



Frequently Asked Questions About the Papal Encyclical

Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home

1. WHAT IS AN ENCYCLICAL?

The word encyclical originally meant any circulating letter, like a flyer. However, in modern times it has become almost exclusively used to denote teachings from the Pope.

Comparing an encyclical to other kinds of official Roman Catholic documents is a good way to understand the significance of an encyclical. Usually when the pope makes a declaration of some article of faith or moral law it is given in the form of a **Papal Bull**, which is very formal and uses prescriptive and dogmatic language. These are rare in recent times. Then there are **Decrees**, which address a very particular problem requiring precise response and action. A third style of Papal documents are **Apostolic letters** and messages, which are characteristically pastoral, encouraging, and inspirational.

Encyclicals can have some features of all these categories but are generally longer; the thinking behind the statements is deeper and articulated more expansively. They are addressed usually to the whole church (a few exceptions have been addressed to bishops of particular nations) and it is understood that bishops will promulgate the teachings and make the encyclicals widely available. Nowadays all the encyclicals are posted on the Vatican website and other websites of Catholic organizations.

Encyclicals are exhortative in tone. They counsel and encourage and thus make clear that what is said is not to be taken lightly. They deal with complex social and moral issues and back up their claims with reference to the Bible and to Catholic tradition and doctrines. They also rely on the traditional significance of the teaching role of the Pope and the bishops as articulated at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).

While Encyclicals do not compel Catholics to believe and act in accordance with what is said, the expectation is that all Catholics (and it is hoped all people of good will) will use the teaching as guidance for their lifestyle and moral commitments. Encyclicals convey authoritative teaching, and often apply prudential judgment to concrete situations such as nuclear war or social issues. Catholics are called to consider these teachings as part of the exercise of conscience. For

theologians, both clerical and lay, relevant encyclicals have traditionally informed their scholarship and continue to do so. The title of an encyclical is the first few words of the document in Latin. *Laudato Si* is the first encyclical to begin with Italian and draws on a poem of St. Francis of Assisi.

2. HAS POPE FRANCIS WRITTEN ANY ENCYCLICALS BEFORE *LAUDATO SI*'?

Prior to *Laudato Si*', the only encyclical written by Pope Francis is *Lumen Fidei*, *The Light of Faith*, which was released June 29, 2013. However, much of that encyclical was written by his predecessor, Pope Benedict XIV. This document focused on the importance of reviving and strengthening faith in a modern, secular world.

3. WHAT TOPICS DOES THIS ENCYCLICAL CONTAIN?

Laudato Si' is the first encyclical in which the environment is the primary topic. Pope Francis connects topics of social justice and economic inequity together with a variety of issues related to ecology and the environment.

4. IS *LAUDATO SI*' ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE?

Laudato Si' discusses many issues, including climate change. The encyclical is about the common home of humanity, which includes all the community of life, namely ecosystems and biodiversity. There are many environmental and social crises that the Pope addresses in the encyclical, including pollution, extinction, water scarcity, inequality, poverty, and the climate crisis. Integrating multiple perspectives on those interconnected crises, *Laudato Si*' presents a holistic approach called *integral ecology*.

5. WHAT IS INTEGRAL ECOLOGY?

The term "integral ecology" is mentioned several times throughout the encyclical, and it is the title of the encyclical's fourth chapter. Ecology is the study of relationships between the organisms and environmental conditions. Integral ecology brings together multiple perspectives on those relationships, including perspectives from sciences, economics, culture, religion, and the

experiences of daily life. Its approach and lines of action are oriented around facilitating dialogue and transparent decision-making across multiple domains of society, from local to international.

Integral ecology recognizes connections between environmental destruction and unjust social systems. Alluding to the Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff, who wrote *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Orbis Books, 1997), the Pope says: “a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*“ (paragraph 49). This phrase became a key theme in the encyclical. Boff is among a variety of thinkers who were discussing integral ecology beginning in the 1990s, including Thomas Berry, who had a strong influence on him. More information about the history and theory of integral ecology can be found in *The Variety of Integral Ecologies: Nature, Culture, and Knowledge in the Planetary Era* (SUNY Press, 2017).

6. WHEN WAS *LAUDATO SI'* ISSUED?

This encyclical was issued in 2015. It is dated May 24, and it was first released on June 18 of that year. The release date intended to focus attention on the December 2015 UN Conference of the Parties (COP) meeting in Paris, which was a critical gathering for an international climate change agreement.

7. HOW DOES THE POPE’S CHOSEN NAME “FRANCIS” RELATE TO THE ENCYCLICAL?

Pope Francis chose as his name that of Saint Francis of Assisi (1181/2 – 1226), who was dedicated to the poor and founded the Franciscan Order to continue his work of service to poor and oppressed people. Saint Francis is also honored for his special respect for and closeness to nature, particularly birds and animals. He was named the patron saint of all who promote ecology by Pope John Paul II in 1979. Pope Francis declared in his inaugural address to the Church that he would be especially attentive to the ecological crises of our time.

