

“The Earth is the Lord’s and everything in it” (Psalm 24:1). In *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis has provided us with a comprehensive reflection on the implications of this item of faith for our responsibilities towards the life-support systems of our beautiful, yet finite and scarred, planet. The predictable response from the neo-conservative commentators was swift, harsh and ignorant. I say ‘ignorant’ because they claim the Pope had written an encyclical “about climate change”, yet climate is one of the least-mentioned terms in the encyclical (14 times); other terms get far more coverage, such as environment (158), poverty / poor (73), ecology (69), waste (28) and consumerism (23). You can be sure the critics falsely ascribed a narrower focus to the encyclical so that they might confront the Pope on a preferred neo-con battle ground where – in the USA at least – they feel they are making headway in championing a *laissez-faire* attitude. These inveterate opponents of objective climate science then have the *chutzpah* to advise His Holiness to “leave science to the scientists” – something they steadfastly refuse to do! What they really mean is “leave us to savage the scientists”; their true concern is that the Pope’s reflections might give heart to embattled scientists who are pilloried by neo-con pressure groups. Shame on them all, especially the Catholics amongst them: they ought to be prayerfully reading the encyclical, especially chapter 2, and indeed trying to make their own the Pope’s two, beautiful closing prayers – an innovation in themselves, with one formulated for inter-faith use, the other explicitly Christian. It is especially distressing to find a Vatican insider – Cardinal George Pell – reinforcing the neo-cons’ spine with his comment that “... the church has no particular expertise in science ... the church has got no mandate from the Lord to pronounce on scientific matters ...”. I suppose it depends what you mean by “church”: do the millions of qualified scientists in the church no longer constitute part of the Body of Christ? The Vatican Observatory employs many fine scientists, and the Pontifical Academy of Sciences regularly convenes highly-respected colloquia. The Lord’s mandate to His church to “pronounce on scientific matters” comes precisely through His calling so many of us to “the life scientific”. And although it is many years since Pope Francis last practised his science, he has lost none of his acuity: I found no scientific blunders in *Laudato si’*. More important even than the holistic picture he paints of the ecological challenges that result from reckless consumer culture is his reflection on “the gaze of Jesus” (nn. 96-100), and the call to a radical change of heart over our world’s fragile and wounded ecology. Cardinal Pell went on to say that “... We believe in the autonomy of science ...”. Let’s get this straight too: as a quintessentially human activity, science is subject to the values of the gospel, which are without exception directed at humans. Scientific epistemology is at its most dangerous when severed from an ethical framework, such as faith provides - which, incidentally, is one of the Pope’s principal observations in *Laudato si’*.

Professor Paul L Younger FEng
Rankine Chair of Engineering
University of Glasgow