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Laudato Si: A Call to Conversion

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Inspired by the words of St. Francis of Assisi, Pope Francis issued his second encyclical, *Laudato Si*, a reflection on the ecological crisis. Drawing on current science and identifying such factors as the emptiness and destructiveness of rampant consumerism and profit-driven economies, and the peril in which the global poor find themselves, the Pope paints the destruction of the environment as a manifestation of much larger injustices and maladies both external and internal. Consistent with the themes of his papacy, Francis contends that the healing of the planet cannot occur without attending to the material and spiritual poverty that enslaves so much of the world's population.

While he claims that it is not the job of the Church to solve scientific or political questions,¹ nevertheless the Pope maintains that it is the Church's role to facilitate dialogue that may lead to life-preserving changes of attitudes and behaviours—dialogue that may lead to conversion. Indeed, Pope Francis writes that the crisis facing our environment is nothing less than “a summons to profound interior conversion.” [217]

THE CALL TO “ECOLOGICAL CONVERSION”

Elsewhere I have written about the importance of conversion in moral

theology²—that, following St. Thomas Aquinas, we as human beings are drawn to the Good even as we may know it only imperfectly and have difficulty conforming our wills and actions to that knowledge (this as a result of Original Sin). The desire to know and to do the Good is in fact the desire to know and be with God who is the ultimate Good. As we progress on our salvific journeys, we will have occasions when our knowledge of the Good, and our behaviours seem inadequate. At these points we may have an overwhelming desire to know more, to know better, and to change our lives so that they more consistently reflect the Good and its requirements as we come to understand them through the working of God's grace in us. These are moments of conversion.

Laudato Si is a call to conversion, presenting us with an opportunity to deepen our understanding of God at work in the world and to change our lives accordingly. In the encyclical, Pope Francis challenges us to adopt a very different view of the created order. Yes, it is a material reality upon which our very lives depend, but the environment, as God's handiwork, has a profound spiritual aspect. We cannot as Catholics, as Christians, engage in worship and good works and simply ignore God's gift of creation. In this respect, the Pope exhorts us to “an ‘ecological conversion’, whereby the effects of [our] encounters with Jesus Christ

become evident in [our] relationship with the world around [us].” [217] This loving concern for the welfare of creation is to be a vital part of our lives as Christians. Pope Francis writes that “Living our vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or secondary aspect of our Christian experience.” [217] To be more fully Christian, according to *Laudato Si*, we must be committed to the care and protection of all that God has created, including the environment.

An ecological conversion is meant to occur on several levels. It calls us as individuals to examine our consciences to see where and how we may have failed to treat the environment as God’s gracious handiwork. As with conversion generally, this is to be followed by repentance and a sincere desire to change our lives for the good. [218] But the Pope notes that individual conversion is not sufficient. The ecological crisis is also a social crisis and as such requires the conversion of communities. To this end, Pope Francis envisions the establishment of groups networking to effect social transformation, insisting on justice for people and for the environment. [219]

Like every conversion, ecological conversion requires a shift in world view. In this case, where once we may have adopted an attitude of dominion over or simple indifference to creation, we are to see instead connectedness, an acknowledgement that we as human beings exist with all of creation “in a splendid universal communion.” [220] Furthermore, Pope Francis writes that “As believers, we do not look at the world from without but from within, conscious of the

bonds with which the Father has linked us to all beings.” [220] We are to appreciate the tenderness with God regards creation and to understand that through the Incarnation, Jesus “is intimately present to each being, surrounding it with his affection and penetrating it with his light.” [221]

An ecological conversion also calls us to a change of heart. We are to open ourselves to the possibility of creation eliciting from us a response of “gratitude and gratuitousness, a recognition that the world is God’s living gift, and that we are called quietly to imitate his generosity in self-sacrifice and good works....” [220]

With this change in worldview, *Laudato Si* challenges us to recover a deeper understanding of what comprises our fulfillment and happiness as human beings.

HUMAN HAPPINESS

Throughout *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis points to our obsessive consumerism and profit-driven economies as not only sources of global misery but as symptoms of human emptiness and misdirection. Our drive to accumulate is an attempt to satisfy a hunger, a longing, that cannot be sated by the acquisition of newer, bigger material goods. We become enslaved by our addiction to having *more*. It is an addiction that has dire consequences for people living on the margins and for the environment. It also keeps us from realizing our authentic calling as human beings.

