

REPORT FOR THE CENTESIMUS ANNUS PRO PONTIFICE FOUNDATION

MADRID CHAPTER, APRIL 2019

ECOLOGICAL CONVERSION, TECHNOLOGY AND THE MARKET ECONOMY

READING *LAUDATO SI'*: QUESTIONS AND REFLECTIONS

The Madrid Chapter of the Centesimus Annus pro Pontifice Foundation (CAPP) concentrated during the present period on the *Laudato si'* Encyclical (LS) during a number of working sessions, each of which was introduced by one of the members and with the whole group participating in the debate. These sessions were enriched with contributions from qualified persons from various institutions.

As it progressed through the Encyclical, a number of questions emerged. The present report does not intend to give final answers to those questions; the group wanted to formulate some reflections with the aim of understanding better this document – which is part of the Church's official teachings –, to perceive its evangelizing message, and to suggest ways of applying it in practical terms. However, these considerations of course never pretend to create a new interpretation of the Encyclical.

1. *Why did Pope Francis decide to write on ecology and thus expose his writings to the risk of political instrumentalization in the public debate?*

In his *Evangelii Gaudium* Apostolic Exhortation, the Pope had already touched upon themes which are recurrent in his teachings such as the “technocratic paradigm”, the “throwaway culture”, the culture of encounter, a diverted anthropocentrism and, in his own words, “thou shalt not” to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills.” (EG, 53) These teachings are in line with those of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI when they condemn a rift between the economy and ethics and an ownership system which lacks relational and solidarity concerns.

Following this same basic line, Pope Francis' concern for the “care of our common home” does not come from any opportunistic or trendy option. He starts from a diagnosis, full of urgency and drama: the planet is not ours and, still, we let ourselves drive by the idea of “infinite or unlimited growth... based on the lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth's goods, and this leads to the planet being squeezed dry beyond every limit.” (LS 106)

Inseparable from such diagnosis, the Pope's approach has a deeper dimension, which was already announced when he chose the name Francis: by referring to the Saint who

did so much to reform the Church and to bring Christians closer to the way of the Gospel, and by quoting Saint Francis' hymn "*Laudato sie, mi Signore, cun tutte le tue creature...*", the Pope reveals the richness and deep meaning of the subject chosen. From the beginning of his pontificate, he emphasized the care for creation as one of his main lines. Among the symbols chosen for his coat of arms, there is a star (related to Saint Mary) and a nard flower, traditionally related to Saint Joseph and his role as caretaker.

From this deeply spiritual and faithful starting point, when facing the environmental crisis, even before climate change started to occupy so much space in public debate, the Pope wrote in paragraph 14 of LS that "obstructionist attitudes, even on the part of believers, can range from denial of the problem to indifference, nonchalant resignation or blind confidence in technical solution". Pope Francis proposes himself as a mediator in a necessary dialogue for the future of humanity, to which faith can contribute significance and motives for commitment.

2. *Why does LS state that there is an intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet?*

The preferential option for the poor is an essential part of Catholic social teachings and it acquires special relevance in the writings of Pope Francis, whose origins make him particularly sensitive to the typical difficulties of a "developing" country. But the relationship between poverty and environmental fragility is not self-evident. One can state that living standards in general have improved spectacularly in our environment and in the world in the last 60 years. The recent world crisis, in spite of such evident progress, has provoked fear of a growing fracture and inequality, not so much among countries, but within each country. How does this relate to the environmental crisis? There may be an element of objective link in the fact that poor populations run a bigger risk from climate change in many parts of the world due, among other factors, to higher levels of sea water and the risk of massive flood, to desertification and a growing flow of climate-based migration.

More generally, underlying the Encyclical is the thesis that the permanence of poverty, on the one side, and the consumption-led exploitation of resources on the other have common roots: the egoistic trend of an ill-oriented society or a deviated anthropocentric concept which feed what the Pope calls "the throwaway culture". The call for a sober lifestyle needs to be brought to all of us in our personal and family life. But from a socio-political point of view, this thesis leaves us with more questions than answers: the lack of economic development in parts of the world seems to us mainly linked to situations and obstacles typical of an underdeveloped context, i.e. a lack of inclusive institutions and entrepreneurial capacity. External motives like, for example, the exploitation of resources by the developed world also play a role, of course, but a more circumstantial one.

