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Jesuit Universities Should Be Taking the Lead in Modeling the Lessons of *Laudato Si'*

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Abstract

Laudato Si' emboldens every Jesuit university to become an institutional leader in moving purposefully toward a just, humane, and sustainable world. The encyclical is a remarkably visionary, comprehensive and prescient document — a truly pathbreaking call to action. It is not overtly prescriptive, rather, it invites our creative imaginations in the service of saving our planet and doing so in a manner that promotes human dignity and social justice. In the end, we embrace and consecrate the document through action, not through protracted debate. *Laudato Si'* calls us to take steps that foster both survival and just sharing in a world of seven billion inhabitants. As institutions founded and nurtured on noble ideals, and now given an historic imprimatur by Pope Francis, Jesuit universities can and should find our ways to integrity on climate change and social justice — in both our words and actions. This discussion is a call for institutional leadership toward modeling and promoting individual behaviors that demonstrate our moral commitment to a just and sustainable world.

Laudato Si' from the Balcony

Today I join thousands of Jesuit university colleagues eager to expound on the details, the implications, and the ultimate consequences of Pope Francis's historic entreaty on climate change. There isn't one chapter in the six that compose the encyclical that doesn't inspire a prodigious outpouring of analysis and discussion — this is truly an overwhelming and remarkable document, remarkable not just in its content, but also in the fact that it was composed and issued at all, and especially that it was produced so quickly and so early in the life of this papacy.

While I have no doubt that Pope Francis was hoping and planning for a comprehensive conversation on the encyclical and its implications, I also believe that he is hoping that we will move quickly from talking and analyzing to taking bold and effective actions. And this is where Jesuit universities can take a lead in demonstrating what is called for by the message of *Laudato Si'*. Clearly what is called for is not an endless protracted debate; what is called for is movement in the direction of saving the planet within a framework of social justice. With that in mind, what do we mean by “within a framework of social justice?”

Foundational Framework for Social Justice

Today the Earth is inhabited by over seven billion people.¹ Social justice, at its bare minimum, demands that we model individual behaviors that *could* be replicated by all seven billion of those inhabitants, given the Earth's limited resources and limited environmental absorptive capacity (with climate change being the most critical current threat to that capacity). To think otherwise is to advocate for a permanent class system that relegates some of the Earth's residents to abject subsistence lifestyles, while lavishing upon others comforts and affluence. No coherent philosophy of social justice accommodates this variation in the human experience. And yet, I am worried that our timid reluctance to see these disparate lifestyles as incongruent with social justice is the norm — a largely unspoken norm, but nonetheless the norm.

Hence the foundational imperative for social justice in a sustainable world is this: *We must live our personal lives in such a way that the world would survive if all its other seven billion inhabitants were to live in the same way.* For each of us, then, the question becomes: “If I choose to do ‘A’ and all of earth's inhabitants similarly do ‘A,’ would this be a sustainable collective behavior?” This line of self-questioning takes us to an assessment of our lifestyles in the spirit of sustainability and social justice, and

chapter six of *Laudato Si'* gives us much to think about, and be guided by, in this process of discernment. “An integral ecology is also made up of simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness.”²

Here is a sample of three basic questions to ask in deciding what lifestyle choices, and “simple daily gestures,” to make:

If I choose to eat meat, could all of Earth's inhabitants also eat meat in a sustainable environment?

If I choose to drive a car to work, could all of Earth's inhabitants replicate that action sustainably?

If I choose to live in a single-family, free-standing home, could the rest of the world's occupants live similarly?

For those who truly embrace the essence of *Laudato Si'*, these are the kinds of questions we must ask ourselves every day as we contemplate “simple daily gestures.” *Should I order a steak? Drive a car? Reside in a 2000-square-foot home? Take a daily shower? Turn on air conditioning? Own five acres of land?* These are the kinds of questions that lay bare the *inconvenient truths* around being in integrity with our convictions and philosophical bearings. For a more thorough discussion of lifestyle choices and their consequences in the face of climate change and pervasive social injustice, see my article “Hypocrisy at the Lectern: Do Our Personal Lifestyle Choices Reflect Our Spoken Commitment to Global Sustainability” in the *Journal of Management for Global Sustainability*, published by the International Association of Jesuit Business Schools.³

Walking Our Talk on Social Justice

I have no doubt that you know the answers to the three sample questions posed above. Even a rudimentary familiarity with the realities of resource scarcity and environmental sustainability precludes a claim of confusion in confronting these questions. Simply put, the world could not long survive the impact from any one of the following actions taken by all 7.39 billion of its inhabitants: eating meat, living in a single-family structure, driving a car.⁴

This *inconvenient truth* is not debatable. Yet, we all know and love people (perhaps even ourselves!) who do all of these unsustainable behaviors and preach social justice, and rail against climate change, on the side. How can this be?

