

Augustinians – Irish Province: An Emerging Conversation

“See I am Doing a New Thing

Part 2 – Interconnected and Interdependent

Our last session focused on the idea that we are all God’s children, created uniquely, equally and deliberately. It’s not a message we have often heard from our church as an institution except on one or two occasions peppered through the liturgical calendar – the Baptism of the Lord, the Easter Vigil or at a family or community celebration of a Baptism. But it seems to me to be the very core of our identity and our call to live as witnesses to God’s love in the world – to be both the messenger and the message.

Since his election 6 years ago, Pope Francis has emphasised the universal nature of our identity as God’s children consistently and certainly more than any other Pope in my lifetime. Many of his comments and statements have referred to God’s desire to draw us closer and to know us intimately, embracing all our weaknesses and imperfections, and he has really discouraged the prevailing image of a God of judgment who advocates our slavish obedience to rules and regulations in order to prove our worthiness. His Papacy which has been so focused on mercy, compassion and universal brother and sisterhood, deeply reflects the vision of his inspiration, St Francis.

More than any other document to emerge from the Papacy since Vatican II, *Laudato Si’*, the Encyclical on ecology and care for creation seeks to recalibrate who we are as people of faith, as members of the global family, and our place within creation. It does this by taking an holistic approach, both to the problem and to the approach needed to redress it, as we see from its English subheading, “On care for our Common Home”.

Many of you are probably already familiar with the various ideas which the Pope shares in the Encyclical – things like “creation is a gift from God and it belongs to everyone”, “the cry of the earth is the cry of the poor”, “the human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together” and the need “for a conversion of heart”. Right across the world, the document has had a huge impact on many people, individually, in parishes and communities regarding the choices they make about how to live more in harmony with the rest of creation.

Most of the emphasis, from a media perspective has focused on the Pope’s call to take better care of the earth, its resources and its species, including the rest of humanity, and on the need for alternative economic and political strategies to facilitate such a shift – and rightly so. Climate change and habitat degradation are threatening the viability of life, both now and in the future. It is a huge and urgent issue which demands a response individually and collectively at local, national and international levels. But in the context of our gathering here today, I would like to explore briefly the idea of integral ecology, one of the key principles underpinning the document, and one which I believe can unlock the Encyclical’s potential as a tool of real transformation.

The phrase “integral ecology” might be summed up as “everything is interconnected and interdependent”. That could be understood as the symbiotic relationship within and between eco-systems where each species and form of life has a place and a role, and the destruction of which has an impact on the rest of the eco-system, diminishing it or rendering it ineffective. A significant dimension of this integral ecology, particularly from a faith perspective, is that humanity is part of such relationships and systems, not separate from them, superior to them or custodian of them.

Laudato Si’ identifies a whole spectrum of situations where those relationships need to be rebalanced or repaired, particularly where indigenous people are being exploited, where species are being destroyed, where corporate interests and practice are promoting unsustainable production or

harvesting of the earth's resources. Pope Francis recognises that for various historical and theological reasons, we have "come to see ourselves as lords and masters [of the earth] entitled to plunder her at will", but he challenges this mentality, urging us to revise our understanding of our place within and our relationship to the rest of creation. He promotes a model based on the relational and familial vision of Francis of Assisi and incites an affection and care for every aspect and element of creation equal to that which we would offer to our own loved ones. In short, he wants us to develop a community mentality. Within this context, mutual care and concern are offered to all members, with a special emphasis on those who are weakest, most at risk of harm or exploitation and in need of protection, and on healing those who have been hurt or damaged. And he advocates a dialogue which involves the whole human family in "honest and forthright debate" in pursuit of a "new and universal solidarity".

One of the things which has struck me repeatedly in the 4 years since *Laudato Si'* was published, is that, by and large, the Encyclical has had limited impact at parish and diocesan level in the church here in Ireland. That is of course, a generalisation, and I know and acknowledge that many religious and missionary orders have been engaging with the document in ways that embrace both attitude and practice. And there are, all across the country, pockets of people who have taken the document, engaged with it and owned its key messages.

