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THE MESSAGE OF 'LAUDATO SI', MI SIGNORE' — 'PRAISE BE TO YOU, MY LORD'

'We are called to be instruments of God our Father, so that our planet might be what he desired when he created it and correspond with his plan for peace, beauty and fullness' (§ 53).

Abstract: Pope Francis' appeal in *Laudato Si'* is both profoundly religious and scientific: it begins from faith, goes on to engage in a philosophical and ethical reflection, and adopts the most precise knowledge of the natural and social sciences. He affirms that the planet in which we live is our common 'sister home' that is sick due to the harm inflicted on it by a few individuals, while the negative consequences are suffered by everyone, especially the poorest. *Ecology* comes from two words, *eikos* and *logos*, which in Greek mean 'house' and 'order', that is to say, that science orders the only home that we all live in, our common home.

Pope Francis has woken up contemporary men and women, inviting them to avoid a 'superficial ecology which bolsters complacency and a cheerful recklessness' (§ 59). Moved by the cries of the poorest caused by the climate, he returns to the heart of the gospel 23, to the Beatitudes and to Matthew 25: 40 'In truth I tell you, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me'. He inserts his new concept of „integral ecology” and to „ecological conversion” into the social thought of the Church, as well as dignity, freedom of thought, fraternity, the universal destination of goods, solidarity...Integral ecology encompasses ecological balance, social justice and spiritual responsibility.

THE RELIGIOUS VISION OF 'SISTER EARTH'

This message is profoundly religious because it considers the world as God's home, as a gift that God has given to human beings — His image — to take care of and develop according to their potentialities for the good of men and women in all times and in all places. Chesterton says in his famous 'St Francis of Assisi' that the Saint of Assisi enables us to discover the truth of heaven and earth in its profound sacredness, created by God and redeemed by Christ, whereas the Greek-Roman mentality, absorbed

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in myth, saw in the heavens and earth, in the constellations and in life, the mere fables of the passions and virtues of the gods and demigods. ‘The flowers and stars have recovered their first innocence. Fire and water are felt to be worthy to be the brother and sister of a saint. The purge of paganism is complete at last...stars stand no more as signs of the far fridity of gods as cold as those cold fires. They are like all new things newly made and awaiting new names, from one who shall come to name them. Neither the universe nor the earth have now any longer the old sinister significance of the world. They await a new reconciliation with man, but they are already capable of being reconciled. Man has stripped from his soul the last rag of nature worship, and can return to nature’ (ch. 2, cf. <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks09/-0900611.txt>).

Saint Francis’ vision and message regarding the world as God’s home and our common home is one that comes directly from the Gospel. ‘Praise be to God for our Sister, Mother Earth, which brings forth varied fruits and grass and glowing flowers’ ends almost with the words ‘Praise be to God for our Sister, the death of the body’. And Pope Francis wants to act on this. As Saint Thomas said, ‘in sacred science, all things are considered under the aspect of God: either because they are God Himself or because they refer to God as their beginning and end’ (*S. Th.* I, 7 c). Francis joins together both dimensions in a ground-breaking approach that he calls ‘integral ecology’. The home that God has gifted to men and women has to be a common home ‘like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us. ‘Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs” (§ 1). The Pope carefully avoids proposing precise and technical solutions. Yet some Christians will protest: again another Pope ‘playing politics’! Francis inscribes his designs in the heart of the mystery of the love of the creation. Perhaps here his inspiration comes from St. Thomas, where he writes, ‘as therefore we say that a tree flowers by its flower, so do we say that the Father, by the Word or the Son, speaks Himself, and His creatures; and that the Father and the Son love each other and us, by the Holy Spirit, or by Love proceeding’ (*S. Th.*, I, 37, 2.)

Concrete humanity — all peoples inhabiting our ‘common home’ — is invited to decrypt the message of trust that God has proposed since the beginning: ‘The entire material universe speaks of God’s love, his boundless affection for us’ (§ 84).

DATA FROM THE NATURAL SCIENCES ADOPTED BY FRANCIS

However, according to the evidence brought forward by the natural and social sciences ‘this sister land is sick and cries out from the damage caused in her due to the irresponsible use and unjust abuse of goods placed in her by God. In modern times we have grown up thinking that we are her owners and rulers, authorized to exploit her’ without any consideration of her potentialities and laws, as if she were an inert material. We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. *Gen* 2: 7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters’ (§ 2).

Here the Pope passes from a theological beginning centred on the Gospel to a consideration and acceptance of the most precise and current data that these sci-

ences provide. Francis begins this analysis — for the first time in the Magisterium — by talking about the climate as a 'common good, of all and for all'. And he defines this at the global level as 'a complex system linked to many of the essential conditions for human life'. He then proceeds by making use of scientific notions and words, asserting that 'a very solid scientific consensus indicates that we are presently witnessing a disturbing warming of the climatic system'. In adopting the observations made by these disciplines, he goes on to affirm clearly that 'in recent decades this warming has been accompanied by a constant rise in the sea level and, it would appear, by an increase of extreme weather events, even if a scientifically determinable cause cannot be assigned to each particular phenomenon' (§ 23).

