



4TH INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS ON THE CARE OF CREATION
Fondazione Giovanni Paolo II per la Gioventù

“Integral ecology for a new humanity”
Card. Michael Czerny S.J.

Lisbon, 31 July 2023

I was asked to talk about your commitment as young people to integral ecology and lifestyles for a new humanity. This theme has a strikingly prophetic tone. It relates directly to this crucial point of history—these times which are being called the anthropocene.

The anthropocene is a new geological epoch; it names a staggering turning point in the history of our planet. Never before has *homo sapiens* lived in such a time. Overwhelming global evidence shows that humans have significantly altered all earth’s systems—the atmosphere, the oceans, the continents, and ecosystems—the whole community of life on earth. We are now experiencing disturbing concurrent trends—ice rapidly disappearing (Arctic Sea ice, mountain glaciers, and parts of the Greenland and Antarctic ice sheets), hotter and more acidic oceans, rising sea level, extreme weather (droughts, floods, and catastrophic wildfires). This is affecting marine, freshwater, and terrestrial life more and more. Since late winter, my home country Canada has experienced its worst wildfire season on record, and in late June and early July the resultant smog blanketed large cities across North America and even reached Portugal here. Now the news says that three continents are in the grip of extreme heat.

The world of the 2020s has already left the safe Holocene climate zone—the global climate conditions in which agriculture and civilisations have developed over the past 11,700 years, since the last Ice Age. Heat records are being exceeded yearly and even month by month.

Human activity causing greenhouse gas emissions is the cause of the excessive heat. More than 90 nations have now signed the Paris Accords and set targets to reach net-zero emissions by mid-century. But what is being done is not enough and results are falling short of the target. So things will get worse. We are now heading dangerously close to the 1.5 to 2 degrees ceiling targeted by the Accords; and dangerous tipping points are looming more closely within the next several decades.

Pope Francis helps us to think about this humanly, spiritually and theologically. In *Laudato Si'*, he reframes Church teaching on Creation – on the natural environment that is our unique cradle of organic life – by highlighting the neglected fact that humans are an integral part of the Earth system and are now collectively shaping its future. He urgently invites the world to engage in honest dialogue on “How shall we construct the future of the planet?” He provides us with the elements needed to reflect theologically on integral ecology. Integral ecology interconnects the wide range of languages and categories that take us “to the heart of what it is to be human” (LS11).

In these unprecedented times, we are called, by the Creator and by the Gospel, to change how we live, and act, and pray. What's "unprecedented" is the complex, combined emergence of multiple crises:

- the eco-crisis,
- culture wars,
- the untold misery of hundreds of millions of poor people and refugees, and
- the new digital age with its many advantages and pitfalls.

These times are so much in need of new meanings, fresh values, and, above all, living examples of persons, communities, and institutions that embody a "new humanity." We must acknowledge the appeal, immensity and urgency of the challenge we face (LS15).

Pope Francis tells us, simply and forcefully, that humanity has to change (LS 202), and even more so, to convert. The required change is much more than simply political or technological solutions. The climate, along with the atmosphere, earth and waters of our planet, constitute a common good, belonging to all and meant for all. We must become more aware of our common origin, our mutual belonging, and our shared future. This basic knowledge would permit development of new convictions, new connections and attachments, new styles of life (LS202).

In *LS ch 3* and elsewhere, Pope Francis traces the "human roots" of the ecological crisis back to a mind-set, a worldview, a particular way of perceiving the natural world and relating with it that has spread since the Industrial Revolution. The technocratic paradigm of Modernity, which now tends to dominate all economic and political life, pits humans against the natural world and against one another. It promotes a modern myth of progress "grounded in a utilitarian mindset (individualism, unlimited progress, competition, consumerism, the unregulated market)." (LS210) "The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast" (LS217 quoting Benedict XVI). This is the moment to embrace a new culture that allows us to recalibrate the relationship between human beings and the environment (LS143).

If we are truly concerned to develop an ecology capable of remedying the damage we have done, no branch of the sciences and no form of wisdom can be left out (LS63). Respect must also extend to the religions and the cultural and spiritual riches of the many different peoples (LS34). And we should be grateful to indigenous peoples for their courageous efforts to protect the earth (LS146).

About you the Holy Father says: "Young people demand change. They wonder how anyone can claim to be building a better future without thinking of the environmental crisis and the sufferings of the excluded." (LS13). "Young people have a new ecological sensitivity and a generous spirit, and some of them are making admirable efforts to protect the environment." (LS209)

In short, the "immensity and urgency of the challenge we face" impel us to embark on a new "ethical and spiritual itinerary", in which "the results of the best scientific research available today" play an absolutely essential role (LS15). In fact, "no branch of the sciences and no form of wisdom can be left out" (LS63). Integral ecology requires that they network together, for scientific activity in various fields shows that "the network is the most effective model for describing reality.

