

# Integral Ecology

## Discovering Its Meaning and Depth

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The purpose of this briefing note is to clarify what the LSRI means by 'integral ecology'. Given the various interpretations surrounding this term, even after Pope Francis laid out the context for its use in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*,<sup>2</sup> this briefing note seeks to overcome some of the confusion and ambiguities.

The aim is not to provide a canonical definition of integral ecology, but rather to unpack *its meaning and implications as a paradigmatic framework for interdisciplinary research*. We identify two interconnected lenses through which to perceive 'integral ecology': 1) the concept of integral human development in Catholic Social Teaching and 2) resources from eco-theology and evolutionary anthropology. These lenses give the framework for research at the LSRI.

The first lens is orientated towards the social sciences, the second towards the natural sciences. Both lenses are rooted in theological understandings of the universe and the human, with the first lens putting more emphasis on the magisterial teachings of the Roman Catholic Church.

For the LSRI, as an academic research institute oriented toward socio-ecological transformation, integral ecology is the practical expression of a theological and philosophical commitment to the value of all life, with special attention to the most vulnerable creatures on earth. It gives priority to those who are living in extreme poverty and creatures living under the threat of extinction. The LSRI frames interdisciplinary research – joining academic work with policy and practice – within this priority. Through such research, the Institute

seeks to find creative ways to address the interlaced social and ecological challenges of current and future generations.

### Lens 1

One way of perceiving the integral ecology paradigm is through the Catholic Church's reflection on social and economic progress, which the encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, published by Pope Paul VI in 1968, named 'integral human development'. By this, the Catholic Church meant that the development path that countries were undergoing in the post-war and decolonisation period should not be limited to economic growth alone but needed to include the development of each human being – the whole person, in all her dimensions: social, cultural, political, psychological, and spiritual.<sup>3</sup>

In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis expands integral human development by adding the ecological dimension. Integral ecology and integral human development can thus be interpreted as synonyms with integral human development signalling more of the social, cultural, economic, and political dimensions of human life and the dignity of each human person (such as decent employment,

### Key Points

- Integral ecology can be understood using two interconnected lenses:
  - a. The concept of integral human development in Catholic Social Teaching
  - b. The concepts of eco-theology and evolutionary anthropology.

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adequate housing, freedom from hunger, accessible healthcare, civil and political rights); and integral ecology signalling more of the biological, physical, environmental dimensions of human life, and the interaction between all living systems, humans, and non-humans.<sup>4</sup>

Seeing the paradigm of integral ecology within the lens of Catholic Social Teaching and its reflections on the progress of peoples, the emphasis remains, however, on the importance of the human. So, in order to address the deep ecological crisis – loss of biodiversity, acidification of oceans, melting of ice caps and glaciers, etc. – one needs another vision of human progress, another understanding of what counts as social and economic development.

## Lens 2

Another way of perceiving integral ecology lies in eco-theology as it has emerged in Christian theology and other religious traditions over the last fifty years. For eco-theology, the emphasis is more often placed on the worth of other creatures. The argument is that for genuine cultural transformation to occur, the biological basis for that culture needs to be protected as a first priority, since without healthy life systems human life cannot exist. However, there are risks in this perspective: pushed too far it can move away from concern for the most vulnerable in society towards an equivalent valuation of all creatures, biocentrism, or even a supra-valuation of the microbial, as

in earth system models such as the Gaia hypothesis.

What is interesting is that through the synodal listening process in the Amazon territory, the second lens of integral ecology (eco-theology) has started to come into greater prominence in Catholic Social Teaching, since indigenous peoples put more stress on the worth of creaturely life as a whole, rather than perceiving the external ‘environment’ as separate from their lives. Instead, they live within an integrated ecological community where humans are perceived as one actor among equivalent others (animals, plants, insects, water molecules, etc.). As indigenous peoples in the Amazon have expressed it: “We are water, air, earth and life of the environment created by God.”<sup>5</sup>





Within this second way of perceiving integral ecology, there is a stress on the importance of the earth as gift and all that the earth contains as creaturely, with human beings in their creaturehood bearing special responsibilities. This theological basis for integral ecology takes its bearings from an understanding of humanity and all other creatures arising from ecological science, natural science, and evolutionary history. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was well aware of this in his discussion of the cosmic evolutionary basis for human life in the *Human Phenomenon*.<sup>6</sup>

The basic theological ground for integral ecology is the doctrine of creation and a theological anthropology, rather than emerging from practical concerns related to social justice, as in *Populorum Progressio*. Pope Benedict XVI spoke of the need to take account of the 'grammar of creation' in our acknowledgement of the gift that is bestowed on the world through the earth and its life forms.<sup>7</sup> Without this element, integral ecology lacks depth of meaning. Such depth is necessary for any possibility of radical ecological conversion, since the motivation to care for all creatures is understood in terms of the profound love of God for the whole of creation and a strong awareness of ecological interconnectedness on which human life depends for its flourishing.

