

The Ecologic Crisis and the Relation of Humankind with Nature

di Péter Bozi

INTRODUCTION

Ecology is a scientific discipline that deals with connections, the reciprocal and integral relationships between the living and their environment.¹ It is well known, however, that alongside their developments to improving their life, human beings are damaging the balance of this relationship. With economic growth and with the promotion of consumerism and the free market, humankind is using up more resources that the planet can provide. As a result of egoism, self-interests seeking, and arrogant ignorance of the scientific warnings, the environment is being widely polluted. Among others, global warming of the planet is also an effect of these attitudes, that brings with itself natural disasters, linked to extreme weather conditions (such as droughts, flooding, heat waves, etc.), and the daily extinction of species just to mention a few effects. It's been pointed out by climate scientists and experts that the way people think will affect this crucial relationship between humankind and nature. The ecological crisis and its solution is therefore dependent on how we humans think, act, and relate to the environment we live in. Therefore, I would like to outline the evolution of the Church's teaching on this issue starting with an article that argues that the roots of the ecological crisis are largely religious.

CRITICISM

One of the principal critics among Christian ecologists was Lynn Townsend White Jr., an American historian, who wrote the article, *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis*, in 1968. He criticises the Judeo-Christian perspective, which presents an overly egoistic and arrogant position, where human beings have primacy over all creatures, because they are created in the image of God and therefore all is subdued to them. He says that the biblical view of humankind's transcendence of nature and dominion over creation has influenced scientific and technological development to reach a point where they are out of control generating the destruction of nature. «Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects».² Perhaps an error White commits is that he interprets that the selfishness of human beings is due to Christianity, which is perhaps independent of this, I consider. A key factor, however, according to White, that defines and has an impact upon the reciprocal relation between humans and nature is how people think. «What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by

¹ L. CONGIUNTI, *Lineamenti di filosofia della natura*, Urbaniana University Press, Città del Vaticano 2016, 108. (My own 1 translation).

² L. T. WHITE, Jr., «The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis», in *Science*, 155 (1967), n. 3767, 1205.



beliefs about our nature and destiny — that is, by religion».³ Another observation that he mentions is that «I personally doubt that disastrous ecologic backlash can be avoided simply by applying to our problems more science and more technology».⁴ He believes that the solution for the problem goes beyond science and technology. He states that: «What we do about ecology depends on our ideas of the man-nature relationship. More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one».⁵ He suggests that «Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not».⁶

The Church has been working in the area of ecology for the past 50 years, reshaping our understanding of the care for creation. The reflection has also achieved a maturation that culminates in Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'*, which talks about a spirituality of ecology,⁷ that isn't a new religion but a new way of thinking of humankind's relationship with nature.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE CHURCH'S TEACHING ON ECOLOGY

The first pontiff to speak out about the danger to the balance of nature caused by the intervention of humankind in a rapidly growing industrial civilisation, was Saint Paul VI in his address to Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations on the 25th anniversary of its institution, in 1970. In his prophetic words he said:

«But the carrying out of these technical possibilities at an accelerated pace is not accomplished without dangerous repercussions on the balance of our natural surroundings. The progressive deterioration of that which has generally come to be called the environment, risks provoking a veritable ecological catastrophe. Already we see the pollution of the air we breathe, the water we drink. We see the pollution of rivers, lakes, even oceans - to the point of inspiring fear of a true «biological death» in the near future, if energetic measures are not immediately and courageously taken and rigorously put into practice».⁸

Pope Paul VI acknowledges the advantages that technical development can bring to human beings, so that everyone could have easier access to their basic needs, but also recognises that this progress has its dangers and that humankind has to take serious steps to stop destroying the environment. It is just unfortunate that no consideration or serious actions were then taken. What is even more alarming is that even to our day there are people who deny that there is an ecological crisis, because what they only care about is their own wealth, wellbeing, comfort and the accumulation of possessions.

