

Integral Ecology: Discovering Its Meaning and Depth

LSRI Briefing Note 1

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The purpose of this briefing note is to seek to clarify what the LSRI means by integral ecology. Given the considerable confusion that has surrounded the use of its term in its various computations and interpretations, even after Pope Francis set out the context for using this term in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, we hope that this briefing note will help overcome some of the confusion and ambiguities. Our 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 basic interconnected lenses which we understand as *ways of perceiving* integral ecology: the concept of integral human development in Catholic Social Teaching, and works in eco-theology and evolutionary anthropology. We argue that these two lenses give the paradigmatic framework of integral ecology two complementary points of emphasis through which research at LSRI is situated. The former lens is orientated towards the social sciences, the latter towards the natural sciences. Both lenses are rooted in theological understandings of the universe and the human, with the former putting more emphasis on the magisterial teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. If we are looking for a definition of what integral ecology means for LSRI, then we can say that for our purposes, as academic research institute oriented at 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 therefore priority to those who are living in extreme poverty and living creatures under threat of extinction. The LSRI then frames interdisciplinary research that joins academic work with policy and practice within that priority. Through such research, we seek to find creative ways forward in addressing the interlaced social and ecological challenges of our current and future generations.

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Lens 1

A first way of perceiving the integral ecology paradigm lies in Catholic Church's reflection on social and economic progress, which the encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, published by Pope Paul VI in 1968, coined as 'integral human development'. By this, the Catholic Church meant that the development path that countries were undergoing in the post-war and decolonisation period could not be limited to economic growth alone but needed to include the development of each person and the whole person, in all her dimensions – social, cultural, political, psychological, spiritual.² In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis expands integral human development by adding the ecological dimension. Integral ecology and integral human developments can thus be interpreted as synonyms with: *integral human development* signalling perhaps more the social, cultural, economic, and political dimensions of human life and the dignity of each human person (such as decent employment, adequate housing, freedom from hunger, access healthcare, civil and political rights); and *integral ecology* signalling more the biological, physical, environmental dimensions of human life, and the interaction between all living systems, humans, and non-humans.³ 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 of 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 the other way around, that is, on the worth of other creatures. If there is to be the potential for a genuine transformation of culture, the argument is that the biological basis for that culture to exist needs to be protected as a first priority, since without

² See http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum.html

³ In 2017, Pope Francis created a Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. Its constitutive document stated that: "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 <http://www.humandevlopment.va/en/il-dicastero/motu-proprio.html>

healthy life systems human life cannot exist. There are risks in this perspective that are not found in the former, since pushed too far there is a perceived danger of moving 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.

Given these two lenses, there is some ambiguity, therefore, in what integral ecology is. What is interesting is that through the listening process in the context of the Amazon territory (what needs to change for each human being to develop and flourish in all her dimensions), 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.”⁴

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 of integral ecology takes its bearings from the concrete understanding of humanity and all other creatures arising in 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*.⁵ The basic theological ground for integral ecology is the doctrine of creation and a theological anthropology, rather than emerging from specific practical concerns related to social justice, as in *Populorum Progressio* which introduced ‘integral human development’ as the distinct Catholic perspective on international development and the progress of peoples. Pope Benedict XVI spoke of the need to take account of the ‘grammar of

⁴ Contributions from the Synod consultation process of the dioceses of San José del Guaviare in Colombia, cited in *Querida Amazonia*, §42. See <http://www.synod.va/content/sinodoamazonico/en/documents/post-synodal-apostolic-exhortation--querida-amazonia-.html>

⁵ 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).

creation' in our acknowledgement of the gift that is bestowed on the world through the earth and its life forms.⁶ We suggest that if this aspect is not taken into account, integral ecology lacks depth of meaning. We contend that such depth is necessary for any possibility of radical ecological conversion, since the motivation to care for all creatures of the earth is understood in terms of both the profound love of God for the whole of creation, and a strong awareness of ecological interconnectedness on which human life ultimately depends for its own flourishing.

The doctrine of creation which presupposes belief in a loving Creator, therefore, operates out of a different metaphysical 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 and Catholic 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 reality of matter. The work of the Holy Spirit is also invested in creation, often being understood as that accompanier and comforter who works for completion and renewal of creation in an eschatological goal towards human flourishing and the flourishing of all life. Further, rather than traditional Father, Son, and Holy Spirit language, it is perhaps preferable to speak of divine Wisdom as showing different faces through the three persons of the Trinity. Creation theology is also profoundly a *sophiology*, where Divine Wisdom and creaturely wisdom meet.⁷ 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 responsibility for creation that bears a specific ethical burden and human responsibility to act (cf. our Briefing Note 2 on accompaniment).

