

TOWARDS AN INTEGRAL ECO- THEOLOGY OF *LAUDATO SI'* IN THE CONTEXT OF CLIMATE CHANGE

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Abstract

Laudato Si' is a ground-breaking encyclical of Pope Francis which was published six years ago. A wide range of issues such as pollution, climate change, fresh drinking water, loss of biodiversity, decline in the quality of life, breakdown of society, globalization etc. find their place in this papal document. Climate change is a global problem with serious implications: environmental, social, economic, political and for the distribution of goods. It represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day. Unlike the previous centuries today the world is ever more in need of an integral ecology that brings together a fresh understanding that people and the planet are part of one interdependent and interconnected community in the whole ecosystem. Our very vocation as human beings is to protect, preserve and conserve the God-given resources in our common home. Hence this article focuses on the theological and ecological insights that are delineated in the teachings of Pope Francis.

Keywords: Climate Change; Ecosystem; Environmental Protection; Human Ecology; Integral Eco-theology; Our Common Home

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Introduction

Pope Francis' Laudato Si' was published on 18th June 2015. In the context of global ecological crisis, this encyclical is very timely. It is for the first time a church document is entirely dealing with the environmental issues. A wide range of issues such as pollution, climate change, fresh drinking water, loss of biodiversity, decline in the quality of life, breakdown of society, globalization etc find their place in this papal document. It is addressed to not only to Christians but also to all people across the globe. It is an appeal of the Pope for responsibility to cultivate and protect "the garden in which God has put the human person." In this article an attempt is made to look into the ecological and theological insights that are contained in this papal encyclicals as well as the problem of climate Change.

1. The Concept of Integral Ecology in *Laudato Si'*

Referring to St Francis of Assisi, the patron of ecology, Pope Francis says,

Francis helps us to see that an integral ecology calls for openness to categories which transcend the language of mathematics and biology, and take us to the heart of what it is to be human. Just as happens when we fall in love with someone, whenever he would gaze at the sun, the moon or the smallest of animals, he burst into song, drawing all other creatures into his praise. He communed with all creation, even preaching to the flowers, inviting them "to praise the Lord, just as if they were endowed with reason". His response to the world around him was so much more than intellectual appreciation or economic calculus, for to him each and every creature was a sister united to him by bonds of affection. That is why he felt called to care for all that exists.¹

Today more than ever before the world is ever more in need of an integral ecology that brings together a fresh understanding that people and the planet are part of one interdependent and interconnected community in the whole ecosystem. We human beings are only a part of the entire Earth community and we need to protect and preserve the resources that are at our disposal. Pope Benedict XVI has already mentioned this in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*:

The environment is God's gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations and towards humanity as a whole. When nature, including the human being, is viewed as the result of mere chance or evolutionary determinism, our sense of

¹Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, No. 11. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

responsibility wanes. In nature, the believer recognizes the wonderful result of God's creative activity, which we may use responsibly to satisfy our legitimate needs, material or otherwise, while respecting the intrinsic balance of creation. If this vision is lost, we end up either considering nature an untouchable taboo or, on the contrary, abusing it. Neither attitude is consonant with the Christian vision of nature as the fruit of God's creation.²

He further says:

...the natural environment is more than raw material to be manipulated at our pleasure; it is a wondrous work of the Creator containing a "grammar" which sets forth ends and criteria for its wise use, not its reckless exploitation. Today much harm is done to development precisely as a result of these distorted notions. Reducing nature merely to a collection of contingent data ends up doing violence to the environment and even encouraging activity that fails to respect human nature itself... Consequently, projects for integral human development cannot ignore coming generations, but need to be marked by solidarity and inter-generational justice, while taking into account a variety of contexts: ecological, juridical, economic, political and cultural (CV 48).

In chapter four of *Laudato Si'* Pope Francis gives a description of Integral Ecology. In the vision of the Holy Father it has five aspects. They are: a) Environmental, economic and social ecology (LS 138–142), b) Cultural ecology (LS 143–146), c) Ecology of daily life (LS 147–155) d) The principle of the common good (LS 156–158), e) Justice between the generations (LS 49). According to him, "Today, however, we have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*" (LS 49).

