


## “Everything is connected”: On the Relevance of an Integral Understanding of Reality in *Laudato Si’*

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### Abstract

The encyclical *Laudato Si’* calls for a deep reading, for its consistent message that “everything is connected” leads to a fundamental questioning of several operating assumptions for modern societies, economies, politics, and ways of life. Fundamentally, the encyclical calls into question the model of progress that has been presumed in the modern age. The new idea of progress put forth in this encyclical presumes the connectedness of all things, and offers a way forward toward solving the ecological crisis. But this cannot happen apart from ecological conversion and a new way of seeing our place in the world.

### Keywords

ecological conversion, environmental justice, integral ecology, *Laudato Si’*, sustainable economics, technology

*Laudato Si’* has found a major echo the world over. The reactions to the text have been quite varied. Some have faulted the pope for allegedly committing himself too wholeheartedly to the hypothesis of climate change as caused by humans. Some have also criticized the encyclical’s treatment of the economy. Yet many people all over the world have understood this letter as an important wake-up call at the right time,

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Like any sophisticated text, *Laudato Si'* (*LS*) reveals its deeper meaning in several stages. On a first reading, one's attention focuses on those aspects that immediately catch the eye. There are controversial phrases and also proposals or considerations that are somewhat surprising. These include highly detailed, down-to-earth suggestions to act in an environmentally friendly manner, ranging from separating refuse to turning off unnecessary lights—a level of detail that had not previously occurred in any encyclical.<sup>1</sup>

It is only on a second or perhaps even third reading of the text that thoughts or contexts come to the fore that may have been overlooked at the start. A closer look at *Laudato Si'* thus helps us gain access to fundamental views held by the pope, and furthermore makes it possible to better consider his thoughts in the context of the pontifical social teaching of the past.<sup>2</sup> I should like to encourage readers to engage in intensive reflections on the thinking of Pope Francis, so as to provide inspiration for the further reception of the letter.

### **“Realities are more important than ideas”**

A central approach for reaching a better understanding of the pope and his concerns appears to be the precept that “realities are more important than ideas.”<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis stresses this principle, which can also already be found in *Evangelii Gaudium* (*EG* 231–33), twice in the encyclical (*LS* 110 and 201).<sup>4</sup> In *Evangelii Gaudium*, the pope explains this principle as follows: “There also exists a constant tension between ideas and realities. Realities simply are, whereas ideas are worked out. There has to be continuous dialogue between the two, lest ideas become detached from realities” (*EG* 231). He also finds, “Ideas disconnected from realities give rise to ineffectual forms of

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1. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (May 24, 2015) 211 (hereafter cited in text as *LS*), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html). This and other URLs herein were accessed on January 26, 2016.
  2. The Catholic Church began to reflect on the ecological crisis long before *Laudato Si'*. As Pope Francis explicitly stresses, back in 1970 Pope Paul VI underlined “the urgent need for a radical change in the conduct of humanity,” as “the most extraordinary scientific advances, the most amazing technical abilities, the most astonishing economic growth, unless they are accompanied by authentic social and moral progress, will definitively turn against man” (*LS* 4). Furthermore, the pope points in his encyclical letter to many publications of national or regional bishops' conferences on environmental issues which point out how Christians all over the world have been committed for years to taking a more responsible approach to creation.
  3. For an explanation of the origin and meaning of this term, see Juan-Carlos Scannone, “Pope Francis and the Theology of the People,” *Theological Studies* 77 (2016) 118–135.
  4. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (November 24, 2013), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html). (This and any further references to *Evangelii Gaudium* were accessed April 10, 2016).

idealism and nominalism, capable at most of classifying and defining, but certainly not calling to action" (*EG* 232).

This principle underlines the fact that the pope is concerned first of all with reality as it is, and to carry out further considerations only on the basis of the insights gained from a consideration of reality. The connection with the classical three steps of "seeing–judging–acting" is manifest here. The pope takes his place within the tradition of Catholic social doctrine, which was always aware of its obligation to an empirical realism, rooted in Aristotelian thinking and taken up by Thomas Aquinas. Linked to this realism is also a skepticism within Catholic social doctrine vis-à-vis any form of ideology. The criticism of capitalism, which has been repeatedly expressed by Pope Francis, can also be understood from this point of view as a form of ideology critique. Particularly in the liberal economic thinking of recent decades, a specific idea of economic market logic, expressed in trust in the invisible forces of the market (*LS* 123), was placed above reality. This kind of thinking can be regarded as one among many of the causes that led to the financial crisis in 2008. Directly tackling reality is characteristic of Pope Francis, and this is contained in a style that argues neither abstractly nor normatively, but which faces problems in concrete, realistic terms.

