

## Global Problem, Individual Solutions? The Challenges of *Laudato Si*

Cynthia Nolan

*Our Holy Father Pope Francis has encouraged the entire world to care for the earth by protecting its beauty and gifts. Laudato Si was written in 2015, and we are perhaps even more challenged five years later with global environmental problems mostly because the solutions have gotten harder. China refuses to import foreign recyclables, and many developed nations do not have anywhere else to turn. So, what is the obligation of the individual to solve the global problems of pollution, waste, and degraded climate? Is the effort just as virtuous as the result?*

Our Holy Father Pope Francis wrote the encyclical letter *Laudato Si* in 2015. Its translation is: “Praise be to You.” He quotes the canticle written by St. Francis of Assisi to emphasize “care for our common home”—the subtitle of the encyclical. We have a common home given to us by God. Its beauty and usefulness are unsurpassed. These are gifts which God has entrusted to us: not only the earth as our home, but life itself. It is a moral obligation to care for our home, and we are obliged to protect its nature, water, diversity, climate, air, land, and life.<sup>1</sup>

Just two years after the encyclical’s publication, China gave notice to the World Trade Organization that it would no longer import foreign recyclable garbage. The ban went into effect at the end of 2017, and by the middle of 2019, many nations which depended on China to take away recyclable trash still have not solved their garbage problems. The result is a stockpile of household plastic and paper recyclables along with commercial waste like steel, wool, ash, cotton, and yarn.<sup>2</sup> Many cities in America do not know what to do with their recyclable trash. So, how do we follow Pope Francis’s encyclical when our recyclables are an unwanted commodity?

### GLOBAL PROBLEM

Pope Francis wrote *Laudato Si* not just for Catholics or the wealthy or even the poor. He particularly addresses young people and the sufferings of marginalized and excluded peoples around the world. If we do not think about the environmental crisis, we will not be able to “protect the home that we share.”<sup>3</sup> For Pope Francis, it is a universal problem with universal

solutions. Indeed, the encyclical mentions global problems and solutions forty-six times. In contrast, the Pope mentions individual problems and solutions but twenty-nine times, and state (or country) problems and solutions thirty-three times.

“All of us can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation, each according to his or her own culture, experience, involvements and talents.”<sup>4</sup> According to Pope Francis, creativity and generosity are key parts to the protection of our common areas. When states and people are consuming energy, resources, and other assets unequally, we are not integrated as a whole. This can result in social decline.<sup>5</sup> Remembering that the family is the basic cell of society, we know that humanity only progresses through real relationships.<sup>6</sup> In other words, cooperation is infectious. If we cooperate at an individual and family level, we are more likely to see local municipalities cooperate and then states cooperate at an international level.

## CHINESE RECYCLING

In 2016, China recycled half of the world’s waste plastic, paper, and metals.<sup>7</sup> China imported foreign garbage from 1992 to 2018 in order to extract the raw materials it needed for rapid industrial growth.<sup>8</sup> Rather than purchase virgin copper or lumber pulp, or create its own plastic or glass, China imported used products via recyclable trash from places like the United States, Canada, Japan, France, England, and Germany, to name only a few countries.<sup>9</sup>

The recycling process employed thousands of people and saved Chinese industry (mostly owned by the state) millions of dollars. It also solved a problem for foreign countries: what to do with recyclables? The arrangement benefitted the states which did not have the capacity to recycle their own garbage and encouraged growth in China. In the summer of 2017, China decided to put a stop to the imports.

China essentially blocked fifty-six types of foreign solid waste by demanding an impurity level of .05 percent. This level is unachievable for most domestic operations.<sup>10</sup> Recycling is expensive to process, and many people do not know the rules so that the effort to clean plastic (for example) goes to waste if one or two bottles that aren’t clean are thrown in too.

## LEVELS OF ANALYSIS

So, should we continue to recycle? What is the relationship between recycling in the United States and environmental life worldwide? According to Pope Francis, the planet is a common homeland for all of humanity, and all people—all states and countries—must be aware of the negative effects

of their lifestyles, especially the consumer “throwaway” culture.<sup>11</sup> Even if technology can be harnessed to solve the problem of waste, the health of an individual can be irreversibly affected. Indeed, health is a common concern because it is part of daily experience, and Pope Francis argues that the solution has to come from individuals working together.

Even if the problem is global and the effects are individual, Pope Francis argues that the solution—protection of biodiversity, answers to desertification, and solutions to climate change—requires states to consider the “global common good” rather than self-interest.<sup>12</sup> When individuals approach their lives unselfishly, they will work for a solution together.

