



Pope Francis's Unreserved Embrace of Animal Protection Full length Interview with Dr. Charles Camosy

This morning, the Vatican released [Pope Francis's new encyclical on the environment](#), and it is truly historic. The encyclical, or letter, from the Pope is full of references to animals and calls on all of us to embrace a more humane path. The encyclical is named "Praised Be" (Laudato Si) after St. Francis of Assisi's *Canticle of the Sun*, in which the Saint praises God for animals and creation.

In the encyclical, the Pope reminds us, "We read in the Gospel that Jesus says of the birds of the air that 'not one of them is forgotten before God' (*Lk* 12:6). How then can we possibly mistreat them or cause them harm?"

The Pope also calls on us all to be better stewards of all creation, noting that "[e]ach organism, as a creature of God, is good and admirable in itself." He condemns the view that humankind has "absolute domination over other creatures" as a misinterpretation of God's grant of "dominion" over creation.

The Pope notes that "our indifference or cruelty towards fellow creatures of this world sooner or later affects the treatment we mete out to other human beings. We have only one heart, and the same wretchedness which leads us to mistreat an animal will not be long in showing itself in our relationships with other people. Every act of cruelty towards any creature is 'contrary to human dignity.'"

And the Pope directly addresses animal testing, noting "the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that experimentation on animals is morally acceptable only if it remains within reasonable limits [and] contributes to caring for or saving human lives... human power has limits and that it is contrary to human dignity to cause animals to suffer or die needlessly."

I asked [Dr. Charles Camosy](#), professor of Theological and Social Ethics at Fordham University and author of *For Love of Animals*, for insight into the significance of this encyclical. Here are some excerpts from our conversation:

What has Catholicism's traditional view been on animals and their welfare?

There are very diverse ideas in the tradition on this topic. In some ways that is frustrating because there isn't an obvious answer to lot of current questions about animals. But in other ways it is exciting because there is a lot of room for the growth of new and interesting ideas...including some found in [Pope Francis' new encyclical](#). I'd say that a pretty consistent view over the centuries is that animals are not mere "things" or "tools" to use as a mere

means to an end. We are to treat animals with more respect than that. Indeed, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* insists that we “owe animals kindness” and that we should not cause them to suffer or die without great need. Beyond that, the Church has a lot to figure out—and *Laudato Si’* is certainly a major step along that road.

What moral limits should we consider placing on the market and technology to protect people, creation, and animals? Should price and efficiency continue to drive animal agriculture?

History shows us that, without protections, an unrestrained market will ignore and even reward the violent marginalization of inconvenient populations. Both human and non-human. In the new encyclical, Pope Francis shows how this is especially true when market forces are married to the imperative to use technology to do things cheaper and faster—regardless of moral cost. The Pope calls us to resist an amoral rush to consume via technology in an unrestrained market. This disconnects us not only the proper value of the things we consume—and of the people who work to bring those goods to us—but ultimately it disconnects us *from ourselves*. Consumerism is a soul-crushing practice, designed specifically to leave us unsatisfied so we keep on consuming more and more with no end in sight. While this might benefit the stock prices of big corporations, it kills the human spirit—and, significantly, the wider creation. As Pope Francis says in the encyclical: the ecological crisis is a primarily a spiritual crisis. We not only need new laws...we need to *become different kinds of people*, living our lives in fundamentally different ways. Ways which resist the quick and easy path of consumerism.

What current practices involving animals are inconsistent with the Pope’s vision of our relationship with creation and animals?

