

The Integral Ecology of *Laudato si'* as a New Framework for Social Sustainability Values

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Summary

The Encyclical Letter Laudato si' On Care for Our Common Home gathers to dialogue all people, organizations and institutions that share the same concern — the care for our common home. Since Pope Francis promulgated Laudato si' in 2015, many people have become better informed about Catholic social teaching which advocates concern for God's creation, the environment included. In Laudato si' Pope Francis describes what is happening to our common home, then considers a theological and sociological approach to today's crisis — the responsibility of humanity — and examines the concept of “integral ecology” as a new social sustainability values framework. In this paper integral ecology is conceptually inseparable from integral society. The great contribution by environmental sociology is emphasized since the subject of analysis thereof are the social causes and effects of environmental change. In the encyclical Laudato si' Pope Francis promotes the principle of the “common good” on three levels — individual, social, and global — in which we find all elements of the Church's social doctrine, such as solidarity and subsidiarity, the common good, justice, participation and “commitment” to the poor.

Keywords: Laudato si'; environmental sociology; integral ecology; Catholic social teaching

Introduction

This paper introduces the implications of the ecological crisis in a sociological and theological framework in which the Pope's encyclical *Laudato si'*, the social doctrine of the Church and the sociological dichotomy of “society/sustainabi-

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lity” is also placed. The encyclical letter will serve as a reference framework for interpreting ecology as a whole in accordance with its perspective on new social values. Ecology as such is presented in the paper as a new paradigm uniting the ecological crisis and the new value system by means of the social and civilizational origins thereof, while Franciscan eco–theology is depicted as a community of persons inspired by Saint Francis’ *Canticle of the Creatures*, supporting a more inclusive vision of the moral community. Nowadays, there is no doubt that man is the cause of a systematic pollution of planetary proportions which, furthermore, has demonstrated a tendency of constant growth and the destruction of ecosystems. One of the fundamental features of modern society is that all social changes are driven by technical achievements.¹ Today’s scientific and technical approach to the unquestionable supremacy of nature due to the primacy of profit, is precisely what forms the fundamental development principle of the technocratic paradigm, wherein it is difficult to distinguish between the world of human culture in nature and nature in the world of human culture.

1. *Sustainability indicators*

According to Lumbreras et al. (2021, 5) »sustainability indicators are measurable aspects of environmental, economic, or social systems that are useful for monitoring changes in system characteristics relevant to the continuation of human and environmental wellbeing«. The ability to engage the broader scientific community requires sociologists to be familiar with the specific tools, knowledge, and approaches that others bring to the study of climate change (Nagel et al., 2010, 27). The ecological crisis and climate change are deeply connected with historical factors, i.e. the historical role of industrialization and the human approach to it. Accordingly, the impact of scientific views applied to human nature has been enormous, after the great disruption linked to sociobiology. Later, developments in genetics, neuroscience, and evolutionary studies were applied in order to better explain human traits (Lumbreras et al., 2). Throughout the history of mankind, technological developments have always served humans as well as society in all their needs, but today there has been developed a model of “technocratic management” that goes beyond the concept of “good living” which Pope Francis presents in his encyclical *Laudato si'* (LS) emphasizing the demiurge–like dimension of technology. Instead of being the subject, man, through technology, becomes his own object, clearly distancing himself from the moral structure that makes him a co–creator in the image of God (Priault, 2018) thereby endangering both the environment and himself. In this sense, the encyclical provides a warning in regard to a number of ecological devastation processes

1 The “socio–technical” thinking of Bostrom et al. (1977) — in what they called a fit between ‘social’ sub–systems (comprised of structures and people aspects) and ‘technical’ sub–systems (comprised of processes and technology aspects) — shows that balanced attention should be given to both technical and social aspects.

and their reflection on nature and humans. Consequently, social action must be viewed at the micro and macro levels, whereby sociological theories greatly help us understand these relationships.

