

# Laudato Si'. Care for Creation at the Center of a New Social Issue

**Pablo A. Blanco** [pabloblancogonzalez@uca.edu.ar](mailto:pabloblancogonzalez@uca.edu.ar).

**Abstract:** This essay reviews the documents of the pontifical magisterium of the Church from the encyclical *Mater et magistra* (1961) to the exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (2013), in order to show the Church's historical commitment to the defense of the environment. It then argues that *Laudato si'* elevates the theological status of the environmental crisis to that of a new social issue, much as Leo XIII did for the industrial crisis with his encyclical letter *Rerum novarum* (1891).

**Keywords:** creation, environmental crisis, integral ecology, pontifical magisterium, Catholic social thought, Pope Francis, *Rerum novarum*, Leo XIII

After *Laudato si'* (*LS*) was published, many began to call Pope Francis the "Green Pope." Indeed, some suggest that Francis's activism helped secure the success of the 2015 Paris Agreement of the Conference of Parties. But does *LS* really represent the first time the Catholic Church has, through its pontifical office, acted, written, or spoken on environmental issues?

This essay reviews the teachings of the Pontifical Magisterium of the Catholic Church from the encyclical *Mater et magistra* (1961) to the exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (2013a) in order to show the church's historical commitment to the defense of the environment. Through this lens, the encyclical letter of Francis appears as a culminating reflection completely rooted in and integrated within the social teachings of the church.

Yet there are also novelties in *LS*. I argue that, in *LS*, Francis elevates the environmental crisis to new heights of theological reflection, making it

into a new social issue, much like Leo XIII did for the industrial economy in the nineteenth century with *Rerum novarum*. I ask: Does *LS* possess the same epochal significance as *Rerum novarum*?

This essay reflects on the novelty and significance of *LS* across four substantive axes: creation as the center of a new social issue; Mother Earth and the need to consider the creation as a living being; integral ecology as an epistemological turn; and ecological conversion as a step toward sustainability. These four theoretical nodes summarize the main novelties of *LS*. Undoubtedly, other points have been left aside because of the limits of this essay; yet these are sufficient to demonstrate the essential contribution of *LS* to interpreting global ecological problems.

## 1. Pontifical Magisterium on the Environment

Between John XXIII's *Mater et magistra* (1961) and Francis's *Evangelii gaudium* (2013a), the Pontifical Magisterium progressively developed teaching on the environmental issue making significant contributions, many of them reflected in United Nations statements. In its teaching, the environmental issue always appears closely linked to the human being. For the church, the human creature as made in the image of God is at the center of creation. The environment is not considered to be a field separate from human beings, but rather is the place where humankind expresses a part of its divinity. Pontifical texts often refer to Genesis 1:28: "God blessed them, saying: be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that move on the earth."

While some see in that Genesis passage a justification for inconsiderate exploitation of nature and therefore reason to criticize the Catholic Church, the pontifical texts consistently say that humans are not given permission to destroy nature. On the contrary, while nature is given to humans for the service of human life (John XXIII 1961, para. 197), the dominion granted to humans by the creator "is not an absolute power, nor can one speak of a freedom to 'use and misuse', or to dispose of things as one pleases" (John Paul II 1987, para. 34). The church teaches, therefore, that care for the environment cannot be understood and promoted under the single aspect of the survival of the species (biological) or of sustainable development (eco-

nomicism)<sup>1</sup>; it should also include the moral and anthropological aspects.

Church teaching has held that degradation of the environment not only offends the divine majesty, it also involves the degradation of the human as image of God (John XXIII 1961, para. 194). The environmental issue is therefore linked to humanity's integral development. Some might consider economic development and degradation of the environment to be two sides of the same coin, and that this degradation would inevitably be intrinsic to God's plan. However, as Pius XII said, "technical progress does not fatally determine the course of history or necessarily lead to an unjust situation" (1944, para. 31). Environmental degradation results from aberrant human activity (Paul VI 1971, para. 21). John XXIII points out that it is humanity "perverted in will" that uses resources in a way "opposed to right reason and seeks ends that are contrary to his social nature and the intentions of Providence" (1961, para. 199). Thus, pontifical teachings warn about the dangers of an immoral development that undermines the human environment; "we find scientific discoveries, technical inventions and economic resources being used to provide terrible instruments of ruin and death" (John XXIII 1961, para. 198).

