

## **THE GOSPEL OF CREATION**

### **Ecological spirituality of living and ethics of care**

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#### ***Introduction***

On September 1 of this year, we are invited to celebrate the day for the custody of creation. It is a day to raise awareness among women and men of goodwill for a genuine and authentic ecological conversion, according to the perspective of the integral ecology of "*Laudato Si*," because - in dialogue and peace between different faiths and cultures the human family can live sustainably on the land given to us.

The day for the custody of creation is an opportunity to know and understand the fragile and precious reality of creation. *Laudato Si* invites us to "a contemplative look" to admire the creatures of the earth and in particular the world of life, so varied and lush; a contemplation that is also worried about at creation, threatened by irresponsible behavior.

***God has given to man "the earth, the sea, and all that they contain" (Psalm 14: 6; Acts 14:15). He put the sky at his disposal, as well as the sun, the moon, and the stars. He has granted men the rains, the winds and all that is in the world. And after all this he gave himself. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (Jn 3:16) for the life of the world.***

These words of the great Alexandrian exegete, Origen (II-III century AD) express in a simple but very effective way the source of Christian theological reflection on the safeguarding of creation. Man is called to take care of creation in so far as it is the fruit of love of God, who was pleased to give it to the man himself, from God "made sovereign over the works of his hands" (cf. Ps 8: 7).

Pope Benedict XVI had already dedicated the traditional message for the 43rd World Day of Peace to ecology - "If you want to cultivate peace, keep creation" (January 1, 2010), - emphasizing the inseparable link between the custody of creation and plenary humanism. "It is indispensable that humanity renews and strengthen that covenant between human beings and the environment, which must be a mirror of God's creative love, from which we come and towards which we are on our way."

But it was Pope Francis who gave a decisive acceleration to this binomial, with the revival of expression of great semantic effectiveness and full of religious, spiritual and ethical consequences: the "***Gospel of creation***."

The expression 'Gospel of creation' comes directly from the title of the second chapter *Laudato si* '(nn.62-100), which constitutes the actual nucleus of the encyclical. It is in it, in fact, that Pope Francis unfolds, in an extensive biblical trajectory, that fraternal gaze on creation that he - as the introduction (nn.1-16) underlines - takes up from Francis of Assisi and qualifies the point view of the text.

The richness of this section allows at least two perspectives of reading, certainly not opposed, but rather complementary. Therefore, starting from their presentation, it will be possible to explore the fundamental notion of "integral ecology" which is the specific object of the fourth chapter (nos. 137-162).

#### **1. Tenderness, care, hope**

Two perspectives of reading, united by the breadth of the biblical reference: an accurate crossing of the canon of scriptures (historical, prophetic, book of wisdom, gospels and other writings of the NT) all conducted precisely in the sign of reference to ***creation***.

The first perspective could be evoked by speaking of a proclamation of the Gospel for the whole of creation, of the narration of a love with a cosmic dimension that addresses every living being: "every creature is the object of the tenderness of the Father, who assigns it a place in the world" (n. 77).

In this direction, also the pages dedicated to Jesus' gaze on the created world go, which call to share his affection for every creature (nos. 96-100). It is in this perspective, markedly theological - that the significant indications present in different sections of the encyclical are also rooted, concerning

some important ethical questions. I am thinking of the underlining of the intrinsic value of the world (No. 115), beyond its functionality to the needs of human beings.

I still think of the invitation to recognize the value of individual creatures, of species (No. 33), of the "lungs of the planet filled with biodiversity" (No. 38), of ecosystems (No. 140) and to practice its care, what a qualifying dimension for being a believer himself. We could grasp the meaning of these indications by recalling the criticism of the absolute anthropocentrism of modernity present in the encyclical. It would be profoundly wrong "to think that other living beings should be considered as mere objects subjected to the arbitrary domination of the human being" (n. 82).

It is also essential, however, to grasp the breadth of the balanced perspective indicated by Pope Francis. The criticism of a "despotic" (n. 68) and "deviated" (n. 69) anthropocentrism does not aim to "equate all beings living and taking away from the human being that particular value which at the same time implies a tremendous responsibility" (n. 90).

It could not, in fact, "be authentic a feeling of intimate union with other beings of nature, if at the same time, in the heart there is no tenderness, compassion, and concern for human beings" (n. 91). On the contrary, precisely because "everything is connected", it is necessary to hold "concern for the environment" together with "a sincere love for human beings and a constant commitment to the problems of society" (No. 91), since "we are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and another social, but a single and complex socio-environmental crisis" (n. 139).

