

# *Laudato si'* - A Call For All People To Dialogue About Our Common Home

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## Summary:

In his encyclical *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis invites all of humanity into a dialogue about the care of our common home. This article explores how Francis uses the local magisterium of Bishops' Conferences from around the world, the historical magisterium of the teaching of earlier popes, and also the teaching of an Ecumenical Patriarch, along with his own creative thinking to present a cohesive teaching of the Church on the care of creation and of the poor. The encyclical presents: aspects of the current crisis; principles from the Judeo-Christian tradition on environment; roots and causes of the contemporary situation; proposals for dialogue and action; and guidelines for human development based on Christian spiritual experience. This article focuses on the common good in the creation tradition, a significant root cause in consumerism, and a way forward with Francis of Assisi through contemplation, conversion and creativity.

**Key words:** *Laudato si'*, Common Good, Ecology, the Poor, Contemplation, Conversion, Creativity, Francis of Assisi, Consumerism

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## ***Laudato si'* - Un llamado a todas las personas hacia el diálogo acerca de nuestro hogar común**

### **Resumen:**

En su encíclica *Laudato si'*, el Papa Francisco nos invita a toda la humanidad a un diálogo sobre el cuidado de nuestro hogar común. Esta obra explora como el Papa utiliza el magisterio local de las Conferencias Episcopales del mundo, el magisterio histórico de las enseñanzas de papas anteriores, y hasta la enseñanza de un Patriarca Ecuménico, con su pensamiento creativo para presentar una enseñanza unida de la Iglesia acerca del cuidado de la creación y los pobres. La encíclica presenta: aspectos de la crisis actual, principios de la tradición judeo-cristiana acerca del medio ambiente, raíces y causas de la situación actual, y líneas guías para el desarrollo humano desde la experiencia Cristiana espiritual. Este artículo enfoca en el bien común en la tradición de la creación, una causa significativo del consumismo, y un camino adelante con Francisco de Asís a través de la contemplación, la conversión y la creatividad.

**Palabras clave:** *Laudato si'*, Bien Común, Ecología, los Pobres, Contemplación, Conversión, Creatividad, Francisco de Asís, Consumismo



## 1. INTRODUCTION

**P**ope Francis' much anticipated encyclical on care for the earth and for the poor of the earth, *Laudato si'*, was released to the public on June 18, 2015. That day the media devoured its contents and started a process of dialogue about its message on television, in the newspapers, in blogs and journals around the world. An earlier conference at the Vatican had already initiated the conversation. Bishops around the globe also began to offer their perspectives, and proceeded to do as Pope Francis proposed when he wrote, "I would like to enter into dialogue with all people about our common home (LS, 3)".

Most encyclicals are addressed primarily to the bishops of the world, while some others are addressed to priests, religious and all the baptized. Francis notes that Pope Saint John XXIII wrote his encyclical "*Pacem in Terris (Peace on Earth) to the entire 'Catholic world' and indeed 'to all men and women of good will.'*" (LS, 3) In this encyclical, Pope Francis drops all qualifiers; he does not only wish to address people of good will. Considering the gravity of the situation he writes, "*Now, faced as we are with global environmental deterioration, I wish to address every person living on this planet* (LS, 3)." This invitation to the whole world to enter into dialogue is just one of the striking aspects of this most recent encyclical. Pope Francis is inviting the whole world into the dialogue. He offers his ideas and contributions to the dialogue, but the encyclical also makes it quite clear that he is not trying to provide all the answers. This is a global problem, and some global responses are needed. At the same



time, local and regional responses are needed to contribute toward the whole solution. The creative energies of the entire planet are urgently needed to respond to this global crisis.

