

# **Relishing Life and Respecting Death Individually and Collectively: Towards and Sustainable and Fulfilling Life Inspired by *Laudato Si'***

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## **Abstract**

Inspired by *Laudato Si'*, this article takes up the sustainability of human life in today's world. Our basic assumption, which we borrow from Mitch Albom's *Tuesdays with Morrie* is that if we know we are going to die, we would change our lifestyle personally and collectively. Ordinarily we try to deny death or delay thinking about it. Instead, if we can look into the face of death directly and fearlessly, we are in a much better position to be in touch with our own true self. This makes personal and societal transformation possible and necessary. In the second part of the article looks into the rise and fall of civilisations, according to Arnold Toynbee, who inspires us to see the moral and spiritual basis of civilisation. Toynbee's study also tells us that unlike individuals, society's do not necessarily have to die. Keeping in mind that if we let our civilisation die, that may be the end of human life, we proceed to understand *Laudato Si'*, which fosters life in its totality.

## **Keywords**

*Laudato Si'*, Mitch Albom, Arnold Toynbee, civilisation, Pope Francis, death, fostering life, spiritual basis of civilisation, meaning of death.

“Everyone knows they’re going to die,’ he said again, ‘but nobody believes it. If we did, we would do things differently.” These words from Mitch Albom’s classic *Tuesdays with Morrie* sum up the basic orientation of this paper (Albom 2007). This tries to help us relish life in its concreteness, by opening ourselves to the real possibility of our own death.

The first part of this article looks at our own personal life and inevitable death, with an invitation to relish life and be open to dying. Basically we believe here that openness to the finitudes of life makes our life more genuine and meaningful. Such a basic openness will change our life-style drastically that we shall contribute to flourishing of life in general. From the study of life and death at a personal level, in the second section, we go to analyse the rise and fall of collective death, through civilizations. For this purpose, we make use of the insights of the British historical Arnold Toynbee, who is convinced that a civilization does not need to die. Even if it dies, it dies from “suicide and not murder,” implying that a civilisation die due to moral and spiritual inabilities of the civilization to respond creatively to the internal and external challenges it faces. Then we show that in the contemporary situation, we cannot afford the luxury of Toynbee to have many different civilizations, since for practical purpose we are one intimately interconnected civilization. If our civilisation fails, the whole humanity fails.

With this background we study the fresh and invigorating insights provided by Pope Francis through his *Laudato Si’* to foster life collectively. With its optimistic outlook and spiritual basis, we try to show that this encyclical is a right step to call humanity back to its senses so that we collectively fight the “culture of death,” and promote a more egalitarian and sustainable life. Thus, the aim of this article is to show that the moral and spiritual resources, which humanity richly possesses and which *Laudato Si’* refers to, can positively help us to cherish life here on this precious planet, which is our home.<sup>1</sup>

## **1. Mitch Albom: The Story of Living and Dying**

“*Death* ends a life, not a relationship” (Albom 2007: 174). Keeping this key insight in mind, we attempt to understand the basic vision of Mitch Albom to promote a counter-culture that

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genuinely affirms life and accepts death in their totality. To understand Albom's insights on living and dying, we sum up his book, *Tuesdays with Morrie* (Albom 2007), with a view to understand living in its dynamic relationship to dying.

*a. A Plot of Human Relatedness*

The American sports journalist Mitch Albom, the book's author and narrator, recalls his graduation from Brandeis University, Massachusetts, USA, in the spring of 1979. After he has received his diploma, Mitch approaches his favorite sociology professor, Morrie Schwartz, and presents him with a monogrammed briefcase. While at Brandeis, Mitch takes almost all of the sociology courses Morrie had taught. He promises Morrie, who is crying, that he will keep in touch, though he does not fulfill his promise. Years after Mitch's graduation from Brandeis, Morrie is forced to forfeit dancing, his favorite hobby, because he has been diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), which is a progressive neurodegenerative disease that affects nerve cells in the brain and the spinal cord. This debilitating disease that leaves his "soul, perfectly awake, imprisoned inside a limp husk" of a body. Morrie's wife, Charlotte, cares for Morrie, though at his insistence, keeps her job as a professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA.<sup>2</sup>