2. The Cosmos as Our Common Home

The word 'ecology' comes from the Greek word *Oikos*, meaning household, home or place to live.³ Keeping its original meaning, Pope Francis has rightly chosen the title *Laudato Si' : On Care for Our Common Home*. A number of times he has used the word 'home' in this encyclical.

In the words of Pope Francis,

The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and

² *Caritas in Veritate*, No. 48. https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html

³ *Compton's Pictured Encyclopedia*, Vol. 4, Chicago: Compton and Company, 1959, 258.

integral development, for we know that things can change... Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home. Here I want to recognize, encourage and thank all those striving in countless ways to guarantee the protection of the home which we share...(LS 13).

Realising the abiding presence of the living God in our common home, the Pope articulates: "In the heart of this world, the Lord of life, who loves us so much, is always present. He does not abandon us, he does not leave us alone, for he has united himself definitively to our earth, and his love constantly impels us to find new ways forward. *Praise be to him!*" (LS 245).⁴

3. The Impact of Climate Change on the Ecosystem

As we know climate change is due to factors such as temperature, atmospheric carbon dioxide, and cloud cover, etc. and it has a direct impact on the growth of plants and trees. As a result, climate change is affecting natural habitats and ecosystems via altering environmental factors. There are even subtle adjustments which can have a great impact on the species living within an ecosystem.⁵ The effect of climate change can be observed at various levels. In the water bodies especially in the ocean, water temperatures are rising and becoming more acidic. On land, temperatures are rising as well, and soil health and freshwater quality are declining. As a result, there is an endangering of entire ecosystems.⁶

Since temperatures continue to rise, many species are not able to thrive in places where they once lived. Today scientists estimate that 8% of current animal species are at risk of extinction due to climate change alone. Near the equator, a region with Earth's highest biodiversity, many species are not able to adapt to rising temperatures. It is also estimated that by 2070 nearly 20% of tropical

⁴Here one is reminded of the vision of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin who sees the world as a 'divine milieu,' filled with a diaphanous divine luminosity capable of penetrating, transforming and transfiguring everything. See P. Teilhard de Chardin, *Le milieu Divin*, London: Collins, 1957. See also U. King, *The Spirit of One Earth: Reflections on Teilhard de Chardin and Global Spirituality*, New York, Paragon House, 1989; Louis M. Savary, *Teilhard de Chardin-the divine milieu Explained: A Spirituality for the 21st Century*, New Jersey, Paulist Press, 2007; Raimundo Panikkar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience: Emerging Religious Consciousness*, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993. Here again it is interesting to note that like his predecessors St John Paul II and Benedict XVI, Pope Francis acknowledges the contribution of Teilhard de Chardin. See LS 83, footnote no. 53.

⁵ See Sarah Moore, "Climate Change and COVID-19," <https://www.news-medical.net/health/Climate-Change-and-COVID-19.aspx>.

⁶<https://scied.ucar.edu/learning-zone/climate-change-impacts/ecology>

plant species will be unable to germinate because of temperatures beyond their upper limit.⁷ It is said that

the bushfire that burned over 25 million acres in Australia during 2019-2020, which started due to a lightning strike following an especially hot, dry spell, killed an estimated one billion animals. Many of the animals that died in these fires are found only in Australia, which raises concern about the future of these unique ecosystems.⁸

Scientists see a correlation between climate change and the increase of severe weather events, which can significantly impact species and ecosystems in a short amount of time. For example, in 2019, an extreme heatwave hit Cairns, Australia, causing the death of one-third of the spectacled flying foxes in just two days as temperatures climbed to 42°C (about 108°F). Even though animals such as flying foxes are adapted to the typical Australian heat, we see that they are unable to survive the extreme temperatures that are becoming more common due to climate change.