In *Laudato Si'* Pope Francis mentions his predecessors who have written about the issue of safeguarding nature and thanks them for their work. The 5th paragraph of the encyclical is dedicated to Pope Saint John Paul II who amongst other documents released the encyclical *Centesimus Annus*. When John Paul II speaks out for justice he also indicates «a change of life-styles, of models of production and consumption, and of the established structures of power which today govern societies»,⁹ which is the foundation of the so called

³ *Ibid.*, 1205.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1206.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1206.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1207.

⁷ Cf.: FRANCIS, Encyclical Letter *Gaudete et Exsultate*, (19 March 2018), n. 28.

⁸ PAUL VI, *Visit of Pope Paul VI to the FAO on the 25th anniversary of its institution*, (16 November 1970), n. 3.

⁹ JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus*, (1 May 1991), n. 58.



ecological conversion, that is introduced for the first time to the teaching of the Church. However wording such as «dominate the earth»¹⁰ when talking about the relationship between human beings and nature, rather expresses a kind of separation, a superior-inferior relation between the two entities, which isn't helpful in this context. As we can see in the following excerpt, Pope Francis goes further on this concept:

«The most traditional perspective of «domination», of Genesis 1,28, is balanced by what began to be called «stewardship», or the «administration» of nature. This concept is developed by Pope Francis in paragraphs 67 and 68 of the *Laudato Si'*, emphasising that an authentic hermeneutic of the biblical text seeks the balance of the context. In this way, Genesis 1,28 must be complemented with Genesis 2,15 where it is read that God invites mankind to «till and keep» the garden of the world. «This implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature» (cf. LS 67)».¹¹

Therefore paragraphs 67 and 68 of *Laudato Si'* provide an explanation from which it becomes clear that a «tyrannical anthropocentrism unconcerned for other creatures»¹² has nothing to do with the teaching of the Bible. Although the human race occupies a special place among created beings as humankind was created in the image and likeness of God and was granted dominion over the rest of creation, nevertheless this position comes with responsibility. Human beings should love the created world as does God, and be custodians, guardians, working for its preservation, cultivating it with care, and be good stewards of it.

Pope Benedict XVI continues to expand more on the theme of ecological conversion because he observes that human ecology affects the environmental ecology. «The way humanity treats the environment influences the way it treats itself, and vice versa».¹³ For this reason the Pope suggests that our lifestyle, culture and the way human beings relate to one another be reviewed seriously as these factors impact how the environment is being treated. Pope Benedict also points out that it is necessary to develop a people-centred economy, because the commercial logic is not able to solve social problems. The economic activity «needs to be directed towards the pursuit of the common good»¹⁴ where there is room for gratuitousness which is «an expression of fraternity».¹⁵ «Civilising the economy»¹⁶ would imply a change of mentality which aims at higher goals than mere profit.

Perhaps going one more step further, a call for immediate action could have generated more improvement as the damage had already been great and the imbalance of nature was alarming. Although the two immediate predecessors of Pope Francis recognised, identified, and presented the problem, some could argue that further measures could have been taken. However we may interpret this as the maturation process of the Church that went through different phases regarding ecology.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, n. 31.

¹¹ E. AGOSTA SCAREL, «La novedad ecológica en *Laudato Si'* », in *Alabanza gozosa y labor cuidadosa por nuestro 11 común hogar. Comentarios a la Laudato Si'*, edited by E. GÓMEZ DE MIER, Docencia, Buenos Aires 2016, 58. (my own translation)

¹² FRANCIS, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*, (24 May 2015), n. 68.

¹³ BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in veritate*, (29 June 2009), n. 52.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, n. 36.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, n. 34.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, n. 38.



