



Striking a Poetic Chord with Love of Nature and of the Poor: Reflections on *Laudato Si'*

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This encyclical takes its title from the poem of St. Francis of Assisi, “Praised be You, my Lord,” which in the Canticle of the Creatures in which St. Francis evokes the idea of the earth as a sister and a mother. The cry of the abused nature and the cry of the abandoned poor ascend to God. With Patriarch Bartholomew, Pope François qualify harm to the environment as sins. The appropriate response to this awareness is a global ecological conversion (5). Concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society and inner peace are inseparable.

The content of this encyclical built around the concept of integral ecology, as a paradigm that is able to articulate the fundamental relations of the human person with God, with himself or herself, with other human beings and with creation. The plan of the encyclical reflects the method see-judge-act with an additional part on education, spirituality and celebration.

The encyclical begins with an overview of the scientific results available today on environmental issues, “letting them

touch us deeply and provide a concrete foundation for the ethical and spiritual itinerary that follows.” (15) The first chapter includes the latest scientific findings on the environment as a way to listen to the cry of creation: science is the privileged instrument through which we can listen to the cry of the earth. The issues addressed are: pollution, climate change, water, biodiversity loss, social deterioration, global inequalities, and weak reactions to these painful scenarios.

The second chapter is the recovery of the wealth of the Judeo-Christian tradition, drawing on biblical texts, and the theological elaboration of the Christian tradition. The complexity of the ecological crisis requires a multicultural and multidisciplinary dialogue that includes spirituality and religion. “Faith convictions can offer Christians and some other believers as well, ample motivation to care for nature and for the most vulnerable of their brothers and sisters.” (64) Obligations towards nature are part of the Christian faith.

The third chapter provides an analysis of “the roots of the present situation, so as to consider not only its symptoms but also its deepest causes,” (15) in dialogue with philosophy and the humanities. The main purpose of the fourth chapter is to develop a new paradigm, that of an integral ecology. The heart of the proposal of the encyclical is the integral ecology as a new paradigm of justice, ecology “which respects our unique place as human beings in this world and our relationship to our surroundings.” (15) There is an inseparable link between environmental issues and social and human issues. Therefore, “it is essential to seek comprehensive solutions which consider the interactions within natural systems themselves and with social systems.” (139)

The fifth chapter presents a set of guidelines and actions for a renewal of international politics, national and local decision-making processes in the public and business sector, the

relationship between politics and economics, between religion and science, maintained in a transparent and honest dialogue that gives voice to all stakeholders. From the conviction that any change requires motivation and an educational path, the final chapter proposes insights into modes of education and living out spirituality that would conform to the new paradigm of integral ecology.

Seven Highlights of this Encyclical

1. Ecological crisis and social crisis are one and the same. “We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature.” (139)

2 We need to guard ourselves against the messianism of technology and Market. Technology and development have become homogeneous, one-dimensional paradigm. The idea of an infinite or unlimited growth has excited many economists, financiers and technologists but the current economy and technology will not solve all environmental problems. The market does not in itself guarantee integral human development or social inclusion (106-109). A new Education shall be directed “to include a critique of the “myths” of a modernity grounded in a utilitarian mindset (individualism, unlimited progress, competition, consumerism, the unregulated market).” (210)

3. There is a need for an alternate perception of economy. The Pope warns us against the principle of maximization of gain which, in fact, is a conceptual distortion of the economy. In fact there is no economy without politics; economy should be inscribed within politics. Quoting from the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, the Pope reiterates that “the environment is one of those goods that cannot be adequately safeguarded or promoted by market forces.” The present crisis that endangers environment and impoverishes further the poor

of the society is precisely because of the disconnect between politics and economy which consequentially ignores the principle of justice and promotes a mindset of indifference both to nature and to weaker sections of humanity. “The mindset which leaves no room for sincere concern for the environment is the same mindset which lacks concern for the inclusion of the most vulnerable members of society.” (196)

4. There is a need for an agreement on systems of governance for the whole range of so-called “global commons.” The Pope, for example, speaks of the governance of the oceans which calls for a continuous undivided regulatory mechanism. This can be done only by adopting a responsible overall approach by international institutions effectively organized in order to become a true world political authority (174-175).