The doctrine of creation, which



presupposes belief in a loving Creator, operates from a different philosophical basis compared with secular conceptions of human development, justice, or ecological flourishing. However, that does not mean that the two are disconnected either.

A doctrine of creation stresses the role of God as Creator in creating the universe and all life forms, and the earth as an originating source of life. In Christian theology, the doctrine of creation is also trinitarian, that is, it is not just the work of God understood as the loving Father, but also the work of the Son, who, as the incarnate Word and Logos, became part of and suffered within the material world. The work of the Holy Spirit is also invested in creation, often being understood as that accompanier and comforter who works for the completion

and renewal of creation – moving towards the eschatological goal of human flourishing and the flourishing of all life. Moreover, rather than using the traditional language of 'Father, Son, and Holy Spirit', we could speak of *Divine Wisdom* as showing different faces through the three persons of the Trinity. Creation theology is profoundly a *sophiology*, where Divine Wisdom and creaturely wisdom meet.<sup>8</sup> In addition, Christian theology faces up to the suffering that is inherent not just within humanity due to sin and disease, but in the created world as such. A theological response to that suffering is necessarily Christological in tone, but eco-theology insists on broadening the scope of that suffering so that it includes all other creatures and not just humanity. It is that creaturely suffering caused by our own lack of taking proper

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responsibility for creation that bears a specific ethical burden and human responsibility to act (see Briefing Note 2 on *Accompaniment*).

In philosophical terms, a trinitarian interpretation of creation challenges the stark either/or of humans/other, and instead recognises that we are all creatures of the one God, just as we all share in our common home. Pope Francis stresses repeatedly that not even one speck of life is forgotten in God's sight.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the role of humanity within creation in an integral ecology framework is spelt out in terms of mutual gift, servanthood, and cosmic covenant, which goes beyond that of stewardship or the responsible use of resources.

The human being still has, to a degree, pride of place as being made in the image of God, but it is in recognition of this that the human's place and authority – in the use of earth's resources and what human hands have made, such as technology – needs to be exercised with both humility and with compassion. Being made in the image of God gives all people everywhere equal human dignity, and this has implications for the practical outworking of integral ecology.

## Elements of an Integral Ecology Paradigm at the LSRI

### ***Everything is connected.***

This means that different forms of



knowledge need to be integrated, so no area of knowledge – all social sciences, natural sciences, humanities, engineering, etc. – may be left out, thus potentially creating a vast panoply of dialogue partners. Such integration of knowledge is best done through dialogue, but it is a dialogue with a specific purpose, namely, *reconciliation* grounded in a specific context. The brokenness of the world – individual and structural sin that lies in the background of social and ecological problems – calls for reconciliation. In theological terms, this is interpreted through a Christological approach to sin, suffering, and death.

Eco-theologies have sometimes lacked the courage to face up to the suffering and sin that is part of the world in which we live. Ecologists understand more than most the wounded nature of creatures living and dying on our earth, just as social scientists and anthropologists are aware of human suffering, often

triggered by structural injustice (or what Catholic Social Teaching calls 'structures of sin').

Where and why evil is present is therefore also a central concern within an integral ecology paradigm, since it helps identify what prevents all creatures from flourishing. For example, take the case of a 10-year old boy in La Oroya, Peru, who died of lead poisoning because the smelter company operating in town did not clean up the toxic waste resulting from its activities, and because the Peruvian government was lax in implementing environmental regulation and monitoring.<sup>10</sup> This illustrates the nature of sin which destroys water and human life at all levels, from the subsidiary company to its mother company based in the United States, from the municipal government to the national government, and from global investor behaviour to global regulation of multinational companies and their subsidiaries.



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***Humans and Nature are not separate.***

Humans are an integral part of the natural world and in constant interaction with it. Social systems are also in interaction with natural systems, so that changes in one system have an impact on the other. Dave Kopenawa, a Yanomami indigenous leader who visited the LSRI in February 2020, states: ‘For us, what the white people refer to in this way [as the ‘environment’] is what remains of the forest and land that were hurt by their machines. The earth cannot be split apart as if the forest were just a leftover part. I would prefer the white people to talk about ‘nature’ or ‘ecology’ as a whole thing. If we defend the entire forest, it will stay alive. If we cut it down only to protect small parcels that are leftovers of what was ruined, it will yield nothing’.<sup>11</sup>

***Institutional analysis is needed at different levels – from the family to local, national, and international systems.***

Institutions are key players in the regulation of social systems including their connection with natural systems. As *Laudato Si’* states, ‘Within each social stratum, and between them, institutions develop to regulate human relationships’

(LS 142). Therefore, at the LSRI we are concerned with researching for ecological conversion at all institutional levels, from our own way of functioning as an institute, living as families and communities, to our local governments, and to the global policy architecture.

