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SECULAR FRANCISCANS IN TIMES OF GREAT CHANGES

An Integrated Ecology: The Secular Franciscan Response

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Introduction

This third issue of **Koinonia** reflects on the relationship we have with our environment. It follows the 2020 theme on *great changes*. Because of the times in which we live, this relationship has become a great challenge for all of humanity. Our commitment to the spirituality that Francis of Assisi taught invites us to live this relationship in mutual harmony and respect. Pope Francis, looking at the testimony of the *poverello* and his relationship with nature, invites us to go back and contemplate and learn from his testimony: “I believe that 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”¹. From this perspective we will deepen our reflection to accompany Secular Franciscans in their vocation as laity.

Ecology: caring for our common home

To begin with, it would be good to define what we mean by ecology. Etymologically, the word “ecology” comes from *eco* (“home”, “dwelling”, “living space”) and *logía* (“treatise”, “study”, “science”). Generally, we can say that it is the science that studies the relationship of living beings with each other and with their environment, and also refers to the defence and protection of nature and the environment².

In fact, Pope Francis in his Encyclical *Laudato Si* calls this earth where we live “Our common home.” *Our house is common because* all the beings that share this vital area are interconnected. Our own body is made up of the elements of the planet - its air is what gives us

¹ POPE FRANCIS, *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si, on care for our common home*, Art. 10.

² <https://dle.rae.es/ecologia>

breath and its water revives and restores us. Just as the different aspects of the planet - physical, chemical and biological - are interrelated, so too living species are part of a network which we will never fully explore and understand³.

Time of great change: climate change and Covid-19

Today, all of us, because of this interconnection in our different countries are suffering the onslaught of the pandemic Covid-19. According to experts, one of the main causes of Covid-19 is climate change. What is climate change? The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) defines that “«Climate change» means a change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is, in addition to natural climate variability, observed over comparable time periods”⁴. As we can see, on the one hand, the causes of climate change are natural, and on the other, it is the result of human activity due to the burning of oil and coal, deforestation, marshes, landfills, manure from cattle farms, the use of fertilizers in agriculture, domestic and industrial solvents, etc. - and all this leads to global warming.

But how is all this related to Covid-19? One of the consequences of climate change is that it facilitates and causes pandemics. A very clear example is that high temperatures, which, according to the WHO, can create perfect conditions for certain infections to incubate, and together with the disappearance of habitats, increases the risk of the exchange of pathogens between species and towards human beings. It also points to the loss of biodiversity, which alters ecosystems and causes humans and some species to be closer and closer, increasing the probability of a “zoonosis” occurring. Zoonosis means disease or infection that occurs in animals and is transmissible to people under natural conditions⁵. We are now suffering this with Covid-19 and, as we see, its consequences are not only in the increase in temperature or in another flu, but it generates a chain that in itself takes many lives and affects governments, economy, production, unemployment, increasing poverty, crime, etc.

The Secular Franciscan: Towards an Integrated Ecology

The Constitutions of OFS calls the seculars to their commitment to the environment with this exhortation: “Following the example of Saint Francis, Patron Saint of ecology, let them promote initiatives to protect and safeguard creation and work together with others in their efforts to prevent the pollution and degradation of nature and to create conditions of life and the environment that do not pose any threats to humanity”⁶. In *Laudato Si* we are invited to understand the intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet so that we may seek to integrate creation, and nature with social systems. We are not faced with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty,

³ Cf. *Laudato Si*, Art. 138

⁴ United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, Art. 1.2.
<https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/convkp/conveng.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.lavozdegalicia.es/noticia/sociedad/2020/05/22/genera-cambio-climatico-pandemia-global/.htm>

⁶ CCGG., 18.4

restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature⁷. In the Final document of the Synod of Amazon, this vision is expanded by saying that integral ecology from a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach, which must integrate justice in discussions about the environment, to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor. *Integral ecology, thus, connects the exercise of caring for nature with that of justice for the most impoverished and disadvantaged on earth, who are God's preferential option in revealed history.*⁸

Lines of action are key to an integrated ecology

Neither the deterioration of the world nor the poverty of the majority of world's population can let us be indifferent. It invites us to an existential commitment today for ourselves and tomorrow for our children, the generations to come. Once we start to think about the kind of world we are leaving to future generations, we look at things differently - we realize that the world is a gift which we have freely received and must share with others. Since the world has been given to us, we can no longer view reality in a purely utilitarian way, in which efficiency and productivity are entirely geared to our individual benefit. Intergenerational solidarity is not optional, but rather a basic question of justice, since the world we have received also belongs to those who will follow us⁹.

