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THE CARMELITE NGO BULLETIN

2022 - Volume 15 - Number 1

English Edition

Organizing for an Integral Ecology (1)

By Kevin Ahern, PhD (2)



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The Crisis of the Anthropocene

Perhaps more than any other recent crisis, the Coronavirus pandemic reveals the Janus-faced nature of our present world order. On one side we can see a profound sense of global interrelationship. We have discovered in a dramatic way the interconnected dimensions of our economies, politics, and biology.

A microscopic virus, which likely originated in a bat, found its way into a person in China and within weeks it had spread to every continent.

On the other side, however, the human family is increasingly divided and fractured. Consider the fratricide of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the crisis of democracy worldwide, increasing political polarizations, and rising incidents of racism and xenophobia. We are fa-

cing, as the anti-racist activist Errin Haines described in a Tweet, “a pandemic within a pandemic (3).

At the same time, as a human species we are increasingly disconnected from the planetary ecosystem that sustains our life. We are now living in what scientists describe as the *anthropocene*, a new era where the actions of human beings threaten the future of entire species, including our own.

In his official teachings, especially *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis offers some helpful perspectives in laying out an integral ecology. Drawing from the Gospel, this vision proposes a new way, a new paradigm for how to relate to our planet and to other people.

But how do we get there? How do we bring about a new paradigm for our society, our planet and our Church? In this task, faith-based organizations, and especially Catholic organizations like the Carmelite NGO and other Carmelite communities, have an enormous potential to bring about this much-needed paradigm shift. Catholic nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), lay movements, and religious congregations, as I have explored elsewhere, have a tremendous power as mediating agents (4). At their best, they mediate complex networks of relationships, bridging local communities with influential agents, translating ideas through the religious and secular divide, and connecting people with one another across borders. Theologically, such structures may even be described as “structures of grace,” in their prophetic resistance to the structural sins dividing the human family today (5).

Given this transformative potential, how can Catholic organizations and structures, from parishes and local community groups to international lay movements and religious congregations, better actualize the vision of an integral ecology?

Towards an Integral Ecology

In July of 2013, just a few weeks after being elected pope, Pope Francis made his first official visit outside of Rome to the island of Lampedusa. This son of Italian immigrants was deeply moved by the experience of migrants in the Mediterranean. In his homily on Lampedusa, Francis speaks for the first time of the “globalization of indifference.” (6)

Our worldwide community may be more interconnected, he argued, but that does not mean we have formed a sense of true siblinghood (fraternity). Using the biblical story of Cain and Abel, Francis emphasized our responsibility to care for each other across borders. As children of the one creator God, we are all siblings. The pope develops these themes of indifference and fraternity a few months later in *Evangelii Gaudium* and his first three World Day of Peace Messages.

With *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis uses the Canticle of Creation prayer by Saint Francis to creatively extend our fraternal obligation to also include creation, sister earth. In the face of a “tyrannical anthropocentrism unconcerned for other creatures” Francis proposes an integral ecology, a new approach that looks to the flourish-

ing and common good of all of creation, including future generations. (7) This approach takes seriously the multifaceted relationships of people with our creator God, with other people, with the world around us, and with our deeper selves. We are, as Francis insists, part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it.” (8) This integral approach to ecology, much like Pope Paul VI's integral approach to development, stands in contrast to the indifference and sinful self-referentiality that marks so much of the dominant culture. (9)

In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis returns to the question of our relationship with each other. While he does not explicitly reference integral ecology in the text, *Fratelli Tutti* approaches human relationships in an ecological key. As we seek the development of the whole person and all people, we must recognize that we are all interconnected.

Instead of Cain and Abel, Francis uses the Parable of the Good Samaritan to affirm the universality of human fraternity and the challenge of working for integral human development across borders. The Jesuit spiritual writer, James Martin, SJ, made a useful connection in a tweet saying, “If the message of #Laudato Si was ‘Everything is connected,’ the message of #Fratelli Tutti is ‘Everyone is connected.’” (10)

This approach rooted squarely in the universal vision of the Gospel challenges the many artificially constructed borders that divide the human family, the appeals to absolute state sovereignty that are frequently used as cover in international relations, and the populist discourses of America First that dominated recent electoral politics in the United States. As Francis teaches, “Jesus’ parable summons us to rediscover our vocation as citizens of our respective nations and of the entire world, builders of a new social bond... the Good Samaritan showed that ‘the existence of each and every individual is deeply tied to that of others: life is not simply time that passes; life is a time for interactions.’” (11)

Organizing the Bold Cultural Revolution

But what does this integral vision mean for Catholic NGOs, communities and religious congregations? Is an integral ecology, as one student recently asked me, just another unrealistic daydream? Indeed, this is one of the biggest challenges facing Catholic social teaching today – putting the vision into action. After all, a good social-ethical framework, as Pope Paul wrote in *Octogesima Adveniens*, is useless unless it is accompanied by a renewed sense of “personal responsibility and by effective action.” (12)

