

## *Laudate Deum: The Spirit of Nonviolence*

by Ken Butigan

On October 4, 2023, the feast day of St. Francis of Assisi, Pope Francis shared with the Church and the world a new Apostolic Exhortation on the climate crisis entitled *Laudate Deum* (“Praise God for all his creatures”), a title that echoes the life and actions of the 13<sup>th</sup> century patron saint of ecology.<sup>1</sup> This is a follow-up to *Laudato Si*, the pope’s historic 2015 encyclical in which he called on all humanity to take concrete steps to care for “our common home.” In this new document, His Holiness explains that he was compelled to publish an update to the earlier text because the worldwide environmental crisis continues to deepen and a much more robust effort by all of us is required to address this global catastrophe.<sup>2</sup>

To explore this new exhortation, it is helpful to see it against the backdrop of the spirituality, way of life, method for change, and universal ethic of nonviolence, a principle and practice that has been a defining hallmark of Pope Francis’ papacy and that connects directly with the importance of humanity taking responsibility for fully engaging the threat to the Earth.

This has been expressed by the pope in many places, but perhaps most clearly in his 2023 book, *I am Asking in the Name of God: Ten Prayers for a Future of Hope* (the English version of which was published this week), where Pope Francis writes: “The Reverend Martin Luther King, a source of inspiration for his calls for peace, expressed it clearly in the last speech he gave before his assassination: ‘It is no longer a question of choosing between violence and nonviolence, but between nonviolence and non-existence.’ The choice is up to us.”<sup>3</sup>

Echoing Dr. King, Pope Francis declares that nonviolence is essential to the survival of the earth and its inhabitants. Why? Because the essence of nonviolence—the refusal to do harm, the commitment to resist violence, the determination to put love and truth into action for the well-being of all, even when that means loving our enemies and opponents—is the basis of creating collaborative solutions to the climate crisis and to fostering the global public will for implementing them. Nonviolence is the foundation for an integral ecology and for a more viable future.

This is the choice to which His Holiness is calling us.<sup>4</sup>

In *Laudate Deum*, Pope Francis sharpens the reality of this choice for us. He does this by highlighting the concrete realities of systemic violence which are worsening the destruction of the planet and the growing climate crisis. He roots this violence in a “technocratic paradigm” and a widespread attitude of indifference, denial, and blame, including blaming this crisis on the world’s poor. He holds that this paradigm is furthered by a destructive economic order that creates a throwaway culture, which includes throwing away other human beings.

In the face of this violence, he points us toward a nonviolent way, underscored by two powerful convictions he enunciates in this document: “This allows me to reiterate two convictions that I repeat over and over again: “Everything is connected” and “No one is saved alone.”<sup>5</sup> Because

everything is connected, violence hurts everyone, just as nonviolence can mend the web of life in which we are all embedded. This very image makes clear his second point, that we are all in this together, and will not be saved singly.

*Laudate Deum* embodies this spirit of the nonviolent way forward by standing against the power of the systemic violence destroying the planet; by proposing nonviolent approaches and strategies; and by calling for nonviolent action. In reflecting on this follow-up to *Laudato Si*, it is possible to see this document itself as a form of nonviolent action Pope Francis is taking at this critical moment in history.

### ***The Crisis Before Us: Global Violent Power***

As in *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis clearly marks out in this exhortation the sobering statistical dimensions of the climate crisis and its impacts on billions of people. But he goes beyond only painting this grim picture by also illuminating the role of power in this growing disaster. Francis is especially concerned about the existential threat posed by the expansion of human power over all creation. As he puts it:

22 ...the greater problem is the ideology underlying an obsession: to increase human power beyond anything imaginable, before which nonhuman reality is a mere resource at its disposal.

24. Not every increase in power represents progress for humanity. We need only think of the “admirable” technologies that were employed to decimate populations, drop atomic bombs and annihilate ethnic groups. ... We stand naked and exposed in the face of our ever-increasing power, lacking the wherewithal to control it. We have certain superficial mechanisms, but we cannot claim to have a sound ethics, a culture and spirituality genuinely capable of setting limits and teaching clear-minded self-restraint”. It is not strange that so great a power in such hands is capable of destroying life, while the mentality proper to the technocratic paradigm blinds us and does not permit us to see this extremely grave problem of present-day humanity.

