



Laudato Si': Chapter 3 – The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis

The third chapter, “The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis”, examines the twin notions of what it calls the “technocratic paradigm” and a “modern anthropocentrism” borne out of a view that sees nature as a mere given, devoid of any spiritual or transcendental value. These notions have led to the misplaced ideas that the earth’s resources are infinite and that economic growth and technology alone can solve global hunger and poverty. In reality, however, a purely materialistic view of reality has not only resulted in disregard for the environment, but also undermined the worth of a human life, especially those forms viewed as having little or no utility – human embryos, the poor, or people with disabilities.

At the heart of consumerist and profit-driven economic ideologies is a wrong-footed idea of dominion. The result is exploitation, and a throwaway attitude towards nature and human life itself. The encyclical calls for a bold cultural revolution in our attitude to development and progress. It puts it rather bluntly: “Nobody is suggesting a return to the Stone Age, but we do need to slow down and look at reality in a different way, to appropriate the positive and sustainable progress which has been made, but also to recover the values and the great goals swept away by our unrestrained delusions of grandeur.” [114].

Chapter 3 – “The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis”

a. Section I – After surveying the power that technology has given us, Francis seems to conclude that we cannot claim to have a sound ethics, a culture and spirituality genuinely capable of setting limits and teaching clear-minded self-restraint. (§105)

But just before that, he seems to reach an even stronger conclusion: human beings are not completely autonomous. Our freedom fades when it is handed over to the blind forces of the unconscious, of immediate needs, of self-interest, and of violence.

- Is Francis suggesting here that when we put our power in the service of these “blind forces” we are enslaving ourselves? Is this plausible?
- Later, we’ll see Rawls argue that human beings lose their autonomy when they surrender to “the contingencies and accidents of the world”. Is Francis saying something similar?

b. Section II – Francis argues that the human roots of the crisis reach deeper than an inability to set limits, that that inability is rooted in a way of looking at the world – the “technological” (§108) or “technocratic” (§§109, 112) paradigm.

- Explain the paradigm in your own words (HINT: see §106)
- Is Francis right to observe in §109 that this paradigm governs political and economic life?
- In §113, Francis says that “people no longer seem to believe in a happy future”. Is he right? If people don’t believe in a happy future, why don’t they? If they don’t because growth has slowed and middle class wages have stagnated, this would seem to tell against Francis’s point rather than for it.
- What is the “cultural revolution” Francis advocates in §114?

Chapter 3 Reflections:

INTEGRAL ECOLOGY

“Everything is connected. Concern for the environment thus needs to be joined to a sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society.” (no. 91)

“A true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor. (no. 49)

“We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature.” (no. 139)

Questions

1. Integral ecology links care for people and care for God’s creation. How is our concern for our fellow human beings connected to our concern for the environment?
2. Pope Francis encourages us to listen both to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor (no. 49). What happens when we are attuned to only one or the other?

Chapter 3 Reflections

CARE FOR PERSONS IN POVERTY

“Many of the poor live in areas particularly affected by phenomena related to warming, and their means of subsistence are largely dependent on natural reserves and ecosystemic services such as agriculture, fishing and forestry. They have no other financial activities or resources which can enable them to adapt to climate change or to face natural disasters, and their access to social services and protection is very limited. For example, changes in climate, to which animals and plants cannot adapt, lead them to migrate; this in turn affects the livelihood of the poor, who are then forced to leave their homes, with great uncertainty for their future and that of their children.

There has been a tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation. . . . Our lack of response to these tragedies involving our brothers and sisters points to the loss of that sense of responsibility for our fellow men and women upon which all civil society is founded.” (no. 25)

“The economy accepts every advance in technology with a view to profit, without concern for its potentially negative impact on human beings.” (no. 109)

“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.” (no. 194)

Questions

1. How are persons in poverty—who contribute to it the least—often impacted the worst by environmental devastation?
2. Why and how does our faith call us to respond?