



‘Why Call it Progress?’

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Pope Francis’s radical critique of the way we live now

Though Francis might look like a raving revolutionary to the captains of capitalism, and though some of his critics within the church have accused him of importing socialism and radical environmentalism into Catholic social teaching, the current pope has in fact pushed out from a path firmly forged by his predecessors.

Saint John Paul II called for an “ecological conversion” of the church through “concrete programs and initiatives,” and Benedict XVI did just that, installing a thousand solar panels on the roof of the Vatican’s audience hall and a hybrid engine in one of the popemobiles. But Benedict’s greatest achievement was to engage theologically with the rising ecological awareness. Noting in *Caritas in veritate* how nature expressed “a design of love and truth,” a “grammar” that “sets forth ends and criteria for its wise use, not its reckless exploitation,” he observed that the logic of gift underpinning the moral intuition behind ecology was incompatible with the ethic of sovereign autonomy.

In a series of addresses, Benedict observed how insisting on respect for the given order of the natural world sat oddly with the contemporary attitude toward sexuality and human life. Permissive laws that upheld a woman’s “choice” assumed that choice alone could specify what was good without reference to transcendent criteria, such

as the sacred value of life. Yet when mining corporations pouring toxic waste into rivers claimed it was a necessary price to pay for jobs and consumer goods, progressives were appalled. If creation were merely raw material without intrinsic value, subject only to cost-benefit analysis, then these choices were justified; but if humanity and creation were governed by a logic of gift, in which the right response to creation—whether human or natural—was respect, why did the same thinking not apply in both cases? Benedict called for the development of a “human” ecology to supplement a “natural” one, as a way of connecting with contemporary sensibilities.

Benedict’s arguments were compelling and clear, but they were aimed more at challenging ecologists than converting Catholics. In the hands of the culture warriors, “human ecology” became simply another stick to beat up liberals in rows over gay marriage or abortion laws. Yet the more that prolife, pro-family groups, especially in the United States, appealed to “human ecology,” the more exposed was their own lack of commitment to natural ecology. Many saw no contradiction in arguing against abortion and gay marriage while defending a free-market model of unrestrained consumption, the right to carry guns, and the death penalty.

Francis gently challenged this schizophrenia at a Vatican conference on male-female com-



plementarity in September 2014, organized by prominent American conservatives, including Professor Robert George of Princeton University. The conference was an astute bid to respond to the deconstruction of marriage and sexuality by highlighting the ecological basis of conjugality: how maleness and femaleness run through all cultures and faiths, as well as the natural world. (Jonathan Lord Sacks, the former chief rabbi to the United Kingdom, offered an account of marriage that began with what he claimed was the first-ever act of copulation—by prehistoric Scottish fish.) To loud applause, Francis described how the collapse of family and marriage under pressure from a “throwaway culture” advanced under “the flag of freedom” had caused “spiritual and material devastation to countless human beings, especially the poorest and most vulnerable.” But he went on to point out that this was “an ecological crisis; for social environments, like natural environments, need protection.” Equating the two environments was a subtle but clear shift, and the applause was more muted.

Francis needed, for the sake of the church’s

credibility, to challenge American conservative double standards, but his main aim was to take ecology where science couldn’t: into the realm of the sacred. Science could pinpoint the “is” but not the “ought”; it could inform, but not move to act. It could shout and sound the alarm, but it could not ask people to care about what they did not love.

This was a point made by climate scientists themselves. One of the great oceanographers of modern times, Walter Munk, remarked in a Vatican conference in 2014 that global warming could only be overcome by “a miracle of love and unselfishness.” Media stories of endangered minorities and species appealed to classically liberal moral concerns but often left religious people unmoved. A Stanford University study published a few months before *Laudato si’* came out showed that a message centered on purity and protecting God’s creation from desecration would resonate deeply with religious sensibilities, moving people both to accept the evidence and to act on it.

