

## READING GUIDE

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Before concluding at point n. 246 with two prayers (one of which is the beautiful, epochal *A Prayer for Our Earth*), at the end of this Encyclical Holy Father Francis says that his is a “reflection that has been both joyful and troubling.” I would suggest—and I do so as a non-believer—that, though the premises are harrowing, it is joy that prevails: the joy of believing in revolutionary change and a new humanity, the joy that imbues Francis’ words, filled with hope even when they describe the worst of the disasters we are currently experiencing.

This Encyclical is a firm but objective realization of the reality of our common home, the earth and all Creation. It makes an extremely lucid analysis of all the damage we have done to things and people by senselessly imposing our development models, allowing our politics to be subject to economics and economics to technology. The first part of the document is a perfect, highly educational summary of the situation in which the world finds itself: pollution and climate change, the issue of water, the loss of biodiversity and the consequent deterioration of the quality of human life, social degradation, the spread of injustice in a sea of indifference and apparent helplessness. It is a picture that leaves no room for doubt, not even scientific doubt: “On many concrete questions, the Church has no reason to offer a definitive opinion; it knows that honest debate must be encouraged among experts, while respecting divergent views. But we need only take a frank look at the facts to see that our common home is falling into serious disrepair” (n. 61). The Encyclical speaks to us about reality in crude but unequivocal terms, and from that reality, to which it often and by no means casually clings, it embarks upon further considerations.

To look upon the beauty of Creation with the same ability to be surprised and moved as St Francis—the magnificence of this is captured in the title *Laudato si’* (Praise Be to You)—is also to grasp a human state no longer suited to the common home and to fully identify with our time. The call to “till and keep,” in *Genesis* (2.15), cited on more than one occasion in the pages that follow, is at once a reference to something ancient and ancestral. It is a way of asking us to live the most profound part of our human nature from the beginning of our days with equilibrium. In the meantime, it becomes a revolutionary commitment for the future. There can be no doubt that these words represent one of the most important turnarounds in the history of the Church and, above all, of humanity.

The novelty lies above all in Francis’ truly universal message. As he has never failed to point out right from his first steps as Pope, he also intends his words for those who profess other faiths and to non-believers, and he does so by choosing a subject that is, of course, very topical but, inasmuch as it truly transcends the terrestrial life of man, also timeless and eternal. Francis speaks to everyone, as John XXIII did in 1963 in *Pacem in terris*, which he dedicated to

“all men of good will.” Strong is his call for dialogue among religions, between science and religion, between technological (and technocratic) knowhow and ancient wisdom, among paradigms and among all men. No one should feel excluded from the Holy Father’s words, no one can remain indifferent to his description of the dramatic reality in which they find themselves living. We must “feel united by the same concern” (n. 7).

Not a few men of science have warned of a future for the Earth in which, sooner or later, the human race will become extinct, if it continues to consume more resources than nature has to offer. Pope Francis himself writes that, “An outsider looking at our world would be amazed at such behaviour, which at times appears self-destructive” (n. 55). The same scientists also agree that the end of humanity would not represent the end of the planet, that the biosphere would survive the human species without any great effort by actuating the necessary adjustments to its complex system of interactions between living beings, be they animal or vegetable. “We are not God. The earth was here before us and it has been given to us” (n. 67). On the one hand, the hypothesis of human extinction, which I do not regard as entirely improbable, lets us see how even for one who lives a different spiritual dimension, life on earth has to be driven to a new approach in the face of the history of the world. On the other, it exhorts us all, without distinction, to interact in a more responsible manner with other living species.

This step can no longer be delayed if our existence on this planet is to be mutually profitable, if it is to be preserved for the benefit of future generations and, above all, for Creation itself. It is a system so complex as to not yet be fully understood by man, in which the indemonstrable—according to the scientific means at our disposal—still bears a decisive weight in the order of things. This is mysterious for those who do not believe and concerns the inner self and faith for those who do, but in any case is characterized by a beauty that nails us to our responsibility. On more than one occasion, Francis speaks of beauty as an aesthetic and spiritual criterion, one that has to guide our ethics and our politics. It is the same beauty sung by Saint Francis, the Pauper of Assisi.

In the exhortation to till and keep, whose epochal philosophical and theological significance is encapsulated in the definition “integral ecology”—which has a timeless quality in its request for us to build a new humanism and change the dominant paradigms—it is also possible to discern a series of stringent questions that might be defined as political. Their innovativeness is such that they drive us, without much choice, towards a radical change that must needs renew both man and the things he does. In Francis’ text there is no shortage of very clear, transparent references to a technical-financial system that is not functioning and demonstrates every day how incompatible it is with a harmonious, just society. Furthermore, the Holy Father reasserts the centrality of politics, seen as the ability to design the world we want and make the choices needed to achieve it, precisely at a moment in time in which the almost spasmodic pursuit of profit prevents rulers from taking farsighted, wide-ranging decisions, capable of imagining a future beyond the ballot box. As Francis points out citing his own

*Evangelii gaudium*, “Time is greater than space,” but it would appear that politics has failed to recognize this.