## 2. UNITING THE LOCAL AND UNIVERSAL TEACHING OF THE CHURCH

In *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis quotes twenty-one times from documents prepared by Bishops' Conferences from around the world<sup>1</sup>. Eight citations are found in the first chapter which seeks to describe the current situation. That is just over one third of the footnoted comments. In the second chapter Pope Francis explores the Judeo-Christian principles that bolster the relevance of Christian concern for the environment. Here again eight footnoted citations of the magisterium from Episcopal Conferences are used to support the ideas presented in this section. Just one text from the Social Justice Commission of the Argentinian Bishops' Conference is quoted in the section on the human roots of the ecological crisis, while one insight from the Portuguese Bishops' Conference supports the section on integral ecology. Three more insights from episcopal conferences around the world are used in the fifth and final chapter that considers ways to continue the dialogue and bring it to action. Pope Francis has said that he wants Episcopal Conferences to have a more acknowledged role in the Church<sup>2</sup>. As in other instances, the pope is a person who puts his ideas into practice. Clearly the teachings of the Bishops' Conferences made a significant impact on this contribution of Pope Francis to the universal magisterium and more specifically to the Social Teachings of the Church.

<sup>1</sup> The following end notes of *Laudato si'* cite material from Episcopal Conferences: 22, 24, 25, 26, 27, 30, 31, 32, 42, 55, 56, 65, 70, 77, 78, 94, 113, 124, 127, 133, and 153. A total of 172 end notes are found in this encyclical.

<sup>2</sup> FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013) 32. The Second Vatican Council stated that, like the ancient patriarchal Churches, episcopal conferences are in a position "to contribute in many and fruitful ways to the concrete realization of the collegial spirit". Yet this desire has not been fully realized, since a juridical status of episcopal conferences which would see them as subjects of specific attributions, including genuine doctrinal authority, has not yet been sufficiently elaborated. Excessive centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates the Church's life and her missionary outreach

By quoting from the magisterium of the local Churches from around the world, Pope Francis is affirming the wisdom of God present in local Churches. Including ideas in this encyclical from texts published by Bishops' Conferences is one way that Pope Francis is uniting the Church, bringing together insights from around the globe to enrich the teaching of the universal Church. A review of the encyclicals written by Pius XII, St. John XXIII, Blessed Paul VI, St. John Paul II and Benedict XVI, all of which can be found on the Vatican website [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va), reveals that only one previous encyclical of those pontiffs had quoted a text from a Bishops' Conference. Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* twice sites CELAM's document from Puebla<sup>3</sup>. The innovative aspect of Pope Francis' encyclical is that he integrates ideas from Bishops' Conferences throughout his encyclical, using their regional insights to build a world vision of the need to care for creation and for the poor.

*Laudato si'* also reaches back into the tradition of Catholic social teaching. Clear connections with the magisterium of Popes St. John XIII, Blessed Paul VI, St. John Paul II, and Benedict XVI are shown. Their encyclicals, apostolic exhortations, various discourses and other writings are cited 78 times in this encyclical<sup>4</sup>. Citations from Scripture, the fathers of the Church, other writings by the saints and about the saints also round out the references to tradition. In another effort to unite the larger Church, Pope Francis remarks that "*Outside the Catholic Church, other Churches and Christian communities –and other religions as well– have expressed deep concern and offered valuable reflections on issues which all of us find disturbing (LS, 7).*" Then he dedicates two paragraphs to the proclamations on ecology and the care of the planet of "*beloved*

<sup>3</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio* (7 December 1990), footnotes 115 remembering the preferential option for the poor in receiving the mission, and 126 which notes the need for the Latin American church to participate in the mission ad gentes.

<sup>4</sup> The following end notes of *Laudato si'* cite material from documents and speeches of previous popes: 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 41, 43, 46, 48, 49, 54, 57, 58, 63, 68, 69, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 79, 81, 82, 89, 90, 93, 95, 96, 97, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105, 106, 107, 108, 109, 110, 111, 112, 116, 120, 125, 129, 135, 136, 137, 138, 145, 146, 147, 149, 150, 152, 156, 157, 164, 165, 166, 167, 168, 169.



*Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, with whom we share hope of full ecclesial communion (LS, 7-9).*" By citing the words of the Patriarch, Pope Francis is recognizing Bartholomew as an important voice of a sister Church. In all of these ways Pope Francis is effectively demonstrating his understanding of the Petrine Office, uniting the voices of the Church around the world in responding to the need for all of humanity to care for our common home and all of us who share that home. These examples also demonstrate clearly how the dialogue about creation has already been going on for some time, and how the world is at a critical point.

