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## THE ECOLOGICAL COMMANDMENT

**Abstract.** In May 2015 Pope Francis published the encyclical entitled *Laudato Si'* about the proper understanding of the issue of ecology. The subject is understood by the Holy Father as one that is most natural, usual and simple, but at the same time obliging everybody, rousing and engaging both in the worldly, popular and everyday sense and in the essentially religious one, which means spiritually and morally absorbing. From the whole of Pope Francis's argument presented in the encyclical it undoubtedly follows that care of the world, also the temporal one, that is ecological life and work, is both a natural and at the same time God's commandment for man, and this means: for each man, both for a believer in God as the Creator of the world, and for a non-believer, but one who is sensible at the basic level of natural law. The Pope suggests adding the theological understanding of ecology to the common one. As a result in Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'* we have received a realistic, but at the same time mystic, evangelical approach to ecology, one in the light of Christ, with the simplicity of the truth, of love of life, also of the worldly life, and with the light of beauty – the beauty of God, man, the earth and the universe. Hence, integral ecology is – according to Pope Francis – a commandment given by God to believers and to non-believers, both to the impersonal world, and to the human, personal one. True ecology stems from the reality of creation, from the love of God and man, from man's participation in the work of creation, and finally from the sense of self-preservation of the human being.

**Key words:** protection of the creation, encyclical *Laudato Si'*, integral ecology, creation from the love of God, sense of self-preservation of the human being, spiritual ecology, ecological morality.

On 24 May 2015, Pope Francis published the encyclical *Laudato si'* (On Care for our Common Home).<sup>1</sup> The “common home” in question is, according to the encyclical, first and foremost, the human family, then, the environment of human life (or what we often call the “local homeland”). Subsequently, it mentions the country, the continent, understood as a community of culture and civilisation, the Earth as a planet and, finally, the entire universe. The subject of care for the “common home” at all levels is perceived by Pope

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<sup>1</sup> Francis, Encyclical *Laudato si'*. On Care for our Common Home [May 24, 2015], [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html) [November 7, 2016].

Francis as the most natural, ordinary and simple, which at the same time obliges, captivates and involves everyone in the temporal, informal and everyday sense, as well as in the religious one, as it essentially engages us both spiritually and morally. On the whole, it undoubtedly follows from Pope Francis's encyclical that the care for the world, including its earthly aspect, the life and activity of man, is both the natural and Divine commandment for each and every one, no matter whether or not they believe in God as the Creator of the world, as long as their sensitivity is at the level of natural law.

#### 1. POINTS OF DEPARTURE

A theological approach to the subject of ecology may be surprising, because it is often said that theology deals with God, heaven and the way of achieving it, with the salvation of the soul and not with the Earth, nature, history, the earthly world, or with "saving," and all the more rescuing or perfecting the material world. All of these are contained in the popular, and in fact strict, understanding of the term "ecology" (from Greek *oikos* "house, dwelling, seat"), yet it is often directed at protection, renewal and rescuing the world, which in turn belongs to a science called "sozology" (or environmental science, from Greek *sodzein* "to protect"). The connection of the study of the human home with what "sozology" stands for, i.e. "healing and protecting the world" expresses well the contemporary meaning of the word "ecology." However, the Holy Father Francis, in his encyclical *Laudato si'*, has broadened the colloquial understanding of "ecology" considerably, giving it a theological dimension.

We need to note that ecology as the science of environmental protection has been studied for a long time, also at Catholic universities. For instance, the Faculty of Mathematics and Environmental Sciences with the Section of Environmental Protection was founded at the Catholic University of Lublin many years ago. It comprised such specialist chairs as: the Chair of Physiology and Environmental Toxicology, of Botany and Hydrobiology, of Zoology and Ecology, of Environmental Protection, of the Protection of Nature and Landscape, of Ergology, of the Ecology of Man, of Biochemistry and Environmental Chemistry, etc. This trend has unfolded and continued in the newly created scientific units, for example, the Faculty of Biotechnology and Environmental Sciences, as well as programmes: environmental safety with

political and social conditions of the modern world. Likewise, other academic communities that study Christian thought, e.g. the Faculty of Theology in Wrocław (the Chair of Dogmatic Theology run by Rev Prof B. Ferdek), or Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. The examples abound. What is important is that this issue has been present in all academic communities in Poland, including those that study theology. It is a fact, however, that we have never had any official and universal papal teaching in the form of an encyclical devoted directly to the issue of contemporary ecology. Certainly, that does not mean that the subject of respecting natural environment was not touched upon in various documents of the Church. It is worth mentioning here the immediate predecessor of Pope Francis – St John Paul II and Benedict XVI.<sup>2</sup>

