



# ENCOUNTERS

A newsletter on faith, economy,  
and ecology

**August 2015**

In July, the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns (MOGC) offered a response to *Laudato Si'* ("Praised be"), Pope Francis' much-anticipated encyclical. *Ecological conversion: Called to hope, spurred to action* is based on previous MOGC statements, incorporates insights and reflections from Maryknoll missionaries around the world, and suggests a policy platform that moves us toward the Holy Father's vision expressed in *Laudato Si'*.

Much of the MOGC's work for a new economy is done through the Faith-Economy-Ecology-Transformation (FEET) group, a loose coalition of mostly faith-based organizations working to "create a human economy that fits within Earth's ecological boundaries, more authentically serves human needs and builds community." As a co-founding organization of FEET, we were thrilled to read *Laudato Si'* as its words align with FEET's founding statement, *A call to integrate faith, ecology and the global economy*.

In the next few Encounters, we will look at the encyclical from the perspective of FEET's **four pillars**<sup>1</sup>, the key areas where we feel that change is needed in order to guarantee a decent future for the next generations.

The first pillar calls for a paradigm shift in mindset and values. We see that "an essential shift from an ethic of exploitation to an ethic of right relationship is essential for individuals and for society. This will entail change from a focus on material goods to holistic well-being; from excess to sufficiency; from exclusion to inclusion; from competition to cooperation; from pursuing privilege to serving the common good; from the pre-eminence of humanity to the reverence for all life."

Pope Francis is clear about the need for similar modifications; perhaps more than anything, *Laudato Si'* is a call for all people to transform their hearts and actions.

As deepening the ideas behind this paradigm shift is such a large and essential part of *Laudato Si'*, in this Encounters we will use extensive quotes from the document. All the quotes are from *Laudato Si'* unless otherwise indicated.

**Many things have to  
change course, but it is  
we human beings above  
all who need to change.  
(#202)**

## **Ecological conversion**

For Pope Francis the change that many people undergo could be called "an 'ecological conversion,' whereby the effects of [our] encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in [our] relationship with the world around [us]." It becomes ever clearer that "**[I]iving our vocation to be**

<sup>1</sup> The Faith-Economy-Ecology-Transformation Working Group's four pillars: 1) We call for a paradigm shift in mindset and values; 2) We call for public policies for an economy of right relationship; 3) We call for an economy of thriving and resilient communities; 4) We call for a return of corporations to their proper place in society.

protectors of God's handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience." (#217)

People who have experienced such an "ecological conversion" develop a deepened appreciation and love for life in all its forms; "a loving awareness that we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures, but joined in a splendid universal communion." (#220) As Pope Francis beautifully describes it, they begin to see that **"each creature has its own purpose. None is superfluous. The entire material universe speaks of God's love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains – everything is, as it were, a caress of God."** (#84)



*Sign outside Maryknoll center in Cochabamba, Bolivia: "We are at a critical moment in the history of Earth, where humanity must choose its future. We must create a society that respects nature. To move forward we must recognize the diversity of cultures and life forms. We are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny -- sustainable respect."*

## Motivated to change

These realizations lead us to change the way we live in a variety of ways. As Pope Francis puts it, "An awareness of the gravity of today's cultural and ecological crisis must be translated into new habits." (#209)

*Lifestyle changes* – The pope describes a number of ways an individual can begin to tread more lightly on Earth, from simply using less heating by wearing warmer clothes to recycling, using public transportation or carpooling, planting trees and more. While not enough on their own, Pope Francis reminds us that even these minimal acts are important and "reflect a generous and worthy creativity which brings out the best in human beings. Reusing something instead of

It becomes clear that we "have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. Gen. 2:7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters. ... **It cannot be emphasized enough how everything is interconnected.** ... Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it." (#139)