## **The Challenge of the Ecological Crisis**

Pope Francis's open, genuine view of reality is also his starting point for the debate on the ecological crisis, which is detailed above all in the first chapter of *Laudato Si'*. As no pope has done before him, Pope Francis seeks here to enter into a debate with the natural sciences while trusting in their expertise, resulting in a text that is scientifically up to date. The letter paints a realistic picture of the multifarious risks posed to our natural habitat. The pope mentions here undeniably major environmental problems, as well as worldwide social injustices. Specifically, the encyclical is a plea to realize the impact that the ecological crisis has on people, and particularly on the poor. The pope looks at reality from the point of view of the poor, which is why we cannot separate ecological concerns from the social concerns. Even if the causes differ, the link between poverty and environment-related issues is self-evident: "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" (*LS* 139). Given this analysis of the situation, Pope Francis points the way toward addressing the ecological crisis with the aim of an integral human and environmentally friendly solution.

## **The Perspectives of an "Integral Ecology"**

The pope's realistic perspective leads to the realization that "everything in the world is connected" (*LS* 16). Impacts on nature are not without consequences for other areas of the ecological system, even though they differ in intensity. No area of the environment exists by itself alone; everything is connected. Yet for a long time, particularly in the industrialized nations, people believed that they could ignore these fundamental connections. We can successfully solve environmental problems

by once again realizing that, in the reality of creation, everything is interwoven. It therefore comes as no surprise that Pope Francis discusses the fundamental concept of an “integral ecology” (LS 124). It follows from this that addressing the ecological issue affects our understanding of humankind, the world, and creation, as well as God himself. I will discuss below what the integral approach envisaged in *Laudato Si’* means for the political arena and the economy, for personal lifestyles, and fundamentally for the modern notion of progress, but we first need to take a look at the causes of the ecological crisis.

## The Causes of the Ecological Crisis

In chapter 3 in particular, the pope explores the roots of the ecological crisis in detail. He points there among other things to the false self-estimation of humankind vis-à-vis creation. He refers here to the encyclical *Centesimus Annus* of Pope John Paul II: “Instead of carrying out his role as a cooperator with God in the work of creation, man sets himself up in place of God and thus ends up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature” (LS 117, quoting CA 37).<sup>5</sup> John Paul also states that “at the root of the senseless destruction of the natural environment lies an anthropological error, which unfortunately is widespread in our day” (CA 37). While this reference to an “anthropological error” could unquestionably also be contained in *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis instead speaks of a “misguided anthropocentrism” (LS 119). Essentially, the two statements are comparable, given that it is particularly the misconception of humankind to deliberately oppose creation by taking center stage, thereby displacing creation, and wishing to rise above nature in this way. Human beings, however, also are and always remain part of nature. The mandate to humankind to be God’s caretaker on Earth changes nothing fundamentally (cf. Gen 1:28). The special status of humankind as being made in God’s image, equipped with reason, freedom, and inalienable rights, goes hand in hand with a corresponding responsibility toward creation. However, if this responsibility is denied, human beings not only neglect their task as the guardians of creation, but at the same time the human root of the ecological crises is revealed: “A certain way of understanding human life and activity has gone awry, to the serious detriment of the world around us” (LS 101).

Thus, human beings can solve the ecological crisis only if they are willing to acknowledge reality and accept their position within the overall structure of nature and creation, regardless of their special mission. This includes acknowledging nature’s own worth, hence also the boundaries that arise for human beings in dealing with nature. This means not regarding nature simply as an object, and in particular not as an object to be limitlessly exploited. Failure to see this, by focusing on profit maximalization, leads to a fatal practical relativism which today determines reality in a variety of areas, not only with regard to denying the worth of nature, but also in the denial of the worth of people: “The culture of relativism is the same disorder which drives one person to take advantage of another, to treat others as mere objects” (LS 123). It becomes clear here that a specific logic affects modes of conduct with regard to both nature and one’s fellow humans.

5. See Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* (May 1, 1991), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_01051991\\_centesimus-annus.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html).