Arriving at the crucial point, the Pope accepts that 'there are other factors (such as volcanic activity, variations in the earth's orbit and axis, the solar cycle)' that coincide with global warming, but Francis energetically denounces the scientifically identifiable causes of this evil, declaring that: 'a number of scientific studies indicate that most global warming in recent decades is due to the great concentration of greenhouse gases (carbon dioxide, methane, nitrogen oxides and others) released mainly as a result of human activity' (§ 23).

We encounter once again the newness of the epistemology of *Laudato Si'*. Whereas the statement that the earth is our home and we ourselves are its stewards has a Biblical foundation, the view that the climatic crisis of global warming is due to human activity that uses fossil fuels is purely scientific. The Bible can tell us that human beings must preserve and develop the earth in line with the design of God but it cannot tell us the real situation of the earth today: knowledge about this situation is a domain of the natural sciences. As a consequence, faith and reason, philosophical knowledge and scientific knowledge, are brought together for the first time in the pontifical Magisterium in *Laudato Si'*.

THE INSIGHTS OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES ADOPTED BY THE ENCYCLICAL

One of the key points sustained throughout *Laudato Si'* is the intimate relationship between the fragility of the planet and the world's poor (whether individuals or cities of people). This comes from a deep conviction that in the world everything is intricately, intimately and causally interconnected. In other words 'climate change is a global problem with serious social, environmental, economic, distributional and political dimensions, and poses one of the greatest challenges for humanity'. The encyclical is not ecological in the 'green' sense, but is primarily a social document.

The poor populations are the most severely affected even though they are the least responsible. *Laudato si'* tells us that: 'the worst impacts are reoccurring and will continue to do so even more so over the following decades, particularly affecting developing countries and the poorest of the world. Many of the poor live in areas particularly affected by phenomena related to warming, and their means of subsistence are largely dependent on natural reserves and ecosystemic services such as agriculture, fishing and forestry' (§ 25).

Climate change provokes the migration of animals and plants that cannot always adapt and this in its turn affects the means of production of the poorest who are obliged to emigrate with great uncertainty as regards their future and the future of their children: 'There has been a tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation. They are not recognized by international conventions as refugees; they bear the loss of the lives they have left behind, without enjoying any legal protection whatsoever' (§ 25).

The detailed explanations of our academician Ramanathan, which the Pope echoes, are convincing: 'Some forms of pollution are part of people's daily experience. Exposure to atmospheric pollutants produces a broad spectrum of health hazards, especially for the poor, and causes millions of premature deaths'. Poor people fall ill, for example, 'from breathing high levels of smoke from fuels used in cooking or heating. There is also pollution that affects everyone, caused by transport, industrial fumes, substances which contribute to the acidification of soil and water, fertilizers, insecticides, fungicides, herbicides and agrottoxins in general' (§ 20).

Pope Francis also affirms that 'The impact of present imbalances is also seen in the premature death of many of the poor, in conflicts sparked by the shortage of resources, and in any number of other problems which are insufficiently represented on global agendas' (§ 48).

In actual fact there is not sufficient awareness of the climate problems that particularly affect the poor and excluded, which consequently exacerbates both poverty and exclusion. Yet the poor and the excluded 'are the majority of the planet's population, billions of people. These days, they are mentioned in international political and economic discussions, but one often has the impression that their problems are brought up as an afterthought, a question which gets added almost out of duty or in a tangential way, if not treated merely as collateral damage. Indeed, when all is said and done, they frequently remain at the bottom of the pile. This is due partly to the fact that many professionals, opinion makers, communications media and centres of power, being located in affluent urban areas, are far removed from the poor, with little direct contact with their problems' (§ 49).

Furthermore, 'This should not make us overlook the abandonment and neglect also experienced by some rural populations which lack access to essential services and where some workers are reduced to conditions of servitude, without rights or even the hope of a more dignified life' (§ 154).

After the crimes of slavery and the colonial and totalitarian experiences of past centuries, humanity — like the idea of the intangible value of human life — is thus once again threatened in its existence, its dignity and its freedom. All these dramatic situations of poverty and social exclusion, caused or increased mainly by global warming, are the breeding ground of new forms of slavery and human trafficking, such as forced labour, prostitution, organ trafficking, drug dependency, etc. It is clear that full employment and schooling form the great defence against poverty, prostitution, drug addiction and drug trafficking.

Consequently, reducing our use of carbon energy is not a question only of the natural environment! The Anthropocene, a term proposed by our pontifical academicians to define the new geological age in which the model of development is

based upon human activity that uses fossil fuels and makes the earth sick, is also 'the greatest construction site for the defence of human rights of our epoch' (Msgr. Desmond Tutu, preface to *Stop Climate Change!*).

