

Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'*. New Paths for Catholic Social Teaching in the 21st Century

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When Pope Francis published *Laudato Si'* (*LS*)¹ in June 2015, it was only a few years after Benedict XVI's *Caritas in veritate*, the previous milestone in Catholic Social Teaching (CST). Explicitly adding his encyclical "to the body of the Church's social teaching" (*LS* 15), he placed it in continuity with his predecessors. As Pope John Paul II reminded the Church, CST is both constant in its vital link to the Gospel and in permanent renewal due to new circumstances.² The question with *LS* is how much is it the continuation of previous teachings and how much a new starter. Only history will tell. It is sure that the notion of *integral ecology* promoted by Francis at the core of *LS* can be seen as an expansion of the notion of *integral human development* put forward by Paul VI in *Populorum progressio* in 1967 and of which *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (1987) and *Caritas in veritate* (2009) already offered an updating while commemorating the 20th and 40th anniversaries of *Populorum progressio*. Nonetheless, with many commentators, I am inclined to see *LS* as opening a new era in CST by addressing traditional social, political, and economic questions in the context of an ecological challenge that compels us to envision humanity in relation to the entire creation or, in other words, to envision the social question in intimate connection to the environmental one. "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). *Laudato Si'* reframes CST and opens new paths calling for transformations of both Church and Society.

The following presentation intends to substantiate this hypothesis. It starts by recalling the context in which the encyclical came out. It continues by a cursory reading, highlighting the dynamism and fecundity of the see-judge-act methodology leading the pope to call for a collective "cultural revolution" (*LS* 114) and a personal "ecological conversion" (*LS* 217) by

¹ All magisterial documents quoted in this paper are available online at www.vatican.va.

² Cf. John Paul II, *Laborem exercens* (1981), no. 2; *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (1987), no. 3.

engaging humanity to journey toward *integral* ecology because *everything is connected*. I will end by specifying three transformative orientations promoted by the encyclical.

1 Context

CST is never a set of a-temporal and universal dogmatic sayings. On the contrary, it is a teaching strongly embedded in time and space. It comes out of a context. This does not mean that it is irrelevant outside this context but it reminds us that a specific document cannot be properly understood and interpreted if the context is not taken into account. In the case of *Laudato Si'*, there is a general context of various crises that erupted in the first decade of the 21st century – the economic and financial crises of 2008, energy and food crises, terrorism in the aftermath of 9/11, ongoing globalization and secularization. This was already the context in which Benedict XVI wrote his sole social encyclical. It is also worth pointing out the immediate context of Pope Francis' encyclical, which is marked by two crucial world summits, the phenomenon of persistent and worsening global inequalities, and the change of pope.

1.1 Crises at the Dawn of the 3rd Millenium

Although the financial and economic crisis was a major concern from 2007 onwards, it is probably more appropriate to speak of crises in the plural to describe the world situation.³ Indeed, many countries faced a food crisis provoked by an increase of almost 80% in the world prices for basic supplies (cereals principally) between 2005 and 2007. The immediate consequences in several countries in Africa, South America and Asia were food riots. A report by the Food and Alimentation Organization (FAO) stated that in the year 2008 more than 100 million people were added to the category of hungry people. This put the overall number at 1.020 million, meaning that one out of six persons in the world suffers hunger.⁴

The constant energy crisis also loomed in the background. During the year 2008, the price of oil quadrupled before falling down again. It raised the question concerning the limits of the earth's resources since oil is a fossil energy which is non-renewable. More generally, in the first decade of the 21st century there was a growing awareness of ecological challenges and especially global warming. Regular yearly meetings of the United Nations Climate Change Conference attempted to push forward agreements among nations about the reduction

³ Luis González-Carvajal, *La fuerza del amor inteligente. Un comentario a la encíclica Caritas in veritate, de Benedicto XVI* (Santander, Spain: Sal Terrae, 2009), 83-104.

⁴ Cf. Darío Múnera Vélez, *La encíclica Caritas in veritate del Papa Benedicto XVI. Claves de lectura y comprensión desde la Universidad* (Medellín, Colombia: Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana, 2010), 18.

of greenhouse gases such as the 1997 Kyoto agreement. However, results did not yet meet the level of the urgency of the challenge.

Finally, to this panorama of crises should be added the tensions provoked by international terrorism in connection with religious fundamentalism. The shock of the 9/11 attacks against the World Trade Center in New York and the emergence of fundamentalists groups such as Al Qaeda undoubtedly affected debates concerning the role and place of religion in political and social life.

1.2 Globalization and secularization

John XXIII, Paul VI and the Second Vatican Council had already highlighted the fact that the social question had become worldwide because of the ongoing process of interconnectedness and “socialization” far beyond national boundaries. However, half a century later, what is now called globalization has taken on proportions unsuspected in the 60s. This is in large part the effect of huge technical progress in the areas of communication and transportation. The result is that more and more people around the world, even if separated by large distances, are nonetheless able to communicate and interact with each other and have become dependent on each other, whether they are conscious of it or not.