8. WHAT DOES THE NAME OF THE ENCYCLICAL MEAN?

The words “Laudato Si’” are the first words of the encyclical. It means “praise be to you,” and comes from a poem written in Italian by St. Francis of Assisi: *Canticle of the Creatures* (also known as *The Canticle of the Sun*). In that poem, St. Francis praises God by praising God’s creation. The encyclical reflects the poem’s expression of humility, gratitude, love, and kinship in relation to all of God’s creatures.

9. HOW IS AN ENCYCLICAL GENERALLY RECEIVED BY THE CHURCH?

An encyclical is addressed directly to all members of the Church. It is considered a significant teaching of the authority of the Church through the Pope. Encyclicals therefore are intended to command the attention and respect of the faithful. This does not mean that there is no scholarly critique or that all Catholics will agree with or follow what is said. This is especially the case when a Pope uses the encyclical to speak on a particular current issue or crisis that is well known and affects many people. Examples in recent times are those addressing social justice or sexual morals.

10. ARE CATHOLIC SCHOOLS, SEMINARIES, AND UNIVERSITIES EXPECTED TO TEACH THIS?

Yes. It would be unusual for educators in Catholic schools, seminaries, and universities not to be aware of and study a recent encyclical. In the case of the social justice encyclicals, liberation theologians study them quite seriously.

It is expected that most Catholics would be somewhat aware of what Pope Francis writes on ecology, those whose area of research and teaching focuses on religion and ecology will pay careful attention to the encyclical. Given the increasing severity of environmental crises, as well as media attention to Pope Francis, it is predictable that *Laudato Si'* will continue to be the subject of conversation and study in many institutions for years to come.

11. HOW MANY ENCYCLICALS HAVE THERE BEEN IN THE LAST 150 YEARS?

Since 1854 there have been 240 encyclicals. However, the number of encyclicals written by more recent popes is less than the number written by earlier popes in this period. Pius XII (pope from 1939-1958) wrote 40 encyclicals and Leo XIII (1878-1903) wrote 87. John Paul II (1978-2005) wrote 14 and Benedict (2005-2013) only 3.

The reasons for these differences in numbers have to do with at least two factors:

- (1) The term encyclical has taken on a narrower meaning in recent times, so kinds of writings that were once called encyclicals are now named differently.
- (2) Recent Popes have more direct contact with Catholics around the world through different forms of media and through travel. Pope John Paul II was the first pope in recent times to travel outside the Vatican.

12. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE MOST IMPORTANT ENCYCLICALS AND WHY?

Among the encyclicals most widely known are:

Rerum Novarum, (Of New Things, Leo XIII, 1891). It is recognized as the source of modern Catholic social teaching. The new things referred to are the social changes of the time stemming from rapid industrialization and the responses from capitalism and Marxism. The encyclical sought to show a middle way, on the one hand upholding the right to private property and on the other promoting the rights of workers, in particular to a living wage.

Providentissimus Deus (On the Study of Holy Scripture, Leo XIII, 1893). This encyclical is often considered the ‘Magna Carta’ of modern biblical studies for Catholics. It took a strong stand against modernism and against a too liberal reading of the Bible, which would reduce it too narrowly to a source of moral teaching only. It also encouraged the reading of the Bible by Catholic laity.

Pacem in Terris (Peace on Earth, John XXIII, 1963). Issued on the heels of the Cuban missile crisis, this is one of the most cited encyclicals. It is at once a call for peace as well as for justice and human rights. It is considered by some to have supported those working for freedom and human rights in the Soviet controlled countries and thus instrumental in the eventual collapse of the Berlin Wall.

Populorum progressio (The Development of Peoples, Paul VI, 1967). This well-known and often cited document introduced the perspective of liberation theologians into official Catholic social teaching, including the now familiar ‘preferential option for the poor.’ It particularly influenced the development of liberation theology in South America as it was taken up by the Medellin conference of Bishops in their call for liberation from all oppressors, both foreign and domestic.

Redemptor Hominis (The Redeemer of Man (sic), John Paul II, 1979). Focused on the dignity and meaning of the human person, it was read as a confrontation with communism. Combined with this Pope’s visit to Poland shortly after the release of the encyclical, it is considered to have strengthened the Solidarity movement in Poland and the subsequent fall of communism.

Humani vitae (On Human Life, Paul VI, 1968). This is probably the most controversial of all the encyclicals in recent times. It laid out the Church’s stand against artificial contraception and led to furthering the divisiveness of the issue among Catholics.

13. HOW DID *RERUM NOVARUM* BECOME A MAJOR SOURCE OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHINGS ON JUSTICE AND EQUITY?

Pope Leo XIII issued a major call for social reform in the late 19th century in his encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*. He attempted to offer a balanced wisdom to many caught in the strife and turmoil that

were the fallout of rapid industrialization and the consequent changes of working conditions. When it was written, there were already lively social movements among Catholics attempting to ameliorate the conditions of the poor and to establish just relations between the rich and poor. Leo XXIII had been influenced by these movements, particularly the German Catholic social movement. So the climate was right for the reception of the encyclical.