4. Climate Change and Human Ecology

Human ecology is all about the study of the relationships between people and their environment. It delves into the analysis and deep understanding of mechanisms of biology, geography, environmental and natural sciences, sociology, economics, and other human sciences, next to applied sciences as medicine and engineering. It “not only integrates in its approach the (environmental, social, and economic) dimensions of sustainable development but equally pays attention to the cultural, psychological, and welfare dimensions of the equation.”⁹ Human ecology is also concerned about the reciprocal relationships between the biophysical and the socio-economic environment in its widest context. According to the human ecologist, the environment is perceived as an ecosystem which is a wide concept both when it comes to its nature and its size. In an ecosystem everything is in a specified physical area – air, water, and soil – which interacts with the biological organisms and physical structures: it is about the organisms in a lake which not only depend on each other but are also influenced by the water they swim in, the quality of the water bottom, and the air above the water surface. Human ecology thus extends the ecosystem concept to areas in which humans are an

⁷<https://scied.ucar.edu/learning-zone/climate-change-impacts/ecology>

⁸<https://scied.ucar.edu/learning-zone/climate-change-impacts/ecology>

⁹An Thinh Nguyen and Luc Hens, *Human Ecology of Climate Change Hazards in Vietnam*, Cham: Springer, 2019, 4.

important factor: a city, a farm, a tourism resort, and the cultural assets, etc.¹⁰

Climate change contributes to migration of people to safer places. They are called environmental refugees who are displaced persons crossing borders due to climate change effects. In recent times environmental refugees attracted the attention of researchers. The relationship between climate change and migration is complex and varies over time. Drought, desertification, and land degradation leading to food and water shortage are considered driving forces of local displacement as a result of the decline in agricultural yields. Extreme weather events are a main reason for affected people to leave their homes and move toward safer areas. The effects of climate change on migration affect people in the developing countries of Africa and Asia more and make them moving faster. That is why migration is considered a strategy to climate change adaptation.¹¹

5. Climate Change in *Laudato Si'*

The study of climate change has emerged in the last three decades as one of the most vexed and contentious areas of contemporary scientific endeavour.¹² According to Stephen Bede Scharper,

From the muzzling of environmental scientists and the closing of ecological research centers in Canada to the censorship of leading climate change researchers in the United States, such as NASA climate scientist James Hansen, politics has tintured, tethered, and at times eclipsed scientific data on one of the most crucial issues of our times.¹³

In the words of Naomi Klein, “Climate change isn’t an ‘issue’ to add to the list of things to worry about, next to health care and taxes. It is a civilizational wake-up call.”¹⁴

Pope Francis underlines that the climate is a common good, belonging to all and meant for all. The scientific community attests to the fact that we are presently witnessing a disturbing warming of the climatic system. In *Laudato Si'* the Pope states:

¹⁰Nguyen and Hens, *Human Ecology of Climate Change Hazards in Vietnam*, 4.

¹¹Nguyen and Hens, *Human Ecology of Climate Change Hazards in Vietnam*, 9–10.

¹²Stephen Bede Scharper, “A Compassionate Science, Pope Francis, Climate Change, and the Fate of Creation,” in Dennis O’Hara et al., ed., *Integral Ecology for a More Sustainable World: Dialogues with Laudato Si'*, London: Lexington Books, 2020, 30.

¹³Scharper, “A Compassionate Science Pope Francis, Climate Change, and the Fate of Creation,” 30.

¹⁴Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything, Capitalism vs. the Climate*, London: Simon & Schuster, 2014, EBook.

In recent decades this warming has been accompanied by a constant rise in the sea level and, it would appear, by an increase of extreme weather events, even if a scientifically determinable cause cannot be assigned to each particular phenomenon... yet a number of scientific studies indicate that most global warming in recent decades is due to the great concentration of greenhouse gases (carbon dioxide, methane, nitrogen oxides and others) released mainly as a result of human activity. As these gases build up in the atmosphere, they hamper the escape of heat produced by sunlight at the earth's surface. The problem is aggravated by a model of development based on the intensive use of fossil fuels, which is at the heart of the worldwide energy system...(LS 23).

Pope Francis further writes:

Warming has effects on the carbon cycle. It creates a vicious circle which aggravates the situation even more, affecting the availability of essential resources like drinking water, energy and agricultural production in warmer regions, and leading to the extinction of part of the planet's biodiversity... Things are made worse by the loss of tropical forests which would otherwise help to mitigate climate change... (LS 24).

"If present trends continue," the Pope says, "this century may well witness extraordinary climate change and an unprecedented destruction of ecosystems, with serious consequences for all of us" (LS 24). The global challenge of climate change is well articulated in *Laudato Si'*. Pope Francis is very sensitive to the problems of the poor and the migrants who are mostly affected by the consequences of climate change.