With this interconnection, large transnational companies have exponentially increased their power. Globalization was seen first in the internationalization of trade, then of the production of goods, but also in an increasingly rapid circulation of capital, the major part of it for speculative purposes. This means an increasing capacity to evade any type of local or national regulation. As the ex-president of a big multinational company expressed it,

For the companies of my group, globalization means freedom to invest when and where they want, to produce whatever they want, to buy and sell wherever they want and to suffer the minimal limitations possible for what refers to labor legislation and the social pact.⁵

In 2007 it was estimated that 500 multinational companies had each a turnover greater than 10 billion dollars a year, meaning greater than the annual national GDP in two thirds of the countries in the world. In other words, each one of those companies is bigger, from an economic viewpoint, than the majority of the countries of the world.

Meanwhile, the phenomena of secularization, affecting firstly Western countries, is gaining others parts of the world, reconfiguring the role of religion within societies and the type of religious discourses that could impact social, political, and economic life. By

⁵ González-Carvajal, *La fuerza del amor inteligente*, 70. Translation mine.

secularization I refer to what sociologist José Casanova has described as the functional differentiation of religion from other spheres of human activity, meaning that religion has less and less direct control on non-religious spheres of social life⁶. This is not contradictory with the increasing existence of radical groups or political movements using religions instrumentally for political purposes. With secularization, religion is not necessarily disappearing but its role is evolving. Secularization was a major concern for Benedict XVI. It is differently addressed by Francis.

1.3 World Summits and Global Inequality

Laudato Si' was released on June 18th, 2015 (though dated May 24th, Pentecost Sunday). Three months later, in September, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted 17 sustainable development goals. In December of the same year, the twenty-first session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), or “COP21,” was held in Paris. The encyclical, obviously, was not written simply because of these two major events and its agenda is much broader and farsighted, but it is significant that the release of the encyclical was scheduled so as to contribute to the debates surrounding these events because it tightly connects them.

As hoped for both within and without the church, the voice of the Pope in the midst of the debates leading up to the Paris Conference was not disappointing. He states clearly that “climate change is a global problem with grave implications: environmental, social, economic, political and for the distribution of goods” (*LS* 25), adding that “a very solid scientific consensus indicates that we are presently witnessing a disturbing warming of the climatic system,” which is the consequence of the raising of the concentration of gases released “mainly as a result of human activity” (*LS* 23). The Pope goes farther by inserting climate change into a larger set of other environmental challenges that threaten our world: pollution from wastes that make “the earth, our home, ... beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth” (*LS* 21), depletion of clean water, loss of biodiversity, and so forth. Everything is connected because it is the result of the same patterns of human activity, shortsightedly oriented toward immediate profit and the unlimited use of natural resources.

While presenting the encyclical at a conference in the Vatican shortly after its publication, the Cardinal Secretary of State, Pietro Parolin, connected it not only to the Paris Conference, but to the adoption by the UN of the new set of development goals the following

⁶ José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994)

September. The eight Millennium Development Goals adopted on the eve of the third millennium had 2015 for their target. Though significant progress was made in many regions of the world, much more remained to be done and a new set of 17 goals was designed, engaging all the nations on a journey toward achieving them by 2030. Significantly, they are named “Sustainable” Development Goals. Already present in the Millennium Goals, the connection between concerns for eradicating poverty and ensuring basic human needs such as universal health and education, concern for environmental and climate change is even more visible in the Sustainable Development Goals. This connection is at the heart of *LS*.

Among the key elements to which Pope Francis calls attention in the overview of the state of “our common home” is global inequality. Indeed, though it is not something new in human history, economic inequality is becoming more and more pronounced, both at national and international levels. It is true that extreme poverty in the world (people living with less than \$1.90 a day) was cut in half between 1990 and 2010. This is one of the Millennium Development Goals successfully achieved. But, in the meantime, inequalities of income and of wealth continued to rise to astonishing levels. According to a 2014 Oxfam study, the wealthiest 1% of the world population owned 50% of the wealth and most of the remaining wealth is owned by the wealthiest 20%, which means that 80% of the world had only 5% to share.⁷ Inequalities of wealth generate huge differences when it comes to their impact on the environment. On the one hand, the most vulnerable people are the ones who contribute least to ecological degradation such as greenhouse gases emissions and, on the other hand, those same people are the first to suffer from ecological degradation. For example, the ecological footprint of a citizen in the United States is ten times that of a citizen of Bangladesh, a country which is already suffering badly from rising sea levels.⁸ If we look just at a single country, it is the same. In France, the wealthiest 10% of households have an ecological footprint that is three times higher than the poorest 10% of households.⁹

Pope Francis calls attention to the fact that “the deterioration of the environment and of society affects the most vulnerable people on the planet” (*LS* 48). He gives the example of fishing communities affected by the depletion of fishing reserves and the example of water pollution which primarily affects those who cannot afford buying bottled water. Overall,

⁷ Oxfam, “Wealth: Having it All and Wanting More,” January 2015, https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file_attachments/ib-wealth-having-all-wanting-more-190115-en.pdf.

