

March 2, 2023

Excerpts from “Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home” (2015)

**Context:** “Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home” is an encyclical\* letter of Pope Francis. “Laudato Si’” was the first encyclical to be promulgated through both standard ecclesial channels and globalized social media platforms like Twitter, and the first to be addressed to “every person living on this planet.” The letter frames the global planetary crisis as a moral and spiritual crisis and proposes that solutions must be sought through an integral ecology; i.e. through a holistic approach stressing the connection of all parts of creation. Likewise, the letter stresses the importance of disciplinary collaborations and dialogue with other modalities of knowing to arrive at sustainable solutions. The passages below focus on models of economic growth, progress, and ethics.

*\*An encyclical is a pastoral letter written to the whole Roman Church, usually offering counsel on moral issues and/or existing doctrine.*

### Questions to Guide Your Reading:

- What are the problems Pope Francis identifies and what does he propose needs to be done?
- What are the ethical bases and imperatives behind his criticisms and proposals?
- How do you react to Pope Francis’s criticisms and proposals—as an individual? As a student in a particular discipline? As a professional in a particular field?
- Francis sees the “technocratic” (rule by technology) paradigm and the economic model of unlimited growth as two underlying causes for many of today’s crises. Do you agree with his assessment? Why or why not?

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106.<sup>1</sup> The basic problem goes even deeper: it is the way that humanity has taken up technology and its development *according to an undifferentiated and one-dimensional paradigm*. This paradigm exalts the concept of a subject who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object. This subject makes every effort to establish the scientific and experimental method, which in itself is already a technique of possession, mastery and transformation. It is as if the subject were to find itself in the presence of something formless, completely open to manipulation. Men and women have constantly intervened in nature, but for a long time this meant being in tune with and respecting the possibilities offered by the things themselves. It was a matter of receiving what nature itself allowed, as if from its own hand. Now, by contrast, we are the ones to lay our hands on things, attempting to extract everything possible from them while frequently ignoring or forgetting the reality in front of us. Human beings and material objects no longer extend a friendly hand to one another; the relationship has become confrontational. **This has made it easy to accept the idea of infinite or unlimited growth, which proves so attractive to economists, financiers and experts in technology.** It is based on the lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth’s goods, and this leads to the planet being squeezed dry beyond every limit. It is the false notion that “an infinite quantity of energy and resources are available, that it is possible to renew them quickly, and that the negative effects of the exploitation of the natural order can be easily absorbed”.[\[86\]](#)

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<sup>1</sup> For the full text, and to access the footnotes, go to:

[https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)

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107. It can be said that many problems of today’s world stem from the tendency, at times unconscious, to make the method and aims of science and technology an epistemological paradigm which shapes the lives of individuals and the workings of society. The effects of imposing this model on reality as a whole, human and social, are seen in the deterioration of the environment, but this is just one sign of a reductionism which affects every aspect of human and social life. We have to accept that 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. Decisions which may seem purely instrumental are in reality decisions about the kind of society we want to build.

108. The idea of promoting a different cultural paradigm and employing technology as a mere instrument is nowadays inconceivable. The technological paradigm has become so dominant that it would be difficult to do without its resources and even more difficult to utilize them without being dominated by their internal logic. It has become countercultural to choose a lifestyle whose goals are even partly independent of technology, of its costs and its power to globalize and make us all the same. Technology tends to absorb everything into its ironclad logic, and those who are surrounded with technology “know full well that it moves forward in the final analysis neither for profit nor for the well-being of the human race”, that “in the most radical sense of the term power is its motive – a lordship over all”.<sup>[87]</sup> As a result, “man seizes hold of the naked elements of both nature and human nature”.<sup>[88]</sup> Our capacity to make decisions, a more genuine freedom and the space for each one’s alternative creativity are diminished.

109. The technocratic paradigm also tends to dominate economic and political life. The economy accepts every advance in technology with a view to profit, without concern for its potentially negative impact on human beings. Finance overwhelms the real economy. The lessons of the global financial crisis have not been assimilated, and we are learning all too slowly the lessons of environmental deterioration. **Some circles maintain 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.** They are less concerned with certain economic theories which today scarcely anybody dares defend, than with their actual operation in the functioning of the economy. They may not affirm such theories with words, but nonetheless support them with their deeds by showing no interest in more balanced levels of production, a better distribution of wealth, concern for the environment and the rights of future generations. Their behaviour shows that for them maximizing profits is enough. **Yet by itself the market cannot guarantee integral human development and social inclusion.**<sup>[89]</sup> **At the same time, we have “a sort of ‘superdevelopment’ of a wasteful and consumerist kind which forms an unacceptable contrast with the ongoing situations of dehumanizing deprivation”,**<sup>[90]</sup> **while we are all too slow in developing economic institutions and social initiatives which can give the poor regular access to basic resources. We 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.**