## 1.1 Paul VI

Already in the time of Paul VI, transformations in the environment acquired a dangerous severity, and an increased awareness of the problem was developing. In Paul VI's view, the inconsiderate exploitation

<sup>1</sup>The term "economicism" refers to the intrusion of economics into language and to the way that frameworks from economics have come to permeate other fields. This has led to the privileging of the terms costs and benefits, inputs and outputs, and to the view that economics is a source of wisdom in realms that have nothing to do with economics, turning from science to ideology.

of nature threatens to destroy everything and make humans into the victim of their degradation (1971, para. 21). Environmental issues are intimately connected to human life and therefore to humans' integral development. It is not possible to preserve the environment without developing universal solidarity. "Man must meet man, nation must meet nation, as brothers and sisters, as children of God. In this mutual understanding and friendship, in this sacred communion, we must also begin to work together to build the common future of the human race" (Paul VI 1967, para. 43).

For Paul VI, therefore, the environmental issue is already a real social problem, "a wide-ranging social problem which concerns the entire human family" (1971, para. 21). In his message to the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, Paul VI clearly summarized the Church's view: "To rule creation means for the human race not to destroy it but to perfect it; to transform the world not into a chaos no longer fit for habitation, but into a beautiful abode where everything is respected." In awareness that human life and environment are more inseparable than ever, Paul VI said that "an abuse, a deterioration in one part of the world has repercussions in other places and can spoil the quality of other people's lives, often unbeknownst to them and through no fault of their own." He concludes that "interdependence must now be met by joint responsibility; common destiny by solidarity" (Paul VI 1972).

## *1.2 John Paul II*

John Paul II focused his teachings to humanity around questions where human beings are the center of reflection, including issues concerning the environment. In the face of increasing dehumanization, he emphasized the importance of the human being as the center of the social question, "the primary and fundamental way for the Church" (John Paul II 1981, 1). In view of technological advances that lack clear moral guidance, he concluded that "we seem to be increasingly aware of the fact that the exploitation of the earth, the planet on which we are living, demands rational and honest planning ... the development of technology and the development of contemporary civilization, which is marked by the ascendancy of technology, demand a proportional development of morals and ethics" (John Paul II 1979, para.

15).

Precisely in the moral dimension, John Paul II noted consumerist greed as the main factor contributing to environmental imbalance. Earth will never be able to satisfy such consumerism, which disregards the principle of the universal destination of goods: “This is the so-called civilization of consumption or consumerism, which involves so much ‘throwing-away’ and ‘waste.’ An object already owned but now superseded by something better is discarded, with no thought of its possible lasting value in itself, nor of some other human being who is poorer” (John Paul II 1987, para. 28).

John Paul II, like Paul VI, stressed the centrality of the human person in approaching the problem, noting that “the Catholic Church approaches the care and protection of the environment from the point of view of the human person ... all ecological programs must respect the full dignity and freedom of whoever might be affected by such programs” (1985, para. 4). The calling of God to possess and use the created things always remains valid, though after sin its exercise will be arduous and self-sacrificing. This should not discourage humans; on the contrary, in the view of John Paul II, God continues to invite humans to find the answers and overcome the difficulties, “with the support also of rational reflection and of the human sciences ... to their vocation as responsible builders of earthly society” (1987, para. 1).

Scientific and technological development can be in favor of the preservation of the environment, and also serve humankind: “With the rapid acceleration of science and technology in recent decades, the environment has been subjected to far greater changes than ever before. As a result, we are offered many new opportunities for development and human progress; we are now able to transform our surroundings greatly, even dramatically, for the enhancement of the quality of life” (John Paul II 1985, para. 3).

In the period ranging from the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Environment in Stockholm to the 1992 Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit, the Pontifical Magisterium remains consistent in its view. It links ecological

imbalance to structural forms of poverty existing in the world and critiques the consumerist lifestyle. In *Centesimus annus*, John Paul II considered the destruction of the environment to be not only a result of humans' desire for domination, but also a direct consequence of the voracity imposed by a "desire to possess" (1991, para. 37). So the Church responds to environmental issues by saying that "the imbalances, under which the modern world works, are linked with that more basic imbalance which is rooted in the heart of man" (Vatican II Council 1965, para. 10).