1.1. Sociology and the new dialogue with theology

Hence, in this paper we focus in particular on the three levels of theories of everyday life in sociology and the representatives thereof — micro, meso, and macro.² Thus, we are looking at sociology in the context of a socio-humanistic discipline as regards the issues and phenomena of modern man's daily life whereby sociology is brought into an interdisciplinary dialogue with theology. Theology plays an important role in this context, for which there are several reasons. Namely, the theology of creation itself already refers to care for the environment and values such as: care for the land on which — and owing to which — people live; respect for all creatures and preservation of the terrestrial, as stated in the Bible, particularly in Genesis 1–2 (Wansbrough, 2018). Only when man is observed as one among other of God's creatures on Earth, with whom the entire human race forms a living community, is it possible to achieve a more complete picture of reality.

Furthermore, theology provides an account of the development of the industrial civilization modern which, together with the emergence of the social sciences, parallelly develops the social doctrine of the Church, whereby the encyclical *Rerum novarum* of Pope Leo XIII from 1891 is considered the beginning of official social teaching in the Catholic Church (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004). The encyclical letter *Rerum novarum*, within the framework of its time, has signified a great breakthrough for the Church into the modern social area, setting reliable guidelines for a proper resolution of so-called social issues — primarily workers' issues and their rights at that time. Finally, Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato si'* makes it clear that the ecological crisis stems from modern man's moral crisis, about which Pope John Paul II had previously spoken in his famous encyclical, anniversary *Centesimus annus* promulgated on the centenary of *Rerum novarum* (John Paul II, 1990). In the Encyclical *Laudato si'* Pope Francis directly proposes a model of culture that includes the concept of “good living”, and the path of ecological conversion, in other words, living a vocation that involves preserving God's creation at least in part, which could be called the “Franciscan Way”, the path Saint Francis followed and lived.

1.2. Franciscan eco-theology

Saint Francis managed to find the key with which to admire all of creation, thus leaving us a legacy of a complete ecology, an approach which attributes intrinsic value to all creation and implies man's harmony with all creatures. Na-

2 Schütz (1967) and Berger and Luckmann (1972), major influences on American symbolic interactionism, focused on mechanisms that underpin interaction in everyday life.

mely, Saint Francis did not see nature as a large warehouse of various kinds of goods that can be simply seized according to one's whims, rather, it is given to man primarily to be managed thoughtfully and guided with wisdom and respect. It was Saint Pope John Paul II who proclaimed Saint Francis of Assisi the patron saint of animals and the environment and, in accordance with his attitude towards brotherhood with all divine creatures and poverty, set him as an example to all Christians of true and utter respect for the integrity of all creation. This placed the concept of "poverty" and "all creation" into a new social dimension of brotherhood, peace and poverty: »As a friend of the poor who was loved by God's creatures, Saint Francis invited all of creation — animals, plants, natural forces, even Brother Sun and Sister Moon — to give honor and praise to the Lord. The poor man of Assisi gives us striking witness that when we are at peace with God, we are better able to devote ourselves to building up that peace with all creation which is inseparable from peace among all peoples« (John Paul II, 1990, no. 16).

1.3. Saint Francis' understanding of poverty and equality

It is only Saint Francis' understanding of poverty that carries a deeper meaning than that of modern man today. Saint Francis would not stop only to give alms to the poor, sick and other marginalized groups, but to meet them, stay with them in the true sense and to serve them. As a true disciple of Christ, he followed the poor Jesus in the poor, who, according to the Epistle of Saint Paul to the Philippians, made himself a servant in order to be like men (Phil. 2:6–7). Therefore, when a man comes to the realization of the limitations of his existence and his power, or when he becomes aware of the fact that he does not exist on his own, he is consequently confronted with the true notion of poverty. To be poor means to have a humble heart that can accept the state of a limited and sinful creature so that the temptation of omnipotence over man and ultimately over all creatures, may be overcome. If poverty is understood in this way, it becomes »the yardstick that allows us to judge how best to use material goods and to build relationships that are neither selfish nor possessive« (Francis, 2017, no. 4). This results in understanding the poverty of the spirit which then becomes the intrinsic reason for the very survival of each individual being. Survival as such can only flow from God's pure love and benevolence towards all creation. In this relationship, we also see Saint Francis' notion of brotherhood. Saint Francis envisioned that all beings, because of their common origin and common purpose, are on a journey towards the eternal, and so it seemed to him necessary to develop a sense of true brotherhood with all that surrounds us. From this perspective it can be said that the premise of acknowledging all as being the fruit of God's love and benevolence enabled Saint Francis to present himself as brother to all creatures, thus transcending his very being (Tomašević, 2020). Therefore, his attitude towards poverty and its connection to fraternity is entirely Christian and is deeply mystical. In this context, the Franciscan experience transports us to the ontology of totality itself, wherein Francis finds himself in a brotherly embrace with beings,

