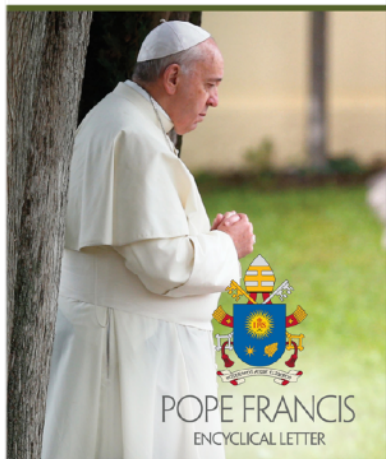


ON CARE FOR OUR  
COMMON HOME  
LAUDATO SI'



## LAUDATO SI' WEEK 16 to 24 May 2020

Pope Francis has invited Catholic communities around the world to celebrate *Laudato Si'* Week from 16 to 24 May 2020. "What kind of world do we want to leave to those who will come after us, to children who are growing up?" he asks. Motivated by this question, he invites the faithful to participate in *Laudato Si'* Week. "It is a global campaign on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of the encyclical letter *Laudato Si': On care for our common home*," he explains. "The cry of the earth and the cry of the poor cannot continue. Let's take care of creation, a gift of our good Creator God."

This document is a reflection for *Laudato Si'* Week. It is written with mindfulness of the corona virus pandemic that is affecting the world at this time, as well as mindfulness of the plight of animals who are relentlessly commodified by human beings. This commodification of God's creatures is the source of many of the world's pandemics.

### A twelve-year-old's Lenten challenge to Pope Francis

In February last year, Genesis Butler from Long Beach, California, twelve-years-old at the time, wrote a letter to Pope Francis, asking him to adopt a plant-based diet and avoid all foods or products from animals for Lent. "I write to you today with the utmost respect and appreciation for your speaking out on climate change, habitat loss, and pollution, and for reminding the world that Earth is a home we all share," she wrote. "In your encyclical letter, *Laudato Si'*, you stated that every effort to protect and improve our world will involve changes in lifestyle, production, and consumption. I agree with all my heart and seek your support in tackling one of the largest underlying causes of the problems we face: animal agriculture."



Genesis Butler's effort to have Francis try out a plant-based diet was backed by the Million Dollar Vegan campaign, an organisation that addresses climate change through food choices. It also raises awareness about how what we eat is connected to world hunger, deforestation, and species loss. The campaign offered to donate \$1 million to a charity of Francis' choice if he took up Genesis' challenge.

Butler, a great-grand-niece of Cesar Chavez, an American labour leader and civil rights activist, citing a report from the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organisation, pointed to the large amount of climate-warming greenhouse gas emissions that animal agriculture produces. She also described the land, health and food security benefits that can come with plant-based diets.

Genesis received a reply from Msgr Paolo Borgia, an official with the Vatican's Secretariat of State. "His Holiness Pope Francis has received your letter, and he has asked me to thank you," the letter stated. "He appreciates the concerns about care for the world, our common home, which prompted you to write to him. The Holy Father will remember you in his prayers, and he sends you his blessing." The letter declined to say anything about her request.

Pope Francis expressed his intention in *Laudato Si'* to enter into dialogue with all people about our common home. It is a pity that he chose not to enter into dialogue with Genesis Butler.

### A turning point in the Church's response to environmental degradation

Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'* brought the Catholic Church into the realm of environmental concern. Contributing substantially towards ecological consciousness, *Laudato Si'* came at a time when global concern about the Earth's degradation, in particular by climate change, was intensifying. There had never before been an entire encyclical devoted to the environment.

*Laudato Si'* sees humanity's relationship with the natural environment as an integral part of a greater whole that includes the social, cultural, political and spiritual spheres. Aware that there are strong views to the contrary, Pope Francis courageously declares in the encyclical that global warming is mostly the result of human activity. After accepting the best

scientific research available on the environmental debate, *Laudato Si'* builds on it by adding the spiritual perspective that understands creation as a sacred gift from God to be revered by all people. *Laudato Si'* challenges an unthinking reliance on market forces that welcomes any technological, scientific or industrial advancement without considering its potential harmful effect on the environment. Technological development, beneficial as it often is, needs to be accompanied by development in human responsibility, values and conscience. *Laudato Si'* points out furthermore that the worse impacts of climate change are felt by the poor in developing countries.

