



Pope Francis' Letter

A beautifully filmed, if stark appeal to humanity to heed the message of Pope Francis, especially with regard to climate change

By Gerard Condon

THE 2015 encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* was a significant landmark in Church teaching. In it, Pope Francis called for swift and unified action against global warming. Subsequently, the *Laudato Si'* Movement was established, to mobilize the Catholic response to the papal teaching (See: www.laudatosimovement.org). Among its initiatives is a new documentary, directed by Nicolas Brown, called *The Letter: A Message for Our Earth* (YouTube Originals: 2022; 80 minutes). This is a beautifully filmed, if stark appeal to humanity to heed the message of Pope Francis, especially with regard to climate change. Its present-day impact on the earth is told through the eyes of three individuals and a married couple.

The global reach of the Catholic Church is well conveyed in the opening segment. Lorna Gold, president of the *Laudato Si'* Movement, meets

with officials from the Vatican's Dicastery (department) for Promoting Integral Human Development. Together they decide to invite, to an audience with Pope Francis, activists who are responding to the climate emergency. Then an official writes to the chosen invitees. He takes the letters to his local post office, located in Saint Peter's Square, where they are stamped and franked *Poste Vaticane*. The camera then follows the letters' journey to four very different destinations, to homes representing the poor, the youth, wildlife and the earth's indigenous peoples.

Four voices

Twenty-six-year-old Arouna Kandé is from the coastal city of Saint-Louis in Senegal. He originally grew up in the inland region of Kolda. There, prolonged droughts have turned once fertile farmland into desert. Many, including himself,

have been forced to migrate to the coastal cities. But now, those same cities are being threatened by rising sea levels, another consequence of climate change. Many Senegalese men have little choice but to make the hazardous journey to Europe as economic refugees. The global refugee crisis is one of the most potent symptoms of the climate emergency. Experts predict that, by the year 2050, climate change will displace as many as 1.2 billion people.

Cacique Dáda, is a tribal leader for the Borarí people of Brazil. They are the traditional (and most effective) custodians of a region that includes ancient forests and waterways teeming with biodiversity. However, in the past twenty years, logging companies have exploited the region for its timber and mineral wealth. Since 1978 an area twice the size of Spain has been lost to deforestation. Dáda has also suffered personally. As a result of his efforts to defend the Amazonian rainforest he has been kidnapped and beaten by local business interests.

From the Haridwar district of northern India, 14-year-old Ridhima Pandey represents young people, the future generation which will

bear the brunt of the world's deteriorating climate. She is determined to make governments and corporations accountable for their inaction. The worsening annual monsoons in India give her nightmares. Among her online friends is Luca Saunders, from the Blue Mountains in Australia. Her family fled the bushfires that afflicted that region in 2019 and 2020. Those fires alone claimed most of the natural flora and fauna in an area roughly the size of the United Kingdom.

Also invited to the Vatican were marine biologists Greg Asner and Robin Martin (a husband and wife team) who are leading a project to map the coral reefs around Hawaii. "Coral reefs are like the rainforests of the sea," explains Robin, "They provide habitat, they provide food, they provide shoreline protection." Yet, in 2015 and again in 2019, marine heatwaves destroyed an estimated 35 percent of the corals in their research area. Ninety-nine percent of coral reefs will become extinct, if there is an average two degree increase in sea temperatures over the coming decades.

Inter-faith dialogue

Arouna is a devout Muslim. Riddhima is a Hindu. Dáda professes the traditional religion of the Amazonian people. Greg and Robin, like many people in Western societies, do not profess a formal religious practice. At first, I was surprised that the film's producers had not chosen to feature some Catholic activists on climate change. But then again, *Laudato Si* is addressed to "every person living on this planet" (par. 3). Pope Francis thinks that the problem of climate change unites all the world's religions. It brings together scientists, philosophers, civic



groups and theologians in a mutually beneficial dialogue.

One image from this film sums up that sense of common purpose. Having convened for their audience with Pope Francis, just outside Saint Peter's Square, the activists pause for a moment to take in the magnificent sight. The near-empty *piazza*, with the outstretched arms of its colonnade, symbolise the Catholic Church as a forum for global encounter. The group's subsequent audience with the Pope proves to be a meeting of hearts and minds. In his contribution, Pope Francis criticises the "arrogance" of the global economic system which reduces the value of human life, just as it degrades the environment. He puts the problem of climate change into the cultural context of the disre-

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spect for human life and, ultimately, the absence of religious values.

The inspiration

The Letter was, appropriately enough, premiered on October 4, 2022, the Feast of Saint Francis of Assisi. *Laudato Si* is dedicated to the patron saint of ecology. Since the mid-1980s the Umbrian city of Assisi has been the venue for many inter-faith gatherings. This documentary features an interview, in Assisi, with Cardinal Raniero Cantalamessa, the retreat master to the Pope. He further explains the connection between Catholic theology and the ecological movement. Francis of Assisi (1181-1216) combined a frugal lifestyle, service to the poor and a love for all creation. Those Christian values are the basis for the best response to the climate emergency.

The five non-Catholic activists featured in this film have returned to their native countries to resume their work. Their trip to Italy gave them an appreciation for its spiritual dimension. As Cardinal Cantalamessa puts it, "We need to have a transcendent reason to care for creation."

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