When human beings place themselves at the center, they give absolute priority to immediate convenience and all else becomes relative. Hence we should not be surprised to find, in conjunction with . . . the cult of unlimited human power, the rise of a relativism which sees everything as irrelevant unless it serves one's own immediate interests. (LS 122)

The concept of an "integral ecology" hence also includes addressing the self-conception of humankind itself.

In light of conduct that fatally relativizes the value of nature and one's fellow human beings, Pope Francis points to the high degree of correlation between the two violations: "The human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation" (LS 48). For this reason, it is important "to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor" (LS 49).

## A New Idea of Progress

When our understanding of progress falls victim to the "technocratic paradigm" (LS 109), both the environment, which is being exploited without consideration, and the poor, suffer. The pope sees this paradigm as an expression of a one-sided and hence curtailed view of reality. Against the background of this criticism of the prevailing understanding of progress, Pope Francis appeals for a universal, new idea of progress which is not simply revealed in production figures and material measures of performance, but also leaves "in its wake a better world and an integrally higher quality of life" (LS 194).

### Looking Back: The Modern Concept of Progress

While in ancient times, a Golden Age at the beginning of human civilization was the yardstick by which the conditions of life were to be judged, a change of perspective took place as Christianity spread. Christian thought influenced the rise of the idea of progress as a development toward something better. A view toward the future opened up. Bringing about of the Kingdom of God and the expectation of a new Jerusalem were signs of hope for the completion of God's entire creation. Humankind understood itself in this process as God's cooperator (*cooperator Dei*) who, being legitimated as the keeper of the Earth (*dominium terrae*) of the creation story, is given the task of shaping the Earth to conform to the order preordained by God. In modern times, a secularized form of the Christian concept of progress has emerged. The *dominium terrae* was understood as an exposed characteristic of man, who was gifted with reason, and to whom the task fell to rule over creation, which is bereft of reason. In the modern form, the saying coined by René Descartes, that human beings are like the masters and possessors of nature ("... nous rendre comme maîtres et possesseurs de la Nature"), expresses this changed awareness.<sup>6</sup> Nature is understood as a thing or an object of which humans may dispose at will.

6. See René Descartes, *Discours de la Méthode* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966).

Such an understanding of progress not only led to a boom in the natural sciences, but also made possible significant technological advances. And enthusiasm for what is technically feasible has generated an optimistic expectation about the future. On the other hand, the ambivalence of this modern idea of progress lies in the fact that the exaggerated striving for the feasible has led to both ecological and social problems. We have witnessed a tendency to transfer the methods and goals of technology to people's lives and to the functioning of society (*LS* 107–9). While the consequences for the environment were neglected for a long time, the social problems that accompanied technological and economic expansion were already evident in the nineteenth century. The successful use of the technological innovations within an untamed capitalist economic system frequently placed workers at a disadvantage, and they became objects of exploitation and oppression. The first social encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, published by Pope Leo XIII in 1891, focused its discussions on the precarious situation faced by workers at that time.

### *The Ambivalence of Progress*

*Laudato Si'* discusses the achievements of technology in detail (*LS* 102). One consequence is that living conditions have changed immensely, and for the better in most cases. However, these achievements also entail new dangers. This realization in itself is nothing new; progress has always entailed difficulties and negative effects. Criticism of progress and rejection of a naïve belief in progress are not the preserve of the modern age. Nevertheless, the ecological crisis, which is a consequence of the industrial society, and which is in turn indelibly linked with technical progress, is a specific characteristic of the modern age. The experience of ecological and economic overexploitation, which Pope Francis has witnessed in Latin America, is certainly reflected here.

But the response to the ambivalence of progress cannot consist in a radical turning away from the idea of progress. This is indeed not what the pope is calling for. Rather, he proposes a differentiated approach and stipulates standards that steer progress in a certain direction. In the final analysis, the expansion of the technical possibilities also entails greater responsibility. The vital question is whether we can justify doing what we are able to do. In his critique of the prevailing notion of progress, the pope is calling for “resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm” (*LS* 111) that dominates science, economy, and the political arena.