This prompts us to pay increasing attention to the interconnections between the different elements that make up the world, on which the delicate balance that makes our survival and that of all living species possible depends. This model is inspired by *Laudato si'*, which both locates the human being within the interconnected web of reality and affirms the irreplaceable human role in the care of the common home.”¹

YOUR ROLE IN INTEGRAL ECOLOGY: SOME CONCRETE ACTIONS

To achieve net-zero emissions, a rapid transformation is necessary across all global systems — how we power our economies, how we transport people and goods, how we feed a growing and ageing population.² Many important actions are necessary for the green transition to sustainability. Briefly, some of the major shifts needed are:

- **ACHIEVE NET-ZERO EMISSIONS BY MID-CENTURY:** this is the principal target of the global climate effort. It means seriously and rapidly transitioning from a fossil-fuel economy to a clean-energy economy. Every nation and every sector has to do it without delay.
- **FORESTS AND PROTECTED HABITATS:** Stopping deforestation, especially in watersheds of global importance like the Amazon and the Congo; plant trees to increase greening the earth and sequestering carbon; protect ocean shorelines from erosion by planting mangroves.
- To protect biodiversity and halt ecosystem degradation, many countries are calling for the protection of 30% of land and marine environments by 2030 and the United Nations has designated the next 10 years “The Decade on Restoration.” Only 16.44% of land worldwide is currently protected, along with 7.74% of the oceans, according to the UN. The 30/30 target is considered to be a minimum.
- **TRANSFORMING CITIES:** Cities, now home to over 57% of the world’s population, take up 3% of Earth’s land, but are responsible for most of the world’s energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions. A holistic approach that looks at entire urban systems is needed to help prepare cities for a sustainable and equitable future. People-friendly cities require more public transport, biking and walking.
- **TRANSPORTATION:** A rapid shift to far fewer private cars, and to greener fuels for all modes of transportation.
- **REGENERATIVE AGRICULTURE** produces food in a way that nurtures and restores soil health, sequesters carbon, and protects the climate, water resources and biodiversity.

¹ Furio Gramatica, “La rete come struttura dell’universo: La scienza dietro *Laudato si’*” (The network as the structure of the universe: The science behind *Laudato si’*), *Aggiornamenti Sociali* (maggio 2023), 348. Our translation.

² See World Resources Institute, <https://www.wri.org/research/realizing-net-zero-emissions-good-practices-countries> and <https://www.wri.org/insights/net-zero-ghg-emissions-questions-answered>.

- **EARTH-RESPONSIBLE ECONOMICS AND FINANCE:** Calling for responsible economics and finance rather than the frantic pursuit of profit that ignores the common good in nature and society.
- **EDUCATION:** “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” (LS215) -- this is exactly what we are talking about today. “Both the teachers and the learners engaged in environmental education must be able to help themselves and everyone “to grow in solidarity, responsibility and compassionate care” (LS210) within the great network of life.

YOUR ROLE, WHEREVER YOU ARE, IN INTEGRAL ECOLOGY

You live within a web of relationships. “Human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself” (LS §66). “Everything is related, and we human beings are united as [siblings] on a wonderful pilgrimage, unfolding in the love God has for each of his creatures” (LS92). Integral ecology seeks “to restore the various levels of ecological equilibrium, establishing harmony within ourselves, with others, with nature and other living creatures, and with God” (LS210). Each of you, whatever your interests and skills, your location and opportunities, has a part to play.

Whether religious or not, we can agree today that the earth is a shared inheritance, whose fruits are meant to benefit everyone. For believers, this becomes a question of fidelity to the Creator, since God created the world for everyone. Consequently, “it is not in accord with God’s plan that this gift be used in such a way that its benefits favour only a few. This calls into serious question the unjust habits of a part of humanity” (LS93). “Hence every ecological approach needs to incorporate a social perspective which takes into account the fundamental rights of the poor and the underprivileged” (LS93).

Like other traditions, our “rich heritage of Christian spirituality, the fruit of twenty centuries of personal and communal experience, has a precious contribution to make to the renewal of humanity” (LS216). More than just ideas, “the teachings of the Gospel have direct consequences for our way of thinking, feeling and living”, and “can motivate us to a more passionate concern for the protection of our world” (LS216).

Integral ecology takes work; indeed, it upholds the value of labour (LS124). But this needs to be balanced by willingness to contemplate the Creator who lives among us and surrounds us; to honestly examine our commitments and lifestyle; and to develop a serene harmony with creation (LS225). “We are speaking of an attitude of the heart, one which approaches life with serene attentiveness, which is capable of being fully present... and accepts each moment as a gift from God to be lived to the full. Jesus taught us this attitude when he invited us to contemplate the lilies of the field and the birds of the air” (LS226). We should imitate Saint Therese of Lisieux whose “simple daily gestures ... break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness” (LS230).

In conclusion, I ask you to take my words as just a step on your path of caring for our common home. I invite you to read Ch 4 of LS, entitled “Integral Ecology”, where Pope Francis treats environmental, economic and social ecology; cultural ecology; ecology of daily life; the principle of the common good; and justice between the generations.

Pope Francis endorses Francis of Assisi as our best guide:

Saint Francis is the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically. He is the patron saint of all who study and work in the area of ecology, and he is also much loved by non-Christians. He was particularly concerned for God’s creation and for the poor and outcast. He loved, and was deeply loved for his joy, his generous self-giving, his openheartedness. He was a mystic and a pilgrim who lived in simplicity and in wonderful harmony with God, with others, with nature and with himself. He shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace (LS10).

Nothing could be better than if these words inspire you to fully and faith-fully live in, and to bravely care for, our common home.