which place their national interests above the global common good. Those who will have to suffer the consequences of what we are trying to hide will not forget this failure of conscience and responsibility” (52).

## What to expect from the Dubai COP?

Looking ahead to COP, Pope Francis writes that “to say that there is nothing to hope for would be suicidal, for it would mean exposing all humanity, especially the poorest, to the worst impacts of climate change” (53).

We must, says the Pope, “keep hoping that COP28 will allow for a decisive acceleration of energy transition, with effective commitments subject to ongoing monitoring. This Conference can represent a change of direction” (54).

The Holy Father observes that “the necessary transition towards clean energy sources such as wind and solar energy, and the abandonment of fossil fuels, is not progressing at the necessary speed. Consequently, whatever is being done risks being seen only as a ploy to distract attention” (55).

We cannot search merely for a technological solution to our problems: “we risk remaining trapped in the mindset of pasting and papering over cracks, while beneath the surface there is a continuing deterioration to which we continue to contribute” (57).

## **No more ridiculing of environmental questions**

Pope Francis asks us to put an end to “the irresponsible derision that would present this issue as something purely ecological, “green”, romantic, frequently subject to ridicule by economic interests.”

“Let us finally admit that it is a human and social problem on any number of levels. For this reason, it calls for involvement on the part of all.”

On the subject of protests by groups “negatively portrayed as radicalized”, Pope Francis affirms that “in reality they are filling a space left empty by society as a whole, which ought to exercise a healthy “pressure”, since every family ought to realize that the future of their children is at stake” (58).

“May those taking part in the Conference be strategists capable of

considering the common good and the future of their children, more than the short-term interests of certain countries or businesses. In this way, may they demonstrate the nobility of politics and not its shame. To the powerful, I can only repeat this question: "What would induce anyone, at this stage, to hold on to power, only to be remembered for their inability to take action when it was urgent and necessary to do so?" (60).

## **A commitment that flows from the Christian faith**

Finally, the Pope reminds his readers that the motivations for this commitment flow from the Christian faith, encouraging "my brothers and sisters of other religions to do the same" (61).

"The Judaeo-Christian vision of the cosmos defends the unique and central value of the human being amid the marvellous concert of all God's creatures," but "as part of the universe, all of us are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family, a sublime communion which fills us with a sacred, affectionate and humble respect" (67).

"This is not a product of our own will; its origin lies elsewhere, in the depths of our being, since God has joined us so closely to the world around us" (68).

What is important, Pope Francis writes, is to remember that "there are no lasting changes without cultural changes, without a maturing of lifestyles and convictions within societies, and there are no cultural changes without personal changes" (70).

"Efforts by households to reduce pollution and waste, and to consume with prudence, are creating a new culture. The mere fact that personal, family and community habits are changing is ... helping to bring about large processes of transformation rising from deep within society" (71).

The Holy Father ends his Exhortation with a reminder that "emissions per

individual in the United States are about two times greater than those of individuals living in China, and about seven times greater than the average of the poorest countries."

He goes on to affirm that "a broad change in the irresponsible lifestyle connected with the Western model would have a significant long-term impact. As a result, along with indispensable political decisions, we would be making progress along the way to genuine care for one another" (72).