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Laudato Si, the Earth and the Disability Community

While humans destroy the earth each day, marginalized communities bear the burden of climate change as natural disasters and extractive economies pollute land, water sources, and homes. In 2015, Pope Francis released *Laudato Si* with the purpose of calling attention to humans' destructive actions and the need to come together as a community to fix systems of oppression that worsen climate change impacts for vulnerable communities. Although Pope Francis primarily focuses on existing historical systems of exploitation and oppression that surround those in poverty, he articulates a framework based on small community support and involvement in order to ensure full inclusion of all peoples in disaster planning. While Pope Francis might never directly mention disabled communities by name, his shared humanity framework focuses on including vulnerable communities that apply directly to disability justice issues which advocate for better representation and community-based support systems. This paper will examine his framework in two parts. First, in order to understand the framework, we must focus on the surrounding social context, most specifically how industrial economies and weak infrastructure disproportionately impact disabled communities today. The second emphasis will be on Pope Francis' belief in shared humanity as the basis to ensuring that all communities are included in policy-making and disaster planning in order to address societal failures.

I. The Social Context

A. Systems of Oppression

To Pope Francis, issues such as world poverty and systems of exploitation exacerbate climate change issues, and he advocates for reforms aimed to incorporate social dynamics into climate change conversations. In one passage, he describes the co-deterioration of people and the planet. "The human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation" (Francis, 22-24). He goes on to detail how climate change disproportionately affects poor communities, which he

attributes to capitalism as it drives economies based on individual desires. He questions, “is it realistic to hope that those who are obsessed with maximizing profits will stop to reflect on the environmental damage which they will leave behind for future generations?” (Francis, 63-64). Consumer-driven economies fail to acknowledge the effects of their practices; instead, they choose to continue cutting down rainforests, mining copper, or extracting coal, oil, and gas in order to profit their companies, not the community. This disconnect between impacts on working class communities and upper class communities can be seen in Leah Lakshmi Piepzna Samarasinha’s poem, “Dirty River Girl” when they describe how the “city fathers” repeatedly insisted that the water was clean to drink, yet working class families felt that “drinking it, you could feel your cells shrivel, and you knew you were forever f***ed, a dirty river girl drinking dirty Worcester water that would make you too sick to even make it out” (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 21-23). The river, originally polluted by computer-chip fabrication, remains polluted due to the inaction of wealthy city leaders and corporations responsible. In order to combat this disparity between classes, Pope Francis’ framework requires that communities inwardly examine inequalities in existing political systems. The approach to stopping climate change must also incorporate a social approach aimed at dismantling systems of oppression.

Referring to past and present forms of exploitation, Pope Francis argues that countries responsible for these systems of oppression must bear more of the burden when dealing with climate justice issues and work to fix the systematic oppression. He focuses on what he calls “an ethics of international relations” which comprises an “ecological debt” that exists between the global north and south, based on the “commercial imbalances with effects on the environment, and the disproportionate use of natural resources by certain countries over long periods of time. . .” (Francis, 30-33). Colonialism resulted in extraction-dependent economies, such as sugarcane farms and coal mining, for the benefit of distant communities, which industries routinely deplete the soil and environmental resources, making these already vulnerable communities even more vulnerable to natural disasters. Zachary A. Morris, R. et. al, for example, write about unregulated construction that damaged ecosystems, which in the past might have been able to protect the now exposed communities (Morris, 92). They also emphasize how as rich

countries benefit from Puerto Rican coal, Puerto Ricans continue to face pollution from processing and disposing of coal waste that poses a great risk to their health and safety. This destruction of ecosystems and increased pollution especially impacts disabled communities, as they already face limited welfare programs and can be left stranded in times of emergency. Therefore, just as Pope Francis emphasizes that vulnerable communities need to be considered in climate change issues, he would also point to the need for disabled communities to be acknowledged and supported.

B. Failed Infrastructure

Disabled communities predominately face the impacts of limited funding and failed infrastructure, as they depend on certain safety nets for living expenses and transportation. One such safety net is the US Supplemental Security Income (SSI), which provides a guaranteed income to disabled adults and children under 65 with demonstrated need. “As of 2015, 8.3 million people in the United States received SSI payments, which average about \$541 a month” (Morris, 93). This income, when taking into account housing, food, water, and electricity, amounts to barely anything. According to the National Council on Disability, “people with disabilities make up approximately 12 percent of the U.S. working-age population; however, they account for more than half of those living in long-term poverty” (NCD). Disabled people disproportionately live in poverty and have limited access to public transportation systems that incorporate accessible vehicles. Delays plague paratransit, making it take much longer to get to work or move around the community (Crosby). This not only unfairly places a burden on disabled people to budget more time for transportation, but it can also impact their place in the workforce as delays and breakdowns might hinder their ability to make it to meetings on time. These failed systems further exacerbate problems that disabled communities face in order to be included in society.

Considering the already existing problems with infrastructure, failure to include disabled people in preparation plans for climate change and natural disasters further exacerbates said problems. One problem that might prove to be fatal is the lack of reliable public transportation or evacuation plans for disabled people. Rob Nixon writes how “discrimination predates disaster” (Belser, 58). Disabled

communities regularly face limited resources during times of stability; these resources are further strained to the point of broken during times of turmoil, and ultimately can lead to death as evidenced with Benilda Caixeta, a quadriplegic woman from New Orleans.

