CAN CIVIC ENVIRONMENTALISM HELP US CARE FOR OUR COMMON HOME?
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The Invitation To Us All
At the very beginning of Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home -- the Papal Encyclical on Climate Change -- Pope Francis extends an invitation to all people:

“I urgently appeal . . . for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of this planet . . . Everyone’s talents and involvement are needed to redress the damage caused by human abuse of God’s creation. All of us can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation, each according to his or her own culture, experience, involvements, and talents.” [14]

Laudato Si defines the problems of climate change as “cultural” and calls for “leadership”:

“. . . we are called to be instruments of God our Father, so that our planet may be what he desired when he created it and correspond with his plan for peace, beauty, and fullness. The problem is that we still lack the culture need to confront this crisis. We lack leadership capable of striking out new paths and meeting the needs of the present with concern for all and without prejudice towards coming generations . . . otherwise new power structures based on the techno-economic paradigm may overwhelm not only our politics but also freedom and justice.” [53]

The Encyclical says that the fundamental cause is that

“. . . human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbor, and with the earth itself. This rupture is sin. The harmony between the Creator, humanity and creation as a whole was disrupted by our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations.” [66]

And that we must be open to different ways of thinking about meaning and values – certainly religion and scientific but also philosophical, cultural . . . art and poetry . . . and “all forms of wisdom”.

“. . . We need to strengthen the conviction that we are one single human family. There are no frontiers or barriers, political or social, behind which we can hide, still less is there room for the globalization of indifference.” [51]

“. . . there is no one path to a solution. This makes a variety of proposals possible, all capable of entering into dialogue with a view to developing comprehensive solutions.” [60]

This brief essay what explores what civic environmentalism in the United States might suggest to Americans and others about how to respond to the Pope’s invitation to share ideas in a new dialogue about climate change.

Civic Environmentalism
Between the 1890s and the 1920s, the U.S. federal government organized agencies to own, manage, and protect parks, forests, and other natural resources. A “second wave” of environmental policy came in the 1960s and 70s – cresting in the early 1970s when Congress passed the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act and other laws that “command and control” pollution. These laws command sources not to emit any pollution that exceeds strict limits. The Environmental Protection Agency and other agencies write detailed regulations that control how factories, farms, homes, appliances, vehicles and homes operate. Every source of emissions must submit detailed reports about how they comply.

Most polluters have cleaned up their operations as required, and some have gone “beyond regulation” to clean up even more. But in many communities, citizens resist command and control or say is that it is undemocratic
or neither sufficient nor truly effective. Civic environmentalism consists of local and regional efforts by citizens, agency staff, and other to protect the environment more than required by laws and regulations. For example,

Noisy, smoggy freeways run through FRUITVALE, CALIFORNIA, a poor Latino neighborhood in Oakland. In 1991, the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) proposed building a massive parking garage next to a transit station. Neighborhood protests killed the proposal, but then students at the nearby University of California in Berkeley suggested that the proposal be redesigned to beautify and revitalize Fruitvale. The University worked with neighborhood groups to develop a plan and organized a nonprofit entity to work with the city to obtain federal funding. The funds supported the first transit-oriented development in a poor neighborhood in the US. The results: more transit use, less air pollution, more jobs in Fruitvale, new businesses and offices, affordable housing, and a safer, prettier neighborhood.

After years of local disputes about logging on national forests near the small town of QUINCY, CALIFORNIA, fired a gun through the window of a local environmentalist’s office, while others vandalized timber roads and equipment. The manager of the local timber mill, the environmentalist, and a county supervisor called an informal meeting in the town library – neutral ground where they could talk about how to protect forests without shutting down logging, the biggest employer in town. They invited other local leaders to participate, consulted with experts, and two years later agreed on a plan to reduce logging in sensitive areas but to cut old stands susceptible to wildfire.

State and national environmentalists objected to the logging, and the Forest Service refused to implement the plan. The Quincy Library Group won passage of a federal law that forced the Forest Service to begin implementing the plan. But then the Forest Service adopted a different plan for all national forests in the state, with less logging. After nine years the Quincy Library Group stopped its monthly meetings, saying that the statewide plan made it impossible to implement their plan. Industry fought on to overturn the statewide plan.

When three freighters ran aground on coral reefs off the FLORIDA KEYS in December 1989, local residents rallied behind a proposal to create a National Marine Sanctuary to protect the Keys. Congress created the sanctuary and directed the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to create a local advisory committee and to write a management plan. National environmental groups had field staff in the area and, like NOAA, were eager to see a strong sanctuary. When NOAA indicated it was prepared to shut some waters to commercial fishing and to regulate divers searching for sunken Spanish galleons, local opposition developed. NOAA’s planning team met in Maryland and wrote a draft plan that suggested that NOAA might regulate airline flights over the Keys and force the county to restrict land use to reduce polluted runoff. A crowd hanged the sanctuary manager in effigy.