### 3. THREE KEY CONCEPTS FROM THE ENCYCLICAL

In light of the fact that Pope Francis has reached far and wide to unite the voices of the Church on this issue of care for our common home, it would seem appropriate to consider what he hopes to accomplish. Clearly he is encouraging women and men of the world to enter into dialogue, clearly indicating that he does not have all of the answers, but he does propose some broader proposals for dialogue and action. At the end of his introduction, he describes the objectives he had in mind for this encyclical: to review characteristics of the current crisis; to consider principles from Judeo-Christian tradition which validate a common commitment to the care of the environment; to explore roots and causes of the existing situation; to offer proposals for dialogue and action as well as guidelines for human development based on our Christian spiritual experience (LS 15). Pope Francis explores many perspectives to examine how people of this world can truly care for our common home. This reflection will examine three different manners in which Francis is inviting humanity to confront one of the disturbing realities of our age. Reaching back into the Christian tradition, Francis tries to help us recover a sense of creation as a part of the common good. Confronting the current situation, Francis identifies consumerism as a key root cause that has grown out of the individualism expressed in modern thought. Moving forward, he identifies the figure of Francis of Assisi who help us discover contemplation, conversion, and creativity as spiritual values that will guide us on the way to care for all of creation.

### 3.1. Creation and the Common Good

*God saw how good it was.* (Gen 1: 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, and 31). This refrain is repeated throughout the account of the days of creation in the first chapter of Genesis. The Judeo-Christian perspective on all of life is that life is imbued with the goodness of God. Men and women created in the image of the Creator are entrusted with the care of that creation. Francis writes, *“The best way to restore men and women to their rightful place, putting an end to their claim to absolute dominion over the earth, is to speak once more of the figure of a Father who creates and who alone owns the world. Otherwise, human beings will always try to impose their own laws and interests on reality (LS 75)”*.

So all is created and ultimately owned by God. Women and men as creatures recognize and respect their relationship with God, and their only fitting response is one of praise. The earth, the mountains, the forests, the rivers, the seas, all the animals, birds and fish praise God is their reason for being. Human beings do the same, when not caught up in themselves. In work and play and care for one another, for the plants and animals, human beings lift a song of praise to God. The ravages of war, pollution, strip mining, accumulation of waste, dragnet fishing, dumping of chemical waste, and pollution of the atmosphere through the pervasive burning of carbon based fuels has, over the last few centuries, introduced major discord into the harmony of God’s creation. Social discord is another aspect of the same rupture of right relationships that God designed for all of creation. Homeless people, refugees, the untouchables, persons with disabilities for whom no one cares, persons living from whatever they are able to scavenge from the dump, those addicted to drugs and living in abandoned buildings are all part of the social refuse created by societies in the world today. This discord is not the result of the harmonious relationships that God has created. Rather it is the consequence of human choices which let sin enter into the world.

Society is ultimately a coming together of women and men for mutual benefit. A basic principal for true social well-being is the



common good. Pope Francis quotes a definition of the common good from *Gaudium et Spes* 26, a document of the Second Vatican Council. The common good is, “*the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfilment*”. This basic principal of social justice is rooted in respect for the human person, requires that the poor are recognized with dignity, and extends into future generations in our care for creation, which is on loan to the people of today for our care, use and preservation for all living beings in the future. Creation is then a common good. It is not the possession of people in the present to use and dispose of as they please. It is a gift given by God, out of love, and all of creation is the object of God’s love (LS 77).

### 3.2. Consumerism

Consumerism is pervasive and even dominant in much of the world. Even the word “consume” brings images of resources burning to ash, or inflowing into a machine, and after all is extracted from those resources for the purpose at hand, the refuse is discarded. A major indicator of economic health is consumer spending. When consumers are not spending, economists can at times become quite concerned. It is true that a certain flow of goods and services indicates healthy economic activity that meets the basic needs of persons in society. On another level there are aspects of modern economic systems that try to create a need for the product that a particular company wants to sell. Marketing seeks to create that sense of need for a product, which helps to increase demand for the product, and of course tends to push the price higher. The competition for getting “the best” leads to bigger and more expensive homes, cars, electronic appliances, and just about anything that one can think of buying. Houses and warehouses full of things that rarely get used are the result of extreme consumerism. Of course, the consumption of resources and energy by a relative few is untenable in the face of the many who call this planet home. Although many cannot participate at this level due to their limited economic resources, too often the consumer culture creates frustration for those unable to get everything that they want.