Local people must work “from within their proper culture.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, there cannot be a one-size-fits-all solution; what works for the developed North will not work for the undeveloped South. Wealthier states should not exploit poorer states by demanding uneven solutions, that is, requiring less sacrifice from wealthier states.

We can imagine that there are some issues that must be answered at each level: international, state, and individual. Some functions like the economy or social injustices or public responsibilities must be addressed by the state. The next question to answer, though, is at what level is environmental degradation solved?

Pope Francis discusses many levels of analysis in *Laudato Si*. He describes environmental problems at the international level: rising of the seas, global warming, global air pollution, global ocean pollution, overuse of resources, desertification, and deforestation. There are also problems at the state level: an increase in mega cities, poor housing, and lack of water. At the individual level, Pope Francis identifies extreme consumerism, utilitarianism, greed and corruption, and the disposable culture.

Overall, the environmental problems are exacerbated by lack of development (at the international level), unequal wealth distribution (at the state level), and a decrease in social connections (at the individual level). Put it together, and you can see two potential extreme reactions for an individual: a lack of concern for the environment (with the belief that technology will solve all problems) OR an over concern for the environment (in which mother earth replaces Our Holy Mother, Mary). Neither will help to solve our problems.

## CLIMATE CHANGE

The earth’s climate changes, and it has changed through specific cycles in history with some warmer and cooler trends, including some cycles of glacial ice or retreat. In the last 650,000 years, there have been seven cycles of ice advance and retreat. About 7,000 years ago, the last ice age

ended, beginning the modern era as we know it. The entire climate system is in a warming trend right now.<sup>14</sup> Temperatures are projected to rise another 3 to 7 degrees Fahrenheit over the next 100 years.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, these projections are highly controversial. There is a strong, vocal objection to the certainty with which these numbers are proclaimed, and Pope Francis does not wade into this controversy in *Laudato Si*. He accepts the projections as fact and reminds the reader of climate problems and issues in pollution, sustainable development, and greenhouse gases, to name but a few of the details.

This data is measured at the global or system level. Pope Francis emphasizes our duty to protect our home with creativity and generosity. He calls for a new lifestyle for individuals, deemphasizing needless buying and spending. “A change in healthy lifestyle could bring healthy pressure to bear on those who wield political, economic, and social power.”<sup>16</sup> Would a change in individual lifestyle affect the global problems that Pope Francis describes?

## SOLUTIONS AND DEVELOPMENT

In the case of the environment, we have a global issue that cannot be solved by one person or even a few people. It requires a critical mass of people working very hard to solve the problem. As Pope Francis argues, a mass movement in lifestyle change is necessary.

The Pope acknowledges, too, how sensitive is the issue. The cause of global warming may be extensive consumption of resources causing air pollution that reduces the ozone layer and warms the planet, but it may not be. The common argument goes that the states that benefited from the industrial revolution and developed their way out of poverty (especially in the last fifty years) may have caused the warming (although again, some dispute this).

Regardless of the cause or the benefit, the data shows that in the twenty-first century, there is an unequal distribution of wealth on the planet.<sup>17</sup> The result of decades of unequal income distribution is that some states are more developed than others. Thus, to ask the undeveloped states to decrease their industrial production at the same level as the developed states throws the solution into a free-rider problem; who will take on the responsibility to solve this global problem? Developed states in the twenty-first century will not want to devolve while underdeveloped states will want to keep moving forward no matter the cost to the environment. It appears to be a system level problem with a system level or perhaps state level solution despite Pope Francis’s protestations to the contrary.

## CONCLUSIONS

At its heart, Pope Francis's argument comes down to one conclusion: If you believe that every man is created in God's image, then you will offer even the smallest of sacrifices for your fellow man. Even if there is no certainty that your sacrifices will result in a material or spiritual improvement of your fellow man's life, it is your obligation to try. Thus, the global problem may (admittedly) not be solved at the individual level, but without the demand for states to respect human dignity, it will not happen at all.

Pope Francis emphasizes a global problem with a wide variety of descriptions, consequences, and complications. The overall term that he uses—environmental degradation—covers a significant number of factors and increased lifestyle problems, including housing, access to water, air pollution, disease, and landfills exceeding capacity.

It is not rational to make a decision that costs more than the benefit it provides. Without a specific way to measure costs (which Pope Francis does not give us), there is no incentive to recycle beyond the generalized one that he gives: to love our neighbor.

