

Lismullin Farming Seminar
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Matthew Dempsey, Chairman, The Agricultural Trust

Custodians of the Environment *Laudato Si'* on the Care of our Common Home (Pope Francis)

The 2015 encyclical from Pope Francis on the care of our Common Home shows a man and a Pope that is visibly in touch with modern scientific, environmental and social issues.

I probably should not have been surprised but I was at the breath of material covered and the depth of material covered and the depth of understanding of modern issues, but placed in a firm framework of faith and belief.

Attitudes to religion and faith vary enormously but I feel there is one central factor that we are in danger of overlooking. As we progress educationally, I firmly believe that we have a responsibility to ensure that our religious education continues in step with our secular education. As we progress in science, music, languages, we should outgrow the simplistic interpretations and the simple observations of rules for rules sake of our childhood, a religion if it is to have a real meaning must be capable of satisfying the intellectual rigour of an intellectual giant such as St Thomas Aquinas or the late Cardinal Basil Hume.

Pope Francis, early on in this encyclical gets to the nub of it when he quotes Pope Paul VI when he says that scientific and economic progress should be accompanied by authentic social and moral progress. This logical follow on from this is that our lives should be guided by some indisputable facts, the Holy Father makes the utterly sensible post that if no indisputable truths guide our lives then human freedom is limitless and human life is pointless but we all need limits and humanity itself demonstrably needs limits and a belief system.

From a farmers' point of view, the Pontiff strikes a number of chords that resonate strongly. He speaks approvingly of a circular model of production – every farmer, in my view, will at least approve of, if not aspire to a system where the manure of his animals goes back onto his own land to produce next year's crops of cereals and grass.

There is something inherently satisfying in growing on one's own farm the protein for the farm's livestock, the straw for the bedding or feeding and ideally using the household food waste to rear a pig or two and the leftover chaff to feed poultry. Ideally I would like to be able to use anaerobic digesters to better utilise slurry while trapping the greenhouse generating ammonia and methane gases for industrial or domestic use. But, how many see this form of circular production as ethical in the broadest sense or simply a pragmatic response to the dangers of a market dominance by a small number of dominant fertilizer and input supply companies?

What has surprised me about Pope Francis' encyclical is the depth of the advice he seems to have received and how he has absorbed that advice and moulded it into a logical approach to both life and the environment, that man and farmers find themselves in. He discusses knowledgeable the question of climate change and the various ways of mitigating it including the new carbon storage technology but he also discusses biodiversity in an extraordinarily enlightened way. First, he pleads for a policy of safeguarding the range of plant species that we have on the very sensible basis that the records suggest that plants can be a really important source of medicines for humans. He says rightly that a blind confidence in technical

solutions is no longer credible but that of course does not mean that technology should be abandoned. But in his suggestions for preserving and enhancing biodiversity, he draws attention to the role of wildlife corridors which are at the very front of modern environmental thinking. And, while he makes a plea for the retention of forests and wetlands, he is clear that the cost of the burden of conservation should not simply fall on the local inhabitants.

I found his quotes from the Book of Genesis really interesting in that while we are all familiar with the granting of power to man over the earth and the beasts that inhabit it and the birds in the air, fewer of us are familiar with the quote also mentioned by Pope Francis that there is also an obligation on us to keep and till the earth. In other words, this power over the earth is not a licence for unrestrained exploitation.

I think, if there is a constant theme running through the encyclical, it is the need for balance, the need to use our unique God-given intelligence but yet to avoid anthropocentrism. He gives us the example of how concerted international action effectively resolved the ozone layers problem and, while this encyclical was written before the Paris Climate Change Summit, it recognised that previous Climate Change Summits had been disappointing.

Pope Francis explicitly calls for the internationalising of the problem and in many ways, prefaces what the Paris Summit actually delivered – a remarkable prescience.

To use the inventions of science in a responsible way for example, he acknowledges the potential for the GM or genetically modified organisms but warns against the development of the so-called terminator gene, in other words where sterility is artificially bred into seeds so that their propagation can be rigorously controlled and artificially high prices charged.

He also calls for a sense of ethics in strong countries dealing with less developed and poorer societies – he was obviously deeply affected by the Union Carbide accident at Bhopal in India.

Farmers are always conscious of the rights of private property. Given that the Pontiff is a native of South America, a continent where land holdings can be enormous and where the levels of inequality can be extraordinary, he points out that as Pope Paul put it, the church does indeed defend the legitimate right to private property but as he puts it, there is always a social mortgage on all private property. But the whole Christian tradition has never recognised the right to private property as absolute or inviolable.

I think most of us as farmers would go along with that but even here in Ireland we have had some interesting recent examples of how different bodies have different rights over our property. Just a few miles from here, we saw the IDA defeated in the Supreme Court in their bid to buy a farm just beside Intel in Leixlip. The organisation cited their powers of compulsory acquisition if land was needed but the law said it had to be for a very specific purpose rather than as part of their general land bank policy. I find the difference in powers between the County Councils and the ESB really interesting. I have had both of them through my land within the last few years.

