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***Laudato si'* and the Issue of Abortion**

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One of the more contentious issues of the mid to late twentieth century was abortion. With the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the fight for reproductive rights was seen as one means of achieving equality with men. It was perceived as a way that women could have control over their own bodies, particularly when it came to unwanted pregnancies. Thus having reliable forms of birth control was seen as essential; so was having access to abortions should birth control fail. Within this context, legalizing abortion and giving women "the right to choose" was seen as fundamental to the women's rights movement.

In contrast to this were those who believed that abortion violated the rights of the fetus being aborted and that an abortion wasn't simply the termination of a pregnancy but the deliberate killing of an innocent human life. This is certainly the position of the Catholic Church. *Donum Vitae*, for instance, insists that from conception, human life is to be protected: "Thus the fruit of human generation, from the first moment of its existence, that is to say from the moment the zygote has formed, demands the unconditional respect that is morally due to the human being in his bodily and spiritual totality. The human being is to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception...."¹ In *Evangelium Vitae*, John Paul II writes: "by the authority which Christ conferred upon Peter and his

Successors, in communion with the Bishops ... *I declare that direct abortion, that is, abortion willed as an end or as a means, always constitutes a grave moral disorder, since it is the deliberate killing of an innocent human being.*"²

It was a polarizing and adversarial time, with both groups passionately defending the rights of two oppressed groups of our human community—women and human beings yet to be born. Common ground was very difficult to find because it seemed that being sympathetic to the concerns of "the other side" cast suspicion on one's commitment to one's own side. It was a battle of rights, of deontological stances—of principles that were unassailable, immovable, inviolable and mutually exclusive.

As Christians, we are called to love one another unconditionally and without exception. For me, as someone who believes in the inherent dignity and goodness of all persons regardless of such factors as life stage or gender, the question has always been: is there another way to approach the issue of abortion? I think that *Laudato Si* makes a significant contribution in this respect.

LAUDATO SI'

Published in 2015, *Laudato si'* is Pope Francis' second encyclical. Drawing on scientific data, Scripture and Catholic Church Teaching, and informed by the heartfelt vision of St. Francis of Assisi, *Laudato si'* addresses the current ecological crisis. For the purposes of exploring

abortion in light of the encyclical, three points made in *Laudato si'* will be of particular relevance: that creation is a tapestry of interconnectedness; that each part of creation has its own essential dignity and value; and that injustice, particularly in terms of ruptured relationships, has thrown this intricate balance into crisis. Let us examine each of these three points briefly.

All of creation, by virtue of having the same source, exists in relationships of interconnection. Francis writes: "...as part of the universe, called into being by one Father, all of us are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family, a sublime communion which fills us with a sacred, affectionate and humble respect."³ This is a reflection of the Trinitarian God—One Godhead comprising three distinct Persons, each with Its own role, existing in an eternal giving and receiving of Love. [238, 239] According to Francis, "the world, created according to the divine model, is a web of relationships." [240] At the heart of this interconnectedness is love; we are united to all of creation and to one another by "bonds of affection" [11] while "the entire material universe speaks of God's love, [God's] boundless affection for us." [84]

The love that God has for creation is unconditional and radically inclusive: even the "least of beings is the object of [God's] love, and in its few seconds of existence, God enfolds it with ... affection." [77] All life, no matter how apparently insignificant or temporary, is loved by God, which makes that life very significant indeed. Furthermore, "each creature reflects something of God and has a message to convey to us." [221] Each creature is a witness to the love of God operative in the world. [84] All of creation, then, has its own

inherent dignity and value and is worthy of respect and protection.

For Francis, the ecological crisis is a crisis of justice, of ruptured relationships with our Creator, our neighbour and our earth. [66] Healing the environment requires "healing all fundamental human relationships" [119], most especially attending to the needs of the poorest and most marginalized members of the human community. According to Francis, "we have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor." [49]

How might we view the issue of abortion in light of these three points?

LAUDATO SI' AND ABORTION

Like his predecessors, Francis condemns abortion but he does so within the context of ecological and social justice. For instance, drawing on the interconnectedness of creation, he writes: "Since everything is interrelated, concern for the protection of nature is also incompatible with the justification of abortion. How can we genuinely teach the importance of concern for other vulnerable beings, however troublesome or inconvenient they may be, if we fail to protect a human embryo, even when its presence is uncomfortable and creates difficulties?" [120]

It makes no sense, in his view, to claim to have concern for the environment and all of creation, but with one exception: the human embryo. According to Francis: "...it is troubling that, when some ecological movements defend the integrity of the environment, rightly demanding that certain limits be imposed on scientific research, they

sometimes fail to apply those same principles to human life. There is a tendency to justify transgressing all boundaries when experimentation is carried out on living human embryos.” [136]

