

# **Climate Change and Care for our Common Home?**

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Three years ago many of the world's religious leaders signed an interfaith climate change statement. Pope Francis, the leader of 1.2 billion Roman Catholics, produced *Laudato Si*, 'Care for our Common Home'; which is a sincere attempt to address what is humanity's greatest challenge - how to live sustainably on the finite resources of our common home. This report's focus on the effects on the world's poor has been criticised as being too liberal. Research by Yale University found that the number of Catholics in the USA who strongly trusted the Pope's views on global warming increased by a quarter, but the number who strongly distrusted him doubled. This may explain why the President of the United States chose to be unimpressed by *Laudato Si*: religious leaders take a world view, political leaders a parochial one.

The climate is changing. Sea levels are rising, posing a real and growing threat to every nation which borders an ocean. No climate scientist doubts this inevitability, their only disagreements concern 'by how much' and 'by when'. The science underpinning global warming is not new. Tyndall speculated on a climatic cause for retreating alpine glaciers in 1859. The potentially catastrophic effects on the ice-sheets of Greenland and Antarctica was identified clearly by Mercer in 1978. Nevertheless, it took until December 2015 to reach agreement on a universal and legally binding programme to mitigate the effects of global climate change.

The Paris Agreement aims to strengthen countries' ability to deal with the impact of climate change and support them in their efforts. The treaty has been ratified by 187 out of 195 signatory nations. Climate change is a most divisive political issue in the USA and may be an underlying cause of the decision to withdraw from the Paris Agreement from November 2020. *Laudate Si* reinforces the aspirations of the signatories to the Paris Agreement, making a very powerful ethical case that all humanity must live sustainably. Central to this is the fundamental belief that those with the most have a moral duty to aid those with the

least. The USA, with 4.3% of the world's population and a 24.4% share of its GDP, has abrogated that duty and one must ask how the 42% of the world's population living in the 179 countries sharing 22.8% of world GDP might view that act. Will it influence other political leaders to view joint action on climate change as a restriction of their national freedoms? The Paris accords recognised that the impacts of climate change will be devastating for everyone: the threats are global and thus the response must also be global.

A child born today may live into the 22<sup>nd</sup> Century when, on present trends, the population could be 11 billion with average temperatures as much as 2°C higher than today, sea level anywhere from 1 to 9 metres higher than today and the incidence of extraordinary weather events steadily increasing. The consequences of this inexorable change is already being seen with more frequent flooding or longer droughts, increasing coastal erosion and inundation and, most worryingly, the steady increase in climate-forced migration of tens of millions, or even hundreds of millions, of poor and desperate people.

It is the poor who are most vulnerable to losing their homes, their livelihoods and even their lives to the consequences of climate change. Political inaction, most especially in the rich nations, is accelerating catastrophe, not delaying it. There are 30 states where the GDP per head is less than 1,000USD: the equivalent figure for the UK is 40 times greater. Shall we in richer nations like the UK do something for the world's poor; or turn up our central heating and count our blessings? Pope Francis has done something. Other religious leaders have acted similarly. Now is the time for us all to follow their lead and act together to change the minds of the sceptics, the unbelievers and the disbelievers. Salvation in the here and now is the offer, who would be so obtuse as to turn *that* down?