Then the advisory committee stepped forward. The sanctuary manager (a long-time local resident who had once been a successful commercial fisherman) and the advisory committee organized dozens of small meetings to listen to both sides. The council drafted extensive revisions for the final plan and regulations, and NOAA accepted the revisions. Members of the advisory committee then persuaded state officials to approve of the plan, required because the sanctuary includes state waters. Most local fishermen now accept bans on fishing in some areas, including a spawning zone for a popular commercial species. Volunteers patrol the sanctuary as members of “Team Ocean”. They ride federal boats, give leaflets to violators, and ask for compliance.
Water flows slowly from central Florida through large sugarcane farms, into pumps and canals built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and eventually through vast state-owned water retention areas and into the **EVERGLADES NATIONAL PARK**, which is just north of the Keys. Water leaving the cane fields is contaminated by fertilizers and natural nutrients. In 1988, front-line state and federal staff helped a free-wheeling U.S. attorney from Miami, the equally independent superintendent of the Park, and the superintendent of a national wildlife refuge prepare a lawsuit against the state of Florida for allowing polluted water to flow into the park. "This is like a cancer, and the cancer is spreading south", said the park superintendent. None of the three had informed their supervisors about the impending litigation, but since a presidential election campaign was in progress, federal agencies were unwilling to disavow the suit. The state of Florida and its regional water management district spent over $6 million fighting the suit for two years.

Then a new Governor tried to settle the lawsuit. He had no success until he went into federal court and told the judge that he wanted to “surrender. . . . I have brought my sword, I want to find out who I can give my sword to.” Thus he forced the process out of courtroom and into the hands of agency scientists and environmentalists, some of whom had helped design the lawsuit. They developed a plan satisfactory to the judge, but the sugar industry refused to sign off and continued litigation. Then a new Secretary of the Department of Interior agreed with the governor to cosponsor negotiations and pressured the sugar industry to participate. An outside mediator was hired and helped negotiate an agreement that industry, the state legislature and Congress approved. The eventual result: $8 billion of government funds to clean up the flows south from farms and towns. Runoff from the cane fields is cleaner, and much of the plan has been implemented. But pressures from local real estate developers and local governments have forced some changes in the plan, which some environmentalists object to strongly.

There are hundreds of similar stories in the US – and no doubt in other countries too. But civic environmentalism takes time and is rarely 100% effective. Local environmental and social tensions remain, and cleanup costs money. But civic environmentalism usually gets implemented more or less, sooner or later. Civic environmentalism helps heal ruptures between people and between people and nature as it builds agreements to protect the environment.

**How Civic Environmentalism Works**

Civic environmentalism often begins in protest against gridlock or against actions by state or federal agencies that threaten local environmental, social and cultural values. In the Keys, NOAA bungled a planning process and threatened to preempt local autonomy. In Fruitvale, BART bungled plans for the garage. As the civic process gains strength, the emphasis shifts from the crisis to the opportunity for a fresh start in addressing deeper problems. In the Everglades the issue grew from polluted runoff from canefields to the timing, volume, and direction of the flow of water through southern Florida. As the focus of civic environmentalism deepens, participants gain a powerful self-confidence and sense of hope. As a member of the Applegate partnership, (which a helped resolve disputes about logging on federal lands in Oregon), explained,

“It was desperation and gridlock that brought us together, but it is trust and respect that keep us going.”

Participants start by meeting informally and discussing which interested parties should be invited to come to the table. The rule of thumb is usually that any group that could veto implementation of an agreement should be invited, including poor people, minorities, tribes and others that are often left out of local decision-making. The group recruits specific individuals to represent the interested parties then seeks informal agreements that they represent the full community.
This takes time and hard work – and listening carefully as each participant explains the values and interests of the group he or she represents, assimilating extensive technical information, and finding words to express agreement. Often meetings take place outside work hours.

Why do people invest so much energy and time in a collaborative process? Focusing one’s work on protecting the environmental values in a particular place can help meet a fundamental human need for meaning. Many participants care deeply about the place they live and work. They find that focusing on this place, trying to understand how it works, how the community functions, and how to help nurture and heal the place and the human community can provide deep personal satisfaction. This provides participants a sense of shared direction.

