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A Parrot Trapped Outdoors in Wintery Warsaw, Poland | © M. C. Tobias

Pope Francis on Animal Liberation

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Pope Francis's "Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si'* Of The Holy Father Franciscus On Care For Our Common Home" ("Given in Rome at Saint Peter's on 24 May, the Solemnity of Pentecost, in the year 2015"), can easily be summarized by virtually any one segment of its 246 stanza entirety. We would suggest statement #71 as a fitting emblem:

71. Although "the wickedness of man was great in the earth" (Gen 6:5) and the Lord "was sorry that he had made man on the earth" (Gen 6:6), nonetheless, through Noah, who remained innocent and just, God decided to open a path of salvation.[1]

Even if the language is of salvation, of a "triune" God, and of the Lord – if interpreted through the insistence upon, or prescriptions of no faith, no religious orientation, not even the alleged neutrality of atheism; and forgetting the tired rhetorical schisms between politics, faith and science, in all "isms" – there remains in this provocative paean to the Earth an inherently good and viable embrace of all that transcends our personal biases.

Francis has effectively merged science, faith, transcendence, and a plethora of the trappings of Church history and catechism. Of the 172 citations, only three, relating to – Dante, Teilhard de Chardin and the late French philosopher Paul Ricoeur – are not explicitly Church authorities. Nonetheless, the breadth of citations encompasses speeches, historic and philosophical texts, and environmental injunctions from a broad

and honest multiplicity of inaugurations, exchanges, and serious conferences (e.g., the Rio Summit 1992), from New Zealand to Asia, each of them in the same camp as what is conventionally thought of as *engaged environmentalism*; of compassion in action.

By invoking Noah, this inspired reverie by the Pope may be summarized in two words: *Animal liberation*, a fitting and massive Church tribute to the very Patron Saint of Ecology [2], Saint Francis himself. Church history shows Noah protecting the animals of the ark day and night for a year (Gen). In Rabbinic tradition, during that year at sea all the animals abstained from sex so as not to overpopulate what was a strictly formulated size of the vessel. Learned debates regarding the boat's size were sustained prominently throughout the Renaissance and did not cease to fascinate the world's audience until the time of Darwin, at which point historians let rest the uncertainties with respect to just how many representatives of each species might have found lodging with Noah.

Of course, the Pope is not the first to equate the killing of animals with humanity's own incorrigible self-destruction. Back in November (8th) 1997, His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, leader of some 300 million Greek Orthodox adherents, in speaking at an environmental symposium in Santa Barbara, declared boldly:

It follows that, to commit a crime against the natural world, is a sin. For humans to cause species to become extinct and to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation... for humans to degrade the integrity of Earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the Earth of its natural forests, or destroying its wetlands... for humans to injure other humans with disease... for humans to contaminate the Earth's waters, its land, its air, and its life, with poisonous substances... these are sins. [3]



Extinct Elephant Bird, Madagascar | © M. C. Tobias

Noah is said to have liberated animals from certain destruction: global annihilation brought upon biodiversity as a result of human greed, hubris, ignorance, vanity and violence, an only too real mythology – magnificently enshrined by such pictorial geniuses as the Flemish Renaissance master Jan Breughel the Elder. God is said to have forgiven Noah. And that forgiveness remained inchoate as a potent and viable template for the future of biology here on Earth.

Within such forgiveness is the corresponding injunction to do something towards renewal, the renaissance of life, the giving back of life, not just the taking of a precious gift, which has been our predominate penchant as a species, and as individuals.



Trapped Burro, Southern India | © M. C. Tobias

This forgiveness gives every indication of our perception of some God-like force, whether one considers him/herself driven by faith, or by nothing; acting alone or in concert; a total narcissist or survivalist. It does not really matter anymore what characterization we choose as individuals with which to align ourselves. The writing on Earth's walls are clear: each of us is zoologically related by birth to the biophilia that pervades that collection of forces and genes that gave us our birthright and self-consciousness, whether in the mind of a man, the man Noah, the Pope Francis, the readership – all of us.

It is our mission to join forces with those recipients of our intentions and actions. Every major ethical and indigenous tradition, going back at least some 70,000 years (to the cave of Shanidar 4 on Bradost Mountain in Iraqi Kurdistan) has honored the implicit *conscience* that accompanies the love of others, of nature, or physiolatry in ancient Greek. This Encyclical is but the latest, perhaps most hard-hitting of documents within that outstanding legacy we think of as our humanity.

