



## Lessons from Pope Francis' Laudato Si: Religious and Ecological Education Leading to Ecological Citizenship

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**Abstract:** Environmental degradation and destruction brought about by misuse of our natural resources and the environment is wreaking so much havoc. It is indubitable that the dreaded warning about climate change is being experienced right now. We are witnesses to extreme weather conditions all over the world. In one part of the globe there are famines and droughts with no rain for months and yet in other parts there is so much rain that it has caused flooding. In other places there are grass fires razing rural and even urban areas because of the extreme heat coupled with the strong winds; and yet miles away there are deadly snow storms causing harm to both lives and livelihood.

Pope Francis in his second encyclical, *Laudato Si: On the Care for Our Common Home* says that "Doomsday predictions can no longer be met with irony or disdain. We may well be leaving to coming generations debris, desolation and filth". (Francis, 2015) These end-of-the-world scenarios are strangely and alarmingly depicted in more and more motion pictures nowadays because they are really happening before our very eyes. In fact, it would seem that they should not be called science fiction anymore because they are real and factual, they are happening right now as we speak.

This paper would like to propose a simple program of study or outline that can be utilized by religious educators in formulating ways of including ecological education in their lessons, thus will ultimately lead their students to living and imbibing "Ecological Citizenship" inspired from the encyclical Laudato Si.

**Key Words:** Laudato Si; Environment; Religious Education; Ecological Education; Ecological Citizenship



## 1. INTRODUCTION

The encyclical *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home* of Pope Francis delves deep into the social teachings of Church on stewardship of creation and modern ways of approaching this crucial social issue. The encyclical is meant to tackle complex problems by suggesting holistic vantage points of how we are to best take care of everything that is important to us: life, livelihood, heritage and culture, which very much includes what we call "human flourishing".

When one reads the encyclical one is led to the idea that there should be a holistic way of seeing this advocacy and stewardship for creation and the environment. Indeed, "there is a loving awareness that we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures, but [are] joined in a splendid universal communion". (Pope Francis, 2016) The idea is very straightforward, everything is important and everything has to be given due concern and attention. From the environment around us - our God-given natural resources; to the poor on the streets; even the unborn in the womb or the convict on death row, all of them are part of creation. "If we destroy creation, creation will destroy us" according to Pope Francis, thus the fight for the environment and which definitely includes all of life and that which has life is not something that can be taken lightly, not even the back-seat in policy-making but it has to be given much weight and importance, as much weight as peace and order as important ingredients for both individual and collective flourishing and development.

Since the encyclical is barely three years of age, it was published last 2015 there has been but a few studies connecting it to religious education, or how the young are to be educated in what it mentions as "ecological education". Definitely, there are many who may see the encyclical more as a good resource and impetus for government policy-making when it comes to environmental and climate change mitigation initiatives but we have to skip that and focus on religious and ecological education which is one of the main themes in the document.

Brian Roewe mentions that in the US, numerous Catholic communities and religious organizations have compiled resources and guides to help individuals, reading groups, youth groups and parishes all digest what Pope Francis said in this encyclical. (Roewe, Brian, 2016) He re-echoes the reality of "throwaway culture" in today's present generation, not just when it comes to resources but even when it comes to how one deals with others in their particular relationships – "how it is easy to get rid of someone these days".

James Lang mentions that we should be hearing messages from the encyclical reverberate from the pulpit on Sundays, our children should be learning about it in their religious education classes (Lang, James, 2015). He reiterates that one of the key features of the encyclical focuses on the challenge of educating ourselves and our young people, about the damage we are doing to the earth and the like. On the bright side, there are countless young people who are working actively in support of environmental causes. This is a much needed respite from all the not so good news we hear nowadays about the destruction all around us. There are also young people who use their skills and giftedness have invented or discovered ways of dealing with the environmental degradation by finding ways to clean our oceans and cities; innovating ways of promoting sustainable means of livelihood or means of earning a living. Indeed, great changes in consumer habits of both young and old are needed in nurturing ecological sensitivity and a generous spirit. On the sad part, there are many young people especially in industrialized and affluent societies who are caught in the grip of consumerist and technological habits which contribute to destruction of our common home. This is thus for him an educational challenge. He continues to share that there is this compartmentalization among the youth, seemingly there is an irony of sorts: students who campaign passionately (and admirably) to save endangered species in some distant forest might not recognize the role that they play in contributing to the destruction of that creature's habitat through their purchase of some fashionable new clothing item. (Lang, James, 2015) He continues, "students incensed about the latest oil spill and its damage to the ocean might not see their own frequent driving habits implicated in the equation. Or those who protest against coal don't connect that with the air conditioner in their window". (Lang, James, 2015) Thus for him it is an imperative for us that we have to help young people recognize that "stewardship of the environment consists not only of political advocacy, but of recognizing the role that each of us play in the careful use of the earth's resources". Such education should of course begin at home, but Pope