Civic environmentalism also needs cash and support from the outside. If regulators are not tough, polluters will have less reason to sit down with citizens and front-line agency staff to work out local problems, so civic energies may lie dormant. Scientific studies may help bring a shadow community of technical experts in business, academia, or environmental groups together to support civic efforts. Expensive research is needed to understand problems and to measure progress. And evening meetings, field trips, and professional mediators do not come cheap, and civic environmentalists often make proposals that are comprehensive and expensive. Outside sponsors – usually an elected official or a top agency manager – help get funding and information to support the civic process and implement the agreement.

Implementing the Results of Collaboration
The work is not over when a local collaborative process results in a plan. Civic environmentalists must next go back to the fragmented, federally-driven system to get authority and resources for implementation. Sometimes agencies can and will implement the plan, but since the purpose of local collaboration is often to “think outside the box”, civic plans often require agencies to behave differently and spend more. For example, the core group in the Everglades followed the logic of science to raise an issue that was not part of the original lawsuit -- the size and timing of flows into the park. Their plan cost billions.

Often local collaborators ask Congress or a state legislature to appropriate funds or pass a law to implement local agreements. Or civic environmentalists may ask a court to write the plan into a legal settlement – or ask agencies and polluters to enter into a contract that gives the force of law to the agreements they have negotiated. And several corporations that prefer public support and regulatory flexibility have written contracts with agencies, environmental groups, or communities promising to adopt environmental management practices that go "beyond compliance" to a higher level of protection than required by statute and regulation. This approach can be used in civic environmentalism also.

The Future of Civic Environmentalism: Challenges, Choices, and Opportunities
As civic efforts on environmental issues spread in the 1990s, several federal agencies took notice. President Clinton’s Council for Sustainable Development blessed these efforts, endorsing "civic engagement", to be achieved by agency efforts “fostering collaboration in problem solving and planning among companies, agencies, and citizens to achieve mutually beneficial results” (President's Commission on Sustainable Development, 1999, p. 77).

After the elections in 2000, the environment – and certainly climate change – lost its spot as a top federal priority. After 2008, economic issues were top priority for the federal government and many states. There was also a rising tide of public cynicism about politics and government – especially at the federal level. But the civic spirit – and civic environmentalism – have continued. Also, some environmental groups have begun working
directly with businesses that are taking environmentalism and climate change seriously, perhaps in part because of rising public dissatisfaction with government.

Some states and many local governments have also invested in sustainability – and in working closely with local governments, businesses, and neighborhoods to be “green”. There are many case studies of – and lots of enthusiasm about – sustainability in neighborhoods, businesses and big corporations. And experts have written many case studies and papers that attempt to measure sustainability. But to my knowledge there are few widely-accepted explanations about why some companies and places try to become sustainable while others do not – or about why some succeed and others do not. But many environmental groups have joined in – as partners, critics or both.

Many environmental non-profits and advocacy groups are also starting to work directly with businesses to reduce carbon emissions and work for sustainability. For example, the Conservation Law Foundation (CLF) – which serves New England states and has won many lawsuits to force command-and-control regulation since the 1980s, while also playing a key role in designing and creating the 9-state cap-and-trade program to reduce carbon emissions – recently started a 4-state effort to help farms and farmers' markets build a “sustainable local food system”. It seeks to help smaller farms and businesses that seek to be environmentally “sustainable” to be as efficient and successful as big firms in food business. It also works to provide easy access to healthy, fresh food to lower-income, largely urban populations at low prices. To this end, CLF is helping to provide professional services – law, food processing, marketing – to help farmers, processors, and others build a system to help bring organic food and environmentally “safe” to supermarkets in big cities in New England and New York.

There is also discussion – and studies by the Pew Foundation and others – suggesting that “millennials” are thinking about environmentalism differently. From my perch at a small New England liberal arts college since 2001, I have seen changes in how students think. Since about 2005, several of our best students in environmental policy courses have been deeply concerned about climate change and have looked for jobs – after graduating – in business or local governments. Before then, students didn’t talk about these jobs, and few took them.

I don’t ask them about it and have no data! But I do have a strong impression that there is a rising interest among “millennials” in finding other ways to assemble civic approaches to climate change. Not laws and federal programs but working with citizens or “clean” energy technologies, farmers’ markets and organic foods, and a wide array of other initiatives only loosely linked to big state and federal agencies. How far can this go? How long? I do not know. But I hope and pray, too.

Pope Francis began Laudato Si by saying
  “In this Encyclical, I would like to enter into a dialogue with all people about our common home.” [3]

His message will be welcome to many people who are active in “civic environmentalism” efforts. And the ideas and approaches that civic environmentalists have developed can contribute to the work of the Church and its members and supporters to stop climate change and other damage to the environment and to protect low-income people and communities from economic and social threats associated with environmental problems.

Note: The numbers in parentheses after quotes in the next – e.g. [3] above – are the numbers of the paragraphs in Laudato Si. The full text is available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html