

BLOG: RESISTANCE & RECONSTRUCTION

Pope's Encyclical: Is this the push the world needed?

Pope Francis's Encyclical 'Care for our Common Home' talks about poverty, social inequality, climate change, violence and other global crises mankind has created and proposes newer ways to resolve them. Ashish Kothari finds the Encyclical lacking in certain aspects but hopes that other religious and political leaders will learn to stand up and speak up like the Pope.



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2015 is a crucial year for the future of humanity. In September the United Nations will convene a General Assembly to adopt a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In December nations of the world will meet again, to hammer out a long-awaited agreement to stem climate change. No bigger agendas face the human species, and with it, life on earth.

Unfortunately, if the record of the recent past is anything to go by, governments are unlikely to agree on anything path-breaking in either of these summits. The remarkable consensus reached at the 1992 Earth Summit has simply never been replicated in subsequent global meetings, and much of what was agreed there remains on paper, or worse, brazenly ignored.

If indeed a miracle is achieved in the period September-December 2015, it will be a result of popular uprisings from people – ordinary people – across the globe. Millions are marching, petitioning, protesting, and providing creative suggestions for a better world, and demanding that political leaders follow. To these voices has just been added that of Pope Francis, and as the leader of 1.25 billion Catholics, it is a powerful voice indeed. In June this year his Encyclical Letter called 'Care for our Common Home' was released.



Leipzig degrowth rally, Sept 2014. Citizens across the world are rallying against profits and for sustainable well-being. Pic: Ashish Kothari

Along with some pronouncements of the Dalai Lama, the Pope's Encyclical may be the most explicit indictment of humanity's stewardship of the earth ever issued by a major religious (or for that matter, political) leader. I do not believe in a 'god' (though I have deep reverence for nature), and am deeply suspicious of all established religions, but I have to admit to being moved by the Pope's palpable anguish, and his ability to call a spade a spade (well, for the most part).

The Encyclical: Key aspects

The first part of the Encyclical is a startlingly harsh condemnation of our treatment of the planet: *"the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of the poor ... we have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will."*

The Pope's eye traverses the various environmental crises we have created, including pollution, climate change, water scarcity, biodiversity loss and runaway urbanisation. The climate crisis comes in for special attention, which is commendable given that a large Catholic following especially in the USA is part of the climate change 'deniers'.

He then focuses on social ills such as inequality, social exclusion and breakdown, continuing poverty, disease, *"increased violence and a rise in new forms of social aggression"*, *loss of identity and alienation (a "deep and melancholic dissatisfaction")*, and the *"globalization of indifference"* as the privileged few of the world increasingly forget about the less fortunate majority. He also connects all these, and in particular, the *"intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet"*.

Next, the Pope trains a sharp eye on the causes, proximate and root, of the crises. Amongst these is *"a model of development based on the intensive use of fossil fuels, which is at the heart of the worldwide energy system ... and current models of production and consumption."*



The Indraprastha Power Station, Delhi: Polluting the air and water is a crime against the earth and humanity. Pic: Ashish Kothari

He decries the weakness of international political responses to the multiple crises, asserting that *“the failure of global summits on the environment make plain that our politics are subject to technology and finance ... economic interests easily end up trumping the common good...”* The wasteful consumption patterns of the rich, and the unsustainable production patterns and global economic forces fuelling this consumption, come in for mention several times.

Interestingly, the Pope does not consider population to be as important a factor as consumption patterns, inequality, and wanton waste of resources; he says *“to blame population growth instead of an extreme and selective consumerism ... is one way of refusing to face the issues ... an attempt to legitimise the present model of distribution, where a minority believes that it has the right to consume in a way which can never be universalised.”*

One of the most pleasant surprises is the Pope’s dismissal of technological and market solutions to ecological problems (including carbon trading), which he terms ‘false ecology’. This should provide some ammunition to people’s movements critical of the ‘green growth’ or ‘green economy’ approaches which are, unfortunately, at the centre of the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals draft document being negotiated by governments to be adopted in September.

The Pope also decries the narrow environmentalism of the north dictating what the south should do. For instance, he quotes from a document of the 5th General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops (2007), saying that *“there are ‘proposals to internationalise the Amazon, which only serve the economic interests of transnational corporations’”*.

Instead, he points to the ‘ecological debt’ that the global north owes to the global south, arising out of

“commercial imbalances with effects on the environment, and the disproportionate use of natural resources by certain countries over long periods of time.”

The Pope's prescriptions

The Pope proposes a framework of ‘integral ecology’ to address the crises, bringing together environmental, social, economic, cultural and political elements in stressing ‘radical’ change. Dialogue and solutions have to be based on all knowledge systems: faith and reason, spiritualism/religion and science.

Commendably, indigenous peoples are given central place as being “closest to the earth” and therefore needing to be “principal dialogue partners.” *“If we are truly concerned to develop an ecology capable of remedying the damage we have done, no branch of sciences and no form of wisdom can be left out.”*

He stresses a “*bold cultural revolution*”, and a “*distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies and educational programme, and lifestyle and a spirituality which together generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm.*” Inter-generational justice comes in for special mention, and he stresses that decision-making and livelihoods should be located first and foremost in the local community.