1. An ecological conversion

This is why the ecological crisis is a call for a deep interior conversion. An encounter with Jesus is an invitation to generate in us a different relationship with nature and precisely to nurture a faith that helps us to respect it. Faith allows us to see much more deeply "Whoever believes sees", because the light of faith comes from God and is capable of illuminating the entire existence of man and opens vast horizons for us¹⁰; and for this we need a theological, contemplative outlook that brings us closer to nature with clean eyes and we can contemplate it as it is. From the encounter with the Lord, we awaken the aesthetic and contemplative sense that God has placed in us and that so often we let languish. Let us remember that, "if someone has not learned to stop and admire something beautiful, we should not be surprised if he or she treats everything as an object to be used and abused without scruples."¹¹ This contemplative gaze, that unites us to all beings, is what makes us look beyond usefulness of something. We can use the things of nature as materials to build a habitable world for human beings and it is this ability to transform our environment with our intelligence that is one of the aspects that makes us the image and likeness of God. At that point, the contemplative gaze provides us with an irreplaceable ability to bring to bear our religious experience which helps us restore our brothers and sisters, the men and women of our time, with an aesthetic sense.

⁷ Cf. *Laudato Si*, Art. 139

⁸ *Final document of the Amazon Synod*, 17-19.

⁹ Cf. *Laudato Si*, Art. 159.

¹⁰ Cf. POPE FRANCIS, *Encyclical Letter Lumen Fidei*, Art. 4.

¹¹ POPE FRANCIS, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Querida Amazonia*, Art. 56.

2. Here and now: in the concrete

Faced with the pressing reality of environmental deterioration and poverty that degrades and discards many of our brothers and sisters, the need is urgent and concrete. Pope Benedict XVI reminded us of this by saying that primarily “Christian charitable activity is not a means of changing the world ideologically, and it is not at the service of worldly stratagems, but it is a way of making present, here and now, the love which man always needs”¹². It is here and now that the hungry need to eat, the naked to be clothed, the imprisoned to be visited, the sick to be cared for...we cannot wait for the structures to change. This here and now requires our willingness to be disposed to the call of the other as the Good Samaritan did and each of us can find it in the family, at work, in the fraternity, in the neighbourhood, in the ecclesial community, in the need of our neighbour who cries out for mercy. Also in the relationship with nature we respond in concrete ways by planting trees, cleaning waterways, respecting and caring for animals and plants, etc. All these activities create an integrated ecology by doing the small and concrete things.

3. Medium-term changes: education on an integrated ecology

Following the thread of this reflection, I point out that we cannot be satisfied with the immediate. In other words, our commitment to the world does not end by only assisting the urgent needs of our brothers and sisters and of the environment; but we are called, personally and as a community, to work for medium or long term changes so that we no longer have people living in misery or our living environment becomes degraded. Many things have to change course, but, above all, we human beings need to change. We lack an awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone. This basic awareness would enable the development of new convictions, new attitudes and new lifestyles. At this point, a great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge will emerge for us, and it will demand that we set out on the long path of renewal¹³.

In order to live this lifestyle we need *a cultural change*, that is, a much deeper change in attitude. The change in attitude takes time and work, and often may take more than one generation. Hence, education is essential, and not just formal education in the school, but education in all possible ways. Educational settings are varied: school, family, the media, catechesis and others. A good school education in childhood and adolescence plants seeds that continue to bear fruit throughout life. In the family we first learn how to show love and respect for life, such as the proper use of things, order and cleanliness, respect for the local ecosystem and care for all creatures. In the family we learn to ask without demanding, to say “thank you” as an expression of genuine gratitude for what we have been given, to control our aggression and greed, and to ask forgiveness when we have caused harm. These simple gestures of heartfelt courtesy help to create a culture of shared life and respect for our surroundings¹⁴.

