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Integral Ecology: Envisioning a New Future for the World

Responding to Pope Francis’ Encyclical on Climate Change and Inequality: On Care for Our Common Home

An Introduction to the Encyclical

One of the noteworthy books of 2015 is a religious exposition, Pope Francis’ 160-page Encyclical on Climate Change and Inequality: On Care for Our Common Home. In her introduction to the Melville House English edition, Naomi Oreskes compares it with Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Silent Spring because it is a book that “catalyzes thought into action.” It covers “virtually every important topic in contemporary life,” a list that includes “climate change, deforestation, and the need for clean, safe drinking water [and] ‘population (and abortion),’ but also various problems of science and technology—including public transportation, urban planning and architecture, social media, genetic modification of crops, embryonic stem cell research—and law, economy, and governance—including the problems of deregulated markets, corruption, and weak governance” (pp. vii, viii).

In his preface, Pope Francis presents the point of view that characterizes the entire book. Citing the writings of his patron saint, twelfth century Francis of Assisi, the pope describes Mother Earth as our sister and declares that she “now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life” (¶ 2). He cites St. Francis, beloved by people everywhere, as an embodiment of the principles which can be entitled “integral ecology.” We must approach nature and the environment with a sense of awe and wonder, the Pope affirms, for “if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs” (¶¶ 10, 11).

Although the encyclical is oriented toward members of the pope’s own church, he acknowledges that people in other religious communities and other disciplines enrich the church’s teaching. He closes the preface with an appeal to readers everywhere: that they join together in “a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet.”

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The next few paragraphs of this introduction to the encyclical offer a summary of its main ideas. It uses phrases and comments from the text of the encyclical, but without attribution, and arranges them in an order that sometimes differs from their placement in the encyclical itself. My purpose is to suggest the range and value of the encyclical and encourage a serious study of the document itself. The major part of this review essay consists of detailed notes on the encyclical, following the sequence of Pope Francis’ exposition and providing full documentation. (Since the encyclical in all of its editions is divided into numbered paragraphs, I cite the text by paragraph [¶] rather than by page).

Although the encyclical is divided into six chapters, it can be outlined under four headings: (A) where things stand now: crisis; (B) analysis of how we reached this state of affairs; (C) the new world and way of life for which we can work; and (D) a course of action for people everywhere, but especially for those whose current way of life is largely responsible for the ecological crisis now confronting the world.

Where things now stand: crisis. We live in a time of “rapidification” that is unprecedented in the history of the world. Change is taking place at a speed far greater than ever before and that contrasts sharply with the naturally slower pace of biological evolution. The crisis can be seen in five conditions: (1) pollution and climate change; (2) the depletion of natural resources; (3) the loss of biodiversity; (4) decline in the quality of human life and the breakdown of society; and (5) global inequality, which is seen in the fact that the effects of the changes are disproportionately experienced by the poor. The crisis is intensified because of weak responses by political forces on the international level due largely to the alliance between the economy and technology which sidelines anything not related to immediate interests. Current opinions for resolving the crisis range between two extremes: the myth of progress that believes that new technology will solve the problems and the assertion that population control will solve them. The only way that this crisis can be resolved is by deep change based on strong ethical considerations.

How we reached this state of affairs. At the core of the crisis is the fact that human beings are abusing their distinctive capacity, which is to use their rational abilities to modify nature for useful purposes. Increasingly this capacity is directed toward achieving terrible results, including destruction and suffering. In sum, the core of what is wrong consists of three factors: (1) the omnipresent technocratic paradigm, (2) the cult of unlimited human power, and (3) the rise of self-serving relativism.

The character of the transformation that is urgently needed: developing an integral ecology. Ecology studies the relationship between living organisms and the environment in which they develop. In part, this environment is the interrelationship of physical, chemical, and biological aspects of the world. Further components are the human, family, and work-related aspects of life, and also historic, artistic, and cultural factors in human experience. At the heart of integral ecology is a vision that is capable of taking into account every aspect of the global crisis and clearly respects all of the human and social dimensions along with the health and fullness of every aspect of the world’s natural life.