### *The Approach of an Integral, New Idea of Progress*

The pope pleads, then, for “redefining our notion of progress” (*LS* 194) and backs up his call by stating, “A technological and economic development which does not leave in its wake a better world and an integrally higher quality of life cannot be considered progress” (*LS* 194). If one wishes to detail the idea of “integral development” (*LS* 46), it appears to make sense to start in turn by referring to the pope's understanding of reality, including the awareness that “everything in the world is connected” (*LS* 16). Such an awareness is at the same time a criticism of a technological or economic

practice that focuses on the pursuit of one-sided interests. In his view, integral progress is needed that serves the well-being of humankind. This new kind of progress is justified by helping to safeguard life and human dignity. It is a matter of responsible progress that takes a holistic view and respects the boundaries of nature and of human beings. Truly humane progress must encompass all fields of human life, both material and immaterial needs. Progress in this sense means taking an integral view of humankind, including intellectual, moral, spiritual, and religious aspects in the prospects for human development.

The goal of integral progress is not merely technological innovation or the increase in economic growth rates, as in the traditional understanding of progress. Instead the pope correlates integral progress above all with "an improvement in the quality of life" (LS 46). This claim shifts the focus onto the fact that human well-being means more than satisfying material needs, and includes "the way to a better future" (LS 113). Quality of life here includes health and viable social relationships, in particular within families, the "great importance" of which the pope deliberately stresses (LS 213). It is also important for a good life to have "an historic, artistic and cultural patrimony" (LS 143), which the pope considers to be at risk; an integral concept of progress must include caring for cultural riches. Finally, the pope turns the gaze to beauty (LS 215), which is also indispensable for human development and for satisfaction with life. All in all, the premises for a good life detailed here—certainly with no claim to exhaustiveness—are to be made reality by a new kind of progress.

The goal of quality of life, which has never before taken up such a central position in any other social encyclical, refers to human beings as made in God's image and to their particular dignity. The shift in the notion of progress is, however, not achieved only *for* people, but also *through* people. In this regard, the pope places considerable trust in people's freedom and ability to take decisions: "We have the freedom needed to limit and direct technology; we can put it at the service of another type of progress, one which is healthier, more human, more social, more integral" (LS 112).

In addition to freedom, an ethical awareness that is conscious of its responsibility for the consequences of its actions is indispensable for a progress that is compatible with human needs. It is demanded that humans take "another course" (LS 53) in this respect. While the earlier model of progress accepts environmental damage as long as growth is not prevented or restricted, an integral definition of progress demands not only looking at the immediate, short-term benefit, but also to consider the long-term impact of our actions. Ignoring limits out of the delusion of what is possible, or due to excessive growth expectations, is an expression of the technocratic paradigm which the pope criticizes. The ethical perspective of a new definition of progress includes, in contrast, developing an awareness of the boundaries of developments and processes. People need to learn to accept existing limits, be they ecological, social, or economic in nature.

The pope fundamentally is not calling for a negative definition of progress or of development. He regards the human being in a role as *cooperator Dei*, since "creating a world in need of development, God in some way sought to limit himself in such a way that many of the things we think of as evils, dangers or sources of suffering, are in reality part of the pains of childbirth which he uses to draw us into the act

of cooperation with the Creator” (*LS* 80). Pope Francis develops on this notion by referring to the positive view of progress and development of all living entities, referring to Thomas Aquinas’s idea of continuing “the work of creation”.<sup>7</sup>

## The Need to Take an Integral View of Politics and Economy

The practical implementation of humane progress also requires changes to be made on the political and economic stage. To this end, Pope Francis makes a few suggestions.

With regard to the economy, the pope puts forward the ambitious idea of a fundamental debate: “This will entail a responsible reflection on the meaning of the economy and its goals with an eye to correcting its malfunctions and misapplications” (*LS* 194). The way in which we set up an economy is decisive for determining how people live, and particularly whether they are able to live on their own responsibility and well. The pope is particularly critical of an approach combining what is technically feasible with the primacy of economic usefulness. If people today do everything that is technically possible, and if over and above that nothing may be prevented which yields economic gains, and if this is moreover combined with a moral of the *minus malum*, of the lesser evil, the world goes off the rails. Gain is not always progress. Technological innovations that drive growth and prosperity may not be accepted blindly without considering their impact on people and on the environment. Furthermore, profitability and economic growth may not become the sole standard by which economic activity is judged. This critique has nothing to do with hostility toward economic activity. Rather, it must be recalled over and over again that economic activity must be sustainable, and may not be based on exploitation of human beings and nature, but must serve the integral development of humankind.

