

Accompaniment: Exploring its Meaning and Implications

LSRI Briefing Note 2

Celia Deane-Drummond and Séverine Deneulin

Laudato Si' Research Institute, Campion Hall, Oxford¹

The purpose of this briefing note is to examine the theological basis for one of our key strategic goals, namely that of accompaniment,² and draw some practical implications of this theological framing of the practice of accompaniment for our work at the Laudato Si' Research Institute. With encounter, dialogue between different disciplines and peoples, and mutual transformation at its core, we also highlight how accompaniment is a channel for the work of the Holy Spirit to become more visible, and how it brings renewal in our relationships with each other and the earth, and allows for transformed institutions to emerge, particularly at the ecclesial level but at the political, social and cultural levels too.

The word 'accompaniment' is often used in Catholic circles to denote a particular mode of relation that is intended to signal the enabling of the other from gifts shared. It is used to describe how some roles are to be framed in development organisations, such as CAFOD (Catholic Agency for Overseas Development) having programme accompaniers and theological accompaniers. It is used in the practice of spiritual direction, which is now more talked about as spiritual accompaniment, where one person accompanies another in his or her journey to discover God's actions in their life, analogous to the role of midwife. But the one we are most interested in is the way it is used to describe a mode of relationship between people who are in a more privileged socio-economic position with those who are less so, or in other words, a specific way or mode of being in solidarity with each other.

¹ Please cite as: C. Deane-Drummond and S. Deneulin. 'Accompaniment: Exploring its Meaning and Implications'. LSRI Briefing Note 2 (Oxford: Laudato Si' Research Institute, Campion Hall, 2021)

² Accompaniment is one of three core strategic commitments within which an integral ecology paradigm at the Laudato Si' Research Institute is worked out. The other two are dialogue and innovation. Contemplation is a fourth dimension within which this triangulation of commitments functions (see Briefing Note 3).

Other Christian denominations have tended to use the term ‘walking with’.³ Etymologically, accompaniment comes from the Latin *ad cum panis*, which implies the idea of sharing bread with, of sharing something that is essential to the life of another person or another being so as to enable the life of the person or animal. Accompaniment has been used so far to denote an expression of solidarity with other human beings, of journeying together on a common path,⁴ but it can also extend to our relationships with creatures that are endangered or under threat of extinction.

The specific practice of spiritual accompaniment will be bracketed out of this briefing note, but that is not to signal its lack of importance. Our focus is more on the distinctive way in which we, as an academic research institute, understand the kind of accompaniment that is appropriate to our relationships with global partner institutions, and how we express solidarity with vulnerable communities and the suffering Earth.

Accompaniment: Love & Mercy with Justice & Solidarity

As such, the concept of accompaniment itself does not appear much in theological writings and is not even mentioned in the papal encyclicals which constitute Catholic Social Teaching. Yet, its constitutive components of love, justice, mercy and solidarity have long been the object of theological inquiry in the history of the Church. Expressing love and solidarity for the marginalized through ‘accompaniment’ is however a modern contribution to theological reflection on love and solidarity with the excluded.

The roots of accompaniment, as currently understood, go back to the encyclical which marks the founding of Catholic Social Teaching, *Rerum Novarum* published by Pope Leon XIII in 1891. The document is a turning point in the relationship of the Catholic Church with those who suffer, in this case, those who suffer from the new labour conditions brought about by

³ See Bryant L. Myers. *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*. Revised Edition (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2011).

⁴ See Paul Farmer, “Accompaniment as Policy,” talk delivered at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 25th May 2011, <https://www.lessonsfromhaiti.org/press-and-media/transcripts/accompaniment-as-policy>; see also chapters 1 and 7 ‘Re-Imagining Accompaniment’, in M. Griffin and J. Weiss Block (eds), *In the Company of the Poor: Conversations with Paul Farmer and Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2013).

industrialisation. The encyclical sees the role of the Catholic Church no longer limited to relieving human suffering by individual acts of charity. It now also includes walking alongside them in their own efforts to change their economic and social conditions.⁵ Decades later, in *Populorum Progressio*, Pope Paul VI would extend this novel way of the Church of expressing love and solidarity with those ‘who are poor or in any way afflicted’ (*Gaudium et Spes*, §3), as ‘to allow all peoples to become the artisans of their destiny’ (PP 65). He did however not discuss further what this might mean concretely.

