



For our COMMON HOME

Reflection on integral ecology

God is in all Creation

When you step out onto the pavement in the morning, do you ever consider what is beneath your feet? Is it possible that under the layers of concrete, we can feel the beating heart of the land? The land which gives life to the trees which provide the oxygen we breathe, that nourishes the gardens that provide our food, and which sustains the homes that give us shelter? Is it possible to see the face of God, Creator of the land, air, water, moon and sun, and of all the universal elements that connect us to each of our sisters and brothers living in our common home?

In today's modern world, we can easily forget that the car we are driving, the cell phone we are using and the sneakers we are wearing all derive from the natural resources that God created. Too often, however, these natural resources are taken from the lands of others and not shared equitably. In addition, the unsustainable use of these resources – spurred by our overconsumption – has triggered our current climate crisis. As a consequence, millions of people live in poverty, experience hunger and climate disasters, have their ancestral lands stolen and desecrated, and are denied their integral human development.

With this reflection, we invite you to begin the journey towards an integral ecology, which “calls for openness to categories which transcend the language of mathematics and biology, and take us to the heart of what it is to be human.” (*Laudato Si'*, 11) Together, let us experience the ecological conversion that incites us all to care for our common home.



**Development
and Peace**
CARITAS CANADA



PART I:

The ecological tradition of the Church

The social teachings of the Church have long affirmed the essential relationship between natural ecology and human ecology, and our responsibility to care for Creation.

Drawing from the Church’s theology of Creation and sacramentality, as well as its reflections on nature and grace, the Second Vatican Council recognized the inter-relationship of salvation, humanity and Creation (*Lumen Gentium*, 48-1964) Saint Paul VI emphasized this inseparable and interdependent relationship, recognizing the inextricable role of nature in the integral development of the person.

Man is suddenly becoming aware that by an ill-considered exploitation of nature he risks destroying it and becoming in his turn the victim of this degradation. Not only is the material environment becoming a permanent menace — pollution and refuse, new illness and absolute destructive capacity — but the human framework is no longer under man’s control, thus creating an environment for tomorrow which may well be intolerable. This is a wide-ranging social problem which concerns the entire human family. (Octogesima Adveniens, 21-1971)

Saint John Paul II further emphasized the moral dimension of caring for Creation, so that both humankind and nature can fulfill the vocation given to them by God.

The growing ecological crisis was now equally viewed as an ethical crisis:

Nor can the moral character of development exclude respect for the beings which constitute the natural world, which the ancient Greeks — alluding precisely to the order which distinguishes it — called the “cosmos”.... A true concept of development cannot ignore the use of the elements of nature, the renewability of resources and the consequences of haphazard industrialization — three considerations which alert our consciences to the moral dimension of development. (Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, 34)

Pope Benedict XVI deepened our understanding of the link between harm to the environment and the over-exploitation of natural resources due to our unjust economic structures. He called for a closer communion between Catholics and nature.

The way humanity treats the environment influences the way it treats itself, and vice versa. This invites contemporary society to a serious review of its life-style, which, in many parts of the world, is prone to hedonism and consumerism, regardless of their harmful consequences.... Every violation of solidarity and civic friendship harms the environment, just as environmental deterioration in turn upsets relations in society. Nature, especially in our time, is so integrated into the dynamics of society and culture that by now it hardly constitutes an independent variable. (Caritas in Veritate, 51-2009)

Pope Francis directly addresses the climate crisis affecting our common home and brings forward the concept of integral ecology, which asks that we focus on the set of relationships that exists between humans, the natural world and God.

When we speak of the “environment”, what we really mean is a relationship existing between nature and the society which lives in it. Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it. (Laudato Si’, 139–2015)

PART II

Hearing the cry of the poor and the cry of the Earth: building right relationships

Nature itself has an inherent dignity that must be respected, and when we humans distance ourselves from nature and allow it to be violated, we are in essence, destroying our own human ecology. Social bonds break down and we forget our love for one another. As the cry of the Earth grows, so does the cry of the poor. The Amazon, for instance, provides 20% of the world’s oxygen. Yet, not only are we destroying this essential biome, but those trying to protect it are being impoverished, criminalized and even killed.

The notion of ecology is at its essence about relationships. The symbiosis of these relationships becomes evident when we begin to examine how our relationship with nature impacts on our relationship with our sisters and brothers, and with God. **Integral ecology calls us to be in a right relationship with all three, because if there is no harmony within any one, the others will suffer.**

As we see in the Book of Genesis, when God set forth Creation, His was already an interconnected vision of the world. When humankind betrays this holistic order, chaos ensues. God flooded the land, but His covenant with Noah provided humankind and the Earth with an opportunity for redemption and renewal, and for forming new and caring relationships.

As our common home faces a climate emergency precipitated by human activity, have we betrayed our covenant with God, who sacrificed His only Son to save humankind and to renew the face of the Earth? When we see a rainbow in the sky, do we remember our shared promise with God, to care for what He created and in turn to be cared for by Him?