Not by chance the same accentuation of the affectionate lordship of God over creation finds expression also in the reference to the *universal destination of the goods of the earth*, as a criticism of an "unjust" system (no. 48-52), to every vision of private property that do not take responsibility for a welcoming solidarity with a global dimension. In short, it is a question of living in creation in the sign of relationship and universal communion. "Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of his creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river, and mother earth." (n. 92).

The last words just mentioned, also guide us to grasp the second perspective mentioned. The reading of the texts of creation conducted in the II chapter of *Laudato si* 'also discovers a real Evangelium. That is, he lives in them, *a good announcement for humanity and its existence within creation*, rooted in the experience of a God who dominates the cosmic chaos and human injustice: "If God could have created the universe from nothing, can also intervene in this world and overcome all forms of evil. Therefore, injustice is not invincible" (n. 72). It is the clear affirmation of the *inseparable intertwining of creation and redemption*". In the Bible, the God who liberates and saves is the same God who created the universe, and these two divine ways of acting are intimately and inseparably connected" (n. 73).

It is not by chance that *Laudato si* ', concludes in chapter VI (no. 202-246) with a sharp cry of hope, with an invitation to never despair in the possibility of change, but rather to allow oneself to be personally involved in the dynamics of ecological conversion. It is also to keep this hope alive that it invites us to contemplate creation with the eyes of faith - the eyes of Francis of Assisi - to understand it as "the entire material universe speaks of God's love, his boundless affection for us... Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God." (n. 84).

## **2. Gazing and listening**

It might seem that this reading of the second chapter of *Laudato Si* has favored too delicate tones, almost leaving in parentheses the drama of the negative that lives in our common home and that Pope Francis knows well. Already from the very beginning of the encyclical he underlines that sister earth protests for the evil that we provoke her, because of the irresponsible use and the abuse of the goods that God has placed in her.

We grew up thinking that we were its owners and rulers, authorized to plunder it. The violence that is in the human heart wounded by sin manifested in the symptoms of disease that we feel in the soil, in water, in air, and living beings. For this reason, among the poorest and most abused poor, there is our oppressed and devastated land, which "groans and suffers the pangs of childbirth" (Rom 8:22) (n. 2).

Precisely in the discovery of the contradiction between the beauty/goodness given that we contemplate and the piercing cry that even creation crosses, the need for care for the common home is rooted, expressed from the subtitle of *Laudato si'*. For this reason it is also an invitation to refine our ears, to be more able to grasp the cry of the earth, in its interweaving with that of the poor (n. 49).

We could read the same encyclical as an indication of a method, of a journey of formation, which all our communities are called to share: precisely the believing gaze, so attentive to the goodness of the world, informs the stages of a journey that demands:

- first of all, *careful listening to the cries coming from victims of climate change* or pollution deaths; from the Amazonia deprived of its forests, from the seas exploited without limits or from the species that become extinct (perhaps without ever even being recognized and contemplated);
- Secondly, the *understanding*, beyond the emotionality of immediate reactions. It is the style of the first chapter of the encyclical, which dedicates a careful examination to some critical dimensions of the ecological-social crisis, grasping the key factors in which it is expressed and the dynamics that determine it. It is not a merely intellectual exercise, but they need to grasp with the instruments offered to the different sciences "what is happening to our home", the title of Chapter I, nos. 17-61): the dynamics of exploitation the resources of the earth and the people that an *unfair* economic system is realizing;
- Finally, the answer. The one that finds expression in the *actual custody of the living reality*, as well as that which is expressed in the need for change in the system, in what is most unacceptable (in this sense above all, Chapter V, n. 163 -201). It is, however, the expression of a response, of an assumption of that responsibility that Benedict XVI already in *Caritas in Veritate* pointed out as a fundamental dimension of the believing moral attitude. *Laudato* emphasizes that "On many concrete questions, the Church has no reason to offer a definitive opinion; she knows that honest debate must be encouraged among experts, while respecting divergent views" (n. 61), but also invites to take seriously the urgent urgency of the issues at stake - think of climate change - which must be met with an incisive action.

### 3. *Integral Ecology*

What was mentioned helps to understand better the meaning of the following expression that appears in the title of this intervention: "integral ecology." The dimension of integrality is undoubtedly essential to truly grasp the message of *Laudato si'*. Francis himself clarified that it should not be read as a green encyclical, but as a social encyclical - attention to environmental ecology and care for the earth, - "common home" - cannot go to the detriment of ecology human and caring for humans.