In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis renews this emphasis in *Rerum Novarum* on the poor and disadvantaged organising themselves to press for structural change: ‘Solidarity means much more than engaging in sporadic acts of generosity. [...] It also means combatting the structural causes of poverty, inequality, the lack of work, land and housing, the denial of social and labour rights. It means confronting the destructive effects of the empire of money... Solidarity, understood in its most profound meaning, is a way of making history’ (FT 116).

In Catholic Social Teaching, solidarity is expressed by both actions for the good of a concrete individual person (love or charity) and actions for the good of all (social, civil, or political love, or justice). In *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, Pope John Paul II had defined solidarity as a ‘firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual’ (SRS 38), and we might extend it today to the cosmic common good, to include the good of all creatures and ecosystems.⁶

Pope Francis develops this relationship between love and justice further in both *Laudato Si’* and *Fratelli Tutti*, which uses the *Parable of the Samaritan* as a paradigmatic example of this creative dialectic between love and justice (FT 165):

Love, overflowing with small gestures of mutual care, is also civic and political, and it makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world. Love for society and commitment to the common good are outstanding expressions of a charity which affects

⁵ See Paul Misner. *Catholic Labor Movements in Europe: Social Thought and Action, 1914-1965* (Washington, D.C. : The Catholic University of America Press, 2015).

⁶ Daneil Scheid. *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

not only relationships between individuals but also macro-relationships, social, economic and political ones. (LS 231)

Behind this discussion is an important principle, namely, the principle of *mercy*. As the theologian Jon Sobrino who lived through El Salvador's civil war, suggests, 'Everything, absolutely everything, turns on the exercise of mercy'.⁷ Sobrino uses the term *misericordia*, sometimes translated as compassion. The theme of mercy has also been central to Pope Francis' pontificate, and central to his own experience of living through Argentina's dictatorship, yet it recalls earlier papal teaching, including Pope John XXIII's opening speech to the second Vatican where he called for the Church to engage in the 'medicine of mercy'.⁸ As Aquinas recognised, the unlimited mercy of God, unlike expressions of human mercy, confers goodness on those who receive it and is not limited by specific human laws of justice, as God is not bound by such laws.⁹ Jon Sobrino fills out Aquinas' account of what human mercy entails by insisting on human imitation of Jesus' radical acts of mercy which is specifically orientated towards those who are most vulnerable.¹⁰

More importantly for our present argument, Sobrino explores the material, social and structural dimensions of what mercy means. He does not, however, expand his ideas on structural and social change to include the vulnerable and suffering creatures of the earth. Yet, this is now a crucial and critical aspect to consider, not least as human suffering is ineluctably bound up with the lives of vulnerable creatures of all kinds that are threatened with extinction – we only have to think here of what would happen to our food systems if bees disappear and pollination ceases. Sobrino argued passionately that those who ignore extreme poverty are inhuman, so mercy must mean structural change, and not simply isolated works. Today, however, it is not just the crucified people that need to be taken down from the cross,¹¹ a phrase

⁷ Jon Sobrino, 'Spirituality and the Following of Jesus', in *Mysterium liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, edited by Ignacio Ellacuria and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993): p. 682 (677-701).

⁸ See Pope Francis, *The Church of Mercy: A Vision for the Church* (Chicago: Loyola, 2014).

⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Letter to the Ephesians*, Chapter 2, lecture 2.

¹⁰ Todd Walatka, 'The Principle of Mercy: Jon Sobrino and the Catholic Social Tradition', *Theological Studies*, 77 (1): 96-117.

¹¹ Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994)

he took from his fellow Jesuit Ignacio Ellacuría who was brutally martyred by the military in November 1989, but the earth as well.

Mercy, in other words, means identifying with suffering as if it were one's own and then taking practical steps to address it. Mercy also means forgiveness of any harm suffered, and in this respect is most relevant to be offered by the most vulnerable towards those in power, hence, mercy is both offered, but at the same time given for past wrongs and harms.

Mercy is particularly relevant in situations of innocent suffering, such as children dying of cancer due to mining toxic contamination and irresponsible governments and businesses, and that form of suffering could lead to a sense of powerlessness and paralysis of action. Yet, as Gustavo Gutiérrez pointed out in his account of the biblical story of Job, 'Are human beings capable, in the midst of unjust suffering, of continuing to assert their faith in God and speak of God without expecting a return?'¹² He notes that Job expresses ultimate hope in God in the midst of his innocent suffering, and does so in an inclusive way, so that he 'practiced a kind of ecological justice towards the earth, mother of life and source of food for the poor'.¹³ Gutiérrez believes that Job provides the basis for an adequate theological response to innocent suffering firstly as a prophetic one through solidarity with those who are poor and secondly through contemplation (cf. our Briefing Note 3).¹⁴

It is within that context of an understanding of the meaning of mercy and the dialectic relationship between love and justice that the practice of accompaniment, as an expression of solidarity with those who suffer, is situated. The final document of the 2007 meeting of the Latin American bishops' conference in Aparecida, which Bergoglio helped draft, speaks of accompaniment and its importance in the life of the Church:

From our faith in Christ, solidarity springs as a permanent attitude of encounter, of brotherhood and service, which finds expressions in visible choices and actions, mainly in the defence of life and the rights of the most vulnerable and excluded, and in the

¹² Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*, translated by Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987), p. 1.

