

Group Discussion Guideline to the Environmental Encyclical

By Thomas Reese, SJ,

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INTRODUCTION

“Facts are more important than ideas” is a statement from Pope Francis that one would have never heard from Popes Benedict XVI or John Paul II.

It is not that Pope Francis is dumb or an anti-intellectual. He is well-read and thoughtful, but by no stretch of the imagination can he be called a scholar. His training as a scientist and his life experience make him approach theory in a different way than John Paul and Benedict. It also helps explain his approach to the environment in *Laudato Si’*.

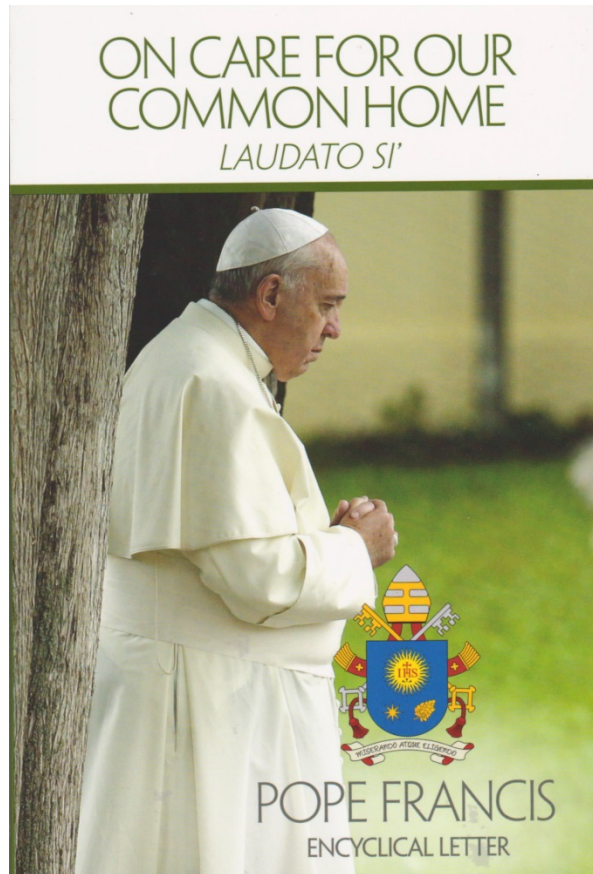
John Paul was trained first as a philosopher and then as a theologian, and as a priest, he taught ethics at a university. He wrote in a style that was not easily digested. Benedict was trained in theology and became one of the leading theologians of his generation. Both wrote scholarly books that promoted a particular perspective.

On the other hand, Francis’ initial training prior to entering the seminary was as a chemist. He never finished his doctorate in theology. He is what academics refer to as ABD, “all but dissertation.” He never wrote scholarly books. He was a wide-ranging consumer of theology, not the proponent of a particular view.

For John Paul the philosopher and Benedict the theologian, ideas were paramount. But for Francis the scientist and pastor, facts really matter.

For John Paul and Benedict, if reality does not reflect the ideal, then reality must change, whereas for Francis, if facts and theory clash, he, like a good scientist, is willing to question the theory.

The personal histories of these three popes also marked them. For John Paul, it was the experience of a church under siege, first by the Nazis and then by the communists. Church unity was paramount in such a struggle. Even after the fall of communism, his model of the church was still that of a church under siege, except now the enemy was much of Western culture – relativism, consumerism, etc.



Likewise, Benedict was influenced first by the Second Vatican Council and then by the upheaval that followed it and the 1968 student riots, which reminded him of the Nazi Brownshirts of his youth. As with John Paul, unity and order were important values.

As a teacher of graduate students and a director of dissertations, Benedict spent much of his time guiding and correcting students. He did not interact all that well with his theological colleagues. It was not surprising that as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, he saw his job as guiding and correcting theologians whom he treated like graduate students, not intellectual equals.

Francis, on the other hand, as a young priest was quickly thrust into the spiritual formation of young Jesuits and became director of novices, provincial and rector of the Jesuit seminary. He dealt with people, not ideas; discernment, not logic, was the guiding principle.

This experience of Jesuit governance was rewarding but not irenic. He experienced conflict and failure. He acknowledges that he was too young for the authority he was given and that he made mistakes. He learned that he needed to listen and consult before making decisions. He brought these learned lessons to his work as archbishop of Buenos Aires, Argentina, where he spent much of his time with people in the slums.