Francis calls for dialogue in the international community, with enforceable international agreements, and for dialogue for new national and local policies. He invites science to dialogue with religion, for life cannot be totally explained by the sciences. Religious thought fosters reflection on the mystery of the universe, on the virtues which make it possible for us to live in harmony. He calls for dialogue with indigenous peoples, especially when large agricultural or mining projects affecting their land are proposed. For them, land is not a commodity but a sacred space where their ancestors rest. They have a deep love for the land and know best how to care for it.



## Enthusiastic response

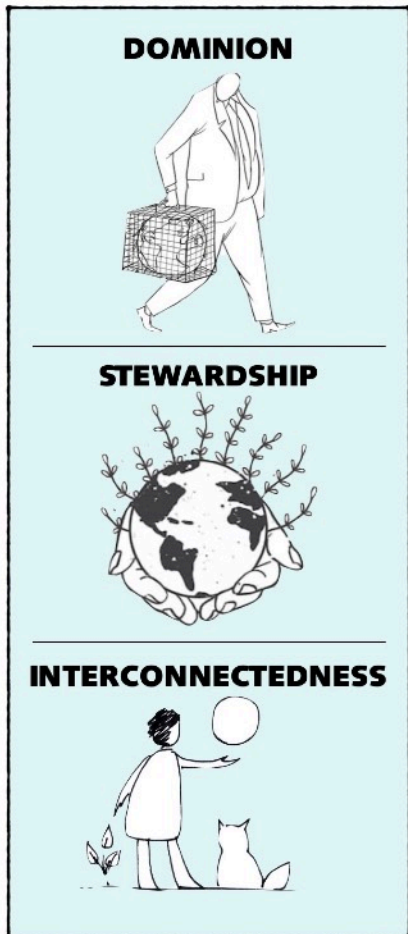
Catholics generally have responded enthusiastically to *Laudato Si'*. Hundreds of parish groups around the world have studied it. Many have created “green teams” that have replaced all lighting in the parish with LED lighting, installed solar panels, established rain gardens to mitigate storm water runoff, eliminated the use of plastic materials as far as possible, and placed recycling bins at all their meeting spaces. The *Laudato Si'* animator programme of the Global Catholic Climate Movement has trained 500 people in 60 countries to

mobilise local advocacy efforts. The movement is lay-led, community-based and action-oriented. Several African countries have organised around the encyclical to move away from fossil fuels and forests as energy sources, and adopt solar technology instead.



## But there are shortcomings ...

After five years of the encyclical, various shortcomings of *Laudato Si'* are becoming apparent. Some of these were brought starkly into focus by the challenge of Genesis Butler.



## How do human beings relate to the rest of creation?

*Laudato Si'* talks a lot about **the relationship of human beings to the rest of creation**. Historically, this relationship has been understood in different ways. There is the traditional anthropocentric **dominion paradigm**, taught by the likes of Augustine and Aquinas, that asserts the superiority of human beings over the rest of creation. Only human beings have reason; animals have worth only inasmuch as they are there for our use. The **stewardship paradigm**, currently popular in Christian circles but criticised by others as “dominion lite,” holds that God has entrusted human beings with the responsibility of caring for God’s creation as stewards or guardians. The **interconnectedness paradigm**, looked upon warily by the Magisterium of the Church lest nature be divinised at the cost of the singular dignity of the human person, holds that human beings do not stand above or apart from other living organisms but are part of a vast ecological community of interdependent life forms all composed of the same elements and all endowed with sacredness.

*Laudato Si'* moves amongst these different paradigms in rather a “have your cake and eat it too” kind of way – wanting several things at the same time without recognising that they may not always be in harmony with one another. Pope Francis retains the traditional doctrine of human beings made in God’s image and given dominion over the earth, but admits that distortions of this position have led to the exploitation of nature. He forcefully rejects “absolute domination” over other creatures by human beings, arguing that dominion means “responsible stewardship.” He also gives some affirmation of the notion that everything is interconnected and related, observing that “a good part of our genetic code is shared by many living beings” (§138). “In our time,” he states, “the Church does not simply state that other creatures are completely subordinated to the good of human beings, as if they have no worth in themselves and can be treated as we wish.” He refers to the teaching of the German bishops that, in regard to other creatures, “we can speak of the priority of being over that of being useful” (§69). This departure from the strict interpretation of the dominion paradigm as taught in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* would not be welcomed by all.