⁸ Cf. www.footprintwork.org.

⁹ “Repenser les inégalités face au défi écologique,” in *Revue Projet*, online version, March 2017. www.revue-projet.com/articles/2017-02repenser-les-inegalites-face-au-defi-ecologique.

“The impact of present imbalances is also seen in the premature death of many of the poor” (LS 48). The pope pleads that we always “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” (LS 49).

The rising inequalities and the more proximate context of important international negotiations are significant aspects of the overall context in which *LS* was written. But, it is the change that occurred in 2013 in the papacy itself which is truly a crucial key for interpreting this encyclical.

1.4 Francis, a Pope from Latin America

At his first appearance on the balcony of Saint Peter’s Basilica following his election, Pope John Paul II pointed out that the cardinals had “called him from a far country.”¹⁰ In the case of Pope Francis, they went much farther! They “have gone to the end of the earth to get [a bishop for Rome],” the newly elected pope told the crowd from the balcony of St. Peter’s on March 13, 2013.¹¹ Francis is the first pope from Latin America and the first to be named after the saint of Assisi. Both features are significant.

Unlike his predecessors, Francis did not participate in the Second Vatican Council but he appears today as a new symbol of the shift, initiated then, from a European-centered church to a world church. Being Argentinian and having lived his whole life in Argentina, Francis has been part of the very rich theological and pastoral development of the church in Latin America since the council. He also has first-hand experience of poverty, underdevelopment and political violence. He had to find his way in the murky waters of the troubled period of military dictatorship in the 1970s, when he was provincial of the Jesuits. As Archbishop of Buenos Aires from 1998 to 2013 he showed a special interest in ministering in the slums of this city.¹²

Francis may have shown some reserve toward the more politically-engaged, revolutionary forms of liberation theology but he can be seen as firmly linked to one current of it developed in Argentina and going by the name of “theology of the people.”¹³ The roots are the same. The theology of the people springs from consideration of massive poverty as the key sign of the times for the continent. As Kasper explains, however, “different from

¹⁰ John Paul II, *First Greeting*, October 22, 1978. Quoted by George Weigel, *Witness to Hope* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), 255.

¹¹ Francis, *First Greeting*, March 13, 2013, www.vatican.va.

¹² Cf. Austen Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer. Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope* (New York: Henry Holt, 2014).

¹³ Juan Carlos Scannone, “Pope Francis and the Theology of the People,” *Theological Studies* 77, no. 1 (2016): 118–135.

other forms that are generally better known to us, Argentine liberation theology does not proceed from an analysis of socio-political and economic relations, or from antagonisms in society in order then to interpret them with Marxist categories, in the sense of a theory of dependence. Rather it proceeds from an historical analysis of the culture of the people, who are united in a common ethos. It is a theology of the people and of culture.”¹⁴

Francis also played an important role during the fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, held in the Sanctuary of Aparecida (Brazil) in May 2007. He chaired the committee in charge of writing the final document.¹⁵ Following upon the earlier gatherings in Medellín, Puebla, and Santo Domingo, Aparecida is an important step in the development of a continent-specific identity within the universal church. Many elements that appear in the final document, its content but also its methodology and style, are present in Francis' teaching. *LS* has the strong flavor of Latin America. As Brazilian theologian, Leonardo Boff noted,

many expressions and ways of speaking refer to what is being thought and written mainly in Latin America. The themes of the “common home,” of “Mother Earth,” the “cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor,” the “care” of the “interdependence of all beings,” of the “poor and vulnerable,” the “paradigm shift,” the “human being as Earth” that feels, thinks, loves and reveres, the “integral ecology” among others, are recurrent among us.¹⁶

It is also very meaningful, in approaching *LS*, to recall why Bergoglio chose “Francis” as his papal name. A few days after his election, he explained that it was because Francis of Assisi “is the man of poverty, the man of peace, the man who loves and protects creation.”¹⁷ The Italian saint gives strong testimony and inspiration for the central message the pope wishes to convey. Attention to the poor, to creation, and to peace cannot be separated and ought to drive the changes necessary in the world. In the Introduction, the pope says,

I believe that Saint Francis is the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically. He is the patron saint of all who study and work in the area of ecology, and he is also much loved by non-Christians. He was particularly concerned for God’s creation and for the poor and outcast. He loved, and was deeply loved for his joy, his generous self-giving, his

¹⁴ Walter Kasper, *Pope Francis’ Revolution of Tenderness and Love* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2015), 16.

¹⁵ CELAM (Latin American Episcopal Conference), *Disciples and Missionaries of Jesus Christ so that our Peoples May Have Life in Him “I am the Way and the Truth and the Life” (Jn 16:4) Concluding Document of the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean. Aparecida* (2007). <http://www.aecrc.org/documents/Aparecida-Concluding%20Document.pdf>.