As we speak of an ecology that starts inside us and reverberates outside in all its might with concrete actions leading to peace and total wellbeing, shared by everyone and everything, we inevitably turn our gaze, without filters, to the impoverishment we have affected on natural resources, the future possibilities we deny ourselves and the debasement of our existence.

Prevalent in this depressing picture in which the human condition has been reduced to a thing of squalor—both for the many who live in poverty and for those surrounded by wealth who have completely mislaid the meaning of true inner and social wellbeing—are what sociologists have defined as “poor relationships”: mere utilitarian relationships between man and things, but also among men themselves. As long as something—or a living being, even, alas, a person—serves a precise purpose and gives me what I want, I use it and carry on a relationship with it. As soon as it stops satisfying this need, I discard and throw away the thing, being or person and break off the relationship. This is a throwaway culture in which consumerism attempts to fill our voids. This is what we do with nature but also with our brothers and sisters who are dying of hunger and malnutrition, who are suffering from poverty, with whom we do not have direct relationships and who cannot give us anything we need: in our eyes, their hunger and their condition has become something that is fatalistically inevitable, something that belongs to the world and cannot be changed, almost as if it were a question of good luck or bad. In other words, it is something intolerable. But this is horrendous. It means that the break risks being irreparable: “Disregard for the duty to develop and maintain a proper relationship with my neighbour, for whose care and custody I am responsible, ruins my relationship with my own self, with others, with God and with the earth. When all these relationships are neglected, when justice no longer dwells in the land, the Bible tells us that life itself is endangered” (n. 70).

The Encyclical asks us to start from resources, from the earth, from water, from agriculture, from food, hence from an ecological inspiration that involves man too inasmuch as it no longer tolerates the injustices we perpetrate, both to nature and to our brothers and sisters. A new ecology that comes from afar, even from the words of the Bible—“These ancient stories, full of symbolism, bear witness to a conviction we share today, that everything is interconnected, and that genuine care for our own lives and our relationships with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice and faithfulness to others” (n. 70)—and which today demands that we make a “conversion” (n. 216). Relatively recent revolutions—the French Revolution, for example—have professed the value of fraternity alongside those of liberty and equality. With the passing of time and history, the value has been lost and fraternity has become the poor sister of liberty and equality, the least considered and the one in whose name the fewest social battles have been fought. This is a mistake: without fraternity there is neither liberty nor equality: fraternity presupposes both of them.

This is the “integral ecology”—economic, social, cultural, everyday—that protects the common good and looks to the future. As Francis said in his Homily for the beginning of the Petrine Ministry, “It means protecting people, showing loving concern for each and every person, especially children, the elderly, those in need, who are often the last we think about.” And here we really do come to politics: historically Francis’ exhortation is unique because it has the ability to stir consciences, and not only in the Christian world. True, what is needed is a mobilization of all our souls, a global opinion movement capable at last of taking human and ecological injustices in hand and righting them in the interest of the human race. I am sure that not only the Christian world but also a huge section of the rest of humanity will respond positively. Believers, people who profess other religions and other forms of spirituality cannot remain indifferent and, at the same time, the call to ecologists to join together and put aside their ideological differences is a call for a truly universal union including secular humanity, which has fought many battles in the name of some of the principles of which Francis reminds us.

More specifically, as the Pope pointed out in his speech at the FAO on June 11 last, the scandal of hunger, unresolved despite the commitment of international organizations, is a disgrace. The causes of hunger and malnutrition in the world today are, by and large, evident for all to see; they are the result of the criminal and grossly unfair distribution of resources, of the plundering of some societies and nations by others, of war, of a general lack of fraternity among men and women blinded by the illusion that they can dominate both nature and their weakest fellows by pursuing a form of material wellbeing that has translated into what we call consumerism with all its consumerist ideology. What is lacking, in short, is “integral ecology.” The pledge to ensure the right to food and water (in this Encyclical, the condemnation of those who privatize the latter resource is final: cf. n. 30) has to become the key mission of the new humanism hoped for by Francis. One cannot but endorse it.

