

***Laudato si'*: an « Encyclical to be Lived »**
A call to reflection for social and spiritual conversion

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The Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'* (*On Care for our Common Home*) by Pope Francis (24 May 2015) was and will remain of great significance to contemporary public opinion, insofar as it addressed the questions and the expectations of a great number of believers and aid organisations, and advocated reflecting on the future of our planet and life.

Most likely, this is the first Papal Encyclical Letter to be read and commented in circles which are in no way connected to the Roman Catholic Church and were even formerly critical of the ethical positions of the Church. *Laudato si'* participated, to an extent, in the moral and historical impetus of the « Paris Agreement » during COP-21, the United Nations Climate Change Conference in December 2015.

Having said that, it would be insufficient, and perhaps even inaccurate, to consider this text only as a mere reflection on ecology, even if it is the very « *integral ecology* » that Pope Francis advocates, and which analyses the Creation we have received, advances in development thus far, and the fraternal solidarity which we must build. The text's subtitle, « *On care for our common home* » suggests that **it is necessary to think and act, understand and hope, considering developments and challenges of an ecological, social, economic, and political nature.**

We can note here that the three terms, « ecology », « economy », and « ecumenism » have the same Greek root, « *oikos* », meaning « home ». We must think of « living together » in the broad sense of the term encompassing all living creatures, now commonly known as « biodiversity » and dialogue among living things. Here we may recall Pope Benedict XVI's beautiful insight in his Encyclical *Caritas in veritate*, which illustrates how the Logos – the Word of the Creator – makes us beings « in Dia-logos » - in the vital act of receiving and giving. When reflecting we cannot, therefore, consider only the future of those humans who seem to have unlimited power over Creation, in all the diversity and complementarity of its components. To think about the « care of our common home » seems to be the greatest challenge of our times: we must learn and relearn how to live together, respecting and valuing all forms of life, from Mother Earth to the humblest being of the Cosmos, whose existence is crucial to the balance of the whole. If we return here to the comparison of the body, used by St. Paul (First Letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 12), we see time and again how each part of the body needs the others to achieve its purpose; and that each part, in turn, brings to another that which is necessary for its fulfilment.

The truly social message of the Encyclical *Laudato si'* is evident from the first chapter of the text, when we are invited to take a close look at « what is happening in our common

home » (numbers 17 through 61). We are to look « critically », in the philosophical sense of the word (« crisis », in Ancient Greek, means « choice »). In contemplating the diverse conditions in which, not without suffering, life and relationships between living things unfold, we very quickly come to the major problems surrounding the relationship between development and social community. It raises the issue of the harmful effects of our model of economic development, but also, and more fundamentally, of the dominance of technology, or « technocracy », which « sometimes solves one problem, only to create others », writes the Holy Father, in number 20 of the Encyclical.

The issue of global warming and endangered ecosystems shows us that the climate, which « is a common good » (LS 23) is damaged, and, along with it, the possibility that human communities will be able to continue to live in harmony on the land of their ancestors. Here we have another call to reflection, as we need to create this ‘harmony’, starting from the plurality and the complementarity of beings themselves, in their daily interaction with human ‘otherness’ and with the objectivity of constructed things.

Our use of the natural resources on which rests the very existence of our global economy will very soon **reach its finite limits**, along with the access to water, that « basic and universal human right », synonymous with the right to life and respect for inalienable human dignity (LS 29). Rethinking access to drinkable water, water for irrigation and sanitation means opening up real opportunities for dignity and peace. It is common knowledge that both conflicts and peace treaties can be born out of a water source, a well or a river...

Finally, we are called to **protect endangered biodiversity** and to understand the challenge of the vital complexity (richness and fragility) of forest areas – such as the Amazon, the lungs of our planet, or the Congo Basin – and wetlands – oases, oceans, and marine species. In fact, they are threatened by industrial exploitation and inconsiderate use of toxic substances, aimed at violent and excessive production (numbers 38 to 42). The link established between a kind of development that causes death whilst claiming to bring life, and the social connection is clearly expressed in this sentence from the Encyclical, which is in and of itself an appeal to our conscience:

«... a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it 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» (n. 48).

