

For an ecological conversion in the light of the encyclical letter Laudato Si

Introduction

To avoid the real danger of "leaving rubbles, deserts and dirt to future generations," an "organic and concerted action of integral ecology" is necessary. This is what the Holy Father Francis was addressing to the participants of the international conference convened on July 6, 2018, on the occasion of the 3rd anniversary of the publication of the encyclical letter Laudato Si. These words echo the cry of the Pope - an appeal to an authentic ecological conversion. It is addressed not only to the rulers and leaders of our planet but to every man and woman aware of the tragic ecological situation in which we are immersed.

In fact, according to the most recent studies and surveys, the world is suffocating because of global warming, and global pollution seems to have become pervasively unstoppable. During the 4th session of the United Nations Assembly for the Environment (UNEA), held in Nairobi last March 11-15, it was stated that one quarter of premature deaths is due to pollution and that the ecosystems are close to global crisis, seriously compromising the well-being of the 3.2 billion people, almost half of the world population.

The most alarming statement is probably that all citizens do not perceive the responsibility for this in the same way. People seem to ignore this problem by themselves. They avoid it as if it didn't matter to them. They avoid it as if they didn't radically involve all life on our planet. Perhaps not everyone knows that the world we live in is a pathogenic world, where the air, water, and food, in most cases, are polluted. In most of the population, the food that they eat is nutritionally unbalanced and deficient with essential nutrients. The clothes that they wear contain massive doses of microplastics. How is it possible that such a situation does not draw interest and worry about everyone? How come it does not alarm every person that exists, lives, and moves in this world?

But who is aware of what happens? Who is aware of the ongoing drama?

Certain decisions are taken by the political and civil leaders certainly lead to the right direction: garbage segregation, the prohibition of the most polluting machines, ecological Sundays. However, few people realize that the simple daily gestures can change things or which, at least, can resolve o the problem: limit the use of plastic, for example, use of glass bottles, avoid throwing cigarette butts on the ground. Some are the fundamental rules of society and healthy habits which we must learn to make our own.

(<https://www.studenti.it/tema-argomentativo-ecologia-inquinamento-degrado-ambientale.html>)

In the final document of the 4th session of the United Nations Environment Assembly in Nairobi, we read these statements in point n. 3: "We are, however, deeply concerned about the findings of relevant global environmental assessments which indicate that,

despite the availability of solutions to our common environmental challenges, our planet is increasingly polluted, affected by the adverse effects of climate change, quickly losing its biodiversity, and experiencing widespread environmental degradation.”

Faced with this sad reality, what can we do or what should we do? To react or to suffer? On May 24, 2015, Pope Francis, through the encyclical letter *Laudato Si*, offered the Catholics and all men of good will guidelines to safeguard our common good, the mother earth, and to ensure a future for the next generations. In light of this particularly evocative document, what path should you take? What kind of behavior do you adopt?

LAUDATO SI: A SCHOOL OF INTEGRAL ECOLOGY

In his encyclical letter *Laudato Si* (LS) published on May 24, 2015, Pope Francis placed himself in the person of St. Francis of Assisi in order to explain the importance of an integral ecology, in which the concern for custody of creation and nature, equity towards the poor, commitment to society, but also joy and inner peace are interconnected.

In the six chapters that make up the magisterial document, the Holy Father points out that our earth, abused and sacked, requires an "ecological conversion," a "change of course" so that man assumes the responsibility of a commitment to "care of the common home." This commitment also includes the eradication of poverty, attention to the poor, equitable access for all to the resources of the planet.

The Pope distances himself from those who minimize environmental risk, considers it not certain or not so serious, pretends not to see (LS 59) or has the somewhat fatalistic hope that the problems will be solved by themselves, perhaps with the baton magical technique or market. On the contrary, it uses in no uncertain terms an alarmist language: if we continue like this, this century could be a witness to unprecedented climate changes (LS 24), so catastrophic predictions cannot be looked at with sufficiency or irony (LS 161). Indeed, in this case, it will not be possible to say that the Church woke up late or did not have a prophetic look. Pope Francis is aware that, on these issues, there is a certain margin of discussion and debates (LS 24), and that it is not possible to pronounce definitive words (LS 61), nevertheless he feels the duty to make his voice heard loudly in defense of land, without claiming to define scientific questions or to replace politics, but inviting everyone to an honest and transparent debate (LS 188).