The encyclical also gave practical directions. The most cited of those is the call for a just wage for workers and the creation of workers unions to protect the rights of the poor. It also argues for the protection of private property as a human right while at the same time speaking for the rights for all to land, food, air, and water. The encyclical supported the increase in Catholic Labor activities both as separate movements in Europe and increased involvement by Catholics in the wider union movement in North America. Many Catholic Labor Schools were established to teach Catholics not only about the social teaching of the church, but also the “know-how” necessary to procure worker rights.

While neither conservatives nor liberals were totally satisfied with the Pope’s stance, *Rerum Novarum* remains a critical source of Catholic social teaching to be expanded by other encyclicals on key anniversaries of its publication. Its boldness, relevance, and practicality of many of its insights most likely contributed to its popularity and endurance.

14. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE RELEVANT STATEMENTS ON THE ENVIRONMENT BY THE CHURCH?

In 1972, Pope Paul VI made the first extensive papal statement on the environment in his address to the Stockholm Conference on the Environment. It was entitled, *A Hospitable Earth for Future Generations*.

Pope John Paul II addressed the issue in two fairly well-known messages. The first was *The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility*, 1989, in which he referred to the environmental crisis as a moral issue. It was also the subject of his World Day for Peace Message in 1990, *Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all of Creation*. He also addressed the issue of environmental devastation in two of his encyclicals *Centessimus Annus* (1991—notably for the 100th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*) and *Evangelium Vitae* (1995). His focus was consistently on the moral duty of Catholics to care for the creation.

Near the end of his time as pope, Benedict XVI made several statements about the environment, probably due to the increased critical importance of the issue during his papacy. Here are a few examples:

In 2011, Pope Benedict addressed the countries assembled in Durban, South Africa for international climate negotiations. He emphasized the critical importance of acting responsibly on the issue ever mindful of the needs of the poorest peoples of the world and of future generations. In other addresses he referred to Saint Francis and spoke of nature as a sacred book revealing the beauty and

goodness of God. He also spoke on several occasions of the importance of food security in light of the growing gap between rich and poor.

One of the strongest statements by a pope to date was made by Benedict in an address to the Reichstag, Berlin, in 2011. The whole speech addressed ecological issues. “The importance of ecology,” he claimed, “is no longer disputed. We must listen to the language of nature and we must answer accordingly.” It is noteworthy that Benedict focused not only on the morality of the issue, but on the theology of creation, i.e. on creation as a source of revelation. In his World Day of Peace Message, he also called attention to the existence of environmental refugees and other emerging realities associated with climate change and spoke of the duty and responsibility of the Church to respond.

Besides statements from the popes, there are other Catholic Church responses. The Pontifical Academy of Science issued a report on climate change in 2011. It laid out in some detail many of the consequences of climate change around the world. It further called on all peoples to take responsibility for the global destruction of the environment and the effects of climate change. The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace issued a report on energy, justice, and peace in 2013 that called for an “ethical-moral sustainability” by which advanced nations should assist developing nations to access sustainable energy with an emphasis on renewable energy.

There have also been national Catholic statements on the environmental crisis from various conferences of Bishops. The following is only a sample. One of the earliest and most well-known is the statement by the Bishops of the Philippines in 1988, entitled *What is Happening to our Beautiful Land?* A statement called “A Cry for Land” was released the same year by the Guatemalan Bishops Conference. The United States National Conference of Bishops issued *Renewing the Earth* (1991) and *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good* (2001). The South African Catholic Bishops Conference Pastoral Statement on the Environmental Crisis was published in 1999; the Australian Catholic Bishops issued *A New Earth – The Environmental Challenge* (2002) and the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops published *A Pastoral Letter on the Christian Ecological Imperative* (2003). Besides National Conferences of Bishops, other groups such as Catholic Religious Orders of Priests, Brothers and Sisters have published their own statements, as have state and provincial bishops and individual bishops writing to their own dioceses. The global Bishops who met at COP 20 in Lima also issued a statement calling for new models of sustainable development and climate justice, as well as strong international agreements, for the sake of the poor and harmony with Creation (December 2014).

Several environmental statements from the Catholic Church have come out since *Laudato Si'* was issued. For instance, in 2015, shortly after the release of *Laudato Si'*, a statement was issued by His Eminence Cardinal Peter K. A. Turkson, the President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, with particular attention to the implications of the Pope’s encyclical for understanding and responding to the climate crisis. Cardinal Turkson released another statement on the occasion of the fourth anniversary of *Laudato Si'* in May 2019. In November of 2017, a workshop was held in Vatican City, organized by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, and the workshop proceedings led to the release of a Declaration of the Health of People, Health of Planet, and Our Responsibility: Climate Change, Air Pollution and Health. Massachusetts Bishops released a statement on climate change in 2019 (titled “Embracing *Laudato Si'*”).

[Go here for environmental statements from Christian groups.](#)

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