In Belize a local music group sings about family members living in the U.S from the point of view of those remaining back home in Belize. The song is entitled, "Send this, send that". Requests come from family and friends to send consumer items back home. In the song, the items seem to get bigger and bigger, starting with blue jeans and progressing to a bicycle, to a colour TV, to a car. Since much of the electronic media is produced in the wealthier countries, the commercials promoting consumer items are often repeated on cable, satellite and airwave systems around the world. Advertising professionals know how to sell their products, and ultimately the needs that they promote and often create for their U.S. and European target audiences also form young minds around the world in that same consumer mentality.

Tourism, one of the economic engines of the Caribbean, is basically a consumer driven industry. Some are questioning the value of certain forms of mass tourism, such as cruise ships. These massive floating hotels bring thousands of tourists into various ports. Their huge numbers most certainly have an impact on the environment. While leaving behind some economic benefit to the country, they also leave behind waste, and some people living in the Caribbean are questioning the practice of flushing liquid and solid waste into the seas, and whether that discharge has a negative impact on the reefs and aquatic ecosystem. Consumerism is a pervasive attitude that encourages people to find their meaning in the things that they have, along with the trips that they can collect to various destinations around the world, expecting to consume the best of local fare and encounter the best of service at the cheapest price.

Consumerism is a mentality which understands the things of the world as all being for sale, if one just has enough money to buy whatever he or she desires. Pope Francis recognizes this as one of the root causes of the environmental ruin those with economic power are leaving behind in this world. This philosophy, based on the right of individuals to take whatever they can afford to buy, with no regard to its effects on the environment nor its effects on the poor in society, is leading the world to a situation we may not



be able to fix. The polar ice caps are melting at a rate not seen in recorded history. Average global temperatures are increasing, and the consensus of scientific studies say that it is the result of our burning of carbon based fuels. Our technological advances have made travel faster, temperatures in homes and offices more comfortable, electronic and electro-domestic products more available and lives generally more comfortable for certain sectors of society and some groups in a relatively few nations. These same advances use energy and other resources of our world at a rate that is unsustainable.

In 2005, the Bishops of the Antilles Episcopal Conference wrote: "*human beings constitute an integral part of the environment, the destruction of which impacts negatively especially on the poor. At the very heart of sustainable development is the quality of life of our people*"<sup>5</sup>. They are affirming that one can in no way pit the care of the environment against the care of the poor. One fits hand in glove with the other. Policies that try to protect the land and forget about the needs of the people are destined to fail. Here again Pope Francis reminds us, "*Any approach to an integral ecology, which by definition does not exclude human beings, needs to take account of the value of labour... (LS 124)*". Recent infrastructural projects in Belize have, at times, taken the importance of human labor into account. One contractor has made it a goal to maximize laborers in his projects. He uses small batch mixers for the concrete. Men with wheel barrels and shovels transport and pour the mix into place. In city projects this company hires workers from street gangs. In rural areas many of the workers come from the Mayan villages where usually they can only find work on their own subsistence farms. By maximizing the labor rather than the profit, this particular company is helping to create social cohesion, as workers find pride in their work, resources to put food on the table and to buy school supplies for their children. This is one way that some are encountering alternatives to the consumer mentality.

<sup>5</sup> Antilles Episcopal Conference, Pastoral Letter *Care for the Earth - Our Responsibility An Invitation to Reflection* (April 2005), 9.