¹⁶ Leonardo Boff, “The Magna Carta of Integral Ecology: Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor,” June 18, 2015, <http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/articles/1149/1/Article-by-Leonardo-Boff-on-the-Popes-Encyclical/Page1.html>.

¹⁷ Francis, *Audience to the Representatives of the Communication Medias*, March 16th, 2013, www.vatican.va.

openheartedness. He was a mystic and a pilgrim who lived in simplicity and in wonderful harmony with God, with others, with nature and with himself. He shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace (*LS* 10).

2 Integral Ecology. Reading *Laudato Si'* According to the See-Judge- Act Dynamism

Even if some magisterial documents depart from it, the See-Judge-Act methodology remains the most common approach for CST since John XXIII stressed its usefulness in *Mater et magistra*.¹⁸ Pope Francis decisively endorses it in his encyclical and it is enlightening to follow this path in order to capture the central message of *Laudato Si'*.

2.1 See

How are we to see? As Christians, the way we consider the situation of the world and the challenges we have to face is shaped by our Christian faith. It is a matter of looking at the situation in the way God sees it, or of following the path of Jesus. This is why, the encyclical insists on looking at the situation with compassion, letting oneself be affected, using as much the heart as the mind.

Our goal is not to amass information or to satisfy curiosity, but rather to become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it” (*LS* 19).

God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement” (*LS* 89).

In order to look at what is happening we need to use all the means at our disposal. In the first place the results of various sciences have to be taken seriously into account: climatology, biology, chemistry, physics, and also social sciences. Each in its own area and with its specific methodology offer an entry point into the reality of the situation. “No branch of the sciences and no form of wisdom can be left out” (*LS* 63).

With this attitude, chapter one offers an uncompromising overview of the current situation of “our common home”: the various pollutions, climate change, loss of biodiversity, scarcity of clean water, but also the inequalities, the degradation of social life, and the lack of the kind of decision-making necessary to tackle real problems. The earth is wounded by the many damages inflicted on her by human beings and the poor are the first to suffer from this situation.

¹⁸ John XXIII, *Mater et magistra* (1961), no. 236.

Most of this is well known and no doubt that the consciousness of the urgency of acting on topics like climate change or biodiversity is growing worldwide. But since some, even among the most powerful leaders of the world, are denying the facts or human responsibility for them, it is significant that the pope restates and endorses what is largely consensual among scientists.

2.2 Judge

Once we have made a realistic overview of what is happening to “our common home,” we need to enter into an analysis and evaluation of it, with the light of faith, in order to clarify what is at stake, what are the causes, and what are the paths of change to be taken.

Chapter two offers insights from Scripture and from the Christian faith tradition. Human beings are part of God’s loving project of creation. They are creatures. This very fact has at least two crucial implications

First, being creatures, we are not the Creator. We are not all-powerful and we should not act like limitless all-powerful agents.

We are not God. The earth was here before us and it has been given to us... we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God’s image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures (*LS* 67).

Whatever specific responsibility human beings have in caring for creation, this does not imply a right to dominate and exploit. Faulty interpretations of biblical narratives – unfortunately not absent from the Christian tradition – need to be challenged.

Second, in God’s loving project of creation, non-human creatures have value in themselves. We share with them the condition of creatures and also our being created by a loving Father. The encyclical underlines God’s call for communion among all creatures, human and other than human alike. He even speaks of a kind of universal family extending to all creatures:

As part of the universe, called into being by one Father, all of us are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family, a sublime communion which fills us with a sacred, affectionate and humble respect (*LS*, 90).

The third chapter then offers an analysis of the human roots of the ecological crisis. Technological development and scientific progress have brought some major improvements in human life but they carry with them a challenging increase of power. Human beings have fallen into a deviant anthropocentrism that recognizes no limits to what technology and

economy render possible because they consider everything – natural resources, non-human creatures and even other human beings – as merely disposable objects. The notion of progress needs to be reconsidered and challenged:

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*).

Nobody is suggesting a return to the Stone Age, but we do need to slow down and look at reality in a different way, to appropriate the positive and sustainable progress which has been made, but also to recover the values and the great goals swept away by our unrestrained delusions of grandeur (*LS 114*)

What needs to be fostered in terms of growth and progress has to do with humane relations, with more humane conditions of living, with the authentic flourishing of humanity:

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*).

In a third step of the analysis of the situation, the encyclical offers a constructive proposal in the fourth chapter. Francis says: “Since everything is closely interrelated, and today’s problems call for a vision capable of taking into account every aspect of the global crisis, I suggest that we now consider some elements of an integral ecology, one which clearly respects its human and social dimensions” (*LS 137*). Everything is connected: relations to others, to nature and environment, to oneself and to God. Everything is connected because ultimately everything is given. We are creatures and not the Creator.