The act of thinking – thinking about current reality and our thought about the future – cannot, therefore, separate ecology and social justice. Generally speaking, *Laudato si'* requires an approach that takes into account the fact that in this world of *technè* « everything is connected »: ecology, economy, and the social, cultural, and spiritual aspects of life. Overemphasis on *technè* could lead us to lose the richness of *poiesis*, to use two categories from the Western philosophical tradition, inspired by Ancient Greek philosophy: practical skills and know-how (*technè*) can too easily exhaust and replace a contemplative approach to reality and all beings (*poiésis* – from which we obtain the modern term ‘poetry’). Once again, we are entreated to think of ecology as social justice and solidarity as the expression of an integral ecology, honouring all aspects of life, the planet, the community, and the person. The « principle of solidarity » which Pope John-Paul II called for in response to the interdependence among countries and peoples in the context of globalisation requires us to look at the other person « as a helper, an equal, and a brother » (Cfr *Sollicitudo rei socialis* 26).

Our « common home » is therefore both the idea and the experience of objective and subjective complementarity among members of the same human family. At the end of the day, as a noted 20th century philosopher phrased it, we only think and build in the way we live in our home. **In other words, integral ecology is a peaceful and just way of living together, as humans and part of humanity, in accordance with the psalmist's vision: «for brothers to live together in unity ».**

Clearly, when reading this Encyclical we are entreated to open our minds: to adopt a certain way of thinking and, by extension, undergo a conversion in our way of thinking and living. It invites us, in fact, to what we might call « existential shifts » in our daily relationships with nature and material goods, in our work and in our human activity. In this regard, the process of intellectual, ethical, and spiritual reinterpretation, of « seeing – judging – acting », which underlies the very architecture of the Encyclical's text, urges the readers to be vigilant and become involved, so that they can continue to build. It is not about abandoning development but experiencing it as a path towards humanisation, staying mindful of what happens to others, especially the poor, those who suffer, and the migrants. Indeed, nobody is so poor as to be incapable of contributing to shared history. Every person has inside of them the promise of life: this « personalist » conviction underpins reflection and opens the mind to social action.

Such « existential » shifts to which the text of *Laudato si'* call us can be identified as follows:

First, there is the call to « let our hearts be touched » by what is happening to our « common home » and those who live – or who are trying to find a place – there. **The starting point for ecological conversion is a true, delicate, encounter. The « culture of encounter », which reconciles knowledge and sensitivity, is an integral part of this essential intellectual and moral shift (Cfr LS 48).**

Next, there is a reflection on our mode (and model) of development. We can no longer only operate under the law of technocracy, according to which everything that is technically possible is automatically morally justifiable or accepted as « progress ». The excessive anthropocentrism which makes man 'owner' and 'master' of the world (cfr LS 115-116) and the insatiable culture of « more and more » and « faster and faster » (what the Pope terms, in his own language, « *la rapidación* ») oblige us to seek « another cultural paradigm for development » (LS 108).

What does this mean? A « paradigm » is « matrix of reflection », or, more simply, « a way of thinking ». We must consider the question from a physical, economic, cultural, and spiritual point of view: « *What does it mean, to (self-) develop?* » How can our development – our growth and enrichment – be considered progress? Here, we see that such shift takes us from 'having' (more) and 'being able' (to do more) to 'being' (being here and being for others) and, therefore, to the growth in humanity which is the joy of personal and collective fulfilment (Cfr LS 132, 185). **The « new cultural paradigm of development », therefore, consists of shared memory, hope for future generations, belief in God the Creator, and the shared responsibility he entrusts to us. Memory, hope, belief, and sharing.**

At the same time, we are aware that another shift is asked of us: « the return to a sober life » (n. 223), built around the two pillars of limitation – a reminder of our mortality –

and joyful sharing, such as that described in the Acts of the Apostles, about the first Christian community (Acts 2:42-46). We need to think in terms of measuring and respecting what was given to us, both in our exploitation of natural resources and in our consumption. We can already sense that 'the unlimited' is the path of death, as is so clearly illustrated in the exponential production of waste, which is transforming our planet (land and sea) into a gigantic rubbish bin and disseminating a « **throwaway culture**» (n. 43), **which spares not humans themselves, when they are considered inefficient, old, obsolete, useless, or « surplus ».**