Resistance to Change

Let's consider some possible explanations for this failure to model behaviors required for saving the planet and achieving a measure of social justice. First, we can pretend that we just don't know — that the earth is warming, that we are causing this change, that most of the world's residents live in a state of utter deprivation, etc. In fact, we can *not* want to know so badly that we create a mental fog when the truth gets too close. At Nuremberg, Reich Minister Albert Speer testified incredulously that he didn't know of his regime's war crimes, while conceding that he could have known and should have known. The problem for us is that we *do* know, despite our Speerian efforts to remain, and appear, oblivious. And the day will come when we will have to confront the truth — that we knew all along (as it eventually did for Albert Speer, albeit 26 years after his death).⁵ We work very hard to pretend that we don't know (“*Yes, 'n' how many times can a man turn his head, pretending he just doesn't see?*”).⁶

Another explanation is that we really do see ourselves as God's chosen people, entitled to lavish lifestyles that are in themselves sustainable only as long as God makes sure that most of the other seven billion *de facto* *untouchables* remain content with starvation and abject deprivation. Of course, we don't allow ourselves to think this out loud, for it lays bare our own depravity of conscience. But every time we open that car door, or enter that house, or put a fork to that steak — we flaunt the entitlements of God's chosen few.

And then there's the sanctuary of truth in knowing that one person's profligate behavior, *in just this one instance*, will neither save nor destroy the world — at least not in this moment! After all, if I eat meat tonight, or drive a car tomorrow, that really won't have a noticeable impact on human deprivation or environmental survival. After all, it's just little me, doing one little thing! And, just today — maybe tomorrow! And, my family! And, my friends! And, my fellow Jesuit university

students, faculty, and staff! We don't really count for that much!

Finally, we might just choose to come clean with our hypocrisy. Let's admit it. It sounds compassionate and magnanimous, not to mention warm and fuzzy, to sing the sweet refrains of caring, concern, and kindness. It soothes the soul to share with each other how distressed we are with global injustices, with starvation, with squalor and homelessness, with disease and famine. It feels good to be in solidarity with our collective grief over the plight of the Earth's unfortunate, and to talk of our collective commitment to *do something about it*. And especially to have these friendly conversations over gourmet cuisine and vintage wine, in the rarely-used dining room of a 3000-square-foot home that we drove our new SUV twenty miles to visit!

The Jesuit University as Model for Living the Imperatives of *Laudato Si'*

Okay, those last few paragraphs were certainly not a cheerful, self-affirming, inspirational launch into “*where do we go from here?*” The positive angle is that our Jesuit universities are uniquely positioned to lead the behavioral changes that are mandated by our social justice sensibilities, and implied in *Laudato Si'*. And on our continuing commitment to work toward a just and sustainable world, we are empowered and encouraged not only by the official decrees of the Jesuit order,⁷ but also by the momentous encyclical of Pope Francis that is the inspiration for this article.⁸ In that sense, as Jesuit universities, we enjoy the imprimatur of the Pope himself to lead our students, alumni, faculty, staff, and friends forward in what it means to *live* sustainably and in integrity with our values around social justice. We can model what it means to act, and to live, in ways that could be emulated sustainably by all seven billion of the earth's residents.

Steps to Be Taken Immediately

In the short term, starting now, we can give concrete substance to vaguely-worded mission statements on both social justice and climate change, adding simply that our concern requires that we each live in ways that could be sustainably emulated by all of the world's seven billion

inhabitants. Furthermore, we can suggest changes in lifestyle that are required if we are to come into integrity with our expressed advocacy for social justice. Since we cannot count on God expanding the volume of earth two-fold, we must move steadily and quickly toward joining our five billion earthly brethren whose diets consist almost exclusively of plant-based nourishment. We should openly acknowledge that the Earth does not have, and will never have, sufficient land and energy resources to breed and feed animals for universal human consumption — even if climate change were not a factor (and, of course, it is).

While most of our Jesuit universities are already offering subsidized access to public transportation, free parking for car poolers, and secure storage for bicycles, we can be more explicit in our reasons for offering these amenities to our students and employees. Consistent with our commitment to work for a just and sustainable world, and in acknowledging that the Earth cannot survive if its seven billion inhabitants were to use automobiles as a primary means of transportation, we should encourage, and support through financial incentives, the use of public transit, carpooling, walking, and bicycling for commuting to and from the university.

Finally, in taking a public stand on sustainable housing we remind our constituents that social justice also demands that we consume less space and less energy in our housing choices. Our commitment to social justice demands that we work toward global housing standards that can accommodate all of the world's population at a shared level of comfort and safety. As such, we should support efforts at the local level, and in particular in the neighborhoods adjacent to the university, to revise zoning ordinances to encourage high-density living — multi-family residential buildings, attenuation of parking-space requirements, exceptions for additional occupants in single-family zoned homes (e.g., so-called “mother-in-law” apartments), and so forth.