Taking into account that everything is closely interrelated, the pope invites us to take the path of integral ecology. Integral ecology, because it is centered on care of the most fragile aspects of the environment and society.

Today, however, we have to realize 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 (*LS 49*).

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. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded and at the same time protecting nature (*LS 139*).

Integral ecology considers many human and social dimensions together (e.g., environmental, economic, political, and social concerns) in the search for the common good. It also takes into consideration the preservation of the diversity of cultures, including indigenous ones, the challenges of daily life, gender and sexuality, and it looks ahead to the generations to come.

2.3 Act

The final two chapters of the encyclical provide orientations for actions to be taken.

Chapter five focuses on the need for dialogue at every level: international, national and local, between economy and politics, between sciences and religions, and among them all. Dialogue is the key for any significant action contributing to the much needed “cultural revolution” the encyclical calls for. I will come back later to the significance and the theological foundation of this principle of action. For now, we can recall the titles of the various sections of the chapter: “Dialogue on the environment in the international community,” “Dialogue for new national and local policies,” “Dialogue and transparency in decision-making,” “Politics and economy in dialogue for human fulfilment,” “Religions in dialogue with science.”

To care for our “common home” there is no ready-made solution. We need to search together, to build solutions together. International agreements are needed. The fruitful effect of the Vienna Convention for the protection of the ozone layer is an inspiring example. But it is even more important to valorize local initiatives (for example in agriculture), to collect grassroots experiences, to organize collectively in order to bring pressure on political and economic leaders.

Among the various paths of action which the encyclical invites us to take, I highlight a significant mention of the need to situate economic principles such as the role of market, in their just place. They are not to be absolutized but rather to be put at the service of the common good:

It should always be kept in mind that “environmental protection cannot be assured solely on the basis of financial calculations of costs and benefits. The environment is one of those goods that cannot be adequately safeguarded or promoted by market forces”. Once more, 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. Is it realistic to hope that those who are obsessed with maximizing profits will stop to reflect on the environmental damage which they will leave behind for future generations? Where profits alone count, there can be no thinking about the rhythms of nature, its phases of decay and regeneration, or the complexity of ecosystems which may be gravely upset by human intervention. Moreover, biodiversity is considered at most a deposit of economic resources available for exploitation, with no serious thought for the real value of things, their significance for persons and cultures, or the concerns and needs of the poor (*LS* 190).

Chapter six deals with education and it highlights the spiritual resources that already exist in the Christian tradition and that can foster and inspire the much needed ecological conversion.

Environmental education has broadened its goals. Whereas in the beginning it was mainly centered on scientific information, consciousness-raising and the prevention of environmental risks, it tends now to include a critique of the “myths” of a modernity grounded in a utilitarian mindset (individualism, unlimited progress, competition, consumerism, the unregulated market). It seeks also to 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 encyclical stresses the importance of virtues. “Only by cultivating sound virtues will people be able to make a selfless ecological commitment” (LS 211). A virtue is a personal disposition which inclines to do good and which is increased by doing good actions. Speaking of developing ecological virtues helps to perceive that changes in our actions and mode of living, apparently insignificant changes at the global level, are still of high value because they change our character. For example, the encyclical refers to “avoiding the use of plastic and paper, reducing water consumption, separating refuse, cooking only what can reasonably be consumed, showing care for other living beings, using public transport or car-pooling, planting trees, turning off unnecessary lights” (LS 212). Thus,

We must not think that these efforts are not going to change the world. They benefit society, often unbeknown to us, for they call forth a goodness which, albeit unseen, inevitably tends to spread. Furthermore, such actions can restore our sense of self-esteem; they can enable us to live more fully and to feel that life on earth is worthwhile (LS 213).

Finally, *Laudato si'* recalls the many spiritual resources for an ecological conversion offered by our Christian tradition, and too often neglected. For Christians, the commitment “whereby the effects of [our] encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in [our] relationship with the world around [us]” (LS 217) cannot be sustained by doctrine alone. We need “a spirituality capable of inspiring us...an interior impulse which encourages, motivates, nourishes and gives meaning to our individual and communal activity” (LS 216). A spirituality that could move us to change our lifestyle, to resist consumerism, to engage in caring for the creation and for others, especially the most vulnerable. Elements of this ecological spirituality are many: inspiring figures of holiness, joy in sobriety, contemplation and ability to stop, the sacraments with their specific connection to the material world, paying attention to beauty, looking for peace. *Laudato Si'* reminds us:

By learning to see and appreciate beauty, we learn to reject self-interested pragmatism. If someone has not learned to stop and admire something beautiful, we should not be surprised if he or she treats everything as an object to be used and abused without scruple (*LS*’, 215).

Christian spirituality proposes an alternative understanding of the quality of life, and encourages a prophetic and contemplative lifestyle, one capable of deep enjoyment free of the obsession with consumption (*LS*, 222).