In other texts¹, Pope Francis has underlined the need for the poor to take their destiny in their own hands, which means that external help should be used to “teach fishing”. This idea seems to be more compatible with our experience of real economic life, rather than that of imposed redistribution models.

In any case, an open question remains about the physical development model since, in the short term and with our present state of knowledge, the energy and other resources appear as not sufficient for the present living standards of the more developed countries to be extended to the whole planet, let alone the much higher level of environment pollution which this would entail. But to face this problem, more than to put a brake on initiative and growth, we think it urgent to look for other solutions like those based on technological innovation and on reorienting investment – as is already happening to a certain extent – towards a development path with a positive and sustainable impact on the environment. This requires a vision for the long term which includes the whole world population and future generations.

3. Does the description of the environment crisis in LS have magisterial authority?

At the end of chapter 1, LS refers explicitly to a diversity of opinions in the world concerning the environment crisis (LS 60 and 61). On many of those questions, we are told that “the Church has no reason to offer a definitive opinion; she knows that honest debate must be encouraged among experts, while respecting divergent views.” The Pope is convinced that we are at a breaking point, but he does not impose just one reading of the facts, and he does not recommend just one policy line. Concern for the care of creation is a compulsory concern for Christians, but the concrete answers can be of different types.

There is a proper value in dialogue, which means rediscovering the relational dimension in group work. The search for the truth does not allow for hurried answers: one can reach provisional conclusions and go all the way for a long-lasting approach towards the good, where “my” personal view will always be partial. This is not a relativistic position, but a Christian vocation to start walking on the ways already shown by Council Vatican II when it affirmed religious freedom. LS insists on many occasions on dialogue with other religions, with scientific and political institutions – and we would like to especially emphasize the need for dialogue with economic leadership.

¹ For example, in his speech to the General Assembly of the United Nations, September 25, 2015: “To enable these real men and women to escape from extreme poverty, we must allow them to be dignified agents of their own destiny. Integral human development and the full exercise of human dignity cannot be imposed. They must be built up and allowed to unfold for each individual, for every family, in communion with others, and in a right relationship with all those areas in which human social life develops.” http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150925_onu-visita.html

4. *Is the commandment from Genesis to “fill the earth and subdue it” in contradiction with ecologist theses?*

A closer translation of the Hebrew text would use the concept of “shouldering”, and that is exactly what care for the common house is demanding. Therefore, there is no question of divinizing nature; humanity is called to shoulder the dangers which threaten the present and future of the common house, using the possibilities offered by technology and working towards a dignified habitat for all. The role of the good caretaker directly leads to the current debate about corporate social responsibility and the ideal profile of a business leader who enlarges his view of the social and environmental impact of the company’s activity and finds new business opportunities therein, thus contributing to the common good.

5. *What is the meaning of a “technocratic paradigm”? Does the Church entertain a certain anti-technical defeatism?*

It is not easy to understand what LS means by “technocratic paradigm”. At first glance we tend to think that techniques are nor good nor bad, all depends on their use. A closer reading of LS in its current and perhaps prophetic dimension leads us to think that the Pope may refer here to the ideology which sometimes surrounds the development of artificial intelligence and the use of “big data”. This system of ideas claims to have the human person as its central concern, as also does the Christian tradition. But the underlying profile of the person, her aspirations, her search for happiness, her possible transformations with technological implants are all part of an idea which differs widely from that of a relational person, open to others, and the yearning for brotherly communion typical of the Christian tradition.

Although the text does not say so explicitly, one can interpret that this fantasy of a new and technological superman does not come free of charge: on the contrary, it sustains the development of an industry which ambitions power through control of information. In this sense the affirmation becomes understandable, that the “technocratic paradigm” works to the benefit of specific economic interests.