¹³ Gutiérrez, *On Job*, p. 42.

¹⁴ A briefing paper on LSRI's understanding of contemplation will follow in due course.

permanent accompaniment of their efforts to be subjects of change and transformation of their situation (§394).¹⁵

Since being Pope, Francis has continued to emphasise this permanent accompaniment as central to the work of the Church. This is why accompaniment, as this ‘permanent attitude of encounter’, is also the site of ecclesial renewal where the presence of the Holy Spirit becomes more visible through these dynamics of encounters. Pope Francis links the exercise of his papacy to such accompaniment, undergirded by the virtues of solidarity and mercy. In his address at the second meeting in Santa Cruz, Bolivia, of Popular Movements, he encouraged them to in their work as agents of social change, concluding:

[t]he future of humanity does not lie solely in the hands of great leaders, the great powers and the elites. It is fundamentally in the hands of peoples and in their ability to organize. It is in their hands, which can guide with humility and conviction this process of change. I am with you.¹⁶

In his address to young people gathered for the Economy of Francesco event in Assisi in November 2020, he has re-iterated the importance of the ability of the poor to organize themselves and of the Church being with, walking with, in other words accompanying, in that process:

[T]he time has come to take up the challenge of promoting and encouraging models of development, progress and sustainability in which people, especially the excluded (including our sister earth), will no longer be – at most – a merely nominal, technical or functional presence. Instead, they will become protagonists in their own lives and in the entire fabric of society. [...] Let us not think for them, but with them.¹⁷

These words ‘I am with you’, ‘Let us think with them’ sum up in a vernacular way the theological concept of accompaniment that is also integral to the principle of mercy. However, the questions of how to be with, how to walk with, how to think with, are left unanswered in

¹⁵ CELAM (Conferencia del Episcopado Latinoamericano y del Caribe). 2007. Documento Conclusivo de Aparecida, <https://www.celam.org/aparecida/Espanol.pdf>.

¹⁶http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/july/documents/papa-francesco_20150709_bolivia-movimenti-popolari.html.

¹⁷http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20201121_videomessaggio-economy-of-francesco.html

papal statements. In a review of ‘accompaniment’ as used in Pope Francis’s texts and discourses, Stephen Pope discusses some concrete ways of accompanying such as in the work of the Jesuit Refugee Service in Cambodia, which centred on both policy advocacy to introduce an international legislation banning land mines, and on supporting the lives of those who have been disabled by land mines.¹⁸ Other examples of accompaniment include the work of religious orders in policy advocacy to end human slavery, in offering assistance to trafficked women globally,¹⁹ and the historical work of the Pastoral Land Commission in Brazil.²⁰ The Synod of the Amazon is another example, at the level of the universal Church, of accompanying people who suffer innocently in their defence of life and in defending their rights in the face of land dispossession, human rights abuses, and ecosystem destruction, an example of a Church that is ‘samaritan, merciful and solidarity’ (§ 22, final document).²¹

An essential component of accompaniment, as an expression of solidarity with those who suffer, is the reality of encounter, of mutual listening, and mutual transformation through that encounter. Being present to the lives of the marginalized is, above all, listening to what they have to say about their lives. No decisions can be made that concerns them without first being present to them. The final document of the Amazon Synod talks of a ‘spirituality of listening’ (§20), of listening being the starting point of ecological conversion.

Accompaniment requires the formation of a culture of listening and of attentiveness to what happens to the lives of others, and to the lives of creatures and the health of ecosystems. The Amazon Synod talks of ‘becoming like Jesus as he reveals himself in the Gospels: close to people, able to listen, to heal, to console; patient, and not seeking to demand but to manifest the tenderness of his Father's heart’ (§107, final document). Cultivating these values of encounter and listening with no agenda, simply being present to the other person, are key

¹⁸ Stephen Pope. 2019. “Integral Human Development: From Paternalism to Accompaniment,” *Theological Studies* 80(1): 123-147.