27. The great present-day problem is that the technocratic paradigm has destroyed that healthy and harmonious relationship. In any event, the indispensable need to move beyond that paradigm.

28. We need to rethink among other things the question of human power, its meaning and its limits.

Power is the ability to accomplish tasks, but often it is understood as a force of domination, threat, or coercion to accomplish those tasks. This is “power-over,” which is the heart of violence. This violent power is at the core of structures of oppression and destruction, wreaking terror and trauma. The Earth is being assaulted by this “power-over.”

There is, though, another form of power: “power-with.” This is a form of integrative power that operates, not by threat and attack, but by cooperation, collaboration, creativity, and a wide range

of non-dominating approaches. We embody this alternative type of power when we find ways to overcome our differences peacefully and to work together. This is what can be called “nonviolent power.” Pope Francis’ watchwords for this nonviolent power has included “fraternity,” “solidarity,” “encounter,” and “closeness.” This nonviolent power is at the heart of synodality, which calls us to “walk together,” listen to one another, and find ways to create a mutual way forward as Church and as People of God. It is at the core of Pope Francis’ relentless call for peace in Ukraine, that recognizes the violence of Cain but also prays that he himself will remember that even Cain is his brother.<sup>6</sup> And it is at the heart of several of the proposals he makes in *Laudate Deum*, calling the Church and the world to take the profound steps that will be necessary to finally respond with our whole selves to the cataclysm of the climate crisis.

In *Laudate Deum*, Pope Francis denounces the violent power which is being wreaked against the earth and its human and non-human denizens. But he also alludes to its alternative: the nonviolent power we all possess to make things different and new.

### *A More Nonviolent Order*

As Pope Francis seeks to shed light on steps forward in this exhortation, he highlights a series of concrete developments that can help us move from the violence of the global systems (which continue to fuel the war against the Earth) to creating a more nonviolent order.

First, he calls for the emergency of what he is naming a “new multilateralism.” This appears to mean a shift from the old, post-World War II order to an emergent cooperation among the nations of the world not dependent on a single power or grouping. The old system will not resolve the climate crisis. In fact, it has fanned the flames of this crisis and has not been able to adequately come to terms with it in any definitive way. In imagining this new order, Pope Francis reaches beyond classic models of geo-politics to the lessons of modern civil society:

37. More than saving the old multilateralism, it appears that the current challenge is to reconfigure and recreate it, taking into account the new world situation. I invite you to recognize that “many groups and organizations within civil society help to compensate for the shortcomings of the international community, its lack of coordination in complex situations, and its lack of attention to fundamental human rights”. [30] For example, the Ottawa Process against the use, production and manufacture of antipersonnel mines is one example that shows how civil society with its organizations is capable of creating effective dynamics that the United Nations cannot. In this way, the principle of subsidiarity is applied also to the global-local relationship.

This is an exciting move, drawing on the power of civil society—which includes the efforts of non-governmental organizations, campaigns, and movements to tackle concrete challenges, both local and transnational (e.g., the campaign to ban landmines, which shows the capacity to create effective dynamics that the United Nations cannot”).

This amounts to the emergence of a

38. ...multilateralism “from below” and not simply one determined by the elites of power. The demands that rise up from below throughout the world, where activists from very different countries help and support one another, can end up pressuring the sources of power. It is to be hoped that this will happen with respect to the climate crisis. For this reason, I reiterate that “unless citizens control political power – national, regional and municipal – it will not be possible to control damage to the environment”. [31]

Toward this, he points to what amount to nonviolent organizations and popular movements in civil society that have taken important initiative where governments and the old global order has failed.

In a time when the power of “strategic nonviolence” and “civil resistance” have been quantified and shown to be effective means of making social and cultural change around the globe<sup>7</sup>, Pope Francis is highlighting how these nonviolent strategies may contribute to the emergence of planetary initiatives for building the movement-of-movements which could be decisive in generating the people-power crucial to mobilizing the will for the dramatic changes Pope Francis sees as essential.