Granted, these are modest gestures that will do little more than remind our students, alumni, and colleagues that there is a direct connection between our avowed advocacy for social justice and environmental sustainability, and our personal

behaviors — and that the university is taking a public stand, and taking incremental actions, in the direction of its belief in social justice and the dignity of humankind. Furthermore, these little steps are a visible precursor of things to come.

Where We Should Be in Year 2020

In four years we should have moved from public pronouncements and incremental gestures to bold change — change that establishes our Jesuit universities as institutional models for demonstrating what social justice and global sustainability require. What does an institution that truly embraces a commitment to global justice and sustainability look like?

First, to be congruent with the realities of feeding a world population that may eclipse eight billion people by 2020, our university food service should offer only plant-based choices. This is a simple recognition that the land and energy resources of the world cannot be used to raise grain to feed cattle so that a minority of the population can eat at the top of the food chain. Either we all consume low on the food chain, or close to half of the world's population will, at best, subsist near starvation — which is the way it is today.

Second, recognizing that transportation choices come next to food choices in denying all hope of a socially just sharing of the Earth's bounties as well as threatening the survival of planet Earth, our Jesuit universities should remove from their premises spaces for parking single-occupancy automobiles. If colleagues and students wish to continue using inefficient and unsustainable modes of transportation, they will need to pursue parking opportunities off campus, from entities that eschew our university's embrace of social justice and global sustainability.

Finally, our Jesuit universities will never be so intrusive of their employees' and students' private lives that they will demand they live in sustainable housing — that is, in housing that could physically accommodate all eight billion of us in the near future. But we can at least remain vigilant in making public this critical connection between high-density living and living in integrity with our values around social justice. Let's continue to be clear that it is not OK to preach justice and

sustainability while living in a single-family home on a half-acre lot — unless you really are one of God's chosen elite!

A Leadership Role for the Jesuit Academy

Our Jesuit universities have an opportunity and an obligation to model what it means to stand for a just and humane — as well as sustainable — world. That opportunity has become particularly timely and relevant with the issuance of the revolutionary encyclical called *Laudato Si'*. We have a duty to practice what we preach and to inspire our students and colleagues to lead by example. This means that we cannot turn our heads and pretend that all God's children can eat meat, drive cars, and live in single-family homes. Indeed, the life expectancy of planet Earth would take a dramatic plunge were all its inhabitants to take just one of these three actions, despite so many of us regarding all three as entitlements of our current lifestyles. If Seattle University, and Regis University, and Boston College, and Georgetown, and our other sister Jesuit institutions truly embrace a commitment to social justice and global sustainability, then our campuses need to begin walking their talk — and become the institutional leaders needed in the spirit of *Laudato Si'*. HJE

Notes

¹ Worldometers, "Current World Population," <http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/>

² Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, Encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* of the Holy Father Francis on care for our common home, sec. 230, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

³ William L. Weis, "Hypocrisy at the Lectern: Do Our Personal Lifestyle Choices Reflect Our Spoken Commitment to Global Sustainability?" *Journal of Management for Global Sustainability* 1, no. 1 (2013): 22-45.

⁴ F. Kaid Benfield, Matthew T. Raimi, and Donald T. Chen, *Once There Were Greenfields: How Urban Sprawl is Undermining America's Environment, Economy and Social Fabric* (New York: National Resource Defense Council, 1999); Felicity Carus, "UN Urges Global Move to Meat and Dairy-free Diet," *Guardian*, June 2, 2010, <http://gu.com/p/2hdtj/sbl>; Michael Lemonick, "Top 10 Myths about Sustainability," *Scientific American*, March 9, 2009, 40-45; Peter Newman and Jeffrey Kenworthy, *Sustainability and Cities: Overcoming Automobile Dependence* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1999).

⁵ Kate Connelly, "Letter Proves Speer Knew of Holocaust Plan," *The Guardian*, March 13, 2007, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/mar/13/secondworldwar.kateconnolly/>

⁶ Bob Dylan, "Blowin' in the Wind", in *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* (New York: Columbia Records, 1963), para. 2. <http://www.bobdylan.com/us/songs/blowin-wind/>

⁷ Thirty-Fifth General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, *Official Decrees of General Congregation 35* (Rome: The Society of Jesus, 2008).

⁸ Jim Yardley and Binyamin Appelbaum, "Unbridled Capitalism at Root of Global Injustice, Pope Says," *The Seattle Times Sunday*, July 12, 2015, <http://www.pressreader.com/usa/the-seattle-times-sunday/20150712/281479275090724/TextView>; "Pope at Audience: Counter a Culture of Waste with Solidarity," *The Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development*, <http://www.interfaithsustain.com/pope/>