Sixteen years after his graduation, Mitch is feeling frustrated with the life he has chosen to live. After his uncle dies of pancreatic cancer, Mitch abandons his failing career as a musician to become a well-paid journalist for a Detroit newspaper. Mitch promises his wife Janine that they will have children eventually, though he spends all of his time at work, away on various sports assignments. One night, Mitch is flipping the channels on his television and recognizes Morrie's voice. Morrie is being featured on the television program "Nightline" in the first of three interviews with Ted Koppel, whom he quickly befriends. Before consenting to be interviewed, Morrie surprises and softens the famed newscaster when he asks Koppel what is "close to his heart." Mitch is truly taken aback to see his former professor on television (Spark Notes 2015).

Following Morrie's television appearance, Mitch contacts his beloved professor and travels from his home in Detroit to

Morrie's home in West Newton, Massachusetts to meet him. When Mitch drives up to Morrie's house, he delays greeting his professor because he is speaking on the phone with his producer, a decision he later regrets.

Shortly after his reunion with Morrie, Mitch works himself nearly to death reporting on the Wimbledon tennis tournament in London. There, he spends much time thinking about Morrie and forfeits reading the tabloids, as he now seeks more meaning in his life and knows that he will not gain this meaning from reading about celebrities and gossip. He is knocked over by a swarm of reporters chasing celebrities Andre Agassi and Brooke Shields, and it is then that Mitch realizes he is chasing the wrong thing (Spark Notes 2015). When he returns to his home in Detroit, Mitch learns that the article he has worked so hard to write will not even be published, as the union he belongs to is striking against the newspaper he works for. Once more, Mitch travels to Boston to visit his old teacher, Morrie.

Following their first Tuesday together, Mitch returns regularly every Tuesday to listen to Morrie's lessons on "The Meaning of Life." Each week, Mitch brings Morrie food to eat, though as Morrie's condition worsens he is no longer able to enjoy solid food. In his first of three interviews with Koppel for "Nightline," The American Broadcasting Company's late-night television's news program for in-depth reporting on the day's major news stories. Morrie admits that the thing he dreads most about his worsening condition is that someday, he will not be able to wipe himself after using the bathroom. Eventually, this fear comes true.

Throughout Mitch's visits to Morrie, we get flashbacks of their days together at Brandeis. Mitch describes himself as a student who had acted tough, but had sought the tenderness he recognized in Morrie. At Brandeis, Mitch and Morrie shared a relationship more like that between father and son than teacher and student (Albom 2007). Soon before Morrie's death, when his condition has deteriorated so much that he can no longer breathe or move on his own, he confides that if he could have another son, he would choose Mitch.

In his childhood, Morrie had been very poor. His father, Charlie had been cold and dispassionate, and had neglected to provide for

Morrie and his younger brother emotionally and financially. At the age of eight, Morrie must read the telegram that brings news of his mother's death, as he is the only one in his family who can read English. Charlie marries Eva, a kind woman who gives Morrie and his brother the love and affection they need. Eva also instills in Morrie his love of books and his desire for education (Spark Notes 2015). However, Charlie insists that Morrie keep his mother's death a secret, as he wants Morrie's younger brother to believe that Eva is his biological mother. This demand to keep his mother's death a secret proves a terrible emotional burden for young Morrie; he keeps the telegram all of his life as proof that his mother had existed. Because he was starved of love and affection during his childhood, Morrie seeks it out in his old age from his family and friends. Now that he is nearing his death, Morrie says that he has reverted to a figurative infancy, and tries in earnest "enjoy being a baby again." He and Mitch often hold hands throughout their sessions together.