A needed ingredient for this new, more nonviolent order is a new model of diplomacy beyond the old power brokers and systems that relied on the “balance of power”: (that often depended on “power-over”):

41. The old diplomacy, also in crisis, continues to show its importance and necessity. Still, it has not succeeded in generating a model of multilateral diplomacy capable of responding to the new configuration of the world; yet should it be able to reconfigure itself, it must be part of the solution, because the experience of centuries cannot be cast aside either.

42. Our world has become so multipolar and at the same time so complex that a different framework for effective cooperation is required. It is not enough to think only of balances of power but also of the need to provide a response to new problems and to react with global mechanisms to the environmental, public health, cultural and social challenges, especially in order to consolidate respect for the most elementary human rights, social rights and the protection of our common home. It is a matter of establishing global and effective rules that can permit “providing for” this global safeguarding.

43. All this presupposes the development of a new procedure for decision-making and legitimizing those decisions, since the one put in place several decades ago is not sufficient nor does it appear effective. In this framework, there would necessarily be required spaces for conversation, consultation, arbitration, conflict resolution and supervision, and, in the end, a sort of increased “democratization” in the global context, so that the various situations can be expressed and included. It is no longer helpful for us to support institutions in order to preserve the rights of the more powerful without caring for those of all.

In each of these passages, Pope Francis is signaling frustration with power-over models and saying, instead, that what is needed are responses that address human rights and “global safeguarding,” implying that the current system is not responsive to the violence of the lack of human rights and the threats to “our common home.” Then he explicitly calls for facets of nonviolence: “conversation, consultation, arbitration, conflict resolution and supervision, and, in the end, a sort of increased “democratization” in the global context.”

But he goes further. He applauds those “from below” who have taken action when the powerbrokers have not:

58. ...Once and for all, let us put an end to the irresponsible derision that would present this issue as something purely ecological, “green”, romantic, frequently subject to ridicule by economic interests. Let us finally admit that it is a human and social problem on any number of levels. For this reason, it calls for involvement on the part of all. In Conferences on the climate, the actions of groups negatively portrayed as “radicalized” tend to attract attention. But in reality, they are filling a space left empty by society as a whole, which ought to exercise a healthy “pressure”, since every family ought to realize that the future of their children is at stake.

Here Pope Francis is lifting up the importance of dramatic, nonviolent action, “filling a space left empty by society as a whole, which ought to exercise a healthy ‘pressure.’” Perhaps His Holiness is counting himself among those called to take such radical steps in order to fill that “empty space.”

In pointing to the next international conference in Dubai, Pope Francis recounts the many conferences since 1992 and is saying, in effect, “Enough is enough.” This next gathering has to take definitive, concrete and comprehensive steps that are “efficient, obligatory and readily monitored.” This new process, he adds pointedly, must be “marked by three requirements: that it be drastic, intense and count on the commitment of all.”

Pope Francis exhortation “to all people of good will on the climate crisis” is a call for powerful and relentless nonviolent action. These objectives will not be achieved without mobilizing nonviolent action, campaigns, and movements dislodging, peaceably but with strong determination, the pillars that keep in place the structures that increasingly put the earth at risk.

He calls the entire world to what he terms a “pilgrimage of reconciliation”:

70. ...there are no lasting changes without cultural changes, without a maturing of lifestyles and convictions within societies, and there are no cultural changes without personal changes.

69. I ask everyone to accompany this pilgrimage of reconciliation with the world that is our home and to help make it more beautiful, because that commitment has to do with our personal dignity and highest values. At the same time, I cannot deny that it is necessary to be honest and recognize that the most effective solutions will not come from

individual efforts alone, but above all from major political decisions on the national and international level.

Pope Francis is calling all of us to embark on a “pilgrimage of reconciliation”: a reconciliation with the earth; a reconciliation with one another; and a reconciliation with our own selves. Naming it as a journey to reconciliation highlights the centrality of nonviolence to that new unity, which will be crucial to a transformed world, where we care for our common home and for one another.

