

THE TEXAS OIL PATCH, POPE FRANCIS AND *LAUDATO SI'*

Gregory Schweers

I AM A CHILD of the 'Texas Oil Patch'. For those outside the USA, this phrase may appear to be nothing more than a bit of American jargon, but the reality of my own roots gives me a perspective on Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato si'* which, I would suggest, permits me to view it in a way that few others can. Being from the Texas Oil Patch has undoubtedly coloured my reading of this papal text.

When I was growing up, in the 1950s and 1960s, my life revolved around the extraction, distillation and manufacture of petrochemical products. My father was a chemical engineer and manager of one of the largest petrochemical facilities in the south-western part of Texas, not too far from the border with Mexico. Unlike the vast majority of Americans, I knew exactly where carbon-based energy came from, how it was produced and, of course, what many of its toxic side effects were. Long before that most maligned US politician of the twentieth century, President Richard Nixon, created the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970, I was intimately aware of the 'down side' of petroleum production and an energy system based on non-renewable resources.

I grew up with divided sympathies: this industry created good jobs with high salaries, yet it fouled the air we breathed and the water we drank. It put food on my family's table and sent five children to university and then, later, on to postgraduate degrees; yet it also crippled or shortened the lives of many workers with whose children I played and went to school. Above all, this industry never seemed to accept the blame for industrial accidents, although it required a kind of loyalty from all those who came in contact with it. For eighteen years, I lived in this Alice-through-the-looking-glass world and thought little of it. Then, that wonderful scholarship letter from my university arrived in the mail, and I thought I had escaped the life that the double-edged reality of the Texas Oil Patch had given me. But, of



course, I was wrong. More than forty years on, the magnified effects of what went on in the 1960s and 1970s are ever more present today. My entire experience of living and working in the Texas Oil Patch was some kind of ‘judgment delayed’, but ultimately not averted.

Having seen the many sides of the petrochemical industry, I came to read *Laudato si’* with a strange mix of admiration and criticism: for me some things in it are spot on, while others widely miss the mark. I would like to address two aspects of the encyclical which strike me as particularly important because they turn the attentive reader away from what one might call the ‘expected answers’ towards the complex issues raised in the document.

Beginning with the first paragraph, Francis reminds us of something fundamental that the ecological argument often overlooks:

In the words of this beautiful canticle, Saint Francis of Assisi reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us. (n. 1)

Francis refrains from identifying his letter as an ‘ecological’ document *per se*, which I think is quite significant. Rather, he insists that the fundamental aspect of the global issues of climate change and environmental degradation is that they threaten that basic unit of human life: *the home*. We are collectively responsible for global problems that also enter the home of each and every human person. What Francis does in the very first sentence of the encyclical is radically to change the terms of the argument from those of climatological and ecological dangers to those of a personalism reminiscent of Henri Bergson’s writings, especially his 1907 book *Creative Evolution*. Bergson, like Pope Francis, sees in humanity a naturally creative impulse which gives it the ability to triumph in crisis, through what he calls an unconquerable *élan vital* (vital impulse).¹

¹ See Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, translated by Arthur Mitchell (New York: Henry Holt, 1911).

The importance of this starting point for the meaning and tenor of the argument is underlined by the fact that Francis uses the term 'home' or 'homes' more than 25 times in his text. While climate change and ecological distress seem to be the central issues in the familiar arguments of today, Francis shows where their real impact must be fully measured out: in the home life of humankind, especially the lives of the poor and the downtrodden. He masterfully redirects a sterile, political discussion back on to the plane of human suffering, poverty and distributive justice. In paragraph 13, he eloquently confirms this perspective:

The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change. The Creator does not abandon us; he never forsakes his loving plan or repents of having created us. Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home. Here I want to recognize, encourage and thank all those striving in countless ways to guarantee the protection of the home which we share.

As he does here and elsewhere in the encyclical, Francis wants to shift the *primary* terms of the argument away from both scientific causality and political calls to action—however important those are. Instead, he wants to affirm these observations within the prophetic context of his ministry: the home is the foundation of all human life, and ecological changes are eroding and ultimately destroying the place where the human family, faith and human love may prosper.

The second point that I see as a radically positive moment in Francis's encyclical comes at the very end of the work, in paragraph 246. Here, Francis offers two prayers, and in the second of these he writes:

Enlighten those who possess power and money that they may avoid the sin of indifference, that they may love the common good, advance the weak, and care for this world in which we live. The poor and the earth are crying out.

Here Francis does something that is seldom seen in the international forums where such discussions occur: he *personalises* the problems of the poor, by giving prophetic witness to all of those who have the money, the power and the control to effect change: to 'love the common good' and try to 'care for this world'. Although this may seem a rather obvious conclusion to draw from this long and detailed letter, what matters is that Francis

is calling on *individuals* to make things right for the poor, the earth and the home life of each human person. In so doing, he refuses to allow faceless multinational organizations to hide behind the duplicity of a vague and diffused corporate, global responsibility.

Francis makes it very clear that the individual conscience of every human person—the wealthy, the powerful, the poor, the politicians—has a *personal* responsibility to the ‘home’ of each global inhabitant. There can no longer be any shirking of that responsibility behind political, economic or social masks: each is implicated to the degree that he or she can *affect* the situation for the better and *effect* changes, locally and globally, that begin to restore the vision of ‘home life’ as normative. Thus, Francis’s letter brings us from a closing prayer at the end of his encyclical right back to its opening paragraph. *Laudato si’* has made the beginning; our task is to carry it to its end.