Hence, the great bifurcation, a massive change of heart, that now hinges on a colossally important decision; a choice that rests solely upon us. Our duty of stewardship has been forcefully called into action, and awaiting its outcome are all those trillions of individual sentient beings whose lives depend on our common sense and common commitment.



A Brazilian Black Howler Monkey © M. C. Tobias

Phenotypic variation, evolutionary quirks, twists and turns do not condemn or free us. Our choices and convictions alone are capable of that: of justice, and of some degree of freedom from pain, if we are lucky.

But common commitment and convictions towards what? We would argue that Pope Francis has made it abundantly clear. A commitment towards enlisting life-saving measures to protect the precious individuals, species, populations and habitats. A decision taken at this time, to provide thorough safety nets for all of those abstruse taxa, identified, unidentified, *who* (not *that*, but *who* –these are biographies, not merely biologies, as philosopher [Tom Regan](#) has long pointed out) are members of the greater biologically interdependent community: the vast assemblage of life-forms of which we are but one demonstrably agitated member.

But it is not our aim to simply *wish* upon a star or greater God for such ethical revivification. Rather, to actively reconstruct, from the ashes of a taxonomic Babel, a true ecological renaissance, a new human nature, whose guide to the ecologically perplexed has been handed down as a gift, as it were: a most lenient, legible, powerfully accessible document in the hands of all our humanity.

It would have added to this tour de force had the Pope also pointed towards the inextricable requirements of family planning within his Encyclical: the liberation of women and their children from unwanted pregnancies; the ecologically-devastating consumerism, pain and mortality associated with unwanted pregnancies. Without

access to contraception, any ecological call to worship is a partly muted cry in the wilderness. It reminds us, and the Church, that there is still a looming sequel here. Nonetheless, Pope Francis has begun the job.

And with such a roadmap, however it may be tweaked – the addition of women’s rights, of contraception, of the massive realities of teen and unwanted pregnancies, of the desperate requirements for universal healthcare that firmly encompasses the easily available suite of options empowering women and young people to make informed choices about logical, safe and humane forms of contraception we then shall be in a position to honor a most comprehensive beacon from the Church leading toward a true ecological reconciliation.

To be in favor of saving and protecting the biosphere is, correspondingly, to embrace pro-choice. These are ecological similitudes.

Yes, it will be variously interpreted and re-confirmed, assimilated, rejected, and re-taken up. But, ultimately, this Encyclical will be embraced as basic to the future of our species, and all those we have the critical task of shepherding. We would fail to do so, says the Pope, at our own peril.

We are asked to assess the consequences to the biosphere of our words, our actions, our thoughts and intentions. To protect and safeguard Others. All Others. For they are ourselves.



*A Caged Ratel, the Indian Honey Badger (Mellivora capensis),
in a Zoo in Yemen © M. C. Tobias*

Even if a vast sector of the human community were unwilling to listen to the Pope, for whatever reason, at present one in every six persons on the planet are of a Catholic disposition, which translates into a critical mass of behavioral transformation. A percentage, logic dictates, that might just be sufficient to arrest, or at least slow down

the Anthropocene (6th mass extinction) and propagate the preconditions for socioeconomic and political reform with a deep beneficence that might, hopefully, prove to be ecologically irreversible, a pandemic of virtue, if you will: a renaissance of goodness.

First, and foremost, on the issue of directly or indirectly harming (read: *killing*) other individuals of other species, inherent to the entire message by the Pope, who says we must stop collaborating in the death of others: what would that mean to the Earth, starting from today? This is the single injunction we should like to examine, for it is at the core of the entire third Encyclical of Franciscus.



The "Life" and Death of Pigs | Photo Courtesy of [SAFE, New Zealand](#)

Rather than elucidating and hammering with sheer numbers, we have chosen to symbolize the vast extent of killing by enumeration of some (43, out of 125) of the most critical indicators, or "Pain Points" as we have long identified the cruel intersections of human behavior and the global environment, a cartography of those aggregates wherein the most pain and needless cruelty and destruction are inflicted by our kind on all the biomes and organisms that live therein. [4]

Some Crucial Pain Points:

Annual human consumption of animals, including: all bovines, ovine's, porcines, *Gallus*, and others

Live animal shipments, carcasses, miscellaneous body parts

Number of slaughterhouses

Total number of animals per slaughterhouse

Total number of animal industries

Animal related-industry tax subsidies

Gross domestic losses from tax subsidies to total animal-related industries

Income derived from total number of animal industries

Religious exemptions by law in respect to total number of animals involved in their own deaths

