

Pope Francis has almost seen the cat

By John Young

The encyclical *Laudato Si* has provoked mixed reactions, not surprising when Pope Francis makes statements like, "The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth" (n. 21). And this: "A very solid scientific consensus indicates that we are presently witnessing a disturbing warming of the climatic system. In recent decades this warming has been accompanied by a constant rise in the sea level..." (n.23).

The major theme of the encyclical is surprising: the environment. Most encyclical letters of the Popes are primarily about questions of faith and morality, whereas this one is essentially scientific, not theological. So some Catholics are asking: Is Pope Francis intervening in a field in which he has no competence?

The Catholic magazine *America* praises the encyclical for saying that life on earth cannot be sustained if we all expect to live according to the dictates of first-world consumer culture. On the other hand Catholic authors such as Steven Mosher maintain that the facts contradict some of the principal claims of *Laudato Si*.

Mosher points to strong evidence that, among other developments, there has been a vast improvement in the quality of drinking water in poor countries; that we are approaching the internationally agreed goal of protecting biodiversity; that since 1815, while there has been an enormous increase in world population, "... our well-being and prosperity have multiplied. Lifespans have more than doubled and per capital incomes have risen a hundredfold!"

The core on which Pope Francis bases his commentary are moral values. He sees the human person as having unique worth and not something that can be used as a means to an end. He denounces the culture of relativism, with its denial of permanent, objective values (n. 122f.). This culture "...drives one person to take advantage of another, to treat others as mere objects, imposing forced labour on them or enslaving them to pay their debts" (N. 123).

Does not the same relativistic logic also claim to justify "buying the organs of the poor for resale or use in experimentation, or eliminating children because they are not what their parents wanted?" (n.123). Later he says: "There is a tendency to justify transgressing all boundaries when experimentation is

carried out on living human embryos. We forget that the inalienable worth of a human being transcends his or her degree of development" (136).

Persons are social by nature and have an obligation to act for the good of society. Further, the earth is our home and must be cared for.

All these principles are in the moral order: they relate to what is morally binding. As such they are matters coming within the province of the Pope. By contrast, most of the material in the encyclical is in the realm of technology, with conflicting views held by different people. Pope Francis acknowledges more than once that his authority as Pope does not extend to these technical questions: "There are certain environmental issues where it is not easy to achieve a broad consensus. Here I would state once more that the Church does not presume to settle scientific questions or to replace politics. But I am concerned to encourage an open and honest debate so that particular interests or ideologies will not prejudice the common good." (paragraph 188)

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- Pope Francis

The final pages of the encyclical contain a theological meditation on the relation of the material universe and humanity to God, the Creator. Francis speaks of the Trinity, of the Christian sacraments, of the eternal destiny of all mankind.

What of his statements on the economy? Here he puts forward principles of social justice; principles belonging to the moral order. Such principles come under the heading of moral truths, although there may be legitimate differences of opinion regarding their application. The Pope's comments here should be of keen interest to Georgists.

Unfortunately he shows no clear perception of a natural economic order, with true competition apportioning benefits equitably through the price system, and the government promoting (but not usurping) that order. He doesn't deny this either, but I would have liked to see the promotion of the system advocated by Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Centesimus Annus* in 1991.

Asking whether capitalism is the model that ought to be proposed to Third World countries, John Paul II replied: "The answer is obviously complex. If by

'capitalism' is meant an economic system which recognises the fundamental and positive role of business, the market, private property and the resulting responsibility for the means of production, as well as free human creativity in the economic sector, the answer is certainly in the affirmative, even though it would perhaps be more appropriate to speak of a 'business economy', 'market economy' or simply 'free economy' (Centesimus Annus, n. 42).

Francis criticizes the lack of housing, with its impact on the personal dignity and welfare of families (n. 152). He points out that the earth was here before us and is given to us. He quotes Old Testament texts stating that the earth belongs to God, then declares: "Thus God rejects every claim to absolute ownership: 'The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me' (Lev 25:23)" (n. 67). Regarding the Jubilee Year in the Old Testament, he says: "This law came about as an attempt to ensure balance and fairness..." (n. 71). "...the earth is essentially a shared inheritance, whose fruits are meant to benefit everyone" (n. 93).

"The principle of the subordination of private property to the universal destination of goods, and thus the right

of everyone to their use, is a golden rule of social conduct and 'the first principle of the whole ethical and social order'" (n. 93). The internal quote is from Pope John Paul II. Francis continues with further quotes from John Paul, who emphasised very forcibly the right of all to the earth.

These statements about land are simply the position Henry George held. And the corollary is the appropriation of site revenue by the government, for that is the only feasible way in which the earth can become "a shared inheritance, whose fruits are meant to benefit everyone". It should be noted, too, that Pope Francis is not proposing something new in the area of Catholic social teaching: he cites John Paul II and earlier official pronouncements of the Catholic Church can be cited.

What he has done, however, is highlight the land question, and indicate the importance of resolving the current injustices flowing from excluding so many from the bounty attached to the land. Logically, he should have gone further and argued for the Georgist "remedy". But that could hardly have been expected, for it is not easy to "see the cat": to pick out the true solution to the land question.