Climate change is a global problem with grave implications: environmental, social, economic, political and for the distribution of goods... Many of the poor live in areas particularly affected by phenomena related to warming, and their means of subsistence are largely dependent on natural reserves and ecosystemic services such as agriculture, fishing and forestry. They have no other financial activities or resources which can enable them to adapt to climate change or to face natural disasters, and their access to social services and protection is very limited. For example, changes in climate, to which animals and plants cannot adapt, lead them to migrate; this in turn affects the livelihood of the poor, who are then forced to leave their homes, with great uncertainty for their future and that of their children... Sadly, there is widespread indifference to such suffering, which is even now taking place throughout our world... (LS 25).

Four years after the publication of *Laudato Si'*, in his address to the finance ministers of various nations on 27th May 2019, Pope Francis

emphasized that we need to resolve to work together for the following ends:¹⁵

- i) to value what is important, not what is superfluous;
- ii) to correct our national accounts and our business accounts, so as to stop engaging in activities that are destroying our planet;
- iii) to put an end to global dependency on fossil fuels;
- iv) to open a new chapter of clean and safe energy, that utilizes, for example, renewable resources such as wind, sun and water;
- v) above all, to act prudently and responsibly in our economies to actually meet human needs, promote human dignity, help the poor and be set free of the idolatry of money that creates so much suffering.

Thus, Pope Francis is a person totally committed to the global concern of climate change and its impact on the world at large.

6. Towards an Integral Eco-Theology in the World of Climate Change

Cardinal Peter Kodwo Turkson traces the background of Integral Eco-Theology. According to him, the Encyclical *Rerum novarum* by Pope Leo XIII in 1891 contained some seeds of current ideas about our natural environment as it stated that those who receive God's bounty in the form of natural resources or property should exercise their responsibility "as the steward of God's providence, for the benefit of others."¹⁶ Later Saint Pope John XXIII is considered as the first Pope to introduce the idea of "integral development of the person" in the Encyclical Letter, *Mater et Magistra* (1961). However, it was Vatican Council II that inspired a committed study of the relationship between humanity and the environment. The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes* (1965), speaks of our "integral vocation," the "integral perfection of the human person," and an "integral culture."¹⁷

In the words of Pope Francis:

¹⁵Pope Francis, "Climate Change and New Evidence from Science, Engineering, and Policy," https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/may/documents/papa-francesco_20190527_climate-change.html

¹⁶Cardinal Peter Kodwo Turkson, "Preface: The Evolution of the Concept of Integral Ecology in Papal Teaching," in Dennis O'Hara et al., ed., *Integral Ecology for a More Sustainable World: Dialogues with Laudato Si'*, London: Lexington Books, 2020, xi. See also Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, Vatican City: Libreria editrice Vaticana, 15 May 1891), 22, https://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html.

¹⁷Turkson, "Preface: The Evolution of the Concept of Integral Ecology in Papal Teaching," xii. Here Cardinal Turkson highlights also the social teachings of Pope Paul VI, Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI on the integral development of humans and the environment. See, xii-xvi.

We are faced not with two separate crisis, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature (LS 139).

An integral ecology includes taking time to recover a serene harmony with creation, reflecting on our lifestyle and our ideals, and contemplating the Creator who lives among us and surrounds us, whose presence 'must not be contrived but found, uncovered (LS 225).

As Naomi Oreskes observes, the pope

adamantly rejects that dichotomy—people versus the planet, or people versus plants and animals—and says that's a false dichotomy. It's all one, the planet, the people on it, the plants and animals...These are all interconnected. For scientists, the answer is it's because we're all part of an ecosystem. For the pope the answer is because it's all God's work.¹⁸

Time and again the Pope emphasizes the interconnectedness of humans with the nature. As he says:

It cannot be emphasized enough how everything is interconnected. Time and space are not independent of one another, and not even atoms or subatomic particles can be considered in isolation. Just as the different aspects of the planet—physical, chemical and biological—are interrelated, so too living species are part of a network which we will never fully explore and understand. A good part of our genetic code is shared by many living beings. It follows that the fragmentation of knowledge and the isolation of bits of information can actually become a form of ignorance, unless they are integrated into a broader vision of reality (LS 67).