At the same time we know that a "sense of deep communion with the rest of nature cannot be real if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human beings." (#91) We see that we "are not faced with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather one complex crisis which is both social and environmental ... [T]he analysis of environmental problems cannot be separated from the analysis of human, family, work-related and urban contexts, and of 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.'" (#141)

immediately discarding it, when done for the right reasons, can be an act of love which expresses our own dignity.” (#211)

In addition, these changes in lifestyle can have larger societal impacts. As consumers, our changing lifestyles and demands can help improve business practices by “bring[ing] healthy pressure to bear on those who wield political, economic and social power. This is what consumer movements accomplish by boycotting certain products. They prove successful in changing the way businesses operate, forcing them to consider their environmental footprint and their patterns of production. When social pressure affects their earnings, businesses clearly have to find ways to produce differently. This shows us the great need for a sense of social responsibility on the part of consumers.” (#206)

*Getting involved* – But the pope is clear that individual changes and actions are not enough to address the serious problems we face today.

The importance of community involvement cannot be stressed too much. Luckily there is a “countless array of organizations which work to promote the common good and to defend the environment, whether natural or urban” that a person can get involved in. (#232)

Pope Francis discusses the ideal of “social love,” quoting the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church: “In order to make society more human, more worthy of the human person, love in social life – political, economic and cultural – must be given renewed value, becoming the constant and highest norm for all activity.” He further explains that “along with the importance of little everyday gestures, social love moves us to devise larger strategies to halt environmental degradation and to encourage a ‘culture of care’ which permeates all of society.” (#231)

**“We must regain the conviction that we need one another, that we have a shared responsibility for others and the world, and that being good and decent are worth it.” (#229)**

### **Environmental education today**

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, a person who has experienced an “ecological conversion” is called to become an educator for others. This education can take place anywhere: in schools, in the media, in catechesis and elsewhere, but is perhaps most important in the family.

It is essential to help people be prepared and motivated for coming changes through environmental education, otherwise societal change will be difficult. “If the laws are to bring about significant, long-lasting effects, the majority of the members of society must be adequately motivated to accept them, and personally transformed to respond. **Only by cultivating sound virtues will people be able to make a selfless ecological commitment.**” (#211)

While in the past environmental education focused heavily on scientific information and consciousness-raising, today it has much broader and deeper goals. These include critiquing the

**Self-improvement on the part of individuals will not by itself remedy the extremely complex situation facing our world today ... Social problems must be addressed by community networks and not simply by the sum of individual good deeds. (#219)**

“‘myths’ of a modernity grounded in a utilitarian mindset (individualism, unlimited progress, competition, consumerism, the market without rules).” (#210) While there are positive aspects to these ideas and they have contributed in bringing about the explosive rates of economic growth in the past two centuries, we live in a different world today where new values must reign. When Earth appeared limitless with endless resources, these values were possible, but as we rapidly reach the limits of Earth’s resources, different values like communitarianism, frugality and cooperation will be more important.

Pope Francis makes it clear: “If we want to bring about deep change, we need to realize that certain mindsets really do influence our behavior. **Our efforts at education will be inadequate and ineffectual unless we strive to promote a new way of thinking about human beings, life, society and our relationship with nature.** Otherwise, the paradigm of consumerism will continue to advance, with the help of the media and the highly effective workings of the market.” (#215)

Another important goal of environmental education is to help “restore the various levels of ecological equilibrium, establishing harmony within ourselves, with others, with nature and other living creatures, and with God.” (#210) In two extended quotes that many people can relate to, Pope Francis explains how the stresses of modern life can make ecological living more difficult:

“The current global situation engenders a feeling of instability and uncertainty, which in turn becomes ‘a seedbed for collective selfishness.’ When people become self-centered and self-enclosed, their greed increases. **The emptier a person’s heart is, the more he or she needs things to buy, own and consume.** It becomes almost impossible to accept the limits imposed by reality. In this horizon, a genuine sense of the common good also disappears. As these attitudes become more widespread, social norms are respected only to the extent that they do not clash