### *1.3 Benedict XVI*

Benedict XVI continued the same line of reflection, adding that the Church not only has a responsibility with respect to creation and its gifts (land, water and air), but that it must also protect humans from destroying themselves, what might be called a human ecology. The deterioration of nature is closely connected to the culture that shapes human coexistence. Benedict wrote, "When 'human ecology' is respected within society, environmental ecology also benefits" (2009c, para. 51).

In his homily on the 42<sup>nd</sup> World Day of Peace, Benedict XVI highlighted the importance of correcting the development model that led to a financial crisis, as well as the cultural and moral crisis of ecological health:

The current global financial crisis must be seen in this regard ... as a challenge for the future and not only as an emergency to which we must find short-term solutions. Are we prepared to undertake a profound revision of the prevalent model of development in order to correct it with concerted, far-sighted interventions? In reality, this is required by the state of the planet's ecological health and especially the cultural and moral crisis whose symptoms have been visible for some time in every part of the world. (2009a, par. 6)

In earlier writings Benedict XVI had included the ecological issue as part of the cause of peace: "Humanity must be increasingly conscious of 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" (2007a, para.

8).

In "To the Members of the Roman Curia," Benedict XVI explicitly affirmed to the Church that ecological issues are part of the good news "about human dignity, life, the family, science and technology, on human labor, the universal destination of the earth's goods and ecology. These are dimensions in which justice is expressed, faith is lived and responses are made to the challenges of our time" (2007b). Benedict XVI also further developed the concept of ecology, connecting "human ecology" with its social dimension. This nexus between the human being, the environment, and the social sphere also includes the field of work and enterprise, because it is "equally important to promote a human ecology which can make both the workplace and personal relations worthy of the human being" (2010b). Therefore, "green" development cannot be considered unless nature and humans are seen as mutually interdependent. Consequently, for Benedict XVI, to degrade humans is to also degrade nature.

That is why a truly "green view" implies also a personal conversion (a point which Francis develops). Just as nature is polluted, so the soul and the human heart also are:

it is contrary to authentic development to view nature as something more important than the human person. This position leads to attitudes of neo-paganism or a new pantheism—human salvation cannot come from nature alone, understood in a purely naturalistic sense... . Reducing nature merely to a collection of contingent data ends up doing violence to the environment and even encouraging activity that fails to respect human nature itself... . Consequently, projects for integral human development cannot ignore coming generations, but need to be marked by solidarity and inter-generational justice, while taking into account a variety of contexts: ecological, juridical, economic, political and cultural. (Benedict XVI 2009c, 48)

What air is for biological life, the Holy Spirit is for spiritual life; and just as an atmospheric pollution exists that poisons the environment and living beings, thus a pollution of heart and spirit exists that mortifies and poisons spiritual life. In the same way that one must not become inured to the poisons in the air and for this

reason ecological commitment is a priority today, likewise one must not become inured to what corrupts the mind. On the other hand, it seems that it is not difficult to become accustomed to the many products that contaminate both the mind and the heart and that circulate in our society for example, images which boost pleasure, violence or contempt for men and women. This is also freedom, people say, without realizing that all this pollutes, and intoxicates the mind, especially that of the new generations and moreover ends by conditioning their very freedom. The metaphor of the mighty wind of Pentecost makes one think instead of how precious it is to breathe clean air, physically with the lungs and spiritually with the heart, the healthy air of the Spirit who is love (Benedict XVI 2009b).

Benedict XVI also twice addressed the Conference of the Parties (COP) climate summits, in 2009 and in 2011.<sup>2</sup> For the 2009 New York summit, he appealed to the intimate relationship between integral development and environment: “The earth is indeed a precious gift of the Creator who, in designing its intrinsic order, has given us guidelines that help us to safeguard creation. Precisely in this context, the Church considers that issues concerning the environment and its protection are intimately linked with the integral human development” (2009d). At the 2011 summit in Durban, South Africa, he called for a responsible response, and for attending with special consideration to the poor and future generations: “I hope that all members of the international community agree on a response responsible, credible and in solidarity with this worrying and complex phenomenon, taking into account the demands of the poorest populations and future generations” (Benedict XVI 2011).