The watermark of Pope Francis' speech, repeatedly emphasized and underlined, is made up of an integral and integrated perspective. In reality, "everything is connected." This basic concept is repeated several times. It indicates that the different elements that stratify reality (matter and spirit; body and soul; science-technique-economy-ethics-anthropology-culture-spirituality and religion; the earth, the others, the human person, God) are profoundly interconnected (LS 79); It appears to be harmful to separate them, to proclaim the hegemony of one dimension (for example the technical-economic perspective) over the others; to reduce the multiform wealth of being to only one of its dimensions. For Pope Francis, the ecology will either be integral and integrated, or it

will only be the romantic painting of fashion environmentalism. Everything is connected; everything is in relation to the whole; everything is interrelation - separating the opaque shell of individualism ("immanence", in the language of Pope Francis) to meet the other and the different ("transcendence", always in his language), constitutes the essence, the marrow of reality: "The fundamental attitude of self-transcending, breaking the isolated conscience and self-referentiality, is the root that makes every cure possible for others and the environment" (LS 208). The reality that has its origin and its model in the mystery of the Triune God (LS 238-240).

In this regard, the most striking example is that given by St. Francis, who combined a love for creation with the care of the poorest and most abandoned, and in this way, he welded God, others, nature and himself in wonderful harmony (LS 10). The integral perspective is realized through the intrinsic connection of four spheres of reality: earth, others, human person, and God. Nature not only manifests God but is also the place of its presence, even in an infinite distance, since things obviously cannot fully express the absolute fullness of God (LS 88). Thus, the divine and the human meet in the smallest detail of the seamless garment of God's creation, even in the last grain of dust on our planet (LS 9).

For this reason, the Pope reiterates the "tremendous responsibility" of the human being towards Creation and reminds us that "the environment is a collective gift, the patrimony of all humanity," "common heritage" to be administered and not destroyed. Following the biblical story of creation, Pope Francis highlights the three fundamental relationships of man: with God, with a neighbor, and with the earth. Every creature has its function, none is superfluous, and everything is "caress of God," writes the pontiff, recalling that "every maltreatment towards any creature is contrary to human dignity."

However, the care of other living beings must always be accompanied by "compassion and concern" for man. And this is why we need the awareness of universal communion. In this perspective, the principle of the subordination of private property to the

THE NEED FOR AN ECOLOGICAL CONVERSION

The encyclical expresses a strong appeal from the Pope on the subject of ecological conversion - as he calls it! - Increasingly urgent. It does not represent anything extraordinary, but as Christians, we cannot believe that ecology does not concern us, it is not our business and that the gospel is only a discourse that is exhausted in prayers or in "going to mass." Does faith have its own and necessary impact on life and, therefore, also on the relationships we structure with people and other creatures?

The concept of conversion

The term comes from the Greek word 'metá-noia,' whose etymology indicates a change of ideas: to change the fundamental ideas on which we construct our reasoning, take our decisions, evaluate the consequences of an action. This is the purpose of the encyclical *Laudato Si* '.

This ecological conversion - continues the encyclical - requires both a negative and, above all, a strong propositional charge. In his 'pars destruens' he needs to acknowledge his mistakes, responsibilities, and negligence and regret from his heart. In his "*pars costruens*" some attitudes to be pursued in life and choices are indicated. We could talk about a "spirituality of ecological virtues." What are these virtues that the Pope invites to cultivate to promote respect and care for creation?

THE ECOLOGICAL VIRTUES

- Gratitude and gratuity

In LS 220 we read: "This conversion (...) 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." The truth here is that the world is not "free of ownership " (LS 89) and therefore completely available to our arbitrary freedom. The world is the work of God and was created by God with a purpose, that of being a welcoming home for all people of all times: "God created the world for all" (LS 93). Man is undoubtedly the lord of the world, and God has entrusted it to him to work and keep it, but the correct interpretation of the concept of our "dominion" over the universe should be understood more properly in the sense of responsible stewardship. " (LS 116). The concept of administrator is central to the Christian idea of creation, but also in any culture where the power of the powerful is not considered supreme law. The administrator manages the assets that have been entrusted to him according to the will of his owner, which in this case means: bearing in mind their common destination, founded on the "awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and a future to be shared with everyone." (LS 202)

Gratitude and gratuitousness, therefore, imply above all a recognition of the free nature of life. This, is not obvious, especially today, where life is often understood as a right, a possession of which can be used at will. "Life as a gift" leads us to "admit" that we are not the protagonists.

- The loving awareness of a universal communion (LS 220)

It is the fundamental idea of "being part of the whole," with the advantages, but also with the responsibilities that this entails. The risk of some fringes of our contemporary culture is that of isolation. Paradoxically, therefore, because in spite of this need for networks, today's man is increasing "individual" and less and less a "person."

"Individual," says "I," emphasizes autonomy, highlights the boundaries that define our spaces, enhances the rights to be respected.