The pope thus considers that it would be desirable “to develop a new economy, more attentive to ethical principles” (*LS* 189). He lists as the condition of such economic activity “more balanced levels of production, a better distribution of wealth, concern for the environment,” but also concern for “the rights of future generations” (*LS* 109). Here one sees the picture of an economy that distances itself from the dictum of limitless growth and is aware of its obligation to serve the goals of social, ecological, and intergenerational justice. Ultimately, this indicates an economy that understands itself not as a means unto itself, but one that puts its activities at the service of humankind and of creation.

The pope does not, however, reject the principle of the market economy per se. Rather, he pleads that “we need to reject a magical conception of the market, which would suggest that problems can be solved simply by an increase in the profits of companies or individuals” (*LS* 190). He furthermore criticizes the idea that growth will simply solve the worldwide problems of hunger and poverty. The market will not do this of itself (*LS* 109). In the same way, the environmental problems cannot be solved solely by economy and technology. The market economy must of necessity be

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7. *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 104, a.1, ad 4.



supplemented by the goal of ecological and social responsibility. Only a market that is obliged to respect values can ensure that nature or the rights of today’s and future generations will be respected. This notion is very close to the fundamental concept of the social market economy as it was developed in Germany after World War II. If there is no ethically defined framework, and if there are no institutions, including the state, there is no real social market economy. This is common sense to the proponents of the social market economy, and I am one of them.

Much of the criticism that has been leveled against *Laudato Si’* focuses on the following statement: “That is why the time has come to accept decreased growth in some parts of the world, in order to provide resources for other places to experience healthy growth” (*LS* 193). These critical tones appear to associate the pope with the “degrowth” movement. However, on closer inspection, we see here too that *Laudato Si’* takes a rather differentiated view. One may certainly think about limiting material prosperity for developed economies while enhancing the quality of growth, but, particularly with regard to less developed countries, it should be considered that one of the major pre-conditions for combating poverty and improving quality of life is economic growth, which must, however, be orientated in line with the criteria of a commitment to the common good. Pope Francis calls on enterprises not only to shoulder social and ecological responsibility (*LS* 194), but also presents business activities as “a noble vocation” (*LS* 129).<sup>8</sup> If they understand their work as a contribution to the common good, they can not only generate prosperity and improve the world for everyone, but also help promote the region and create jobs (*LS* 129).

Finally, the pope’s writings on economy and growth, as well as on technology and progress, reiterate the call to avoid any absolutization with regard to the whole—not only the absolutization of the market, but equally the absolutization of the environment or of people. We must combine economic, social, and ecological goals, otherwise we place at risk the balance for healthy development.

## For a Policy with a Broad Horizon

Focusing on an integral perspective is not only relevant for economy, but must also apply in the political arena. We must not only regain the primacy of politics (*LS* 189), but also strengthen the global orientation of politics. When it comes to today’s concrete ecological and social problems—for instance climate change, which “is a global problem with grave implications: environmental, social, economic, political and for the distribution of goods” (*LS* 25)—there is a particular need to improve global governance. Pope Francis speaks in this context of “an ethics of international relations” (*LS* 51), and calls for leadership (*LS* 53, 164) to solve the global environmental problems: “What is needed is a politics that is far-sighted and capable of a new, integral and interdisciplinary approach to handling the different aspects of the crisis” (*LS* 197). Despite the frequent criticisms of the weaknesses of politics we hear today, this is an

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8. For an earlier expression of this idea, see *EG* 203.

encouragement for those states and persons in positions of political responsibility to stand firm, even in the face of resistance, and to keep on striving for global solutions. The state and politics are called on and obliged, as regulating entities, to set a suitable framework. This also applies at the global level. With regard to the need to increase the internationalization of politics, the pope refers to devising stronger and “more efficiently organized international institutions” (LS 175). In this context, he furthermore reiterates the call for “a true world political authority” (LS 175), a notion favored by previous popes.

All people are called upon to solve the problems of environmental destruction and worldwide social injustice. The pope, however, considers the responsibility to fall on the developed countries in particular. He is intensely critical of the fact that the rich countries have done so little so far to overcome environmental problems:

The poorest areas and countries are less capable of adopting new models for reducing environmental impact because they lack the wherewithal to develop the necessary processes and to cover their costs. We must continue to be aware that, regarding climate change, there are differentiated responsibilities. (LS 52)

Hence, the pope recalls the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities” (LS 170), which was formulated at the World Summit in Rio back in 1992. He rightly calls to mind the “ecological debt” (LS 51) that the prosperous states have toward the poor ones. One of the reasons for this is that the prosperity of these countries came at a cost to the environment. Here, he demands a change of course. However, the poor countries also have a responsibility to fight corruption or “the scandalous level of consumption in some privileged sectors of their population” (LS 172), and to become committed to the development of sustainable forms of energy generation.