<sup>2</sup> The United Nations Framework for the Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was adopted at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. The supreme decision-making body of the UNFCCC, referred to as the Conference of the Parties (COP), meets annually

## 1.4 Francis

Pope Francis thus inherits and takes up all of the environmental themes developed by the Pontifical Magisterium. *LS* cannot be understood without this necessary background. The concerns of the popes must always be understood in their historical context, in the light of the integrality of the Church's social teaching, and in the light of the concern and compassion not only for the creation, but for the entire human family. Even before *LS*, Francis signaled his continuity with those teachings in his encyclical *Lumen fidei* and the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*.

In *Lumen fidei* Francis claims that faith, truth, and reason do not need to be opposed to each other; rather faith is truth, and faith enlightens human reason. Moreover, the light of faith is needed in today's world to awaken a critical sense; that science not reduce nature to formulas, that it marvel at the mystery of creation, widening the horizons of reason (2013b, para. 34). In *Evangelii gaudium*, Francis outlines four substantial issues: an approach focused on the creation as a living being (it is no longer the concept of nature); the consubstantiality between humans and other creatures together with their mutual fragility; the criticism of a voracious and predatory economic system; and intergenerational solidarity as an expression of a covenant of love proposed to humanity. There, developing themes that he received from the pontifical tradition and anticipating their further development in *LS*, he says that "there are other weak and defenseless beings that are frequently at the mercy of economic interests or indiscriminate exploitation. I am speaking of creation as a whole ... . Thanks to our bodies, God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment" (Francis 2013a, para. 215).

## 2. The Novelties of *Laudato Si'*

Nonetheless, in *LS* Francis introduces some new elements to his approach to ecological issues. First, he identifies creation as the center of a new social issue, but one whose roots can be found in the Industrial Revolution. Second, there is a need to consider creation as a living being redeeming ancient Christian and indigenous traditions, which allows him to name it "Mother Earth." Third, the integral ecology perspective is not just a methodological approach to the environmental issue, it could also be considered an epistemological turn. Finally, ecological conversion of humankind is a necessary step toward sustainability.

### 2.1 Creation at the center of the new social issue

Leo XIII's *Rerum novarum* is the fundamental milestone in the development of a doctrinal approach wherein the Magisterium of the Church speaks to humankind about social issues. John Paul II, writing about the impact of *Rerum novarum* in its time, said that it broke with the idea that the Church talks only about supernatural realities. *Rerum novarum*, he says, gave the Church "citizenship status" (1991, para. 5) by establishing that giving opinions on temporal reality is part of its evangelizing mission.

In *Rerum novarum*, Leo XIII addressed a dramatic structural transformation produced by the Industrial Revolution. This transformation caused the "conflictive" relationship between capital, labor and property, and completely changed the preexisting power ratio (1891, para. 2). In *LS*, Francis addresses another structural transformation. He affirms that there are three closely connected fundamental relations in human existence:

with God, with the neighbor, and with the earth. The internal relationships with oneself and with others, with God and with the land all fall within the same logic where “everything is interconnected” (2015, para. 70). These three relationships can be reinterpreted in the social light as three dimensions: peace, justice, and conservation of creation (Francis 2015, 92). These three vital relationships have been broken within us and among us. In the complexity of the ecological crisis and its multiple causes, we are facing a structural crisis and imbalance of power similar to the one caused by the Industrial Revolution at the time when *Rerum novarum* was written. What produced the transformation of the world into an industrial society has also caused the environmental damage. This damage has led to a current planetary crisis of sustainability.

The origin of this crisis lies in a despotic anthropocentrism (Francis 2015, para. 68) that leads us to put ourselves in the place of God, or to worship other worldly powers without limit (Francis 2015, 75). Francis is clear: “We are not God. The earth was here before us and it has been given to us” (2015, para. 67). The fact of being created in the image of God and the commandment to dominate the earth do not imply a stranglehold on the other creatures; on the contrary, it requires establishing a relationship of responsible reciprocity between human beings and nature. The rupture between the two leads to the sins of “destructive power in wars, the various forms of violence and abuse, the abandonment of the most vulnerable, and attacks on nature” (Francis 2015, para. 66), and in the latent menace of humanity destroying itself.

