



Earth is the Poorest of the Poor

By Helen Bergin

HELEN BERGIN writes of the challenges and the hope in Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'*.

Praised be you my Lord, through Brother Sun, Sister Moon,
Brother Wind, Sister Water, Brother Fire,
Sister Mother Earth, and Sister Death!

— *Laudato Si'*

It was certainly not chance that led Pope Francis to model his pontificate on the one to whom the *Canticle of the Sun* is attributed — Francis of Assisi. For it is in St Francis's song that creation raises its melodies to God. And while the *Canticle* extols the gifts of planet Earth, Pope Francis invites humans to be at the service of God's multi-

faceted creation — "stewardship" being one critical principle of Catholic Social Teaching.

Human voices raised on behalf of Earth are not new. Indigenous peoples have constantly honoured the gift of Earth. In more recent years theologians have added their voices. In 1993, North American theologian Sallie McFague described the world

as "the body of God" and in 1999, Brazilian Ivone Gebara wrote: "we [human beings] are one body with the whole universe." Pope Francis acknowledged Earth as the "the poorest of the poor."

In *Laudato Si'* Francis engages with his human sisters and brothers. He initially challenges us with the words "we have forgotten who we are" and reminds us that since we belong to Earth we are often part of Earth's peril. While we depend on air, earth, fire and water, we are not "lords" of Earth's elements. Francis deliberately links humanity's amnesia towards the elements with humanity's indifference to the poor. He speaks of human consciences as having been numbed towards the poor (*LS* par 49).

Francis expressly states that the Church is not offering a "definitive opinion" — rather he encourages further conversation. He knows that the spectre of ecological peril has been raised for decades by scientists and communities across the globe but he takes tiny steps to expand the long-held Christian principle of "the common good" to include more than human well-being. "Everything is connected" (par 117).

In the following I highlight two aspects of this document, namely the inter-dependence of creation and the challenge for human beings to respect each species. Then I will suggest that *Laudato Si'* is fundamentally a hope-filled document.

Theme of Interdependence

Central to *Laudato Si'* is the element of inter-dependence or connectedness. However, the principle expands from being a solely anthropocentric term to one which includes all creation. Readers are reminded that within planet Earth all creatures share "our common home."

As always, there are ongoing challenges for all living in the one home and attempting to live peacefully and interdependently. Midway through the document we read: "It cannot be emphasised enough how everything is interconnected ... Living species are part of a network which we will never fully explore and understand"

(par 138). And along with manifold distinctions of the species we learn that: "Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature" (par 139).

Francis's claim that humans both benefit and suffer from the beauty and deterioration of nature within the common home, reminds us of our fragility. Living creatures depend on one another and on Earth which, common to all, sustains and feeds us. Francis expresses it thus: "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" (par 89). He comments pertinently that many humans almost experience "a physical ailment" when species vanish from their midst or when productive land becomes desert.

Human beings share one Earth with myriads of living beings and Francis asserts that "Creatures exist only in dependence on each other, to complete each other, in the service of each other" (par 86). Each species is of value.

We who live in southern regions of the globe are invited to ponder the earth, air and water we take for granted, the creatures that delight us, the seasons that engage us and the diverse humans with whom we share our home.

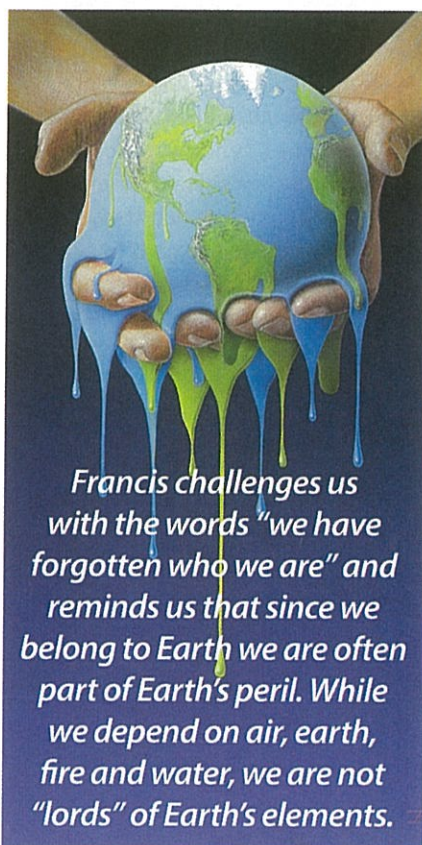
Yet, we cannot overlook the burdens experienced by impoverished nations, religious groups and individuals. The document warns against a globalisation of indifference since "we are one single family" (par 52). Our familial bonds invite us to respect human beings whatever their age, status or apparent worth.

Respect and Honour All Species

A second important element in *Laudato Si'* relates to the giftedness of all Earth's species. Each human is invited to act vigilantly towards creation since individual species have intrinsic value and contribute to the whole. Human beings are a wonderful but often dominating species within planet Earth.

The encyclical's wide-ranging ethical stance emerges from descriptions of Earth's bounty and

human giftedness. In highlighting the goodness of earth and of human creativity in the sciences, technology, arts and medicine, Francis's appeal to humans to honour Earth and its gifts seems most pertinent.



Francis encourages an ethical stance towards preserving resources for future humans and "other than human" species while also appreciating present gifts. We are invited to think generously towards the future and to exercise prudence today. This ethic is grounded in the virtue of love.

Love not only nurtures individual human beings and creatures but it encourages communion. Love also exists when humans heal one another and attempt to heal nature. For Francis, "the other" — whether within the natural environment, whether divine or human — is a "thou" (par 119) and he encourages the healing of all that is ailing. In a profound way we humans are encouraged to sharpen our awareness and alter our behaviour (par 202).

The Gift of Hope

The title *Laudato Si'* ("Praise to you, my God!") is already a prayer of hope. But, there is more!

In Chapter One, after Francis outlines the challenges of climate

change, access to water and poor water quality, loss of biodiversity and social breakdown he concludes: "Hope would have us recognise that there is always a way out, that we can always redirect our steps, that we can always do something to solve our problems" (par 61). Francis invites us to engage now in individual and communal commitment to Earth.

Then in Chapter Two when pondering the wisdom emerging from the Flood story, Francis highlights Noah's stance. He says: "All it takes is one good person to restore hope!" (par 71). We are reminded of the generosity of "one plus one".

And in contemplating the love behind creation, Francis cites the poet Dante who described divine love as that "which moves the sun and the stars". Creation, when seen through a Christian lens, is God's immense gift of love. It is worth restoring!

Then in Chapter Five, when Francis outlines "the major paths of dialogue which can help us escape the spiral of self-destruction which currently engulfs us" (par 163), we may heed his commitment to assisting Earth's journey back into wholeness.

And, finally, for we who live in Earth's southern regions, it is encouraging to see Francis acknowledging comments from New Zealand and Australian bishops regarding respect for the environment and those living within it (par 95; par 218).

Laudato Si' is a timely document for Earth and humanity. Perhaps with ongoing commitment we might reverse Francis's chilling warning: "We have forgotten who we are" and instead begin to recognise who we *truly* are. ■

Painting by Bjørn Richter, Norwegian painter, sculptor, designer and writer. © Prints (Giclée) available through www.bjornrichter.com
"The sales help me continue my (often idealistic) work for our planet. I began expressing my concern in painting in 1974—probably the first artist to do this."



Helen Bergin, a Dominican Sister, lives in Auckland. Having previously taught theology she hopes now to focus on some theological writing.