



INTEGRAL ECOLOGY: HOW TO HEAL DECAY

The first Pope named Francis gifted the Church and world with its first encyclical on the environment, entitled *“Laudato Si: On the Care of Our Common Home”*—a very “Franciscan” title. Indeed, the document opens with the first lines of St. Francis’ “Canticle of the Creatures.”

POORER AND EVER-MORE IMPOVERISHED EARTH

The Pope’s courageous text relaunches the timeliness of the saint of Assisi, the form of evangelical life he practiced, and his successful attempt to reform the Church from within through the demanding choices of poverty and the poor. And today who is poorer and ever-more impoverished than the earth? In fact, “the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor” (n. 2). We well know that our planet is undergoing systematic abuse and even though Pope Francis makes a point of avoiding the use of apocalyptic terminology, he has no fear of pointing out bitter truths, declaring that “the exploitation of the planet has already exceeded acceptable limits” (n. 27), which are, in fact “reaching a breaking point” (n. 61)—the famous “point of no return” regarding the sustainability of human life.

The first of the document’s six chapters (*What is happening to our common home*), reviews the various aspects of the ecological crisis: pollution, waste, global warming, the loss of biodiversity, climate change...but with a unique twist in that it highlights how “the human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together” (n. 48; cf. no. 56). As a result, “a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach” (n. 49; cf. nn. 93, 139). In other words, questioning ourselves about the created world always means questioning ourselves about the meaning and purpose of the human being within that framework: whether or not we are acting responsibly in this regard. In short, environmental ecology goes hand-in-hand with human ecology. Furthermore, the latter raises global issues like hunger, the universal distribution of goods, social inclusion, and blossoms spontaneously into a social ecology based on fraternity.

A TRULY GLOBAL DIMENSION

All too often, the cry of the poor echoes the cry of the earth since it is the poor who pay the highest price in the ecological crisis: “These situations have caused sister earth, along with all the abandoned of our world, to cry out, pleading that we take another course” (n. 53). The weaving together of the three forms of ecology (environmental, human and social) gives the encyclical a tru-

ly global dimension. The document is very innovative: it does not get bogged down in sectorial issues but urges human beings to adopt a new way of looking at things, a new way of thinking, policies, an educational program, a lifestyle and a spirituality in opposition to the technocratic paradigm (cf. n. 111).

NATURE OR CREATION?

Do Christians have anything authoritative to say about the environmental crisis? The encyclical seems to say yes. It takes advantage of the *Gospel of Creation* (Chapter Two) to move from the wisdom of the biblical accounts of creation to the admiration and tenderness with which Jesus gazed upon the world, human beings and all creatures (nn. 62-100). It clarifies that the word “creation” has a broader meaning than just “nature” (n. 76), saying that creation should not be divinized (cf. n. 8); that every creature has its own purpose and that “soil, water, mountains: everything is a caress of God” (n. 84). The Pope cites St. Thomas in sustaining that “God’s goodness cannot be represented fittingly by any one creature” but he also does not fail to point out the singular place human beings hold among creatures. However, he warns, this “pre-eminence” must not be exercised despotically but instead must be united to responsibility (cf. nn. 90, 220). Without this awareness, we fall into a “misguided anthropocentrism” (n. 118)—the prevailing attitude of a certain modern mentality that was the primary cause and accelerator of the serious ecological crisis we are facing today (Chapter 3: *The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis*).

From this problematic background, the encyclical rises up to point out positive ways of approaching ecological decay: first, by adopting the concept of integral ecology, that is, by viewing environmental, cultural and social ecology as a whole (Chapter 4), presupposing that the way we approach the problem is itself a part of the solution.

Faced with the glaring impasse of public dialogue on ecology (meetings of political leaders, summits, international conferences...), the fifth chapter (*Lines of Approach and Action*) calls for “a more responsible overall approach” (n. 175) that should lead to a new governance of creation. In what sense? Not only through the backing of the



most authoritative international bodies but also through policies that are not subject to the economy, and an economy that is freed from the dictates of an efficiency-driven paradigm of technocracy (cf. n. 189).

The encyclical concludes with a reflection on “ecological conversion” (Chapter 6: *Ecological Education and Spirituality*), which, in the Christian experience, is neither optional nor secondary. This conversion will be profound and enduring to the degree that it is integral, that is, to the degree that it involves all the areas of life of every person and community. In short, an authentic and converted Christian life is the best antidote to the ecological crisis.

Fr. Ugo Sartorio

OFM delegate on the themes of
Justice, Peace and the Safeguarding of Creation

EARTH DAY 2016

Earth Day, celebrated annually on 22 April—a month and two days after the Spring Equinox—was launched in 1970 for students of all grade levels (including university) to sensitize young people to environmental protection. Over the years, it has become an educational and informative event. Groups of ecologists take advantage of the occasion to evaluate the earth’s environmental problems: air, water and soil pollution; the destruction of ecosystems; the thousands of plant and animal species that are becoming extinct; the depletion of non-renewable resources...

On Earth Day 2016 a landmark agreement on climate change, adopted in Paris last December with the consensus of nearly 200 nations, was signed at the United Nations headquarters in New York City, U.S.A.