

## A Monastic Response to *Laudato Si'*

Last summer the Monastic Institute at Collegeville, Minnesota, which we attended, looked at Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'* and possible monastic responses. Here in White Lake we held a few classes of our own to discuss *Laudato Si'* and related issues.

### What is *Laudato Si'* about?

Though it has been identified as an “environmental” text this is only half the story. Simply put, the issues at hand are peace and justice, and the shape of the future we are creating for our descendants and the entire earth by the systems at play in the present. As EB White wrote over fifty years ago of nuclear threats to global peace and human and environmental health, “what we are really doing is fighting a war that uses the lives of future individuals.” In respect to current environmental issues it is also a war that uses the lives of the poorest in the present — and perpetuates poverty for others who are usually not “us” — for the present advantage of many of the rest of us.

None of this is new; leaving aside for the present what is incomplete or unquestioned in *Laudato Si'* (an Anglican religious response two years ago, in typical Anglican fashion, began with identifying such points and arguing them out!) our aim was to look at the essential points of this document and work out a practical response.

For Christians and other people of faith, *Laudato Si'* particularly asks us to live our faith with greater awareness of our place in creation and as members of one human family, in a way that embraces the entire creation and generations to come. In effect, we are asked to change our lifestyles to make a livable future possible for the entire planet: we are tasked with building new models of society, of production, and of consumption. *Laudato Si'* also

considers certain ethical implications, in particular allocation of water, food distribution, and just working conditions. There are four main themes:

- “Everything is connected to everything else.”
- “The environmental crisis is fundamentally a spiritual crisis.”
- “Technical solutions are not enough; we need new and different lifestyles.”
- “We need to love the earth as a sister, as we do our own homes.”

The fact that we live in a country where we can choose to change our models, and not necessarily have change forced on us, means we are also responsible for being aware of the systems we operate within. For

to be unaware of these systems is to be complicit in and to accept whatever systems come along, including those instigated by uncontrollable environmental changes.

### How can we respond?

*Laudato Si'* notes that because the challenge is so complex, “strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combatting poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature” (§139). This challenge is compounded by our being not simply “rational” but emotional beings. Theologian Richard W Miller noted “According to Kari Marie Norgaard’s influential work in social psychology...it is the feeling of powerlessness in the face of the overwhelming truth of climate change that generates angst, which ‘we are profoundly motivated to avoid.’ It is this recoiling from angst that influences our retreat into lived climate denial and ‘essentially makes climate change unthinkable.’ Since the feeling of powerlessness generates lived denial, the way out of lived denial is empowerment.”

You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.

**Buckminster Fuller**

The very first choice is awareness. We are not powerless, nor are we irreparably stuck in the systems we use. We can ask ourselves where we have power to effect change, and act on that power. The necessity to take up a “new and different lifestyle” for the sake both of our own future and that of others involves starting to do the usual things differently — to think about the systems we use (to obtain water, to obtain food, fuels and resources, how the needs of the poor are met or not met where we live) and consciously choose to take power to act.

At the Monastic Institute, we identified three levels of action: small and personal (what I can do personally), medium and communal (what my local community does and how I partake in that), and large and expansive (what can be done individually or corporately to provoke change on a larger scale).

These are actions motivated by our faith — specifically, that we are inseparably part of creation, and that the work of contributing to God’s kingdom involves building and nurturing community on every possible level. On a human level, such care for each other is perhaps the single most important thing any of us can choose to do.

### What can a monastic response be?

A specifically monastic response would be one that is shaped by the mission of a monastery: people called to live the gospel together, and contribute to the kingdom of God, in a particular residential community committed to prophetic witness.

As a community with resources, however few, we are among those who are able to make more choices about changing our lifestyle. This privilege brings with it the responsibility of helping make empowerment possible for those who are most affected by economic, environmental, and social injustice. The prophetic witness of any monastery is



tied up in how much it lives the gospel of peace and extends that fellowship to all, one reason why those in monastic communities are called “brother” and “sister.” If we wish to have any sort of solidarity with those who are suffering from the systems we depend on, one question we must keep before us, even in our most straitened circumstances is: “are we living too comfortably?” — that is to say, “complacently?”

One way we chose to further our witness was by a community examination of what we purchase and how this affects others: asking questions about our regular expenses, recycling, energy and water use, awareness of the excluded where we live, awareness of the human cost of the products we purchase, and awareness of policies in our state and nation. From this, we were able to make choices: what is the very next thing we can do? Through these choices we form new patterns of choice.

Ultimately a monastery can show that it is possible to live with greater simplicity, generosity, and courtesy, that a “simpler” life is realistic, fulfilling, and can be maintained indefinitely. A monastic response to *Laudato Si’* may be as much about deepening our commitment and witness as intentional and prophetic communities as about specific responses we as communities can make. If we are people of faith, then we can respond in ways of faith and hope, trusting that just as every person matters, so does every effort.

The most important message I can leave you is this: if you want to do something to help the people of Africa, change your lifestyle, influence your politicians, and let us make fighting climate change the highest priority on all of our agendas. Without much more action, the future is bleak, very bleak indeed. We stand at the eleventh hour.

**Thabo Makgoba**  
Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town