

TAKING US TO THE HEART OF WHAT IT IS TO BE HUMAN: A REFLECTION ON LAUDATO SI'

"I would like to enter into dialogue with all people about our common home." (3)

Much has been written about *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis' encyclical. But how many of us have truly responded to his invitation to dialogue? Do we reflect on and discuss the Pope's message with others? Have we allowed that dialogue to move us towards the ecological conversion he is calling us to? (217)

Development and Peace believes that if we truly open ourselves to Pope Francis' invitation, we can begin the journey towards an **integral ecology**, which "calls for openness to categories which transcend the language of mathematics and biology, **and take us to the heart of what it is to be human.**" (11)

This reflection offers questions that can be used for personal contemplation or group discussions in the service of this dialogue. We must not forget that despite the challenges we face, "humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home." (13)

Reflection questions: How did you feel when the encyclical was released? Have you read it in full, in part or not at all? Have you responded to the Pope's call to enter into dialogue? If yes, how?

An encyclical for the world

The Pope, as Bishop of Rome, is the visible source of the unity of the Church¹. *Laudato Si'* is a beautiful representation of this unity, as Pope Francis draws from the wisdom of the whole Church in its presentation. There are no fewer than twenty quotations taken from bishops' conferences around the world: from South Africa to Paraguay, Bolivia to the Philippines, and even from Canada.

Many of the world's coral reefs are already barren or in a state of constant decline. "Who turned the wonderworld of the seas into underwater cemeteries bereft of colour and life?" (25)

We require a new and universal solidarity. As the bishops of Southern Africa have stated: "Everyone's talents and involvement are needed to redress the damage caused by human abuse of God's creation." (14)

In fact, the deterioration of the environment and of society affects the most vulnerable people on the planet: "Both everyday experience and scientific research show that the gravest effects of all attacks on the environment are suffered by the poorest." (48)

The Canadian bishops rightly pointed out that no creature is excluded from this manifestation of God: "From panoramic vistas to the tiniest living form, nature is a constant source of wonder and awe. It is also a continuing revelation of the divine." (85)



This map is not erroneously upside down. It is meant to challenge our own perspective of the world, which, as a sphere suspended in space, can be viewed in many different ways. By viewing the world from this vantage point, we symbolically put the needs of our sisters and brothers in the Global South at top of our perspective. As Pope Francis writes, "every ecological approach needs to incorporate a social perspective which takes into account the fundamental rights of the poor and the underprivileged." (LS 93)

¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 882

Reflection questions: What is happening in your community when it comes to caring for our common home? Does your local church reflect the unity of the universal Church when it comes to addressing the ecological crisis?

SEE, JUDGE, ACT: A way to read the encyclical

In the opening of *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis lays out the structure of his letter for us (15). It follows the See, Judge, Act method of responding to the signs of the times². The first part, he explains, reviews “several aspects of the present ecological crisis.” (SEE – Chapter 1) The next part is an “attempt to get to the roots of the present situation, so as to consider not only its symptoms but also its deepest causes.” (JUDGE – Chapters 2-4). In the final part of the encyclical, Pope Francis puts forward, “some broader proposals for dialogue and action,” and offers “some inspired guidelines for human development” with respect to ecological education and spirituality. (ACT – Chapters 5-6).

SEE: The Earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth. (21)

Pollution, climate change, quality of and access to water, loss of biodiversity, the breakdown of society, and global inequality: these are all challenges touched upon in the SEE section. The last two issues are especially striking. Often we set ourselves apart from creation and look at issues of poverty and injustice as being separate from environmental concerns. Pope Francis reminds us that “human beings too are creatures of this world.” (43) Therefore, “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.” (48) In other words, we must attune ourselves, “so as to hear both the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor.” (49) In this sense, the focus of the encyclical on “our common home” is especially significant – in particular the word ‘home.’ A home is not only a physical reality but also a social and spiritual one. Our own homes consist not only of bricks and mortar, but also of the social relationships that exist between us and the people with whom we share that space.

Reflection questions: In your own life, where do you find that you hear both the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor in the world? When Pope Francis speaks about our common home, did you ever think of that home as being more than just the natural environment, but one that includes human relationships?

JUDGE: It is good for humanity and the world at large when we believers better recognize the ecological commitments which stem from our convictions. (64)

In seeking to understand the ecological crisis, Pope Francis paints a vision of reality that neither makes nature (90) or the human person (117) divine. He wants humanity to understand that, “**We are not God.**” (67) Instead, the Pope argues that the human reality, “is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the Earth itself.” (66) The ecological crisis is best understood as a rupture of these three vital

relationships. That rupture is sin. And yet, there is hope of healing. The story of Noah and the great flood is evidence that, “All it takes is one good person to restore hope!” (71) This hope is embodied in what we may call an ‘authentic humanity.’

“An authentic humanity, calling for a new synthesis, seems to dwell in the midst of our technological culture, almost unnoticed, like a mist seeping gently beneath a closed door. Will the promise last, in spite of everything, with all that is authentic rising up in stubborn resistance?” (112)

Pope Francis proposes a new synthesis in response to this call, which he names ‘**integral ecology.**’ Integral ecology begins with the recognition that everything is interconnected. This reality is something which “cannot be emphasized enough.” (138) Integral ecology therefore draws together relationships that exist between the ecologies of the environment, the economy, society, and culture. The Pope even draws in the “ecology of daily life,” which is a profoundly human ecology. (147-158) An integral ecology also stretches across time through generations of people, requiring an “intergenerational solidarity.” (159)

Integral ecology is above all an invitation to go to the heart of what it is to be human. “When we ask ourselves what kind of world we want to leave behind, we think in the first place of its general direction, its meaning and its values. Unless we struggle with these deeper issues, I do not believe that our concern for ecology will produce significant results. But if these issues are courageously faced, we are led inexorably to ask other pointed questions: What is the purpose of our life in this world? Why are we here? What is the goal of our work and all our efforts? What need does the Earth have of us? It is no longer enough, then, simply to state that we should be concerned for future generations. We need to see that what is at stake is our own dignity.” (160)

Reflection questions: Where in our world do you see the authentic humanity, which dwells almost unnoticed, “like a mist seeping gently beneath a closed door?” If an integral ecology leads us to life’s deepest questions, do we have the courage not to dismiss them as cliché or irrelevant and to ask them of ourselves?