In his lessons, Morrie advises Mitch to reject the popular culture in favor of creating his own. The individualistic culture Morrie encourages Mitch to create for himself is a culture founded on love, acceptance, and human goodness, a culture that upholds a set of ethical values unlike the mores that popular culture endorses. Popular culture, Morrie says, is founded on greed, selfishness, and superficiality, which he urges Mitch to overcome (Albom 2007). Morrie also stresses that he and Mitch must accept death and aging, as both are inevitable and necessary part of life. On one Tuesday, Janine travels with Mitch to visit Morrie. Janine is a professional singer, and Morrie asks her to sing for him. Though she does not usually sing upon request, Janine concedes, and her voice moves Morrie to tears. Morrie cries freely and often, and continually encourages Mitch to do so also. As Morrie's condition deteriorates, so does that of the pink hibiscus plant that sits on the window ledge in his study. Mitch becomes increasingly aware of the evil in media, as it drenches the country with stories of murder and hatred. One such story is the murder trial of O.J. Simpson, the verdict of which causes major racial division between whites and blacks.<sup>3</sup>

Mitch tape records his discussions with Morrie so that he may compile notes with which to write a book, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, a

project which he and Morrie refer to as their “last thesis together.” Morrie continually tells Mitch that he wants to share his stories with the world, and that this book will allow him to do just that.

Meanwhile, at Morrie’s insistence, Mitch attempts to restore his relationship with his brother Peter who lives in Spain. For many years, Peter has refused his family’s help in battling pancreatic cancer and insists on seeking treatment alone (Albom 2007). Mitch calls Peter and leaves numerous phone messages, though the only reply he receives from his brother is a curt message in which Peter insists he is fine, and reminds Mitch that he does not want to talk about his illness. Morrie prophesizes that Mitch will once more become close to his brother, a prophecy which, after Morrie’s death, is realized. At Morrie’s funeral, Mitch recalls his promise to continue his conversations with his professor and conducts a silent dialogue with Morrie in his head (Spark Notes 2015). Mitch had expected such a dialogue to feel awkward, however this communication feels far more natural than he had ever expected.

#### *b. Talking about Death*

On one of the Tuesdays, Morrie talked exclusively on dying and its relation to living and this section deals with that. Morrie tells Mitch that everyone is aware that they will eventually die, though no one actually believes it. Mitch notes that Morrie is in a business-like mood on that day, as he scribbles notes in his now undecipherable handwriting. In Detroit, the newspaper strikes continue, and Mitch remains out of work. Once again, he notes the disgustingly violent news stories he has heard and read about, namely the O.J. Simpson murder trial. In Morrie’s office, however, news events are inconsequential, and they focus on more meaningful subjects (Albom 2007).

Morrie is now somewhat dependent on an oxygen machine to breathe. Mitch asks him how one can be prepared to die. Morrie responds with a Buddhist philosophy that every day, one must ask the bird on his shoulder if that day is the day he will die. Morrie adopts values and parables from many different religions; described by Mitch as a “religious mutt,” Morrie had been born into Judaism, but turned agnostic during his teen years. Morrie

reveals that it is only once a person knows how to die that he can then know how to live. He repeats this idea for reinforcement, and Mitch asks him if he had considered death before contracting ALS. Morrie responds that he had not thought very much about death before his illness; in fact, he had once vowed to a friend that he would be “the healthiest old man” his friend had ever met.

The men talk about why facing the reality of death is so difficult for most people. Morrie says that realizing the imminence of death is realizing what is essential, thus you see your life in an entirely different light. Morrie also tells Mitch that if he accepts death, he may not be as ambitious as he is now, as he will see that he must spend time on what is meaningful to him, and not working to make money. Morrie urges Mitch to consider further “spiritual development,” and concedes that he is not exactly sure what that phrase means, though he is certain that people are too involved in material goods and their own egotism (Albom 2007). Morrie notes that he appreciates what he sees from his window, though he is unable to go outside and enjoy it.

Morrie continues to receive letters from the viewers who had seen his interview with Ted Koppel on “Nightline.” He dictates responses to his friends and family, and one afternoon while he is with his sons, Rob and Jon, responds to a note from a woman named Nancy who had lost her mother to ALS and says she sympathizes with Morrie for his suffering. Morrie dictates a kind reply, saying that he hopes she can find “healing power” in grieving as he has. Another woman, Jane, had written Morrie a letter in which she named him a prophet. He thanks her graciously, though he does not agree that he is of such revered status. In another letter, a man from England asks Morrie for help in contacting his dead mother. There is also a four-page letter from a former graduate student who, after graduating, experienced a murder-suicide and three still-born births. Her mother had died of ALS, and she fears that she will also develop the disease. Morrie is unsure of how to answer her. Rob suggests they simply tell her thank you for having written such a long letter. It is clear that Morrie is happy to have his sons with him.