For this reason Francis makes use of the social sciences together with the natural sciences. In a globalised world, we cannot fail to recognise that the true social approach is connected with ecology and vice versa: 'a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment'. Indeed, His Holiness concludes that we must 'hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*' (§ 49).

Hence 'every ecological approach needs to incorporate a social — and political — perspective which takes into account the fundamental rights of the poor and the underprivileged and likewise, all socio-political consideration must have an integral ecological dimension' (§ 93).

SOLUTIONS FOR AN INTEGRAL ECOLOGY: WE ARE IN TIME TO ADDRESS THE PROBLEM

This invitation to safeguard the 'common home' expresses God's appeal to man to set to work. So what are the solutions? 'In actual fact, developing the created world in a prudent way is the best way of caring for it, as this means that we ourselves become the instrument used by God to bring out the potential which he himself inscribed in things: „The Lord created medicines out of the earth, and a sensible man will not despise them”' (*Sir* 38: 4; § 124). Caring for the earth is not like taking care of a museum, which only preserves and maintains works that have no biological life. Caring for the earth also entails developing it according to its God-given vital potentialities, in accordance with scientific discovery and activity, for the common good of man, for the sustainable development of our planet, with generational and intergenerational solidarity, leaving all progenies to inherit a healthy earth rather than a sick one. In addition, protecting an integral ecology means eradicating social exclusion and marginalisation as soon as possible, particularly poverty and new forms of slavery, which today have become the most valuable form of business for traffickers.

The Pope affirms that 'in the present condition of global society, 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'. We should therefore search for the common good by forming partnerships on the planet, honour the value that God gives to each person in fighting for his dignity, embody the mercy of the Lord for those who are most threatened, transform socio-political mechanisms in order to reduce inequalities, and recognise the infinite patience and mercy of God towards men and women, nurturing faith, hope and charity.

We could cite here the golden rule, at the base of all civilisations and religious traditions: 'do not do to others what you would not like them to do to you', or in its positive formulation: 'Do to others as you would have them do to you' (Lk 6: 31).

However this rule today is not enough: it deserves to be interpreted in the light of the Beatitudes of the Gospel according to St. Matthew chapter 5, and the protocol by which we shall be judged in Matthew chapter 25, which refers to the other, the poorest and the neediest in an existential and real situation of suffering. To choose the Beatitudes and the poor, those who suffer, those who weep, those of pure heart, the meek, the merciful, and the peacemakers, those who love justice and are persecuted for its sake, is a choice that transcends the golden rule, which is too abstract to respond to the suffering of the other and those most in need. The option to follow the Beatitudes 'entails recognizing the implications of the universal destination of the world's goods' but as the Pope mentioned in 'the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, it demands before all else an appreciation of the immense dignity of the poor in the light of our deepest convictions as believers'. Indeed, the Pope concludes: 'We need only look around us to see that, today, this option is in fact an ethical imperative essential for effectively attaining the common good' (§ 158). In definitive terms, differently from the golden rule, in the Beatitudes the other is that suffering being that the Gospel never ceases to place at its centre. Suffering is not only defined as physical suffering, as mental or moral pain, but also by the diminution or the destruction of the capacity to be and to act, to be able to do, which are felt as an attack on the integrity of the person. And, again in a different way from the golden rule, a sort of equalisation appears in the Beatitudes where suffering man is at the origin and, thanks to the shared suffering of the suffering other and oneself, the love required by the Beatitudes is not confused with mere pity, where one can be secretly happy at being rewarded. In the Beatitudes, when truly implemented, one, where the power of acting is at the outset greater than that of the suffering other, is affected by everything that the other can offer in return. From the suffering other there proceeds a gift that no longer comes from the power to act and to exist but from weakness itself. It may be precisely here that we find the proof of the love required by the Beatitudes, which, at the moment before death, lies in voices that speak to each other or the weak holding of hands.

The German philosopher Habermas, in a dialogue with Cardinal Ratzinger, said that to save today's world 'a liberal political culture can itself require secularised citizens to take part in the effort to translate the significant material of religious language into a language that is accessible to everyone'. The most significant material of religious language, the most revolutionary discourse, the most relevant, the most human and the most divine, the shortest and the most profound, that any religious man has ever pronounced during the course of history, is that of the Beatitudes, the Sermon on the Mount, of Jesus Christ. Politicians and social scientists, in particular those of Latin America, are called to reflect on the way of embodying the Beatitudes both as a law of politics and society and also as the shared concrete goods of globalised society, and lastly as a new name for the common good. Welcome will be the thinker, the academic, the economist, the worker, the politician and the religious or social leader who is able to bring the programme of the Beatitudes of Christ to contemporary globalised society!

I very much thank you for inviting me to this city of Berlin, which has given a great deal and which still has a great deal to give to the world. Thank you very much for listening to me.