

The remarkable six day visit of Pope Francis to the United States has generated renewed interest in his ground breaking encyclical *Laudato Si'*, which develops in greater depth the ecological themes mentioned in his speeches, especially his address to the United Nations.

Although *Laudato Si'* has important things to say about the environmental crisis, including the claim that there is a scientific consensus on human responsibility for global warming, the encyclical actually has a broader purpose and more comprehensive focus which is developed under the heading of an "integral ecology" based on a solid anthropology.

In the view of Pope Francis, the world is facing a single urgent crisis with two dimensions: the degradation of the environment by global warming, pollution, depletion of resources and the extinction of species; and the exploitation of human beings trapped in poverty and denied the secure setting needed for full personal development and a healthy communal life. While many commentators recognize them as separate problems, Francis insists that they are essentially united and organically connected so that they influence one another. The poor suffer most from environmental disasters. The hungry are hurt most by soil erosion. Marginalized people are most likely to become refugees due to climate change. By the same token, when people are lifted out of poverty, they can be more attentive to caring for their surroundings. When marginalized people are integrated into a healthy communal life, they can contribute to the crucial task of caring for our common home.

Recognizing that "all creatures are connected," an integral ecology is attuned to the mysterious "network of relations" between human beings and their environment. An integral approach promotes "human ecology," dedicated to creating a healthy communal life for all people, and an "environmental ecology," committed to caring for the earth and protecting it. Since the world is facing a single unified crisis with two interconnected aspects, we need to find comprehensive solutions that take both concerns into account.

In reading the signs of the times, Pope Francis detects a "decline in the quality of human life," the unruly growth of cities with "visual pollution and noise," and congested neighborhoods lacking in "green space." Technological innovations, which have accomplished much good, have also contributed to increased violence, social aggression and drug trafficking. The omnipresent digital world can impede people from "learning how to live wisely, to think deeply and to love generously." The electronic world, which facilitates communications, can also "shield us from direct contact with the pain, the fears and the joys of others and the complexity of their personal experiences." The lack of physical encounters between the affluent powerful and the marginalized poor impoverishes both groups, leaving the poor invisible and the rich unmoved. In poor southern countries "access to ownership of goods and resources for meeting vital needs is inhibited by a system of commercial relations and ownership which is structurally perverse." An integral ecology must be attentive to both the degradation of the earth and the cries of the poor.

Searching for the root causes of our united ecological problems, Francis assigns blame to what he calls "the technological paradigm," an undifferentiated one-dimensional way of viewing our relationship to the world which celebrates human control over material objects. This creates a confrontational relationship between the earth and human beings who accept "the lie" that there is an infinite supply of the world's goods that can be "squeezed dry beyond every limit." In this outlook, the method and aims of science and technology become the only way of attaining truth and managing the world. Technology tends to absorb everything into its "ironclad logic," which seeks power and lordship over all. This paradigm celebrates the free market and economic growth without concern for its potentially negative impact on human beings and the natural world. Reliance on technology to solve our problems blinds us to the larger picture and more creative solutions. It creates a "consumerist mentality" that privileges having over being, placing greater value on accumulating possessions than on personal growth.

The pope insists that to "generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm," we need a distinctive way of thinking about public policies, educational programs, and various lifestyles. We might call this combination a "spiritual paradigm" which challenges the technocratic paradigm, or as an ecological mindset that challenges the consumerist mindset.

A more spiritual approach to our ecological crisis can be grounded in a Christian anthropology. As Francis insists, we humans are characterized by fundamental relationships to God, other persons, and nature. We are not God and we did not create ourselves. We are totally dependent on the God who sustains us and is worthy of adoration. The Creator calls us to share in the ongoing task of creating our unfinished evolving world.

All human beings are made in the image and likeness of God, which means we possess an inherent dignity, are worthy of respect, and have the right to be included. As children of the Father, we are brothers and sisters to one another. All humans are always subjects and should never be reduced to objects. We must treat every other person as a thou and not an it. As members of the human family, we are responsible for one another. Following the example and teachings of Jesus, we are to love our neighbor as ourselves, a command that extends to enemies as well as those pushed to the margins and trapped in a circle of poverty. We are all members of a universal family, “a sublime communion” joined by “unseen hands,” which grounds our moral obligation to exclude no one from our compassion and care. This communion extends over time, creating an “intergenerational solidarity” which obliges us to care for the earth so that it is available in its beauty and richness for those who come after us.

Through our bodies we are organically related to the material world. We are members of the community of creatures. We come from the earth and return to it. The fate of the human family is essentially connected to the fate of the earth. The beauty of the natural world reveals to us something of the beauty of the Creator. As Francis puts it: “Rather than a problem to be solved, the world is a joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and joy.” As Christians, our sense of being intimately connected to the earth is supported and focused by our belief in the Incarnation, that the Word became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, who walked our earth and delighted in God’s creation.

For Francis, “there is no ecology without an anthropology.” Some theologians argue that his position would be strengthened by including the common universe story shared by all humans. We are the product of a 13.7 billion year history. We are stardust become conscious of itself. We are the leading edge of the evolutionary process, now responsible for its future progress. Apart from the universe story, the relational anthropology of the pope provides a solid basis for an ecological spirituality that lives out the demands of loving our neighbor and protecting the earth.

In contrast to the technocratic paradigm, persons formed by Christian spirituality treat the earth not as material to be controlled and manipulated but as a gift from God worthy of respect and care. Realizing that material resources are finite, they try to limit their consumption and support sustainable development. Rejecting the common belief that accumulating possessions brings happiness, they try to simplify their lifestyle and make good with less. Persons with an ecological mindset are able to rise above the rugged individualism celebrated by our culture and make decisions based on concern for the common good, which Catholic social teaching describes as the sum total of conditions that allows humans to flourish. They reject unbridled forms of capitalism as well as dehumanizing forms of socialism in favor of economic systems and policies that serve the wellbeing of all the citizens, especially the most vulnerable and least fortunate. They are not content to remain in their own political and social enclaves, but attempt to promote dialogue with those who are “other” and to make personal contact with them.

According to Francis, developing a spirituality that challenges the entrenched technocratic paradigm requires an “ecological conversion,” a radical change of mind and heart, a new way of thinking and acting that combines care for the earth and love of the poor and powerless. To sustain this effort we need “ecological virtues,” habits formed by healthy family life, wise educational practices, socially responsible institutions, and, for Christians, a church attuned to the crisis of both the earth and the poor. Christians who have appropriated a spiritual paradigm can realistically face our urgent ecological crisis without losing “the joy of our hope.” As Pope Francis reminds us at the end of his wide-ranging, beautifully written, faith inspired encyclical: the Lord of life “does not abandon us, for his love constantly impels us to find new ways forward.” In a final Christian prayer, the pope concludes “the poor and the earth are crying out. O Lord, save us with your power and light, help us to protect all life, to prepare for a better future, for the coming of Your Kingdom of justice, peace, love and beauty. Praise be to You!”