Lines of approach and action to achieve an integral economy: Rather than laying down his recommendations for what should be done by human beings individually and in their various economic, political, and national identities, the pope indicates that solutions will arise in dialogues of several kinds: (1) dialogue on the environment in the international community; (2) dialogue for new national and local politics; (3) transparency in decision making; (4) politics and economy in dialogue for human fulfillment; and (5) religions in dialogue with science. Im-
Explicit throughout this discussion is that overcoming the crisis will take concerted effort by people everywhere. All types of moral conviction and technical competence must be brought to bear upon the challenge to develop a new integral ecology in which all life and the world itself will flourish.

There is something for everyone to do, and especially for all who live in societies marked by over consumption, waste, and short-sighted, self-centered patterns. We can begin the process of living with less, finding by this change a life that is richer and more satisfying, marked by joy and peace, sobriety and humility. Central to it all is the conviction that we need one another and have a shared responsibility for others and the world, and that being good and decent are worth it. Although Pope Francis addresses this document to people everywhere, whatever their religion or station in the world, he occasional speaks directly to Christians, and especially Catholics. An encyclical is a theological treatise in the form and phrasing of a long pastoral letter or sermon. He encourages his readers to renew classic Christian practices, including the sacraments and the celebration of Sundays as a day of rest that helps heal our relationship with God.

**The Encyclical: An Interpretive Summary**

**Chapter One: What Is Happening to Our Common Home**

This chapter grounds the encyclical’s theological and philosophical reflections upon “a fresh analysis of our present situation, which is in many ways unprecedented in the history of humanity.” The pope introduces the term “rapidification,” noting that the increasing “speed with which human activity has developed contrasts with the naturally slow pace of biological evolution” (¶¶ 17, 18). Seven factors now trouble us that can no longer be dismissed. (1) **Pollution and Climate Change**: Our throw-away culture leads to despoiling nature, pollution, climate change, and disproportionate impact upon the world and all who dwell therein. (2) **The depletion of natural resources**, with the rapidly developing crises concerning fresh water as a prime example. (3) **The loss of biodiversity**, which is a challenge in two ways: we are losing the potential benefits (many of them not yet recognized) that natural species offer, and we forget that all of these elements in creation have the right to live and give glory to God. (4) **Decline in the quality of human life and the breakdown of society**: Two factors of contemporary life that are significant factors in this decline are urbanization and privatization. (5) **Global inequality**: The negative effects of these changes are disproportionately experienced by the poor. We have to realize, he writes, “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.”

The pope dismisses the frequently heard diagnosis that population growth is the problem rather than “extreme and selection consumerism on the part of some.” This is “one way of refusing to face the issues. It is an attempt to legitimize the present model of distribution, where a minority believes that it has the right to consume in a way which can never be universalized, since the planet could not even contain the waste products of such consumption” (¶¶ 49, 50).

The sixth problem on the pope’s list is (6) **Weak Responses**, the foremost being the weak international political response. The “alliance between the economy and technology ends up side-lining anything unrelated to its immediate interests,” and the results are “superficial rhetoric, sporadic acts of philanthropy and perfunctory expressions of concern for the environment,
whereas any genuine attempt by groups within society to introduce change is viewed as a nuisance based on romantic illusions or an obstacle to be circumvented” (¶ 54).

This chapter concludes with (7) A Variety of Opinions. On one extreme is the myth of progress: that “ecological problems will solve themselves simply with the application of new technology and without any need for ethical considerations or deep change.” The other extreme is that “men and women and all their interventions [are] no more than a threat, and that the solution is to reduce their numbers rather than change the way they live. The pope concludes this chapter with a sentence that holds a key to the continuing discussion: “Hope would have us recognize that there is always a way out, that we can always redirect our steps, that we can always do something to solve our problems” (¶¶ 60, 61).