“I stayed on the phone with Benilda, for the most part of the day ... She’d been calling for a ride to the Superdome [for the past two days]; but, despite promises, no one came. The very same Paratransit system that people can’t rely on in good weather is what [they had to] rely in the evacuation ... I was on the phone with Benilda when she told me ... “the water is rushing in.” Then her phone went dead. We learned five days later that she had been found in her apartment, dead, floating next to her wheelchair” (Belser, 62).

Her death was not caused by her disability, rather New Orleans’ failed paratransit system. Had the system not been a problem before the disaster struck, her life could have possibly been saved; instead, Caixeta becomes another disabled victim to inadequate infrastructure. Placing Caixeta’s story in Pope Francis’ framework, her community should be held responsible for her death and must work together in order to ensure this will never happen again.

II. Shared Humanity

Pope Francis grounds his framework in the idea that our shared humanity requires and even demands that we work together to better the common good, as all humans will be affected by climate change decisions. To Pope Francis, “many things have to change course, but it is we human beings above all who need to change. We lack an awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone” (Francis, 66-67). Regardless of whether one is disabled, they are still a human being and deserve to be included in conversations having to do with public safety and welfare programs. These programs need to be grounded and derived organically from each specific community. This individual community-driven approach will ensure that everyone’s needs are addressed, not just those who have resources and power to lobby the government. To disability activist, Piepzna-Samarasinha, the future of a community depends on the “collective struggle” to center the marginalized at the forefront of the conversation. Just as Pope Francis focuses on “mutual belonging,” Piepzna-Samarasinha indicates how the “liberation of all living systems and the land” are a necessary and “integral” factor in “the liberation of our own communities, as we all share one planet”

(Piepzna-Samarasinha, 15). Both Pope Francis and disability justice activists recognize how as humans we are united by our humanity, regardless of race, nationality, sex, or ability. This humanity demands that one helps in whatever small way they can, which starts with community support systems to develop plans that meet the needs of the community in total, not just the needs of individuals or policymakers.

By following Pope Francis' commitment to small community efforts, community leaders can grow to incorporate typically marginalized voices, thereby allowing for future plans that embrace ignored voices and communities. Currently, Pope Francis would stress the danger of our capitalist, individual-focused system. In Pope Francis' words, "men and women of our postmodern world run the risk of rampant individualism, and many problems of society are connected with today's self-centered culture of instant gratification" (Francis, 50-52). Individualism counters the idea of community-based support, as it implies that individuals must help themselves, which can be difficult for disabled people who need support especially during times of natural disaster. Instead of continuing to feed powerful individuals and corporations who profit from the extractive economies, the power must be shared with those unheard voices. Piepzna-Samarasinha emphasizes this further when saying, "to truly have liberation we must be led by those who know the most about these systems and how they work" (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 14). Who better to know the system than those being systematically pushed to the side and forgotten? The disability justice community actively advocates the slogan, "nothing with us without us," which goes in tandem with Pope Francis' community-driven social change framework (Ostiguy, 310). Policymakers cannot continue to craft policies for disabled communities when they don't understand the disabled experience. Without attempting to understand and empathize with the community's experience, the policy can reflect failed thinking and not adequately address the issue at hand. Therefore, by uniting in shared humanity, marginalized communities must come together with those in power to have transparent conversations about failed infrastructure and welfare programs. This dialogue will ensure future stability and better preparation plans for natural disasters and climate change issues.

Bringing the community together and recognizing shared humanity allows for more voices to be heard and strengthens community development projects as such ideas flourish in the presence of people with diverse opinions and backgrounds. Holden expands on this idea of strength in diversity in his essay, “Laudato Si A Scientifically Informed Church of the Poor Confronts Climate Change,” where he argues that in addition to the earth’s biosphere, the earth is also made up of an “ethnosphere [that] may be defined as ‘the sum total of thoughts, beliefs, myths, and intuitions brought into being by the human imagination since the dawn of consciousness’” (Holden, 48). Bringing different voices together increases this “sum total” and paves the path for strategic and effective preparation plans for climate change disasters. By allowing different voices to be heard, each community project can meet more people’s needs, thereby allowing for more comprehensive and well thought out disaster planning.

III. Conclusion

Despite failed infrastructure and welfare programs, this shared humanity framework, when implemented, can allow communities to work together to ensure the inclusion of all voices, regardless of ability or socioeconomic status. By following Pope Francis’ framework of small community involvement formed by our “mutual belonging” and “collective struggle,” communities can work together for the representation of disabled people in climate change disaster preparation plans and allow for a comprehensive community-based support system. Working within this framework will allow individuals to bring diverse backgrounds and opinions to the forefront and will foster dialogues based on empathy and understanding. As humans, we have a responsibility to each other and the earth we share. Recognizing that we each belong to the greater community of the world can enable us to fully commit to deconstructing systems of oppression in order to help each other and take care of our home, our planet.

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