Pope Francis has attempted to make use of an extensive output of all ecological sciences, but his main inspiration has a feature of, as it were, an apostolate of the beauty of creation that St Francis of Assisi proclaimed and lived: “*Laudato si’, mi’ Signore* – Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs” [St Francis of Assisi, *Canticle of the Creatures*]. Pope Francis, recalling this song by St Francis of Assisi, reaches for profound problems that are still valid – the principal mystical question is the Divine beauty of creation. What is needed in the second place is the discovery of the natural “brotherhood” of man with the Earth and with nature, as well as the idea of the community and unity of all man and the praise of the material world, steeped with Christ’s light, which is clearly and implicitly inspired by the view of another great Jesuit, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin [no. 83, 255-236 and 245], and, finally, the close connection of ecology with man, his life, morality, as well as his lot and poverty. As a result, Pope attempts to point out that it is completely wrong to separate ecological issues from the integrity of human condition: social, moral, spiritual and religious. To sum it up, ecology is not necessarily natural, but genuinely human; not only physical, but moral and spiritual. What is worth noticing is that the great novelty of Pope Francis’s encyclical about ecology is a certain

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<sup>2</sup> What I have in mind here are such documents as: John Paul II, Encyclical *Centesimus annus* [1991]; John Paul II, *Peace with God the Creator, Peace With All of Creation*. Message for the World Day of Peace [1990]; Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Caritatis in veritate* [2009]; Benedict XVI, *If You Want To Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation*. Message for the World Day of Peace [2010]; cf. Teresa Feszczyn, “Filozofia i teologia ekologiczna w Polsce w świetle nauczania Jana Pawła II,” *Poznańskie Studia Teologiczne* 13 (2002); Zbigniew Mirek, „Bóg, człowiek, przyroda. Na pograniczu teologii, etyki, przyrody,” *Dziki Życie* 7-8 (1997).

degree of universalism. He resorts not only to the Bible and the doctrine of the latest popes, St John Paul II and Benedict XVI, but also to official teachings of almost all Bishops' Conferences from around the world, including other denominations, religions and non-religious thinkers. At any rate, the encyclical *Laudato si'* demonstrates expressively that Christian thought has nothing in common with the traditional Manichean negation of matter, flesh and nature, which we are frequently accused of by people who are not familiar with the Catholic vision of the world. For us, Catholics of today, sins against God, man and creation are evil, while the material and temporal world in its nature is not evil.

## 2. PERILOUS PATHOLOGICAL PHENOMENA

The automatic evolution of nature on the level of regeneration has recently been unable to keep up, according to Pope Francis, with the development of all human activity of today, and the faith in omnipotent progress has proved irrational. What has been generated is an enormous amount of pollution, burdensome waste, fumes of all kinds, coming from households, workplaces, decay, medical institutions, technological units, factories (often giving off toxic exhaust), means of transportation. Research has revealed the acidity of soil, which was the cause of collapse of a few countries in the past, also in ancient times. Furthermore, chemical fertilisers, insecticides, fungicides, pesticides have all contributed to the material pollution of the environment, triggering at the same time the phenomenon of cultural, social and vital rejection. This profound thought of Pope Francis is well illustrated by an example of the environment of Poland. Indeed, in the times of the People's Republic of Poland some, even big, rivers used to become stinking and life-destroying sewer lines. In fact, things, and even people, after some time become rubbish, especially for the wealthy. Industrial systems do not utilise all the residue and waste, and recycling is not sufficiently widespread. Soil and reservoirs are becoming vast terrains of debris or wild dumps.

