

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

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In September 2017 the Ambassadors to the Holy See of Georgia, The Netherlands and Germany invited three theologians to Rome to discuss a plan for a conference on *Laudato Si'* the following year. I was one of them. None of the Ambassadors were Roman Catholic, two were Protestant and one was Orthodox, but all shared the view that one of the most serious challenges of global society today is paying sufficient attention to the very base of all life, the earth itself and its creatures. And they saw in *Laudato Si'* a message for the whole world: If we don't learn to treat the earth right, the very fabric of all human life, especially the most vulnerable and poorest of the poor, will have no future. As all life forms are interconnected, that means that what happens to them happens to us and *vice versa*.

But how do we move from a scary message about climate impacts, environmental degradation and biodiversity loss to positive action? From our conversations it soon became clear that we didn't want just another academic conference on what the encyclical was about. Rather, we wanted those who came to be inspired to work harder and pool their resources so that real societal transformation became possible, or at least more likely. *Laudato Si'*, by combining science, economics, development, theology, spirituality and education, to name just a few of its ingredients, uses the vision of liberation theology: see what is the case, judge what this means and then act. But how can scientists, economists, those working in development policy, theologians and spiritual leaders really engage in fruitful dialogue as contributors to change?

We knew how important it was to secure the agreement of the Prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, Cardinal Peter Turkson. He set the scene for the conference by contributing the first keynote. His talk followed a welcome by the Rector of Gregorian University, who kindly agreed to host the conference, and then letters of support from Pope Francis and the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Bartholomew 1. Their call to heal the brokenness of ecological sin and promote justice for those who are poor sat alongside a new vision to renew faith and go back to the roots of Christian hope. The theological papers that followed by an Orthodox and Catholic scholar stressed the

need to learn to see differently, to take time in contemplation to listen to the voice of the voiceless and to dwell in ascetic stillness.

Reconciliation means *sharing the same space* and to achieve that requires radical asceticism combined with revolutionary mysticism. God, as a God of Wisdom and Love challenges us to think more deeply about the value of creation for its own sake, as it is beloved of God. Biologist and explorer Enric Sala, then reminded us of the incredible discoveries of science, including a picoplankton that was only discovered in 1987. This tiny cyanobacteria, so small that it escaped detection for so long, is responsible for generating the majority of the oxygen that we breathe. No small reminder that we are dependent on creatures, for better or worse. And the power of the natural world to recover after being despoiled by human activity is a true sign of hope.

Then a panel on migration followed, and how there can be lessons from the mass migrations in the biological world in helping to find ways for migrating peoples to become more resilient. Michael Northcott's talk on indigenous peoples and land rights showed how a different way of living lightly and being in the natural world is possible. And interspersed throughout voices from Africa, the Philippines and India and particularly women, reminded us that this is a global problem and there are real challenges but also signs of hope. Louis Caruana, a Jesuit who is Dean of Philosophy at the Gregorian University, pushed us hard to try and understand the underlying philosophical and theological frameworks that inform the debates. Ottmar Edenhofer, from the Potsdam Institute for Climate Research, delivered a sobering paper on economics and reminded us that keeping global temperatures within a habitable range for most communities, requires recognizing that the earth's cumulative carbon burden is nearly at its limit.

Yet, it was the attention to practice within and outside the church that was one of the true highlights of the conference. Ethnographers who worked alongside churches who are active in environmental responsibility opened up new insights in the deep appeal to justice questions across different denominations. And an environmental psychologist, from the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies, Katharina Beyerl, showed how best to craft the message of *Laudato Si'* so that it touches on those multifaceted aspects of human psychology in order to encourage lasting change.

CAFOD's Linda Jones led one of the three workshops towards the end of the conference, right at the time when participants were starting to

ask about how to work towards strategic change. CAFOD's *Laudato Si'* project, started in 2015, the same year as the release of the encyclical, is pioneering in its scale and extent. But CAFOD was already ahead of the curve through its practical projects linking climate and development that had been going on for over a half dozen years prior to the release of the encyclical. The CAFOD workshops held in different parts of the world, including those in vulnerable communities in Sierra Leone, Bangladesh and Ethiopia, modeled an inclusive way of working, encouraging solidarity across nations and continents. Building trust before there is an openness to change is core to CAFOD's experience and a lesson for others wanting to take up this message.

The final panel returned to the theme of spirituality, particularly the Ignatian spirituality that has strongly informed Pope Francis's ministry. The ability to find God in all things, to learn to detach from unhelpful desires in order to serve God more effectively, and learning proper discernment in difficult decisions help ground this goal for transformative work in the practice of prayer. Efforts at conservation are not separate from building flourishing communities, and Peter Harris, the founder and Director of the largest Christian conservation agency in the world, *A Rocha*, explained using some case studies how to do that.

At the closing dinner for speakers hosted by the Ambassador to the Kingdom of the Netherlands, HRH Prince Jaime de Bourbon de Parme, described the overall conference as like a mosaic in which all the different parts fitted together in a beautiful whole. What is really remarkable is that even though many of us have been on this track for years, for some over a generation, all of us recognized we could and needed to go deeper. Radical ecological conversion always starts at home in the decisions I make day by day. And that applies to both individuals and institutions. If this conference has inspired even some of those taking part to make changes, then it will have been worthwhile.