It may appear to be an immense task, but the Pope’s words make us understand how every single day in our own small lives it is possible to leave a mark. It is everyone’s job to educate themselves on a new lifestyle, to promote a different paradigm, “degrowth” for those who objectively have too much and sobriety as a universal value. There is certainly no lack of examples to refer to. The interesting thing is that it is precisely from the humble that we have to begin: not just to defend and protect them, but also watching how they behave and how they live in the world despite their difficulties. If I think of the farming world, I see that in the countryside around the globe, where many of those who are suffering live, there are many elders who are the stewards of sustainable agricultural skills and knowledge; I see women who not only cook and prepare food, but also do most of the work in the fields, in many countries taking on the hardest tasks; I see young people returning to the land, who instead of abandoning their birthplaces stay on to cultivate and take care of the land; I see indigenous people, to whom the Holy Father devotes a wonderful section in this Encyclical (at n. 146, for example), who with their cosmogonies are masters at cultivating a harmonious relationship with the nature that surrounds them and the resources they have at their disposal. The humble are

the closest to the land: the derivation of the word—*humus*, from the Sanskrit *bhumi* and *bhuman*, the creature of the land, the human—says as much. But they are also, writes Francis, the closest to God. Even the poor and the sufferers have to be listened to. See Job (7.5-7), for example: “My body is clothed with worms and scabs, my skin is broken and festering. My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, and they come to an end without hope. Remember, O God, that my life is but a breath; my eyes will never see happiness again. The eye that now sees me will see me no longer; you will look for me, but I will be no more.” It is hardly worth stressing that the reference to this speed that prevents the eye from seeing corresponds exactly to what has happened in frenetic consumer society, in which we rush to satisfy ephemeral needs, losing sight of our responsibilities and lucidity in making choices—every food purchase is of crucial importance because what we eat orients what we grow and how we grow it, what we keep and how we keep it—and, lastly, the ability to listen to others. All this makes us deaf and blind, tolerant of the havoc wrought on Creation and on others.

It is to be hoped that Francis' ground-breaking exhortation will effectively mobilize souls and bodies, and in all likelihood it will, given its explicitness in the final pages. The Holy Father is not the only one, albeit the most influential, to launch appeals for care for the environment, for protection and development models respectful of the earth. His voice, as clear and lucid as ever in the depth of the message, polite yet blunt, joins and corroborates that of so many others engaged in the mission of changing the dominant techno-economic system and the political system enslaved to it. The moment has come for the appeal to serve not only as a reflection on our condition but to make us act, moving without delay from the particular to the global. The change concerns our very being and the actions that follow should begin—as I have said—with our everyday choices and possessions and ultimately generate a wave obliging those with the most power to implement all the initiatives necessary for us to change direction. In the fifth chapter, ‘Lines of Approach and Action’ (nos. 163-201), Francis speaks of the irremissible value of local policies, but also of the responsibilities, often disregarded, of international politics, putting forward new systems for governing the world in a way shared by all and more oriented towards concreteness, and demanding dialogue and transparency in decision-making processes.

I believe that this Encyclical will annoy many of the powers that be (with its reference to monocultures, for example, to the power of the food and seed multinationals, and the reflections on GMOs), and will thus be bitterly criticized by some. But it is what a multitude of human beings was asking and waiting for (and was necessary) to exert new force and shed new light on the road of change, and this obviously cannot come about unopposed by those who defend the status quo. Innovation has been addressed by other Popes and other documents in the past (Francis makes constant references to John Paul II e Benedict XVI and constantly cites Episcopal Conferences all over the world) and has already been shared by other Confessions (at point n. 8 of the introductory premises there is a clear reference to Patriarch Bartholomew), but it has never been dealt with so thoroughly in a message with as much weight as this

Encyclical. To re-establish a relationship interrupted arguably as a result of some of the earlier interpretations of doctrine is to “reconnect” Man and Creation. The belief that man has to dominate nature and use it as he likes must not induce us to think that any type of disaster is permissible. If it is true that human nature is different from vegetable or animal nature, it is just as true that the context in which man lives is a system made up of connections that are evident or hidden, understood or mysterious. To preserve, “to till and keep” this system is our duty because it is in our interests: survival, existence, fullness of spirit and, ultimately, peace. Joy.

In the pages that follow, I invite the reader to study the meaning of the peace and the joy of which the Holy Father speaks. They are for all human beings. And once you have read these pages, full of this joy and no longer disturbed by the dramatic nature of the denouncement, you will be filled by a desire to build, to “till and keep.” Returning to St Francis, there is a phrase attributed to him that seems to me to sum up the Holy Father’s document perfectly: “Start by doing what is necessary, then what is possible, and suddenly you are doing the impossible.” Nothing must frighten us about the task we are called upon to perform, whether we are believers or non-believers. Though it may seem impossible, we will be surprised to find ourselves performing it—with the same sense of surprise that one has in the contemplation of Creation and beauty. We will re-establish a harmonious relationship with nature, we will feel part of it, and nothing will be precluded to us in the sobriety and the promotion of human and natural diversities, and we will eventually erase hunger and malnutrition. We will perform an even greater task by restoring peace among men and women, and this will give our place in the world renewed significance and renewed pleasure.

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