Francis also lived in Argentina at a time when there was a clash of ideologies going on, and he grew to hate ideological thinking. I define an ideology as a system by which we ignore data and experience in order to preserve our opinions. Peronism, communism, and libertarian capitalism were fighting for power. The military, following the idea of the national security state, violently suppressed all opposition.

At the same time, while John Paul experienced communism as a foreign oppressor, Francis met communism as a young man in the person of his first boss and mentor, whom he admired and with whom he maintained friendship for life. He learned early that a communist could be a good person.

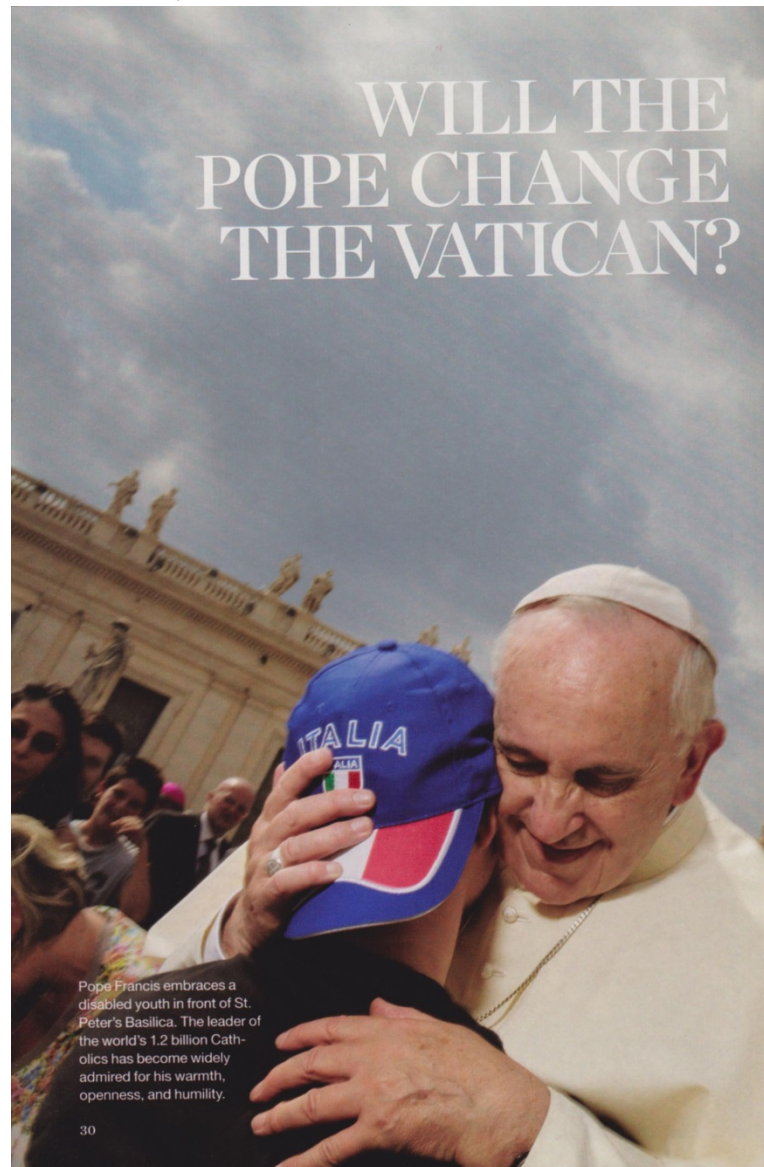


Image from August 2015 issue of *National Geographic*

Pope Francis is uncomfortable with ideologies on the left and the right. He was critical of certain forms of liberation theology because they incorporated Marxist analysis and supported violent revolution. He felt that these theologians were imposing their ideas on the poor rather than listening to their views.

But Francis is even more critical of libertarian capitalism, which blindly claims that all boats would rise with the tide of economic growth, because the people he met in the slums of Buenos Aires were in fact drowning without boats.

All of this background influenced the writing of Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'*. Rather than starting with philosophy and theology, the first chapter of the encyclical starts with science. What are the facts?

The pope and his collaborators began by consulting widely with the scientific community. What is happening to the environment? They went to the scientific community not to argue with it, but to learn from it. If there was a consensus in the scientific community, they accepted it.

Although the church gets a bad rap for Galileo, in fact, the Catholic church has been a supporter of science through the centuries (Jesuit astronomers, Gregor Mendel, Georges Lemaître, etc.). This was grounded in Catholic theology that argued that there can be no conflict between faith and reason because both are from God.

