

Laudato si' and integral ecology: Do not be afraid

October 15, 2015 *Pedro Walpole*

“Do not be afraid” could well have been Pope Francis’ opening words in this encyclical, as he asks us to go deeper, and not to fear going deeper, into our daily life experience: “Inner peace is closely related to care for ecology and for the common good because, lived out authentically, it is reflected in a balanced lifestyle together with a capacity for wonder which takes us to a deeper understanding of life” (n.225).

As we read this encyclical, we grow spiritually so as to express our concern, act with environmental justice, and seek reconciliation with the pain of the land. This is a living document that finds its mark in the world of political and market decisions through the need for increasing bottom-up solidarity and accountable use of resources. I discuss the encyclical, therefore, from the point of view of these five key themes: *do not be afraid, go deeper, persevere, the pain of the land, and find the mark.*

Of these five points, the first three are about personal conversion, and the last two are concerned with the gross injustices, over-consumption, and loss of equity in today’s society. The pain of the land consists both of human suffering and environmental degradation – these are one and the same call for justice. And the target of the encyclical is the power of global markets over the use and distribution of natural resources, which in many cases equally disregards local needs and global sustainability.

I write from the perspective of Asia Pacific, a part of the world where there are expanding economies of consumption, a growing, if insecure, middle class, increasing numbers of the poor, and high levels of environmental exploitation and risks. These risks may vary in relation to other regions, but they are specific and real. Responses to environmental concerns are mixed, owing to political considerations, financial uncertainties, the desire for economic growth, belief in technological development, and confused strategic intervention. The region wants to get on in the world as well and Asia Pacific has its share of the world’s richest people.

Meanwhile there is a limited sense of social cohesion and personal commitment to accountability. There is marginalisation, not only of the poor in general but of the rural poor and indigenous communities in particular. Corporate, globalised food production results in a loss of local food security and food quality, while waste co-exists with hunger. Water is now a commodity, and in many places it is not a right. Biodiversity and ecosystems are seriously threatened.

None of the world’s economic or ecosystem flows are going to become more sustainable and inclusive unless, one by one, we change by finding a simpler lifestyle and transcending our wants and images of success through a spirituality of presence and reconciliation. We need to hear the call anew and respond with reflection and perseverance, in solidarity with others. We need, in this process, an attitude and spirit that share in the joy, frailty and peace of life; but we also need an understanding of science, ethics and governance.

We are challenged to understand the financial and technical worlds if the spiritual dimension is to connect with them and be a source of reconciliation and regeneration. Pope Francis recognises the need for scientific endeavour taking “into account the data generated by other fields of knowledge, including philosophy and social ethics; but this is a difficult habit to acquire today” (n.110).

We are similarly challenged to understand science and the complexities of the physical world. We have to acquire this habit when we come from a spiritual perspective to reflect on the knowledge gathered together by others and to understand its integral role in human development and healing the Earth. We have to come to terms with scientific language and let scientific results “touch us deeply and provide a concrete foundation for the ethical and spiritual itinerary that follows” (n.15). The solutions to the environmental crisis are not simply technical but challenge humanity at the deepest level to be responsible for all life.

Levels of environmental exploitation and risk can be expressed through the nine planetary boundaries, originally defined in 2009 by a group of 28 scientists with the aim of “estimating a safe operating space for humanity with respect to the functioning of the Earth System” as published in [Ecology and Society \(2009\)](#), [Science \(January 2015\)](#), and in [Stockholm Resilience Centre \(January 2015\)](#). These planetary boundaries are deeply interconnected, and their measurement and impact are inseparably both biochemical and social.

What have these planetary boundaries to do with spirituality, we might ask? These limits are so integral to my own and my neighbour’s way of life that spiritual reflection brings me to deep concern as to what I can do, and how to avoid oppressive guilt and fathomless action. I encounter these boundaries every day, but not necessarily directly. They may not be the subject of my work, the preoccupation of my home life or the needs I present to God, but they are intrinsic to much of what I touch, eat, and buy. I am so connected to the integrity of the world that I am daily pushing and pulling on these planetary boundaries. I may think in a bubble, but I do not actually live in a bubble, but in the planet’s atmosphere.

Spirituality enables us to embrace suffering with personal or family trials and when we spend time with the poor. Knowing the poor as friends rather than just as those in need gives us a very different experience of life. Engaging with life at the margins is not so difficult when we have such friends to help us understand what it is like. The experiences and needs of poor people’s lives are reflected in Pope Francis’ teaching. He elevates these concerns to be heard globally, while at the same time they are still understood locally. In the silence of this man’s heart, he accompanies those who are suffering.

Do not be afraid

Why not be afraid? A whole complex of linked ecological and social problems is getting worse; our politicians are doing as little as possible; and consumerism grows daily as we urbanise. What difference does one voice make in a world of denial? But we need to start from gratitude and with praise towards God, not from a focus on the issues. “Rather than a problem to be solved, the world is a joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and praise” (n.12). Then the issues become concerns that are internalised and acted upon.

Pope Francis talks about pollution, water, energy, biodiversity and climate in terms of the common good. His spirituality and solidarity are empowering, and shared that “men and women are still capable of intervening positively. For all our limitations, gestures of

generosity, solidarity and care cannot but well up within us, since we were made for love” (n.58). The common good is alive but it needs vitality – our vitality.

There is a depth of love and life here for everyone, and those with faith humbly feel that this is a calling of God: we are drawn to do God’s work in the world. We are transformed in the process and experience greater hope and a little more integrity. As we look for the “ethical and spiritual roots” of the ecological crisis, we find liberation from fear (n.9). And when we overcome indifference and fear, we are given a new mission; gratitude and praise resound again as we seek to serve.