In his 1990 World Day of Peace Message, Saint John Paul II exhorted, “An education in ecological responsibility is urgent: responsibility for oneself, for others, and for the earth. This education cannot be rooted in mere sentiment or empty wishes.” This message resonates as powerfully today, if not more so. Is it not time to reconnect with the splendour of God’s Creation and to extend the love in our hearts to all?

PART III

Ecological conversion: a new vision of love

The ecological question must not be faced solely because of the frightening prospects that environmental destruction represents; rather it must above all become a strong motivation for an authentic solidarity of worldwide dimensions. (Compendium of Social Doctrine of the Church, 486)

Solidarity is a special form of love. It asks us to care for all the members of our human family unconditionally. It becomes increasingly difficult to experience this form of love when the structures of society place profit and the accumulation of wealth over the wellbeing of the planet its people. When this becomes our driving purpose, we are pulled away from one another and God’s Creation.

Pope Francis calls us to undergo an ecological conversion. The word ecology comes from the Greek “*oikos*”, which means “home” or “place to live.” Should not our common home be a sustainable one, where humankind and nature live in mutual respect and in dignity, and all can benefit equally from the bounty of Creation, as God intended? How do we restore its splendour when we have become so disconnected from its gifts? Home is where the heart is and that is where the transformation must happen first.

The development of an integral ecology, then, is both a call and a task. It is a call to rediscover our identity as sons and daughters of our heavenly Father who have been created in the divine image and commissioned to be stewards of the earth (cf. Gen 1:27,28; 2:15); re-created through the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (cf. 2 Cor 5:17); and sanctified by the gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. 2 Thess 2:13). Such an identity is God’s gift to every person and even to Creation itself, made new by the life-giving grace of the Lord’s death and resurrection. In this light, our call to solidarity as brothers and sisters and to a shared responsibility for our common home becomes increasingly urgent. (Pope Francis, address at the International Conference of the Centesimus Annus Pro Pontifice Foundation, June 8, 2019)

How do we answer this call to convert hearts and minds, including our own? **Integral ecology means embracing solidarity in its full sense and extending our love to our sisters and brothers who are suffering the worst impacts of climate change, to our Earth and to future generations who should not inherit a home destroyed by our irresponsibility.** It means opening our minds to dialogue with others, to the wisdom and knowledge of Indigenous peoples and the voice of those who are voiceless. It means being the Church in the world and for the world, its “sacrament of salvation, the sign and the instrument” of God’s communion with humanity (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 780). The growing love of converted hearts will then be transformed into action.

PART IV

Caring for our common home: taking action

Saint Therese of Lisieux invites us to practise the little way of love, not to miss out on a kind word, a smile or any small gesture which sows peace and friendship. An integral ecology is also made up of simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness. (Laudato Si’, 230)

Even a simple smile towards a stranger is an action to care for our common home. There are many ways to build the world we want and need. Here are some ways to take action:

Individually and with your family

- **Take part in the Ignatian practice of daily examen:** Through this method of prayerful reflection, which asks us to find the presence of God in daily events and discern his direction for us, contemplate how your identity as being in the image and likeness of God grounds you in Creation.
- **Make lifestyle changes:** As Pope Francis reminds us, lifestyle changes such as taking public transit, choosing plant-based food more often and reducing consumption in general can have a powerful impact.
- **Reconnect with nature:** Living in harmony with nature means building a relationship with and an appreciation for the living world. Taking a walk in the woods, observing the night sky or reading a book in the park are just a few ways to feel the embrace of Mother Earth.
- **Reflect on Church teaching about reverencing nature:** Read, meditate and reflect on Church teachings such as those which have been cited in the first three parts of this text.

- **Pray:** There are many prayers that can guide us on our spiritual path, including St. Francis of Assisi’s Canticle of Creatures and the thanksgiving address of the Iroquois Confederacy. Being contemplative in the midst of nature, embracing its magnificence and thanking God is also a form of prayer. Find these and other suggested prayers at devp.org/en/laudatosi.

In your community

- **Green your parish and neighbourhood:** Consider starting an initiative to make your parish or neighbourhood more ecological and environmentally-friendly if this is not already underway.
- **Engage with your municipal government:** Some of the most significant changes can happen at the municipal level. Encourage your municipality to build parks and bike paths and to ban plastic bottles, plastic straws and wasteful packaging.
- **Support retreat centres and Catholic movements:** Institutions and orders that emphasize meditation, simple living and respect for nature have much to teach us.

Nationally and globally

- **Call on** the Canadian government to respect its commitments to the Paris Agreement and to enforce corporate accountability.
- **Hold** corporations and other businesses accountable for human rights violations in their corporate practices and financial investments.
- **Invite** all political parties to uphold the rights of Indigenous peoples and to do more to respect authentic, integral and sustainable development.
- **Support** Development and Peace – Caritas Canada’s actions to build a world of justice and peace.

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