

## ***Laudato Si'*: On Care for Our Common Home – Connecting Ecology and Urban Development**

***Alejandro Crosthwaite***

### **Introduction**

Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* calls urban planners to an "ecological conversion" regarding the integration of city design with the natural environment and people's quality of life with a special concern for the poor and excluded in our cities. This paper reflects on the relationship between urban development, environmental ecology and human ecology as presented in Pope Francis' second Encyclical *Laudato Si'*. I first present the general "ecological" message of the Holy Father's Encyclical, and focus on the integration in city design of the natural environment that is attentive to true human flourishing as well as his call for better housing, especially for the poor. I conclude with suggestions for caring for our common home in city planning.

### **Eco-Encyclical**

*Laudato Si'* is Pope Francis' urgent call to humanity to become aware of the negative and immoral impact it has on the planet it calls its common home (environmental ecological crisis) as well as the destructive behavior it perpetuates against its fellow human beings (human ecological crisis).

In analyzing the current environmental ecological crisis, the Encyclical takes a wider perspective by not only addressing the negative impact that human beings have on the environment but it also tackles the many philosophies, theologies, and cultural attitudes that menace in different situations the relationship between humanity and the natural world in addition to the bonds within the human family.

The environmental and human ecological challenge of the beginning of the Third

Millennium calls, not to preachy moral chastisement, but to dialogue and conversion. With regards to dialogue, Pope Francis states: "I urgently appeal, then, for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation that includes everyone, since the environment challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all" (Francis 2015: n. 14). Moreover, this dialogue with all who share planet Earth as their home calls all, but especially Christians, to a "profound interior conversion":

The ecological crisis is also a summons to profound interior conversion. It must be said that some committed and prayerful Christians, with the excuse of realism and pragmatism, tend to ridicule expressions of concern for the environment. Others are passive; they choose not to change their habits and thus become inconsistent. So what they all need is an "ecological conversion", whereby the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them. Living our vocation to be protectors of God's handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience (Francis 2015: n. 217).

As Sylvia Goulard, MEP (ALDE), President of the European Parliament's Intergroup on Extreme Poverty, concludes: "The Pope's call reaches out to all responsible people, whether or not they are believers. Following the spirit of the Gospel, the Pope is speaking to all [people] of good will. By calling for a universal initiative, which would reach across national borders and give topmost priority to the preservation of our 'common home'" (Daily 2015).

### **Integrate the Natural World in City Design**

*Laudato Si'* explains that many cities have truly become unlivable places for human

beings due not only to air, audio and visual pollution, inadequate transportation, traffic gridlocks, segregation, inequality and violence, but also because there is a marked “loss of identity... [a] silent rupture of the bonds of integration and social cohesion” (Francis 2005: n. 46). As Pope Francis writes,

Nowadays, for example, we are conscious of the disproportionate and unruly growth of many cities, which have become unhealthy to live in, not only because of pollution caused by toxic emissions but also as a result of urban chaos, poor transportation, and visual pollution and noise. Many cities are huge, inefficient structures, excessively wasteful of energy and water. Neighborhoods, even those recently built, are congested, chaotic and lacking in sufficient green space. We were not meant to be inundated by cement, asphalt, glass and metal, and deprived of physical contact with nature (Francis 2015: n. 44).

The Holy Father proposes especially to “those who design buildings, neighborhoods, public spaces and cities” that urban development needs to take into account in their city planning the interconnectedness of the natural and living environments because the dwelling environment humans create has a direct impact on how humans thrive and behave. Therefore, city planners “ought to draw on the various disciplines which help us to understand people’s thought processes, symbolic language and ways of acting. It is not enough to seek the beauty of design” (Francis 2005: n. 150). Urban development must truly serve the exterior and interior needs of city-dwellers, by taking “into consideration the view of those who will live in these areas” (Francis 2005: n. 150). In other words, to create in dialogue with city-dwellers better cities that contribute to “physical contact and encounter” and “mutual assistance” (Francis 2005: n. 49; 150).

The Pope also highlights the importance of “preserving common areas, visual landmarks and urban landscapes” that give a city a special character and familiarity. These fundamental city elements increase the “sense of

belonging, of rootedness, of ‘feeling at home’ within a city which includes us and brings us together” and that are so important for human flourishing (Francis 2005: n. 151). As *Nextcity* journalist Ann Clark states in her article on building better cities:

Preservation of structures and spaces for their own sake is irrelevant; rather, preservation efforts should be tailored to the public good, and should be accessible to all. When they are well integrated into the landscape, residents of the city will feel a deepened sense of the whole. When they are not well integrated, they contribute to isolation and separateness (Clark 2015).

This ecological Encyclical also addresses the transportation crisis in our modern cities. The prevalence of a worldwide “car culture” is the cause of “traffic congestion, raising the level of pollution, and consuming enormous quantities of non-renewable energy” (Francis 2005: n. 153). This leads many nations to build more highways and parking spaces “which spoil the urban landscape” (Francis 2005: n. 153). But changing transportation policies and directing all to public transports will not prove easily acceptable to a comfortable “driving” society: “unless substantial improvements are made in the systems themselves, which in many cities force people to put up with undignified conditions due to crowding, inconvenience, infrequent service and lack of safety” (Francis 2005: n. 153).

To conclude this section on integrating human ecology, environmental ecology and city planning, Pope Francis does not want to leave out the preservation of “untouched” natural spaces:

Interventions which affect the urban or rural landscape should take into account how various elements combine to form a whole which is perceived by its inhabitants as a coherent and meaningful framework for their lives. Others will then no longer be seen as strangers, but as part of a “we” which all of us are working to create. For this same reason, in both urban and rural settings, it is helpful to set aside some plac-

es which can be preserved and protected from constant changes brought by human intervention (Francis 2005: n. 151).