with people and with God. Saint Francis' notion of poverty offers the discovery of a new dimension — the dimension of equality. This dimension reveals that God has given man a certain role in the created world — that of ruler of all creation on Earth. However, this does not mean that other creatures do not have a specific role likewise assigned to them. There is nothing in the world that is superfluous, accidental or purposeless. This points to the fact that Saint Francis' understanding of poverty and equality has a deeper meaning than the one he lived, which is why Saint Francis perceived no humiliation in referring to every creature on Earth as his brother or sister. This is exactly the reason why Saint Francis, as the creator of the *Canticle of the Creatures*,³ calls all that God has created his brother or sister: the sun and the moon, the earth and the air, water and fire, animals and plants.

2. *Laudato si' in the context of social ecology and climate change*

Therefore, when we apply Franciscan eco–theology today in the context of the integral ecology promoted by Pope Francis in the encyclical *LS*, we encounter two realities of Saint Francis that are deeply interwoven into the value system of the encyclical *LS*. Namely, that only with a true spirit of obedience and humility does man enter into unity with all creation and then with his Creator. Nature, as the work of a divine creative act, is by no means meant to compete with man. Secondly, all creatures are equal because all are created by the same Creator. In creating the universe and the world in which He created both the animate and inanimate, as the Book of Genesis tells us, He »saw that it was good« (Gen. 1:4.10.12.18.21.25). Therefore, Pope Francis speaks of holistic ecology as the new paradigm of a value system from which the values of the “holistic man” derive, a man who embraces the concept of “good living” in which an integral understanding of solidarity is inherent in the theology and morals of the Catholic Church. This is the foundation for the definition of holistic human development within all scientific disciplines (Turkson, 2019) which approach integral ecology in search of a new framework for social sustainability values. Therefore, in order to understand integral ecology today, we must be aware of the fact that integral ecology recognizes our interrelatedness as being complex and evokes a response to the suffering in our world by integrating social, economic and environmental approaches to social justice.

Today, we cannot extract environmental issues from individual human, family, societal, urban or political contexts. Therefore, it is understandable that environmental issues play an extremely specific role in the thought structure of individuals. In this sense, we cannot speak of the involvement of individuals and

3 This “poem” is one of the first literary works in the Italian vernacular, which was a type of “*lauda*” in which Saint Francis expresses his gratitude to God, and invites all creatures, as well as the elements of the Earth to praise God the Creator. See: <http://franciscanseculars.com/the-canticle-of-the-creatures/>.

groups if we have not previously taken into account their values and ideological choices, both on the individual psychological level and on the level of their relationship with society, but with nature as well. In this respect, sociology increasingly provides certain answers to the questions of environmental ethics and the development of a new discourse between contemporary global culture and nature. In the historical context of sociology, it was considered that the concept of the “social” could be explained only by the “social”, whereby the notion was always “independent” in relation to the natural. However, the ecological crisis has shown that self-sufficiency and independence from the “social” is questionable, therefore contemporary sociology has a two-fold challenge with regard to ecology: firstly, to question the reflective relationship of basic concepts in the history of the profession, and secondly, for sociology not to deny the reality of ecological problems, nor to maintain the hierarchical dualism of nature and society as its basis, but to strive to renew the critical theory of society. This means that the potential of sociology is to be found in the process of an interdisciplinary treatment of issues (which means including and accepting contributions by the social sciences and humanities) and should include critical questioning of the dominant pattern of interpretation and its structural basis. When it comes to environmental issues, sociology has the primary task of discovering how environmental problems are socially constructed and of striving to find processes and social relationships that can limit such constructs. In the context of integral ecology, the encyclical LS emphasizes the importance of the relationship between man, nature and God, contained in the phrase “everything is connected”. Pope Francis poses the question of ecology together with Saint John XXIII in his encyclical *Pacem in terris* which, for the first time, mentions a danger to the world and its survival (PT), while the encyclical LS covers ecology, which is treated not only bioethically, theologically, or philosophically, but also sociologically. This is most noticeable in the fact that the three ecologies of the individual — the ecology of the individual based on society, the biosphere, and individual ecology (the individual’s relationship to himself) — are represented in the LS encyclical through the “environment–society–individual” triangle in relation to the Creator. In sociological discourse, when we speak of social ecology, it is seen as the basis for a “humane ecology”,⁴ in which climate change is a global issue with serious environmental, social, and economic implications.