*Weaver birds build intricate nests*

## THE DOMINION PARADIGM IS BEING CALLED INTO QUESTION

A constantly growing body of research is revealing the extraordinary abilities of animals. Often dismissed as dumb brutes without reason, mammals, birds and certain other creatures such as octopuses are being shown to possess consciousness, reasoning powers, complex social behaviour, emotions and self-awareness. They experience mental states that can be positive or negative for them. From the olfactory abilities of dogs who can detect cancer in humans, to the pin-sharp vision of raptors, to dolphins' and bats' use of sonar echo-location, to birds speeding through webs of branches without so much as grazing a wing tip, to insects' capacity to see

ultraviolet light, the capacities and behaviours of animals are challenging human beings' alleged superiority in all things. Chimpanzees, elephants and dolphins are capable of empathy and compassion. There is a possibility that some animals may even have a rudimentary morality and therefore, it could be argued, even a form of divine image-bearing suited to their particular species. Animals are breaking out of the limits within which the dominion paradigm has tried to confine them!

*Beavers are great engineers  
Here they build a dam*



## The terror and dread of animals

Dominion theology appeals to the mandate given in Genesis to human beings to "have dominion" over the earth (1:28), to "till it and keep it" (2:15). Usually overlooked but often pointed out by those who hold to the interconnectedness paradigm, is that the mandate specifically excludes killing animals for food (in 1:29 and 2:9 and 16). Only in the post-flood world, as a concession to human weakness, does God relent and allow humans to kill animals for food (9:1-6). But this comes at a great and very terrible price. The harmony between humans and animals will be destroyed, and the human-animal relationship will henceforth be characterised by enmity. Human beings will be the terror and dread of animals.



*Male chicks, useless to the egg industry, are culled by the hundreds of thousands, either by suffocation or maceration*

## Animal agriculture today

Now, in our times, all this has escalated into what the twelve-year-old Genesis Butler hoped Francis' Lenten fast would bring to the world's attention: animal agriculture. Animal agriculture includes the meat industry, with its factory farms and abattoirs; the dairy industry, which keeps cows virtually continuously pregnant and forces them to produce ten times more milk than they would produce naturally by manipulation of their food and hormones; the egg industry, which confines battery hens all their lives in tiny wire cages; and the fishing industry where overfishing is bringing fish populations to the point of collapse. We may wonder how such treatment of animals brutalises the psyche of human beings. Furthermore, animal agriculture has severe ramifications for the environment and for climate change. These include greenhouse gas

emissions, rainforest destruction, species extinction, ocean dead-zones, water pollution and habitat destruction. Animal agriculture is also a justice issue, for if the breeding of billions of animals to provide for meat for the well-off was ended or curtailed, the food grown to feed "livestock" could be diverted to feed the billion poor people in the world who go hungry every day.

## Wet markets and bushmeat markets – ideal for the spread of pathogens

Animal agriculture includes the wet markets of Asia and the bushmeat markets of Africa. In the former, dozens of animal species – cats, civets, bears, snakes, bats, lizards, chickens, ducks, rats, fish, pangolins, salamanders, ostriches, porcupines, among them – are crammed into cages so tiny they can barely move. They are slaughtered for customers on demand. The cages are stacked one on top of another in unsanitary conditions. Animals are left to lie in one another's excrement; butchered meat hangs in the open air. The animals are severely stressed. They are surrounded by the sights, sounds and







smells of death. The stress causes their immune systems to be compromised. These unhygienic conditions provide the ideal mixing bowl for a virus to spread. When human beings handle, slaughter and eat these creatures, or use them in traditional medicine, the virus jumps to human beings – as has happened with the novel corona virus that spawned the Covid-19 pandemic now sweeping the world, and as happened with other zoonotic diseases such as SARS, MERS, Ebola, Rift Valley fever, West Nile virus, Zika virus, Nipah virus, and, of course, AIDS. The human quest for meat is the key driver in the spread of these diseases that kill millions of people. And, as with climate change, it is the poor who suffer most.

## Conventional animal farming operations also spread pathogens

We should not be too outraged by the wet markets of Asia and the bushmeat markets of Africa, however. Infectious diseases are not only found there. Across the world, farmed animals are kept in similarly unnatural conditions. In industrialised animal farming operations, where most of our meat and milk and eggs come from, conditions are also ripe



for the spread of virulent pathogens. Animals are pumped full of antibiotics to minimise viruses spreading, setting the stage for antibiotic-resistant superbugs to infect human beings. Steroids and growth hormones are added to animal feed or injected directly into animals, to make them grow abnormally quickly. The legs of chickens become unable to support their body weight. The majority of pigs that are slaughtered have pneumonia. These operations are also ecological time bombs.

To protect ourselves against the corona virus we practise social distancing, and isolate those who are sick. We are told to lower stress and to exercise. Yet we are surprised that diseases flourish among animals when we force them into cages and feedlots and gestation crates so that they live on top of one another, severely stressed and their immune systems suppressed.