But as an institution, the Irish Church has broadly failed to initiate or support large scale engagement with, or immersion in *Laudato Si'*, which begs the question "Why?"

I'm suggesting that there may be several reasons.

Some parishes don't have their own priest and operate as a cluster which makes it more difficult to create a programme of activities specific to one group of people.

Associated with that, many priests are under enormous pressure and have work loads which are really unsustainable, and from a faith perspective, are morally unjust.

Despite the Pope's insistence that, as people of faith, we must be as concerned with care for creation as any other part of our lives, many people, and priests, would still take the view that "that ecology stuff" has nothing to do with the church. And many people would use their lack of knowledge and understanding to justify their lack of engagement, leaving it to "the experts".

I would like to suggest to you all that there may be another, perhaps more fundamental reason why *Laudato Si'* has been largely "shelved" both literally and metaphorically, at parish and diocesan level in Ireland. The document is constructed around a relational engagement – dialogue, inclusion, engagement, equality of dignity and participation, and even a recognition of the need for change. It suggests that the frameworks and systems within we interact and operate need to be reviewed, revised and changed and that everyone should be included in this process. Relational engagement has not, in my experience, been a predominant characteristic of parish or diocesan life in the Irish Church. I don't believe that much has been done to pursue open and inclusive dialogue, conversations in which each person was facilitated to participate, or the development of decision-making structures which reflected the diversity of the community. It is probably true that the demand for such realities has only become more vocal in recent years; but it is also true that deep-rooted resistance to them is endemic in the system.

I intend no disrespect to anyone; the Irish Church as an organisation has been a channel for important development and enormous good, but I consider that its failure to embrace and engage with *Laudato Si'* stems from a recognition, consciously or unconsciously, that the relational engagement it proposes and the call for conversion which it sounds represents something of a watershed.

Once people begin conversations about the need for fairness and justice for the poorest nations and communities; once the need for dialogue and participation are accepted in relation to the use of

natural resources, or the conditions in which people live and work; once the importance of advocacy to influence policy and demand fairer corporate practice has been recognised in every other area of people's lives, how can the Church as a structure or organisation remain immune to or above such discussions? How can the way the Church operates, the imbalances within its structures relating to the role of women, its obscured processes of governance and its location of authority and decision making in an elite minority not also come under the spotlight and be subject to scrutiny?

Isn't that core theme on which we reflected earlier, our identity as children of God, intrinsic to any suggestion that we are all vital threads within the web of life, rather than masters of creation to use as we please? Integral ecology rejects the idea that God established a hierarchical creation, with humanity at the top. It is unequivocal in affirming the inherent value of every aspect of creation, through its creation by God. Are we then to suppose that God altered his template, choosing to create some humans as more deserving, more worthy, more precious than others? Nothing in the behaviour of Jesus in the Gospels would support such a notion – if anything his behaviour subverts the established order, the traditional structures and proposes a radical inclusion and equality focused on the value of every individual. This sounds a lot like integral ecology to me.

Pope Francis acknowledges that in order to effect the changes needed to address the climate crisis, to restructure institutions and organisations and effect policy change, to arrest environmental degradation and the disappearance of species and to ensure a more equal use and distribution of the earth's resources, the attitudes of each person will have to undergo fundamental changes. He acknowledges too that this will be difficult. And so the approach he advocates is to become emotionally connected to creation, to value and care for it on an experiential level, by undergoing a conversion of heart. Which makes perfect sense – if we love something or someone, we will care for and protect it.

So, this is the core of the issue. If we can, in the context of our own unique, intentional and deliberate creation by God, embrace the relational equality and inclusion of integral ecology, our challenge becomes to love ourselves as God loves us, and then to love others in the same way – our family, our community, our neighbour and the rest of creation. Focusing on love will nurture a more relational mind-set, a space where there is trust and respect. In such a framework those difficult conversations dealing with questions of inclusion, participation, transparency and governance can take place. In such a space genuine and honest engagement can generate an organic dialogical process where everyone is included, respected and valued, rather than assuming negative and disproportionate importance, or generating resistance and fear.