¹⁹ Graw Leary, Mary. 2018. “Religious Organizations as Partners in the Global and Local Fight Against Human Trafficking,” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 16(1): 51-60.

²⁰ Pinto, Lucas. 2015. “The Influence of the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) in the Constitution of the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST),” *Revista de Estudios Sociales*, 51:76-88.

²¹ <http://www.synod.va/content/sinodoamazonico/en/documents/final-document-of-the-amazon-synod.html>.

components of the integral ecology paradigm proposed by *Laudato Si'*,²² and we could also add simply being present to other beings, being present to the bees which pollinate, of the spider constructing her web between tree branches. In his Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Querida Amazonia*, Pope Francis talks about listening to the silenced earth, and those who suffer in silence, as a duty of justice (QA 26, 52, 66).

One could wonder whether it makes sense to speak of accompaniment beyond the human community, as Pope Francis does in *Querida Amazonia* when talking of the Church walking with the Amazonian region as a whole, its peoples and forests. If the principle of God's mercy and care extends to all creation, and if, in solidarity and in accompaniment with the poorest communities of the earth we become more aware of the importance of recognising other creatures as having agency, then our accompaniment too can be extended, even if it takes a slightly different form. In this case, our 'listening' is to the silent voice of creatures who are suffering under the weight of human devastation of our planet. Like Job, who suffered innocently, we recognise through contemplation the mystery of God's presence in the world. Yet, that recognition, as in other forms of accompaniment, is at the intersection of mercy and justice, in this case mercy towards those creatures becoming extinct, and ecological justice that resists unwarranted instrumentalization of living creatures on whom our whole earth and the lives of us all depends. Importantly, when the church as a whole adopts such a stance it becomes a place of renewal where the presence of the Holy Spirit is more visible. This is not least because the practice of mercy, which is required when accompanying any person or being who suffers, requires the presence of charity, which is a theological virtue, and mercy as beatitude is also a gift of the Holy Spirit.²³

Implications for the LSRI

The Laudato Si' Research Institute strives to make accompaniment a core principle underpinning its activities and research, and relation with partner organizations. While we cannot accompany those creatures under threat of extinction literally, except through a kind of

²² Grey, Carmody. 2020. "Time and Measures of Success: Interpreting and Implementing Laudato Si'," *New Blackfriars* 101(1091): 5-28.

²³ While Aquinas believed that such gifts were confined to Christian believers, there is no good reason to suppose the work of the Holy Spirit is restricted in this way. In this sense, those who accompany others and show mercy to the vulnerable on earth are also instruments of the Holy Spirit.

proxy in contemplation of the natural world, we can listen and accompany those biologists, ecologists and agencies that are committed to ecological preservation, ecological justice and flourishing, and the communities themselves who live in the lands and forests which are threatened and who are their best guardians and protectors. Accompaniment therefore implies first and foremost an attitude of listening with sincere and open intent, through the seminars, workshops and conferences we organize, and through the research we conduct. We endeavour for the voices of marginalized communities to be expressed in academia, with a preference for this to be directly by them whenever language and logistics allows, or through people who work closely with them. We also endeavour for their voices to help shape our consultancy and academic research, through shared knowledge and exchange.

A second implication of accompaniment for the work of the LSRI is in our work in resourcing organisations who work at socio-ecological structural transformation towards more just and sustainable societies in care for our common home. We are in that regard hosting the Ecclesial Alliance Network in Integral Ecology, which is a network of church organisations seeking to promote integral ecology in their local territories. This global network began to be established with the Amazonian Ecclesial Network that led to the Amazonian Synod in October 2019. The LSRI is offering a platform where all the networks at different stages of development from Asia, Oceania, Africa, Europe, North, Central and South America can come together and listen and learn from each other for their work in their respective territories.

The LSRI is not accompanying alone. It is part of a network of other institutions globally oriented at socio-ecological structural transformation through research and formation, such as the Campus de la Transition in Paris and the Georgetown Environmental Justice Program.²⁴ Accompaniment also influences the manner in which our dialogue with other partners is shaped, including, for example, our deliberations with natural and social sciences. The LSRI is developing a platform in order to host a Global Laudato Si' Research Network so that we can listen to the work of other allied academic institutions, including their connectivity with those working directly for practical socio-ecological transformation, and learn from each other in our different gifts and emphasis and different contexts.

²⁴ Respectively: <https://campus-transition.org/en/our-project>; <https://environmentaljustice.georgetown.edu>.