

Ask Fr. James

What should we take from Pope Francis' doctrine on the environment?

Pope Francis is the 266th successor of St. Peter in the Roman Catholic Church. He chose the name Francis as his papal name in honor of St. Francis of Assisi. Many people wonder why a Pope would bother about ecology instead of spiritual and pastoral affairs. Some have even questioned his expertise on this matter.

First, Pope Francis' background is in Chemistry technology having graduated with a chemical technician's diploma before he joined the seminary. As Pope, chief among the expert resources available to him at the Vatican is the *Pontifical Academy of Sciences*, founded by Pius XI in 1936 and consisting of eighty eminent scientists from many countries who are elected without regard to religion. Its mission is “to promote the progress of the mathematical, physical and natural sciences and the study of epistemological problems relating thereto, and advise the Pope on these matters.” In this openness of the Catholic Church to science, perhaps, Pope Francis, through his doctrine on the ecology sought to realize the ideal of “openness to the truth,” from whichever branch of knowledge or science it comes.

Thus, in May 2015, Pope Francis published his doctrine on the environment in the encyclical *Laudato si'* (“Praise be to thee”). *Laudato si'* has attracted more attention, both favorable and unfavorable, than any papal utterance since *Humanae vitae* by Paul VI in 1968. *Laudato si'* is “addressed to every person living on this planet.” It is inspired by St. Francis of Assisi, who lived over 800 years ago and whom John Paul II in 1979 declared to be “the patron saint of all who study and work in the area of ecology.”

The theme of the encyclical, “*Laudato si'*” is “care for our common home.” Pope Francis reminds us that the universe did not come about by “chance” but by a “decision” of God.” He thence cautions against an emerging situation in which “Man sets himself up as God and thus ends up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature.” Pope Francis in his writing reminds us of our dignity as God’s children and our responsibility for compassionate care for the earth entrusted to us by God.

Pope Francis like the example of St. Francis’ of Assisi who had great concern for nature and animals, wakes us up to ecological sensitivity, as we are the coworkers of the Creator and are able to see and experience an integral ecology that is beyond any human being’s knowledge and understanding. Pope Francis compels us and challenges us to take action to save our common home from the deteriorating situation and to continue to find God’s face and existence in all creatures. He says; not only do we need to realize the oneness living on this planet, but we also need to dialogue with people both inside and outside our community.