That is why creation becomes the core of the new social issue. Here Francis develops an ecological implication that follows from the principle of the universal destination of goods. As the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith writes, “every man must have the possibility to enjoy the well-being necessary for their full development” (1986, para. 172). This means humans must care for creation, which is the home of, and the condition and destination for, the fulfillment of the “whole man and of every man” (Paul VI 1967, para. 42). There is a duty of care for nature (compare Gen 1:28 and Francis 2015, para. 64). Yet, to say “creation” is to reaffirm that the “the whole is greater than the part,” “to broaden our horizons” (Francis 2013a, para. 235), which requires overcoming a merely instrumental vision of the world, where it is only a problem to be solved, reduced to a mean to some end rather than an end in and of itself. Creation implies a joyful mystery to be contemplated (Francis 2015, para. 12).

Moreover, the idea of “creation” assumes that all living creatures have the right to live by virtue of the simple fact they exist. This is because of the value they have by themselves. We cannot manage them at our will (Francis 2015, para. 69) or consider them mere objects subject to the man’s discretion (Francis 2015, para. 82). To perceive each creature singing the hymn of its existence is to live joyfully in the love of God and in hope, “for the believer, to contemplate creation is to hear a message” (Francis 2015, para. 85), because “each creature reflects something of God and has a message to convey to us” (Francis 2015, para. 221): nature is a place of God’s demonstration and presence (Francis 2015, para. 88). Francis therefore affirms with unprecedented clarity that, the word “creation” has a broader meaning than “nature” because it has to do with God’s loving project “in which every creature has its own value and significance” (2015, para. 76).

## *2.2 Mother Earth: Creation as a living being*

Francis introduces in *LS* the concept of “Mother Earth.” Here there is no doubt about the influence of Saint Francis of Assisi, whose cosmic vision talks of “our Sister, Mother Earth” (Francis 2015, para. 1). That concept appears in numerous references to the earth as a living being, to such an extent that Francis says that it is

necessary “to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” (2015, para. 49). The situations of injustice “have caused sister earth, along with all the abandoned of our world, to cry out, pleading that we take another course” (2015, para. 53).

The concept of “Mother Earth” allows Francis (and, therefore, the Church) to enter into dialogue with indigenous cultures; the Mother Earth also has its roots in the indigenous peoples of America. For these peoples, the adjective “mother” denotes a relationship of respect for and recognition of subsidiarity toward nature. The concept of Mother Earth refers to a living being; that is why we can experience her in a sense of deep communion, tenderness, compassion and concern, which includes our fellow human beings as well (Francis 2015, para. 91).

Moreover, it aligns with sciences that conceive the Earth as a system that articulates the physical, chemical, biological and human areas in an interdependent way. Life is a part and a product of this complex system. The synergy between living organisms and the elements of the Earth is creating and maintaining a suitable habitat we call the biosphere, so that the land itself is all life. Life on land is intimately connected to the land itself. Land is a living ecosystem supporting lives and livelihoods.

The United Nations has recognized the living traits of the earth by changing the name of “International Earth Day” to “International Mother Earth Day.” Mother Earth is a common expression used to refer not only to the planet Earth in various countries and regions but also to the interdependence existing between human beings, other living species, and the planet that we all inhabit. In the view of indigenous peoples, nature is not a lifeless object, a source of resources, but our home, with which human beings are closely related. Similarly, *LS* recalls that “everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of his creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth” (Francis 2015, para. 92). Indigenous peoples’ different thanksgiving practices to Mother Earth tend to create a sisterhood relationship with the birds, the mountains, the rivers, the wind and all the beings that surround us, as conceived by Francis of Assisi in his famous “Canticle of the Creatures.”

Francis calls for indispensable attention to indigenous communities and their cultural traditions: “They are not merely one minority among others, but should be the principal dialogue partners, especially when large projects affecting their land are proposed. For them, land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God and from their ancestors who rest there, a sacred space with which they need to interact if they are to maintain their identity and values” (Francis 2015, para. 146). The Pope sees in indigenous peoples “a strong sense of community, a readiness to protect others, a spirit of creativity and a deep love for the land” (Francis 2015, para. 179). It is right to say with them that Mother Earth is wise, is alive and is sacred. All peoples are part of her and should be able to live in harmony with her, taking from the goodness of the earth what they need for their survival, “but [they] also [have] the duty to protect the earth and to ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations” (Francis 2015, para. 67).