The encyclical takes, for example, distances from those who believe that "the human species, with any of its interventions, can only be a threat and consequently compromise the global ecosystem, so it is convenient to reduce its presence on the planet and prevent it every time type of intervention" (n. 60). His is instead a humanist position, but of a new humanism, in solidarity and attentive to its roots in the earth, cultured as a *mother*.

Nor is it possible, in this sense, to contrast human ecology with an environmental ecology, almost the latter representing a superficial, inadequate approach. On the contrary, precisely by keeping strong as the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter of *Laudato si'* does - the connection with the concreteness of environmental issues in their specificity, the idea of an ecology of the human, strengthened in its full integrity, is increased, taking seriously what in the common sense is the immediate referent of the expression - environmental ecology - reinforces the re-signification brought about by the integral adjective.

Thus we can understand the central function, in different senses, that it has for the installation of *Laudato si'*. On the one hand, it has a meaning of significance, of appeal against reductionist approaches: "the integral ecology requires opening towards categories that transcend the language of the exact sciences or biology and connect us with the essence of the human" (n 11). It is no coincidence that chapter IV also examines dimensions that are rarely associated with the expression ecology: the cultural one (nos. 143-146) or the one of living in urban communities (nos. 147-155). On the other hand, however, it plays a vital role for an encyclical that effectively holds together a profoundly theological and contemplative dimension and a convocation, wide-ranging, addressed "to every person who lives on this planet", to "enter into dialogue with everyone about our typical home" (No. 3).

In the idea of integral ecology, in fact, Pope Francis links that sense of urgency of change, which most of humanity now associate with the environmental question, with the perception of its inescapable connection to the social, cultural, anthropological dimension (LS, c. III) and educational (LS, c. VI). An expansion of meaning, therefore, analogous to that realized in nos. 216-221 of chap. VI for the idea of "*ecological conversion*."

Here, then, that the integral ecology comes to assume a function in some way analogous to that which has traditionally for the ethical-social Catholic perspective the **common good**, which not by chance is referred to precisely in chapter VI (nos. 156-158). It becomes a multi-dimensional objective, to which the efforts of the various social components are directed, in relation to the **well-being** of the global society. A shared goal - "the environment is a collective good, the patrimony of all humanity and the responsibility of all," (n. 95) - around which it is possible to convene men and women of ideal belonging, also profoundly different, for a dialogue-oriented to the care of the typical home. A key concept, therefore, for that work of cultural and social mediation that is at the center of socio-political formation in a plural society.

A concept that allows inserting into the same dialogue for the common home, absolutely some specific words of the experience of Christian faith. I think the bond that comes to be established between the shared ecological knowledge of the relational interconnection of our world, so central to the fourth chapter - "everything is connected" (no. 138), - and its interpretation as **communion in creaturalty**: "all of us in the universe is united by invisible bonds and form a sort of universal family, a sublime communion that drives us to a sacred, loving and humble respect" (n. 89). I still think of the further rereading offered in the final numbers of the encyclical in the light of **faith in a Trinitarian Creator**: "the world, created according to the divine model, is a web of relationships" and this network of links "invites us to mature spirituality of global solidarity that springs from the mystery of the trinity" (n. 240).

#### 4. *An ecological spirituality*

An antiphon of the liturgy of the hours reads: *From the rising of the sun to its setting may the name of the Lord be praised* (Psalm 112). What shape should this praise have in today's history? It is perhaps not the answer, in the concrete dimension of our life that is, with our way of "living the earth" producing and consuming and living in relationships with the other and with "things" - the convocation of the Creator God of all things, so that we may return to re-encounter the face of the Creator in creation?

Simon Weil wrote that **Jesus' smile shines in the beauties of the earth**. But what did we do with the "good and beautiful" things that the Creator gave us? What have we done with God's smile? This "distancing" from collaboration with the Creator has led to the construction of the "territories of dissimilarity from God" in which multiple "iniquities" proliferate, multiple "disfigurements to the order of things" that God the creator has generated. The evangelist, Luke, reminds us: **"What good is it for man to gain the whole world if he then loses himself."** (Lk 9:25). Indeed, man has "gained" the world, but perhaps he is losing it in the blindness of his greed that precludes a future. The face of man and earth have been disfigured, and the earth and the man of today are in suffering!

Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si* made himself the interpreter of this suffering, of the pain of men and the earth, listening also to the "suffering of God," always in search of a human friend who "cooperates" with his continuous work of creation and keep it.