There are, however, two aspects of the encyclical that I find troubling. One is its overall tone, which often seems to be excessively pessimistic, if not doom-laden:

The social dimensions of global change include the effects of technological innovations on employment, social exclusion, an inequitable distribution and consumption of energy and other services, social breakdown, increased violence and a rise in new forms of social aggression, drug trafficking, growing drug use by young people, and the loss of identity. (n.46)

It also refers to ‘irrational confidence in progress and human abilities’ (n.19) and ‘the modern myth of unlimited material progress’ (n.78).

In 1820 the earth supported about 1 billion people with an average life expectancy of around thirty years. In our current situation, however, we find the earth populated with more than seven billion people, with an average lifespan of over seventy years. According to the economist Angus Maddison, between 1820 and 2003, world per caput income rose ‘nearly tenfold’.² Given this state of affairs, the encyclical does not seem to give due weight to the tremendous improvements that have taken place in the life of the average inhabitant of this planet. Of course, there are

² See James C. Riley, *Rising Life Expectancy: A Global History* (Cambridge: CUP, 2001), 1; ‘Life Expectancy’, available at http://www.who.int/gho/mortality_burden_disease/life_tables/situation_trends/en/; Angus Maddison, *Contours of the World Economy 1–2030 AD: Essays in Macro-Economic History* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), 352.

large and significant areas of poverty throughout the world, and in these places there is a quality of life that people in the developed world would find abhorrent. But the words and tone of *Laudato si'* take little account of the great advances that have been made, not only in Europe and North America but throughout the developing world. The 'catchphrase' that will probably be the most frequently quoted line from the entire encyclical (and which has already been tirelessly repeated) remains: 'The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth' (n.21).

My second concern arises from what I think are the inbuilt consequences of the Pope's plan to deal with these issues as a truly global concern. He often seems to have one eye on the political and scientific wrangling that has so bedevilled countless national and international conferences without the serious advancement of a goal or methodology which can be agreed upon by those involved. 'Interdependence obliges us' he writes 'to think of *one world with a common plan*' (n.164). This entire part of the encyclical has the feel of a 'position paper' rather than a teaching document: Francis enjoins us to be mindful of 'best practices' when developing a 'healthy politics' to tackle climate change (n.181).

Many writers have noted the prophetic and homiletic style that pervades *Laudato si'*. And certainly a world gone mad with consumerism is greatly in need both of a witness that is truly prophetic and an exhortation that, in the deepest sense of the word, is homiletic. And, yet, when one examines the longer history of the encyclical going back at least to Leo XIII, one can clearly discern that there is, above all, a *teaching tradition* found in papal encyclicals. In this document, Francis gives a profoundly pessimistic view of global capitalism, without providing us with the theologically analytical tools needed to understand *why* and *where* things have gone wrong. Where are the principles on which to base a critique that is not only coherent and cogent, but also persuasive in a manner heretofore not seen in the global discussions of ecological crisis?

Pope Francis has written an encyclical letter that is spiritually challenging in the best tradition of the Catholic prophetic voice, but weak if the reader should be looking for theological principles to guide politicians, scientists and the common believer in a quest for a planet that is whole, sustainable and nurturing of its seven billion inhabitants. As such, I fear that the public reactions we have already seen will lead to an increasing hardening of positions *vis-à-vis* his letter's message. This would be a tragedy. There is so much that is good and worthy of our collective

and individual reflections on this document, especially in its insights about the oneness of ecological, social, spiritual and economic concerns. There is, indeed, a seamless garment when Francis deals with these issues in *Laudato si'* but I fear that it will experience the fate of so many other 'prophetic' papal documents, such as *Humanae vitae*, *Populorum progressio*, *Laborem exercens* or *Centesimus annus*.

I began this reflection with an autobiographical note which might lead some readers to see my critique as ultimately a rejection of Pope Francis's message. On the contrary, what I fear is that too many encyclicals (including those just mentioned) end up on the historical ash heap after a short, intensive period of examination, commentary and criticism; they disappear leaving hardly a trace. During the summer of 2015 I returned to the heart of the Texas Oil Patch to see old friends and view the land where I was born: amazingly, the air was free of the noxious odours with which I grew up; the small streams of southern Texas had water flowing in them that was not the colour of drilling mud, and the newest technologies were being embraced, with caution, by local communities. When Pope Francis remembers that the earth is 'our home', this is not a quixotic attempt to turn back towards rural primitivism, but rather an urgent call to rescue both the powerful and the powerless from forces that could, indeed, destroy this gloriously blue planet!

Gregory Michael Schweers O.Cist. is a Cistercian monk of Our Lady of Dallas Abbey in Irving, Texas. His studies have included work at the University of Dallas, the Pontifical College of Sant'Anselmo in Rome, and the University of Texas. Father Gregory earned his BA in philosophy, *summa cum laude*, his MA in English Literature with a thesis on the Jesuit Recusant martyr Robert Southwell, and his MA in theology with a thesis on the twentieth-century Jesuit theologian Bernard J. F. Lonergan. After a sabbatical year in London studying the History of Art, he is now an adjunct instructor in English at North Lake College and teaches literature and art history at the Cistercian Preparatory School in Irving, Texas.