This ecological spirituality is not merely a source of personal dynamism and individual conversion. “Self-improvement on the part of individuals will not by itself remedy the extremely complex situation facing our world today. Isolated individuals can lose their ability and freedom to escape the utilitarian mindset, and end up prey to an unethical consumerism bereft of social or ecological awareness. 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).

3 Transforming Church and Society

Taking seriously into account the call of *Laudato Si*’ to care for our common home requires us to take the path of a solid ecological conversion that affects all the dimensions of our personal and social life. In this last section, I suggest, without attempting to be exhaustive, three transformative orientations highlighted by the encyclical: listening to the poor, practicing dialogue, and following Jesus Christ.

3.1 Listening to the Poor

Even if formally mentioned only once¹⁹, the preferential option for the poor is at the heart of the ethical reflection in *Laudato Si*’. The encyclical is articulated around the call “to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” (*LS* 49). The *excluded* are the majority of the planet’s population (*ibid.*) and “the deterioration of the environment and of society affects the most vulnerable people on the planet” (*LS* 48).

It comes to little surprise that Pope Francis’ social encyclical stresses the option for the poor. First it is a crucial principle of Catholic social teaching. Primarily articulated in the ambit of Latin-American post Vatican II theology – even if there is no doubt that the practical notion of the primacy of the poor is within the very essence of the church from the beginning since it is the very option taken by Jesus Christ proclaiming the Kingdom of God – it has been offered as a guideline in the universal social teaching by John Paul II in *Sollicitudo rei*

¹⁹ Cf. *LS* 158.

socialis in 1987²⁰ and also confirmed by Benedict XVI.²¹ Second, as the first pope from Latin America, Francis, through words and symbolic gestures, repeatedly reaffirms his wish for “a poor Church for the poor”²².

Nonetheless, there is a decisive aspect of the option for the poor that is developed by Francis. Not only the poor and the excluded should be of primary concern in practicing justice and charity but they should be *listened to*. They have much to teach us. In *LS* Francis writes:

This option entails recognizing the implications of the universal destination of the world’s goods, but, as I 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 (*LS* 158).

Indeed, in *Evangelii gaudium* (*EG*), he had previously highlighted:

I want a Church which is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us. Not only do they share in the *sensus fidei*, but in their difficulties they know the suffering Christ. We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them. The new evangelization is an invitation to acknowledge the saving power at work in their lives and to put them at the centre of the Church’s pilgrim way. We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them (*EG* 198).

Giving the floor to the poor, listening to them, recognizing the wisdom they bear with them, this is a crucial dimension of opting for the poor and this could be profoundly transformative for the Church and for the society.

Laudato Si’ gives flesh to this dimension. The pope complains that the majority of the population on the planet are “excluded”, not taken into account and not listened to and “this is due partly to the fact that many professionals, opinion makers, communications media and centers of power, being located in affluent urban areas, are far removed from the poor, with little direct contact with their problems” (*LS* 48). Later he gives as examples for an “ecology of daily life” people of urban areas who despite living in precarious conditions within buildings where the facades are derelict, “show great care for the interior of their homes, or find contentment in the kindness and friendliness of others”. “At times a commendable human ecology is practiced by the poor despite numerous hardships” (*LS* 148). In chapter 5, speaking of the necessity of engaging in a transparent dialogue in order to assess the

²⁰ See, *SRS* 42.

²¹ Benedict XVI, *Opening Address at the 5th Conference of the Episcopate of Latin-America and the Caribe*, Mays 13th, 2007, no.7.

²² Francis, *Address to the media*, March 16, 2013.

environmental impact of particular plans, policies, or program, *LS* reminds that “the local population should have a special place at the table” (*LS* 183).

LS also practices what it preaches by including as resources for the reflection the contribution of several local conferences of bishops. It is noticeable that those explicitly mentioned are not merely the conferences of large nations, with huge capacity of producing documented studies. Pastoral letters from modest groups such as the Bishop of the Dominican Republic or the bishops of Patagonia are mentioned in the encyclical.

The explicit aim of the synod on Amazonia is to open paths for integral ecology and for the Church. In the line of *LS*, it is another good example of the wish of the pope to listen to the peripheries so as to enrich everyone.

3.2 Practicing Dialogue

As already mentioned, when it comes to dealing with lines of action in chapter 5 of the encyclical, dialogue is central. The titles of the sections speak by themselves: “Dialogue on the Environment in the International Community”; “Dialogue for New National and Local Policies”; “Dialogue and Transparency in Decision-making”; “Politics and Economy in Dialogue for Human Fulfilment”; “Religions in Dialogue with Science”.

