

Sublime Community

Reflections on Eco-Theology
and *Laudato Si'*



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Table of Contents

1. Sublime Communion	1
2. A Cosmopolis of Ecological Concern	5
3. Creation: A Living Questions	11
4. Ecological Conversion	21
5. A Eucharistic Ecology	41
6. The Holy Spirit	45
7. Room For All	51
8. From Neighbour To Neighbourhood	57
9. The Eucharist and Ecology	63
10. Trinitarian Connections	67
11. In Memoriam: Denis Edwards (1943–2019)	93
12. Big Picture: Background for Sublime Communion	103
13. Hope for Nature	117
14. Homily: A Eucharistic Theology	125

Sublime Communion

It is some years since Pentecost Sunday, 24 May 2015, when Pope Francis issued *Laudato Si': On Care for our Common Home*. It broadened and deepened Catholic awareness and identity, encouraged dialogue with many sciences and disciplines while stimulating ecumenical and even interreligious collaboration and communication. This new focus is evident as with the Pope's apostolic letter, in *Querida Amazonia* as he pushes on toward a more *integral ecology*. *The papal project implies that any new integration will prove elusive* if it ignores the transcendent source and goal of our inter-relational existence and so bypasses the reality of the universe in which all things participate and exist in an interconnectedness and communion. A widespread collaborative effort is called for, not only on the part of the sciences and economics, but also in those areas with a specifically human concentration such as anthropology, sociology, politics, philosophy and art. No domain of knowledge or exploration can be left out of the conversation. Some will make their best contribution scientifically by throwing light on, say, climate change, desertification, ocean warming, political approaches, economic modelling, and so on. Others will make their best contribution in terms of theology, spirituality, morality and ethics, as well as a range of philosophical questions dealing with the distinctiveness of the human, a more integrated sense of ecology, the phenomenon of human consciousness, and its place in the community of living things.

Ecological questions seem to be a zone of irreconcilable conflicts. Open-minded exchange with others is rare on the intellectual, professional and political level. On the other hand, larger religious, spiritual and philosophical horizons can lessen the danger of

ideological divisiveness and monodimensional mindsets. Inevitably, there will be opposing points of view even though there are new modes of collaboration to be discovered and more inclusive and respectful conversations to be conducted.

An integralecology holds the promise of a more authentic humanity as this 'common era' comes to appreciate the wonder and diversity of life on this planet, and our human and earthly responsibilities within it. Appreciating the role and responsibility of the human within the 'sublime communion' of life on planet Earth does not demean other forms of life in this biosphere, but it does point to quite a special mission of the human in 'caring for our common home'—to quote the subtitle of Pope Francis's encyclical. The phenomenon of human consciousness, the human capacity to know, to explore, and to experience the wonder and beauty of life, necessarily casts us human beings into the role of being ecological agents. Unlike other animals, we humans can live beyond the confines of a mere habitat, and enter an expanding world, and so awaken as a participant in a boundless universe.

In that respect, there is a distinctiveness of the human which—regardless of how much it shares a genetic inheritance with other animals—which must be respected and defended. After all, there have been no reports so far of a pod of whales holding a conference on the declining quality of plankton, or of leopards gathering to plan a cosmetic makeover to change their spots, or of dolphins who, after meeting in prayer, have decided to assert the rights of fish. We have no information of lemmings exploring less wasteful organizational procedures, or of the higher apes writing monographs on the meaning of life. Any developments in such directions have so far escaped detection. As a result, questions of meaning and value, of an englobing sense of the universe, seem to be left to the human. With all other animals, the human being breathes the air of this planet; but human consciousness inhales the atmosphere of another realm—original and ultimate.

From Aristotle on, previous generations spoke of the human as the 'rational animal' (*zoon logikon* in Greek, *animal rationale* in Latin). This was the classic description of the human as the biophysical lifeform that can reflect on itself, and even reflect on its own reflecting. Through evolutionary biology, there is new understanding of the process in which human existence has emerged, with a rediscovery of

the basic animality of the human. The human is not somehow circling the globe looking for a temporary physical habitation. Rather, the human animal shares with all other animals a common emergence and structure in a biophysical world, with needs, emotions, and the instincts to bond, reproduce, care for young, and so forth.

Yet there remains the 'rational' aspect—that strange ability in the human for thought and freedom. It is the capacity for reflective openness to everything—from the genetic makeup of our bodies and the brain's trillion neurons, to the phenomenon of consciousness itself—and all its manifestations in faith, science, philosophy, art—and even understanding something of the ecology of our existence. Negatively speaking, an *integral* ecology is not to be realised by excluding any domain or dimension of knowledge from consideration. or even the whole terrestrial biosphere, let alone the incomprehensible totality of existence so as have a sense of participating in a 'sublime communion' [LS N 92, 221].