Chapter Two: The Gospel of Creation

“Why should this document, addressed to people of all good will, include a chapter dealing with the convictions of believers?” Pope Francis asks this rhetorical questions and then answers: “science and religion, with their distinctive approaches to understanding reality, can enter into an intense dialogue fruitful for both” (¶ 62). The Christian faith offers the deepest reasons for commitment to defending human dignity in the creation and provides important insights into the relationship of humankind and creation. Our human task is not to dominant creation but to till and protect the earth. Quoting German bishops, he affirms that we should speak of “the priority of being over that of being useful” (¶ 69). Judeo-Christian thought demythologizes nature, affirming its grandeur but refusing to speak of nature as being divine (¶ 77).

The Pope describes the earth as a complex of intercommunicating systems of which humankind is one with special capabilities and a distinctive purpose. Working together, these systems, and especially humankind, can bring about new possibilities for good or toward adding new ills. God continues to work within these systems and is able to bring good out of suffering. Within creation’s interlocking systems, human beings have the calling to lead all creatures back to their Creator (¶ 83). Each creature has its own purpose, given by God and made possible by God’s continuing subsistence within creation. This reality does not imply the divinization of the earth. Instead Christian faith affirms the grandeur of creation and in so doing “emphasizes all the more our human responsibility for nature. This rediscovery of nature can never be at the cost of the freedom and responsibility of human beings who, as part of the world, have the duty to cultivate their abilities in order to protect it and develop its potential. If we acknowledge the value and the fragility of nature and, at the same time, our God-given abilities, we can finally leave behind the modern myth of unlimited material progress. A fragile world, entrusted by God to human care, challenges us to devise intelligent ways of directing, developing and limiting our power (¶ 78).

Pope Francis emphasizes the social dimension of the human relationship with the earth. The “Christian tradition has never recognized the right to private property as absolute or inviolable, and has stressed the social purpose of all forms of private property.” Quoting John Paul II, he affirms that “the Church does indeed defend the legitimate right to private property, but she also teaches no less clearly that this is always a social mortgage on all private property, in order that goods may serve the general purpose God gave them” (¶ 93).

As example, he refers to Jesus who lived in full harmony with the world. Even though his was a simple life in which he worked with his hands at making things, he did not despise the
world or the body. In his risen state and universal Lordship, Jesus is present throughout creation. “Thus, 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. The very flowers of the field and the birds which his human eyes contemplated and admired are not imbued with his radiant presence” (¶ 100).

Chapter Three: The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis

Chapters three and four are the substantive core of the encyclical. In the third chapter, the Pope turns from describing the symptoms of the ecological crisis to focus on one part of it, the part that he believes is critical to moving forward to resolving the crisis. In chapter four, he uses as his key phrase the term “integral ecology,” which at its heart is “a vision capable of taking into account every aspect of the global crisis [and] clearly respects its human and social dimensions” (¶ 138).

“A certain way of understanding human life and activity has gone awry, to the serious detriment of the world around us,” the pope declares, and “I propose that we focus on the dominant technocratic paradigm and the place of human beings and of human activity in the world” (¶ 101). He affirms that a central feature of human beings is our ability to use rational processes to modify nature for useful purposes. During the past two centuries, much has been accomplished for which we have good reason to rejoice. Yet, this same human capacity can be used for terrible purposes that bring destruction and suffering. The applications of human technoscience bring power, which can be used in ways both good and evil. He states that the people of our time have not been trained to use power well, as is clearly seen in the fact that “our immense technological development has not been accompanied by a development in human responsibility, values, and conscience. Each age tends to have only a meagre awareness of its own limitations. It is possible that we do not grasp the gravity of the challenges now before us” (¶ 105).

Deepening his critique, he writes that “it is the way that humanity has taken up technology and its development according to an undifferentiated and one-dimensional paradigm” (¶ 106). The very process of mastering nature is valued without constrain either from the effect upon nature or the effect upon human society.” We use “the method and aims of science and technology” as an “epistemological paradigm,” and the result is the deterioration of the environment and of human life. Technological products “are not neutral, for they create a framework which ends up conditioning lifestyles and shaping social possibilities along the lines dictated by the interests of certain powerful groups” (¶ 107). It is increasingly difficult for us to imagine life in which we do not yield to the results of technoscience even though we at the same time realize that it will inevitably lead to disaster for nature and human life.