**The integral ecology paradigm also highlights other broader issues that will inform LSRI research:**

First, the *development of the whole human person* is central. This includes a focus on the dimensions of life which most affect others, such as health, work, and culture. Because of its role in human fulfilment, in exercising creativity, developing one’s talents, forming a life plan, relating to others, and contributing to society (LS 127), *Laudato Si’* sees the provision of decent work as central to integral ecology. Given its theological understanding of human life, integral ecology also includes careful attention to culture, which we broadly define as the mode of co-existence between humans and other living organisms and matter on earth.<sup>12</sup> Yet cultures are not static, and the paradigm of integral ecology itself can contribute to a better understanding of cultural evolution and change (e.g., how ecosystem change leads to cultural

change).

Second, humans are called to be shapers of their own destiny (see Briefing Note 2 on *Accompaniment*). An integral ecology perspective implies listening to people’s voices and enabling them to become authors of their own lives. This implies paying special attention to the deep intertwining of social and economic inequality with political inequality, as those who are socially and economically marginalized often have little political voice to make theirsufferings heard.<sup>13</sup> This listening component within an integral ecology paradigm implies a strong connectedness to a certain soil and culture, and closeness to the lives of the marginalized.

As Pope Francis argues in *Evangelii Gaudium*, ‘Our commitment [to the poor] does not consist exclusively in activities or programmes of promotion and assistance; what the Holy Spirit mobilizes is not an unruly activism, but above all an attentiveness which considers the other “in a certain sense as one with ourselves”. [...] The poor person, when loved, “is esteemed as of great value”, and this is what makes the authentic option for the poor differ from any other ideology, from any attempt to exploit the poor for one’s own personal or political



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interest. Only on the basis of this real and sincere closeness can we properly accompany the poor on their path of liberation'.<sup>14</sup> An implication of a bio-regional territorial approach, and this closeness to the people who suffer in that bio-region or biome, puts residents as protagonists for analysing what is happening to their territory, identifying what needs to change, and how change can be brought about.

Third, a practical implication of the integral ecology paradigm for the LSRI is *contemplation* (see Briefing Note 3 on *Contemplation*). The theological anthropology implicit in integral ecology includes openness to a transcendental dimension.<sup>15</sup> This implies 'taking time to recover a serene harmony with creation, reflecting on our lifestyle and our ideals, and contemplating the Creator who lives among us and surrounds us, whose presence 'must not be contrived but found,

uncovered' (LS 225). Love of God and creation is the ground which provides the deepest motivation for socio-political change. Pope Francis urges us to learn from the indigenous peoples of the Amazon and 'to contemplate the Amazon region and not simply analyse it, and thus appreciate this precious mystery that transcends us'.<sup>16</sup>

## Implications for LSRI Strategic Planning

What does research within an integral ecology paradigm look like in practice at the LSRI? One of the challenges is that, given the rich kaleidoscope of possibilities, setting priorities is not always straightforward, since the whole point of integral ecology is that it insists on a deliberative approach that is inclusive of different perspectives and disciplines rather than exclusive. Rather than focusing on the need for information or the provision of

a canonical definition of integral ecology, what is more appropriate is *developing a responsive search for wisdom* and an *integrated understanding of knowledge that deliberately listens to and discerns the signs of the times* and responds accordingly. So integral ecology acts more like a paradigmatic framework within which our research is situated, rather than a blueprint for a strategic plan.

Any such plan is therefore worked out dialogically with our partners and in accompaniment and in solidarity with them. Using an integral ecology paradigmatic framework in the context of new technologies and dialogue will be different from using it in an educational context. Conducting research using an integral ecology framework will be different in a slum in Kisangani or in the Virunga National Park, all part of the same Congo Basin bio-region.