The pope thus takes up a neuralgic point of the UN climate negotiations: While the industrialized nations point out that threshold countries such as China and India need to engage in climate protection now because they have already caught up with the industrialized nations in terms of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, and will make a major contribution toward greenhouse gas emissions in the future, these threshold countries insist that the industrialized nations must first of all face their historical responsibility, and that the industrialized nations are denying them similar resource-consuming development. All this, however, only indicates that the global north is maintaining a lifestyle and mode of conducting business that cannot be applied across the board without destroying the planet. The pope weighs in: “In practice, we continue to tolerate that some consider themselves more human than others, as if they had been born with greater rights” (LS 90). With regard to the international community of states, he complains of a frequently “cheerful recklessness” (LS 59), criticizing how people deal with ecological problems: “This is the way human beings contrive to feed their self-destructive vices: trying not to see them, trying not to acknowledge them, delaying the important decisions and pretending that nothing will happen” (LS 59).

The “integral ecology” approach developed in *Laudato Si'* corresponds with the principle of the common good that the pope regards as the central principle in social

ethics. Given the globalized world, the principle of the common good (*LS* 156) naturally refers today to a global common good, and implies a preferential option for the poorest (*LS* 158). If opportunities are not enabled for all—particularly for the poor—then progress is not really acceptable progress. For this reason further efforts need to be undertaken to lend greater weight to the “global commons” (*LS* 174). Pope Francis is concerned about “care for the common home,” as he puts it in the subtitle to the encyclical. We humans only have this one world, for which we share responsibility and which we need to maintain. For this reason, the world needs to pull itself together to engage in a new mindset for the sake of the conservation of creation and the future of our planet.

## **We Are All Responsible: On the Question of Personal Lifestyles**

An integral approach to the ecological crisis includes the question of individual lifestyles. The manner in which people live carries much political significance. For this reason, responsibility falls not only on states or on the economy to change their way of doing things. In fact, the pope is calling for a change of mentality on the part of every person living “on this planet” (*LS* 3). The decisive point is for each individual to exercise their freedom responsibly on the way to development that respects the needs of humankind and the environment. Here we must “restore the various levels of ecological equilibrium, establishing harmony within ourselves, with others, with nature and other living creatures, and with God” (*LS* 210).

The pope hopes that changing lifestyles “could bring healthy pressure to bear on those who wield political, economic and social power” (*LS* 206). He recalls the influence of consumers, and warns against simply trusting that things will somehow come out in the wash. He also focuses here on responsible freedom. Ecological and social damage “both are ultimately due to the same evil: the notion that there are no indisputable truths to guide our lives, and hence human freedom is limitless” (*LS* 6).

## **The Need for an Ecological Conversion**

The pope goes on to state why faith-based convictions play such a considerable role in an encyclical that is addressed to all people. He opines that these enrich the discussion and can encourage people to commit themselves to ecological and social action. For Christians, faith in God definitively includes love for God’s creation. Those who do not love creation can therefore not be really good Christians. The spiritual-transcendental dimension is hence part and parcel of an integral ecology. This goal does not take on concrete shape until we see the need for an “ecological conversion” (*LS* 217). In order to further the ecological conversion which he favors, the pope takes up the model of Saint Francis: “We come to realize that a healthy relationship with creation is one dimension of overall personal conversion, which entails the recognition of our errors, sins, faults and failures, and leads to heartfelt repentance and desire to change” (*LS* 218). The ecological conversion for which the pope is calling is fundamentally “a

conversion of heart" (LS 218). This is contingent on people searching their consciences and being ready for conversion in terms of their conduct toward nature.

The ecological conversion will, however, not be brought about if only individuals examine their actions: "Social problems must be addressed by community networks and not simply by the sum of individual good deeds . . . The ecological conversion needed to bring about lasting change is also a community conversion" (LS 219). In order to "foster a spirit of generous care, full of tenderness" (LS 220), which is needed to bring about an ecological conversion, the pope formulates a variety of basic stances: gratitude for the gifts of creation, generosity in terms of our actions, comprehensive fraternity which opens our eyes to realize that all beings are connected, and a willingness to make sacrifices, to create space for creativity, and to face the challenges of the world with considerable enthusiasm (LS 220).