Clearly, integral ecology does not presume a ready-made synthesis; it is always 'in the making.' From embodied consciousness emerge science and all kinds of scientific specializations. The manifold creativity of knowledge, however, does not replace immediate experience but articulates it.² Here, an integral ecology can learn much from phenomenological works intent on disclosing the experience that is at 'the heart of reason.' Rather than take for granted the post-Enlightenment fragmentation of knowledge and the endless proliferation of specializations pointing us away from the concreteness of experience, it is better to be immersed in reality as it is *given* before any rational analysis, in ways that precede concepts, systems or even verbal formulae. What is the *given* is that we consciously exist and coexist, immersed in, and participating in the inexpressible totality of the universe.

The door opens to new forms of collaboration. We human beings are being inspired to develop a new sense of conscious connections with the biosphere of this earth and the encompassing cosmic realities of space and time. In that context, the singularity of Christian revelation might come to fresh expression, so as to allow for the rigorous objectivity of the scientist, the creativity of the artist, and the unutterable experience of the mystic, and the everyday patterns of communication and action in the daily life of the world. In this context, we human beings have a unique capacity to ask the big

questions arising from the world in which we live, the universe in which we participate with the character and capacity of the human itself.

There is work to be done. Modern science has shown its magnificence in its concentration on empirical data regarding the material constitution of the universe and the stages of evolution. It has, however, tended to neglect another kind of data, namely, the data of consciousness which enable human consciousness itself, along with science, ecology, and the life of the spirit to be examined in a more ample and integrated fashion—in the interests of a genuine integral ecology.

From beginning to end, the expanding meaning of the incarnation is crucial. The resurrection and ascension of Christ do not mean that he is now disincarnate and disembodied but, rather, that he is fully embodied in the world as it will ultimately be. We human beings are not yet fully embodied in him within a transformed creation. Still, we must start from scratch: that means giving death its due—some times a missing dimension in ecological thinking. Death has a place within the framework of integral ecology if it is to remain truly open to the witness of Christian faith and hope. Likewise, there is room for eschatological reflection on how ultimate fulfillment in Christ includes the liberation and transformation of earthly nature itself. Understandably, this is a neglected dimension in ecological reflection. After all, the Word became flesh—an ‘earthling’ in a planetary environment. Consequently, eschatological fulfillment does not entail the abolition of the natural world, but its unimaginable fulfillment in Christ.

A Cosmopolis of Ecological Concern

What is needed is a widespread collaborative effort, not only on the part of the sciences and economics, but also including all the human concerns that are the domain of anthropology, sociology, politics, and art, and more—since no one can be left out of the conversation. For all explorers of faith, a proper docility regarding scientific analyses is presumed: we leave to experts such questions of climate change, desertification, ocean warming and the like, while at the same time making our best contribution in terms of faith, theology, spirituality, art, language and the great philosophical questions. Faith may not provide a detailed program, but it does inspire hope and a sense of living in an environment in which the Word became flesh, and in a universe called into existence by God's creative love. By evoking this larger religious horizon, the danger of ideological divisiveness and monodimensional mindsets might be avoided.

There will be inevitably opposing points of views even though there are new modes of collaboration to be discovered, and more inclusive and respectful conversations to be conducted in a *cosmopolis* of ecological concern. This is not unrelated to the multifaceted tradition of natural law,³ with its emphasis on the common good, even if this lacks a specific concern for the integrity of terrestrial life. In this respect, what is needed is a communication of the best intelligence and enlightened practice, able to resist the general bias of short-term goals and vested interests. An integral ecology, for its part, envisages, however imperfectly, not only particular ecological niches, not only larger habitats, but the whole terrestrial biosphere: in short, the incomprehensible totality of existence in life lived as 'a sublime communion'.

In the scale and variety of its achievements, the Enlightenment eventually worked against the true integration of human knowledge. Complex cultural and social conditions tended to mute the disclosive power of religious and even philosophical language in the deepest registers of meaning. A genuinely integral ecology became impossible as it awaited a *second enlightenment* amid a sad fragmentation of disciplines and a jumble of attitudes and perspectives within a diminishing sense of synthesis and communication in a world of competing points of view. Formerly, a religious sense of creation provided a background in which our diverse human creativities could improvise their variations within the symphony of reality.

Indeed, the scientist and philosopher, Michael Polanyi, outlined possibilities of generous collaboration between science, philosophy, ecology, and theology. In this regard, the dynamics of different types knowing suggest,

A continuous ascent from our less personal knowing of inanimate matter to our convivial knowing of living beings and beyond this to knowing our responsible fellow men. Such I believe is the true transition from the sciences to the humanities, and also from our knowing the laws of nature to our knowing the person of God.

Thus, the very performance of such knowing points to the creativity that has sustained and moved the evolutionary unfolding of the universe. What is the light of intelligence in which we participate? What is this universe of co-existence, even of communion, that has enabled the chaos of atoms and molecules, of different life-forms, and processes underlying the conscious living of relationships as it emerges for our contemplation in this present moment?

Bruno Latour's *Inquiry into Modes of Existence: Anthropology for Moderns*¹ provides a valuable resource for the integral ecology of 'sublime communion'. He contests the flat univocal conception of science in favor of intercommunication between many 'modes of existence', and the communities and institutions they represent, in order to form networks serving a more holistic understanding of human existence: a promising and practical step forward.

1. Bruno Latour *Inquiry into Modes of Existence: Anthropology for Moderns* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 2013).