As for the climate, global warming is said to be taking place, accompanied by sea level rise and extreme weather phenomena. The cause thereof is the high level of greenhouse gases (carbon dioxide, methane, nitrogen oxides, etc.) in the atmosphere, triggered off by the use of fossil fuels and deforestation. The effects of these climate changes concern, for the most

part, poor countries that are dependent on natural resources and propel great migration of people, and even animals and plants. In relation to the issue of global warming, there have been accusations levelled against Pope Francis that he run down the countries that rely their energy production on coal power, like Poland, which do not possess any sufficient alternative sources of energy. The accusation is unfounded. Pope does not lay down laws, but recounts views. Afterwards, he asserts that it is the rich economies that do not want to understand that coal-dependent countries has no alternative, and their misfortune lies in the very fact that the imposition of reducing the emission of greenhouse gases, in the vein of highly industrial countries, has deteriorated the situation of undeveloped countries; consequently, the reversal of the global warming tendency has not allowed for the elimination of poverty in poorer countries [no. 26, 170, 171, 174, etc.]. In other words, this issue must be solved by appropriate international institutions without the impediment of the development of poor countries and regions [no. 175]. It might not be a coincidence that on 30 June 2015 in Paris, the Chinese Premier of the State Council, Li Keqiang, announced the plan of reduction of the emission of CO<sub>2</sub> by 2020. He did it while some Americans blamed the Pope for an anti-American act of calling for the reduction of greenhouse gases.

Another crucial issue is access drinking water, especially in Africa, or wherever the supplies are in danger of pollution [no. 27-31]. Biological diversity has been lost. Every year thousands of species of plants and animals die out, destroyed by de-agriculturalisation, land improvement, or even inappropriate afforestation and construction of routes, etc. Marine life, counting plankton and coral reefs that house millions of species and algae, disappears. Human economy creates particular monocultures, more frequently shaping caricatured species, e.g. meant only for consumption, which upsets the balance, beauty and richness of nature [no. 32-42].

Bigger terrains are divided into ecological and unecological, rich and poor, developed and undeveloped, into societies of spiritual culture and pathological ones [no. 43-7]. Therein lies the “ecological debt” between the rich North and the poor South, propelled by exploitation of southern countries on the part of the North, turning former colonies into substandard areas and, as it were, dumps where the real and helpful community is replaced with a civilisation of death and moral degeneration. Thus, as Pope Francis has noted, the degradation of not only the natural and human environments, but also of ethics are closely related [no. 43-59].

Pope Francis has indicated two ways of solving the problem – some claim that only technology can help, others state that human activity will but deteriorate the situation, so the population should be reduced. The Holy Father writes that we ought to avoid either extreme, but the Church has no right to put forward her own definite solution. She may listen and promote sincere debate among scientists and the socio-political and economic “rulers” of today. I am of the opinion that the answer is humble and valid. However, it may pose a threat of pushing the Church away from the scene altogether. The Pope does add that the Church has the right to look on the degradation of our common home with care and raise the hopes of a positive solution [no. 60-1], but it cannot mean leaving the Church off and reducing her role to mere prayer, which is exactly what we are accused of by materialists and left-wing liberals. The Pope himself says next that Christ illuminates the temporal life of the world, too. Therefore, we should work out and suggest a personalistic approach, in which man, as a person, creates a synthesis and transforms the material and technological sphere into a spiritual and moral one, and *vice versa*. It will serve as a scientific, and not necessarily theological solution, even though fully supported by Catholic theology. Such a solution is implied by individualistic and social personalist anthropology, whose peak is constituted by a Christological vision of the world and the whole creation [cf. no. 62-100].

### 3. THE CRISIS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TECHNOLOGY AND ETHICS

“Humanity has entered, as Pope Francis writes, a new era in which our technical prowess has brought us to a crossroads. We are the beneficiaries of two centuries of enormous waves of change: steam engines, railways, the telegraph, electricity, automobiles, aeroplanes, chemical industries, modern medicine, information technology and, more recently, the digital revolution, robotics, biotechnologies and nanotechnologies” [no. 102]. As a result, man is living increasingly by technological light, which sees nature as something secondary; man himself seems to be more of a creation of technology than nature and God (cf. IVF). Technology, so to say, promises omnipotence to man. This has severe consequences for the very concept of man. For instance, the basis of ethics has thus far been human nature, the essence of his being, whereas now this position is claimed by technology. A fundamental

issue arises here – man seems free from the laws of nature, as if he himself created the whole reality and himself, thus he needs neither God nor traditional ethics. The technocratic world has its own moral code, whereby everything that is not technological becomes anti-human and anti-cultural. What is the paradigm is one's own creativity, power over reality, usefulness, efficiency and maximal profit. The megalomaniac lack of inhibition makes man lose the depth of his own being and spiritual dimension [no. 101-14].

