

Immaculate Conception 18th October 2022

Towards an integral ecology

pic Laudato Si 2015

Aim: to explore the thinking behind Pope Francis' teaching on an integral ecology as a basis for practical action. Set out in Chapter 4 of Laudato Si, his encyclical on care for our common home.

Francis argues that the only way to confront the scale and complexity of the climate emergency we face in the world today is through conversion to a vision of an integrated or integral ecology.

It is a way of seeing the world which proposes that the ecological crisis we face is not simply a series of problems that need to be fixed, but is a symptom of something much deeper. We live in a world of high consumption, rapid growth, deep economic inequalities, indifference towards other humans, other creatures and life forms....'

At the heart of this way of living, Francis argues, there is a deep disconnect – not just in the way we relate to nature, but to a wider web of relationships with work, trade, land, other creatures and life forms. The roots of the climate crisis are ethical and spiritual. Renewal requires a process of deep conversion.

- I will look first at the theology of creation which lies behind this vision
- at the way in which integral ecology provides us with a way of seeing, a way of doing analysis and a moral imperative to help us decide how to act (see, judge, act).
- and at its place within the rich tradition of CST (ref Duncan).

In putting this together I have drawn on Anna Rowland's *Towards a Politics of Communion*.

A way of seeing: a theology of creation

image: pavement Denniston

Francis perceives the world as a communicating sign of its creator. He shares a mystical account of creation. Its diversity and the multiplicity of its relationships speak of God's goodness and desire to draw all of life into a logic of communion, of being on relation. So he begins with a world view that sees everything as gift.

He writes:

'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. The ideal is not only to pass from the exterior to the interior to discover the action of God in the soul, but also to discover God in all things' (n 233).

In the Jewish/Christian tradition, Francis notes, creation has a broader meaning than nature. It implies the idea of a Creator, a loving plan, a value placed on each facet of creation.

He writes:

'nature is usually seen as a system which can be understood and controlled, whereas creation can only be understood as a gift from the outstretched hand of the Father of all,

and as a reality illuminated by the reality of the love which calls us together into universal communion' (n76).

Francis builds on Pope Benedict's theology of love and gift, which Benedict developed in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*. Francis proposes that an integral ecology should be grounded in an approach to the **environment as created gift**. It is an expression of the loving work of a Creator who invites us into a communicative engagement with each part and with the whole, and through the whole created order, brings us home to God.

Gift, encounter and dialogue are all hallmarks of Francis' social teaching.

A way of doing analysis

image: North sea oil rig

Integral ecology offers us a way of doing analysis. It helps us think of the way our various human and ecological crises might be connected. Francis suggests, for example, that we try to make sense of the interconnection between the way we treat the most marginalised humans and the way we treat the earth. This, in turn, enables us to give voice to the mistreatment of life in all its forms.

He writes:

'An integral ecology is made up of simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness. In the end, a world of exacerbated consumption is at the same time a world which mistreats life in all its forms' (230).

Along with Benedict Francis is concerned about the 'technocratic paradigm' – the tendency to see nature as a thing or an object to be manipulated and extracted from. Both note the dangers of this paradigm in politics and economics and its connection to the environmental crisis. Francis writes that it:

'... has made it easy to accept the idea of infinite or unlimited growth... based on the lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth's good, and this leads to the planet being squeezed dry...' (n 106)

A fundamental shift

image: walking on the shore

Drawing on the teaching of Orthodox patriarch Bartholomew, Francis argues for a fundamental shift in this world view, away from merely technical solutions towards the ethical and spiritual roots of environmental problems. They require us to look for solutions not only in technology but in a change of humanity (n9). He asks us to replace 'consumption with sacrifice, greed with generosity, wastefulness with a spirit of sharing, and learning to *give*, not simply to *give up*. It is a way of loving, of moving gradually away from what I want to what God's world needs'. This mindset stems from a willingness to accept the world as a sign or sacrament of communion, as a way of sharing with God and our neighbours on a global scale.

'It is our humble conviction' says Bartholomew, 'that the divine and the human meet in the slightest detail in the seamless garment of God's creation, in the last speck of dust of our planet'. (n 9)

A moral principle: how we should act

image: election 2015

Integral ecology as a moral principle can help us judge how to act in order to foster mutual flourishing. At the political level Francis argues that we need to question our models of development, production and consumption. Everything, he stresses, is connected.

‘We are faced with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combatting poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature’ (n139).

He writes of an economic ecology, a cultural ecology, an ecology of daily life, and of justice between the generations.

Link with the CST tradition

image: CST compendium

CST helps us think through and recognise the interconnectedness of economic and political questions. Laudato Si’s teaching on ecology is part of that tradition.

Francis writes:

‘Human ecology is inseparable from the notion of the **common good**, a central and unifying principle of human ethics. The common good is the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members... access to their own fulfilment’ (n156)

His concept of integral ecology has been described as the ultimate expression and development of the virtue and principle of **solidarity** (Vincent Miller p. 289 Rowland)

At the core of creation, as we already noted in the teaching of Benedict and Francis, there is a **circulating logic of gift**. God’s own giving is sheer gratuity and we can’t give anything back; but within the sustaining gift of creation we can have a mutual exchange of gifts for the enrichment, renewal and flourishing of the whole.

- The goodness of the creator is communicated gratuitously through the whole of creation;
- The goodness of each thing in itself is emphasised
- And the divine intention is that the created goods of the earth are given to meet the needs of all and should be circulated easily to ensure they are adequately met.

This is the basis for the CST principles of the **universal destination of created goods** and the **option for the poor**. In LS, Francis connects the universal destination of created goods to his vision of an integral ecology which embraces the economy and the environment in a single ethic. He reiterates that the earth is a shared inheritance, its fruits are meant to benefit all; and that in a world where this is manifestly not the case, a commitment to moving towards the universal destination of goods must begin with the option for the poor.

Towards an integral ecology....

Image: Towards a politics of communion

To sum up: an integral ecology is rooted in a receptive awareness of the *interconnectedness* of all created things. Woven through all of creation this interconnectedness is

- divinely intended
- it is a social reality
- it must be actively forged by co-creative human action. We are on a journey.

An integral ecology is linked to the long body of teaching on the universal destination of goods. It is a good example of the way in which all the threads of CST are woven together, sometimes unpicked a little and restitched into the tradition to reflect the contemporary challenges we face and our changing understanding (Anna Rowlands suggests, eg, that we need to look at the issue of race and racial solidarity. She also suggests that the principle of the universal destination of created goods might help us address rising questions of post-colonial responses).

And so the tradition develops and is developed by us as we learn and relearn how to live out our Christian vocation in our common home. *Laudato Si* offers us not just ideas for action, but an underlying and sustaining vision of our connectedness with one another and with the whole of creation.

Resources

Online:

[Laudatosi.actionplatform.org](https://laudatosi.actionplatform.org)

ecocongregationscotland.org

caford.org.uk

Books:

Anna Rowlands, *Towards a politics of communion*. Bloomsbury 2021

Joe Holland, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching 1740-1958*. Paulist Press, 2003