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For a good many of us, “Laudato Si” (Praised Be) will be the most subversive text we will read all year, or indeed for many years. The extraordinary eco-encyclical from Pope Francis contains explosive truths, not about the science of climate change, but about the persistence of poverty, the excesses of a market economy, the fetish for technology and the technocratic solution, the consequences of middle-class aspirations, the failings of the media, even the role of the human in a “rapidifying” world.

“Laudato Si” offers the kind of radical reading that subverts our assumptions, challenges our deepest convictions, makes us see anew. The lengthy document attempts to give a truly global treatment of the ecological catastrophe we all face; some or many of the notes the Pope strikes will be familiar to us, but taken together, the whole acquires a resonance unheard since “Gaudium et Spes” signaled the reconciliation between the Church and the modern world.

Right on the first page, in Paragraph 2, we read: “The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she ‘groans in travail’ (Rom 8:22).”

The earth itself is poor. This powerful assertion flies in the face of the easy assumption that the planet is rich in still untapped resources, and that vulnerability is a human construct not applicable to it; the statement forces us to see that the connection between poverty and planetary fragility is intimate, as close as it gets.

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Given the advice on homilies Pope Francis suggested in his apostolic exhortation “Evangelii Gaudium,” it is no surprise to find that Paragraph 16 helpfully lists the key themes which “reappear as the Encyclical unfolds.” There are 10 in all: “the intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet, the conviction that everything in the world is connected, the critique of new paradigms and forms of power derived from technology, the call to seek other ways of understanding the economy and progress, the value proper to each creature, the human meaning of ecology, the need for forthright and honest debate, the serious responsibility of international and local policy, the throwaway culture and the proposal of a new lifestyle.”

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Some passages acquire a deeper shade when read against the Pope’s personal background. For instance, those of us who believe in the “aspirational” dimension of planned real estate communities will be disturbed to read Paragraph 45: “In some places, rural and urban alike, the privatization of certain spaces has restricted people’s access to places of particular beauty. In others, ‘ecological’ neighborhoods have been created which are closed to outsiders in order to ensure an artificial tranquillity. Frequently, we find beautiful and carefully manicured green spaces in so-called ‘safer’ areas of cities, but not in the more hidden areas where the disposable of society live.”

This note reminds us of a disclosure Francis made, in that series of interviews Francesca Ambrogetti and Sergio Rubin conducted with him when he was still cardinal archbishop of Buenos Aires, about his first trip abroad, in the 1970s: “In Mexico I came across a gated community for the first time, something that didn’t exist in Argentina back then. I was astonished to see how a group of people could cut themselves off from society.”

Paragraph 45 revisits that original moment of astonishment, but now sees in the phenomenon of the gated community another aspect of it: not the decision of “a group of people” to “cut themselves off from society,” but rather the effect that cutting off has on the “outsiders,” the “disposable.” Taken together, the “artificial tranquillity” that gated communities offer may come at too high a price.

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Other passages hit us where we least expect it. Paragraph 47, for instance, is a startling critique of the media’s role in “mental pollution.” Startling because it comes unexpectedly in a section on the declining quality of human life, and because it does not pull any punches. It begins: “when media and the digital world become omnipresent, their influence can stop people from learning how to live wisely, to think deeply and to love generously.” It continues: “True wisdom, as the fruit of self-examination, dialogue and generous encounter between persons, is not acquired by a mere accumulation of data which eventually leads to overload and confusion, a sort of mental pollution.” It concludes: “We should be concerned that, alongside the exciting possibilities offered by these media, a deep and melancholic dissatisfaction with interpersonal relations, or a harmful sense of isolation, can also arise.”

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There are many more such passages; in a document that tries to see the greatest crisis facing the planet in the clearest terms, there is no room for fudging or word-mincing. The Pope’s visit to the United States in September will provoke an encounter with science-denying Catholic conservatives. The encyclical will not allow them to misunderstand Francis. Here, for instance, is Paragraph 67: “We are not God. The earth was here before us and it has been given to us. This allows us to respond to the charge that Judaeo-Christian thinking, on the basis of the Genesis account which grants man ‘dominion’ over the earth (cf. Gen. 1:28), has encouraged the unbridled exploitation of nature by painting him as domineering and destructive by nature. This is not a correct interpretation of the Bible as understood by the Church.” That, it seems to me, is a subversion of the peculiarly American gospel of never-ending resource-rich prosperity.

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