⁶ '[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.' (*Caritas in Veritate*, §48, http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html)

⁷ 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.

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 time and again that not even one speck of life is forgotten in God's sight.⁸ 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 responsible use of resources. The human still has, to a degree, pride of place as being made in the image of God, but it is in recognition of this that human's place and authority in use of earth's resources and all what human hands have made, such as technology, needs to be exercised with both humility and with compassion. Humanity made in the image of God gives all people everywhere equal human dignity, and this has implications for practical outworking of integral ecology. The next section discusses some of these implications of these two interconnected lenses for the work of the LSRI.

Basic elements within an integral ecology paradigm at LSRI

- a) Recognition that *everything is connected*, and the need for integration of different forms of knowledge: this means no area of knowledge – all social sciences, natural sciences, humanities, engineering, etc. – may be left out, thus potentially creating a vast panoply of different options for dialogue.

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 are at 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 also 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

⁸ '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).

why evil is present is therefore also a central concern within an integral ecology paradigm, since it helps to identify what prevents all creatures to flourish. For example, take the case of a 10-year old boy in La Oroya, Peru, who dies of lead poisoning because the smelter company which operates in the town has not taken its responsibility to clean up the toxic waste resulting from its activities, and because the Peruvian government has been lax in implementing environmental regulation and monitoring.⁹ 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.

- b) *Collapse of the human-nature dichotomy*: as noted above, it is preferable to use the term *ecology* rather than the environment, since the latter still implies an external setting in which humans live.

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 have an impact on the other. We would like to quote here Dave Kopenawa, a Yanomami indigenous leader who visited the LSRI in February 2020, on referring to nature as ‘environment’: ‘For us, what the white people refer to in this way 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’.¹⁰

- c) *Institutional analysis at different levels*, from family to local, national and international.

Institutions are key players in the regulation of social systems including their connection with natural systems. As *Laudato Si*’ puts it, ‘Within each social stratum, and

⁹ The case of La Oroya, and how it has informed *Laudato Si*’, is narrated in Austen Ivereigh, *The Wounded Shepherd* (Henry Holt Company, 2020), pp. 198–99.

¹⁰ David Kopenawa, Albert Bruce and Alison Dundy *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman* (Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 396.

between them, institutions develop to regulate human relationships' (LS 142). This is why at the LSRI we are concerned about researching for ecological conversion at all institutional levels, from our own way of functioning as an institute, of living as families and communities, to the local governments under which we live, to the global policy architecture.

We are also considering other broader issues when using the integral ecology paradigm to inform our research at the LSRI:

First, the *development of the whole human person* is central to an integral ecology paradigm. 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.¹¹ 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* (cf. our 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 their sufferings heard.¹² 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

¹¹ In *Laudato Si'*, the disappearance of a culture is put on par to that of a plant or animal species (LS 145).

¹² Examples of marginalized communities whose voices are silenced abound. A particularly poignant example is that of the Curuguaty massacre in Paraguay, see J. Correia, 'Soy states: resource politics, violent environments and soybean territorialization in Paraguay', *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 46. 2(2019): 316–36.

“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 interest. Only on the basis of this real and sincere closeness can we properly accompany the poor on their path of liberation’.¹³ An implication of a bio-regional territorial approach and this closeness to the people who suffer in that bio-region or biome is putting its residents as protagonists for analysing what is happening to their territory, identifying what needs to change, and how change can be brought about.

A third practical implication of working within an integral ecology paradigm at LSRI is *contemplation* (cf. our *Briefing Note 3* on contemplation). The theological anthropology implicit in integral ecology includes openness to a transcendental dimension.¹⁴ 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 themselves about learning ‘to contemplate the Amazon region and not simply analyse it, and thus appreciate this precious mystery that transcends us’.¹⁵

Implications for LSRI strategic planning

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

¹³ *Evangelii Gaudium* §199, see http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html

¹⁴ ‘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)

¹⁵ *Querida Amazonia*, §55, see <http://www.synod.va/content/sinodoamazonico/en/documents/post-synodal-apostolic-exhortation--querida-amazonia-.html>.

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 needs to be 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. We give specific examples of these partnerships in our strategic plan. Using an integral ecology paradigmatic framework in the context of new technologies and dialogue with will be different from using it in an educational context. Conducting research using an integral ecology paradigmatic 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.

Further, one of the weaknesses of integral ecology as a paradigmatic framework rooted in the Catholic theological tradition is that it could leave the wrong 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.¹⁶ 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 new ways to conceive and approach the purpose and mission of higher education and its role in societal transformation.

¹⁶ 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, as 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).