The path of dialogue is not a strategic option required by the mood of our times. Dialogue has a theological foundation. Pope Paul VI, whom Francis regularly recognizes as an inspiring figure for him, explains this theological foundation at length in *Ecclesiam suam* (*ES*), his first encyclical in 1964.²³ Dialogue is “the mental attitude which the Catholic Church must adopt regarding the contemporary world” (*ES* 58) because dialogue has its origin “in the mind of God himself” (*ES* 70). It is the way God reveals Godself all along the Sacred History as we read it in the Scriptures. Dialogue between God and humanity has taken a renewed dimension with the Incarnation and the coming of God in our world as one of us. Dialogue is at the heart of religion as expressed in prayer. Dialogue has even something to do with the essence of our Triune God. “In Christ's ‘conversation’ with men, God reveals something of Himself, of the mystery of His own life, of His own unique essence and trinity of persons” (*ES* 70).

In *Laudato Si'*, Francis invites the faithful and all people of good will to take “the major paths of dialogue which can help us escape the spiral of self-destruction which currently engulfs us” (*LS* 163). He shows us the way in various respects.

²³ Cf. *ES* 58-119.

First, there is dialogue with the sciences. We have already noticed the importance given to the results of scientific research. Actually, what the encyclical does is not merely incorporate scientific results that are taken for granted, but it attempts dialogue through discussion searching for the greater common good. “Given the complexity of the ecological crisis and its multiple causes, we need to realize that solutions will not emerge from just one way of interpreting and transforming reality” (*LS* 63). In other words, every mode of apprehending reality and acting upon it is needed, from scientific data to religious and wisdom texts, poetry, and expressions of popular cultures. “If we are truly concerned to develop an ecology capable of remedying the damage we have done, no branch of the sciences and no form of wisdom can be left out” (*LS* 63).

Another key aspect of dialogue practiced in *LS* is dialogue within the Church. The encyclical incorporates many references to documents produced by local conferences of bishops from all over the world. They are meant to help describe the situation but also to help analyze it and to suggest paths for actions.

Dialogue also extends to discussions with other Christian churches and even other religions. Strikingly, in a section dedicated to the sacraments, the encyclical refers to a Muslim spiritual master, Alî al-Khawwâç, as an inspiration for better understanding the presence of God in all things (*LS* 233). That a non-Christian reference appears within a reflection of a spiritual and theological nature, in a document of the Magisterium, is certainly surprising for many, but it says a lot about the importance of inter-religious dialogue. It is not simply needed for the sake of building peace among people but it is also a possible source for Christian faith.

Dialogue is not merely a matter of intellectual discussion among experts. For Francis, the logic of dialogue is closely connected with the “culture of encounter” that he promotes. Dialogue is the fruit of personal and concrete encounters. Individuals and groups are enriched by developing forms of dialogue in which they learn from each other out of their differences. Still, this can only happen if there is a real encounter. Francis laments that too often dialogue within a society is truncated because many voices, including the voices of the poor, are not heard.

Connected to the promotion of dialogue lies also one of Francis’ key principles for the constitution of a people oriented toward the common good. “Unity prevails over conflict.”²⁴

²⁴ *EG* 226-230.

Conflicts exist, for example between various interests in political and economic fields (cf. *LS* 198). They should not be ignored but resolutely faced. This means neither looking the other way nor being entrapped in the conflict so that unity becomes impossible. Francis advocates for a third way which is “the willingness to face conflict head on, to resolve it and to make it a link in the chain of a new process” (*EG* 227).

Dialogue is also crucial in connection to another of Francis’ principles: “The whole is greater than the parts.”²⁵ This implies that we must always think about the connection of the issues we are facing. “The analysis of environmental problems cannot be separated from the analysis of human, family, work-related and urban contexts, nor from how individuals relate to themselves, which leads in turn to how they relate to others and to the environment” (*LS* 141) “We constantly have to broaden our horizons and see the greater good which will benefit us all. But this has to be done without evasion or uprooting” (*EG* 235). “The whole is greater than the parts” means also that it is greater than the sum of the parts. It is true in the case of a group of people, or a group of groups. Dialogue is the path to mutual enrichment. As explain by Francis, the model is not the sphere “which is no greater than its parts, where every point is equidistant from the center, and there are no differences between them. Instead, it is the polyhedron, which reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness” (*EG* 236).

3.3 Following Jesus Christ

The path opened by *LS*, although sharable with many others who do not share in our faith is nonetheless profoundly Christian as well. It is a matter of making the effects of our encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in our relations with the world around us. Francis writes:

It must be said that some committed and prayerful Christians, with the excuse of realism and pragmatism, tend to ridicule expressions of concern for the environment. Others are passive; they choose not to change their habits and thus become inconsistent. So what they all need is an “ecological conversion”, whereby the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them. Living our vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience (*LS* 217).

²⁵ *EG* 234-237.

Already, 25 years earlier, Saint John Paul II had stated that Christians “realize that their responsibility within creation, and their duty towards nature and the Creator, are an essential part of their faith.”²⁶

At the end of chap 2, we have a section titled “The Gaze of Jesus”²⁷ which offer suggestive openings to understand why following Jesus has serious consequences in matters of ecological conversion. *LS* is not merely an ethical reflection but has something to say in the field of Christology.