As creatures made in the image of

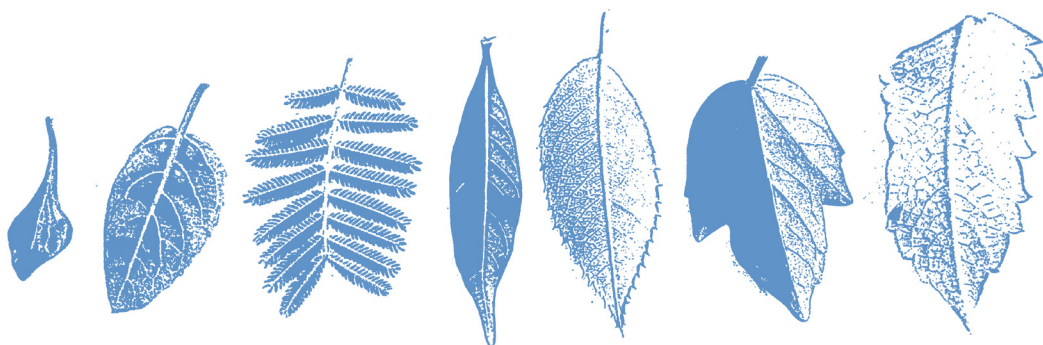


God, we need to take and embrace the gifts and opportunities that are given to us, while being sensitive to the need to take time, listen, and respond with discernment.

One of the weaknesses of integral ecology as a paradigmatic framework rooted in the Catholic theological tradition is that it could leave the impression that there is no room for innovation or, in theological language, co-creation. There are striking intellectual questions that need to be addressed such as the extent to which language used in indigenous cultures is compatible

with traditional Catholic social thought or Trinitarian theology.<sup>17</sup>

Pope Francis, for example, was willing to use freely the language of mother earth in the interest of solidarity with indigenous perspectives. We have a responsibility not just to develop particular areas of ethical or sociological or theological analysis, but also to create new ways of conceiving and approaching the purpose and mission of higher education and its role in societal transformation.





## Endnotes

1. Please cite as: Celia Deane-Drummond and Séverine Deneulin. 'Integral Ecology: Discovering its Meaning and Depth'. *LSRI Briefing Note 1* (Oxford: Laudato Si' Research Institute, Campion Hall, 2021).
2. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for our Common Home*, 2015.
3. Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, 1968.
4. In 2017, Pope Francis created the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. Its constitutive document states: "In all her being and actions, the Church is called to promote the integral development of the human person in the light of the Gospel. This development takes place by attending to the inestimable goods of justice, peace, and the care of creation." See the apostolic letter *Moto Proprio*, 2017.
5. Contributions from the Synod consultation process of the dioceses of San José del Guaviare in Colombia, cited in Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, 2020, §42.
6. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Human Phenomenon* edited by Sarah Appleton Weber (Sussex Academic Press, 1999). See also Celia Deane-Drummond, ed. *Teilhard de Chardin on People and Planet* (London: Equinox, 2005).
7. '[T]he natural environment is more than raw material to be manipulated at our pleasure; it is a wondrous work of the Creator containing a "grammar" which sets forth ends and criteria for its wise use, not its reckless exploitation.' Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 2009, §48.
8. Sergii Bulgakov, *Sophiology: The Wisdom of God* (Hudson: Lindisfarne Books, 1994). See also Celia Deane-Drummond, 'Nature, Sophia and Spirit: Interpreting Creation and New Creation Under the Sign of the Wisdom of the Cross and Resurrection', *Concilium* (London: SCM Press, 2018), pp. 55–63.
9. 'It is our humble conviction that the divine and the human meet in the slightest detail in the seamless garment of God's creation, in the last speck of dust of our planet' (LS 9, quoted from Thomas of Celano, *The Life of Saint Francis*); 'Together with our obligation to use the earth's goods responsibly, we are called to recognize that other living beings have a value of their own in God's eyes' (LS 69).
10. The case of La Oroya, and how it has informed *Laudato Si'*, is narrated in Austen Ivereigh, *The Wounded Shepherd* (New York: Henry Holt Company, 2020), pp. 198–99.
11. David Kopenawa, Albert Bruce, and Alison Dundy, *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 396.
12. In *Laudato Si'*, the disappearance of a culture is put on par to that of a plant or animal species (LS 145).
13. Examples of marginalized communities whose voices are silenced abound. A particularly poignant example is that of the Curuguaty massacre in Paraguay, see Joel Correia, 'Soy States: Resource Politics, Violent Environments and Soybean Territorialization in Paraguay', *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 46.2 (2019): 316–36.
14. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013, §199.
15. We have forgotten that "man is not only a freedom which he creates for himself. Man does not create himself. He is spirit and will, but also nature".' (LS 6)
16. *Querida Amazonia*, §55.
17. Celia Deane-Drummond, 'A New Anthropology: *Laudato Si'* and the Question of Interconnectedness' in Robert McKim, ed., *Laudato Si' and the Environment: Pope Francis' Green Encyclical* (London: Routledge, 2020); pp. 189–201. In his post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Querida Amazonia*, Pope Francis summarizes the relationship between indigenous mysticism and the Catholic tradition, with the latter emphasising 'the interconnection and interdependence of the whole of creation', and the former turning 'this relationship with God present in the cosmos into an increasingly personal relationship with a "Thou"' (§73).



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