This does not mean that there were not bumps along the road (Galileo, Darwin, Freud), but Catholicism was usually able to reconcile itself with new science faster than those for whom the Bible was the only source of authority. Today, conflict is over how science is used, not over what science discovers.

What did the pope learn about the environment from scientists?

Chapter 1 of the encyclical first reports on air pollution: "Exposure to atmospheric pollutants produces a broad spectrum of health hazards, especially for the poor, and causes



Image from August 2015 issue of *National Geographic*

mil-lions of premature deaths.” Pollution is “caused by transport, industrial fumes, substances which contribute to the acidification of soil and water, fertilizers, insecticides, fungicides, herbicides and agrottoxins in general.”

Then the chapter moves on to the pollution caused by waste. “Each year hundreds of millions of tons of waste is generated, much of it non-biodegradable, highly toxic and radioactive, from homes and businesses, from construction and demolition sites, from clinical, electronic and industrial sources.”

The pope also learned that “a very solid scientific consensus indicates that we are presently witnessing a disturbing warming of the climatic system” and that “a number of scientific studies indicate that most global warming in recent decades is due to the great concentration of greenhouse gases (carbon dioxide, methane, nitrogen oxides and others) released mainly as a result of human activity.”

Chapter 1 includes a discussion of how global warming can lead to melting of glaciers and polar ice, rising sea levels, and the release of methane gas from the decom-position of frozen organic material. It also notes that “carbon dioxide pollution increases the acidification of the oceans and compromises the marine food chain.”

“If present trends continue,” the encyclical states, “this century may well witness extraordinary cli-mate change and an unprecedented destruction of ecosystems, with serious consequences for all of us.”

Chapter 1 devotes an entire section to the loss of biodiversity, its causes and consequences. “Each year sees the disappearance of thousands of plant and animal species which we will never know, which our children will never see, because they have been lost forever. The great majority become extinct for reasons related to human activity.” These are resources that will not be available to future generations.

The encyclical reports on polluted water supplies, dying coral reefs, and deforestation. It summarizes the current thinking of scientists about environmental issues.

Later in the encyclical, Francis writes, “Doomsday predictions can no longer be met with irony or disdain. We may well be leav-ing to coming generations debris, desolation and filth. The pace of consumption, waste and envi-ronmental change has so stretched the planet’s capacity that our contemporary lifestyle, unsus-tainable as it is, can only precipitate catastrophes.”

Facts matter when it comes to the environment, which is why Francis begins his encyclical with a presentation of the scientific consensus on the state of the environment and where we are going. These facts present the world with a moral dilemma that will be explicated later in the encyclical.

Facts, in Francis’ universe, should not be twisted to fit our ideas. Rather, facts can force us to change our ideas. For example, what it means to be a Christian in the 21st century must change when confronted with environmental crisis we face.

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GUIDELINES FOR DISCUSSION

One of the many marvelous things about Pope Francis’ encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si’*, on Care for Our Common Home, is that it is written in a very accessible style. It does not read like an academic tome as did many encyclicals of the past. Anyone who can read a newspaper can read this encyclical and get something out of it.

True, it is 190 pages and about 40,000 words, but the six chapters flow nicely. It is not a hard read.

The encyclical is great for individual reading but even better for a book club, class, or discussion group. Reading and discussing the encyclical in a group is exactly what is called for because throughout the letter, there are calls to dialogue.

There is no need for people to wait while the bishops and pastors organize a response to the encyclical. Anyone can download the encyclical (1), call their friends and say, "Let's read and discuss the encyclical." Anyone part of a book club can recommend that the encyclical be their next read.

The impact of the encyclical is going to be significant even outside the Catholic church. Environmentalists and scientists have endorsed the document. Likewise, non-Catholic religious leaders are eager to discuss the encyclical, which will become a topic of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue.

So here is a readers' guide with study questions to help in reading the encyclical. Because of the richness of the content, I would suggest taking one chapter at a time for reading and discussion. There are lots of questions. Use the ones you find helpful for discussion; don't feel you have to answer them all.

(1) To download the encyclical:

Enter browser search words: "*Laudato Si* (24 May 2015) Francis" or access the website:
http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

Or alternatively: purchase the book *ON CARE FOR OUR COMMON HOME – Laudato Si* – Pope Francis Encyclical Letter available from Amazon and other sources.