With both *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti*, Francis offers some guidance on how to concretize this vision in the world. Following the see, judge, act method, both texts include calls to action. Francis is clearly aware that this shift toward an integral ecology is not easy. In *Laudato Si'* Francis calls for “a bold cultural revolution,” which necessitates changes in the ways we relate to techno-

logy, culture, consumer goods, the earth, and each other. (13)

A few months after promulgating *Laudato Si'*, Francis is blunter in his call for change in a meeting with popular movements in Bolivia:

“Let us not be afraid to say it: we want change, real change, structural change. This system is by now intolerable... We want change in our lives, in our neighborhoods, in our everyday reality. We want a change which can affect the entire world, since global interdependence calls for global answers to local problems”. (14)

Catholic NGOs, religious congregations and lay movements are uniquely situated to bring about this change at three different levels. Groups like the Carmelite NGO are already doing some of this important work, but much more is needed.

A. Personal Conversion:

The first level is at the personal level. A true integral ecology demands personal conversion and changes in lifestyles. Chapter Six of *Laudato Si'*, for instance, highlights the power of education and spirituality in promoting an environmental responsibility. Small actions, from car-pooling to turning off unnecessary lights, Francis teaches, can be “acts of love.” (15) Similarly, in *Fratelli Tutti*, Francis wants people, especially Christians, to be formed in a sense of responsibility to the other. Not in an abstract way, but in a way that fosters real relationships between people. “Our relationships,” he says, “if healthy and authentic, open us to others who expand and enrich us.” (16) Authentic love calls us to go out beyond our small circles and to cultivate “a social friendship that excludes no one and a fraternity that is open to all.” (17)

Such personal conversion is not easy. Experience shows that communities, especially small ones, play a critical role in helping individuals to learn about the changes that are needed and in supporting them as they undertake such a process.

The cause of popular education and outreach can be difficult for some groups. It is tempting for some NGOs working with the UN system to see their role only in terms of advocacy with political institutions. The *Laudato Si'* Lesson Plan for Secondary Education, developed by the Carmelite NGO, for example, takes seriously the task of personal conversion and seeks to actualize the potential of Catholic high schools. But what about other Catholics?

Do Catholic parishes, including those attached to Carmelite communities, truly inspire lay people to a deeper personal conversion with God, their neighbors, and creation? This can be a difficult question, but it is one that must be considered given how many Catholics there are in positions of political, economic, and cultural power. Consider what could change if even a fraction of these adopted a vision of integral ecology.

To bring about a deeper personal conversion, schools and parish structures, by themselves, are not enough. Other forms of communities are needed, inclu-

ding small faith groups, cooperatives, and study groups to support each other in living more sustainably.

At the same time, communities also need the support of other communities nationally and internationally. Such relationships, like the creation of many Catholic NGOs, can help us go beyond the temptations to self-referentiality and the comfort bubbles that usually serve to reinforce the status quo.



“Communities also need the support of other communities nationally and internationally”

B. Political Conversion:

While necessary, changes in individual lifestyles by themselves are insufficient to address the real threats facing people and planet today. A true integral ecology demands structural and political conversion. Consider climate change. While individual choices, like recycling, do matter, they do not account for the bulk of the carbon emissions. To truly address climate change, we urgently need, as *Laudato Si'* affirms, “enforceable international agreements” and new changes in how we approach technology, the economy and politics. (18) In *Fratelli Tutti*, Francis calls for a renewed approach to “politics which is far-sighted and capable of a new, integral and interdisciplinary approach to handling the different aspects of the crisis.” (19)

Here, the temptation for some Catholic groups is to only focus on personal conversion and to neglect the need for social and political change. To focus on only individual choices and personal responsibility is a distraction that benefits those in power. One could feel very good about the ways they recycle their own garbage yet overlook the way their lifestyle and political inaction reinforces the wider system. This is evident with racism in the United States. Many white people claim that racism is a question of personal responsibility and thus not an issue that demands policy change. What they fail to acknowledge are the many ways in which the structures of the society uphold racial disparities. Until these sinful structures that impact our housing, healthcare and educational systems are changed and some effort of reparations are made, no amount of conversion of hearts will be sufficient. *Laudato Si'* puts it this way:

“Isolated individuals can lose their ability and freedom to escape the utilitarian mindset, and end up prey to an unethical consumerism bereft of social or ecological awareness. Social problems must be addressed by community networks and not simply by the sum of individual good deeds.” (20)

Here, global Catholic communities like the Carmelite NGO are called to go beyond the individual level and mobilize their members and wider communities to reflect on new models and to advocate for change in places like the United Nations.