Here, we must examine a third shift, which is just as important as the previous two and sheds further light on the relationship between ecology and social justice. It regards the work that needs to be done on the glaring and increasingly shameful inequalities within our supposedly 'developed' societies as well as between the continents. Our liberal and technocratic development has been accompanied by a social rift between those who master the increasingly innovative techniques and who have benefitted – in the true meaning of the word – from investments in so-called « high value-added industries » and those who have been kept out of this « development ». We are witnessing a growing gap between those who have more and more and consolidate their assets instead of using them to support the creation of jobs or the access to knowledge and expertise, and those who do not have enough to satisfy their basic needs: access to water, food, healthcare, or education. We therefore see this gap amplified on a backdrop of deviance and desperate acts of violence. Such glaring inequality cannot fail to touch the hearts of men and women whose conscience has remained sensitive, preoccupied with the question of the future of life (cfr n. 109).

The crisis brought about by the technocratic paradigm of development is now returning to affect the very actors in this 'development without conscience'. It is a cultural and spiritual – and not just an economic or political – crisis, which calls for an **ecological and social conversion which must be « lived » as a new dialogue between man and nature, man and his fellow men, man and God, and man and himself.** The four cardinal points of this compass draw a space that is open to the grace of God to inspire human initiative, which concerns everyone. We are all aware of the urgency of this crisis and the fact that we are currently at a crossroads, even if political authorities and powers continue to put a heavy pressure. There is a need for an education that turns into dialogue between all actors – old and young, citizens and leaders, religious people and experts, poets and spiritual guides -, to create a culture of cooperation where each person, respecting the experience of the other, is him/herself enriched and can grow (cfr n. 213).

We can see that, after the diagnosis of the problem (LS 210), the appeal for contemplation (LS 225), and the stage of proposals (LS 228-231), the Encyclical moves on to a final chapter, dedicated to ecological education and spirituality (LS 222 ff.). **Seen in the light of faith, our interest in social issues is a spiritual path** which brings us from selfish consumerism to a new, universal consciousness (LS 207), and from compassion to responsibility (LS 210-211). All facets of our existence come together here to bring about this overall personal conversion (LS 218), following the example of St Francis of Assisi, for whom every part of Creation is a reminder of the greatness of the Father's love.

Laudato si' therefore addresses each of us, on our different paths and in our different communities, as an « **Encyclical to be lived** » and not a « **theoretical and definitive text** »; an **active and generous path to conversion and not a closed doctrine.**

« First, it entails gratitude and gratuitousness, a recognition that the world is God's loving gift, and that we are called quietly to imitate his generosity in self-sacrifice and good works (...) It also entails a loving awareness that we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures, but joined in a splendid universal communion » (n. 220).

The appeal to our consciousness, both in the personal and universal sense, is a recurring message throughout the text of *Laudato si'*; we are to be aware that we are actors and members of the human community. The text couches this word in terms of our relationships: our consciousness is our relationship « with the other persons»: 'the other' in Creation and 'the other' in Humanity. Without this relationship, we remain in an existence that is governed solely by the logic of production and consumption. Again, « thinking about the kind of society we want to build » and «taking ownership over what we become » are essential attitudes to cultivate if we want to address the challenge of protecting and guaranteeing the future of « our common home ».

In the expression of our shared faith, the sacraments, essential signs of the grace of God, Creator and Father, the freedom of Christ, Son and Brother in our humanity and the inspiration of the Spirit of Pentecost, feed the relevance of the first and ultimate reference to the Word that creates, saves, and reconciles. For there can be no thought and still less action which is not brought about by hope, which reminds us that History does not end here, and it is not too late to « take care » of Creation and of the future of our common home.

Here and now begins the future of life.

Rome, 30 May 2019, Feast of the Lord's Ascension.

The 40th Anniversary of my Ordination to the Diaconate.