



THE ENCYCLICAL LAUDATO SI',
THE NEED TO UNDERSTAND AND CARE
FOR OUR "COMMON HOME"

FROM THE DIRECTOR

The OPSA-PUCE is an academic initiative undertaken in response to Ecuador's unique natural conditions and the challenges resulting from those advantages as regards designing policies and solutions aimed at achieving a sustainable balance between the environment and the country's productive, social and financial needs.

As part of the university with most influence in the framing of public policies and private decision-making, the OPSA devises —and has developed since its inception— mechanisms for the mainstreaming in society of environment-themed debate and research. This approach is taken with the conviction that a departure is necessary —a divorce from the reductionism with which physics and economics problems are commonly addressed, as well as the isolation and methodological individualism typical of academia.

On the other hand, the observatory's strategies, dialogue and research processes of this observatory correspond to the epistemology of complexity, and totality, as well as an ethos of plurality and tolerance of various points of view, knowledge and considerations concerning the environment in a context that —in addition to its biological-ecosystematic diversity— is home to invaluable cultures and knowledge intrinsically linked to nature which nourish academia in ways that transcend the results of scientific research.

Furthermore, the OPSA's motivation is strengthened by global policy aimed at investing in the mitigation of the impact of human activities —primarily those economic in nature— on the operation of the climate systems of the planet. In the last decades, climatic transformation has evinced the civilizatory threats to nature and humanity's potential to endanger the generality of life.

In short, the OPSA-PUCE has become a meeting ground for ancestral and scientific knowledge and their diffusion, as well as research, data gathering and analysis in one of the most environmentally sensitive and diverse territories on Earth.



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Introduction

In this encyclical, Pope Francis, in addition to giving a historical account of the chief point of interest of various pontiffs concerning the environment since Pope Paul VI (over 50 years ago), clearly reminds us that planet Earth must be thought of and treated as “*our common home... like a sister with whom we share our life*”.

In a virtuous show of both openness and ecumenicism, Pope Francis refers to the contributions of orthodox philosophers and theologians such as Patriarch Bartholomew, Paul Ricover the French Protestant, and Ali al-Khawas the mystical Muslim, among others. That is, various contributions are present in the initial outline of this issue to achieve a communion of interests allowing for a profound internalization of the urgent need to modify our way of life —at present dominated by consumerism and self-interest.

His concern goes beyond humanity's potential impact on nature with the question: “What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up?” Thus evincing a clear interest in inter-generation solidarity, which is essential to the preservation of the *common home* (an extension of the economic concept: “common good”).

This essay contains various excerpts from the aforementioned Encyclical which have been rearranged for a concise interpretation of various relevant aspects pertaining to the challenges it poses to the inhabitants of the earth while stressing the responsibilities of economics, which obliges that we, as academics, take them into account in our classrooms, curricula, debates, events, etc.

First: the nature (object)-society (subject) relation

The Encyclical is, without a doubt, exhaustive and comprehensive wherein each part stands on its own and still grasps the spirit of it all, and the whole constitutes a reality which surpasses each of its parts. The Encyclical is an invitation to critically interpret the current situation and a challenge to understand and live life in a more complete manner —both individually and communally.

The sentence which possibly best sums up this epistemological proposal to understand and live life is as follows:

“...we do not look at the world from without but from within.”

At the core of this proposal lies the notion of making our common home a space for life —a life in requisite harmony with the ecological and social systems related to “*care for ecology and for the common good*” and achieving “*harmony with creation*”. This not only requires contemplation but also commitment to be a part of nature and act accordingly.

The text elucidates that “*the book of nature is one and indivisible, and includes the environment, life, sexuality, the family, social relations, and so forth*”. It is a whole, a complex system, which requires the development of new methodologies to understand it, new paradigms for state-designed policies, as well as for private policies, and for policies by families and social organizations.

The environment must be understood in terms of the close nature-society connection. Nature is an integral part of a way of life and not something separate from it. It states that “*we are part of nature, included in it*” and “*the deterioration of nature is closely connected to the culture which shapes human coexistence*”. Therefore, the formative elements of culture, the economy, policy and their contribution to either the care or destruction thereof cannot be separated.

This encyclical warns us that the earth's resources (the object) are being plundered because of short-sighted and individualist approaches to the economy, commerce and production, and finance. It warns us that our current economy is driven by an obsession for wasteful consumption on the basis of a paradigm wherein technological development is reliant on profit, the real economy is overwhelmed by finance, and hunger and poverty are expected to be resolved simply through market growth.