Mitch thinks it is significant that Morrie is suffering from a disease named after an athlete, Lou Gehrig. Morrie urges Mitch to

do his imitation of Gehrig giving his farewell speech in which he says that he is the “luckiest man in the world.” Morrie, however doesn’t feel quite the same way.

*c. Death as Game-Changer*

The O.J. Simpson murder trial is an issue which appears repeatedly throughout the book. Mitch uses the trial as a tool to portray the popular, media-saturated culture as a source of meaninglessness, as he does when he sees the murderous potential on the faces of the people at the airport, or reads about murder and other crimes in the newspaper. These crimes that taint the popular culture are used, in large part, to contrast the good of Morrie’s self-created culture against the evil of the mainstream social culture, whose values are entrenched in meaningless and wasteful endeavors, such as watching television and reading tabloid gossip. Why, then, if Morrie loathes the media and the popular culture, does he agree to do multiple interviews with Ted Koppel for “Nightline”? Because only “Nightline” can provide him with the means to reach millions of people, so that he may share his story and influence their lives with his life lessons. It seems that Morrie must use the popular culture he condemns as a vehicle to spread his philosophy of a self-created culture (Albom 2007).

Mitch refers to Morrie as a “religious mutt” because he has created his own religion from a variety of different religious philosophies. The Buddhist philosophy Morrie shares about asking the bird on his shoulder if today is the day he will die serves as a metaphor for his awareness that he may die at any moment (Spark Notes 2015). The bird itself is symbolic of Morrie’s consciousness that his death is fast approaching, and his readiness to accept it when it does arrive. His lesson, however, pertains more to Mitch than to himself. In telling the parable, he wants Mitch to realize that this bird is on everyone’s shoulder at every moment of their lives, despite how young or old they may be. When he tells Mitch that one must know how to die before one can know how to live. By this he means that one must accept the possibility of one’s own death before he can truly appreciate what he has on earth, as the sobering awareness that one day, it will all be out of reach, prompts the urge to appreciate and value what one can have only for a limited period of time, and to use every

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moment of that time doing something that one will not regret when the bird sings its last note.

When Morrie tells Mitch that he may not be as professionally ambitious as he is if he were aware and accepting of his own death, he is continuing with his idea of “time as a precious, irreplaceable gift” (Spark Notes 2015). What Morrie means by this is not that Mitch should be lazy, but that he should reassess his priorities. He assumes that if Mitch were “to truly and completely realize that his will someday die, he would surely rearrange his values system and realize that dedicating his time to love, family, and friends is far more important than spending his life at work, earning money that does not fulfill him.” Mitch feels a void in his life which he stuffs with dollar bills, believing that material wealth is really what he wants and needs. But Morrie sees through Mitch’s superficial desire, and knows that the only salve for Mitch’s emotional void is love and friendship (Albom 2007).

The basic message of the story of Tuesdays with Morrie is that we cannot run away from death, which is actually running away from life. Instead, we need to look into death directly. “The truth is, once you learn how to die, you learn how to live.” After having seen the need to affirm and accept death, so as to live life to the fullest, in the next section we want to apply this insight not to our individual life and death, but our collective life and death, that is, of our own civilization. For this purpose we borrow the basic insight of Arnold Toynbee, the British historian, on the rise and fall of civilizations.

## **2. Arnold Toynbee: The Story of the Rise and Fall of Civilisations**

Arnold Toynbee, (1889—1975) is an English historian whose 12-volume *A Study of History* (1934–61) put forward a philosophy of history, based on an analysis of the cyclical development and decline of civilizations, that provoked much debate and discussion (Editors, Encyclopedia Britannica. 2015).