## The silence of *Laudato Si'*

Despite the concern of *Laudato Si'* that the cry of the earth be heard, the encyclical does not as much as mention animal agriculture, not even as one of the causes of climate change. Instead, it speaks of the domestication of animals as a “universally accepted practice” (§133). Francis speaks strongly of the need to “forcefully reject ... absolute domination over other creatures” by human beings, yet there is surely no more absolute form of domination over animals than killing and eating them.

That the Vatican and Pope Francis just don't get what a twelve-year-old activist gets (Genesis Butler has been vegan since the age of six and has staged many protests against animal cruelty), is illustrated not only by their lame response to her plea, but also by their presentation of *leather-bound* copies of *Laudato Si'* to Francis' visitors, as to actor and environmentalist Leonardo DiCaprio on 28 January 2016 (pictured right).

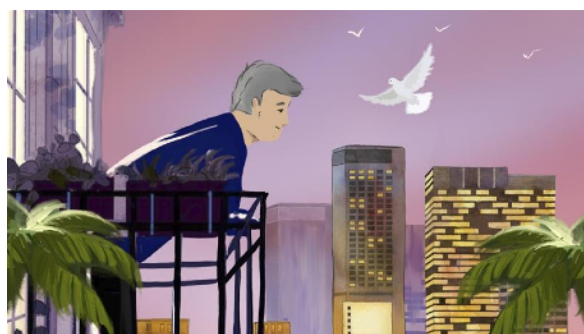


***The irony of binding *Laudato Si'* in leather seems to escape Pope Francis***

## Is nature turning on us?

Some say the corona virus is the rebellion of nature. Those who personify nature as Mother Nature or Gaia say she wants us to stop killing and consuming and burning, or else she's going to stand up to us and defend herself. Mother Nature is shouting, she is calling out, and we are not listening. Recounting a Spanish proverb that God always forgives, man sometimes forgives but nature never forgives, Pope Francis himself pondered these possibilities in his recent Earth Day message on 22 April.

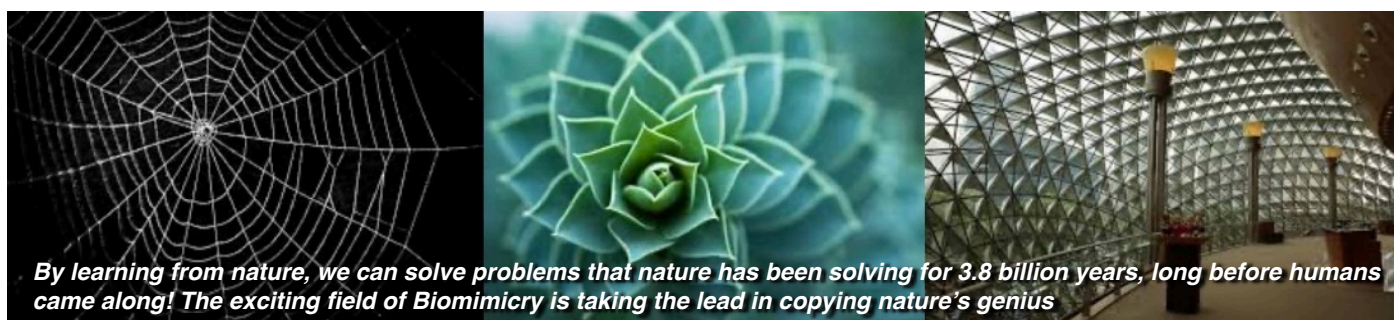
Scientists tell us that nature is our ally, not our enemy. Nature shields us against pandemics, if we allow it to. But for decades we have been removing the protective barriers between ourselves and the animals that carry disease-causing pathogens. We invade vast areas of the earth, shrinking the natural habitats of animals as we turn areas such as vast tracts of Amazon rainforest into grazing land for the cattle that we turn into meat. In effect, we are removing the buffer zones that keep us safe. It is not a matter of nature hitting back. We are simply reaping what we sow. We have placed too many pressures on the earth's natural systems and something had to give.



Now, with a third of the world's human population under lockdown and much human activity curtailed, nature has some breathing space to recover. Rivers are running clean again, the air is less polluted, animals that have not been seen for a long time are reappearing, even in cities. There is a meme doing the rounds on social media: Nature is healing! We are the virus!