To exclude human beings at the embryonic stage of existence is to miss the essential interconnectedness of all creation and the inestimable worth of all of its parts. Just like any creature, a human embryo is known and loved by God and “calls us to enter into relationship with [God].” [88] Just like any creature, a human embryo is witness to God’s love at work in the world. And as a human being, a human embryo has “inalienable worth” that “transcends his or her degree of development.” [136]

However, Francis is well aware that being human does not guarantee that one’s rights or dignity will be respected. In a world permeated by relationships of domination and exclusion, he sees human embryos as a marginalized human population. Unless there is justice for all persons, including embryonic human beings, there can be no ecological justice. As Francis writes: “When we fail to acknowledge as part of reality the worth of a poor person, a human embryo, a person with disabilities – to offer just a few examples—it becomes difficult to hear the cry of nature itself; everything is connected.” [117]

In condemning abortion, Francis is not arguing from an adversarial rights perspective but from convictions about the interconnectedness of creation, the inestimable value of all of God’s creatures, and the need for justice for all of creation, including the human embryo. However, there was another element in the abortion issue as it was played out in the twentieth century: the rights of women. How might *Laudato si’* address the concerns that

drove women to seek the legalization of abortion?

ABORTION, WOMEN AND A CULTURE OF CARE

It is important to note that the issues raised by the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s were not solved by the legalization of abortion. Even in so-called developed countries, women remain vulnerable to poverty in ways that men are not. They have not achieved financial equality or equality of opportunity in the workplace. The labour that they expend on caring for children and then for aging relatives is not recognized as financially valuable and can negatively affect their earnings outside of the home. Women are more vulnerable than men when it comes to sexual violence and domestic abuse. As a population globally, women experience discrimination and marginalization because of their gender.⁴

How does one begin to right this kind of injustice? *Laudato si’* is clear in its answer: love. As Francis writes: “Love, overflowing with small gestures of mutual care, is also civic and political, and it makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world.” [231] This love is more than an intellectual decision or an abstract ideal. It is “tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human beings.” [91] We are to extend our love to the marginalized and to persons experiencing injustice not out of a sense of duty but because we recognize in the “other” a sister or a brother, someone who is intimately connected to us by virtue of having the same source of life and love—God, who created us all. [228] Love as individual acts of care, or as the impetus for social change becomes the basis of what Francis calls a “ ‘culture of care’ ”. [231] It is important to note that, as an undertaking, a culture of care doesn’t help only persons who are poor and marginalized; for those who

engage in it and commit to it, a culture of care becomes “a part of our spirituality, which is an exercise of charity and, as such, matures and sanctifies us.” [231]

Laudato si' states that, as believers, we have a responsibility to ensure that ours is a lived faith and that our actions are consistent with our beliefs. Believers “need to be encouraged to be ever open to God’s grace and to draw constantly from their deepest convictions about love, justice and peace.” [200] If we are truly to address the issue of abortion more broadly, we need to confront questions about the injustices that women face: Is our society welcoming to pregnant women and to women with children? Does our society value care? How can we be supportive of those who face diminished incomes because of care responsibilities that they have taken on? How can we ensure that girls and women are safe on the streets, in the workplace and in their homes? How can we ensure that, globally, girls and women are treated with dignity and respect

and have the same opportunities to flourish as boys and men have? How can our society be more inclusive of women, especially those on the margins?

When it comes to the issue of abortion, we must build a culture of care not only for human embryos but also for women. If we believe in our essential interconnectedness not only with creation but with each other as human beings, if we believe in the essential dignity and worth of all of God’s creation, if we believe that human flourishing depends on cultivating justice and if we believe that our task is truly to love and care for one another, then we must attend to the needs of women as tenderly as we do to the needs of human embryos—which is very much in keeping with the spirit of *Laudato si'*. ■

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¹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum Vitae*, ch. 1, q. 1 http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19870222_respect-for-human-life_en.html (accessed January 2018).

² John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, sect. 62 http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html (accessed January 2018). Italics in original.

³ Francis, *Laudato si'*, sect. 89 http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html (accessed January 2018). Further references to sections of *Laudato si'* will appear in square brackets in the text.

⁴ See, for instance: Melissa Moyser, “Women and Paid Work” in Statistics Canada, “Women in Canada: A Gender-based Statistical Report,” seventh edition, 2017 <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-503->

<x/2015001/article/14694-eng.htm> (accessed February 2018); UN Women, “Facts and figures: Ending violence against women”

<http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures> (accessed February 2018); Maire Sinha, ed., “Measuring violence against women: Statistical trends” Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2013

<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-002-x/2013001/article/11766-eng.pdf> (accessed February 2018); Gita Sen and Pirooska Östlin, “Unequal, Unfair, Ineffective and Inefficient: Gender Inequity in Health: Why it exists and how we can change it,” Final Report to the WHO Commission on Social Determinants of Health, September 2007

http://www.who.int/social_determinants/resources/csdh_media/wgekn_final_report_07.pdf (accessed February 2018).