The Great Himalayan National Park: the Pope's is an anguished plea to respect Mother Earth, the basis of our survival. Pic: Ashish Kothari

The Encyclical proposes new policies, simpler lifestyles, widespread ecological education, rekindling relationships with nature and each other, redefining progress by removing its sole focus on material wealth, respecting cultural diversity, local decision-making over the commons, making governments accountable through public pressure, and reviving the precautionary principle that helps avoid actions

which could have adverse consequences. It says that a major focus on secure livelihoods and employment is crucial.

The Pope does not rest at general prescriptions, but gets into specifics. For employment, for instance, he advocates the “*great variety of small-scale food systems which feed the greater part of the world's peoples, using a modest amount of land and producing less waste.*” In this context he also issues a strong caution regarding genetically modified cereals, proposing widespread discussions with farmers and others.

Other specific actions proposed include public transport, transparent and participatory environmental impact assessments, renewable energy and energy efficiency, better management of marine and forest resources, universal access to drinking water, reducing and recycling.

Is this a pathbreaker?

The Encyclical reads for the most part like a strong environmentalist's or social activist's manifesto. Both in its content and language, and of course in who it is emanating from, it will be a huge boost to the growing disquiet against today's dominant economic and political institutions. This is perhaps not surprising, given the Pope's past involvement in land and worker movements in Latin America; also the Vatican has organised meetings with people's movements and scientists in the run-up to the Encyclical.

By itself, though, the Encyclical cannot be a pathbreaker. This is partly because the forces controlling these institutions are far too powerful, and uncaring, to be swayed by a single voice, even that of the Pope. But it is also because it is not strong enough in its structural analysis.

Unfortunately the Encyclical does not clearly acknowledge (much less apologize for) the use or misuse of Christianity (as indeed of all major religions) in the brutal colonisation of indigenous & other peoples and ecological damage in many regions. But in a subsequent address (10th July in Santa Cruz, Bolivia, at a session of the World Meeting of Popular Movements), the Pope has done yet again what none of his predecessors explicitly did, stating: “*many grave sins were committed against the native peoples of America in the name of God ... I humbly ask forgiveness, not only for the offences of the Church herself, but also for crimes committed against the native peoples during the so-called conquest of America.*”

Some interpreters have said that the Encyclical, and some pronouncements of the Pope, suggests that he is Marxist. He himself has denied this. Indeed, the Encyclical names Communism, totalitarian regimes, and corporations as part of the problem, but does not mention capitalism as one of the key structural forces underlying global crises.



Vedanta ad at Bhubaneswar airport. The Pope's criticism of profit-making as a sin applies to most big corporations. Pic: Ashish Kothari

He partly (but only partly) made amends for this omission in his Santa Cruz address: *“And behind all this pain, death and destruction there is the stench of what Basil of Caesarea called “the dung of the devil”. An unfettered pursuit of money rules. 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 ... and, as we clearly see, it even puts at risk our common home.”*

The Encyclical is also somewhat ambiguous about growth as the key strategy for ‘development’ in most countries; it mentions the need to decrease growth in the rich parts of the world (Europe’s degrowth movement should be happy!), but justifies this as enabling ‘healthy growth’ in the poorer parts. This unfortunately ignores the increasing evidence that the nature of growth even in the south is predatory, iniquitous and unsustainable. (For a detailed analysis of this in India, see [Churning the Earth: The Making of Global India](#)).

A more fundamentally transformative agenda to achieve well-being based on alternative economic and political worldviews would have been more appropriate. The Pope hints at the need for ‘radical change’, but does not really plunge into this in any depth. He could perhaps have mentioned the many radically [alternative approaches emerging \(or re-emerging\) in many parts of the world](#).

The Pope does state that *“unless citizens control political power, national, regional and municipal, it will not be possible to control damage to the environment”*, but he also advocates the re-assertion of nation states in the face of corporate take-over, and a ‘true world political authority’, both of which may militate against direct democracy.

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Some other aspects of the Encyclical made me squirm. It talks of 'God as an all-powerful Creator', of the world as a deliberate and planned creation of 'God', and of the sin of abortion, all of which are part of the deep conservatism of many religions. The Pope does hint at ethical principles appearing in many languages including religion, and as quoted above, he advocates a place for all branches of science and forms of wisdom, but perhaps he could have been as explicit as the Dalai Lama has been in respecting non-religious basis for ethical living.

My feeling is that if the Encyclical had extended itself to these aspects, it could have been that much more powerful an ally to global social and ecological movements. It would have been embraced even by those who are disinclined towards religion.

Notwithstanding these problematic parts of the Encyclical, it is clear that the Pope has stood up for the sake of the earth and has gone beyond any of his predecessors, risking a major backlash from conservative Catholics including climate deniers. Let us hope that other faith leaders, and equally or more importantly, political leaders, have the same guts to stand up and be counted, as we lead up to two summits that could well change the fate of the earth.

If they don't, people will force the change anyway; to give one final quote from the Pope's Santa Cruz address: "*the future of humanity does not lie solely in the hands of great leaders, the great powers and the elites. It is fundamentally in the hands of peoples and in their ability to organise.*" Amen.

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