Toynbee was a nephew of the 19<sup>th</sup> century economist Arnold Toynbee. He was educated at Balliol College, Oxford (classics, 1911), and studied briefly at the British School at Athens, an experience that influenced the genesis of his philosophy about the decline of civilizations. In 1912 he became a tutor and fellow in

ancient history at Balliol College, and in 1915 he began working for the intelligence department of the British Foreign Office. After serving as a delegate to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 he was appointed professor of Byzantine and modern Greek studies at the University of London. From 1921 to 1922 he was the *Manchester Guardian* correspondent during the Greco-Turkish War, an experience that resulted in the publication of *The Western Question in Greece and Turkey* (1922). In 1925 he became research professor of international history at the London School of Economics and director of studies at the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London (Editors, Encyclopedia Britannica. 2015).

Toynbee began his *Study of History* in 1922, inspired by seeing Bulgarian peasants wearing fox-skin caps like those described by Herodotus as the headgear of Xerxes' troops. This incident reveals the characteristics that give his work its special quality—his sense of the vast continuity of history and his eye for its pattern, his immense erudition, and his acute observation.

In the *Study* Toynbee examined the rise and fall of 26 civilizations in the course of human history, and he concluded that they rose by responding successfully to challenges under the leadership of creative minorities composed of elite leaders. Civilizations declined when their leaders stopped responding creatively, and the civilizations then sank owing to the sins of nationalism, militarism, and the tyranny of a despotic minority. Unlike Spengler in his *The Decline of the West*, Toynbee did not regard the death of a civilization as inevitable, for it may or may not continue to respond to successive challenges. Unlike Karl Marx, he saw history as shaped by spiritual, not economic forces (Editors, Encyclopedia Britannica. 2015).

While the writing of the *Study* was under way, Toynbee produced numerous smaller works and served in many prestigious educational posts. He also retained his position at the London School of Economics until his retirement in 1956. A prolific writer, he continued to produce volumes on world religions, western civilization, classical history, and world travel throughout the 1950s and 1960s. After World War II Toynbee shifted his emphasis from civilization to the primacy of higher

religions as historical protagonists. His other works include *Civilization on Trial* (1948), *East to West: A Journey Round the World* (1958), and *Hellenism: The History of a Civilization* (1959).

Toynbee has been severely criticized by other historians. In general, the critique has been leveled at his use of myths and metaphors as being of comparable value to factual data and at the soundness of his general argument about the rise and fall of civilizations, which relies too much on a view of religion as a regenerative force (Editors, Encyclopedia Britannica. 2015). Many critics complained that the conclusions he reached were those of a Christian moralist rather than of a historian. His work, however, has been praised as a stimulating answer to the specializing tendency of modern historical research.

#### ***a. Rise and Fall of Civilization***

Human civilization is not a static condition but a dynamic movement. “Civilization is a movement and not a condition, a voyage and not a harbor.” Such a civilization does not need to follow the cycle of birth and rebirth. “I do not believe that civilizations have to die because civilization is not an organism. It is a product of wills.” As a product of the will it is up to us, the collective humanity, to decide if the civilization will die or not. As such, unlike individual human beings, the collective society or civilization does not need to die. “As human beings, we are endowed with freedom of choice and we cannot shuffle off our responsibility upon the shoulders of God or nature. We must shoulder it ourselves. It is up to us.”<sup>4</sup>

Thus he is convinced that civilizations decline from internal reasons, lack of enthusiasm and moral apathy. “Civilizations die from suicide, not by murder,” he emphasizes. He adds: “History teaches us that when a barbarian race confronts a sleeping culture, the barbarian always wins.” As such civilizations can continue to adapt themselves to both internal and external threats and flourish. This would need continued and creative responses.

But a civilization in decline is characterized by uniformity and lethargy. “Civilizations in decline are consistently characterized by a tendency towards standardization and uniformity.” He adds:

“The last stage but one of every civilization, is characterized by the forced political unification of its constituent parts, into a single greater whole.” His remedy for the survival of suicide is enthusiasm, imagination and ideal. “Apathy can be overcome by enthusiasm, and enthusiasm can only be aroused by two things: first, an ideal, which takes the imagination by storm, and second, a definite intelligible plan for carrying that ideal into practice.” This makes the civilization compassionate and viable. “Compassion is the desire that moves the individual self to widen the scope of its self-concern to embrace the whole of the universal self.”