Meanwhile, progress and technology, which are essentially to constitute man's participation in the creational work of God, tend to be abused again by human errors, ill will, pride and sin. "Instead of carrying out his role as a cooperator," man deems himself an absolute lord and god of the world [no. 117]. There is no objective truth, goodness and beauty to him, but everything beyond him is relative. He treats all other men as objects; all the more, everything else has no objective value in itself. All laws, rules, programmes and norms are avoided. Usefulness is the only "law." Thus the rule of "use and throw away" [no. 123] takes over. The hierarchy of values and norms, influenced by technocracy and relativism, is so shaky that a number of ecologists of good will save the lives of the beetle and do not oppose, or even support, killing human embryos or soon-to-be-born children [no. 120]; being reserved about research of the animal worlds, they are unbridled when it comes to experiments on human embryos [no. 136].

The technological paradigm and technologisation push aside blue-collar workers, craftsmen, farmers and other employees, while work is a vital part of the meaning of life on earth, and thanks to it man grows in his work and society. Therefore, technical development cannot be absolute and total, because, in effect, it leads to the ruin and enslavement of the majority of the society. We must then strive for an adequate symbiosis of technology and nature in both creative and ethical reflection. We ought to be careful and wise, however, when the science and technology interfere in the lives of plants, animals, genetically modified organisms (GMO) and, above all, man. The wrong use of biotechnology may result in an imbalance in nature, or even in destruction of life over vast terrains [no. 124-36]. In any event, Pope Francis voices his concern that the extreme domination of technology inevitably leads to humiliating marginalisation of the poor, weak, afflicted and disqualified at various levels.

#### 4. ECOLOGY OUGHT TO BE INTEGRAL

Pope Francis calls for an integral ecology, which will possibly encompass all the spheres of life, including the human and social dimension. St John Paul II did raise this issue, but Francis stresses it even more firmly. What threatens such fragmentary and isolated ecology is the ignorance of the link of one field to the other. [no. 137-8]. The relation between nature and society is crucial here. Both economic and social dimension must be accounted for, yet the whole relation is more important than its part. Social ecology must then be institutional and comprise all the possible dimensions – the family, local community, nation, country and the family of nations. Here we run up against a great number of complex problems, e.g. the demand for drugs in rich countries fosters their production in poor countries, which, as a result, collapse and fall apart even more [no. 142]. Human ecology is inseparably connected with the notion of common good in its various shades. For instance, the ecology of the rich may not exacerbate the life of the poor. The conflicts of this kind need to be solved not only scientifically and praxeologically, but, above all, ethically [no. 157-8]. Common good, as Pope Francis states after Benedict XVI, concerns future generations. The Earth belongs to those who will come after us as well. We are responsible for our future. We must take into account not only intragenerational, but also intergenerational justice [no. 159-62].

Cultural ecology also belongs here. What it additionally assumes is the care for the richness of human culture, hence it must heed local culture. The great diversity of cultures cannot be hegemonised in an economy that is primarily globalised. Imposing a hegemonic lifestyle may be as harmful as the destruction the ecosystem, thus the phenomenon of the “ecology of man” is also existent. It encompasses the whole everyday life of man, along with moral law inscribed in his nature, which improves a given environment [Benedict XVI]. Man has his own nature, his own “ecosystem” to be respected and not manipulated at will. We must bear in mind, as Francis writes, that our body is in direct link with the other person and other living creatures. Therefore, knowledge, acceptance and due care for our own bodies is the basic element of the ecology of man. What is essential here is also the relationship between genders. The current tendency to blur sexual difference is detrimental to the ecology of man.



## 5. NEED FOR AN INTERNATIONAL ACTION

According to Pope Francis, since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a tendency of perceiving the Earth as a homeland and humanity as a nation that lives in a common home has been present [no. 164]. Therefore, there is an urgent need for normalising ecological issues and actions around the world legally. Nevertheless, resolutions and appeals, undertaken during international meetings, e.g. Stockholm Declaration (1972), the Declaration of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences "Love for Creation" (1993), the Earth Summit (Rio de Janeiro, 1992 and 2012), various conventions (Basel, Vienna), or the Earth Charter (2000) have all proved feeble and fruitless in regard to the level of greenhouse gases in the air, protection of biological diversity, rules of forestation, dangerous waste, international trade of wildlife and endangered species, as well as the protection of the ozone layer [no. 163-171].

