

A Comment on Pope Francis' Encyclical *Laudato Si'*

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Introduction

I should like to begin by expressing my deep gratitude for the honour to be invited to take part in this event of launching the new Encyclical of His Holiness Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'*. I am also honoured by the fact that His All-Holiness, the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, has asked me to convey to you his personal joy and satisfaction for the issuing of the Encyclical. As some of you may already know, the Ecumenical Patriarchate has been the first one in the Christian world to draw the attention of the world community to the seriousness of the ecological problem and the duty of the Church to voice its concern and try to contribute with all the spiritual means at its disposal towards the protection of our natural environment. Thus, back already in the year 1989, Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios issued an Encyclical to the faithful Christians and to all people of good will, in which he underlined the seriousness of the ecological problem and its theological and spiritual dimensions. This was followed by a series of activities, such as international conferences of religious leaders and scientific experts, as well as seminars for young people, Church ministers etc. under the auspices of the present Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, aiming at the promotion of an ecological consciousness among the Christians in particular and more widely in the community of men and women.

The issuing of the Encyclical *Laudato Si'* is, therefore, an occasion of great joy and satisfaction for the Orthodox. On behalf of them I should like to express our deep gratitude to His Holiness for raising his authoritative voice to draw the attention of the world to the urgent need to protect God's creation from the damage we humans inflict on it with our behavior towards nature. This Encyclical comes at a critical moment in human history and will undoubtedly have a worldwide effect on people's consciousness.

Those who read the Encyclical will be impressed by the depth and the thoroughness with which the ecological problem is treated and its seriousness is brought out, together with concrete suggestions and proposals on how to act in order to face its consequences. There is in its pages food for thought for all: the scientist, the economist, the sociologist and above all the faithful of the Church. My own comments will be limited to the richness of theological thought and spirituality of the Encyclical. Time and space prevent me from doing full justice to the treatment of these aspects. I shall limit myself to the following points:

- a. The theological significance of ecology;
- b. The spiritual dimension of the ecological problem; and
- c. The ecumenical significance of the Encyclical.

1. Theology and Ecology

What does ecology have to do with theology? In the traditional manuals of theology, there is hardly any place for ecology and the same is true for the academic curricula of the theological schools, Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant. The Encyclical devotes a whole chapter (ch. 2) to show the profound ecological implications of the Christian doctrine of creation. It points out that according to the Bible “human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships with God, with our neighbor and **with the earth itself**” (par. 66). This third relationship, i.e. with the earth, has been very often ignored by Christian theology to such an extent that the American historian Lynn White, in a now famous article in the periodical *Scientist*(1967), would accuse Christian theology for being responsible for the modern ecological crisis. For it is true that in Christian theology the human being has been so exalted above material creation as to allow humans to treat it as material for the satisfaction of their needs and desires. The human being has been de-naturalized and in its abuse and misuse of the biblical command to the first human couple – “increase and multiply and subdue the earth” (Gen. 1.28) – humanity was encouraged to exploit the material creation unrestrictedly with no respect for its integrity and even sacredness.

This attitude to creation did not only lead to a misuse of the biblical doctrine but at the same time contradicted fundamental principles of Christian faith. One of them is the faith in **the Incarnation of Christ**. In assuming human nature, the Son of God took over material creation in its entirety. Christ came to save **the whole** creation through the Incarnation, not only humanity; for according to St. Paul (Rom. 8.23) “the whole creation groans in travail and is suffering” awaiting its salvation through humanity.

The other fundamental principle of Christian faith that has important ecological implications relates to the very heart of the Church, which is **the Holy Eucharist**. In the celebration of the Eucharist, the Church offers to God the material world in the form of the bread and the wine. In this Sacrament space, time and matter are sanctified; they are lifted up to the Creator with thankfulness as His gifts to us; creation is solemnly declared as God’s gift, and human beings instead of proprietors of creation act as its **priests**, who lift it up to the holiness of the divine life. This brings to mind the moving words of St. Francis of Assisi with which the Encyclical opens: “Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth.” As St. Gregory Palamas and other Greek Fathers would put it, the whole of creation is permeated by God’s presence through His divine energies; everything declares God’s glory, as the Psalmist says, and the human being leads this cosmic chorus of glorification to the Creator as the priest of creation. This way of understanding the place and mission of humanity in creation is common to both Eastern and Western Christian tradition, and is of particular importance for the cultivation of an ecological ethos.

2. The Spiritual Dimension

As it emerges clearly from the Encyclical, the ecological crisis is essentially a **spiritual problem**. The proper relationship between humanity and the earth or its natural environment has been broken with the Fall both outwardly and within us, and this rupture is **sin**. The Church must now introduce in its teaching about sin the sin against the environment, the **ecological sin**. Repentance must be extended to cover also the damage we do to nature both as individuals and as societies. This must be brought to the conscience of every Christian who cares for his or her salvation.

