

## Integral Ecology

Based upon chapter IV of the papal encyclical *Laudato Si'* I attempt an approach from the point of view of the human responsibility to preserve the whole of creation as the Creator wanted it.

*“Everything is closely interrelated, even time and space are not independent of one another”* (L.S. 137-138), and *“we are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it”* (139). The first question we have to ask ourselves is whether people are willing to be a part of the whole. Maybe most of them are individualists and therefore only concerned with their own welfare and wellbeing. Many may think that everything is at our service, for free. Maybe they would like to be owners of the universe, and try to function as if they were in possession of the earth and its resources. All too easily, people claim power for themselves, to be on top of everything, considering other creatures as their dependents or at least their inferiors. About issues of a world scale like climate change they may say: ‘this is none of my business’.

In the apostolic exhortation ‘Querida Amazonia’ pope Francis makes it clear that no economic interest can be put before the right of the inhabitants of the Amazon forest. It is their land, their culture, their home. As there is a solidarity principle among people of all nations and cultures, there is also a need of solidarity between human beings and nature and all other creatures. Solidarity considers the past and the future. This brings us to the question of responsibility of the human population towards all other elements. The basic question is whether responsibility also includes the freedom to handle natural resources at one’s own profit.

Pope Francis also refers to the principle that *“inhabitants of indigenous communities should be principal dialogue partners regarding every issue that is discussed about their culture, land, heritage, history and future”* (cf. LS 183). Within this framework the pope also means to say that men and women are equal, as they are together nominated by the Creator as caretakers of the whole of creation (cf. Gen 1, 26). If we apply this principle to the social structures in society and in the Church, we have to affirm that all parts and organisations at all levels share - in one way or the other - the responsibility for the whole. When we consider the necessary representation of a number of elected people to guide institutions or organisations, nations or Churches, these men and women will have to carry the burden (and the joy) of guiding the totality of the institution by sharing responsibilities as equals. Applying this to the society as a global reality we have to take into account that today cities and countries are inhabited by a great diversity of people hailing from very different origins, cultures, as well as different economic and social statuses. They, too, are responsible for the building of the future of the nation. In a very concrete way I experienced this being a member of a local parish council: a mixed group of people gathered to conduct the life of the parish, chosen by the multicultural and intergenerational community. There was no feeling as this is ‘my’ parish, instead all were convinced that this is ‘our’ parish and we are equally and complementarily responsible for the totality of the life of the parish. So it is in the care for nature and for the ecology, as everything is interconnected. We may not easily experience this common responsibility in daily life, but when a disaster hits us, a typhoon or anything of the sort, all will spontaneously join in the rebuilding of what was destroyed.

If we accept that *“the whole is greater than the parts”* (EG 237), we can understand that power games can have no part in a collaborative system. This urges us to look at reality in a broad sense, not closing ourselves up in a cosy cocoon. Also in this sense we can understand the appeal of Pope Francis to go out to the periphery to grow in the consciousness that everything is connected.

What is then the specific role of the Church in the concern for integral ecology? The Church is not called to enter into discussion on economic parameters nor to discuss the techniques that guide the

technological reality. It is her duty to focus upon human dignity and ask respect for each person and for the environment he and she are living in. Technological development has to be conscious of the meaning of creation given by the Creator and of the place given to mankind as caretaker. In order to make creation grow, all parts of it have to be developed in a positive sense. It cannot be that one part can be destroyed in order to develop another one. This leads us to reflect again on the distribution of power. Can any political power claim the freedom to decide whether a part of the universe can be destroyed in favour of another part? Do issues about life and death belong to the competence of political or ideological decisions? Can a country remain indifferent towards the effect climate change has on poorer countries. Pope Francis quotes the Brazilian Bishop's Conference saying that *"the countries which have benefited from a high degree of industrialisation, at the cost of enormous emissions of greenhouse gas, have a greater responsibility for providing a solution to the problems they have caused"* (LS 170). In the same way we can question the use of enormous amounts of money for luxury and private profit while poverty is on the increase all over the world.

Ultimately it is our duty to listen to the signs of the times and discern about the best way to respond to them. The first command Jesus gave was *"shema Israel"*, we can refer this to the way we go about our relation to universal issues. Integral ecology can only be achieved if men and women, in all positions and situations, listen to nature, to creation, to history, to their neighbours and even to their own body. The capacity to listen to immigrants, to the sick, the elderly and the young generations will help us to discover where the needs are, and also the solutions to foster a more ecological process. Pope Francis adds: it is not enough to hear, listening means also to act just as God heard the cry of the people of Israel in Egypt and acted accordingly, asking Moses to guide the people to the Promised Land.

In order to work towards a sound ecology we will have to feel intimately a part of the world we belong to. *"We do not look at the world from without but from within, conscious of the bonds with which the Father has linked us to all beings"* (LS 220).

As a conclusion I want to refer to what the apostolic exhortation 'Querida Amazonia' states : *"A sound and sustainable ecology, one capable of bringing about change, will not develop unless people are changed, unless they are encouraged to opt for another style of life, one less greedy and more serene, more respectful and less anxious, more fraternal"* (QA 58). Maybe listening to the complexity of the universe and discerning the right attitude, will be the easiest way to work for change.

+ Luc Van Looy