Dimensions of an Integral Ecology
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In 1971, Blessed Paul VI prophetically invited Christians to turn to “new perceptions in order to take on responsibility, together with the rest of men, for a destiny which from now on is shared by all.” The new perception of “a wide-ranging social problem which concerns the entire human family” was entitled The environment. In language which might now sound antiquated, the Holy Father wrote with prescience, depth and wisdom:

While the horizon of man is thus being modified according to the images that are chosen for him, another transformation is making itself felt, one which is the dramatic and unexpected consequence of human activity. Man is suddenly becoming aware that by an ill-considered exploitation of nature he risks destroying it and becoming in his turn the victim of this degradation. Not only is the material environment becoming a permanent menace – pollution and refuse, new illness and absolute destructive capacity – but the human framework is no longer under man's control, thus creating an environment for tomorrow which may well be intolerable.²

Thus the irrational exploitation of nature not only seriously damages the material environment, but also poses a serious human social problem. The timely message of Pope Paul VI, largely unheeded by economic and political decision-makers for decades, would need repeating and underlining until our own day.

For the purpose of our Conference on Human and Natural Ecology, to me it seems both relevant and fascinating that, from the first explicit utterances of the Magisterium on the topic, the Holy Fathers have effectively been speaking of integral ecology, to such an extent that, nearly 50 years later, we do well to ask ourselves, “Why does it seem necessary for Catholics to add two important adjectives – ‘human’ and ‘natural’ – when we’re talking about ecology? Who has ‘put asunder’ what seems to have been whole, integral and inter-related from the start?

My guess is that, slow to pick up the concerns stated by Blessed Paul VI and reiterated with greater and greater vigour by his successors, Catholic leaders, thinkers and teachers have allowed others to appropriate, to narrow, to distort and to reduce ecological discourse to such a point that – moments before the promulgation of the first Encyclical on the Environment – it seems timely to hold a Church-sponsored Conference to explore the terms and, especially, to insist on the and between “human” and “natural” when speaking of ecology.

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² Paul VI, Octogesima Adveniens (1971), § 21.
There are four components to consider: I) what is an encyclical? II) what is ecology? III) what kind of ecology? and IV) in conclusion: let us pray.

I) What is an encyclical (not)?

In the early centuries the term ‘encyclical’ was applied, not only to papal letters, but to certain letters emanating from bishops or archbishops and directed to their own flocks or to other bishops. The latter, addressed by an Ordinary to all his subjects, are now commonly called pastorals.

According to its etymology, an encyclical (from the Greek *egkyklios, kyklos* meaning a circle) is basically a circular letter. This form of Apostolic Letter has long been in occasional use. In modern times, the term “encyclical” is used almost exclusively for certain important papal documents.

For example, *Pacem in Terris* is addressed to “our Venerable Brethren the Patriarchs, Primates, Archbishops, Bishops and all other local ordinaries who are at peace and in communion with the Apostolic See” while *Caritas in Veritate* simply starts, “to the Bishops”. This is an important clue: the *Bishops* are the first to receive an Encyclical, make it their own, and transmit it to their people and, indeed, to all the people in their area.

Encyclicals are also used in the Anglican Church for important texts, and from the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew we have the great example of his two-page “Encyclical on Ecology.”

Thus, an encyclical is magisterial. It is not what is usually meant by “policy” or “programme” or “advocacy”, even though – as appropriated by the Church, its dioceses, parishes, associated groups and movements and perhaps even by others – it can and hopefully will nourish advocacy and have implications for policies and programmes at every level. Thanks to its solid persuasiveness but thanks, even more, to its power (authority) to address minds and hearts, an Encyclical is more like a Gospel.

II) What is ecology? Here are five inter-related key words:

*Environment* comes from the French *virer*, “to turn” or “to veer,” and *environ* “around,” from which we get “to turn round” and finally “surroundings.” *Environment* not only refers to all the surrounding conditions that influence botanical, biological and human life but also suggests that we pay ever more careful attention to how pollution might damage them.

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3 Bartholomew, Encyclical on Ecology for the Church New Year, 1.09.2012
http://www.patriarchate.org/documents/encyclical-of-his-all-holiness-for-the-church-new-year
Eco are three letters from the Greek oikos, which means “home or household”. To me “home” and “household” are thoroughly human notions evoking the family, life from conception to death, nourishment, communion, hospitality leading towards community and society. At the risk of over-simplifying, to me it seem that saying “human ecology” is to say ‘human’ twice.