(2) Download the readers' guide.

<http://ncrnews.org/documents/NCR%20Readers%20guide.pdf>

For additional copies of the guide, enter browser search words: "A readers' guide to *Laudato Si* National Catholic Reporter"

Or alternatively: access the website:

<http://ncronline.org/blogs/faith-and-justice/readers-guide-laudato-si>.

THE INTRODUCTION

The pope begins the encyclical by summarizing his presentation and citing earlier popes and other religious leaders who have spoken about the environment. He says Sister Earth "cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her."

Questions:

1. Where have you seen harm inflicted on Sister Earth (Paragraph 2)?
2. Why do you think few people knew that Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI spoke out on environmental issues (4-6)?
3. St. Francis of Assisi has been called the patron saint of the environment. What is attractive about him (10-12)?
4. Pope Francis concludes his introduction with an appeal (13-16). What is your response?

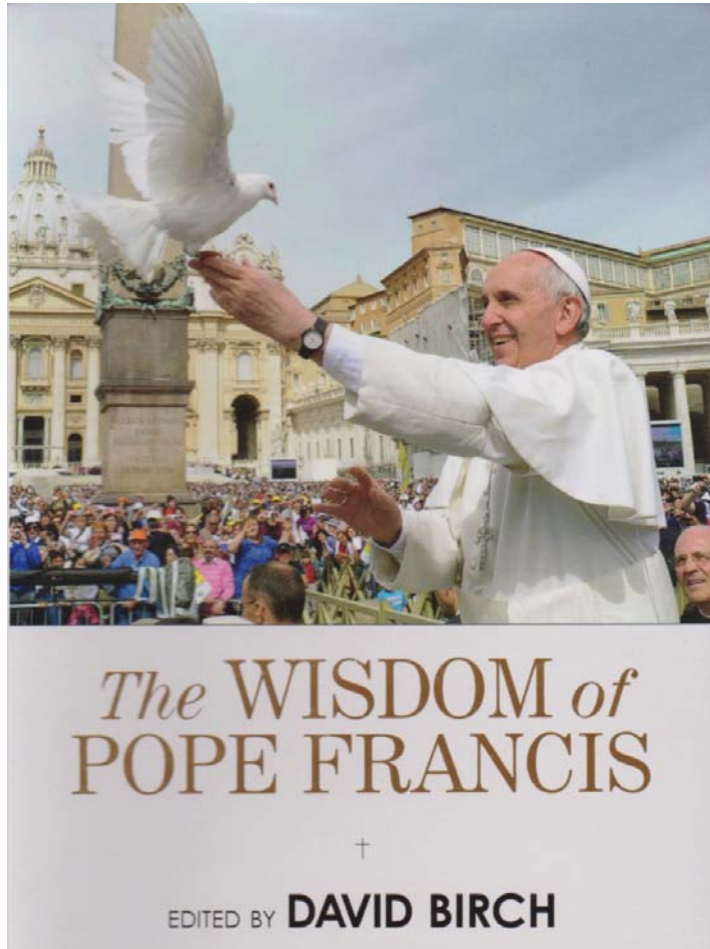
CHAPTER 1: WHAT IS HAPPENING TO OUR COMMON HOME

Pope Francis is a firm believer in the need to gather the facts in order to understand a problem. Chapter 1 presents the scientific consensus on climate change along with a description

of other threats to the environment, including threats to water supplies and biodiversity. He also looks at how environmental degradation has affected human life and society. Finally, he writes about the global inequality of the environmental crisis.

Questions:

1. How has pollution affected you or your family personally?
2. What does the pope mean by a “throwaway culture” (22)? Do you agree with him? Why?
3. What does the pope mean when he says, “The climate is a common good” (23)?
4. What is the evidence that climate change is happening and is caused by human activity (23)? What will be its effects?
5. The pope says “access to safe drinkable water is a basic and universal human right,” yet many poor people do not have access to it (27-31). Why is this? What can be done?
6. Why does the pope think biodiversity is important (32-42)? What are the threats to biodiversity?
7. What are the effects on people’s lives of environmental deterioration, current models of development, and the throwaway culture (43-47)?
8. Why does the pope believe “we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation” (48)?
9. Why does the pope think that simply reducing birth rates of the poor is not a just or adequate response to the problem of poverty or environmental degradation (50)?
10. “A true ‘ecological debt’ exists, particularly between the global north and south,” the pope writes (51). What does he mean?
11. Why does the pope think the response to the world's environmental crisis has been weak (53)?