Jesus teaches his disciples, and through them all of us, a certain way of relating to other creatures and nature. He proposes “ideals of harmony, justice, fraternity and peace” (*LS* 82) that are at odds with how we live when other living beings are considered as mere objects, when nature is viewed only as a source of profit and gain simply because we have some power over it. “This vision of ‘might is right’ has engendered immense inequality, injustice and acts of violence against the majority of humanity, since resources end up in the hands of the first comer or the most powerful: the winner takes all” (*LS* 82).

The core of Jesus’ teaching is that God is Father. He invites his disciples to recognize “the paternal relationship God has with all his creatures” (*LS* 96) because “they are all important in God’s eyes” (*LS* 96). For *LS* this relation of kinship is fundamental in order to recover one’s proper place in the creation – as creature and not Creator – but also to understand that the world did not happen by chance, but because of God’s love. This teaching about God as father is a teaching about God’s love. (cf. *LS* 76). Ethical consequences are obvious since we should not mistreat what God so painstakingly takes care of. If “not one bird in the air is forgotten before God” (Lk 12:6), “how then can we possibly mistreat them or cause them harm?” (*LS* 221).

Jesus’ very attitudes and practices teach us the proper relationship to creation. *LS* insists that Jesus “was in constant touch with nature, lending it an attention full of fondness and wonder” (*LS* 97). His contemplative gaze further nourished his teaching in parables which are full of concrete references to trees, plants, fruits, animals, mountains, sea, etc. Moreover, “his appearance was not that of an ascetic set apart from the world, nor of an enemy to the pleasant things of life” (*LS* 98). He did not depreciate the body and matter. He “worked with his hands, in daily contact with the matter created by God, to which he gave form by his craftsmanship” (*LS* 98).

²⁶ John Paul II, *Message for the 1990 World Day of Peace*, 15.

²⁷ *LS* 96-100

Laudato Si', however, insists that there is more in the New Testament about the relationship between Jesus Christ and creation than merely presenting an “earthly Jesus and his tangible and loving relationship with the world” (LS 100). First, the mystery of Christ is present from the beginning and tied to the whole of creation for “all things have been created through him and for him” (Col 1:16). The Prologue of John's Gospel speaks of Christ as the Divine Word (logos) who is at work in the process of creation: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being” (Jn 1:1-3) (cf. LS 99).

Secondly, the mystery of the incarnation has a cosmic dimension. That “the Word became flesh” (Jn 1:14) means that God enters into the cosmos and this impacts not only humanity but all creation. *Laudato Si'* explains that “particularly through the incarnation, the mystery of Christ is at work in a hidden manner in the natural world as a whole, without thereby impinging on its autonomy” (LS 99). An extended theology of the incarnation is also found in the section that deals with the sacraments. In their celebration, natural elements and matter are indispensable. We use water, bread, wine, fire, oil etc. They mediate God's gift of Godself. Therefore, they call to mind that “for Christians, all the creatures of the material universe find their true meaning in the incarnate Word, for the Son of God has incorporated in his person part of the material world, planting in it a seed of definitive transformation” (LS 235).

Thirdly, the Paschal mystery of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection also encompasses the whole of creation. The cross is mentioned only twice, without further development, and yet it is crucial. The encyclical states that “one Person of the Trinity entered into the created cosmos, throwing in his lot with it, even to the cross” (LS 99). In the next paragraph, *Laudato Si'* cites Colossians: “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross” (Col 1:19-20). As for the resurrection, *Laudato Si'* reminds us that the New Testament “shows [Jesus Christ] risen and glorious, present throughout creation by his universal Lordship” (LS 100).

Finally, an eschatological perspective is presented. Directing our gaze to the end of time we remember that “the Son will deliver all things to the Father, so that ‘God may be everything to everyone’” (1 Cor 15:28). It implies that “the creatures of this world no longer appear to us under merely natural guise because the risen One is mysteriously holding them

to himself and directing them towards fullness as their end” (LS 100). Previously, the encyclical had mentioned that “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, and thus “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” (LS 83).

Caring for our common home and taking the path of an ecological conversion, are, therefore, strongly rooted in our Christological faith and our being a disciple of Jesus Christ. Since the ecological conversion ought to be spiritual as well and can rely on spiritual resources as the last chapter of *Laudato Si'* explains, we can end by recalling the inspiring figure of Saint Francis of Assisi which is present all along the document. Indeed, Francis of Assisi is the perfect example that following Jesus Christ leads to the poor and to caring for the creation. The quote mentioned at the beginning of the paper is worth being repeated to end it:

I believe that Saint Francis is the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically. He is the patron saint of all who study and work in the area of ecology, and he is also much loved by non-Christians. He was particularly concerned for God’s creation and for the poor and outcast. He loved, and was deeply loved for his joy, his generous self-giving, his openheartedness. He was a mystic and a pilgrim who lived in simplicity and in wonderful harmony with God, with others, with nature and with himself. He shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace (LS 10).