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A game-changer?

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REUTERS

A nun reads Pope Francis' new encyclical titled 'Laudato si' at the Vatican.

Is this the push the world needed, asks the writer, of the Pope's Encyclical on climate change.

Rarely has a global religious leader issued as clear an indictment of humanity's stewardship of the earth, as Pope Francis in his recent Encyclical Letter 'Care for Our Common Home'. Without mincing words, the Pope has identified multiple ecological, social, and economic crises, pointed to root causes, and listed changes needed towards a saner world. With the UN General Summit on the Sustainable Development Goals coming up in September, and the crucial climate summit in December, will this Encyclical push governments to take action to avert ecological catastrophe and widespread social misery?

As someone deeply suspicious of all established religions, I approached the Encyclical with scepticism. I must say however, that the Pope's palpable anguish, and his ability to call a spade a spade (well, for the most part), moved me. He starts with an unequivocal broadside on humanity's 'sinful' treatment of Mother Earth, and of itself. Multiple crises — pollution, climate, water scarcity, biodiversity loss, inequality, continuing poverty, disease, alienation (a "deep and melancholic dissatisfaction") — are stated with clarity.

Next, he trains a sharp eye on the causes: control over powerful technologies and economic structures in the hands of a few ("politics subject to technology and finance"), the 'deification' of the market and the "modern myth of unlimited material progress", iniquitous distribution, collective and individual selfishness, the decline of ethical and cultural values. The wasteful consumption patterns of the rich, and the unsustainable production patterns fuelling them, are repeatedly mentioned.

The Encyclical also repeatedly rejects the 'false ecology' of those who propose technological and market solutions to these problems (including carbon trading), or the narrow environmentalism in which the north dictates what the south should do. This should give some fodder to movements critical of the 'green growth' or 'green economy' approaches that are, unfortunately, at the centre of the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals draft document being negotiated by governments to be adopted in September.

Finally (leaving aside those parts addressed primarily to Christians), the Pope proposes a framework of 'integral ecology' to address the crises. Commendably, he tries to bring together environmental, social, economic, cultural and political elements in stressing 'radical' change. Dialogue and solutions have to be based on all knowledge systems, faith and reason, spiritualism/religion and science; happily, indigenous peoples are given central place as being "closest to the earth". New policies and ways of thinking, simpler lifestyles, widespread ecological education, rekindling relationships with nature and each other, redefining progress away from its sole focus on material wealth, respecting cultural diversity, local decision-making over the commons, governments made accountable by public pressure, reviving the precautionary principle, and a host of more specific actions — public transport, transparent and participatory environmental impact assessments, reducing

and recycling — are part of his prescriptions.

For the most part, the Encyclical Letter reads like an environmentalist's or social activist's manifesto and I have no doubt it will add a massive punch to the growing disquiet against today's dominant economic and political institutions. This is perhaps partly explained by the Pope's past involvement in land and worker movements in Latin America; the Vatican has also organised meetings with movement leaders and scientists in the run-up to the Encyclical.

By itself, though, the Encyclical cannot be a game-changer. This is partly because the forces controlling these institutions are far too powerful, and uncaring, to be swayed by a single voice, even that of the Pope. But it is also because of gaps in its structural analysis.

The Encyclical fights shy of clearly stating and (why not?) apologising for the use or misuse of Christianity (as indeed of all major religions) in the brutal colonisation of many peoples (especially indigenous) and ecological damage in many regions (which is not to deny that there has also been a positive role in other places). There is a general mention of how misunderstanding of "our own principles" could have led to engaging in "war, injustice and acts of violence", but nothing more explicit. The Encyclical does not mention capitalism as one of the key structural forces underlying global crises, even as it names Communism, totalitarian regimes, and corporations. It mentions the need to decrease growth in the rich parts of the world (Europe's de-growth movement should be happy!), to enable 'healthy growth' in the poorer parts, without addressing how such growth could suddenly become less predatory, iniquitous and unsustainable than it has been. A more fundamentally transformative agenda for well-being based on alternative economic and political worldviews (of which there are many in the world) would have been welcome.

Finally, its message of a 'God as an all-powerful Creator', of the world as a planned creation of 'God', and of the sin of abortion will make many deeply uncomfortable. Somewhere it hints at ethical principles appearing in many languages including religion; perhaps the Pope could have been as explicit as the Dalai Lama in *Beyond Religion* in respecting non-religious basis for ethical living. My feeling is that if the Encyclical had extended itself to these aspects, it could have been that much more powerful an ally to global social and ecological movements. Nevertheless, Pope Francis has gone well beyond any of his predecessors, and perhaps he will surprise us a few more times by progressive pronouncements along these lines.

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