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*The* FURROW

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In praise of  
*Laudato Si'*

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# In Praise of *Laudato Si'*

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John J. Moore

I have been over-joyed by the appearance of Pope Francis' Encyclical Letter on 'Care for our Common Home'. In some way, I have been waiting for it for sixty-seven years.

I first came in contact with Ecology as a young eager science student in 1948. The ecology course was given in the Botany Dept. by the daughter of the Professor, who had recently returned from her travelling scholarship: she had spent half her time at Cambridge where Tansley (the 'Father' of British Plant Ecology) worked – and half at Montpellier in France, at the feet of Braun-Blanquet, founder of the Continental School of Plant Sociology. This Helen Doyle was a very good lecturer and besides a vivacious young woman who won me over completely to Ecology. When I joined the Botany Department after my Ordination, I took over the Ecology section from her – she was now concentrating on rearing her own family.

During most of my time at the University in Dublin I gave the course in Introductory Biology to the large (400+) first year Science and Agricultural class, and I always gave quite a sizable part of the course over to Ecology and Environmental problems. My teaching did not seem to be having any great effect except for a few teachers who began introducing ecological topics into their Biology courses.

In the year before I left UCD for Zambia I gave the usual ecology 'indoctrination' about the evils of pollution etc. in Ireland and I was surprised at the end to see five stalwart young males coming down the steps of the lecture theatre in a very determined and almost threatening way.

'That is *awful*, what you told us. But what are you *doing* about it?'

'What can I do? I'm only paid to tell you about it!'

'But we will help you to organize a protest; we will organize a few hundred of those lazy buggers walking out the door there.'

Then I came to the University of Zambia in Lusaka. I wrote

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an article for the Bulletin of the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection in Zambia. Three years later, when I came back to Ireland for home leave, all the media were full of horror stories or feature programmes about environmental pollution, our ruined fresh-water fisheries, our cattle poisoned when drinking from our once beautiful lakes – an endless tale of woe. It seemed paradoxical that the surge in awareness of our ecological woes came *after* I had left the country.

My ecological convictions are part of my religious background and so I was a little saddened at the very slow pace of any recognition in official Church documents of the growing threat of breakdown of our natural ecological cycles.

In 1962 Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* appeared. It is usually credited with having aroused public awareness of the damage being done to our natural systems by over-use of pesticides in parts of the USA. The title – *Silent Spring* – referred to the fact that several areas in the US reported that the beautiful 'dawn chorus' of birds at the beginning of the breeding season was no longer heard. Instead many dead birds were found scattered over the countryside. I can remember well a meeting of lecturers from the Science and Agricultural Faculties to discuss the book. Several of my academic colleagues viewed her earnest writing as 'outpourings of another over-emotional female'. They did not realise the enormous amount of research she had put into that book over the previous three years.

Five years after Rachel Carson had alerted people to the extent of the disruption of the ecosystems of our beautiful planet, an article appeared in Science magazine entitled 'The Root of our Ecological Crisis'. The author (Lynn White) was not a scientist but a historian specialising in the late mediaeval history of Europe. He came up with a very clear verdict, fully supported from his historical data. The culprit was: *The Judaeo-Christian Ethic*. He claimed that this ethic, based on the text in Genesis 1:28 '*fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea ...*', and much re-enforced by human greed, was really responsible. This stark judgement shocked both Christian and Jewish scholars.

As a result there was a flurry of articles in the Christian literature trying to prove that the Genesis text should be interpreted as 'have stewardship over all creatures'. Unfortunately the troublesome text meant exactly what the traditional translations said (subdue ... have dominion) and the Hebrew words involved are used elsewhere in the Bible only in the sense of subduing your enemies after a military victory.

There was no reaction from the official Church, as far as I am aware. A fellow Irishman, Fr Seán McDonagh of the Columban

Missionaries wrote a challenging book in 1990 called *The Greening of the Church*. In it he criticised strongly the slow pace at which official Church documents began to recognise the gravity of the situation caused by pollution and the destruction of our forest resources in third world countries. Pope John Paul's Message for the World Day of Peace, 1990 was published just as McDonagh was preparing his book for the press. He praised it highly: 'Its coverage is comprehensive, the analysis is incisive and the text reverberates with a note of urgency.' However, McDonagh's overall verdict remained 'that it is fair to say that the Church has arrived on the scene a little breathless and a little late'. I think that would also have been my opinion at that time.

So, why am I so over-joyed at the appearance of *Laudato Si'* ?

So often, when Catholic theologians, either dogmatic or moral, write about subjects bordering on the Natural Sciences, they betray that they are not really familiar with the scientific aspects of the subject they are writing on – they betray themselves by lapses in language or misuse of technical terms. With Francis, his first chapter summarises the scientific evidence, and there is not the slightest trace in it of such unfortunate lapses. When I read it first, it felt as if one of my scientific colleagues was giving a semi-popular overview of the world situation in ecology today – not a foot wrong ! It might be objected that this effect could easily have been achieved by allowing a few friendly scientists to read drafts of the Encyclical carefully and critically. True, but even if that had been the case, I rejoiced that Francis had the wisdom to do just that.