Nevertheless, the Pope warns that there is a danger of excluding God from the domain of human development and progress and consequently the humans become exploiters and oppressors of the universe. Hence his plea is to promote and foster the integrity of creation and work of the well being of all creatures. As he writes:

Once we lose our humility and become enthralled with the possibility of limitless mastery over everything, we inevitably end up harming society and the environment... (LS 109).

Men and women have constantly intervened in nature, but for a long time this meant being in tune with and respecting the possibilities offered by the things themselves... Now, by contrast, we are the ones to lay our hands on things, attempting to extract everything possible from them while frequently ignoring or forgetting the reality in front of us... It is the false notion that an infinite quantity of energy and resources are available,

¹⁸As quoted in Scharper, "A Compassionate Science Pope Francis," 34.

that it is possible to renew them quickly, and that the negative effects of the exploitation of the natural order can be easily absorbed (LS 106).

Echoing the clarion call of protection of the environment as well as the integral development of the whole planet, in his latest encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis writes:

To care for the world in which we live means to care for ourselves... Often the voices raised in defence of the environment are silenced or ridiculed, using apparently reasonable arguments that are merely a screen for special interests. In this shallow, short-sighted culture that we have created, bereft of a shared vision, "it is foreseeable that, once certain resources have been depleted, the scene will be set for new wars, albeit under the guise of noble claims."¹⁹

Elsewhere in the same encyclical Pope Francis stresses the need to listen to each other and to nature. As he writes:

The ability to sit down and listen to others, typical of interpersonal encounters, is paradigmatic of the welcoming attitude shown by those who transcend narcissism and accept others, caring for them and welcoming them into their lives. Yet "today's world is largely a deaf world... At times, the frantic pace of the modern world prevents us from listening attentively to what another person is saying. Halfway through, we interrupt him and want to contradict what he has not even finished saying. We must not lose our ability to listen". Saint Francis "heard the voice of God, he heard the voice of the poor, he heard the voice of the infirm and he heard the voice of nature...(FT 48).

Cardinal Peter Kodwo Turkson succinctly summarizes the Integral Eco-theology of Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'*:²⁰

- i. Pope Francis links the vulnerability of the poor and the fragility of the environment. In response to these immense intertwined challenges, he proposes the social teaching of the church in the form of a new integral ecology to reduce our footprint and reverse the deterioration of the natural and social environment.
- ii. He makes an urgent appeal for a new dialogue about how to shape the future of our planet. Such dialogue must include ecological conversion, an education in ecological citizenship and an ethical and spiritual itinerary.
- iii. He shows profound trust in humanity's ability to respond and expresses real hope that we can work together to rebuild our common home.²¹

¹⁹Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* No. 17. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html

²⁰Turkson, "Preface: The Evolution of the Concept of Integral Ecology in Papal Teaching," xx.

²¹Turkson, "Preface: The Evolution of the Concept of Integral Ecology in Papal Teaching," xx.

Conclusion

Ever since the publication of the ground breaking encyclical *Laudato Si'* there has been a renewed understanding of ecology and eco-theology today. We human beings are called to protect, preserve and conserve the God-given resources in our common home. Pope Francis has been a champion of promoting the integral ecology from the very inception of his pontificate in 2013. His vision of the universe and human beings in particular is reflected in all his magisterial teaching wherein he addresses a wide ranges of issues concerning the environment including the adverse effects of climate change. Today as we are facing the global pandemic Covid-19 crisis, our Holy Father is exhorting all people of good will irrespective of caste, creed, culture or nationality to do all we can to bring about a healthy and peaceful world. It is the responsibility of everyone to work for peace, justice and integrity of creation. Hence let me conclude with the prayer of Pope Francis in his latest encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*:

Lord, Father of our human family, you created all human beings equal in dignity: pour forth into our hearts a fraternal spirit and inspire in us a dream of renewed encounter, dialogue, justice and peace. Move us to create healthier societies and a more dignified world, a world without hunger, poverty, violence and war. May our hearts be open to all the peoples and nations of the earth. May we recognize the goodness and beauty that you have sown in each of us, and thus forge bonds of unity, common projects, and shared dreams. Amen.