### 3.3. Contemplation, Conversion and Creativity - Spiritual Values in the Franciscan tradition

A few words about St. Francis are appropriate here. The Bishops of the Antilles Episcopal Conference wrote in their pastoral letter on the environment, "*St. Francis interceded for all who groaned - the poor, displaced, refugees, hungry, homeless, fish, birds, animals, polluted rivers and seas, polluted air, land perishing because of drought, and he continues to intercede for them*"<sup>6</sup>. In Christian history, Francis of Assisi is the mystical figure who best brings together care for the poor and care for creation. He threw off the trappings of the well to do society of his time in order to embrace holy poverty. His friars or little brothers dedicated themselves to a life of poverty and proclaiming the Gospel of the one who made himself poor to enrich humanity. Pope Francis writes, "*I believe that Saint Francis is the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically (LS, 10)*". Recovering the attitude of St. Francis is essential to discovering a humble attitude about creation and the place for humanity in all that God has made. Contemplation, awe, wonder, humility, joy, love, and peace are values that St. Francis lived and passed on to the sisters and brothers who continue to recognize him as their spiritual father. Many Christians who are not Roman Catholic, and people of other faiths are fascinated by the life and the poetry left to us by Francis of Assisi. This tradition is a key to finding the way back from the consumer society which is devouring the resources of our earth and often leaving ruin in its wake.

In order to replace the pervasive mentality of consumerism, society needs to develop a new way of perceiving what is most important in the world. In *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis is recommending that one way might be to reach back into the Christian Tradition and re-discover a new way of relating to each other and to all the created world. Francis of Assisi gives humanity the example of how this can be done. In contemplation, in conversion, in creativity,

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 64.



people can follow Francis of Assisi and embrace all of creation as God's precious gift.

“Saint Francis, faithful to the Scriptures, invites us to see nature as a magnificent book in which God speaks to us and grants us a glimpse of his infinite beauty and goodness... Francis asked that part of the friary garden always be left untouched, so that wild flowers and herbs could grow there, and those who saw them could raise their minds to God, the Creator of such beauty. Rather than a problem to be solved, the world is a joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and praise (LS, 12)”.

Contemplation is a stance towards the world that leads to honor, respect and praise of God. The one who contemplates takes time to look into the wonder and the beauty of what is. It leads to awe, and to treasuring the great gift of God. Anyone who takes time to contemplate, begins to see the world with different eyes. In Belize, 40% of the land is set aside in national parks and preserves. Cooperation with the neighbouring countries of Mexico and Guatemala has even created corridors for large animals such as jaguars and mountain tapirs. As populations grow, there are more and more pressures for the use of lands. Even plants and animals in the protected areas are in danger, as illegal hunting and logging often strips biodiversity from the land. None-the-less, the Franciscan tradition of setting aside a piece of the garden for wild growth is one way that nations on a larger scale can preserve some of the treasures of nature for this and future generations.

“In calling to mind the figure of Saint Francis of Assisi, we come to realize that a healthy relationship with creation is one dimension of overall personal conversion, which entails the recognition of our errors, sins, faults and failures, and leads to the heartfelt repentance and desire to change (LS 218)”.

One of the ways to move from the individualism of a consumer mentality to an integral ecology is through conversion. Coming to know and to accept our part in the process that has led us to where

we are is essential for finding a way out. Some do not want to recognize that there is a problem. They claim that the change in climate is not due to human activity, it is part of the natural change over centuries in the climate of the earth. While at times unsightly, the stripping of the earth by mining operations is necessary for the economic good. If this company does not do it, the Chinese or the Russians or someone else will. They say that these ecological proposals are going to bankrupt hard working companies and put many people out of work. It is much easier to persist in the present mentality than to change.

“The ecological conversion needed to bring about lasting change is also a community conversion. This conversion calls for a number of attitudes which can foster a spirit of generous care, full of tenderness... gratitude and gratuitousness... loving awareness... greater creativity and enthusiasm (LS 220)”.

Along with conversion, creativity is another important capacity to confront this reality. In his appeal, Pope Francis said, *“Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home. Here I want to recognize, encourage and thank all those striving in countless ways to guarantee the protection of the home which we share (LS 13).”* Women and men of today still have the gifts needed to deal with this problem. One amazing thing about human beings is their creative potential. *God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him, male and female he created them (Gen. 1, 27).* Perhaps that is the divine spark, the way in which human beings are created in the divine image, the gift of creativity. When properly channelled, with the respect and reverence for all of creation, that creativity can move mountains.