A major concern of the encyclical is that Christian spirituality should provide encouragement for "a prophetic and contemplative lifestyle" connected with changed "understanding of the quality of life" (LS 222). The conviction that "less is more" is vital here. "Such sobriety, when lived freely and consciously, is liberating. It is not a lesser life or one lived with less intensity" (LS 223). If, by contrast, the appreciation of moderation and humility declines in a society, an attitude becomes prevalent that becomes "enthralled with the possibility of limitless mastery over everything" (LS 224).

Apart from a return to simplicity "which allows us to stop and appreciate the small things" (LS 222), the pope considers Christian spirituality, which is aware of its responsibility to serve the goal of conserving creation, to also include a "culture of care": "Love, overflowing with small gestures of mutual care, is also civic and political, and it makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world" (LS 231). For Pope Francis, consideration is to be understood as "an exercise of charity" (LS 231), in which he creates a link between the societal challenges and the Christian obligation to love: "Love for society and commitment to the common good are outstanding expressions of a charity which affects not only relationships between individuals but also macro-relationships, social, economic and political ones" (LS 231). The pope thus regards love in the social field as a central key to solving the ecological crisis, given that love is an expression of "a sense of solidarity which is at the same time aware that we live in a common home which God has entrusted to us" (LS 232).

All in all, an environmentally compatible lifestyle, a willingness to engage in an ecological conversion, and "an attitude of the heart" (LS 226) that is based on a Christian spirituality constitute the facets of an integral ecology that takes "time to recover a serene harmony with creation, reflecting on our lifestyle and our ideals, and contemplating the Creator who lives among us and surrounds us, whose presence "must not be contrived but found, uncovered" (LS 225).

## Assessment and Outlook

Since the solution to the ecological crisis constitutes a task for the future that will keep humanity busy for quite some time to come, *Laudato Si'* takes on a significance that

will reach far into the 21st century. This pontifical letter and its groundbreaking message are comparable to some degree to the first social encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, published 125 years ago, which Pope John XXIII referred to in the encyclical *Mater et Magistra* as “the Magna Charta of social and economic reconstruction.”<sup>9</sup> *Laudato Si’* is therefore more than merely an environmental or climate encyclical. Because of the comprehensive conception of the letter, which also analyzes in detail the global social upheavals of the ecological crisis, this text can very much be placed in the context of the previous social encyclicals.

Although Pope Francis points to serious, major problems, namely the current destruction of the planet as well as worldwide poverty and social injustice, he has not penned a pessimist indictment. *Laudato Si’* is above all an encouragement in the face of the ecological crisis. Its message remains full of hope and confidence, based on a strong trust in God. The pope believes that people can be moved to enter into an ecological conversion and decide in freedom to do what is right. In his view, humankind can still overcome the challenges and change the world for the better by converting and engaging in responsible actions. The title of the encyclical also bears witness to this optimism, which as we know comes from the Canticle of the Sun by Saint Francis: “Laudato si’, mi’ Signore—Praise be to you, my Lord.” The pope furthermore points out on the first pages that he considers the example of Saint Francis to be a motivation for “care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically” (LS 10). Taking Saint Francis as an orientation in the question of how we wish to shape the future of our planet can hence be an encouraging, motivating inspiration not only for Christians, but also for all people. And *Laudato Si’* offers an important programmatic text for such an approach.

### Author biography

Reinhard Cardinal Marx, Archbishop of Munich and Freising, Germany since 2008, was elevated to the cardinalate in 2010. He was elected President of the Commission of the Bishops’ Conferences of the European Community in 2012, and President of the German Bishops’ Conference in 2014. Cardinal Marx earned his doctorate in theology from University of Bochum in 1989 under the direction of Hermann-Josef Pottmeyer with a dissertation entitled, “Ist Kirche anders? Möglichkeiten und Grenzen einer soziologischen Betrachtungsweise.” He is the author of several books, including *Das Kapital: Ein Plädoyer für den Menschen* (2008), *glaube!* (2013), and *Kirche (über)lebt* (2015). He currently serves on the council of cardinal advisors to His Holiness, Pope Francis.

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9. Pope John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra* May 15, 1961, 26) [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_j-xxiii\\_enc\\_15051961\\_mater.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_15051961_mater.html).