CHAPTER 2: THE GOSPEL OF CREATION

The pope argues that faith convictions can motivate Christians to care for nature and for the most vulnerable of their brothers and sisters. He begins with the biblical account of creation and then meditates on the mystery of the universe, which he sees as a continuing revelation of the divine. “Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of his creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth.”

He concludes, "The earth is essentially a shared inheritance, whose fruits are meant to benefit everyone."

Questions:

1. According to Francis, the Bible teaches that the harmony between the creator, humanity, and creation was disrupted by our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations (66). What does it mean to presume to take the place of God?
2. How does Francis interpret Genesis 1:28, which grants humankind dominion over the earth (67)?
3. How does Francis use the Bible to support his view that the gift of the earth with its fruits belongs to everyone (71)?
4. In reflecting on the mystery of the universe, what does Francis mean by saying that "creation is of the order of love" (77)?
5. What is our role "in this universe, shaped by open and intercommunicating systems" where "we can discern countless forms of relationship and participation" (79)?
6. Francis says, "Creating a world in need of development, God in some way sought to limit himself in such a way that many of the things we think of as evils, dangers or sources of suffering, are in reality part of the pains of childbirth which he uses to draw us into the act of cooperation with the Creator" (80). How do you understand this?
7. If the ultimate purpose of other creatures is not to be found in us, how do we and other creatures fit into God's plan (83)?
8. Alongside revelation contained in Scripture, "there is a divine manifestation in the blaze of the sun and the fall of night" (85). How have you experienced God in creation?
9. What is your reaction to the hymn of St. Francis of Assisi (87)?
10. "The Christian tradition has never recognized the right to private property as absolute or inviolable, and has stressed the social purpose of all forms of private property" (93). When can the right to private property be subordinated to the common good?
11. What was the attitude of Jesus toward creation (96-100)?

CHAPTER 3: THE HUMAN ROOTS OF THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

"Although science and technology "can produce important means of improving the quality of human life," they have also "given those with the knowledge, and especially the economic resources to use them, an impressive dominance over the whole of humanity and the entire world." Francis says we are enthralled with a technocratic paradigm, which promises unlimited growth. But this paradigm "is based on the lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth's goods, and this leads to the planet being squeezed dry beyond every limit." Those supporting this paradigm show "no interest in more balanced levels of production, a better distribution of wealth, concern for the environment and the rights of future generations. Their behaviour shows that for them maximizing profits is enough."

Questions:

1. What is Francis' attitude toward technology? What does he mean by the technocratic paradigm (101, 106-114)?
2. How does Francis argue that "technological products are not neutral," (107, 114) that "the technocratic paradigm also tends to dominate economic and political life" (109)?
3. Francis says, "We are all too slow in developing economic institutions and social initiatives which can give the poor regular access to basic resources" (109). What does he mean? Why does this happen?

4. Francis asserts that “by itself the market cannot guarantee integral human development and social inclusion” (109). Why does he say this? Do you agree?
5. Francis argues, “To seek only a technical remedy to each environmental problem which comes up is to separate what is in reality interconnected and to mask the true and deepest problems of the global system” (111). What are the true and deepest problems of the global system in Francis' mind?
6. Francis calls for a broadened vision (112), “a bold cultural revolution” (114). What would that look like?
7. What does Francis mean by “modern anthropocentrism” (115)?
8. For Francis, “the present ecological crisis is one small sign of the ethical, cultural and spiritual crisis of modernity” (119). What does Francis mean by “practical relativism” (122) and cultural relativism (123)?
9. Why does Francis argue that any approach to integrated ecology must also protect employment (124)?
10. What does Francis see as the positive and negative aspects of biological technologies (130-136)?

CHAPTER 4: INTEGRAL ECOLOGY

Recognizing the reasons why a given area is polluted requires a study of the workings of society, its economy, its behavior, and the ways it grasps reality. We are not faced with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis that is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature.