Under no circumstances, however, do these statements by Francis suggest animistic or fetishist interpretations, or a deification of nature. It is very clear that one of the greatest contributions of Judeo-Christian thinking has been to demythologize nature by removing its divine and/or magical character: “a divinization of the earth which would prevent us from working on it and protecting it in its fragility... . We should be concerned lest other living beings be treated irresponsibly. But we should be particularly indignant at the enormous inequalities in our midst, whereby we continue to tolerate some considering themselves more worthy than others” (Francis

2015, para. 90). Readers should not, therefore, fall into the temptation of supposing all living beings are equal. That would take away from the human being its unique value that at the same time imposes a tremendous responsibility. We should, on the contrary, further reaffirm our commitment to the earth, because “this rediscovery of nature can never be at the cost of the freedom and responsibility of human beings” (Francis 2015, para. 78).

### 2.3 Integral ecology: An epistemological turn

John Paul II introduced the concept of “human ecology” (1991, para. 38). Benedict XVI then further developed this concept by showing that there is a “social” dimension that is intrinsic to the conception of this “human” ecology; that is, that human ecology is also social ecology (Benedict XVI, 2010). Francis expands that line of teaching in a novel way by considering ecology in a comprehensive perspective: “integral ecology.” But, is this really a new contribution to Catholic social thought?

Looking at the traces of Latin American theology present in *LS* we could affirm that rereading *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* by Leonardo Boff (1997) offers an archeological study of *LS*. Integral Ecology is a great novelty in papal teaching, but in fact, Boff provoked a huge change in ecological discourse by moving from environmental ecology to integral ecology, which includes political-social, mental, cultural, educational, ethical and spiritual ecology, emphasizing that everything is interconnected. Global warming emerges from industrialist fury and the poverty of a great part of humanity is related to the modern mode of production, distribution, and consumption. The drawback to Boff’s theology is that his “integral” vision could easily be assimilated into the usual environmental discourse without taking into account how we are facing a particular cosmological problem that requires investigating ideas, values, projects, dreams, and institutions. In Boff, we remain within a fragmented rationality. Boff addressed a methodological turn, Francis turned it into an epistemological one.

Violence against the earth and its ecosystems derives from the prevailing paradigm that has been at the base of our dominant civilization: anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism is the base of our illusory understanding that we own things and that they only make sense to the extent that they serve our enjoyment. Within this paradigm God is absent and is replaced by a technological paradigm. Integral ecology indicates the need for a broad view, one that considers environmental problems from multiple dimensions and contributions. Pope Francis extends an invitation to seek comprehensive solutions, to consider “the interactions within natural systems themselves and with social systems” (2015, para. 139), and “calls for openness to categories which transcend the language of mathematics and biology, and take us to the heart of what it is to be human” (2015, para. 11). A theology of the “common home” must be a theology of the interrelations of life, a theology of cultural dialogue, of knowledge, a theology challenged by economics, ecology, and ecumenism in its broadest sense. The eco-theology of *LS* is thus made from the paradigm of complexity. That is not just a change of methodological perspective; it is an epistemological change. The step taken here by Francis transcends the merely conceptual sphere because it interprets the environmental crisis as one with the crisis of development, building on Paul VI’s notion of “integral development” in *Populorum progressio*. Tracing a historical continuum, the Church’s agenda has evolved from the concept of *progress* in *Rerum novarum*, to *development* in *Populorum progressio*, and finally to *sustainability* in *LS*.

The epistemology of *LS* requires comprehensive ecological design. Such design includes a model of sustainable development and a healthy institutional framework aimed at an all-inclusive improvement of the

quality of human life. When human ability to contemplate and respect creation is damaged, the conditions to disfigure the meaning of work are created. “Work should be the setting for his rich personal growth, where many aspects of life enter into play (Francis 2015, para 127). He goes on to note, “Work is a necessity, part of the meaning of life on this earth, a path to growth, human development and personal fulfilment” (Francis 2015, para. 128). Additionally, sustainable development requires intergenerational solidarity (Francis 2015, para. 159). So integral ecology involves considering all humans (present and future generations), when developing a proper way to respond to the moral law written in human nature and directed toward humanity’s common good (Francis 2015, paras. 152, 155, 156).

It is therefore no longer enough to speak only of the integrity of the ecosystems, “we have to dare to speak of the integrity of human life, of the need to promote and unify all the great values” (Francis 2015, para. 224). Integral ecology includes taking the 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” (Francis 2015, para. 225). In this regard all religions must enter into dialogue among themselves and with science about everything that concerns the common house of humanity (Francis 2015, para. 62).