That meant providing a new narrative that transcended liberal ecology, one that could take the polarity of respect for nature on the one hand and

Pope Francis at the Pentecost Mass in St. Peter’s Square, June 9, 2019.



respect for human uniqueness on the other and create a new synthesis beyond the dialectically opposed ideologies of biocentrism and anthropocentrism. *Laudato si'* called this new thinking "integral ecology" because it offered a unified moral narrative. Humankind was called to be a custodian of creation, rather than its arrogant overlord; human beings were interconnected with, and biologically dependent upon, our fellow species. All of us were God's creatures. Thus *Laudato si'* would be the first authoritative Catholic document to teach, unequivocally and emphatically, the intrinsic goodness of nonhuman animals, making animal welfare a prolife issue.

Integral ecology also enabled Francis to position the global church at the heart of a drive to respect the divinely gifted design of love and truth in every "environment." Whether in the natural world, the family, or urban spaces, integral ecology offered a lens with which to judge the misuse of human autonomy and the idolatry of power. It was a challenge both to prolife, pro-family conservatives to respect the integrity of the natural world, and to environmental campaigners to safeguard the institutions and laws that protect human life and family. In this sense, *Laudato si'* has been key to Francis's evangelization call. The purpose of the church in the contemporary world is not to dominate but to serve, to reveal a loving Creator who cares deeply about His creation.

Laudato si' wasn't addressed only to the bishops and faithful, or even—as some encyclicals have been—to all "people of goodwill," but to everyone on the planet. The pope was inviting every human being to join in a new great task of collaboration with their Creator and with each other, one that was about "ecology" in the original Greek sense of *oikos*, meaning "home." At the church of San Damiano in Assisi, Jesus appeared to St. Francis to ask him to repair His church. Now a pope named after St. Francis was asking humanity to repair God's world.

According to Pablo Canziani, an Argentine atmospheric physicist who studies climate change, Francis's genius was to discern the moment when science and religion were reaching out to each other, ready for a partnership that could enable new ways of seeing among the mass of citizens of the world, and so halt the hurtling train of consumption and destruction. That new lens starts with the anguished realization that something vital has been lost and leads to a conviction that things have to be done differently to get it back. The old-fashioned word for this is "conversion."

Understanding what got lost and when is crucial to the backstory of *Laudato si'*. Nature was once something sacred, to be respected and cooperated with. But then came the triumph of science and industry on the backs of a population explosion and economic activity allied to the raw power of *techné*. "We went from one extreme to the other without finding the midpoint," Canziani explains in his office in Buenos Aires, "and now we're on a path of destruction." That loss is the theme of Romano Guardini's extraordinary texts, *The End of the Modern World* (1956) and its accompanying essay, *Power and Responsibility* (1961), which took as their subject what the German theologian saw as the central question of the age: the mindset of power shaped by technocracy.

In a 1989 lecture at the Colegio del Salvador in Buenos Aires on the need for a new political anthropology, Bergoglio quoted the books, describing Guardini as "the prophet of postmodernity" for identifying how the rapid development of technology over two hundred years, accelerated by globalization, had brought humanity to a fork in the road of history. Guardini's thesis was key not just to the narrative of *Laudato si'*, which regularly quotes *The End of the Modern World*, but also to how Francis saw the encyclical's purpose: to help humanity grasp that the choice was annihilation or conversion.

The German theologian's account centers on the radical sundering of Creator and created. Where premoderns saw nature as an expression of the divine, and saw themselves as an organic part of nature, now people asserted themselves *over* nature in search of their well-being. As the world ceased to be God's creation, it could be possessed and plundered with new know-how. Guardini saw a paradox in the autonomous rationality that underpinned this shift: that man's bid for power would render him ever more subject to a power not his own. Such a power would increasingly enslave humankind by tempting it with limitless possibility, like the forbidden fruit offered by the serpent in Eden.