### ***Conclusion***

*Laudate Deum* is a call to nonviolent action. At the same time, it is itself a form of nonviolence: calling on the people of the world to embark on a way forward refusing to harm the earth or each other; calling out the realities of the global violence of the climate crisis; calling on the world to confront those realities with organized nonviolent strategies; and calling on all of us to shift to a more nonviolent future.

Regarding this apostolic exhortation itself as a form of “nonviolent action” is bolstered by how His Holiness closes this letter. He foregoes a flowery conclusion and instead sharply addresses the greatest carbon emitter on the planet, the United States (“emissions per individual in the United States are about two times greater than those of individuals living in China, and about seven times greater than the average of the poorest countries”), calling for “a broad change in the irresponsible lifestyle connected with the Western model [which] would have a significant long-term impact.”

This is followed by a brief but clear theological point undergirding the entire document: “For when human beings claim to take God’s place, they become their own worst enemies.”

Here the nonviolent pope confronts the wounds of climate violence so that we can heal the hubris at the root of this catastrophe.

Nonviolence has been at the core of Pope Francis’ papacy. It is at the heart of this update to *Laudato Si*.

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- <sup>1</sup>Apostolic Exhortation *Laudate Deum* of The Holy Father Francis to All People of Good Will on the Climate Crisis, October 4, 2023, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html)
- <sup>2</sup> Pope Francis: “I feel obliged to make these clarifications, which may appear obvious, because of certain dismissive and scarcely reasonable opinions that I encounter, even within the Catholic Church. Yet we can no longer doubt that the reason for the unusual rapidity of these dangerous changes is a fact that cannot be concealed: the enormous novelties that have to do with unchecked human intervention on nature in the past two centuries.” *Laudate Deum*, 14.
- <sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, *I Ask You in the Name of God: Ten Prayers for a Future of Hope*, 2023.
- <sup>4</sup> Examples abound of Pope Francis’ promotion of nonviolence. For example, in April 2023 he marked the 60th anniversary of the promulgation of Saint John XXIII’s encyclical *Pacem in Terris*<sup>4</sup> by urging the world to pray for a “nonviolent culture.” (Vatican News, “Pope’s April prayer intention: ‘For a nonviolent culture,’” March 30, 2023. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2023-03/pope-francis-april-prayer-intention-nonviolent-culture.html> Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zGmqkZgCcYI>.) In that “prayer intention” His Holiness declared, “Let us make nonviolence a guide for our actions both in daily life and in international relations. And let us pray for a more widespread culture of nonviolence that will progress when countries and citizens alike resort less and less to the use of arms.” In his Message for the Celebration of the Fiftieth World Day of Peace, 1 January 2017, “Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace,” he wrote: “To be true followers of Jesus today...includes embracing his teaching about nonviolence”; “In the most local and ordinary situations and in the international order, may nonviolence become the hallmark of our decisions, our relationships and our actions, and indeed of political life in all its forms,” and may we “make active nonviolence our way of life,” and “I pledge the assistance of the Church in every effort to build peace through active and creative nonviolence.” In a speech he delivered at the Pontifical Theological Faculty of Southern Italy in 2019, he declared, “...I think of nonviolence as a perspective and way of understanding the world, to which theology must look as one of its constitutive elements.” And during a 2017 encounter with the Anti-Defamation League, he shared his understanding of nonviolence by proclaiming, “Faced with too much violence spreading throughout the world, we are called to a *greater* nonviolence, which does not mean passivity, but active promotion of the good.”
- <sup>5</sup> *Laudate Deum*, 19.
- <sup>6</sup> For Pope Francis, the Gospel’s bold prophetic message of peace hinges on its most radical and challenging command: to love our enemies, which is underscored in a prayer the pope recited in reflecting on the Ukraine war: “Stop us, Lord, stop us, and when you have stopped the hand of Cain, take care of him also. He is our brother.” Text of prayer for peace in Ukraine recited by pope, Catholic News Service, March 16, 2022: <https://catholicnews.com/text-of-prayer-for-peace-in-ukraine-recited-by-pope/>.
- <sup>7</sup> See: Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (Columbia University Press, 2011).