

Reflections from a conference on Radical ecological conversion: Discovering the values of all creatures

By Augusto Zampini Davies, Director of Development and Faith at the Vatican

Two years ago, the world was welcoming Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si', on the care for our common home*. The Pope's groundbreaking message has helped to raise awareness of the seriousness of the social and ecological crises we are facing, which are inextricably connected. In fact, "a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor" (LS, 49).

In order to respond in depth to those cries, many things must change, but above all, we need to change; we need a deep conversion at all levels (cf. LS, 202). Put differently, as the creation accounts in the book of Genesis imply, "human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself" (LS, 66). When these three vital relationships have been broken (sin), we need to heal them (conversion). Healing relationships is about changing the attitude that has caused their disruption, namely the attitude of dominion and exploitation, and walk towards an attitude of care and service (cf. LS, 66-67).

How to promote and support this on-going and urgent conversion? How to help each other to re-discover the intrinsic value and beauty of all creatures, humans and non-humans, and thus act differently? To answer those questions, on 7-8 March 2018, a conference entitled "Radical Ecological Conversion: Discovering the Values of All Creatures" took place at the Pontifical Gregorian University, in Rome. It was co-organised by the Embassies to the Holy See of The Netherlands, Germany and Georgia. The Dicastery for the Promotion of Integral Human Development of the Vatican supported it. Cardinal Peter Turkson, the Prefect of this Dicastery, gave one of the keynote speeches, explaining that the hope the Church has for a radical change, relies on the human capacity of contemplation and wonder, as well as on the capacity to change our hearts, minds and actions, both personal and social.

CAFOD had a critical role in the conference too. Dr Celia Deane-Drummond, one of our theological advisers, gave a keynote speech alongside Cardinal Turkson. Linda Jones, CAFOD's Head of Theology Programme, was in charge of one of the sessions. She addressed

the commitment to ecological conversion, presenting CAFOD's multiple initiatives. Among them, Linda explained what CAFOD has learned from the listening processes of the *Laudato Si'* workshops about the meaning of progress. In front of well-known professors and religious authorities, Linda also mentioned: (i) CAFOD's educational materials on *Laudato Si'*; (ii) CAFOD's Live Simply award to parishes that are socially and ecologically responsible; (iii) how Romero House, CAFOD's headquarters, has been ecologically designed; (iv) CAFOD's new resilience tool-kit for communities in the South on how to face socio-ecological problems; (v) CAFOD's brochure on the Sustainable Development Goals and *Laudato Si'*, and the role agencies can play in helping local authorities to implement them; (vi) how a theology rooted in *Laudato Si'* is helping CAFOD to promote change in policies and in attitudes of staff and partners, including policies that aim at linking immediate response and assistance to the long-term development programmes.

Celia and Linda's presentations were complemented by my session on the spirituality for radical ecological conversion. As a former CAFOD theological adviser and current Director of Development and Faith at the Vatican, I relied on the outcomes of CAFOD's *Laudato Si'* processes that I conducted during my time there. I explained that, a deep and radical conversion starts with our deep humanity (or spirituality), as CAFOD's partners and staff have emphasised. We have been created in the image and likeness of God, and entrusted to care for all the goodness he has created. Conversion, therefore, is to walk away from what threatens life and walk through paths where life is enhanced. Radical and deep conversion does not start with our good will or our 'doings', but by delving deep into our being. We humans have an immense dignity, capable of self-knowledge, of self-possession and of freely giving ourselves and entering into communion with others (cf LS, 65). Our being as humans also comprises the capacity to praise and contemplate God's wonders. This is a crucial step towards reconciliation with God and his creation, and thus to change behaviours: "nature as a whole not only manifests God but is also a locus of his presence. The Spirit of life dwells in every living creature and calls us to enter into relationship with him. Discovering this presence leads us to cultivate the 'ecological virtues'" (LS, 88). But it's God's light that indicates the path for healing, reconciliation, and conversion: "In God's light, we see light" (Ps 36:9).

Hence, if we start with our deep "being", we can respond to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor with our "best doings". Also, by starting with our deep spiritual being, we could find the motivation required for a radical change.