ACT: A great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge stands before us, and it will demand that we set out on the long path of renewal. (202)

How are we to live out this integral ecology? Saint Francis of Assisi is put forward by the Pope as “the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically” (10), because of his love of creation, the poor and God.

While we can look to Saint Francis for inspiration and motivation, Pope Francis offers humanity concrete orientations for action. In the fifth chapter, he outlines five dialogues to move us forward out of the ecological crisis³. It is important to note that the concept of dialogue here is inherently a path of action and not just a meaningless exchange of words or ideas. For example, in the section “Dialogue on the environment in the international community,” it is stated that “the use of highly polluting fossil fuels – especially coal, but also oil and, to a lesser degree, gas – needs to be progressively replaced without delay.” (165)

² See, Judge, Act was developed by Cardinal Cardijn of the Young Christian Workers movement in Belgium and affirmed as Catholic Social Teaching by Pope Saint John XXIII in *Mater et Magistra*



Other paths of action put forward include: devising stronger and more efficient international institutions, continuing the development of economic co-operatives, citizen control over all levels of political power, strengthening the use of the precautionary principle in environmental assessments, removing the principle of maximization of profits from economic thinking, and the inclusion of religious perspectives in public ethical debates.

The last chapter on ecological education and spirituality also provides an important path of action because, “many things have to change course, but it is we human beings above all who need to change.” (202)

For Pope Francis, this education is needed in order to develop a new awareness that will allow us to overcome a destructive consumerism and “truly be able to develop a different lifestyle.” (208) This education aims to “restore the various levels of ecological equilibrium, establishing harmony within ourselves, with others, with nature and other living creatures, and with God.” (210)

An ecological education to address the crisis faced by the world is rooted in a call to conversion – specifically an ecological conversion. This conversion will not happen through an education that simply “provides information,” but rather through one is focused on “cultivating virtues” (211). It is less concerned with passing on concepts and more focused on developing a spirituality that can “motivate us to a more passionate concern for the protection of our world.” (216)

The signs of an ecological spirituality are the joy and peace found in the liberation from obsessive consumption. It is a spirituality which is captured in the moment of grace before meals, which Pope Francis urges us to return to: “That moment of blessing, however brief, reminds us of our dependence on God for life; it strengthens our feeling of gratitude for the gifts of creation; it acknowledges those

who by their labours provide us with these goods; and it reaffirms our solidarity with those in greatest need.” (227) When we do grace, it calls to mind our relationship with God, the Earth, and others, and transforms the act of literal consumption into awareness that everything in everyday life is sacred.

It is extremely important to note that an ecological spirituality is one that neither embraces heaven at the expense of the Earth nor embraces Earth at the expense of heaven. As Pope Francis says, “encountering God does not mean fleeing from this world or turning our back on nature.” (235) An ecological spirituality instead celebrates these two distinct realities and the relationship between them – the relationship between Creator and Creation.

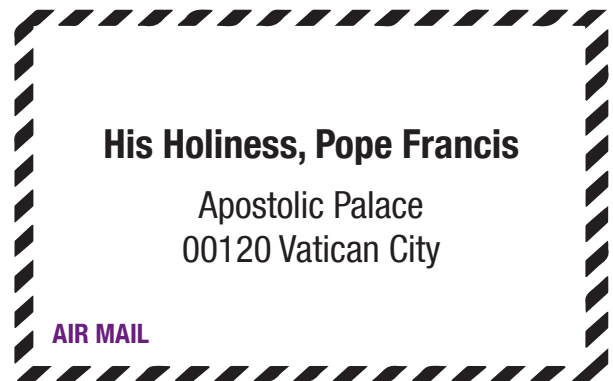
For Catholics, the Eucharist is the greatest expression of this relationship. It “joins heaven and Earth; it embraces and penetrates all creation.” (236) We may also refer to our experience of this relationship as Grace: “Grace, which tends to manifest itself tangibly, found unsurpassable expression when God himself became man and gave himself as food for his creatures. The Lord, in the culmination of the mystery of the Incarnation, chose to reach our intimate depths through a fragment of matter.” (236)

Reflection questions: Of all the paths of action outlined by Pope Francis, which ones do you feel most strongly called to participate in? Would you describe your own spirituality as one that “joins heaven and Earth”? How can we cultivate this ecological education and spirituality in our own communities?

Continuing the dialogue

This reflection is a simple tool to begin the dialogue that Pope Francis invites us to enter into on our Care for our Common Home. It is hoped that it will encourage you to take the time to go deeper. Find a local study group on the encyclical to join or even start one of your own!

Finally, why not dialogue directly with Pope Francis himself? You can write to the Pope and tell him how his message is impacting you, your family, your community and even your country.



3 Five Dialogues: I. On the environment in the international community II. For new national and local policies III. For transparency in decision-making IV. Politics and economy for human fulfillment V. Religions in dialogue with science.