Ecology starts with “eco” and then adds logos, which is “discourse, meaning, sense.” So ecology is meaningful talk about our home the earth. The modern term “ecology” was introduced by the biologist Ernest Häckel in 1869. It is the scientific study of living beings in relationship with their surroundings. Being “a wondrous work of the Creator,” the natural environment contains “a ‘grammar’ which sets forth ends and criteria for its wise use, not its reckless exploitation”.

Pope Francis, like Pope Emeritus Benedict, relates ecology to two other words beginning with more or less the same letters. Economy starts with oikos and adds nomos, “rule” or “law”; and ecumenical builds on oikos to become oikoumenē gē, “the whole inhabited world” and all its inhabitants including our descendants. The three words beginning with oikos imply how we should dwell and behave here on our planet – we are members of one household common to all.

Moreover, each of the five key words suggests a quality or virtue that we need in order to embrace God’s gift of nature:

- eco / oikos recognizes dignity,
- environment calls for awareness,
- ecology enjoins responsibility,
- economy requires justice, and
- ecumenical hearkens to unity, not only global but also intergenerational.

Thus, in addition to their definitional meanings, these five key words also contain suggestive clues for appreciating Catholic social teaching on the environment. It is not a narrow or reductionist or “trendy” ecology, but rather a broad, generous and deep ecology that we need in order to comprehend reality – natural, social, human, etc. – in all its complexity and inter-relatedness and deep unity. So our eco-logos is profoundly human, it is abundantly environmental, it is realistically economic, and it is strategically ecumenical! We are called to protect and care for and evangelize all creation and the whole human person. These concepts are reciprocal and, together, they make for authentic and sustainable human development. To speak about human and environmental ecology is to speak about a great deal!

III) What kind of ecology?

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5 Cf. Mark 16:15.
If we agree that environmental language and action are all-embracing should avoid extremes, this raises the question: What are the proper boundaries?

Vatican II affirmed that “God intended the earth with everything contained in it for the use of all human beings and peoples.”

In the early 90s, building on Vatican II and the teaching of Blessed Paul VI, Saint Pope John Paul II gave eloquent expression to environmental concern: “People are rightly worried — though much less than they should be — about preserving the natural habitats of the various animal species threatened with extinction, because they realize that each of these species makes its particular contribution to the balance of nature in general.”

He then masterfully broadened and deepened the scope: “In addition to the irrational destruction of the natural environment, we must also mention the more serious destruction of the human environment... Too little effort is made to safeguard the moral conditions for an authentic ‘human ecology’.”

Pope Benedict XVI went on to develop “the links between natural ecology, or respect for nature, and human ecology. Experience shows that disregard for the environment always harms human coexistence, and vice versa.”

And the vital importance of human ecology rests in this: to “protect mankind from self-destruction... If there is a lack of respect for the right to life and to a natural death, if human conception, gestation and birth are made artificial, if human embryos are sacrificed to research, the conscience of society ends up losing the concept of human ecology and, along with it, that of environmental ecology.”

Indeed how could one claim to bring about peace, the integral development of peoples or even the protection of the environment without defending the life of those who are weakest, beginning with the unborn. Every offence against life, especially at its beginning, inevitably causes irreparable damage to development, peace and the environment.

Divine revelation is our guide to human nature: “Nature expresses a design of love and truth. It is prior to us, and it has been given to us by God as the setting for our life. Nature speaks to us of the Creator (cf. Rom 1:20) and his love for humanity. It is destined to be ‘recapitulated’ in Christ at the end of time (cf. Eph 1:9-10; Col 1:19-20). Thus it too is a ‘vocation.’ Nature is at our disposal … as a gift of the Creator who has given it an inbuilt order, enabling man to draw from it the principles needed in order ‘to till it and keep it’ (Gen 2:15).”

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6 Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, § 69.
7 John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, § 38.
Here is the crucial correlation: “The way humanity treats the environment influences the way it treats itself, and vice versa… [T]he decisive issue is the overall moral tenor of society”\textsuperscript{13} which eventually but inevitably affects the health of the planet. Pope Benedict’s messages on environment and ecology guide a sound understanding which consistently keeps the human within nature (not opposed or neglected) and gratefully acknowledges nature as work and gift of the Creator. What perspective could be more important than this!

