



The Seamless Garment of God's Creation

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In an article titled “The Flowers of Papa Francesco”¹ Sudheendra Kulkarni, one-time ideologue of BJP, made this insightful observation: “at a time when official India, after a long slumber of denial, has woken up to the harsh realities of poverty and wealth inequality brought to light by the Socioeconomic and Caste Census (SECC) earlier this month, I am pained to see that few prominent Hindu religious leaders have deemed it their duty to comment on it. Even though poor Hindus constitute the majority among the Indian poor, Hindu religious leaders are not very vocal about poverty in India, much less about global poverty. Have we ever heard the Ashok Singhal and Praveen Togadias of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) speak about poverty and the egregious wealth divide as evidence of unacceptable economic injustice that is against the basic teachings of Hinduism? No. Their priority, it seems, is to make India a ‘Hindu rashtra’, pursuing a divisive agenda that actually seeks to de-emphasise any anti-poverty agenda”.

From all accounts it is obvious that *Laudato Si* (hence forth referred to as LS) is very timely and challenging piece of

¹ (‘Outlook’ Aug 03, 2015; .

<http://www.outlookindia.com/printarticle.aspx?294917>)

Papal teaching. It is a game-changer in many ways. The fact that Pope Francis chose to write on the most vexing and challenging issue of our time is itself a powerful theological statement. Let us highlight some of the features that are significant from South Asian perspective; however this is no substitute to reading the text in full and relish 'Francis Effect'.

1) LS qualify this planet earth as our **'common home.'** This is unusual. Rather than talking about 'valley of tears of the banished children of Eve wandering on this earth' in search of the other world, LS makes bold to call this earth as our 'home'. It is God's creation, it is common habitat, and it is our home. A new respectful relationship is proposed with earth as our home. This is good news to all the indigenous people; it is an indictment of the powerful who plunder 'our home'.

2) Created by a loving Father, this world is a graced entity in every particle. There is the presence of the divine in every tiny element of this earth. Everything and everyone is inter-connected and inter-dependent; everything is suffused with the divine. Moving away from the Greco-Roman dualistic thinking which had influenced Christian thought far too long, *Laudato Si* sings a different tune: the divine is present in the earthly; **'that the divine and the human meet in the slightest detail in the seamless garment of God's creation**, in the last speck of dust of our planet'.

3) Concern for earth is essentially linked with **concern for the poor.** Eco-sensitivity is not leisure time activity of the elite, but a significant commitment towards the poor. When earth is plundered by the rich and the powerful, the poor, the women and children are the most affected. They live on the peripheries where the pollution and waste are dumped. Soon after becoming Pope in March 2013, he said, "Poverty in the world is a scandal. In a world where there is so much wealth, so many resources to feed everyone, it is unfathomable that there are so many hungry children, that there are so many children without an education." He was addressing a gathering of students from Albania, the

poorest country in Europe. “I tell all you young persons: don’t let yourselves be robbed of hope. Please, don’t let it be stolen from you. The worldly spirit, wealth, the spirit of vanity, arrogance, and pride...all these things steal hope. Poverty calls us to sow hope.”

5) *‘Laudato Si’* respects **the wisdom traditions** of the world and invites a new spiritual bonding with the entire humanity and the planet. The humankind journeys with the planet earth to the destined fulfillment of the creation and we are part of that journey.

6) *Laudato Si* talks about ‘**gospel of creation**’; creation is a gospel; it is good news for all and of all. The Encyclical is thus attempting to retrieve this patristic notion (creation as the first testament) for today through Francis of Assisi! To imbibe the spirit of *‘Laudato Si’* means learning to walk humbly and gently on the face of the earth.

7) LS deals with several “**aspects of the present ecological crisis**”: pollution, waste and the throw-away culture; climate as a common good; displacement and migration caused by environmental degradation; access to safe drinking water as a basic and universal human right; loss of bio-diversity; decline in the quality of human life and break-down of society; global inequality etc. LS has also denounced pesticides and genetically engineered (GE) crops, declaring “*the spread of these crops destroys the complex web of eco-systems, decreases diversity in production and affects the present and the future of regional economies*”. Bio-tech companies across the world will surely not be happy with this statement! Human crisis: Pope Francis warns us: ‘Time, my brothers and sisters, seems to be running out; we are not yet tearing one another apart, but we are tearing apart our common home. Today, the scientific community realizes what the poor have long told us: harm, perhaps irreversible harm, is being done to the ecosystem. The earth,