THE NOVELTY OF *LAUDATO SI'*

The encyclical begins with the poem of St. Francis, calling our Mother Earth a Sister, and establishes that we should have an intimate family relationship with nature. Pope Francis however makes it clear that humankind hasn't respected, hasn't made wise use of the nature and therefore is destroying the common home.¹⁷ There is need for a conversion where a new term, integral ecology, finds its centre. The objective of this new paradigm is the restoration of justice between human beings, God and creation. It calls for openness to philosophical and theological principles, categories that "transcend the language of mathematics and biology, and take us to the heart of what it is to be human".¹⁸ This also implies that there is a mystical aspect of the reality that has to be incorporated. In paragraph 83 the encyclical arrives at a pivotal point where it is explained what the relationship should be between human beings and nature. From this paragraph we can understand what comes after and the things that have already been said in the document.

«The ultimate destiny of the universe is in the fullness of God, which has already been attained by the risen Christ, the measure of the maturity of all things.[53] Here we can add yet another argument for rejecting every tyrannical and irresponsible domination of human beings over other creatures».¹⁹

We see that every type of tyrannical dominion is being rejected because

«The ultimate purpose of other creatures is not to be found in us. Rather, all creatures are moving forward with us and through us towards a common point of arrival, which is God, in that transcendent fullness where the risen Christ embraces and illumines all things. Human beings, endowed with intelligence and love, and drawn by the fullness of Christ, are called to lead all creatures back to their Creator».²⁰

The ecological conversion is also a basic idea that is further elaborated in the encyclical. The pontiff calls us to examine our lives, to take into consideration the way we live, the decisions we take, and to «acknowledge the ways in which we have harmed God's creation through our actions and our failure to act»,²¹ because what is necessary for a conversion is a renewed mentality, a changed heart. Without recognising the conditions, it is difficult to desire change but there is also the need for an underlying motivation to move humankind to action. This is where a ground-breaking component appears as Pope Francis trace the primary motivation for the care of the creation back to love.²² In fact love is the principal idea that interweaves the encyclical, the power that holds the scientific, philosophical, moral, and spiritual content together. «Because all creatures are connected, each must be cherished with love and respect, for all of us as living creatures are dependent on one another».²³

¹⁷ Cf.: FRANCIS, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*, (24 May 2015), n. 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, n. 11.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, n. 83.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, n. 83.

²¹ *Ibid.*, n. 128.

²² Cf.: E. AGOSTA SCAREL, *Ecological Conversion. In Hope of "New Heaven and New Earth"*, Carmelite NGO, 22 Salamanca 2019, n. 20.

²³ FRANCIS, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*, (24 May 2015), n. 42.



CONCLUSION

This paper allows us to acknowledge how serious the ecological crisis is. We can see that that solution for this problem depends on human mentality and behaviour in relation with the environment. Therefore, it can be acknowledged that Lynn White's observation was correct in stating that the key factors in the humankind-nature reciprocal relationship is how we think and what our beliefs are. By reviewing the evolution of the Church's teaching on this issue, we should agree that religious view can also play an important part in resolving the ecological crisis. In fact over the years the Church's view has matured and has gone beyond the ideas and criticism of White. Several important encyclicals such as *Centesimus Annus*, *Caritas in Veritate*, have laid a good foundation for the most current papal document on ecology. *Laudato Si'* calls for justice in changing our life-styles, model of production, model of consumption, and the established structures of power that govern societies. One of the crucial steps in the lengthy process of finding solutions to the ecological problem is to improve the way human beings think and relate to one another. To cultivate the different aspects of the integral ecology, where justice is promoted in both social and environmental spheres, taking into consideration the mystical element of the reality too. Yet again religion and the Church can play a fundamental role in helping the world to grow and improve in the interior dimensions. We cannot solve the ecological problem if we neglect the truth that «all creatures are moving forward with us and through us towards a common point of arrival, which is God».²⁴ For an ecological change, hearts have to change too. From materialistic motivations there is a need to move towards spiritual values because «For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also» (Mt 6,21). It is also useful to keep in mind that it is easy to talk about ecology, about the crisis we face, and to look for solutions but it is much more difficult to put words into practice. May we become people who act according to what we say.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, n. 83