3. *Climate as a common good*

Climate is »a common good, belonging to all and meant for all«, as Pope Francis highlights in LS, admonishing that climate change is a »global issue with grave environmental, social, economic and divisive implications«. There is no

4 In the late 1970s sociologists William R. Catton and Riley E. Dunlap were arguing for a “new human ecology” or environmental sociology, continuing the tradition of Park and Burgess (Gross, 2004).

doubt that the human race has found itself threatened by climate change because man has undertaken a dominant role over the created world — or all of creation — forgetting that he was not meant to be a ruthless master who exploits and exhausts, but a wise and responsible master. »Yahweh God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate and keep it«, we read in the Book of Genesis (Gen. 2:15), in the second account of Creation, which is Paradise on earth. From the Book of Genesis through to the Book of Revelation, the earth is presented as a fundamental concept and seems always and everywhere to be a point of reference. The expulsion from the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3), the account of the conflict between Cain and Abel (Gen. 4:1–16), and the narrative of the building of the Tower of Babel with its tragic consequences (Gen. 11:1–9), speak of violence as man's original sin against his fellow man and the earth. In our postmodern world, changes in values, especially the thesis of the shift from materialistic to postmaterialist values, are not only considered as positivist cognition, but the eternal human need for new and firm strongholds. Consequently, social ecology, in the context of integral ecology as promoted by Pope Francis in the encyclical *LS*, increasingly occupies a position of sustainability by means of the notion of solidarity in which solidarity is firmly and emphatically linked to responsibility. In this sense, Saint John Paul II, in the encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (Social Care) from 1987, speaks of solidarity as follows: »It is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good. That is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all« (SRS 38). Such commitment to the common good of “everyone”, the responsibility for “everything” includes all of creation.

4. *Laudato si' and the social doctrine of the Church*

The principle of the “common good” (*bonum commune*) is constantly present in Catholic social teaching (Wright, 2017). The commonly accepted meaning, as stated in the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, is as follows: »the common good indicates ‘the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily’« (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004, 164). The common good is binding for every single member of society, such that every man is responsible in accordance with his abilities to work at achieving and developing the same. This is not easy to accomplish because a permanent quest for another's good is required to the extent that the others' good is likened to one's own. In the encyclical *LS*, Pope Francis promotes this principle of the “common good” on three levels — individual, social, and global — in which we find all elements of the Church's social doctrine, such as solidarity and subsidiarity, the common good, justice, participation, and “commitment” to the poor. Starting from man as a person who is both an individual and a social being, Catholic social doctrine contains some principles in relation to social reality which are intertwined and upon which Pope Francis puts particular emphasis in his encyclical *LS*, namely,

the dignity of every man, his right to life in the context of “natural rights”, and the building of a society on principles of solidarity, the virtue of justice, and inclusion (Schallenberg, 2020). The fact remains that the direct relationship between man, nature, and God, as we find in pre–modern societies, is disappearing in contemporary society.