The whole area of private property – ESB and County Councils – strikes a chord but it is when he is dealing with some modern developments that he displays a remarkable grasp of the realities of today's world. All of us as farmers are keenly aware of what modern science is delivering – the development of fungicides in the late '70's and early '80's transformed cereal growing in this part of the country. It's easy at this remove not to appreciate that these developments of technology, if they had occurred earlier, would have spared us the potato famine but in the modern world, they have lifted Irish winter wheat yields to among the very

highest in the world; but their development has led to making life more complicated. The Pope speaks of the fragmentation of knowledge – we in fact increasingly lack the capacity to control and account for our power. Not just in the application of fungicides and pesticides of which the Pontiff is clearly aware of the danger they pose if not used properly so as farmers, we are forced down the road of hiring specialist knowledge to compile the nutrient management plan for crops, fertilizer and increasingly, there are limitations placed on the active ingredient applied per acre. In these circumstances, you would imagine that there would be a really broad welcome for at least some GM developments such as the blight-free potato that dramatically reduces the need for spraying but it's clear that EU legislators and consumers have difficulty in seeing the whole picture. A dilemma referred to by former Taoiseach and EU Ambassador to the US, John Bruton, this places a real onus on us, in my view, to have a well informed and ethical farm organisation to lobby government and act as a counterweight against the interest of the enormous input suppliers, processors and supermarket chains.

In several places in the Bible, in both the old and New Testament, there are references to the need for human beings to work. I have already referred to the statements in Genesis that the right to dominion over the earth is matched by an obligation to care for and till the earth while the Pope also refers to man as having been created with a vocation to work. Implied in this is an obligation to care for nature and the environment and it is these aspects that have attracted the most publicity surrounding this encyclical. But in delving somewhat deeper, the Pope has some really perceptive messages in calling for a sustainable and diversified agriculture. I just wonder which came first in his view, the CAP reform measures on Greening – the three-crop rule on tillage farms and the European determination to try and regulate the maintenance of permanent grassland. But he is really interesting in his views on greenhouse gases where he is against a high price for carbon on the basis that it simply maintains the status quo. This whole debate even following the Paris Accord is, in my view, only in its infancy. Taking it that a full livestock unit emits roughly 1 tonne of carbon per year, under normal conditions of western prices, this would not be an impossible burden but of course he is right, it would preserve the world income and wealth status quo. In the context of this particular area, he is perceptive on the process of development.

I was surprised at his enthusiasm for renewable energy, including solar power but he calls for objective environmental impact assessment and it could be a direct reference to planned windmills in Meath when he talks of a shrinkage of visual horizons.

Farmers can identify readily with the Pontiff's thoughts and sense of ethics and a call for a lack of extravagance and rampant consumerism.

An old piece of country advice is to live as if you will die tomorrow but farm as if you will live forever. To have as a guiding principle that you will hand on a farm or organisation in a better state than you found it. This should be the scorecard, not just how much money you accumulated by fair means or foul.

Summing up, we have to wonder why this sensible, perceptive knowledgeable document received so little public debate and analysis. Nobody wants to return to the provincial pages of my childhood, full of the Lenten encyclicals of the Bishops. But there has to be a recognition of ultimately what a man like Pope Francis and the Church ultimately stands for. It's that appreciation and recognition that has to some extent been lost in modern Ireland. Have people become so mesmerized by the scandals that they overlook the selfless sacrifices of thousands as they tried over the centuries to do good.

Matt Dempsey

Matt Dempsey is one of the foremost authorities on national and international agricultural policy and industry trends; his knowledge, critique and assessment of Government and EU policy is highly valued by the agri-food sector. He is Chairman of The Agricultural Trust, publishers of the Irish Farmers Journal and The Irish Field. He retired as Editor of the Irish Farmers Journal after 25 years in 2013. He is a former President of the European Agricultural Publishers Association and the Irish Grassland Association. He is President of the RDS having been Chairman of the Board for 10 years. Also, Matt is a past Chair of the National Agricultural Research Institute and ACOT, the national advisory and education body before their amalgamation into Teagasc. A graduate in Agricultural Science from UCD, he also runs an intensive tillage and beef farm in Co Kildare. In 2010, Matt was awarded an Honorary Degree of Doctor of Science from University College Dublin. In 2011, Matt was conferred with an Honorary Doctorate (DLitt) from Harper Adams University. He is a member of the Board of the National Gallery of Ireland and in 2012, Matt was appointed Chairman of the National Newspapers of Ireland. In 2013, Matt was appointed as Chairman of the Irish National Stud. Matt is also Chairman of the Board of IdentiGEN, a leading provider of DNA-based solutions to the agri-food industry with operations in Ireland, UK, USA and Canada.