## Caring for the Earth or letting the Earth care for us?

Will we learn our lesson, or will we return to our old ways, and continue to play with fire? To prevent further pandemics, both global warming and the destruction of the natural world for farming, mining and housing have to end. The Covid-19 pandemic is a massive wake-up call for us to examine how we live on this earth. The subtitle of *Laudato Si'* is “On Care for our Common Home,” a reflection of the stewardship paradigm. But one way to learn our lesson, is rather than imagining that we are here to care for and “improve” the earth, perhaps we human beings need to humble ourselves and learn to let God's Earth care for us. After all, the earth has been regulating itself for aeons of time, long before human beings – a very young species – arrived. All of the earth's systems – whether it is a spider's web or a bird's feather – are cyclical and they all give back to the planet when they become soil after their life ends, whereas most human systems of manufacture use vast resources to produce enormous amounts of energy to heat raw material, which is shaped with heavy machinery and treated with toxic chemicals to maintain its design and strength. What is left over is thrown away as waste. All of nature's organisms work to sustain air and water, whereas human activity pollutes them and uses them up. When we have messed things up so badly, is it not arrogant of us to presume that we know better, that we are in charge!



***By learning from nature, we can solve problems that nature has been solving for 3.8 billion years, long before humans came along! The exciting field of Biomimicry is taking the lead in copying nature's genius***

## Change your behaviour!

In the meantime, people of faith are praying to God to stop the virus and to help scientists find a vaccine. Catholics are doing what Catholics do – turning to Mary. Around the world, bishops have been dedicating their countries to her. The bishops of Italy – one of the hardest hit countries – are the latest to do so. On 1 May, in response to requests from many of the faithful, the Italian Episcopal Conference entrusted the entire country to the protection of the Mother of God. Mary will help us. Mary will get her Son to fix it.



What would Mary have to say to us at this time? She will tell us what she has always told people at her appearances, or when they turn to her. Repent! Change your behaviour! Have a conversion of heart! Stop grieving my Son! Take responsibility for your actions!

So, as we celebrate *Laudato Si' Week*, let us give thanks to God for Pope Francis and for his foresight in writing *Laudato Si'*, and for the way the encyclical has raised the ecological consciousness of so many people, all for the common good and for the good of our common home, the Earth. The pope wanted to make the environment one of the priority issues of his papacy. Three days after his election, he explained that one of the reasons he took the name Francis was because Francis of Assisi is “the man who loves and protects creation ... These days we do not have a very good relationship with creation, do we?” To improve that relationship, let us recognise that we still have a long way to go in educating ourselves to tread lightly on the Earth, especially in the light of the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite its limitations and omissions, *Laudato Si'* is one valuable resource we can use to do this.



## Some questions for reflection

1. In 2015, when Pope Francis penned "*Laudato Si', on Care for Our Common Home*," he challenged us to “hear the cries of the earth and the cries of the poor.” Have you heard these cries? How are you responding to them?
2. Pope Francis challenged every Christian to experience an “ecological conversion”? Has this conversion happened for you?
3. What are the strengths of *Laudato Si'*? What are its weaknesses?
4. Is the dominion paradigm obsolete? If so, what could replace it?

### 5. **By harming the Earth and its creatures, we are harming ourselves**

The novel corona virus was transmitted to humans from pangolins via bats in the wet market of Wuhan in China. Poachers are ruthlessly hunting pangolins to the point of extinction. Pangolins feed off ants and termites. If they are wiped out in an area, the way is opened for ants such as the leaf-cutter to completely decimate and denude large tracts of land of their vegetation, which leaf-cutter ants do very quickly. This leads to desertification. In regard to the way we live on the Earth, are we the “dumb stupid ones,” devoid of reason, or are animals?

6. What is the lesson that the world needs to learn from the Covid-19 pandemic? Will it learn this lesson?

### 7. **Liturgical renewal**

Christianity is the most anthropocentric of all the world religions. People of eastern religions look at Christianity and find it profoundly contemptuous of animal life. The rest of creation might as well not exist for all the consciousness there is of it. This anthropocentrism is reflected in our liturgy. We cannot afford to wait for the Church's lengthy approval process if we hope to develop a healthy ecological spirituality in time to reverse current destructive approaches to nature and prevent devastating global suffering.

What can we do, therefore, to make our liturgy express greater awe and wonder at the magnificence of God's creation, and greater reverence for it?

Watch the documentary  
*Eye of the Pangolin*  
by two South African  
filmmakers, about the race  
to save these shy and  
intriguing creatures from  
being poached to  
extinction  
[www.pangolin.africa](http://www.pangolin.africa)



This reflection was produced by Neil Mitchell OP for the Dominican Family of Southern Africa, writing in his personal capacity. The views expressed herein are not necessarily those of the Dominican Family.  
29 April 2020 ✱ Feast of St Catherine of Siena