

Pope Francis Calls for Environmental Stewardship in Letter

By: Kenneth J. Warren, *The Legal Intelligencer*

The participation of Pope Francis in the upcoming World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia has garnered much attention. At first blush, the diverse issues to be addressed at a meeting of families would not seem to focus on environmental stewardship. Marriage, parenting, religious education and the role of women are among the family issues that quickly come to mind.

Francis, however, considers all societal issues as intertwined with family issues. In particular, he views families as central players in the fight to protect "our common home" from environmental degradation and social dysfunction. As a result, one of the scheduled presenters at the September meeting is set to speak on the topic, "Caring for Creation: Pope Francis and Environmental Stewardship."

Over the past few months, Francis has been particularly outspoken in advocating environmental stewardship as a religious and ethical obligation. On May 24, the Vatican released Francis' encyclical letter titled "Laudato Si'" on the "care for our common home." The source of the name is a canticle attributed to St. Francis of Assisi that includes the words, "Praise be to you, my Lord, through our sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us."

In contrast to the dense and often tedious language of some religious writings, the text of the lengthy encyclical letter, divided into 246 paragraphs and ending with a prayer, reads like a revolutionary manifesto. It chronicles the serious global environmental problems, and also the economic, social and political conditions that Francis believes have caused and perpetuate the misuse of Earth's resources. It concludes with a call for an "ecological conversion" with economic and social components that would revolutionize how we produce, distribute and consume goods and how we relate to our fellow human beings and the natural world.

"Laudato Si'" lays the groundwork for its sweeping call for action in its science-based description of the pollution crisis. Francis laments the high volume of wastes generated by manufacturers and consumers, the scarcity of potable water in some regions, the degradation of water quality, deforestation and the loss of biodiversity caused by economic development enhanced by modern technology. The harmful effects of climate change, including intense weather events and sea level rise, are also described. Francis endorses the scientific mainstream by attributing the disruption of our climate to human activity that has increased the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.

"Laudato Si'" does not regard environmental degradation as an isolated problem amenable to a targeted solution. Rather, it asserts that lack of care for the environment and the health of other species reflects a similar lack of care for our fellow humans. As such, Francis finds environmental and social approaches to be interrelated and properly focused in part on questions of justice to the poor.

Based on this premise, "Laudato Si" describes not only our environmental challenges, but also asserts that unequal distribution of wealth, mistreatment of the poor and destruction of indigenous cultures stem from the same causes. It complains that our urban lifestyle, consumerism and misuse of technology separates individuals from nature and relegates the most vulnerable members of society to conditions where housing, transportation and safety are lacking. These conditions diminish our spirituality and cause unhappiness, crime and violence. It asserts that our culture of relativism ignores basic truths about the dignity of our fellow humans and other species, and leads to the "globalization of indifference."

Francis relies on the teachings of the Catholic Church as the foundation for his message. "Laudato Si" notes that according to the Gospel of Creation, all creatures were created by God and serve a purpose. All species are interconnected. Humans as the species with "particular dignity" bear a special responsibility to protect nature. Just as we should regard each human, regardless of wealth, as a person equal in dignity to all others, so too we should value each species that God has created.

"Laudato Si" also contains a secular ethical argument that may appeal to the public. Its ecological message sounds strikingly like Aldo Leopold's 1949 essay, "The Land Ethic." Leopold argued that the ethical obligation to act for the benefit of the community should include the soils, waters, plants and animals, which he termed the "land." In describing his ecology-based ethic, Leopold sought to change the role of humans "from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it." This ethic "reflects the existence of an ecological conscience, and this in turn reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land."

Like Leopold, Francis emphasizes that the unifying principle of social ethics is the requirement to advance the common good, and that acting ethically requires respect for the natural world. Citing the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, "Laudato Si" underscores the need for sustainable development that equitably meets the developmental and environmental needs of present and future generations. In Francis' view, modern society exhibits unsustainable patterns of production and consumption that fail woefully to meet these standards.

The principal culprits in "Laudato Si" responsible for the violation of these principles are leaders of international corporations, who "end up prey to an unethical consumerism bereft of social or ecological awareness." Those people able to exploit technology to their advantage have power over the rest of society. In this view, the global economic system has turned individuals into consumers and created a "throwaway" culture. This culture recognizes no absolute truths, ignores the common good and views Earth's finite resources as available for immediate exploitation without regard to the needs of the poor, future generations or other species. "Laudato Si" paints a dismal picture of the current state of our environment, our society and our spirituality.

In keeping with its description of the problem, "Laudato Si" recommends an environmental, social, economic and spiritual solution that is revolutionary. Francis calls for an "ecological conversion" premised on the belief that we are joined with the natural world in a universal communion. New laws can help address, but not alone cure, what ails society. To combat rampant consumerism that he sees as corrupting our society, polluting our environment

and destroying biodiversity, Francis advocates an economic, social and cultural ecology. Under this approach, protection of the environment, the poor and local cultures would be an integral part of human economic and social activity.

As Francis acknowledges, implementation of his ideas would alter the world's market-based economy by, at a minimum, slowing the pace of production and consumption. It would require those industries that utilize public ecological resources to internalize the costs of using and impacting those resources. Its approach would redistribute wealth from richer countries and individuals to poorer ones. Francis asserts, however, that even for the wealthy, long-term and intergenerational benefits would result from sustainable use of resources. In his view, ecological conversion would eventually yield progress, defined as a sustainable, higher quality of life and a better, more just world.

Although individuals can do much to help achieve his goal of ecological conversion, Francis recognizes that communal action is also necessary. This may occur on a grand scale such as agreements among countries, or, on a smaller scale, by actions of family units. "Laudato Si" stresses "the great importance of the family" in providing an ecological education that inculcates an awareness of "the covenant between humanity and the environment." In combination with religious and other institutions and groups, the family plays a central role in educating the young on the basic values necessary to achieve the ecological conversion that "Laudato Si" advocates. Ecological conversion will require a "change of heart" that the family can help each of its members to undergo.

When the leaders of the American Revolution met in Philadelphia to adopt the Declaration of Independence, they held "these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, [and] that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights." "Laudato Si" seeks a new environmental, economic and social paradigm in part based on respect for the natural world as God's creation. Might we expect the September meeting in Philadelphia to espouse a revolutionary doctrine supporting the ecological conversion that Francis seeks?

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