This paradigm is being globalized so that its values and methods increasingly dominate life everywhere even though the effects, both good and bad, are unevenly distributed and experienced. Some people avoid facing these facts because they operate with the conviction that “current economics and technology will solve all environmental problems, and argue, in popular and non-technical terms, that the problems of global hunger and poverty will be resolved simply by market growth.” Not only these people, but all of us “fail to see the deepest roots of our present failures, which have to do with the direction, goals, meaning and social implications of technological and economic growth” (¶ 109).
This globalized paradigm leads, the pope concludes, to a condition he entitles practical relativism. “When human beings place themselves at the centre, they give absolute priority to immediate convenience and all else becomes relative. Hence we should not be surprised to find, in conjunction with the omnipresent technocratic paradigm and the cult of unlimited human power, the rise of a relativism which sees everything as irrelevant unless it serves one’s own immediate interests. There is a logic in all this whereby different attitudes can feed on one another, leading to environmental degradation and social decay” (¶ 122). The important terms in this paragraph, which are the components of the challenge, are (1) the omnipresent technocratic paradigm, (2) the cult of unlimited human power, and (3) the rise of self-serving relativism.

While discussing “the crisis and effects of modern anthropomorphism,” the Pope devotes several paragraphs to a discussion of abortion. Our concern for protecting the rights of the vulnerable extends to protecting a human embryo (¶ 120). He concludes with cautionary remarks concerning the need to protect employment and new biological technologies such as genetic modification of various kinds.

Chapter Four: Integral Ecology

“Since everything is closely interrelated,” the pope declares, “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” (¶ 137). Ecology “studies the relationship between living organisms and the environment in which they develop.” Just as the “different aspects of the planet—physical, chemical and biological—are interrelated, so too living species are part of a network which we will never fully explore and understand.” This network includes our setting in nature, but also “human, family, work-related and urban contexts” and “how individuals relate to themselves, which leads in turn to how they relate to others and to the environment,” and to the “interrelationship between ecosystems and . . . the various spheres of social interaction” (¶¶ 138-141).

Less frequently discussed aspects of the broader topic of ecology are especially important in this chapter. “Together with the patrimony of nature, there is also an historic, artistic and cultural patrimony which is likewise under threat.” The Pope refers to the “cultural treasures of humanity in the broadest sense,” but also to culture understood as “a living, dynamic and participatory present reality, which cannot be excluded as we rethink the relationship between human beings and the environment” (¶ 143). His conclusion is that “merely technical solutions” are not enough because “they run the risk of addressing symptoms and not the more serious underlying problems” (¶ 144). Furthermore, we must give attention to the factors that allow and encourage people to make creative adaptations to the needs of daily life, including housing and transportation that works effectively for them.

Following a pattern that appears elsewhere in the encyclical, the Pope then introduces a factor that some readers may consider extraneous: “the relationship between human life and the moral law, which is inscribed in our nature and is necessary for the creation of a more dignified environment.” An illustration is learning “to accept our body, to care for it and to respect its fullest meaning,” including “one’s own body in its femininity or masculinity” (¶ 155). The chapter concludes with two further considerations: the principle of the common good; and justice between the generations.
Chapter Five: Lines of Approach and Action

Rather than offering solutions to the multi-faceted ecological challenge that he has discussed so fully, Pope Francis outlines “the major paths of dialogue which can help us escape the spiral of self-destruction which currently engulfs us” (¶ 163). He discusses five aspects of dialogue, the first being a dialogue on “the environment in the international community. He cites several international protocols, including the Stockholm Declaration of 1972 and Rio+20 of 2012, as support for the claim that worldwide the ecological movement has gained ground. With respect to “protection of biodiversity and issues related to desertification,” however, “progress has been far less significant” (¶ 169). He questions the effectiveness of carbon credits and emphasizes the need for systems of international governance, especially for the protection of the oceans.