Francis has called us teachers to the table as well as so-called second parents to our students. In his last couple of statements he gives a compelling challenge: "I challenge educators at schools and colleges and universities everywhere to give "Laudato Si" a close reading and consider whether it speaks to their hearts, and could find a way to inform their classrooms and curricula". (Lang, James, 2015)

The present editor of Logos, Michael C. Jordan gives compelling motivation about the pedagogical importance of the encyclical to religious education. He says that "a significant point of emphasis in the document [Laudato Si] that holds particular importance for Catholic universities around the world is its call for the cultivation of an "integral and integrating vision" that is necessary to address the development of an "integral ecology", and in so doing provides a fresh approach to the concept of the unity of knowledge that holds great importance for planning the curriculum especially in Catholic universities. (Jordan, Michael C., 2015)

The encyclical, poses a higher and more extensive opportunity to consider ways of redeveloping the soundness of the underlying plan for the entire curriculum, because while calling our attention to the global and social relevance of the academic disciplines it also highlights their necessary interdependence in the cultivation of a mode of understanding that is sufficient to encompass the environmental crisis. Clearly, the challenge of advocating an awareness of the interdependence of academic disciplines within the vision of the unity of knowledge, powerfully articulated by Blessed John Henry Newman in *The Idea of a University*, has long held importance for Catholic universities. (Jordan, Michael C., 2015) This is precisely the reason behind the way liberal arts are at the core of the curricula, and why we do what we do, or why we teach what we teach.

We cannot deny and close our eyes to the importance of liberal education that we recognize the classic situation in response to which liberal education has its historical and philosophical roots: human beings develop their intellectual and spiritual habits, orientation, and horizon from the culture in which they live and in most cases with no distinct awareness that their opinions are shaped by principles they have neither examined nor freely endorsed. Enabling students to recognize the existence of the epistemological paradigm within which they are operating and to consider and examine that paradigm critically is a goal that universities that function in the tradition of liberal education embrace. To illuminate the goal of liberal education with an eye toward fruitful and critical engagement with the dominant modes of thought that have contributed to the development of the global environmental crisis presents an opportunity for an unusually clear and urgent approach to liberal education. (Jordan, Michael C., 2015)

Catholic universities play a vital role in not just the lives of their students but that of the community and the Church, both local and universal, so much so that these universities that grant full participation to theological and faith based perspectives in their academic discourse (core courses) can extend such dialogue to encounters between religion and science through which fundamentally different or surprisingly integrated perspectives on the place of the human person in the world might arise. (Jordan, Michael C., 2015) Catholic universities are ideal sites for such dialogue and renewal to be pursued – a dialogue between religion and science, between faith and reason; between theology and the social sciences/humanities. There should not be any compartmentalization or fragmentation. Every thing is seen as a whole, like the way we see the curricula. The critique of the fragmentation of knowledge in the contemporary world is very familiar, and the encyclical gives a particularly emphatic position to that critique as it calls for an integral understanding that is sufficiently large to embrace the complexities of contemporary problems. (Jordan, Michael C., 2015)

## 2. MAIN CLAIM/S

The main claim of this paper is that the key concepts from *Laudato Si* can be contributory to incorporating ecological education in the curricula of theology, religious or values education subjects in the true spirit of the encyclical. As educators in a Catholic University, we are primarily religious educators and that there is a so-called *mandamus* in the Apostolic Exhortation *Ex Corde Ecclesiae: On Catholic Universities* of Pope John Paul II which says that "Christians among the teachers are called to be witnesses and educators of authentic Christian life, which evidences attained integration between faith and life, and between professional competence and Christian wisdom. All teachers are to be inspired by academic ideals and by the principles of an



authentically human life.” (Pope John Paul II, 1990)

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The method that was employed for this study was not just expository in nature (textual exposition) with key elements that will be culled directly from the primary text (the encyclical) and allied texts that will contribute to a better pedagogical rendering of the call and challenge to ecological education through religious education leading to living out one's calling to ecological citizenship; but also a reflective-practical way of putting into action the motivation from encyclical when it comes to ecological education.