5. Change of lifestyles is indispensable. The Pope laments that the paradigm of efficiency of technocracy unfortunately leads to a consumerist culture that gives priority to short-term private interests over long-term global interests (189 and 184). He makes an emphatic assertion that “obsession with a consumerist lifestyle, above all when few people are capable of maintaining it, can only lead to violence and mutual destruction.” (203)

7. This encyclical is a practical exercise of collegiality in the Catholic Church, ecumenism and Dialogue. As a sign of collegiality, The Pope makes reference to the statements of 14 Episcopal conferences in addition to the CELAM and the FABC. From the ecumenical point of view again this encyclical is a breakthrough in so far as it is the first encyclical that cites a non-catholic Christian in the person of Patriarch Bartholomew as a source of inspiration for the Church (7-9). The encyclical also underscores the importance of dialogue with people from different walks of life: scientists, philosophers, mystics, theologians and policy makers. It is also interesting to note that the encyclical cites secular minded thinkers of Philosophy and

Theology like Paul Ricœur, Guardini and Scannone. Reference is also made to the Sufi mystic Ali al-Khawwas (233).

Reflections from the Perspective of Social Teaching of the Church

The encyclical *Laudato Si'* of Pope Francis adds a new dimension to the social teaching of the Church. It is not an encyclical on climate change or ecology in the narrow sense. It is a document that needs to be understood by placing it in the series of *Rerum Novarum* (1891 on industrialization and the working misery) of *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931, on the social order and subsidiarity) of *Pacem in Terris* (1963 peace between nations), *Populorum Progressio* (1967, on the development of poor nations), and *Centesimus Annus* (1991, criticism of neo-liberalism and the need for ethics in economic and political matters). *Laudato Si'* takes a critical look on the evolution of globalized societies, the triumphant neo-liberalism and the naive belief in the virtues of the market economy and technological progress.

Laudato Si' is a call to an ecological revolution, a paradigm shift, causing a change in our modes of thought and observation. A paradigm is the set of experiences, beliefs and values that influence how a society perceives reality, reacts and builds the future. This paradigm - the integral ecology - does not compete with scientific or political paradigms. This new paradigm offers a critical outlook of the actualities and calls for an active care for the planet, our home and all who inhabit this home now and the future generations for whom too this planet will be home.

What this new paradigm demands of us is to build new models of development and to define anew the notion of progress. "It is not enough to balance, in the medium term, the protection of nature with financial gain, or the preservation of the environment with progress. Halfway measures simply delay the inevitable disaster. Put simply, it is a matter of redefining our notion of progress. A technological and economic

development which does not leave in its wake a better world and an integrally higher quality of life cannot be considered progress.” (194) Progress should not be confused with the accumulation of material wealth or GDP growth; the real progress is to increase the quality of life.

The novelty of this encyclical is the synthesis of already known elements placed in a powerful global thinking. Pope Francis calls us to abandon the logic of domination, exploitation and the culture of waste in favor of a new logic of gift, beauty, quality of life and spirituality. He resumed the social teaching his predecessors by establishing a close relationship between the fragility of the planet and the poor who are the first victims of climatic disturbances. Thus the encyclical brings to the fore many important social aspects of human life which include among others, the critique of technology, the criticism of naïve faith in the virtues of the market economy which claims to offer solutions to our collective problems, the invitation to seek other ways of understanding the economy and the progress, the dignity of every human being, the need for sincere and honest debates in which all stakeholders especially the poorest and least represented have a say, responsibility both in domestic and international politics, the connection between policy change and change in lifestyle and the contribution of education and spirituality.

The heart of the encyclical is to present integral ecology as a new paradigm of justice, “ecology which respects our unique place as human beings in this world and our relationship to our surroundings” (15). Indeed, “nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live” (139). This is true in different spheres of human life such as economics, politics, culture, and more importantly in every moment of our daily life that is constantly under threat. The encyclical reminds us of the politics of love: “Love for society and commitment to the common good are outstanding expressions of a charity.” (231) 🌱