### ***b. Moral and Spiritual Basis as Key to Survival***

Toynbee is convinced that the survival of a civilization is based on its moral and spiritual strength. “Material power that is not counterbalanced by adequate spiritual power, that is, by love and wisdom, is a curse.” Such moral and spiritual power gives them the ability to respond successfully to the crises confronting them. “Now civilizations, I believe, come to birth and proceed to grow by successfully responding to successive challenges. They break down and go to pieces if and when a challenge confronts them which they fail to meet.”

He believes that the basic causes for the decline of a civilization are moral and spiritual. At the moral level, he is clear: “The only real struggle in the history of the world ... is between the vested interest and social justice.” At the spiritual level also he is emphatic: “Sooner or later, man has always had to decide whether he worships his own power or the power of God.”

At the same time his prospectus for the survival of our contemporary civilization is not strong. “The human race’s prospects of survival were considerably better when we were defenseless against tigers than they are today when we have become defenceless against ourselves.” So he sums up his view of the decline of a civilization thus: “On this showing, the nature of the breakdowns of civilizations can be summed up in three points: a failure of creative power in the minority, an answering withdrawal of mimesis on the part of the majority, and a consequent loss of social unity in the society as a whole.”

### ***c. Our One and Only Civilisation***

As Toynbee studied the rise and fall of 26 civilizations and drew lessons for our own survival, one thing that we need to keep in mind that we do not currently have the luxury of having 26 civilizations. Our current globalisation, free market and networking have made our civilization almost totally dependent on each other. The fall of one causes the fall of all others. The one and universal civilization that we human beings share make it impossible to observe the fall of one civilization in a detached or objective manner. Ours is one world and one civilization and either we sink together or flourish together.<sup>5</sup>

It is in this context of the dependence of each other for our survival that we can listen to the intense plea for social justice, sustainability and care for the earth that the present Pope is making. Like Toynbee he too pleads for a moral and spiritual vision which alone can save us from impending destruction. Recognising the real dangers threatening our civilization, he is optimistic the collectively we can collectively respond creatively and positively.

### **3. Pope Francis: Fostering Life through *Laudato Si'***

*Laudato si'* (Medieval Central Italian for “Praise Be to You”) is the second encyclical of Pope Francis. The encyclical has the subtitle “On care for our common home.” In it, the pope critiques consumerism and irresponsible development, laments environmental degradation and global warming, and calls all people of the world to take “swift and unified global action” to save life in the planet earth. The encyclical, dated 24 May 2015, was officially published at noon on 18 June 2015, accompanied by a news conference.

Pope Francis’ revolutionary new encyclical calls for a “broad cultural revolution” to confront the environmental crisis and thus to sustain and promote life. This encyclical is addressed not only to Christians but to “every person living on this planet” with the hope of entering “into dialogue with all people about our common home.”

In this encyclical Pope Francis affirms unequivocally that everything in the world is connected. His idea of earth as our

common home that all of us have to work to protect life in the precious planet. In it the “preferential option for the poor meets the preferential option for the earth, since climate change most dramatically affects the poor, especially in the Third World where the poor depend so directly on earth, farming and fishing, for their livelihood” (Hagan 2015).

***a. Encountering Collective Destruction and Possible Death***

In the encyclical the Pope fights against the culture of death. “The place in which life – the gift of God – can be properly welcomed and protected against the many attacks to which it is exposed, and can develop in accordance with what constitutes authentic human growth. In the face of the so-called culture of death, the family is the heart of the culture of life” (LS 213). Then he warns us: “If present trends continue, this century may well witness extraordinary climate change and an unprecedented destruction of ecosystems, with serious consequences for all of us. A rise in the sea level, for example, can create extremely serious situations, if we consider that a quarter of the world’s population lives on the coast or nearby, and that the majority of our megacities are situated in coastal areas (LS 24). While acknowledging that much is being done, there are still self-destructive tendencies in our human life-style. “Some countries are gradually making significant progress, developing more effective controls and working to combat corruption. People may well have a growing ecological sensitivity but it has not succeeded in changing their harmful habits of consumption which, rather than decreasing, appear to be growing all the more. A simple example is the increasing use and power of air-conditioning. The markets, which immediately benefit from sales, stimulate ever greater demand. An outsider looking at our world would be amazed at such behaviour, which at times appears self-destructive” (LS 55).