Under dialogue for “New National and Local Politics,” the pope calls attention to the “myopia of power politics” and affirms both the importance and the limitations of local legislation. He also calls attention to the importance of establishing long-term national policies and programs, stating clearly the importance of continuity because we can’t change policies with every change of administration. This discussion leads naturally to the third aspect of dialogue, which he refers to as transparency in decision-making. His ideas are summarized well in the paragraph that opens this section. “An assessment of the environmental impact of business ventures and projects demands transparent political processes involving a free exchange of views. On the other hand, the forms of corruption which conceal the actual environmental impact of a given project, in exchange for favours, usually produce specious agreements which fail to inform adequately and to allow for full debate” (¶ 184).

The fourth dialogue is politics and economy with human fulfilment. The pope speaks in language that cannot be misunderstood and at this point in the encyclical has been supported with numerous examples and talking points. His point is that the “dictates of an efficiency-driven paradigm of technocracy” have to be moderated in order to allow new definitions of progress and human development to arise.

The fifth dialogue is religions with science. While wanting to give full respect to empirical science, the Pope also insists that we also must give attention to other partners, including aesthetic sensibility, poetry, reason, and religious classics. Here we come into contact with “the great motivations which make it possible for us to live in harmony, to make sacrifices and to treat others well. Believers themselves must constantly feel challenged to live in a way consonant with their faith and not to contradict it by their actions” (¶ 200).

Chapter Six: Ecological Education and Spirituality

In the final chapter of the encyclical, Pope Francis resumes his basic stance as the international leader of one of the world’s major faith traditions. He speaks not only as a theologian, well versed in the literature of his own tradition, but also as a person acquainted with a wide range of scientific, political, ecological, and spiritual writings. Just as he began this treatise so he concludes it, with references to the visionary spirituality and simple, joy-filled way of life of St. Francis of Assissi. He states forthrightly that many Christians need an ecological conversion “whereby the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them” (¶ 217). He gives examples from daily life, including references to the temperature to which we set our thermostats and the importance of conservation and recy-
living with less can actually lead to a richer and more satisfying way of life marked by joy and peace, sobriety and humility. Habits of ordinary life, such as giving thanks before and after meals, contribute to this ecological spirituality.

What we need to recover is the conviction “that we need one another, that we have a shared responsibility for others and the world, and that being good and decent are worth it.” We’ve had “enough of immorality and the mockery of ethics, goodness, faith and honesty. It is time to acknowledge that light-hearted superficiality has done us no good” (¶ 229).

As he concludes this pastoral letter, the pope reaffirms the value of certain classic Christian practices—the Sacramental signs and the celebration of rest that has been manifested in Sunday observance, a day that heals our relationship with God. “Rest opens our eyes to the larger picture and gives us renewed sensitivity to the rights of other. And so the day of rest, centred on the Eucharist, sheds its light on the whole week and motivates us to greater concern for nature and the poor” (¶ 237).

Concluding Comments

It ought not to be a surprise that Pope Francis concludes his encyclical in the way he does. This kind of document is highly specialized and uses the sermonic form to write a theological treatise. Another way is to say that it blends theology and ethics so fully that it is hard to separate them from each other. It articulates ideas and convictions that remain the same now and forever while they at the same time respond creatively to new circumstances and in the process are renewed. While reading encyclicals is an activity that has occupied very little of my attention over the years, I find Encyclical on Climate Change and Inequality: On Care for Our Common Home to be a compelling document and recommend it to all who are concerned about what is happening to the world around us.

With Pope Francis’ informed, multi-faceted, and cogent encyclical as our guide, people of every faith or no faith can work to refashion the way that we live in the world.

Note: the formal title of this encyclical is Laudato si [Praise be to you], the first words of the Latin edition. The Latin text and authorized translations in various languages are available online and in print. I used Encyclical on Climate Change and Inequality: On Care for our Common Home / Pope Francis. Introduction by Naomi Oreskes (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2015).