

## Chapter Four

### **Integral Ecology: A Response to *Laudato Si'*, *On Care for Our Common Home***

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The events of the past two years have shown us how interconnected lives are across the globe. A virus, which started as a flu in December 2019, put the world to a halt in March 2020 after more than a hundred countries had detected Covid 19. The recent war in Ukraine has globally increased the prices of gas and grain since the major suppliers and distribution channels are affected. These examples highlight that all things are connected, and we live in a web of life. *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical, addresses this interconnectedness.

Pope Francis proposes integral ecology as a new paradigm. Humans must understand that they live in an ecology, a system where everything is interconnected. We must therefore understand this relationship of living organisms and the environment. Everything is closely interrelated, and creation is a web of life that includes “human and social dimensions.” These interrelationships make Francis remark, “We are faced not with two separate crises, 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).

He calls for a “social ecology” that recognizes that “the health of a society’s institutions has consequences for the environment and the quality of human life.” This includes the primary social group, the family, as well as wider local, national, and international communities. When these institutions are weakened, the result is injustice, violence, a loss of freedom, and a lack of respect for law — all of which have consequences for the environment.

Pope Francis also argues that it is important to pay attention to “cultural ecology” to protect the cultural treasures of humanity. But “Culture is more than what we have inherited from the past; it is also, and above all, a living, dynamic and participatory present reality, which cannot be excluded as we rethink the relationship between human beings and the environment.” He complains that a consumerist vision of human beings, encouraged by globalization, “has a leveling effect on cultures, diminishing the immense variety which is the heritage of all humanity.” New processes must respect local cultures. “There is a need to respect the rights of peoples and cultures, and to appreciate that the development of a social group presupposes an historical process which takes place within a cultural context and demands the constant and active involvement of local people from within their proper culture.”

This interconnectedness means that “environmental exploitation and degradation not only exhaust the resources which provide local communities with their livelihood, but also undo the social structures which, for a long time, shaped cultural identity and their sense of the meaning of life and community.” In various parts of the world, he notes, indigenous communities are being pressured “to abandon their homelands to make room for agricultural or mining projects which are undertaken without regard for the degradation of nature and culture.” This calls us to stop and think about what is happening around us. Mercury poisoning in Asupeeschoseewagong First

Nation (Grassy Narrows), an Anishinaabe community in Northwestern Ontario, is an important example. Grassy Narrows lies about 120 miles east of Winnipeg, with an approximate population of 1490 people. This land supplies the community's basic needs for subsistence and is essential to their culture, identity, and life as a nation – as Anishinaabe. The community has resisted repeated attempts to sever their connection to the land by corporations – previously Reed Paper Limited, Dryden Chemicals, Abitibi, and currently Weyerhaeuser logging company – as well as by the provincial and federal governments.

Pope Francis speaks of “ecology of man,” based on the fact that “man too has a nature that he must respect and that he cannot manipulate at will.” He notes that “thinking that we enjoy absolute power over our own bodies turns, often subtly, into thinking that we enjoy absolute power over creation.” Here he calls for “valuing one’s own body” so that “we can joyfully accept the specific gifts of others, the work of God the Creator, and find mutual enrichment.

Human ecology cannot be separated from the notion of the common good, which he calls “a central and unifying principle of social ethics.” He defines the common good as “the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment.” The common good calls for respect for the human person as well as the overall welfare of society and the development of a variety of intermediate groups. It requires social peace, stability, and security, “which cannot be achieved without particular concern for distributive justice.”

For Pope Francis, it is obvious that “where injustices abound and growing numbers of people are deprived of basic human rights and considered expendable, the principle of the common good immediately becomes, logically and inevitably, a summons to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters.”

Finally, Francis’ vision of integral ecology and the common good includes justice between generations. He reiterates, “the world is a gift we have freely received and must share with others.” This includes future generations. “The world we have received also belongs to those who will follow us.” Therefore, the environment is a loan from our children, and we should pass it on to them in a good condition.

According to Pope Francis, the ethical and cultural decline which accompanies the deterioration of the environment forces us to ask fundamental questions about life: “What is the purpose of our life in this world? Why are we here? What is the goal of our work and all our efforts? What need does the earth have of us?”

Pope Francis calls for an integral ecology that sees the interconnectedness of environmental, economic, political, social, cultural, and ethical issues. Such an ecology requires the vision to think about comprehensive solutions to what is both an environmental and human crisis.

*Loving God, Creator of Heaven, Earth, and all therein contained. Open our minds and touch our hearts, so that we can be part of Creation, your gift. Be present to those in need in these difficult times, especially the poorest and most vulnerable. Help us to show creative solidarity as we*

*confront the consequences of the global pandemic. Make us courageous in embracing the changes required to seek the common good. Now more than ever, may we all feel interconnected and interdependent. Enable us to succeed in listening and responding to the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor. May their current sufferings become the birth-pangs of a more fraternal and sustainable world. We pray through Christ our Lord. Amen. (www.eco-catholic.com/common-prayer)*