So he urges us not to take a superficial or evasive attitude to this serious problem. “At the same time we can note the rise of a false or superficial ecology which bolsters complacency and a cheerful recklessness. As often occurs in periods of deep crisis which require bold decisions, we are tempted to think that what is happening is not entirely clear. Superficially, apart from a few

obvious signs of pollution and deterioration, things do not look that serious, and the planet could continue as it is for some time. Such evasiveness serves as a licence to carrying on with our present lifestyles and models of production and consumption. This is the way human beings contrive to feed their self-destructive vices: trying not to see them, trying not to acknowledge them, delaying the important decisions and pretending that nothing will happen” (LS 59).

He wants us to acknowledge the destructive power of sin. “This is a far cry from our situation today, where sin is manifest in all its destructive power in wars, the various forms of violence and abuse, the abandonment of the most vulnerable, and attacks on nature” (LS 66).

He urges us to develop the spiritual and moral courage to save us from these self-destructive tendencies. “In this universe, shaped by open and intercommunicating systems, we can discern countless forms of relationship and participation. This leads us to think of the whole as open to God’s transcendence, within which it develops. Faith allows us to interpret the meaning and the mysterious beauty of what is unfolding. We are free to apply our intelligence towards things evolving positively, or towards adding new ills, new causes of suffering and real setbacks. This is what makes for the excitement and drama of human history, in which freedom, growth, salvation and love can blossom, or lead towards decadence and mutual destruction. The work of the Church seeks not only to remind everyone of the duty to care for nature, but at the same time “she must above all protect mankind from self-destruction”.” (LS 79).

### ***b. Widespread Indifference and Selfishness Worsen Environmental Problems***

Pope Francis reserves his strongest criticism for the wealthy who ignore the problem of climate change, and especially its effect on the poor, notes the Jesuit commentator, James Martin (Martin 2015). “Many of those who possess more resources seem mostly to be concerned with masking the problems or concealing their symptoms...” (LS 26). Why, he asks, are so many of the wealthy

turning away from the poor? Not only because “some view themselves as more worthy than others,” but because frequently decisions makers are “far removed from the poor,” physically, with no real contact to their brothers and sisters (LS 90, 49). Selfishness also leads to the evaporation of the notion of the common good. This affects not simply those in the developing world, but also in the inner cities of our more developed countries, where he calls for what might be termed an “urban ecology.” In the world of *Laudato Si*’ there is no room for selfishness or indifference. One cannot care for the rest of nature “if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human beings” (LS 91).

Although science and technology “can produce important means of improving the quality of human life,” they have also “given those with the knowledge, and especially the economic resources to use them, an impressive dominance over the whole of humanity and the entire world” (LS 104) Francis says we are enthralled with a technocratic paradigm, which promises unlimited growth. But this paradigm “is based on the lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth’s goods, and this leads to the planet being squeezed dry beyond every limit.” Those supporting this paradigm show “no interest in more balanced levels of production, a better distribution of wealth, concern for the environment and the rights of future generations. Their behaviour shows that for them maximizing profits is enough” (109).

This irresponsible attitude coupled with our selfishness has made of our planet look like “more and more like an immense pile of filth.” Pope Francis writes: “Account must also be taken of the pollution produced by residue, including dangerous waste present in different areas. Each year hundreds of millions of tons of waste are generated, much of it non-biodegradable, highly toxic and radioactive, from homes and businesses, from construction and demolition sites, from clinical, electronic and industrial sources. The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth. In many parts of the planet, the elderly lament that once beautiful landscapes are now covered with rubbish. Industrial waste and chemical products utilized in cities and agricultural areas can lead to bioaccumulation in the organisms of the local population, even when levels of toxins in



those places are low. Frequently no measures are taken until after people's health has been irreversibly affected" (LS 21). That is the result of widespread indifference and selfishness towards the needs of others.