#### *2.4 Ecological conversion: Moving forward to sustainability*

As we have seen, the central idea that cuts across all of Francis’s work is the fact that the environmental crisis is the result of the crisis of modernity. It is then a crisis of the human heart, and of ethics, culture and spirituality. The solutions to the environmental crisis therefore involve the conversion of mankind itself: “We cannot presume to heal our relationship with nature and the environment without healing all fundamental human relationships... . Our relationship with the environment can never be isolated from our relationship with others and with God” (Francis 2015, para. 119). One way this deep crisis manifests itself is in what Francis calls “practical relativism” (2013a, para. 80), which he holds is still “more dangerous than doctrinal relativism” (2015, para. 122), because it is to act as if God did not exist. Such a culture of relativism is the “same ‘use and throw away’ logic” (Francis 2015, para. 123) that generates so much waste only because of the messy desire to consume more than what is really required. Public policies—or the force of the law—do not succeed in curbing the behaviors that affect the environment because these behaviors are born out of a particular type of corrupt culture where “objective truth and universally valid principles are no longer upheld” (Francis 2015, para. 123). Response to this crisis therefore requires conversion.

Part of this conversion implies that politics and the economy act in an interdependent way, without submitting to each other. According to Francis, in order to attain the common good, there is an urgent “need for politics and economics to enter into a frank dialogue into the service of life, especially human life” (2015, para. 189). A genuine ecological culture of care cannot be reduced to a series of urgent and partial responses. There is an intimate connection between what humans produce and who humans are; the solutions to the environmental crisis therefore must involve the conversion of human persons. Global change toward environmental sustainability thus requires a “green” conversion of all humanity.

Such “green” conversion implies a successive—not linear—series of “conversions.” Such a conversion is personal, social, cultural, and includes the political and economic conversions necessary for an effective transformation of the unjust realities. “Ecological conversion,” in my interpretation of Francis’s encyclical, presupposes and includes each of these conversions: personal, social, cultural, political, and economic. The conversions of the

heart of human beings have to become concrete conversions that transform the existential realities of all humankind.

### 3. Conclusion

The complexity of the ecological crisis shows that we are facing a structural crisis and power imbalance similar to the one provoked by the Industrial Revolution at the time when *Rerum novarum* was written. Leo XIII addressed the “conflictive” relationships between capital, labor and property that led to the dramatic structural transformation. What produced the transformation of the world into an industrial society has caused the environmental damage that now produces the planetary crisis of sustainability addressed by Francis in *LS*. Moreover, the present crisis is closely connected to three fundamental relations of human existence: with God, neighbor, and Earth. From a social perspective these turn into three other dimensions threatened by our present crisis: peace, justice, and conservation of creation (Francis 2015, para. 92). The rupture within us and among us of these three vital relationships is the new social issue identified and developed by Pope Francis.

This essay has shown how *LS* is in continuity with the social teachings of the Church since *Rerum novarum*, and also that it goes beyond mere synthesis of previous teachings. *LS* brings new concepts and paradigms to understand the systemic crisis we face. The central idea of Pope Francis’s work is that the environmental crisis is the result of the modern crisis of the human heart. Solutions to the environmental crisis therefore require the conversion of humanity itself. Real global change towards environmental sustainability requires a series of “conversions” whose dimensions are personal, social, cultural, and include the political and economic conversions necessary for an effective transformation of unjust realities. *LS* elevates the theological status of the environmental crisis to a new social issue, much as Leo XIII did for the industrial crisis with *Rerum novarum*. In the future, *LS* will probably be considered as momentous as was *Rerum novarum* in its historical moment.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>This essay was reviewed, edited and proofread by Ms. Gisel Presno.

## REFERENCES

Benedict XVI

2007a *Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace*. [https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20061208\\_xl-world-day-peace.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20061208_xl-world-day-peace.html) (accessed December 27, 2017).

2007b *Address to the Members of the Roman Curia at the Traditional Exchange of Christmas Greetings*. [https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2007/december/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20071221\\_curia-romana.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2007/december/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20071221_curia-romana.html) (accessed December 27, 2017).

2009a “Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God and 42nd World Day of Peace.” *Homily*. [https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2009/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_hom\\_20090101\\_world-day-peace.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20090101_world-day-peace.html) (accessed December 27, 2017).

