

Integral Ecology: A Cross-cutting Issue for the Church and Caritas

Integral Ecology Takes the Stage

The Irish missionary and theologian of Catholic Social Teaching (CST), Fr Donal Dorr, took Pope, now Saint, Paul VI, to task when he pointed out that the Pope's *Populorum Progressio*, regarded as the midwife of a theology of development, barely touched on the ecological damage which was adding to poverty and destroying the planet and accused the Pope, in the nicest possible way, of being too anthropocentric. While two of Pope Paul's successors, Pope, now also Saint, John Paul II and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI adverted to, not just the exploitation of the poor in what they regarded as maldevelopment, but also the exploitation of the Earth's resources, it has been left to Pope Francis to meld them together in his term 'integral ecology' in *Laudato Si'*.

In this paper, I want to touch on how integral ecology emerges from Pope Francis's big picture of Integral Human Development (IHD), how it can be manifested by Caritas members in their humanitarian, social and development work, and how the term 'sustainable development' should be discarded and replaced by IHD which embraces integral ecology in a 'thicker' interpretation of development itself.

In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis enfolds 'integral ecology' into Integral Human Development, an enfolding which one scholar describes as a 'family resemblance'.¹ The Pope thereby makes this new development paradigm not only much less anthropocentric but also connects it much more closely to the whole of Creation, the flora, fauna and oceans which help us live and delight in our planet. The Pope affirms the dignity of all creatures and nature itself, not just human beings, but he puts the blame for the current signs of destruction firmly on one animal - *homo sapiens* and the unjust political, economic and social structures which this particular animal has produced. Just a few reminders.

Just recently, the World Wildlife Fund's 2020 Living Planet Report showed how our wildlife populations have now decreased by two-thirds since 1970 and there is no sign of this being halted.² We will cross the safe limit of greenhouse gas emissions into our atmosphere by 2035.³ A chunk of ice the size of the UK is melting rapidly from the Antarctica ice cap and will make living next to an ocean a nightmare and, for the poorest, will mean oblivion. At a Vatican conference on *Laudato Si'* in 2015, I heard the Prime Minister of Tuvalu with tears in his eyes, pleading to the world community to save his people by taking the climate crisis seriously and repairing the damage caused by Western capitalism. His home of low-lying atolls in the Pacific is three meters above the waves. Australia has already refused to take his people in. So, in a world of massive movements of people because of violence, poverty, discrimination, and withdrawing citizenship (such as the Rohingya in Myanmar), we can now add climate change migration as well as possible climactic genocide.

Pope Francis stresses that everyone has the responsibility to act, pointing out that humankind is not confronting one crisis but "rather with one complex which is both social and

¹ Daniel P. Castillo, "Integral Ecology as a Liberationist Concept", *Theological Studies* (vol. 77, Issue 2, pp. 353-376) June 2016. Retrieved from <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0040563916635781>.

² World Wildlife Fund, "Living Planet Report 2020". Retrieved from <https://livingplanet.panda.org/en-gb/>.

³ Lorna Gold, *Climate Generation: Awakening to our Children's Future*, (Dublin: Veritas, 2018) 44.

environmental”.⁴ He calls for an “integrated approach to combatting poverty, restoring dignity and at the same time protecting nature”.⁵

Pope Francis encourages everyone to link their economic and political decisions as well as personal ones around lifestyle, consumption and waste to care for the planet. He critiques the “magical conceptions of the market” which largely ignore biodiversity and the health of the planet as well as the needs of the poor in the frenetic rush for more financial gain.⁶ Melding together these major injustices under Integral Human Development and Integral Ecology, the Pope has created a situation where “the principle of the common good immediately becomes, logically and inevitably, a summons to solidarity and preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters”.⁷ He proposes dialogue and actions to promote a healing of our world and all that it contains. Given the Pope’s stark and prophetic warning, what are the lessons for Caritas members?

Integral Ecology Lessons for Caritas members: A Personal View

It is clear that many Caritas members which support programmes in the global South are already implementing climate adaptation schemes and regard work to combat the climate change crisis as a cross-cutting issue which should be taken into account in all programmes. Just as many Caritas members view their work through a gender lens to ensure that women, who have been traditionally oppressed in all societies, are supported by programmes, it is also necessary now to take an ‘integral ecology’ lens to development work. This also, however, applies to humanitarian programmes anywhere and to the social service programmes among the ‘poor’ *chez nous* - the elderly, the disabled, those with mental health issues and other disadvantaged groups. Pope Francis emphasises that everything is connected and that includes the neo-liberal economic system which puts profit before planet and human life. For Caritas, it could be a warning to reject those who promote a market-based solution to aid.