In addition to all this, it is also necessary within our fraternities to continue insisting that we have formation. From a renewed formation we will be in a position to better accompany the family and society. That is why socio-environmental issues should permanently be part of the content of reflection in our meetings, conferences and formation in general.

¹² POPE BENEDICT XVI, *Encyclical Letter Deus caritas est*, Art. 31.

¹³ *Laudato Si*, Art. 202.

¹⁴ *Laudato Si*, Art. 213.

4. Structural change: from politics and dialogue

Values and principles are manifested through policies that are at the service of the common good. Human ecology, a dignified life, involves placing structures and institutions at the service of the human person. Working for the common good is the most worthy way of conducting politics and this implies a consequential commitment - from the conviction that we are not alone in this world, that we need each other, that we have a responsibility to others and to the world. Love for society and commitment to the common good are eminent expressions of a charity which affect, not only relationships between individuals, but also “macro-relationships, social, economic and political ones”¹⁵.

For this common plan we need to continue working to create bridges that allow us to connect interests and needs, not only from a local but also a global vision. That is why the Pope tells us, “I urgently appeal, then, for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all”¹⁶. All this invites us to continue dialoguing with the organizations that come from different aspects of civil society who will work together to generate agreements that become laws that regulate the integrated care of the environment in which we live.

5. JPIC: pastoral creativity

Pastoral creativity is an invitation to know how to use those means that are within our reach to bring the Good News to the world. And one of the privileged means to work an integral ecology is JPIC. (Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation). In this globalized world it is one of the pastoral spaces with a lot of connectivity that we can have today.

But we have to know on which values this rich pastoral work of the Church is based. Justice, peace and integrity of creation, besides being an ecclesial institution, are biblical and evangelical values, values of the Kingdom of God. The JPIC ecclesial institution, the Commissions and JPIC animators do not carry out their work, in the first place, for sociological but fundamentally theological reasons. Because JPIC is born from a spirituality centered on God’s LIFE plan for all his creation in which he calls us to collaborate; it is born and is nourished by the discovery of the face of the God of Jesus, who is revealed in history and who is found in reality - of the desire to live, with lucidity and compassion, following the Lord Jesus, in an unjust, torn and violent world; and of the need to discern the signs of life that the Spirit is awakening today.

Living from the JPIC perspective leads to living a poor, fraternal, supportive and ecological lifestyle, and to getting involved, personally and as a community, in trying to transform the unjust social, economic and political system that governs our world today, in defense of the dignity of all human beings, and against all kinds of oppression, injustice and violence; building a PEACE, which is a gift of God and a human task, and which is only built from truth, freedom, justice and love; and caring for and defending creation, the rights of the Earth, the sustainability of the planet¹⁷.

¹⁵ *Laudato Si*, Art. 231.

¹⁶ *Laudato Si*, Art. 16.

¹⁷ <https://www.franciscans.cat/organismos/jpic/1052-jpic-como-espiritualidad>

As a Franciscan family we are witnesses - both as seculars and religious - that are engaged in this pastoral activity; it is an effective tool to continue collaborating within our Franciscan family and in dialogue with other ecclesial and civil agents for an integrated ecology for a better world.

Conclusion

At the end of all reflective works there is always a teaching or perhaps an existential learning which further continues for the one who prepares the reflection. “The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integrated development, for we know that things can change”¹⁸, so said Pope Francis in the introduction of *Laudato Si*. Yes, things can change if ideas are embodied in commitment and in sustained work over time. Hence, our responsibility is to continue working, first in the penitential witness of our life and, then, in the openness and collaboration with all men of good will to gradually become aware of a real human family, where we enjoy successes and failures. Or where we all suffer. Covid-19 is a great example of this reality.

¹⁸ *Laudato Si*, Art. 13.