2009b “Solemnity of Pentecost.” *Homily*. [https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2009/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_hom\\_20090531\\_pentecoste.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20090531_pentecoste.html) (accessed December 27, 2017).

- 2009c *Caritas in veritate*. [https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20090629\\_caritas-in-veritate.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html) (accessed December 27, 2017).
- 2009d *Video Message of the Pope to the Participants in the UN Summit on Climate Change*. <https://es.zenit.org/articles/vidiomensaje-del-papa-a-la-cumbre-de-la-onu-sobre-cambio-climatico/> (accessed December 27, 2017).
- 2010a “Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God and 43rd World Day of Peace.” *Homily*. [https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2010/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_hom\\_20100101\\_world-day-peace.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20100101_world-day-peace.html) (accessed December 27, 2017).
- 2010b *Address to the Directors and Personnel of the Municipal Electricity and Water Board (ACEA)*. [https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2010/february/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20100206\\_acea.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2010/february/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20100206_acea.html) (accessed December 27, 2017).
- 2011 “Support of the Pope to the UN Conference in Durban.” [https://en.radiovaticana.va/storico/2011/11/27/pope\\_benedict\\_xvi\\_on\\_climate\\_change\\_a\\_credible\\_response\\_is\\_needed/en1-541410](https://en.radiovaticana.va/storico/2011/11/27/pope_benedict_xvi_on_climate_change_a_credible_response_is_needed/en1-541410) (accessed December 27, 2017).

#### Boff, Leonardo

- 1997 *Cry of Earth, Cry of the Poor*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

#### Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith

- 1986 *Libertatis conscientia: Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation*. [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19860322\\_freedom-liberation\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19860322_freedom-liberation_en.html) (accessed December 27, 2017).

#### Francis

- 2013a *Evangelii gaudium*. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html) (accessed December 27, 2017).
- 2013b *Lumen fidei*. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130629\\_enciclica-lumen-fidei.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20130629_enciclica-lumen-fidei.html) (accessed December 27, 2017).
- 2015 *Laudato si'*. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html) (accessed December 27, 2017).

#### Leo XIII

- 1891 *Rerum novarum*. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_l-xiii\\_enc\\_15051891\\_rerum-novarum.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html) (accessed December 27, 2017).

#### John XXIII

- 1961 *Mater et magistra*. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_j-xxiii\\_enc\\_15051961\\_mater.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_15051961_mater.html) (accessed December 27, 2017).

## John Paul II

- 1979 *Redemptor hominis*. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_04031979\\_redemptor-hominis.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_04031979_redemptor-hominis.html) (accessed December 27, 2017).
- 1981 *Laborem exercens*. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_14091981\\_laborem-exercens.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens.html) (accessed December 27, 2017).
- 1985 *Address to the Members of the Agency of the United Nations*. [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1985/august/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_19850818\\_centro-nazioni-unite.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1985/august/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19850818_centro-nazioni-unite.html) (accessed December 27, 2017).
- 1987 *Sollicitudo rei socialis*. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_30121987\\_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html) (accessed December 27, 2017).
- 1991 *Centesimus annus*. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_01051991\\_centesimus-annus.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html) (accessed December 27, 2017).

## Paul VI

- 1967 *Populorum progressio*. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_enc\\_26031967\\_populorum.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum.html) (accessed December 27, 2017).
- 1971 *Octogesima adveniens*. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost\\_letters/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_apl\\_19710514\\_octogesima-adveniens.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-vi_apl_19710514_octogesima-adveniens.html) (accessed December 27, 2017).
- 1972 "Message to Mr. Maurice F. Strong, Secretary-General of the Conference on the Environment." [https://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/messages/pont-messages/documents/hf\\_pvi\\_mess\\_19720605\\_conferenza-ambiente.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/messages/pont-messages/documents/hf_pvi_mess_19720605_conferenza-ambiente.html) (accessed December 27, 2017).

## Pius XII

- 1944 *Oggi*. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/es/speeches/1944/documents/hf\\_p-xii\\_spe\\_19440901\\_al-compiersi.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/es/speeches/1944/documents/hf_p-xii_spe_19440901_al-compiersi.html) (accessed December 27, 2017).

## Vatican II Council

- 1965 *Gaudium et spes*. [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html) (accessed December 27, 2017)