Questions:

1. Why does Francis argue that “we are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental’ (139)?
2. What would it mean to have “an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature (139)”?
3. Why does Francis think it is important for us to understand ecosystems and our relationship to them (140)?
4. Why do “we urgently need a humanism capable of bringing together the different fields of knowledge, including economics, in the service of a more integral and integrating vision” (141)?
5. Francis speaks of an “integral ecology” that combines environmental (138-140), economic (141), social (142), and cultural (143) ecologies. What does that mean? How does it work?
6. How does the environment of our homes, workplace, and neighborhoods affect our quality of life (147)?
7. How does poverty, overcrowding, lack of open spaces, and poor housing affect the poor (149)? Why are these environmental issues?
8. What does Francis mean by “the common good” (156)?
9. What are the consequences of seeing the earth as a gift that we have freely received and must share with others and that also belongs to those who will follow us (159)?
10. “What is the purpose of our life in this world? Why are we here? What is the goal of our work and all our efforts? What need does the earth have of us” (160)?
11. Why does Francis say, “Doomsday predictions can no longer be met with irony or disdain” (161)?

12. What does Francis mean when he says, “An ethical and cultural decline ... has accompanied the deterioration of the environment” (162)?

CHAPTER 5: LINES OF APPROACH AND ACTION

What is to be done? Francis calls for dialogue on environmental policy in the international, national and local communities. This dialogue must include transparent decision-making so that the politics serve human fulfillment and not just economic interests. It also involves dialogue between religions and science working together for the common good.

Questions:

1. The word “dialogue” is repeated throughout this chapter. What does it mean and why does Francis think it is important?
2. Francis speaks of the need for a global consensus for confronting problems. Why is it needed, and how is it going to be achieved (164)?
3. Why does he think that “the post-industrial period may well be remembered as one of the most irresponsible in history” (165)?
4. What does Francis see as the successes and failures of the global response to environmental issues (166-169)?
5. What international strategies does Francis oppose in responding to the environmental crisis (170-171), and which does he support (172-172)?
6. Francis argues, “The same mindset which stands in the way of making radical decisions to reverse the trend of global warming also stands in the way of achieving the goal of eliminating poverty” (175). What is this mindset?
7. Given the real potential for a misuse of human abilities, Francis argues, “individual states can no longer ignore their responsibility for planning, coordination, oversight and enforcement within their respective borders” (177). What does that mean for Canada?
8. “The Church does not presume to settle scientific questions or to replace politics,” Francis says. “But I am concerned to encourage an honest and open debate so that particular interests or ideologies will not prejudice the common good” (188). What is the proper role of the church in political, economic and environmental issues?
9. Francis is critical of many business practices, has no faith in the marketplace to safeguard the environment, and sees a robust role for government in the regulation of the economy and protecting the environment. How will Canadians respond to this? How do you?
10. What does Francis mean when he says, “There is a need to change ‘models of global development’” (194)? What is wrong with the current models? What would the new models look like?
11. What are the separate roles of religion and science, and how can they dialogue and work together (199-201)?

CHAPTER 6: ECOLOGICAL EDUCATION AND SPIRITUALITY

We need to change and develop new convictions, attitudes and forms of life, including a new lifestyle. This requires not only individual conversion, but also community networks to solve the complex situation facing our world today. Essential to this is a spirituality that can motivate us to a more passionate concern for the protection of our world. Christian spirituality proposes a growth and fulfillment marked by moderation and the capacity to be happy with little. Love, overflowing with small gestures of mutual care, is also civic and political, and it makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world.

Questions:

1. Throughout this encyclical, Francis links concern for the poor with the environment. Why does he do that?
2. Francis is critical of a consumerist lifestyle (204). Why? What would a new lifestyle look like?
3. What could be the political and economic impact of a widespread change in lifestyles (206)?
4. What does Francis see as the role of environmental education in increasing awareness and changing habits (210-211)?
5. What does Francis mean by an ecological spirituality, and how can it motivate us to a passionate concern for the protection of our world (216)?
6. Self-improvement on the part of individuals will not by itself remedy the extremely complex situation we face today, according to Francis. What is the role for community networks? Governments?
7. What are the attitudes that foster a spirit of generous care (220-221)?
8. Granted all of the problems we face, what gives Francis joy and peace (222-227)?
9. Love must also be civic and political, according to Francis. "Social love moves us to devise larger strategies to halt environmental degradation and to encourage a 'culture of care' which permeates all of society." How can we encourage civic and political love in Canada?
10. Francis proposes that the natural world is integral to our sacramental and spiritual lives (233-242). How have you experienced this?
11. How is this encyclical going to change your life?

For additional reading on the encyclical, see "Francis: The Environmental Encyclical" at:
<http://ncrnews.org/documents/NCR%20Readers%20guide.pdf>

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