The rupture of the proper relationship between humanity and nature is due to the rise of **individualism** in our culture. The pursuit of individual happiness has been made into an ideal in our time. Ecological sin is due to human greed which blinds men and women to the point of ignoring and disregarding the basic truth that the happiness of the individual depends on its relationship with the rest of human beings. There is a **social** dimension in ecology which the Encyclical brings out with clarity. The ecological crisis goes hand in hand with the spread of social injustice. We cannot face successfully the one without dealing with the other.

Ecological sin is a sin not only against God but also against our neighbor. And it is a sin not only against the other of our own time but also – and this is serious – against the **future generations**. By destroying our planet in order to satisfy our greed for happiness, we bequeath to the future generations a world damaged beyond repair with all the negative consequences that this will have for their lives. We must act, therefore, responsibly towards our children and those who will succeed us in this life.

All this calls for what we may describe as an **ecological asceticism**. It is noteworthy that the great figures of the Christian ascetical tradition were all sensitive towards the suffering of all creatures. The equivalent of a St. Francis of Assisi is abundantly present in the monastic tradition of the East. There are accounts of the lives of the desert saints which present the ascetic as weeping for the suffering or death of every creature and as leading a peaceful and friendly co-existence even with the beasts. This is not romanticism. It springs from a loving heart and the conviction that between the natural world and ourselves there is an organic unity and interdependence that makes us share a common fate just as we have the same Creator.

Asceticism is an unpleasant idea in our present culture, which measures happiness and progress with the increase of capital and consumption. It would be unrealistic to expect our societies to adopt asceticism in the way St. Francis and the Desert Fathers of the East experienced it. But the spirit and the ethos of asceticism can and must be adopted if our planet is to survive. Restraint in the consumption of natural resources is a realistic attitude and ways must be found to put a limit to the immense waste of natural materials. Technology and science must devote their efforts to such a task. There is a great deal of inspiration and help that can be drawn from the Encyclical itself in this respect.

Finally, spirituality must penetrate our ecological ethos through **prayer**. The Encyclical offers some beautiful examples of how to pray for the protection of God's creation. From the prayers cited at the end of the Encyclical, I find the following extract moving:

O God, bring healing to our lives, that we may protect the world and not prey on it that we may sow beauty, not pollution and destruction. Touch the hearts of those who look only for gain at the expense of the poor of the earth. Teach us to discover the worth of each thing, to be filled with awe and contemplation, to recognize that we are profoundly united with every creature as we journey towards your infinite light.

At this point I should like to mention that the Ecumenical Patriarchate decided as early as 1989 to devote the 1st of September of each year to praying for the environment. This date is according to the Orthodox liturgical calendar, going back to the Byzantine times, the first day of the ecclesiastical year. The liturgical service of the day includes prayers for creation and the Ecumenical Patriarchate commissioned a contemporary hymnographer from Mount Athos to compose special hymns for that day. The 1st of September each year is now devoted by the Orthodox to the environment. Might this not become a date for such prayer for all Christians? This would mark a step towards further closeness among them.

This brings me to my last comment on the Papal Encyclical, namely its ecumenical significance.

3. The Ecumenical Significance of the Encyclical

There are in my view three dimensions to ecumenism. The first we may call **ecumenism in time**, an expression frequently used by one of the greatest Orthodox theologians of the last century, the late Fr. Georges Florovsky. By this we mean the effort of the divided Christians to unite on the basis of their common Tradition, the teaching of the Bible and the Church Fathers. This is the object of the theological dialogues which are taking place in the Ecumenical Movement of our time and it seems to be the predominant form of ecumenism.

At the same time an **ecumenism in space** is also practiced through various international institutions, such as the World Council of Churches and similar ecumenical bodies which bring together the divided Christians so that the different cultural contexts in which they live may be taken into consideration in the search for unity. This has brought together Christians from Asia, America, Europe, Latin America etc – an expression of the universality of the Christian Church.

To these two dimensions which have dominated the ecumenical scene for the last hundred years we must add, I think, a third one which is usually neglected, namely what I would call an **existential ecumenism**. By that I mean the effort to face together the most profound existential problems that preoccupy humanity **in its entirety** – not simply in particular places or classes of people. Ecology is without doubt the most obvious candidate in this case.

I believe that the significance of the Papal Encyclical *Laudato Si'* is not limited to the subject of ecology as such. I see in it an important ecumenical dimension in that it brings the divided Christians before a common task which they must face together. We live at a time when fundamental existential problems overwhelm our traditional divisions and relativize them almost to the point of extinction. Look, for example, at what is happening today in the Middle East: do those who persecute the Christians ask them to which Church or Confession they belong? Christian unity in such cases is *de facto* realized by persecution and blood – an ecumenism of martyrdom.

The threat posed to us by the ecological crisis similarly bypasses or transcends our traditional divisions. The danger facing our common home, the planet in which we live, is described in the Encyclical in a way leaving no doubt about the existential risk we are confronted with. This risk is common to all of us regardless of our ecclesiastical or confessional identities. Equally common must be our effort to prevent the catastrophic consequences of the present situation. Pope Francis' Encyclical is a call to unity – unity in prayer for the environment, in the same Gospel of creation, in the conversion of our hearts and our lifestyles to respect and love everyone and everything given to us by God. We are thankful for that.