The next way to measure the incentive to recycle would be the likelihood that recycling helps to solve the international problems that Pope Francis identifies. According to the majority of websites on recycling (see [myzerowaste.com](http://myzerowaste.com), [conserve-energy-future.com](http://conserve-energy-future.com), and [earthsfriends.com](http://earthsfriends.com) just to name a few), participation in recycling will reduce energy consumption (by providing cheaper, recycled materials for manufacturing) and thus reduce greenhouse gases. But none of these effects will occur without a demand for recycled products. If the Chinese are no longer importing foreign recyclables, it is difficult to see an immediate solution. The municipal recycling centers in the US may find buyers for their tons of paper or plastics, but that has not happened yet. In the meantime, recycling continues without a market for it.

Can international cooperation solve the recycling/garbage problem? One of the most popular and public solutions to worldwide garbage is the beach cleanups that we see in so many commercials. NGOs like Surfrider Foundation and the Ocean Conservancy publicize their efforts, and it looks very effective. However, many experts in waste management will tell you that the solution to pollution on beaches is better waste management, not recycling in the United States.<sup>18</sup> In other words, international problems of environmental degradation CAN be resolved with local solutions, but maybe not solutions from thousands of miles away. Overall, there is no strong connection between the local and the international levels.

Pope Francis's *Laudato Si* emphasizes an attitude of thankfulness, appreciation, and a low impact lifestyle. Unless and until someone finds a creative solution to China's refusal to import our local garbage, we will have to rely on global virtue to solve our global problems. Perhaps we need an entrepreneur—a bold and visionary solution—to remedy our problems with plastics, paper, and cardboard recycling. Remember, Pope Francis's categories of problems and solutions show us that the virtue of the solution is not actually related to RESULTS, but to the EFFORT itself.

### Notes

1. Francis, *Laudato Si*, ¶¶3–9.
2. Albeck-Ripka, "Your Recycling Gets Recycled, Right?"
3. Francis, *Laudato Si*, ¶13.
4. Ibid., ¶14.
5. Ibid., ¶¶45–47.
6. Ibid., ¶157.
7. Mosbergen, "China No Longer Wants Your Trash."
8. Couronne, "Trash Piles Up in US as China Closes Door to Recyclables."
9. Albeck-Ripka, "Your Recycling Gets Recycled, Right?"
10. Goldstein, "Cities Scramble to Rewrite Rules on Recycling After China Stops Taking 'Foreign Garbage.'"
11. Francis, *Laudato Si*, ¶22.
12. Ibid., ¶169.
13. Ibid., ¶144.
14. National Aeronautics and Space Administration, "Global Climate Change."
15. University Corporation for Atmospheric Research, "Predictions of Future Global Climate."
16. Francis, *Laudato Si*, ¶206.
17. Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First*.
18. Kiessling, Salas, Mutafoğlu, and Thiel, "Who Cares about Dirty Beaches?"

### References

Albeck-Ripka, Livia. "Your Recycling Gets Recycled, Right? Maybe, or Maybe Not." *The New York Times* (May 29, 2018). Accessed August 25, 2018, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/29/climate/recycling-landfills-plastic-papers.html>.

- Couronne, Ivan. "Trash Piles Up in US as China Closes Door to Recyclables." *Science X* (July 12, 2018). Accessed August 25, 2018, at <https://phys.org/news/2018-07-trash-piles-china-door-recycling.html>.
- Francis. *Laudato Si*. Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2015. Accessed December 19, 2019, at [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html).
- Goldstein, David. "Cities Scramble to Rewrite Rules on Recycling After China Stops Taking 'Foreign Garbage.'" *McClatchy Washington Bureau* (July 1, 2018). Accessed August 25, 2018, at <https://www.mcclatchydc.com/latest-news/article213532024.html>.
- Kiessling, Tim, Sonia Salas, Konar Mutafoğlu, and Martin Thiel. "Who Cares about Dirty Beaches? Evaluating Environmental Awareness and Action on Coastal Litter in Chile." *Ocean and Coastal Management* 137 (March 2017): 82–95.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ocecoaman.2016.11.029>
- Mosbergen, Dominique. "China No Longer Wants Your Trash. Here's Why That's Potentially Disastrous." *Huffington Post* (January 24, 2018). Accessed August 25, 2018, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/china-recycling-waste-ban\\_us\\_5a684285e4b0dc592a0dd7b9](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/china-recycling-waste-ban_us_5a684285e4b0dc592a0dd7b9).
- National Aeronautics and Space Administration. "Global Climate Change: Vital Signs of the Planet: Facts: Evidence" (December 13, 2019). Accessed December 19, 2019, at <https://climate.nasa.gov/evidence/>.
- Piketty, Thomas. *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014.  
<https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674369542>
- University Corporation for Atmospheric Research. "Predictions of Future Global Climate." Center for Science Education: National Center for Atmospheric Research (2011). Accessed December 19, 2019, at <https://scied.ucar.edu/longcontent/predictions-future-global-climate>.