

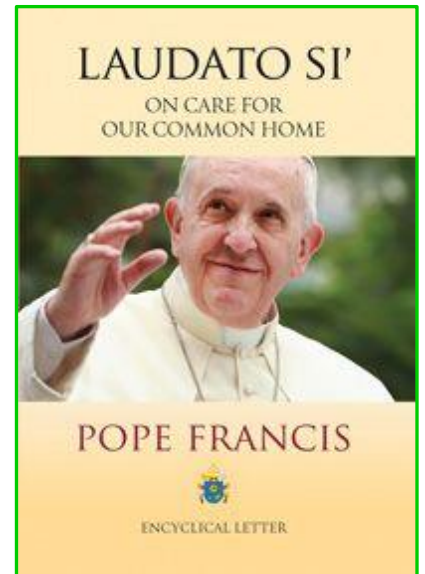
LAUDATO SI - AN INITIAL RESPONSE

At 7 pm on Thursday, June 18, thirty-five Ballarat North parishioners gathered in the foyer of St Columba's Church for their regular two hour theology session. This time it was to be a theology session with a difference, although in continuity with the ecological focus of earlier sessions. They found themselves participating in a moment in history, namely the live streaming of the launch of Pope Francis' Encyclical, *Laudato Si: On Care of our Common Home*. Thanks to the one Italian speaker in the group, Margaret Martino, a more or less simultaneous translation facilitated the process of understanding and of palpable excitement.

The live-streaming was not, of course, the only unique feature of this event. This encyclical represents an extraordinary and courageous exercise of religious leadership in the contemporary world. As an authoritative document from the faith leader of 1.6 billion Catholics, it carries considerable weight, not only within the Church, but for all who are open to dialogue with the Church. It is, in fact, addressed to 'every person living on this planet' (LS 3). It is the Pope's express desire to enter into dialogue 'with all people'.

Laudato Si is a very readable document. Its title, inspired by St. Francis of Assisi's Canticle of the Creatures, is an invitation to think from the outset in planetary even cosmic terms and to embrace our planet as the common home of all Earth beings. While St Francis composed his Canticle in the 13C against the backdrop of an earlier understanding of the cosmos, his words have the potential to move us beyond our human selves to consider our planet as the common home of all. A constant concern of the encyclical is the human self-centredness (anthropocentrism) that has contributed so dramatically since the Industrial Revolution to the plight of our planet: we have come to see ourselves as "lords and masters" of the planet, "entitled to plunder" at will (2). Pope Francis points to the consequences of the violence in human hearts, namely the sickness evident in the earth elements of water, soil, air and all forms of life. He embraces the suffering earth as "among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor". For those who have always equated the poor with suffering humanity, this statement is an invitation to a monumental shift in consciousness.

In subsequent editions of ECOS (newsletter of the Diocesan Ecological Sustainability group), there will be further discussion of the content and challenge of the encyclical. For the present, we simply invite you to engage with the overview of planetary distress offered in the introduction and first chapter and to listen to the pope's call to make the pain of the Earth our own so that we might learn what to do about it (LS 19).



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