The framework that will be used for this project will be along the lines of “Doing-Theology”, the See-Discern-Act process of social analysis according to the guidelines of the Catholic Social Teachings (Social Doctrine of the Church). There will be innovative ways of seeing things that will be proposed as a viable paradigm for the holistic pedagogical approach of ecological education.

### 4. FINDINGS

“Ecological Education”, according to Pope Francis is basically an education that bespeaks a promotion of the environment. (Seño, Reuel Rito, 2017) “Good education plants seeds when we are young, and these continue to bear fruit throughout life” (Francis, 2015). He stresses “the great importance of the family”, which is ‘the place in which life is seen as a gift from God’. (Seño, Reuel Rito, 2017) “The family has to be welcomed and protected against the many attacks to which it is exposed, and can develop in accordance with what constitutes authentic human growth. In the face of the so-called culture of death, the family is the heart of the culture of life” (Francis, 2015).

Ecological Education should be instilled in both young and old for it leads to a profound reality: “the relationship between human life and the moral law, which is inscribed in our nature and is necessary for the creation of a more dignified environment” (Francis, 2015). Pope Benedict XVI spoke of an “ecology of man”, based on the fact that “man too has a nature that he must respect and that he cannot manipulate at will” (Benedict XVI, 2011). This is definitely what is needed to be instilled in the curricula in our schools and universities – the need seeing beyond what the eyes can see - transcendence.

Pope Francis utilizes the three-fold step of doing theology See-Discern-Act or in other circles is called social analysis. This can be a very good paradigm to be mindful of when we read the encyclical or when we put into practice what we read from it. Definitely, this is already being practiced though not in the right way. When one reads *Laudato Si* one can use the See-Discern-Act. When one reads it one sees the interconnections between one element and the other. There is urgency in his words and yet we the readers are the ones to reflect on these words and put our discernment into well-formed decisions and actions both individually and collectively.

The following are five lessons or topics gleaned from *Laudato Si* that can be inserted or incorporated into theology, religious or values education classes:

**Integral Ecology:** “Destroy creation and creation will destroy you” says Pope Francis (Francis, 2015) is a powerful reminder of how everything is interconnected. There should be a holistic way of seeing this advocacy and stewardship of creation. “There is a loving awareness that we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures, but joined in a splendid universal communion” (Francis, 2015). The song “Pilgrim's Theme” can be a



good jumping board for this lesson with how it emphasizes listening to the “voice within” and how we are to find our place in the great scheme of things. Everything has a place in the great plan of the Creator. That is why we definitely try our best to follow the set of laws and rules that are promulgated by lawful authority for the common good coupled with the requirements of justice. Definitely, there is much room for creativity and innovation in so far as this freedom is meant to choose the true and the good. Indeed, the whole of creation should be taken cared for. We may fight animal cruelty but we may be silent about the life of the unborn; we may uphold the cleanliness of our own backyards but we dump trash on our neighbour’s lawn. We have to instill this in our students that a truly loving and caring person is also loving and caring of others, even of those who are unlovable or who do not even deserve it at all.

**Christian Humanism:** Humanism is simply defined as to put forward the promotion of the human person, which is good as long as it is kept in check and of the well-balanced type. But it has to be integral and solidary meaning that a humanism at the extremes can be very dangerous to civilization and human flourishing. We have to consider the whole human person, body-soul, mind-heart and that there is no dualism or leaning to one side. Secondly, it is very much in solidarity with the whole human family, it is against the individualism that is contrary to the spirit of global citizenship. (Seño, Reuel Rito, 2017) Yes, we do not say that the whole is more important than its parts. That would be totalitarianism. The individual is important and should be given much support and care but we do not belong just to ourselves, we belong to a human family and community. We belong to the society and that is part of who and what we are. The students have to be led to the truth of true humanism which is if I may say so is characteristically Christian, which is imbued with the true spirit of the Gospel of Jesus Christ – the spirit of mercy and compassion. We have to emphasize that sometimes there is a need to look beyond our family, our neighbourhood and even our country. Sometimes “clannish mentality” and ethnocentrism gets the best of us especially when we see ourselves and our community more important than others. There is a move towards this so-called global citizenship. We are part of this bigger circle of life which does not include only other individuals but even other creatures and natural resources and heritage as well.