In his Apostolic Exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel* Pope Francis almost certainly invokes the plight of animals in factory farms when he speaks of “other weak and defenceless beings who are frequently at the mercy of economic interests or indiscriminate exploitation.” In such farms, technology is used to gain more protein units per square foot, thus making more money for the corporation and cheaper food for the consumer. But this is precisely the kind of consumerist social structure called out more generally in *Laudato Si’*. Instead of buying purely on price, disconnecting ourselves from the value of the animal, of the workers in the farms, and from our own human good, we must reorient our lives in new ways. We must reconnect to the means of production, and consume good based on something other than price. Indeed, the new encyclical calls for a new kind of “asceticism”: one which cultivates new practices of resistance to “greed and compulsion” and instead seeing creation as something more than merely a set of objects to be “used and controlled.”

Indeed, this is based on the theological idea—taught by both John Paul II and Benedict XVI—that *all creation has intrinsic value*. Here are some important quotes from Francis making this point:

“It is not enough, however, to think of different species merely as potential “resources” to be exploited, while overlooking the fact that they have value in themselves.” (#33)

“Where certain species are destroyed or seriously harmed, the values involved are incalculable.” (#36)

“We must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God’s image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures.” (#67)

When we think of the cosmos as “mere ‘space’ into which objects can be thrown with complete indifference”, then the “intrinsic dignity of the world is thus compromised” (#115)

Creation has “an intrinsic value” which is “independent of [its] usefulness. Each organism, as a creature of God, is good and admirable in itself.” (#140)

If we take the Pope seriously on this idea, Western culture in particular will need to totally rethink its relationship with animals as mere tools or products for us to use merely as products in sinful social structures of technological consumerism.

One specific suggestion this new encyclical, perhaps as a first step along these lines, is a goal shared by HSUS as well. The Pope calls for “small-scale food production systems” (#129), and that would obviously mean rethinking the factory farm model and returning to smaller farms which are able to be better stewards of their animals.

What issues should concern us regarding genetic manipulation and biomedical research related to animals?

Happily, this issue is addressed explicitly in the encyclical: “the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that experimentation on animals is morally acceptable only if it remains within reasonable limits [and] contributes to caring for or saving human lives... human power has limits and that it is contrary to human dignity to cause animals to suffer or die needlessly.” (#130)

What are “reasonable limits”? The answer is complicated and goes beyond the scope of the encyclical. But in [a recent article](#) I wrote with a Professor of Veterinary medicine we argue that any research on animals must permit the animals to flourish as the kinds of beings God created them to be. They are not to be mere tools of research. And they are certainly not to be mere tools of research at the service of profits for biotech companies.

Indeed, Francis argues that “technology”—while obviously a good—is a complex good which must be seen in its proper context. Apart from a particular horizon or goal, technology “proves incapable of seeing the mysterious network of relations between things” and often “solves one problem only to create others.” (#20)

How is the flourishing of animals and creation related to the flourishing of human beings?

Perhaps the central new insight of *Laudato Si'* is something that the Pope calls “integral ecology.” For decades now we’ve heard about the ecology of the non-human, and more recently Catholic theology has spoken of something called “human ecology.” But this new encyclical asks us to think about the *interrelated* ecology of the human and non-human.

Indeed, Francis claims that we must “integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.*” (#49) When we mistreat the earth and its creatures, yes, we violate their intrinsic dignity—but we also harm ourselves, and especially the least among us.

Factory farms, of course, are a classic example of this. The intense and horrific harm done to animals is obvious. But the human harms are terrible as well: too much animal fat in our blood causing heart disease and cancer; all kinds of chemicals and drugs necessary for animals in factory farms getting transferred to human bodies; creation of dangerous superbugs via huge amounts of antibiotics; perhaps the most serious cause of climate change; and much more.

Pope Francis’ integral ecology explicitly “takes us to the heart of what it is to be human.” (#11) When we reject consumerism, selfishness, and violence with respect to the non-human, we are then on the way to becoming the kinds of human beings we were created to be. In helping all of creation become happier and healthier, we become healthier and happier ourselves. This is the near-unbelievable good news—the Gospel—of the Christian message more generally. Rightly understood, Christian moral requirements are not a burden, but rather a means for becoming our best and most flourishing selves.

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