### ***c. Moral and Spiritual Bases***

The greatest contribution of *Laudato Si* to the environmental dialogue is its systematic overview of the crisis from moral and spiritual points of view. Until now, the environmental dialogue has been framed mainly with political, scientific and economic language. With this new encyclical, the language of faith enters into the discussion of ecology "clearly, decisively and systematically" (Martin 2015). This does not mean that Pope Francis is imposing his beliefs on those concerned about the environment. "I am well aware," he says, that not all are believers (LS 62). Nonetheless, the encyclical firmly grounds the discussion in a spiritual perspective and invites others to listen to a religious point of view, particularly its understanding of creation as a holy and precious gift from God to be revered by all men and women. But the pope also hopes to offer "ample motivation" to Christians and other believers "to care for nature" (LS 64). This does also not mean that other popes (and other parts of the church) have not spoken about the crisis—Francis highlights the teachings of his predecessors, particularly St. John Paul II and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI. But in its systematic spiritual approach, this is a groundbreaking document that expands the conversation by inviting believers into the dialogue and providing fresh insights for those already involved (Martin 2015).

## **4. Conclusion**

As responsible human beings, "the poor always have a moral claim upon us" (Winters 2015). Pope Francis, therefore, considers the environmental issues, such as water use and biodiversity, relying on the scientific consensus and urging us to moral vigilance and spiritual depth. His is a plea to foster life on the planet earth in its totality.

While the most important issue in the encyclical is the environment, it is not only our lives or our souls that are at stake. It is the planet. It is future generations. The evidence of the danger is

all around and the cure will require a change in our lifestyle. Pope Francis' encyclical reminds one of the Dutch statesman and journalist, Abraham Kuyper's famous line: "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!" (Winters 2015). That sense of God's presence permeates the text of *Laudato Si'*, and the Holy Father extends the cry to the whole domain of Creation. He wants us to look at Creation and see the handiwork of the Creator, at all times and in all our decisions. He is brutally frank about the entrenched ways of thought and powerful interests that hope we will do nothing of the sort. Let us hope that Pope Francis can and will change the conversation. At a time when the leadership of the world seems so unequal to the challenges, Pope Francis is a moral and spiritual giant who is not afraid to face our challenges creatively.

This implies that we realise the deep interconnectedness among human being and between humans and the nature. From an optimistic perspective we can learn to accept life and death. This implies that we learn to relish the simple things of life and take life both playfully and seriously, as Mitch Albom has shown. It also implies that we can be agents of the counter culture, just as Mitch Albom, Arnold Toynbee and Pope Francis have shown. Swimming against the current, with a sense of urgency, hope and commitment, we can creatively and collectively respond to the danger facing us: the remote possibility of the extinction of life through human being's reckless greed and exploitation.

Then we can relish life much more intensely. Then we shall be open to the dangers of death, without denying or delaying them. Then we can respond to the urgent call that Life makes to us: to respond to the existential crisis we face with renewed moral and spiritual courage and conviction. That's the urgent invitation Pope Francis gives to us, irrespective of our religious affiliation!

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**Notes:**

1. In this article, I do not intend to take primarily philosophical approach on death, which I have attempted elsewhere. See Pandikattu 2004, 2005, 2010 and 2013.
2. For this summary, I am heavily Indebted to Spark Notes. See “SparkNotes: Tuesdays with Morrie: Plot Overview.” 2015. Accessed August 16.  
<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/morrie/summary.html>.
3. Athlete *O.J. Simpson* is the football star and actor who was accused of the murder of his ex-wife, Nicole Brow Simpson. Most of the Americans followed the details of the long trial which had also racial connotations, since Simpson is an African-American.
4. All the quotes of Toynbee are from various internet sites. See specially “Arnold J. Toynbee Quotes from QOTD.org (page 1 of 3).” 2015. Accessed August 22.  
<http://www.qotd.org/quotes/Arnold.J.Toynbee>.
5. More of it is elaborated in my earlier work, Pandikattu 2002.