It should be noted also that, in *Laudato Si’*, he does not just quote magisterial sources but liberally cites Bishops’ Conferences (and others) around the world. Pope Francis stresses that dialogue on integral ecological issues with everyone should be welcomed but, quoting St John Paul II, Christians should “realise that their responsibility within creation, and their duty towards nature and the Creator are an essential part of their faith”.⁸ That also applies to Caritas members who should take on board the importance of maintaining links with the hierarchical Church and to use the tools of the faith, in this case a theological Creation-based view of the world’s destiny, in their work. Just as the Pope used the Cardijn dialectic of ‘see, judge, act’ as a framework for *Laudato Si’*, so it might be wise for Caritas agencies to follow suit. It means invoking the Catholic Social Teaching (CST) principles of solidarity and the preferential option for the poor in a new sense of the common good in an era when climate

⁴ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si: On Care for our Common Home*, (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015) par. 139.

⁵ Ibid. par. 139.

⁶ Ibid. par. 190.

⁷ Ibid. pr.158.

⁸ Ibid. par, 64. The quote from St John Paul II is from his Message for the 1990 World Day of Peace.

change is particularly affecting the poorest. It is an urgent call to action in what the Pope calls “an ethical imperative essential for effectively attaining the common good”.⁹

Practically, many Catholic agencies from Caritas and linked to networks such as CIDSE have published analyses of *Laudato Si'*. The encyclical is regularly cited by many Caritas members in their publications and a number of the agencies have begun climate change campaigns.¹⁰ Many such as SCIAF/Caritas Scotland have made climate change reduction a cross-cutting issue in their programmes while also undertaking advocacy campaigns with the Scottish Government, over climate change issues – and having some success.¹¹ The Pope also encourages us to take Christian spirituality as our starting point, as it “is another way of working, which forms part of our very essence. It protects human action from becoming empty activism”.¹²

The Pope warns us all that what is necessary is an “ecological conversion” and not to view the world in a desacralized fashion but to realise that when we enter every life and culture in our Caritas work, we enter a sacred space.¹³

Caritas also needs to be careful about language. Pope Francis warns of a “false, superficial ecology” yet much of the ‘sustainable development’ camp legitimises what Pope Francis condemns.¹⁴ The term was coined in the Brundlandt Report of 1987 but it was clear from the outset that there was a tension between economic growth and environmental concerns. The development expert, Gilbert Rist, sums up the concerns many of us still share about the concept: “Sustainable development looks like a cover up operation: it allays the fears aroused by the effects of economic growth so that any radical challenge can be averted..... The thing that is meant to be sustained really is ‘development’, not the tolerant capacity of the ecosystem or of human sacrifice.”¹⁵

The Church has its own developmental language drawn from our Catholic Social Thought Tradition which contains a hermeneutic of suspicion necessary around such concepts. We should now promote IHD as our integrated approach to development for people and ‘integral ecology’ for the planet and the creatures and flora with whom we share this ‘common home’.

Conclusion

The Church used to recite the following post-communion prayer for Sundays of Advent after it was accepted by the Council of Trent in 1570 and in use for the following 400 years: *Domine*,

⁹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, par. 158. See also Lisa Sowle Cahill, “*Laudato Si'*: Reframing Catholic Social Ethics” in *The Heythrop Journal*, HeyJ LIX, (2018), 887-900, 887.

¹⁰ CIDSE, internal document, *Main Messages linked to our Climate Justice and broader political work*, (Brussels: CIDSE, 2015). To take one example of a climate change campaign, SCIAF/Caritas Scotland, has a campaign around *Caring for our Common Home*, urging its supporters to “Download our guide to Caring for Our Common Home to cut your carbon footprint and bring *Laudato Si'* to life in your parish”. Retrieved from https://www.sciaf.org.uk/assets/000/000/109/Caring_for_our_common_home_original.pdf?1502800582.

¹¹ SCIAF website. Retrieved from <https://www.sciaf.org.uk/>.

¹² Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, par. 237.

¹³ Ibid. par. 217.

¹⁴ Ibid. par. 59.

¹⁵ Gilbert Rist, *The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith*, (New York: Zed, 2008) 47-108.

doce nos terrena despicere et amare celestia (Lord, teach us to despise the things of earth and to love the things of heaven). With his espousal of integral ecology, Pope Francis has moved the things of earth a little nearer the things of heaven in terms of the love we must show our planet, its diversity, its wildness and everyone and everything who walks, crawls and swims in it. In that way, we, in the words of the Pope, come “to realise 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”.¹⁶

¹⁶ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, op. cit. par. 49.