Pope Francis reminded us that man is not "at the center of the world", around which everything must be instrumentally reported, but he **must learn "to live with"**, integrating himself with the nature of which he must take charge and in the community of co - creatures that inhabit that global village that is our land.

The theologian J. Moltmann affirms "the place of man" in the order of creation. **"Men, in their peculiarity, in their destination and their hope of life, are a part of nature. Therefore they are not at the center of the world, but to survive they must be integrated into the nature of the earth and into the community of the co-creatures they live with."** In other words, men must learn to relate to all forms of otherness created by God the Father. This way of perceiving oneself in the order of everything created is fundamental to avoid falling into the imposing logic of human self-referentiality. In arrogant



reasoning (those who claim the criterion of acting regardless of the context to which it belongs) it will lead to reckless use of the earth's goods, only to complain then in front of environmental criticalities that precisely undermine our reckless lifestyle.

Self-referentiality, or being self-centered, inevitably leads to having a purely instrumental relationship with the others who are beside me and with nature, a "disposable" relationship that uses everything from material goods to affections and even human relationships. If it appears evident that the times claim a new modality of human activity, we cannot but start from the urgency of the "regeneration of man," so that it becomes "capable of working" to exercise its function in creation and creation - to let justice work. The time has come for everyone to respond to this voice of the Pope with his specific "here I am!" But the "care and custody of creation" cannot be given if the custodians are not "constituted," indeed if the man is not renewed, he will not be regenerated by the spirit.

Of course, the knowledge of the world of techno-science can give us the "tools" indispensable to work, but it is necessary that the "tools" be "governed" by men who are aware of the common good, the awareness of what is convenient to human nature and useful to the social consortium. Technologies, as instruments of human activity and its "relationship" with nature and the environment, are never neutral to the ecological question.

To have "new eyes" (purified) means to recognize the Creator in creation and thus be able to assume "the commitments to the creation that the gospel of Jesus proposes to us" (n. 246). This implies knowing how to see the world and recognize its intrinsic complexity which means knowing how to "watch" or "stay with" and "get one's hands dirty," also exercising "healthy pressure on those who hold political, economic and social power" (No. 206). It implies knowing how to be a prophetic sign even with the "counter-current" testimony of a lifestyle capable of weaving new human relationships (the life of sharing with the brothers) and new ways of living the relationship with what Pope Francis did not hesitate to call "our mother earth", thus building a habitat "with a human face".

## Conclusion

*Laudato Si* really offers stimuli and ideas to profoundly renew the presentation of the social thought of the Church, deepening its roots in writing and tradition, but also elaborating it in forms capable of effectively interpreting the life of humanity of this time, that is, seizing it - according to the indication of the Conciliar Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (no. 1) - in its joys and hopes, in its sadness and its anguish. In short, he lives in that practice that the Council has indicated as qualifying for the mission of Christian communities: the ability to "***discern and interpret the various languages of our time (...) so that the revealed truth is always more deeply understood, both better understood, and to adapt it more successfully in our times***" (GS n. 44).

Safeguarding, safeguarding and redeeming creation appears as a commandment given to men before the law given to Moses. Together with the command of sabbatical rest, there is the command *to guard and cultivate the garden*, a command addressed to all men.

Man must choose between being the lieutenant of God who reigns over creation and authoritatively enhancing his life, or being a disfigurer, exploiter, ruler of creation. Man does not only sin against God, against his brothers, against himself but also against nature, often making the land desolate.

The *Adam* of the first creation, the earthling, in his sinning, have sinned and sins also against the creation, but the *new Adam* (cf. 1 Cor 15.45), the last to come but first in the thought of God, knew how to live with the creation in an excellent way. His messianic action not only concerned the relationship with men but also that with creation. Jesus loved the earth, remained faithful to it, showed himself a contemplative of creation, capable of seeing in it a gift of God and a responsibility for man. Reconciled with nature, with animals, with the work of man, with daily reality, from the contemplation of nature he was able to draw lessons, consolation, and was able to respond to the groan present in everything. It was not only "the beautiful/good shepherd" (Jn 10:11) of the sheep, but also of nature!

And we, following him, in front of the "advancing desert" - as Nietzsche announced -, facing the increasingly desolate land, we should learn from him to see in the depths of creation the *signatura*

*rerum*, the writing of things, to grasp not only the *lacrimae rerum* (cf. Rom. 8:22), but also the *laudes rerum* (cf. Ps. 19: 2-5; Bar 3.34-35).