5. Modern society and climate change

Modern man’s relationships are becoming more abstract and strongly mediated by technological culture and the progress thereof. Today, the mediation of technology in interpersonal relationships has advanced to the point where objective reality has been replaced by virtual reality, and man has become increasingly disconnected from the natural world. We find ourselves faced with a paradox — man objectively depends more on nature and subjectively experiences it less. Within this relationship, the relationship with the Creator of all creation is lost. The consequence of this relationship is that man has begun to perceive nature as a “source of utility” instead of a “spiritual heritage”. Therefore, in the encyclical LS, climate change and biodiversity loss are linked and intertwined. Pope Francis places a particular emphasis on these from the perspective of integral ecology. Climate is »a common good, belonging to all and meant for all« (LS 23), and the consequences of climate change — Pope Francis predicts — will be felt by developing countries in the coming decades because they are heavily dependent on natural resources from ecosystems, and have no other economic potential or goods which would enable them to adapt to climate change. The Pope’s messages and warnings on excessive consumption and waste, i.e. consumerism and uncontrollable growth, which cause global warming, make clear the manner in which such processes significantly affect the most vulnerable groups within our society (LS 23). The Pope also points out the connection between poverty and the fragility of our planet and encourages the search for new models of development which will value the whole of creation. These are the focus of interest of the LS encyclical. The justice that Pope Francis speaks of in LS refers primarily to the equitable division between the global north and the global south which is due to economic inequality and the disproportionate use of natural resources.

Conclusion

What we nowadays call the “ecological crisis” is only the culmination of the moral destruction of modern society and technical civilization. Today, the notion of “environment” transcends political, legal, and human boundaries, as every human being on planet Earth faces large–scale challenges, such as climate change, droughts, floods, pollution, and biodiversity loss. It is the notion of holistic ecology which imposes a new value system that is at odds with anthropocentrism, which, according to the Western understanding of development and progress,

has led to negative consequences for the natural environment and man himself. Although technical achievements nowadays seem stronger than ever, they completely overshadow all other forms of human existence, and modern man with his technical advances — in the name of this kind of progress — is consequently exterminating countless species: seas and oceans are polluted and air, water, and food are contaminated. This is the manner in which the holistic human development life network is being destroyed. In this regard there are recognizable, unequivocal, and meaningful demands for a change in attitude towards all creation.

Today, modern society would do well to embrace the principles of human dignity, solidarity, and subsidiarity which are based on Catholic social teaching. With a knowledge of these social principles, we shall be better armed and informed as to how to articulate the Catholic vision of reality in the current socio-ecological crisis.

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*Cjelovita ekologija u Laudato si' kao novi okvir društvenih vrijednosti za održivost
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Sažetak

Enciklika Laudato si' o brizi za naš zajednički dom dovodi do dijaloga sve ljude, organizacije i institucije koje dijele zajedničku zabrinutost — skrb za naš zajednički dom. Otkako je papa Franjo 2015. godine predstavio encikliku Laudato si', mnogi su dobili bolji uvid o načinu na koji socijalni nauk Crkve zagovara skrb za okoliš i sve stvoreno. U socijalnoj enciklici Laudato si' papa Franjo opisao je što se danas događa s našim zajedničkim domom, a zatim se je osvrnuo na teološko i sociološko shvaćanje današnje krize, čovjekove odgovornosti te je predstavio koncept “cjelovite ekologije” kao novoga okvira društvenih vrijednosti za održivost. U ovom radu sociologija se stavlja u interdisciplinarni kontekst s teologijom s obzirom na pojave koje se povezuju s ekologijom i sociologijom svakodnevnoga života. Cjelovita ekologija je u ovom radu konceptualno neodvojiva od cjelovitoga društva, s jasnim naglaskom na glavni doprinos socijalne ekologije koja stavlja u predmet analize društvene uzroke i posljedice promjena u okolišu. U enciklici Laudato si' papa Franjo promiče načelo “općega dobra” kroz tri razine — individualnu, društvenu i globalnu — u kojima nalazimo, uz već spomenuto “opće dobro” i druga načela socijalnoga nauka Crkve kao što su solidarnost, supsidijarnost, pravo, sudjelovanje i “briga” za siromašne.

Ključne riječi: Laudato si'; sociologija okoliša; cjelovita ekologija; socijalni nauk Crkve

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