In *Laudato Si*, the Pope urges us to return to our tradition of Christian spirituality and a life of simplicity and contemplation because it is here that we will find true happiness and

fulfillment. While it may seem countercultural, even radical, to cultivate the virtues of sobriety and humility [224] and difficult to imagine being happy having less, Francis notes that this is the path to our liberation as human beings. Those who allow themselves to live with less “are able to shed unsatisfied needs, reducing their obsessiveness and weariness. Even living on little, they can live a lot, above all when they cultivate other pleasures and find satisfaction in fraternal encounters, in service, in developing their gifts, in music and art, in contact with nature, in prayer. Happiness means knowing how to limit some needs which only diminish us, and being open to the many possibilities which life can offer.” [223]

Happiness also requires practising being present [226], taking time for quiet contemplation, and opening ourselves to wonder. [225] In this, as the Pope points out, we follow the example of Jesus who was “completely present to everyone and to everything, and in this way showed us the way to overcome that unhealthy anxiety which makes us superficial, aggressive and compulsive consumers.” [226]

Ecological conversion calls us as individuals and communities, but what might it mean in practice to us as Catholics?

ECOLOGICAL CONVERSION AND CATHOLIC PRACTICE:

In *Laudato Si*, the most ordinary actions, when informed by this awakened consciousness, can take on new meaning.

For Pope Francis the simple practice of saying grace at mealtimes has great power:

That moment of blessing, however brief, reminds us of our dependence on God for life; it strengthens our feeling of gratitude for the gifts of creation; it acknowledges those who by their labours provide us with these goods; and it reaffirms our solidarity with those in greatest need. [227]

He also looks to St. Thérèse of Lisieux and her “little way of love” that seeks every opportunity, no matter how apparently small, to practise Jesus’ command to love. As Francis writes: “a kind word, a smile or any small gesture which sows peace and friendship”—these are the “simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness.” [230]

The love contained in these individual acts has the power to transform lives and is something that is within the reach of us all. But, according to Pope Francis, love can also be undertaken as a social and political act that will lead to the building of a “culture of care”. [231] As unique individuals, we each have a very personal calling; nevertheless, when we find ourselves working with others to protect the environment and preserve the common good (in whatever capacity our work may be), we will simultaneously be building bonds of friendship and trust. We will be actively weaving “a new social fabric” [232] as we connect with people who otherwise would have remained strangers, and as we share something of ourselves and receive something of others in turn. This form of communion can be a profound spiritual experience for persons working together for social change. As Pope Francis puts it:

When we feel that God is calling us to intervene with others in these social dynamics, we should realize that this too is part of our spirituality, which is an exercise of charity and, as such, matures and sanctifies us. [231]

For Catholics, the inestimable value of creation can become apparent in the Liturgy and Sacraments. The bread and wine; the salt, oil, and water; the candles and linen—the fruits of the earth are in the service of the Transcendent. They are gifts, pure and simple. As Pope Francis writes, “The world which came forth from God’s hands returns to him in blessed and undivided adoration....” [236]

Viewed this way, how can the environment elicit anything but wonder and gratitude from us? How could we not want to cherish and protect God’s gift of life?

CONCLUSION:

Our conversion to the Good will not be complete until we have through the grace of God experienced the fullness of the Beatific Vision. With this in mind, *Laudato Si* makes

¹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si* (On Care for Our Common Home), section 188, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.pdf, accessed August 2015. Further

no claim to have the final answers about the ecological crisis, including its causes and consequences. As Pope Francis writes, the questions raised in the encyclical “will not be dealt with once and for all, but [will be] reframed and enriched again and again.” [16] This seeming incompleteness should not be cause for anxiety or inaction; it simply points to the reality of the human condition and the need for ongoing conversion. According to Pope Francis, our task as Catholics is simple:

Believers themselves must constantly feel challenged to live in a way consonant with their faith and not to contradict it by their actions. They need to be encouraged to be ever open to God’s grace and to draw constantly from their deepest convictions about love, justice and peace. [200] ■

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references to sections of *Laudato Si* will appear in square brackets in the text.

² Bridget Campion, “Conversion and Catholic Bioethics,” *Bioethics Matters* 11 (Feb 2013), pp. 1-4.