"Person," instead, says above all relationship, openness, the necessity of the other, expresses the need of the neighbor. The ecological spirituality of Pope Francis focuses on the rediscovery of our being people, of our being part of an "everything": this characteristic is not a simple existential accessory, but something constitutive of our life, of our identity. You are not happy alone, ever!

- Creativity and commitment

"By developing our individual, God-given capacities, an ecological conversion can inspire us to greater creativity and enthusiasm in resolving the world's problems ..." (LS 220). The believer is not one who is watching, who is content to receive a gift, thanking, but remain fixed in the static nature of his needs. A fundamental virtue is that of "rolling up our sleeves," with creativity and enthusiasm. Here we recall an aspect that should already be established of Christian spirituality in general, and therefore also of the "ecological" one.

Here, then, are three concrete virtues that outline the figure of a Christian who is attentive to the environment. Indeed, the Pope seems to be saying that neither information nor laws are enough to reverse the situation. The laws must be there, and probably others must be made, and they must certainly be enforced. But here we are talking about an attitude, a necessary mentality that is at the basis of slavish respect for these laws.

ATTITUDES TO CONTRAST

- *The consumer mentality to be contrasted with sobriety.*

The Pope speaks of obsessive consumerism, almost like a psychological pathology, which tends to make us believe that to be happy, we must possess and dominate. To this logic, the encyclical contrasts the expression "less is more" (LS 222). It is a clear invitation to the sobriety of life, which is not pauperism, but the ability to appreciate everything and every moment in their beauty and importance. It knows how to enjoy with little, in simplicity. It is an attitude that frees from idols and makes people more joyful. The freedom from false needs, in fact, from the often induced needs, preserves us from that dissatisfaction, fatigue, anxiety that often color (better, make gray) the days and the relationships. An ancient Greek proverb reminds us that "nothing will satisfy the one who is not satisfied with just a little." "Less is more" is a strong invitation to the enhancement of everyday life, especially personal talents, of gifts received to be spent to create a climate of fraternity. "Less is more" means trust in life, in the potential of life that is often not under our determined control. "Less is more" is preparatory to an openness to life, to create the ability to marvel, to get excited about life itself.

- *Utilitarian pragmatism to be contrasted with wonder*

What matters is technical effectiveness, technological progress. It is dangerous not in itself, of course. We all appreciate and rightly take advantage of the scientific and technical progress of the company. But it becomes harmful if it induces us to make people forget the true beauty of life if it leads them to consider useless a look admired towards a beautiful landscape or a work of art and if it classifies the importance of things (if not of people), based on efficiency criteria. Certainly a bit of pragmatism is necessary and useful in life. The problem is when you lose the ability to marvel, the ability to contemplate, that is, to have a look that knows how to go beyond appearance to see the traces of beauty sown in that reality.

- *The superficiality to be contrasted with the capacity for contemplation*

In every creature, there is, in fact, a reflection of God, as well as an order, a dynamism desired by God. In faith, then, we know that creation itself was assumed by Christ in the incarnation. The Christian, therefore, far from despising the matter, considers it not

only as a reality desired by God but as an obligatory way for salvation. "The universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely. Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person's face." (LS 233). The Christian has "big eyes." It is a contemplation that is not an end in itself, but rather a tendency to take care. The beauty that can be seen is a beauty that provokes, that pushes to act, to take care of it. It is therefore not surprising that Pope Francis continues to articulate parallelism and insists that there is no respect for nature without regard for the poor, that ecology must be integral, that is, foresee the responsibility for both environmental conditions and the issues of justice towards the weakest. Nature is not taken care of without even the poor. The two things go inexorably "arm in arm." Contemplation looks at the landscape as the face of the brother. There is a beauty! Integral ecology becomes a synonym of charity, justice, universal brotherhood.

To conclude, we believe that the ecological conversion proposed by Pope Francis cannot be reduced to some technical measures - the lowering of polluting emissions, the safeguarding of endangered animals, more equitable legislation, etc. - that "they run the risk of considering symptoms that do not correspond to the deepest problems" (LS 144). The basic ideas must be converted, the very logic of our reasoning and our decisions: it must be changed - where it exists - a selfish logic with a logic that takes seriously the common origin, mutual belonging, the future shared by all, and above all the fact that true happiness consists in being more and not in having more at all costs.

Thus, this encyclical calls everyone to respect the principle of the universality of goods, since the goods have been donated to "everyone". And the term "all" has not only a spatial value but also a reciprocal temporal value; therefore a generation cannot be allowed to impact the environment to such an extent that even the essential resources of future generations are dissolved. An African proverb summarizes this condition beautifully: "We have not inherited the land from our fathers, but we have borrowed it from our children." An integral ecology is therefore synonymous with respect for the relationship of man with the principles of the common good