

Raising Hope

10 years of Laudato Si'

Laudato Si' (Praise to you) takes its name from a line in the *Canticum of the Creatures* – St. Francis's song of creation – written 800 years ago. And one of the lovely themes in it and in this conference at Castel Gandolfo in early October was the idea that this work should be joyful. 'Let us sing as we go.'

And yet Pope Francis's encyclical, Laudato Si' made clear the 'song of creation' had become a cry of creation (a *lament* of creation) and crucially, brilliantly connected the current cry of creation with the ongoing cry of the poor.

The most vulnerable, the poorest suffer the greatest because of our exploitative relationship with nature. And its that exploitative relationship that must change

Laudato Si' was produced as the Paris Climate Agreement was being considered; and was regarded by many – particularly by those outside the church – as a refreshing example of moral clarity. At its heart is a critique of our throwaway culture, It gave the church (and faith communities in general) a renewed sense of purpose by calling us to work alongside others in caring for our common home. It argues that this problem is larger than something that can be fixed by a technological breakthrough or by tweaks to our capitalist incentive structure

This is a spiritual crisis and we need to undergo an 'ecological conversion'.

This ecological conversion is not a conversion to one understanding of religious truth (such as converting to Islam or converting to Catholicism), but a conversion away from a destructive, exploitative relationship with nature to an 'integral ecology' – an integral relationship with nature and with each other. It is a move away from self-centred, short-term gains toward an appreciation of how we are all connected not just on this earth and in this life time – but as those who are connected to the generations that have come before and yet to be.

10 years on the Paris Agreement has largely been abandoned; nation states are not living up to their promises, many – including my own – are doubling down on fossil fuels.

There is now wobble in the gulf stream; there are changes in the north Atlantic because of all the fresh water entering the ocean from melting glaciers.

And with governments pulling back from their responsibilities, there is all the more reason for a concerted effort from faith communities and civic society to take the lead.

One of the main encouragements of being at the conference was to realise that people of other faiths and people from the scientific community, policy makers from around the world wanted to be there. They saw the Church and the Pope as an ally, a valuable and effective uniter of peoples around this issue.

This idea of a common home, this idea of a common goal is managing to unite disparate people together – and helps me see more clearly how Corrymeela's place as a faith community of reconciliation within an increasingly multi-faith environment is a significant place to be. We, too, can help connect people who want to be connected around this common concern.

My main disappointment with the conference was that 10 years after Laudato Si' and the Paris Climate accords – we still seem to be trying to fix the problem by incentivizing markets rather than coming to grips with bigger, more disruptive issues.

What do I mean by that? One of the main speakers at the conference was Arnold Schwarzenegger – who, among other things, is a former governor of California. At one level, his presence was a good reminder that Republicans have often taken a lead on environmental issues in the States. We may not be as divided as we sometimes think. This issue can provide common cause across political divisions. One of his main points was that he and his administration put in some fairly stringent environmental standards that have led the way as other States have had to keep up. They were implemented even though people said it would tank the state's economy. Arnold was able to boast that although California put in all those stringent laws, it now not only has the strongest economy of the 50 States but is on its own the 4th largest economy in the world. He wanted our takeaway to be: see, you don't have to choose between a strong economy and environmental protection.

However, I found myself struggling with that because it suggests we don't actually have to change or address the root issues that Laudato Si' names. The Californian economy is much like the larger American economy. On paper it is amazing. It is creating a huge GDP – but it is mostly benefiting a very small group at the tippy tippy top. Silicon Valley is in California. The AI boom is in California. Very rich people are becoming unfathomably rich in California. But the way we measure the strength or success of our economy does not always mean much to normal people. In fact, it may be hurting more people at the bottom when our bottom line looks good.

I keep coming back to this observation: that it is easier for Americans (and I'll say it is easier for us in the West) to imagine the end of the world than it is for us to imagine the end of capitalism. And we may need to start imagining both if we are actually going to go through an ecological conversion and reach something like an integral ecology.

One thing that did give me hope at the conference was the suggestion that – despite our desire not to change too much, despite this fantasy that we can solve this problem with tweaks to capitalist incentives, despite all the backing away from Paris accord promises – one thing has changed significantly in the past 10 years. And it does have to do with markets, so I don't mean to discount that incentive entirely. It is something that might not only help address the climate crisis but the economic injustice that goes along with it.

This is the good news: in the past ten years, renewable energy has become the cheapest energy on earth to produce. We really can, as one speaker said, replace the energy of hell with the energy of heaven. Solar panels are becoming so cost effective that the move away from fossil fuels is now within our reach. AND because the sun touches every inhabited part of the world, the availability of solar panels could have a liberating effect on people who are otherwise dependent on diesel fuel or oil companies or power grids. Solar power is – as one person's t-shirt put it – 'people power' and could become a great leveller of economic opportunity. If there's one thing that we should be concentrating on, it's seizing the opportunity to shift to solar energy before it's too late.

The other thing that gave me hope at the conference is that more and more people seem to be ready for hope. We lazy humans don't act until we absolutely have to – and more and more of us are realising that we absolutely have to. There is a sense that 10 years after Laudato Si' that

we've pretty much gotten everyone on board who was going to get on board because of logical arguments or by trying to scare people into sense. Now we need to provide people who are already scared and overwhelmed a sense of hope and purpose: a way out. One of the horrible lessons I've learned about the Troubles is that the peace process only came about after people got so desperate and so worn down by the endless violence that they realised they couldn't go on and that is when hope of something new in the peace process gained a natural momentum.

Likewise, I think there is a confluence occurring that we (particularly in the West) realise we cannot keep going the way we are going. The economy is simply not working well enough for enough people; the current system is only making things worse. Something like a real conversion is necessary. And when people see that such a conversion can be toward righting our relationships with the earth *and* with each other – it becomes very attractive.

That was probably the most hopeful part of the conference – just the fact that there were so many different people there, from so many different places and faiths and backgrounds. We were finding common cause in our concern for our common home. Something that Laudato Si' wanted to bring to the world's attention 10 years ago.

And 10 years further on, with increasingly scary statistics on climate related disasters, with those in political power clearly unwilling to make the choices necessary to course correct, with undeniable evidence of how bad this is gonna get, the organisers of the Raising Hope conference asked us the rhetorical question: *How do we dare to raise hope at such a time as this?*

The answer is: we do it together.

The more we talk about this, the more we hear that others feel the same way.

The more we get involved, the more we find others already at work.

The more we practice nurturing hope within ourselves, the more we receive encouragement from others who are offering hope as well.

I still don't know how or why I got an invitation to go this conference in Rome – but I know that it had to do with others who see Corrymeela as a partner, as an ally – as one already in relationship with them, and they wanted us to be there. Because we remind them that they are not alone in this.

And as we continue this conversation over the weekend, that's the biggest thing perhaps to take away: we are not alone in this. Let us therefore move forward with hope -- and with faith in something bigger than us all.