The problem of human housing is also addressed by *Laudato Si'* as well as the moral obligation city-planners have not to exclude the poor from urban development.

### **Better Housing, Especially for the Poor**

Shelter is a basic human need in addition to a fundamental natural right. Nonetheless, even wealthy nations grapple with the ever growing housing problem of its citizens, especially of their poor and immigrants. This housing problem has become a world crisis by the ever increasing population of cities due to migration from rural areas to the cities as well as from foreign nationals who in general settle in hosting cities in search of work and a more promising future. These factors are causing disastrous effects on urban shelter and basic services. As Indian Sociologist Pujá Mondal warns,

There is a severe housing shortage in the urban areas with demand–supply gap increasing day-by-day. The [Indian] National Building Organization (NBO) had estimated the 1991 urban housing shortage at 8.23 million, and had expected the absolute shortage to decline progressively to 7.57 million in 1997 and 6.64 million in 2001 (Mondal 2001).

Pope Francis highlights that governments in general assign a small portion of the national budget for providing housing for all social classes, a fact that goes against the dignity of all citizens that he defends throughout his Encyclical: “Having a home has much to do with a sense of personal dignity and the growth of families” (Francis 2015: n. 152). The situation is worse for those of the lower social classes:

In some places, where makeshift shanty towns have sprung up, this will mean developing those neighborhoods rather than razing or displacing them. When the poor live in unsanitary slums or in dangerous tenements, “in cases where it is necessary to

relocate them, in order not to heap suffering upon suffering, adequate information needs to be given beforehand, with choices of decent housing offered, and the people directly involved must be part of the process” (Francis 2015: n. 152).

The deterioration of the natural environment and of society especially has negative consequences on the poor of the world: “The impact of present imbalances is also seen in the premature death of many of the poor, in conflicts sparked by the shortage of resources, and in any number of other problems which are insufficiently represented on global agendas” (Francis 2015: n. 48). This situation is aggravated by the “privatization” of certain spaces of beauty as well as communities “closed to outsiders in order to ensure an artificial tranquility”, especially from “the disposable of society” (Francis 2015: n. 45).

Moreover, as Pope Francis laments “It needs to be said that, generally speaking, there is little in the way of clear awareness of problems which especially affect the excluded” (Francis 2015: n. 49). Furthermore, a true green approach must always take into consideration a social approach “it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” (Francis 2015: n. 49). Planners must also consider that “the poorest areas and countries are less capable of adopting new models for reducing environmental impact because they lack the wherewithal to develop the necessary processes and to cover their costs” (Francis 2015: n. 52).

*Laudato Si'* likewise warns on finding an easy solution in population control for the problems of the environment, housing and the poor:

To blame population growth instead of extreme and selective consumerism on the part of some, is one way of refusing to face the issues. It is an attempt to legitimize the present model of distribution, where a minority believes that it has the right to consume in a way which can never be

universalized, since the planet could not even contain the waste products of such consumption (Francis 2015: n. 50).

To conclude this final section, every ecological housing solution must “incorporate a social perspective which takes into account the fundamental rights of the poor and the underprivileged” (Francis 2015: n. 93). As Pope Francis exhorts,

Creativity should be shown in integrating rundown neighborhoods into a welcoming city: “How beautiful those cities which overcome paralyzing mistrust, integrate those who are different and make this very integration a new factor of development! How attractive are those cities which, even in their architectural design, are full of spaces which connect, relate and favor the recognition of others!” (Francis 2015: n. 152).

## Conclusion

Pope Francis’ ecological Encyclical *Laudato Si’* insists on the *moral cause* for city development and design. Whether he is arguing for the creation of cities that are truly places of “physical contact and encounter” and “mutual assistance” (Francis 2005: n. 49; 150); “preserving common areas, visual landmarks and urban landscapes” that give cities their special character, familiarity, and make them home for the citizens of this world; all within a context of dialogue between city planners, government, and city-dwellers; he always calls all to integrate environmental ecology and city planning with human ecology: “Our insistence that each human being is an image of God should not make us overlook the fact that each creature has its own purpose. None is superfluous” (Francis 2015: n. 84). This is especially true of the poor and the “thrown away” from society.

This holistic sustainable ecological call must include a true “ecological conversion” and not just an ecological awareness. “People may well have a growing ecological sensitivity but it has not succeeded in changing their harmful habits of consumption which, rather

than decreasing, appear to be growing all the more” (Francis 2015: n. 55). This is made more corrosive by “the imposition of a dominant lifestyle linked to a single form of production [that] can be just as harmful as the altering of ecosystems” (Francis 2015: n. 145).

Our habitats are intensely personal, and influence how we think, feel, act and express our identity:

Authentic development includes efforts to bring about an integral improvement in the quality of human life, and this entails considering the setting in which people live their lives. These settings influence the way we think, feel and act. In our rooms, our homes, our workplaces and neighborhoods, we use our environment as a way of expressing our identity. We make every effort to adapt to our environment, but when it is disorderly, chaotic or saturated with noise and ugliness, such overstimulation makes it difficult to find ourselves integrated and happy (Francis 2015: n. 147).

If our living spaces are well designed — equitable, serviceable, historic, coherent and integrated with the natural world— they, according to Pope Francis, make it possible to “recover something of our true selves” (Francis 2015: n. 84).

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