Guardini foresaw that power itself would become increasingly depersonalized, emptying itself of moral sensibility, of empathy and compassion. Man had come to believe the lie that he, not God, was the author of his own creation, and over time his freedom would be undone, ironically, by his autonomy. Foreseeing that humanity "will be free to further his lordship of creation, carrying it even to its last consequences," Guardini observed that this mastery would be open to him because he

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“has permitted himself utter freedom: the freedom to determine his own goals, to dissolve the immediate reality of things, to employ its elements for the execution of his own ends.” Increasingly, he would do these things “without any consideration for what had been thought inviolate or untouchable in nature.” The effect would be to sunder the very bonds that held people together.

Rejecting the optimism of the postwar world, Guardini predicted with remarkable clarity that the forces that led to Auschwitz and the Gulag would accelerate as family, tribe, church, and nation continued to fall apart. The era of the totalitarian state would give way to the totalitarianism of economic and corporate power: with the dissolution of the bonds holding people together in families, institutions, and nations, humanity would be increasingly destabilized and dominated by the forces of technology and finance. Guardini saw at the end of the road what the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman would memorably call “the liquid society,” and even named its symptoms: a time of mass migrations, social breakdown, and the collapse of grand narratives, in which fluidity takes over from stability as the new norm of human existence. It is to this world—ours now—that Francis in *Laudato si’* has offered the church’s first comprehensive response.

Francis agrees with Guardini that the real drama of postmodernity turns not on technology per se but on the mindset of power that flourishes in a technocratic age. In the Incarnation, Guardini observed, God had revealed true power, which is the power of service, in which freedom is subject to and constrained by the essence of things and the limits of human nature. Jesus’ unmasking of the false power of domination and violence was the triumph of the Cross, his kenosis, which Guardini calls “supreme power converted into humility.”

Hence the hidden hope of *Laudato si’*: the alternative modernity it points to, as, with greater ecological awareness, humanity awakens to the false promises of technocracy and consumerism. Francis trusts that the very technocracy laying waste to the Christian legacy will also awaken Christians from their slumber. As love disappeared from the face of the public world, Guardini foresaw, it would throw into relief “the courage of the heart born from the immediacy of the love of God as it was made known in Christ.”

This revelation would be accelerated and assisted by secularization. As the unbeliever learned to live honestly without religion, the church, unshackled from law and culture, would be better able to contradict the surrounding ethos.

The authentic Christian witness—concrete and close, authentic and “organic”—would contrast ever more with the temptation “to erect a culture on rational and technical foundations alone.” The drama of Western postmodernity would unfurl in the ever starker contrast between the technocratic paradigm on the one hand and a renewed Christianity on the other. Either humanity would be saved by integrating and subordinating the new power of the *techne*, or it would surrender to that power and perish.

Guardini closed with an intriguing intuition: that as people become ever more governed by forces they cannot control, they would turn to a “great man.” His imagined leader—whether in the world of politics or religion, he does not say—understands “how to subordinate power to the true meaning of human life and works.” Free from the modern dogma of progress, comfortable with technology but not in thrall to it, and thus capable of establishing an authority that respects human dignity and creating a social order in which “God is acknowledged as the living norm and point of reference for all existence,” the great man (or woman) needed for our time, he concluded, would be able to grasp “Christianity’s inmost secret: humility.”

Is Francis that “great man”? In his mass of inauguration on the Feast of Saint Joseph, March 19, 2013, the new pope’s homily was precisely on this topic of authentic power as service, a power of nurture that can midwife a new social order.

It was a social order in which government had an important role, checking the forces of technocracy and protecting the various environments, human and biological, urban and rural, that are necessary for human flourishing. Just as Jacques Maritain’s “integral humanism” in the 1940s offered a postwar Catholic vision of a European democracy open to God, in contrast to the prevailing liberal individualism and socialist collectivism, Francis’s “integral ecology” offers a vision of social and economic organization underpinned by the gift logic of the Christian tradition as an alternative to the dominant technocracy. It is integral because it respects the organic links of existence. In speaking of the “environment,” Francis wrote in *Laudato si’* that “what we really mean is a relationship existing between nature and the society which lives in it.” He went on:

Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are