The new economy certainly breaks with traditional business models as it turns upside down production and distribution patterns. This change of model brings deep change to employment and a substantial development of autonomous work, with positive consequences, but also with threats for stability and the “social pact”. This transformation opens in our view at least two fronts:

- On one side, the new economy challenges Western democratic societies in so far as established competition and free market policies seem unable to confront the giants of the fourth industrial revolution. More than a change towards unknown or socialistic systems, this challenge asks for a renovation of the instruments of the social market economy in order to adapt “level playing field” policies to the new economic realities, and to move protection from jobs

towards the working persons and their permanent education. Christian opinion can be important to help moving social dialogue towards these aims.

- On the other side, a change of direction seems necessary in philosophical and ethical reflection in the public debate and the consequent transformation of educational programs, away from the illusions of a deviated anthropocentrism, towards promoting solidarity, cooperation and gratuitous gift. In this process the Church, all its institutions and Christian opinion in general can play a very influential role.

6. *What can business do to effectively influence society towards care of the common house?*

Change is already on its way: to face climate change, a deep reorientation of objectives and frameworks of reference is already happening step by step in the business world. In some cases, this may be window dressing for marketing purposes, but in other cases it has direct effect on business strategy. Change is happening partly due to conviction of business leaders, and above all through a better perception of public opinion and demand.

In this respect the Madrid CAPP Chapter conducted interviews with various representatives of large companies in the financial and energy sectors. In the financial context, some groups are moving to fund investment with ecological and social positive impact; some are publicly committed to Agenda 2030, the Sustainable Development Objectives approved by the UN in 2015 and the European Commission Action Plan for the unification of ESG (Environment, Social, Governance) criteria; there is even discussion of adapting credit scoring to the ecological quality of borrowers, although this may create problems regarding a break of market unity. In the energy sector, the Paris Agreements and the whole ecological movement are driving companies, not only for their own sustainability, to consider alternative future developments and to plan moving from non-renewable to renewable energy sources.

More generally, every company has the possibility to improve the quality of its operation by improving processes within its own area of activity, from the purchase of inputs to product design, marketing policies and distribution: in all these areas it is possible to promote ways of operating which, after due analysis, have positive effects from the point of view of environmental and social sustainability. Decisions of this kind require cautious discernment within the framework of integral ecology because, as always, each option has partially positive and negative aspects, among which one needs to choose. Entrepreneurial creativity is key for new business initiatives which take environment protection as their framework from scratch.

7. Is the market economy able to reorient itself ecologically?

The market economy has given historical proof of its capacity to adapt and change direction. In addition to regulation and as a complement to it, change requires however an adequate system of incentives and disincentives based on real cost. For this to happen there is need of a movement of opinion to support transparent inclusion of ecological cost into prices, so that market mechanism may work correctly and drive change towards more sustainability.

For the time being, the cost of environmental damage is “socialized” in a hidden way or just ignored and transferred as a heavy inheritance for future generations. This problem is politically and socially difficult: as shown recently by the rebellion of the French ‘yellow jackets’ against a tax on motor fuel, the effects of tax measures sometimes worsen unequal situations and affect negatively the more vulnerable.

Governments and business organisations should promote transparency initiatives in order to modify accounting principles and practice so as to show the cost of environmental damage and repair. It is necessary to promote research and debate in this field in order to reach consensus on methodology.

8. What does “ecological conversion” mean for us?

The LS Encyclical requires from all of us a personal meditation on the lines of Saint Francis who “faithful to Scripture, invites us to see nature as a magnificent book in which God speaks to us and grants us a glimpse of his infinite beauty and goodness... Rather than a problem to be solved, the world is a joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and praise” (LS 12). This entails heartfelt repentance, gratitude and gratuitousness, a “loving awareness that we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures” (LS 220). We are invited to adopt “an alternative understanding of the quality of life..., a prophetic and contemplative lifestyle, one capable of deep enjoyment free of the obsession with consumption” (LS 222).

But the message is not limited only to the personal and family dimensions: “Love, overflowing with small gestures of mutual care, is also civic and political, and it makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world” (231). There is a collective dimension which needs to express itself in various political, social or economic contexts. This dimension is not an easy one because opinions differ, little attention is paid to rational analysis and, sometimes, emotional enthusiasm produces more confrontation than consensus.

Still, we can say, following the Pope’s invitation in the last paragraphs of LS: “May our struggles and our concern for this planet never take away the joy of our hope” (LS 244).

Madrid, 8 April 2019