entire peoples and individual persons are being brutally punished. And behind all this pain, death and destruction there is the stench of what Basil of Caesarea – one of the first theologians of the Church – called “the dung of the devil”. An unfettered pursuit of money rules. This is the “dung of the devil”. The service of the common good is left behind. Once capital becomes an idol and guides people’s decisions, once greed for money presides over the entire socioeconomic system, it ruins society, it condemns and enslaves men and women, it destroys human fraternity, it sets people against one another and, as we clearly see, it even puts at risk our common home, sister and mother earth.’

LS delineates the various causes of the ecological crisis. It interrogates **the ‘autonomy of the marketplace’ as a new form of tyranny**, in which whirlwind of needless buying and spending resulting in compulsive consumerism, widespread corruption and self-serving tax evasion” are taken on. Pope Francis challenges the existing dogma that consumerism is god for growth. The fact that what is called ‘growth and development’ today is a morally, socially and ecologically cancerous growth. He is inviting the global community to take a pro-poor and low-carbon reorientation of the global economy. Thus LS has set the agenda for the crucial United Nations climate talks due in Paris this December, when world leaders will try to reach a new agreement aimed at reducing greenhouse gases. One of the specific anti-poverty measures Pope Francis has been demanding these days is that governments must accept the three Ls—labour, lodging, land—as the fundamental rights of the poor. (Cf. *Sudheendra Kulkarni*).

9) LS argues that ecological crisis is not merely a political, economic or scientific question. Religious or **spiritual perspective** has to be brought in for an integral approach to view creation as a holy gift from God and therefore to care for the earth. LS decries the model of development that is dominating our world today and proposes an outlook that is not

technocratic and controlled by market economy of extreme consumerism. Leonardo Boff's celebrated phrase that 'poverty is the antidote to poverty' seems to be validated by LS when it says 'less is more'.

Everything is related, we need one another. If politics is dominated by financial speculation, or if the economy is ruled solely by a technocratic and utilitarian paradigm concerned with maximum production, we will not grasp, much less resolve, the great problems of humanity. Cultural life has an important role to play in this regard, for it has to do not only with the development of the mind through the sciences and the creation of beauty through the arts, but also esteem for the local traditions of a people – this is also culture – which are so expressive of the milieu in which they arose and emerged, and the milieu which gives them meaning.(143) There is also need for an ethical and moral education which can cultivate solidarity and shared responsibility between individuals. We should acknowledge the specific role of the religions in the development of culture and the benefits which they can bring to society.

'Laudato Si' proposes a **new spirituality** in which saving water, maintaining eco-garden, caring for the poor of this world and manual labour, denouncing consumerism and the tyranny of the market forces are spiritual activities that the believers are urged to take on. It elicits a devotion to everything. LS lauds the sacramentality of everything. Reverence is to be practiced towards everything because it is suffused with the divine. LS implies an every-day spirituality that impinges on our everyday choices. It is based on the social teaching of the church on **Universal destination of goods**. The eco-habitat like the Amazon rain forests and the western ghats (**India**) are to be protected for the sustenance of the planet earth. **LS** corroborates

the Gandhian approach of Swadeshi of being rooted in the here and now and expanding in ever-widening circle.

10) Pope's encyclical is a wake-up call to all religions to discover the common ground on which they are standing and search for common solutions to the ecological crisis. The creation theology of Abrahamic faith and the deep empathy visible in the Eastern religions with the natural world could form a common platform to search for solutions to ecological crisis in spite of the alienation caused by the developmental agenda in the last 200 years. Francis' encyclical rightly draws our attention to the connection between the degradation of the planet – largely by rich over-consuming nations – and the effects of this on the poor. The secular world only has more economics, unsustainable consumption and quantitative easing to offer. Spiritual perspective of LS provides an integral approach. Let us embrace with tenderness all that exists! 🌱

Quotes from *Laudato Si'*

- “What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up? This question not only concerns the environment in isolation; the issue cannot be approached piecemeal.” (160)
- “Politics must not be subject to the economy, nor should the economy be subject to the dictates of an efficiency-driven paradigm of technocracy. Today, in view of the common good, there is urgent need for politics and economics to enter into a frank dialogue in the service of life, especially human life.” (189)