**Clean-as-you-go Mentality:** This so-called “CLAYGO” that is being practiced in our cafeterias inside the campus and workplace can be a very good practice of imbibing that sense of mindfulness of our surroundings that we leave it clean and orderly before we leave and move on – we leave it as it is. Same way when we go outdoors camping, to the beach and even go trekking, this is basic wilderness etiquette which will definitely go a long way, far beyond just taking care of the environment. The students should be made to realize that this practice will also help in how we behave in urbanized areas or in city centres and the like. We try our very best not to throw trash and keep things in order. We do not take what is not ours and we respect ourselves and even others in the process. When we employ this CLAYGO mentality we are indeed practicing justice - to give what is due to ourselves and others.

**Importance Patience, Silence and Peaceful Living:** These virtues of patience, silence and promotion of peace are part of the core of the encyclical. We need to develop and imbibe the many values that are not only good for human flourishing but also for the good of the whole of creation because they make us more attuned to the sublime, to the things that we cannot see and fully fathom; the mysterious ways of nature. (Seño, Reuel Rito, 2017) “The continued acceleration of changes affecting humanity and the planet coupled with a more intensified pace of life and work is called ‘rapidification’ (Francis, 2015). We can see how this is very true today. With the rush-hour in our urban centres and cities we see that everyone is rushing and everyone is in a hurry. There is that need to speed up things not just the means of production and development but even life itself. We have to promote these with our students by giving them time for practicing contemplative silence in



class not asleep but very much awake yet quiet and keeping still. The practice of meditation can do wonders in both young and old for it soothes both the mind and the spirit and definitely helps them to be at ease, to concentrate with tasks given to them. Imbibing peace in oneself and with others is what our world needs right now. If we can only be “slow to speak and slow to anger” we can definitely avoid much conflict and anger among us.

**Simple Living:** Mahatma Gandhi once said “to live simply so that others may simply live” speaks of the call to simplicity of lifestyle. “Humanity is called to recognize the need for changes of lifestyle, production and consumption, in order to combat this warming (global warming) or at least the human causes which produce or aggravate it” (Francis, 2015). Contrary to a simple life is this “throwaway culture” which sees things as all trash to be discarded rather than that which can be reused, reduced and recycled. These problems are closely linked to a throwaway culture which affects the excluded just as it quickly reduces things to rubbish. If only we can try to save what we can and let not things go to waste there will be more needy people who will benefit with the surplus of our supplies because if the supply of basic commodities in the market remain high, demand will be low and so prices will remain low. More people will be able to buy what they need with the money they have. (Seño, Reuel Rito, 2017)

## 5. ANALYSIS

Ecological Education is and should always be aimed at imbibing “ecological citizenship”. We have to promote and incorporate the mentioned concepts that will lead to a new way of seeing and living our lives today. We have to facilitate the opening of the consciousness of our students to read not just the news, but to know what is happening in the world both politically and ecologically; think globally and not just fight for our nation's self-vested interests and have it always at the forefront of everything we do even at the great expense of the smaller and poorer nations. (Seño, Reuel Rito, 2017) This is a very radical way of looking at the way we see ourselves because it means that we have to let go not just of egocentrism but even ethnocentrism, and live as members of one human family. In fact, we are all connected in one way or another, through the inbreeding, mix marriages and extended family relations which cut across ethnicities, religions, cultures and economic backgrounds. (Seño, Reuel Rito, 2017)

## 6. CONCLUSION

We have high hopes that this paper will contribute to the eventuality of including ecological education in the curricula of both public and private schools and that it is feasible to find ways of incorporating these from basic up to tertiary education because “good education plants seeds when we are young, and these continue to bear fruit throughout life. We can start simply and yet surely. It can be a gradual even tedious process but it can be worth it. These can be good building blocks for a more robust curriculum that is keen environmentally and ecologically.

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