

## *Laudato Si'*

### The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis

It was on the day of the Solemnity of Pentecost in 2015 that our Pope Francis delivered to us his long-awaited encyclical on integral ecology. True to his usual methodology, he first invited us to look at what is happening in our common home: problems of pollution, climate change, water; loss of biodiversity; deterioration in the quality of life; social degradation; global inequality; the weak responses to these disturbing phenomena. (Ch. 1)

Secondly, he guided us in a dual analysis of the causes of the situation in which we find ourselves, one analysis theological (Ch. 2), the other more scientific. (Ch. 3 and 4) Finally, he pointed us towards some important approaches for correcting the situation, approaches that involve various dialogues to be undertaken (Ch. 5) and a suggestion for an ecological education and spirituality. (Ch. 6)

Every chapter of *Laudato Si'* offers us several opportunities for deeper reflection. We are going to focus our attention here on Chapter 3, which attempts to identify the human roots of the ecological crisis we are experiencing. "It would hardly be helpful," says Francis, "to describe symptoms" (Ch. 1) "without acknowledging the human origins of the ecological crisis" (*Laudato Si'*, 101). He will attempt to pinpoint these human roots by identifying "*the dominant technocratic paradigm*" of our society, and "*the crisis of modern anthropocentrism*."

#### The Dominant Technocratic Paradigm

There is no doubt that science and technology are "wonderful products of a God-given human creativity." The Encyclical does not vacillate: "How can we not feel gratitude and appreciation for this progress, especially in the fields of medicine, engineering and communications?" (*Laudato Si'*, 102) "Yet it must also be recognized that nuclear energy, biotechnology, information technology, knowledge of our DNA, and many other abilities which we have acquired, have given us tremendous power." (*Laudato Si'*, 104)

Be careful, it is not a question of believing "that every increase in power means an increase of 'progress' itself." (*Laudato Si'*, 105) Technology has fascinated human beings to the point where one can speak about the emergence of a technocracy, that is to say, the advent of a world in which technology reigns.

But, Francis reminds us, a "science which would offer solutions to the great issues would necessarily have to take into account the data generated by other fields of knowledge, including philosophy and social ethics." (*Laudato Si'*, 110) But, he adds, "this is a difficult habit to acquire today" because "life gradually becomes a surrender to situations conditioned by technology, itself viewed as the principal key to the meaning of existence." (*Laudato Si'*, 110)

#### A Distinctive Way of Looking

When, therefore, we speak about an ecological culture, we are not just thinking about responding to the problems of environmental decay, depletion of natural resources and pollution, but we are aiming at "a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies, an educational program, a lifestyle and a spirituality which together generate

resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm." (*Laudato Si'*, 111) The reflection on the domination of the technocratic paradigm ends with the following clarification: "Nobody is suggesting a return to the Stone Age, but we do need to slow down and look at reality in a different way, to appropriate the positive and sustainable progress which has been made, but also to recover the values and the great goals swept away by our unrestrained delusions of grandeur." (*Laudato Si'*, 114)

### Modern Anthropocentrism

"Modernity," says Francis, "has been marked by an excessive anthropocentrism." He says that we have to ask ourselves about the way we understand the dominion of man over creation. And he answers, with the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (Tagaytay 1993): "Instead, our 'dominion' over the universe should be understood more properly in the sense of responsible stewardship." (*Laudato Si'*, 116)

### "Everything is Connected"

A certain phrase is repeated many times over the course of this encyclical, as a kind of mantra: "Everything is connected." "When we fail to acknowledge as part of reality the worth of a poor person, a human embryo, a person with disabilities [...] it becomes difficult to hear the cry of nature itself." (*Laudato Si'*, 117) In the society in which we live, we often see that "a technocracy which sees no intrinsic value in lesser beings coexists with the other extreme, which sees no special value in human beings." (*Laudato Si'*, 118)

Francis says further that if "the present ecological crisis is one small sign of the ethical, cultural and spiritual crisis of modernity, we cannot presume to heal our relationship with nature and the environment without healing all fundamental human relationships." Do not think, adds our father and brother Francis, that to have a correct relationship with the created world, you need to "weaken the social dimension of [human beings] openness to others, much less [their] transcendent dimension." (*Laudato Si'*, 119)

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis had said that practical relativism 'was' even more dangerous than doctrinal relativism. (*EG* 80; *Laudato Si'* 122) If we allow the technocratic paradigm and unlimited human power to prevail, can we be surprised at "the rise of a relativism which sees everything as irrelevant unless it serves one's own immediate interests"? Here, Francis sets out a long list of situations that illustrate this practical relativism. (*Laudato Si'*, 123)

### The Workplace

Still with the objective of better situating humankind within the whole of creation, he examines the workplace (*Laudato Si'*, 124–129) and the possibilities and limits of research in biological technologies (*Laudato Si'*, 130–136). Do not talk about integral ecology, Francis tells us, if you do not take into account the value of labour. Think about the responsibility that *Genesis* gives us:

- Protect creation but also work the land so that it produces more. (*Laudato Si'*, 124)
- Work is a necessity; it is part of the meaning of life on this earth, a path to growth, human development and personal fulfillment. (*Laudato Si'*, 128)
- Yes, of course, we can help the poor by giving them money, but it is so much more important to help them to "have a dignified life through work." (*Laudato Si'*, 128)

- But to be able to offer employment, it is imperative to promote an economy which favours productive diversity and business creativity (*Laudato Si'*, 129)

And if you think about research and biological innovation, remember that even though "human intervention on plants and animals is permissible when it pertains to the necessities of human life," the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2419) teaches that "experimentation on animals is morally acceptable only 'if it remains within reasonable limits [and] contributes to caring for or saving human lives.'" (*Laudato Si'*, 130)

### Technology and Ethics

Of course, "human activity cannot be suppressed," nor can we stop "those who possess particular gifts for the advancement of science and technology." However, "we need constantly to rethink the goals, effects, overall context and ethical limits of this human activity." (*Laudato Si'*, 131)

There is also the question of organisms whose genome has been modified by genetic engineering. What judgment can we make "about genetic modification (GM), whether vegetable or animal, medical or agricultural"? One feels here that Pope Francis is being very nuanced, avoiding a general judgment, as these developments include various processes. "In nature, however," he points out, "this process is slow and cannot be compared to the fast pace induced by contemporary technological advances." (*Laudato Si'*, 133)

Another crucial question is asked at the end of Chapter 3: How is it that while "some ecological movements defend the integrity of the environment, rightly demanding that certain limits be imposed on scientific research, they sometimes fail to apply those same principles to human life"? All our thinking about this chapter of *Laudato Si'* leads us to conclude that "a technology severed from ethics will not easily be able to limit its own power." (*Laudato Si'*, 136)

### A Long Reflection Necessary

We are truly invited to undertake a reflection that will have to be long to do justice to the depth of questioning and possible solutions proposed by our Francis of the 21st century!

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