

O God come to my assistance – O Lord, make haste to help me.

Laudato Si Chapter 4 'Integral Ecology'

A very warm welcome to you for this 5th reflection on Laudato Si by Pope Francis. I am unashamedly giving this retreat as a talk that I found on this Chapter by Thomas Reece, because it sounds very like the summary I would like to have made myself, but frankly haven't had the time or space to do so. Like the other retreats on this topic, I include some resources to fill out the rest of the day, if that is helpful to you. And So...

Integral ecology is a key concept in chapter four of *Laudato Si'*, It flows from Pope Francis' understanding that "everything is closely related" and that "today's problems call for a vision capable of taking into account every aspect of the global crisis."

Relationships take place at the atomic and molecular level, between plants and animals, and among species in ecological networks and systems. For example, he points out, "We need only recall how ecosystems interact in dispersing carbon dioxide, purifying water, controlling illnesses and epidemics, forming soil, breaking down waste, and in many other ways which we overlook or simply do not know about."

Nor can the "environment" be considered in isolation. "Nature cannot be regarded as something **separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live,**" writes the pope. "We are part of nature."

As a result, if we want to know "why a given area is polluted," we must study "the workings of society, its economy, its behaviour patterns, and the ways it grasps reality." And in considering solutions to the environmental crisis, we must "seek comprehensive solutions which consider the interactions within natural systems themselves and with social systems."

These interrelationships enable Francis to see that "we are not faced with two separate crises, **one environmental and the other social,** but rather **one complex crisis which is both social and environmental.**" As a result, "Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature." In such an "economic ecology," the protection of the environment is then seen as "an integral part of the development process and cannot be considered in isolation from it."

He also calls for a “social ecology” that recognizes that “the health of a society’s institutions has consequences for the environment and the quality of human life.” This includes the primary social group, the family, as well as wider local, national, and international communities. When these institutions are weakened, the result is injustice, violence, a loss of freedom, and a lack of respect for law -- all of which have consequences for the environment.

Pope Francis also argues that it is important to pay attention to “cultural ecology” in order to protect the cultural treasures of humanity. But “Culture is more than what we have inherited from the past; it is also, and above all, a living, dynamic and participatory present reality, which cannot be excluded as we rethink the relationship between human beings and the environment.”

He complains that a consumerist vision of human beings, encouraged by globalization, “has a levelling effect on cultures, diminishing the immense variety which is the heritage of all humanity.” New processes must respect local cultures. “There is a need to respect the rights of peoples and cultures, and to appreciate that the development of a social group presupposes an historical process which takes place within a cultural context and demands the constant and active involvement of local people from within their proper culture.”

This interconnectedness means that “environmental exploitation and degradation not only exhaust the resources which provide local communities with their livelihood, but also undo the social structures which, for a long time, shaped cultural identity and their sense of the meaning of life and community.” In various parts of the world, he notes, indigenous communities are being pressured “to abandon their homelands to make room for agricultural or mining projects which are undertaken without regard for the degradation of nature and culture.”

Pope Francis also talks about the ecology of daily life “in our rooms, our homes, our workplaces and our neighbourhoods.” We attempt to shape our environment to express our identity, but “when it is disorderly, chaotic or saturated with noise and ugliness, such overstimulation makes it difficult to find ourselves integrated and happy.”

He marvels at the ability of the poor to practice human ecology where “a wholesome social life can light up a seemingly undesirable environment” and

“the limitations of the environment are compensated for in the interior of each person who feels held within a network of solidarity and belonging.”

Francis recognizes that “The extreme poverty experienced in areas lacking harmony, open spaces or potential for integration, can lead to incidents of brutality and to exploitation by criminal organizations,” but “I wish to insist that love always proves more powerful” when people “weave bonds of belonging and togetherness which convert overcrowding into an experience of community in which the walls of the ego are torn down and the barriers of selfishness overcome.”

He acknowledges the importance of architectural design and urban planning, but these must serve the quality of people’s lives and take into consideration the views of those who live in the areas affected. Such planning must protect common areas and promote affordable housing and public transportation.

Pope Francis quotes Pope Benedict who spoke of an “ecology of man,” based on the fact that “man too has a nature that he must respect and that he cannot manipulate at will.” He notes that “thinking that we enjoy absolute power over our own bodies turns, often subtly, into thinking that we enjoy absolute power over creation.”

Here he calls for “valuing one’s own body in its femininity or masculinity” so that “we can joyfully accept the specific gifts of another man or woman, the work of God the Creator, and find mutual enrichment.” It is not a healthy attitude, he says, “to cancel out sexual difference because it no longer knows how to confront it.”

Human ecology, Pope Francis argues, cannot be separated from the notion of the common good, which he calls “a central and unifying principle of social ethics.” Quoting *Gaudium et Spes*, the Second Vatican Council’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, he defines the common good as “the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfilment.”

The common good calls for respect for the human person as well as the overall welfare of society and the development of a variety of intermediate groups. It requires social peace, stability and security, “which cannot be achieved without particular concern for distributive justice.”

For Pope Francis it is obvious that “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.”

Finally, Pope Francis’ vision of integral ecology and the common good includes justice between generations. Returning to his biblical vision, he says that “the world is a gift we have freely received and must share with others.” This includes future generations. “The world we have received also belongs to those who will follow us.” Or as the Portuguese bishops, whom he quotes, said, the environment “is on loan to each generation, which must then hand it on to the next.”

Thus he ends chapter four with the challenging question, “What kind of world do we want to leave to those who will come after us, to children who are now growing up?” He fears that “Doomsday predictions can no longer be met with irony or disdain.” On the contrary, “the pace of consumption, waste and environmental change has so stretched the planet’s capacity that our contemporary lifestyle, unsustainable as it is, can only precipitate catastrophes, such as those which even now periodically occur in different areas of the world.”

According to Pope Francis, the ethical and cultural decline which accompanies the deterioration of the environment forces us to ask fundamental questions about life: “What is the purpose of our life in this world? Why are we here? What is the goal of our work and all our efforts? What need does the earth have of us?”

Pope Francis calls for an integral ecology that sees the interconnectedness of environmental, economic, political, social, cultural, and ethical issues. Such an ecology requires the vision to think about comprehensive solutions to what is both an environmental and human crisis.

Thank you for listening. I include a full text of Chapter 4 in the resources and a few other resources which may help us come to grips with ‘Integral Ecology’.