A few examples may be quoted:

In chapter 1 '*What is happening to our Common Home?*' Pope Francis answers: 'Drawing information from the sciences, our goal is not to amass information or to satisfy curiosity, but rather to become painfully aware, to dare to turn to what is happening to the world into our own painful suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it' (19).

He starts with the problems of *pollution, waste and the throw-away culture* and then goes on to deal with Climatic Change. In the North American media, the subject of the new Encyclical was headlined immediately as 'Pope Francis writes on Climate Change'. In fact climate change is the second subject he touches on and he devotes only three paragraphs to it. In contrast, he devotes eleven paragraphs to the problem of extinction of species and the resultant loss (for ever) of valuable genetic information locked up in the DNA of these victims of our callous carelessness.

In 2008 I wrote an article for this journal ('King Canute to the Rescue') pointing out the scientific difficulty I had in fully

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accepting the predominant view that the phenomenon of ‘global warming’ was primarily due to the increased concentration in the atmosphere of CO<sub>2</sub> and other ‘greenhouse gases’ arising from human activities.

I had myself been working on the history of climate and vegetation change in the west of Ireland around the time of the Neolithic colonisation of Ireland (about 4,500 years ago). A large area of Western Ireland, which had formerly been covered by pine forest, was transformed in a short time into a tree-less waste we call ‘Western Blanket Bog’. Our question was: Was this due to climatic changes, or to human mismanagement or to both? I was thus familiar with the methodological and technical aspects of climate change.

My purpose in writing that article was because I felt that the contemporary concern for climate change, so strongly depicted in the media at the time, was over-emphasised and was eclipsing concern for the widespread pollution of the land being practised in the industrialised European countries. Since this scale of land pollution is not widely practised in Central Africa except in the vicinity of the mines, we might think that Francis’s words, ‘turn our beautiful earth into a pile of filth’ was a bit exaggerated, but it is a reality in so many places in the Northern Hemisphere.

Francis thus deals with ‘Climate Change’ in the second place. He seems to recognise that we are not 100% sure at this stage that avoiding any further increase in the concentrations of CO<sub>2</sub> will eliminate climate instability; he clearly distinguishes ‘a very strong scientific consensus’ from positive support for a theory. He seems to realise that Science does not advance by a democratic process, but by demonstrative proof – either supporting or demolishing a currently accepted hypothesis.

The concluding words of Lynn White’s article on the ‘Roots of our Ecological Crisis’, referred to above and written over 50 years ago, seem uncannily prescient today:

The greatest spiritual revolutionary in Western history, Saint Francis, proposed what he thought was an alternative Christian view of nature and man’s relation to it: he tried to substitute the idea of the equality of all creatures, including man, for the idea of man’s limitless rule of creation. He failed. Both our present science and our present technology are so tinctured with orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature that no solution for our ecologic crisis can be expected from them alone. Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not. We must rethink and re-feel our nature and destiny. The profoundly

religious, but heretical, sense of the primitive Franciscans for the spiritual autonomy of all parts of nature may point a direction. I propose Francis as a patron saint for ecologists.

– Lynn White, in *Science*, 1967

*'The remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not;'* and here it has come at last from the Pope himself. The language and the thought-forms of faith have entered into the discussion, decisively and systematically and in a way that is acceptable to all except the most prejudiced of anti-Christian enquirers, and those who disagree with Francis's views on the 'growth economy'.

A similar plea was made thirty three years later by a group of scientists (including thirty three Nobel prize-winners) to a meeting of religious and parliamentary leaders from 83 countries and signed by 271 of them. And yet, despite the strength and cogency of the arguments, little seems to have happened.

The question now arises: will Francis' plea, tightly argued over about 100 pages, encounter the same fate? We need to be realistic. A 100-page document is not likely to influence the ordinary voter in the worst affected countries. However it is likely to encourage many promising efforts in different parts of the world to adopt a more ecologically viable life style.

Pope Francis also makes a fair criticism of the ecological curricula we used to follow in my heyday as an lecturer in ecology.

Environmental Education has broadened its goals. Whereas in the beginning it was mainly centred on scientific information, consciousness-raising and the prevention of environmental risks, it tends now to include a critique of the 'Myths' of a modernity grounded in a utilitarian mindset (individualism, unlimited progress, competition, consumerism, the unregulated market.) (210).

I used to say, 'An ecologist needs to be a jack of all trades – well informed in all branches of Biology, some knowledge of Meteorology, Geology and Soil science,' – all within the scope of the natural sciences. For me personally the religious approach was also important, but I would never have thought of entering the areas of Economics and Politics.

Alas, I too have come too late to the scene.