C. Ecclesial Conversion:

In addition to the personal and political, we can also see a third area for change in the writings of Pope Francis and this is the ecclesial space. A true integral ecology also demands a corresponding integral ecclesiology. Like an integral ecology, an integral ecclesiology would be holistic and encompassing. An integral ecclesiology would view the church through an ecological lens. This would help us to better see the church as a community of the baptized with varied and complex social relationships internally and externally, rather than only as an institution centered around the power of ordained men.

Such an ecclesiological lens stands in contrast to both the clerical and consumeristic models of the church which seek to pacify the voices and roles of lay people. This may be what Francis is getting at with his proposals for synodality and the upcoming 2023 Synod.

In this space, Catholic NGOs, including the Carmelite network can serve as structures of synodality. During the Second Vatican Council, Catholic NGOs, like *Pax Romana* and the Young Christian Workers, used their decades of experience in working with the United Nations and League of Nations to engage the conciliar deliberations. In the upcoming process before the 2023 Synod, Catholic NGOs have much to offer in sharing the social concerns of local voices from different countries with church leaders.

Conclusion

As a global institution, the Roman Catholic church has an enormous potential to transform our broken ecology of indifference into a just and thriving integral ecology. In this task, Catholic NGOs, movements, and congregations have an important responsibility to design strategies that can effectively transform the hearts of individuals, change the unjust institutional structures and policies that divide our human family, and renew the life of the church.

As Pope Francis affirmed in 2015, “the future of humanity does not lie solely in the hands of great leaders, the great powers and the elites. It is fundamentally in the hands of peoples and in their ability to organize.” (21) At the end of the day, we must ask ourselves, are we truly willing to take up the apostolic challenge of organizing a new model? Are we really willing to support each other in this journey ahead?

Notes

- (1) Parts of this article were adapted from an address by the author to the 2021 National Assembly of the Movimento Ecclesiale di Impegno Culturale in the volume 3, issue 2 of the Journal of Orthodox Christian Studies.
- (2) Kevin Glauber Ahern, PhD is an associate professor of Religious Studies at Manhattan College. He has published several books, including *Structures of Grace: Catholic Organizations Serving the Global Common Good and Public Theology* and *The Global Common Good*. Kevin has been involved in several international lay movements and recently completed a five-year term as President of the International Catholic Movement for Intellectual and Cultural Affairs (ICMICA-Pax Romana), a global community of intellectuals and professionals engaged in the world with a spirituality of action. @kevin_ahern
- (3) Errin Haines tweet, 5/28/20. <https://twitter.com/emaravelous/status/1266178423430529024>.
- (4) See Kevin Ahern, “Mediating the Global Common Good: Catholic NGOs and the Future of Global Governance,” in *Public Theology and the Global Common Good: The Contribution of David Hollenbach*, ed. Kevin Ahern et al. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2016), 14–25.
- (5) Kevin Ahern, *Structures of Grace: Catholic Organizations Serving the Global Common Good* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2015).
- (6) Pope Francis, *Visit to Lampedusa: Homily of Holy Father Francis* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), www.vatican.va.
- (7) Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’, On Care for Our Common Home* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), no. 68, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.
- (8) *Laudato Si’*, no. 139.
- (9) Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1967), www.vatican.va.
- (10) James Martin, SJ, tweet 10/4/20, <https://twitter.com/JamesMartinSJ/status/1312716610399096833>
- (11) Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti, On Fraternity and Social Friendship* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020), nos. 66-67, www.vatican.va.
- (12) Herman Daly, “Economics for a Full World,” *Great Transition Initiative* (June 2015), p. 6
- (13) Pope Francis. 2015. *Laudato Si’*; section 195, p. 142
- (14) Pope Francis’s Address to Popular Movements, 9 July 2015. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/july/documents/papa-francesco_20150709_bolivia-movimenti-popolari.html
- (15) *Laudato Si’*, no. 211.
- (16) *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 89. (17) Pope Francis. 2015. *Laudato Si’*, section 195, p. 142.
- (17) *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 94. (19) Pope Francis. 2015. *Laudato Si’*, section 54, p. 40.
- (18) *Laudato Si’*, no. 173.
- (19) *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 117.
- (20) *Laudato Si’*, no. 219.
- (21) Pope Francis’s Address to Popular Movements.



May 22-29

Listening and Journeying Together

The Carmelite NGO Main Office
 1725 General Taylor Street
 New Orleans, LA 70115 USA
 Tel: (+01) 504.458.3029
 Fax: (+01) 504. 864.7438
jfremson2@gmail.com

Spanish Office
 Convento El Carmen, carretera de Tale s/n,
 12200 Onda, España
ong.carmelita@zohomail.eu