**Christian spirituality proposes an alternative understanding of the quality of life, and encourages a prophetic and contemplative lifestyle, one capable of deep enjoyment free of the obsession with consumption. We need to take up an ancient lesson, found in different religious traditions and also in the Bible. It is the conviction that ‘less is more.’ A constant flood of new consumer goods can baffle the heart and prevent us from cherishing each thing and each moment. (#222)**

with personal needs. So our concern cannot be limited merely to the threat of extreme weather events, but must also extend to the catastrophic consequences of social unrest. **Obsession with a consumerist lifestyle, above all when few people are capable of maintaining it, can only lead to violence and mutual destruction.**” (#204)

“Many people today sense a profound imbalance which drives them to frenetic activity and makes them feel busy, in a constant hurry which in its turn leads them to ride rough-shod over everything around them. This too affects how they treat the environment. **An integral ecology includes taking time to recover a serene harmony with creation, reflecting on our lifestyle and our ideals, and contemplating the Creator who lives among us and surrounds us ...**” (#225) Ecological education can help people overcome these cultural influences and regain a sense of oneness with other people, with Earth and with God.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, environmental education needs to go deeper than facts and figures in order to facilitate “making that leap towards

the transcendent which gives ecological ethics its deepest meaning. It needs educators capable of developing an ethics of ecology, and helping people, through effective pedagogy, to grow in solidarity, responsibility and compassionate care.” (#210) It is these more profound feelings and realizations that make people commit to changing their lives and improving their communities.

### **Christian foundations of a simple life**

While *Laudato Si'* is written as a “dialogue with all people about our common home,” it also contains specific messages for believers, showing how the “rich heritage of Christian spirituality, the fruit of 20 centuries of personal and communal experience, has a beautiful contribution to make to the renewal of humanity.” Pope Francis offers “a few suggestions for an ecological spirituality grounded in the convictions of our faith, since the teachings of the Gospel have direct consequences for our way of thinking, feeling and living.” (#216) Throughout the encyclical, he shows this heritage by quoting Scripture, former popes, spiritual mystics, bishops’ conferences, and saints. Those who complain that the ideas in this encyclical are radically new and stray from Catholic foundations should be referred to these numerous references from other Catholic sources.

The pope is clear that giving up this proliferation of things and living more simply will not result in hardship, but open a person to new levels of happiness. “Such sobriety, when lived freely and consciously, is liberating. It is not a lesser life or one lived with less intensity. On the contrary, it is a way of living life to the full. ... Even living on little, [we] can live a lot, above all when [we] cultivate other pleasures and find satisfaction in fraternal encounters, in service, in developing their gifts, in music and art, in contact with nature, in prayer. Happiness means knowing how to limit some needs, which only diminish us, and being open to the many different possibilities which life can offer.” (#223)

The sacraments play an important role in sustaining our conversion. They “**are a privileged way in which nature is taken up by God to become a means of mediating supernatural life.**” (#235) Pope Francis writes a beautiful reflection on the Eucharist as a cosmic linking of heaven and earth that “embraces and penetrates all creation.” It is an important “source of light and motivation for our concerns for the environment, directing us to be stewards of all creation.” (#236)

### **Conclusion**

As shown here, the call for a deep and radical ecological conversion is a key message of *Laudato Si'*. From this conversion comes forth a lifelong dedication to help bring about a more equitable and sustainable society. Despite the appearance that our work may not have the effects we desire, Pope Francis encourages us to remain diligent. “We must not think that these efforts are not going to change the world. They benefit society, often unbeknown to us, for they call forth a goodness which, albeit unseen, inevitably tends to spread. Furthermore, such actions can restore our sense of self-esteem; they can enable us to live more fully and to feel that life on earth is worthwhile.” And clearly, for such an important endeavor, God will always accompany us on the path. “God, who calls us to generous commitment and to give him our all, offers us the light and the strength needed to continue on our way. In the heart of this world, the Lord of life, who loves us so much, is always present. **He does not abandon us, he does not leave us alone, for he has united himself definitively to our earth, and his love constantly impels us to find new ways forward.** Praise be to him!” (#245)