Total number of animals exploited for biomedical research

Number of animals tested and re-tested before their deaths

Number of animals killed without pain alleviation

Total number of animals that qualify as road-kill and air-kill

Total number of animals killed by the military

Total number of animals killed by environmental agencies/divisions

Total number of animals killed in consumer product testing

Total number of animals killed by human-induced fires

Total number of animals killed in the name of biosecurity

Total number of animals that qualify as by-kill

Total number of animals eaten alive by humans

Total number of animals killed – in general – by human development

Total number of threatened species (by any national or international criteria)

Total number of zoos

Pollution indices as pertaining to total domestic animal populations and downstream and/or edge effects on habitat, including air quality, soil quality, ground water, aquifers, riparian systems, lakes, wetlands, coastal areas, forests and shrubland; seven critical biological zones that include alpine, temperate, cool temperate, warm temperate, dry subtropical, humid subtropical, and wet subtropical; and all of the critical forest types, including mixed broadleaf podocarp, conifer, fir, upland and lowland hardwoods, etc.

Destruction or usurpation of wild habitat by animal related industries

Total economic losses from total number of farm animals as measured by biodiversity loss and impact on other free nature's services

Human epidemiology as pertains to morbidity and mortality linked to animal captivity and products

Pet industries

Illegal pet industries

Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species violations

Animal control statistics (e.g., killing of “predators” on public and private lands)

Total number of hunted animals

Subsidized hunting regimes

Total value of hunting to the economy versus non-hunting tariffs—e.g., duck stamp revenues, local economic benefits from sale of rifles, guns, bullets, etc—versus total revenue generated from bird watching, photographic safaris, and other non-lethal recreational activities

Total number of murdered animals divided by total number of hunters (worldwide)

Total number of convictions for those illegally possessing or trading wildlife

Citations for pet store owner violations

Total number of animal abuse cases

Fresh water and marine vertebrate consumption data

Total number of dead-zones

Total number of no-kill marine zones

Fresh water and marine invertebrate consumption data

Total number of fishing violations

In sum, the Authors have posited an easily captured set of global criteria for estimating the extent of human violence meted out to others; a general tabulation that does not even account for intra-species violence, but, by illimitable means introduces the breakdown of our violence towards other persons in the biological arena known loosely as Earth. [5]

For each of these data sets exists a mindful mitigation that, with even the slightest legal, ethical, educational, economic and geopolitical willpower might yet undermine the pernicious trends our species has long favored for its own ends.

Climate change is but a telling sub-set, or reminder, of the cumulative, mindless violence we have triggered in the name of species solipsism. If one includes bacteria and viruses, the planet unquestionably contains possibly in excess of one hundred million species. Each species, in turn, on average, comprises millions of individuals, in some cases billions (e.g., the sub-Saharan red-billed quelea, *Quelea quelea*, or the marine cyanobacteria genus *Prochlorococcus*, about 3-times-ten-to-the 27th individuals). [6]

The fact we have surveyed fewer than 1.75 million species, to date, yet can already identify the unambiguous reality of a human-induced Anthropocene now sweeping the planet should overwhelmingly qualify Pope Francis's "Encyclical" as a benchmark in the modern history of environmentalism, nothing less than a massive summons for animal liberation. It also coincides in a most timely manner with the Global Genome Project, intent upon saving representatives of the "500 plant families and more than 13,000 genera" on Earth. [7]

Every human being capable of reading, or hearing the lyrical, hard-hitting, emphatic animal and plant rights treatise, generated this May 24th from the Vatican has no excuse any longer for inaction in the defense of nature. This is, indeed, a call of Mayday.

Footnotes:

[1] http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

[2] http://www.st-josephstatue.com/st_joseph_articles_details/saint_francis.htm

[3] <http://www.acton.org/public-policy/environmental-stewardship/theology-e/orthodox-churches-statement-environment>

[4] **God's Country: The New Zealand Factor**, pp. 367-373, freely downloadable from: <http://www.dancingstarbooksfilms.org/gods-country-the-new-zealand-factor/>

[5] *ibid.*

[6] <http://microbewiki.kenyon.edu/index.php/Prochlorococcus>, said to contribute possibly as much as "30-80% of primary production" in those regions of the world's (oligotrophic) oceans that are characterized, otherwise, as low in nutrition. Hence, this minute organism has an enormous impact on the atmospheric chemistry of the planet.

[7] <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-33438201>; Dancing Star Foundation has been advocating for the GGP to add the rich terrestrial flora of Antarctica to its initiative.

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