A week after his election, Pope Francis declare the Catholic Church to be “conscious of the responsibility which all of us have for our world, for the whole of creation, which we must love and protect.”\textsuperscript{14}

In his first Easter message \textit{urbi et orbi}, the Pope wished “Peace to the whole world, torn apart by … the iniquitous exploitation of natural resources! Peace to this our Earth! May the risen Jesus bring comfort to the victims of natural disasters and make us responsible guardians of creation.”\textsuperscript{15}

In June 2013, in a General Audience on World Environment Day, Pope Francis reflected on the multiplication of the five loaves and two fish. “And this tells us that when the food was shared fairly, with solidarity, no one was deprived of what he needed, every community could meet the needs of its poorest members. Human and environmental ecology go hand in hand.”\textsuperscript{16}

Now, nearly two years later, everyone should already be able to guess at the content of the Encyclical about to be promulgated. In addition to \textit{Evangelii Gaudium}, Pope Francis has spoken or written about this topic at least 25 times since his election. The encyclical will (i) help us to deepen our faith and spirituality, our bonds of fraternity and solidarity with all our fellow inhabitants and all future generations; (ii) help to turn our partial and fragmented knowledge into the best possible wisdom; and (iii) motivate us to act committedly in our cities, towns and villages and in our organizational, family and personal lives, with greatest political responsibility, internationally and nationally, policy-wise and economically.

The timing of the new encyclical is significant: 2015 is a critical year for humanity. In July, nations will gather for the Third International Conference on Financing for Development in Addis Ababa. In September, the U.N. General Assembly should agree on a new set of sustainable development goals running until 2030. In December, the Climate Change Conference in Paris will receive the plans and commitments of each Government to slow or reduce global warming. The months of 2015 are crucial, then, for decisions about care for or stewardship of the earth, about effective commitment to international development and human flourishing.

\textsuperscript{13} Benedict XVI, \textit{Caritas in Veritate}, § 51.
\textsuperscript{14} Francis, \textit{Address} to the representatives of the Church, Ecclesial Community and of the different Religions, 20/03/2013.
\textsuperscript{15} Francis, Easter Sunday, \textit{Urbi et Orbi}, 31/03/2013.
\textsuperscript{16} Pope Francis, \textit{Address} to General Audience, 5.06.2013
The last important meeting towards a climate change agreement took place in Lima. This is how Pope Francis evaluated it: “The meeting in Perú was nothing great” (15.1.15). There was no lack of scientific evidence or concrete steps proposed. But there was a desperate lack of so-called “political will”. “I was disappointed by the lack of courage; things came to a stop at a certain point.” For the decision-making needs to go well beyond the term of office of current governments and well beyond their national boundaries, and it also needs to include the needs and interests of future generations. Binding regulations, effective policies, and measurable targets are the necessary means and tools.

Never before in history have the Holy Father and the Catholic Church weighed in so explicitly on a vast global process underway. “The important thing is that there be a bit of time between the issuing of the encyclical and the meeting in Paris, so that it can make a contribution…. Let’s hope that in Paris the delegates will be more courageous and will move forward with this.”

**In conclusion: let us pray**

At every Eucharist, at the Offertory, the celebrant offers the bread with these words: “Blessed are you, Lord God of all Creation, for through your goodness we have received the bread we offer you, fruit of the earth and work of human hands. It will become for us the bread of life.” How does this familiar prayer strike you? For me it expresses the dynamic relationships in which we exist and act, receive and give, pray and work. In these words we have the whole universe, the fruitful earth and a bit of bread, God’s generosity and human work and our offering …

Then the III Eucharist Prayer opens like this, “You are indeed Holy, O Lord, and all you have created rightly gives you praise.” The Italian puts it more succinctly, “O Father truly holy, to You be praise from every creature.” How is it that, over 40 years a priest, I never before noticed how we are called to be fully engaged, as fellow creatures with the universe and all it contains, in offering praise and thanksgiving to our Creator, through Jesus Christ His Son our Lord. To me it seems that our worship, as expressed in both Offertory and Canon, is far ahead of our praxis in ecology and stewardship.

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17 Pope Francis, *Response* to Gerry O’Connell during the Press Conference on-board the flight from Colombo to Manila, 2015.01.15
18 “Padre veramente santo, a Te la lode da ogni creatura.”