110. The specialization which belongs to technology makes it difficult to see the larger picture. **The fragmentation of knowledge proves helpful for concrete applications, and yet it often leads to a loss of appreciation for the whole, for the relationships between things, and for the broader horizon, which then becomes irrelevant. This very fact makes it hard to find adequate ways of solving the more complex problems of today’s world, particularly those regarding the environment and the poor; these problems cannot be dealt with from a single perspective or**

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**from a single set of interests.** A science which would offer solutions to the great issues would necessarily have to take into account the data generated by other fields of knowledge, including philosophy and social ethics; but this is a difficult habit to acquire today. Nor are there genuine ethical horizons to which one can appeal. Life gradually becomes a surrender to situations conditioned by technology, itself viewed as the principal key to the meaning of existence. In the concrete situation confronting us, there are a number of symptoms which point to what is wrong, such as environmental degradation, anxiety, a loss of the purpose of life and of community living. **Once more we see that “realities are more important than ideas”.**[\[91\]](#)

111. Ecological culture cannot be reduced to a series of urgent and partial responses to the immediate problems of pollution, environmental decay and the depletion of natural resources. There needs to be 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. Otherwise, even the best ecological initiatives can find themselves caught up in the same globalized logic. To seek only a technical remedy to each environmental problem which comes up is to separate what is in reality interconnected and to **mask the true and deepest problems of the global system.**

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134. **Although no conclusive proof exists that GM cereals may be harmful to human beings, and in some regions their use has brought about economic growth which has helped to resolve problems, there remain a number of significant difficulties which should not be underestimated.** In many places, following the introduction of these crops, productive land is concentrated in the hands of a few owners due to “the progressive disappearance of small producers, who, as a consequence of the loss of the exploited lands, are obliged to withdraw from direct production”.[\[113\]](#) The most vulnerable of these become temporary labourers, and many rural workers end up moving to poverty-stricken urban areas. The expansion of these crops has the effect of destroying the complex network of ecosystems, diminishing the diversity of production and affecting regional economies, now and in the future. In various countries, we see an expansion of oligopolies for the production of cereals and other products needed for their cultivation. This dependency would be aggravated were the production of infertile seeds to be considered; the effect would be to force farmers to purchase them from larger producers.

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141. **Economic growth, for its part, tends to produce predictable reactions and a certain standardization with the aim of simplifying procedures and reducing costs. This suggests the need for an “economic ecology” capable of appealing to a broader vision of reality.** The protection of the environment is in fact “an integral part of the development process and cannot be considered in isolation from it”.[\[114\]](#) **We urgently need a humanism capable of bringing together the different fields of knowledge, including economics, in the service of a more integral and integrating vision.** Today, the analysis of environmental problems cannot be separated from the analysis of human, family, work-related and urban contexts, nor from how individuals relate to themselves, which leads in turn to how they relate to others and to the environment. There is an interrelation between ecosystems and between the various spheres of social interaction, demonstrating yet again that “the whole is greater than the part”.[\[115\]](#)

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193. In any event, if in some cases sustainable development were to involve new forms of growth, then in other cases, given the insatiable and irresponsible growth produced over many decades, we need also to think of containing growth by setting some reasonable limits and even retracing our steps before it is too late. **We know how unsustainable is the behaviour of those who constantly consume and destroy, while others are not yet able to live in a way worthy of their human dignity. That is why the time has come to accept decreased growth in some parts of the world, in order to provide resources for other places to experience healthy growth.** Benedict XVI has said that “technologically advanced societies must be prepared to encourage more sober lifestyles, while reducing their energy consumption and improving its efficiency”.[\[135\]](#)

194. For new models of progress to arise, there is a need to change “models of global development”;[\[136\]](#) this will entail a responsible reflection on “the meaning of the economy and its goals with an eye to correcting its malfunctions and misapplications”.[\[137\]](#) It is not enough to balance, in the medium term, the protection of nature with financial gain, or the preservation of the environment with progress. Halfway measures simply delay the inevitable disaster. Put simply, it is a matter of redefining our notion of progress. **A technological and economic development which does not leave in its wake a better world and an integrally higher quality of life cannot be considered progress.** Frequently, in fact, people’s quality of life actually diminishes – by the deterioration of the environment, the low quality of food or the depletion of resources – in the midst of economic growth. In this context, talk of sustainable growth usually becomes a way of distracting attention and offering excuses. It absorbs the language and values of ecology into the categories of finance and technocracy, and the social and environmental responsibility of businesses often gets reduced to a series of marketing and image-enhancing measures.