“Compulsive consumerism is one example of how the techno-economic paradigm affects individuals.”

Second: the method of life

This encyclical again presents the challenge of understanding each part of the whole and the whole in each part. For example, it suggests that to act on the ecological and social systems requires “a politics which is far-sighted and capable of a new, integral and interdisciplinary approach to handling the different aspects of the crisis” and cautions that a paradigm shift on the basis of a twofold epistemological acknowledgment must take place: “A consumerist vision of human beings, encouraged by the mechanisms of today’s globalized economy, has a leveling effect on cultures, diminishing the immense variety which is the heritage of all humanity.”

The Encyclical reiterates the fact that the dilemmas posed by these ecosystems cannot be resolved through standardized or standardizing regulations, or simple unilateral technical interventions, as this overlooks the complexity of the problems specific to their networks. Everything is connected in the social and natural reality and thus integral, linked solutions that consider the interactions of the natural systems with the social and political systems must be sought.

“It cannot be maintained that empirical science provides a complete explanation of life, the interplay of all creatures and the whole of reality. ... If we reason only within the confines of the latter, little room would be left for aesthetic sensibility, poetry, or even reason’s ability to grasp the ultimate meaning and purpose of things.”

Therefore, the relation between society, economics and politics must be redefined on the basis of the consensus of a full democracy and active participation of all of the stakeholders. Government, business owners, families and communities must agree on long-term decisions aiming to achieve specific goals. For this, both continuity and long-term commitment are essential as climate change and environmental preservation-related problems do not have an immediate solution.

Politics and economics are two inseparable disciplines, where many times one hinders the other from thriving. The problem with economics as a science is that it has been at the service of profit-driven efficiency, without assuming the externalities that result from said technical-efficient exercise and has thus proven to be incapable of internalizing the costs said production imposes on nature. Politics, on the other hand, has served to exercise and guarantee corruption and the continuation of economic power, in an exercise where the power balance of social entities is asymmetrical.

This asymmetry becomes manifest precisely when it comes to defining strategies to reduce emissions of pollutant gas that seek to internationalize environmental costs, where less wealthy countries may have to undertake commitments similar, in the very least, to commitments by more industrialized nations, or when an industrial relocation process is proposed from the center to countries with scarce environmental regulation.

These processes fail to consider the “*principle of subsidiarity, which grants freedom to develop the capabilities present at every level of society, while also demanding a greater sense of responsibility for the common good from those who wield greater power.*” Hence Pope Francis’s call for the development of a new kind of economy, mindful of the principles of ethics, and a new form of policymaking not subordinate to economics and that creates spaces for the participation of all of the social strata in all their diversity.

“There is urgent need for politics and economics to enter into a frank dialogue in the service of life, especially human life.”

Thus “*what is needed is a politics which is far-sighted and capable of a new, integral and interdisciplinary approach to handling the different aspects of the crisis.*”

The encyclical stresses the need to understand the close relation between politics and economics. It enjoins that economic failures cannot always be corrected with politics and vice versa. For example, the collapse of a bank cannot be solved with a desperate government bailout, because politics will then lose credibility and society will become distrustful. On the other hand, if politics were at fault and election promises were not kept, politics will lose legitimacy, which is not something that can be fixed by implementing economic measures, because economics would lose credibility. If economics and politics do not work together they will ultimately place the blame on each other, which means neither accepts its responsibility.

Third: towards new forms of life/models of progress

This encyclical, on the basis of this reflection regarding the *raison d’être* of economics and the role of politics, calls for humanity to redirect its course to the development of a common consciousness, and a sense of mutual belonging as well as the need to build the future together.

This proposal entails a difficult challenge: the construction of a “*new cultural and ecological conscience based on new habits and behavior,*” which involves transforming the educational system and “*creating an ecological citizenship that is personally transformed in all its dimensions to*

respond, and that those dimensions all systemically aim to promote a culture of life and foster solid individual and social virtues."

It maintains that Christian spirituality is an ecological spirituality given that it is a way of thinking, feeling and living in harmony with society and nature. It is a mysticism that drives, motivates and encourages, and gives meaning to personal and community action. However, individual initiatives do not suffice when addressing social issues; network responses, the convergence of forces and unity in execution are needed. Ecological transformation is a transformation of community action.

For example, to guarantee quality human life requires decent work in a world in which technology must not be used to replace work or the environment. *"It is imperative to promote an economy which favours productive diversity and business creativity."* Business activity must be governed by the principles of social justice —good working conditions make for better workers who perform better. Both businesses and society win.