Meanwhile, poverty, corruption excessive consumption of privileged groups have spread in a number of countries. We are threatened with environmental disasters, the problem of marine debris and downright banditry in using ocean resources, migrations that trigger imbalance and other escalating phenomena, such as terrorism. We are in need for efficient legal systems and adequate international institutions, which will have global authority. Thus, we need a responsible world political power [St John XXIII, Benedict XVI; no. 172-5]. We must set up new international, national and local ecological policies, providing they are continual, decisive and uninfluenced by choice that aim at winning over people who do not support ecology. Decisive processes must be carried out transparently, in the atmosphere of dialogue, sincerity and truth [no. 176-88].

The dialogue between politics and economy must always head for unfolding the fullness of humanity. Politics must not be subordinated exclusively to economy, and economy must be freed from technocracy. Economy and politics are to serve life, especially human life. They should observe ethical norms. Progress and development ought to be redefined by means of their relation with man, whereas in a model of "success" and "privacy" economists seek financial benefits, and politicians are interested in retaining or increasing their power [no. 189-98].

A dialogue between science and positively shaped religions must be struck up. Sciences do not fully explain life and the essence of creation, or the whole reality. Nor do they provide a meaning, aim and beauty of being

and the world. Classical religious wisdom do offer meaning for people of all ages; they have a great motivating power and open new horizons. Moreover, dialogue is necessary between sciences themselves, as they often close down in their idiom and overestimate their views. Subsequently, clashes of various ecological movements also occur. The Holy Father says, “realities are greater than ideas” [no. 201]. The Pope strongly emphasises realism in opposition to idealism, in both philosophy and theology.

## 6. ECOLOGICAL SPIRITUALITY

Just as we speak of religious, Christian, monastic, etc. spiritualities, which are specific attitudes of the soul and person to a given field of life, chosen values or special devotion to what characterizes a given spiritual life, so too Pope Francis claims that a special ecological spirituality exists – a form of a specific pro-ecological attitude with its thought, involvement and activity – to put it simply, an ecological virtue. In order to form such an ecological spirituality, one must get to know ecology, pro-ecological education and be willing to change the lifestyle. We need to leave technocratic dictatorship, excessive consumption and shallow utilitarianism behind and open ourselves up to common good and higher values, such as the truth, goodness, beauty. We must rediscover grandeur, joy and peace so as to experience the greatest bond of creation with God [no. 202-8]. We have to, as it were, renew the covenant between man and his environment, both natural and human, as well as the entire earthly world – in admiration, love and fascination with its beauty [no. 209-15].

We must have in mind that ecological spirituality relies its mysticisms, highest motivation and meaning of ecological activity on the Gospel. Consequently, we are in need of “ecological conversion” patterned after St Francis of Assisi, which aims at learning to find something of the Resurrected Christ’s life in God’s creation, to sense the communion of man and things in God [no. 216-21]. Ecological conversion brings joy and peace and, above all, helps us to build civil and political love, general kindness and brotherhood. The Church offered the world “the civilisation of love” [Bl Paul VI] and “the civilisation of mercy” [St John Paul II; no. 222-32].

Francis states: “The universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely. Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person’s face” [no. 233]. A mystic experiences the

innermost bond between God and all beings [St John of the Cross]. God Christ is in everything [no. 234]. Material signs of sacraments themselves carry supernatural life. The highest elevation of the creation is found in the Eucharist, which is the centre of the universe and the act of the cosmic love [no. 237].<sup>3</sup> Rest and celebrations also humanise man so that he may work [no. 233-7].

The Trinity is the higher principle of social life. It grants pluralism and ultimate unity to all beings so that reality must be interpreted in the Trinitarian key of multitude, solidarity and unity [no. 239-40]. Creation reaches the fullness of its beauty in Mary, Queen of the Universe, who cares for the maimed world [no. 241]. Also St Joseph, Protector of the universal Church, who serves man humbly, teaches us how to protect the world [no. 242]. The most important foundation for our joyous hope is the truth that “in the heart of this world, the Lord of life, who loves us so much, is always present. ... for he has united himself definitively to our earth” [no. 245].

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As a result, Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato si’* has given us an approach to the most important issues of ecology. This view is both realistic and mystical, or evangelical. It has been presented in Christ’s light, with the simplicity of the truth and love of life, also earthly life, and with the light of beauty, the beauty of God, man, the Earth and the universe. Integral ecology is, in Pope Francis’s opinion, God’s commandment to believers and non-believers alike, referring to both non-personal and personal human world. True ecology springs from the reality of creation, from love of God and man, from the participation of man in the act of creation and, last but not least, from the sense of self-preservation of the human being.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Zarys wszechświata personalistycznego* (Warszawa: PAX, 1985), 164; John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 8.

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