Go deeper

Once we find gratitude, slowly we are moved to solidarity and feel empowerment grow in our hearts. Attitudes change out of desire much more easily than out of a moral imperative. Ultimately, deep love of life is open to a deep faith in the source of life. Of ecological conversion, Pope Francis writes: “A commitment this lofty cannot be sustained by doctrine alone, without a spirituality capable of inspiring us, without an ‘interior impulse which encourages, motivates, nourishes and gives meaning to our individual and communal activity’” (n.216).

Another way in which we must go deeper is in looking to the future by transforming education for all. In the words of the encyclical: “If we want to bring about deep change, we need to realize that certain mindsets really do influence our behaviour. Our efforts at education will be inadequate and ineffectual unless we strive to promote a new way of thinking about human beings, life, society and our relationship with nature” (n.215).

To go deeper is also to get broader, connecting more people together. Young people, in particular, want to have different experiences, meet different people, know the world for what it is. How can the young who seek sources of inspiration find enough support to act with a sense of the human spirit? What are the social structures outside school in which such values and aspirations can form a working environment for them beyond weekend programmes of reflection and short-term exposure?

Persevere

Fear and the sense of failure destroy so many good intentions when they lack an initial commitment, while the habits of *lifestyle* steal life and living from those who are unsuspecting and unreflective. It is difficult to persevere when we see no concrete change resulting from our efforts and when the contributions of many are easily wiped out, but spiritual commitment and solidarity allow us go further than we thought possible. *Laudato si'* shares hope, and the deep, integrative meaning of how we live that can bring us to a point of liberation and transformation.

[Communities of practice](#) are places where we can live out in simple activities a relationship with creation and with others that gives all of us life. The [Satoyama Initiative](#), based in Japan, supports locally based and traditional ways in which communities manage and coexist with an environment shaped, and not destroyed, by human activity. A growing interest in a broader sense of “good living” or [buen vivir](#) is emerging in different forms globally. Buen vivir is based on classical ideas about a good quality of life, but with a specific focus on well-being within community.

Even short periods of reflection and conversation in community can help us form the way we use the greater part of our time and to be part of “a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies, an educational programme, a lifestyle and a spirituality which together generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm” (n.111).

Those of us who live a privileged life, secure in all our basic needs, and able to have a little extra, must live with moderation and with generosity towards others. The most important generosity is generosity with time, which allows us to experience what it is to live at the margins, letting go of our own obsessions and contemplating life with others, serving and striving for their benefit. Such engagement strengthens us for the long-term goal of “deep change.”

The pain of the land

The stories of men and women who labour on the land and who have only known one community tell us how things have changed. If you belong to a traditional community, you have a pattern of daily communication, you know the land, the turn of every sod, every pregnancy, birth, marriage and death relating to every person in that community. Every person, young or old, is engaged in common daily activities and a common set of social relations. There is much to learn from this experience of life in understanding the integrity of our action in the world.

Life experience is very different for those of us who live and work in modern cities. Every day we see pictures and hear reports about disasters, wars and terrible human loss, economic and political strife. The media inform us about life beyond our own community, but also disempower us, because we know that the problems are too big for any one of us, too complex and often too far away to tackle. We may share the experience of these problems, even if it is only through traffic and pollution, but the effect of this is often to focus us on our own need for security, our need to keep moving on – whatever that means.

Could I ever take a day off from my busyness and follow my household rubbish to the end of its journey, to what places would I be led? What would I, my family and my community learn? It may be difficult to find out where our wastewater goes, but do we even know where our water comes from in the first place, where the rain actually falls? And what about the less fortunate? The pilgrimage to find such things out is an inner experience, meeting people along the way and seeing their lives, asking ourselves questions and reflecting deeply. But does it help us change our actions?

How can we know the complexity of this situation in a way that causes us to act? How can we achieve environmental justice and so “hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” (n.49)? It will not be easy to move from the “pain of the land” to a new experience of “love of the margins.”

Find the mark

Our present framework for global negotiations does not allow for the shift in mindset that is needed to deal with the immediate local concerns of many communities. The depth of realisation, the sense of connection, and the hope that need to be shared for changes in global economic and political systems to take place are insufficient, precisely because those changes have not yet happened. There is a fragmentation of thinking and decision-making, as

scientific, economic and social realities do not meet. Political structures are not designed for intervention either at the local level such as coping with the particular effects of an environmental disaster, or at the global level, enforcing an effective carbon tax. There is a call for fundamental change.

While *Laudato si'* addresses the demand from within the institutional Church for an integral ecology, spiritual depth and a renewed commitment in faith and solidarity, it also engages global dialogues and processes of change.

The encyclical imparts an energy for change, for people to gather on the streets and proclaim their solidarity with humankind and the planet in need. It gives civil society some leverage in the national elections that will take place in many countries during 2016. The document is not going to alter the results of meetings or elections but the Pope's involvement lends a better focus and depth.

The message is appealing in a secular context because there is so little leadership in the world that commands hope. Pope Francis is defining an attitude and a culture prepared to "confront this crisis" (n.53). Water, blood diamonds, energy, refugees – all these issues are connected in this period of deep crisis which requires "bold decisions" (n.59) in the face of "outdated criteria which continue to rule the world" (nn.189).

And because *Laudato si'* is inspiring and generates an interior impulse, it moves all generations to act, and supports them not in a pious but in an apostolic way. We now have a sense of spirituality and solidarity that is capable of inspiring us to nothing less than world conversion!