“As the bishops of South Africa have stated: ‘Everyone’s talents and involvements 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. (LS 14)”.



Having united us, pulling together ideas from around the world, Pope Francis brings us back to the beginning, to our creation story in Genesis. With the journey of conversion leading humanity back from sin to the harmony of the garden. Humanity can encounter hope in the midst of this situation in which some would be lost in despair. Humanity can discover hope in recognizing that women and men and all that exists is created by God. That realization of being part of the created world leads to humility and respect for all of creation.

#### 4. SOME CHALLENGES FOR THE CHURCH IN THE CARIBBEAN

Pope Francis addresses every person living on this planet. He invites all people into a dialogue about our common home. That dialogue suggests more than talk. It is a dialogue leading to action in caring for the poor and for all of creation. So here in the Caribbean, what does that mean for the local Church? The Antilles Episcopal Conference (AEC) wrote a *Declaration on Climate Change* (8 June 2015) in anticipation of Pope Francis' encyclical. Among other recommendations, the Bishops of the AEC call on all people:

- “To consider the spiritual and moral dimensions of climate change.
- To adopt a fair and legally binding global agreement (Conference of Parties 21st session in Paris, France for December of 2015).
- To promote sustainable energy for all.
- To fund the adaption needs of the most vulnerable”<sup>7</sup>.

At the same time the Bishops committed to action in their own communities through:

- “A process of education of all of our peoples on the causes and possible effects of climate change on our vulnerable communities.

<sup>7</sup> Antilles Episcopal Conference, *Declaration on Climate Change* (8 June 2015), 10.

- To develop programs to educate people on reducing our energy and water consumption and that allows us to care for our natural resources and sustainable lifestyles in general.
- Collaboration with Government, Corporations and Civil Society to put climate change on the national agenda<sup>8</sup>.

These recommendations and commitments certainly are a call for the local Churches of the Caribbean to become much more active with governments and people on exploring ways to make societies sustainable and caring for creation. With many institutions: schools, churches, social service organizations, and health care facilities, the Roman Catholic Church has an opportunity to explore ways to promote sustainable energy to power these operations. Solar and wind power are two energy options that continue to improve on their generation of power. The most expensive aspects of these systems is often the battery storage units. Countries that encourage the development of alternative energy resources allow these systems to feed into the energy grid during peak production hours, selling the energy to the system, then using energy from the system when production is low. These systems generally require a fairly large input of capital. In some places, grants are available to encourage their development. Besides producing energy and saving money for Church institutions, the installation of solar systems can be a wonderful educational opportunity for school children as well as adults. Solar companies have even developed curricula to use in schools where their systems have been introduced. Exploring ways to introduce renewable energy systems is one practical, concrete way that the Church could lead society in exploring options to better care for the planet.

Considering the spiritual and moral dimensions of caring for the earth is another essential area that the Church can provide resources to encourage the dialogue in the nations of the Caribbean. *Laudato si'* is a rich encyclical and many resources are already being developed to promote dialogue. One richness of the diocese

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 11.



throughout the Caribbean is a variety of cultures. Belize has a small population with a rich variety of cultures: Kriol, Mestizo, Garifuna, Q'uechi Maya, Mopan Maya, Maya Yucatec, Lebanese, East Indian, Chinese, and Mennonite. Amongst these cultures there are certainly a number that can help to ground the society in a care for the land and all who live on it. These are perhaps the strongest anchors to counter the pervasive consumer culture in mass media. Tapping those cultural roots can ground a people in the love of their land. This is another area that the Church can facilitate dialogue and the treasuring of traditions that connect to the past and open possibilities for sustainable living into the future. The challenge that Pope Francis puts before all of humanity is indeed a paradigm shift. It calls humanity out of self-centred sinfulness of consumerism into the harmony that God wants for all of creation. Perhaps humanity will be able to learn to sing again with Francis of Assisi to the praise of God in all creation.

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