

**SUSTAINABLE USE  
OF TERRESTRIAL  
ECOSYSTEMS AND  
SOCIAL JUSTICE**

THEOLOGY IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

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ASKING QUESTIONS ABOUT ASKING QUESTIONS

If one thing, this symposium shows that the different Schools of Tilburg University, a university devoted to understanding people and society, are developing interesting insights on the future of our society in and after the Anthropocene, the era in which human activity is, for the first time in history, having serious consequences for the state of ‘Mother Earth’. Theologians are compelled to contribute to the development of these understandings. In classic Christian anthropology, human beings have been regarded as ‘the crown of creation’, but this is not unequivocal, for traditionally they are regarded as ‘co-creators’, whom has been given the responsibility to keep creation as a whole intact.

In recent encyclicals, Pope Francis has time and again displayed what might be called the prophetic power of tradition, precisely by underlining this responsibility. His reflections on the interplay between economy and ecology, between social justice and concern for the climate, leave nothing to the imagination. And when looking into matters more closely, he is not the first pope to do so. In fact, previous pivotal moments in the development of global economy and Western society have inspired religious leaders with a vast impact, and such are popes, to address the position of humans in their natural surroundings and the consequences of their behavior.

## I

In what history books call the modern era, and more in particular in the late nineteenth-century, an age when the industrial revolution gained steam through all kinds of technical innovations and developments, an influential pope already raised his voice against the undeniable downsides of unbridled entrepreneurial progress. In his 1891 encyclical ‘on the new things’, *Rerum novarum*, Leo XIII sharply criticized the exploitation and resulting poverty of the workers. He argued that every worker should be paid a salary that would enable him to accumulate as much private property as necessary to guarantee his family an orderly life of well-being. And he condemned capitalism to the extent that it led to ‘inhuman practices’ on the part of factory owners and to ‘all-consuming usury, driven [...] by greedy speculators’ (*Rerum novarum* 2). On the other hand, Leo XIII – a child of his time – rejected the solution of socialism, then on the upsurge, and its advocacy of collectivization of the means of production. He considered this to be contrary to the person’s right to property from which human beings derive part of their dignity. More important than these rejections of what he regarded as the extremes on either side, was his plea for a balanced society, and his rejection of an overly stress on individual gains.

A second pivotal moment in modern history came when Pope Pius XI published the encyclical *Quadragesimo anno*. In 1931, in the midst of the Great Depression that followed the 1929 stock market crash, and at a moment when the

United States and Europe suffered from extremely high unemployment rates, this pope fought poverty by vehemently protesting the growing inequality in Western society. A society in which only a small group benefited from the advantages of new inventions, but where the largest group, workers, remained condemned to poverty due to their puny wages, was seen as unjust. Pius denounced the economic despotism of the few at the expense of the prosperity of the many. A fair market economy, he wrote in *Quadragesimo anno*, must be aimed at the welfare of all people, and this means specifically that economic freedom can never be the regulative principle of the economy. Excessive economic liberalism will hinder the enshrining of social virtues such as ‘social justice’ and ‘social charity’.

Another six decades later, in 1991, the context of world political and economic developments had again drastically changed. After a long Cold War era, the Berlin Wall had collapsed when a Polish Pope, John Paul II, wrote the encyclical *Centesimus annus*. With history on his side, just after the downfall of communism in the former Soviet Union and its satellite countries, he warned against the dangers of excessive state power. In his idea, the state’s main task was to create the preconditions for societies and cooperation at a sub-state level. In this way, individuals are better able to flourish and people can receive more adequate aid when faced with poverty. Like his predecessors, John Paul II criticized the free market as the most effective tool for ‘harnessing resources and responding effectively to needs’. And again, like his predecessors, he warned of the dangers of poverty and injustice that would arise if free trade is not based on and limited by an ethical and value driven order.

The observant reader will have noticed the rhythm underlying this series of papal encyclicals: *Rerum novarum* was written in 1891, *Quadragesimo anno* (meaning ‘After forty years’) four decades years later, and John Paul II’s *Centesimus annus* (‘The hundredth year’) celebrated the centennial anniversary of Leo XIII’s charter. Admittedly, the choice of titles was not highly original, but these encyclicals do express a certain continuity in the Catholic Church’s social thought.

## II

The current, fourth pivot point in our list puts us in a new context, one characterized by ever-increasing globalization and by an unseen ecological crisis. The Anthropocene is definitely upon us. In this age, the tradition of Catholic thought on social justice is ever more combined with an emphasis on humanity's responsibility for the 'integrity of creation'. In 2009, Benedict XVI wrote *Caritas in veritate*, 'Love in truth'. This encyclical reads like an urgent appeal to the international political community. Globalization, the pope argued, should make people more aware that they are all part of one and the same human family, and should foster care for one another like brothers and sisters. The pope did not hesitate to stress that trade agreements should never encourage markets to become places where the rich oppress the poor. This dynamic can be broken by giving a greater role to *caritas*, in the market. This entails a shift in focus, as monetary value is replaced by another type of value, that of charity. *Caritas in veritate*, 'love in truth', ideally takes the shape of criteria to ensure that economic actors act justly, that they pursue prosperity and well-being for all, and are aware that 'the economy' must contribute to the unfolding of the intrinsic dignity of every human being.

While Benedict's voice was still strongly human-centered, a change of tone is noticeable under Pope Francis. Although the continuity with his predecessors is recognizable, there are also clear discontinuities in papal discourse, in the sense of a broadening. Experts point to Pope Francis's different, non-Roman and even non-Western perspective. A perspective that is, in a sense, more global and has a keener eye for the destructive forces of unbridled progress and injustice and the planet as a whole. This may well be why *Laudato si'*, published in 2015, is likely to become one of the Christian tradition's great encyclicals: ecology and social justice go hand in hand in view of the defense of an 'integral ecology'. This Latin American pope writes penetratingly about the worrying state of 'Mother, Sister Earth', and passionately decries the fact that climate change, the scarcity of drinking water and declining biodiversity affect the poor in the first place. He points to the poignant interwovenness of climate change and the unbridled needs of consumption for people in rich countries. The core of Catholic social thought comes to the fore when Pope

Francis describes international solidarity as necessary:

Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of his creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth. (*Laudato si'* 92)

In *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis articulates the practical consequences of this insight to a greater extent than his predecessors did, and in stronger terms. For him, personal property should never come at the expense of the common good, and the idea of the common good is seen in a broad sense: it includes the interests of the poor and that future generations. Solidarity creates the social preconditions that allow people in poor countries to live with dignity. If there is no substantial commitment to those who suffer, the 'globalization of indifference' will fester. He makes it very clear that the ecological crisis is rooted in a moral crisis in the hearts of people in prospering countries. According to Pope Francis, the failure of first-world citizens to let their motives be informed by the values of the gospel leads to greater poverty for those who depend on the rich. Ultimately, this *habitus* will cause not only the demise of a civilization and a culture, but above all of the devastation of 'our common home'.

### III

The urgency of the message of critics of the Anthropocene, contained in the Sustainable Development Goals is reminiscent of prophetic speech. And it is strikingly close to the social agenda of Christians. Time and again, the Church has denounced unjust economic mechanisms that increase poverty for large parts of the world's population. The respective popes have aimed to instill a sense that brotherhood and sisterhood, solidarity and substantial commitment to people who live below the poverty line, are the most viable solutions to end poverty. Again and again, papal statements have confronted the with the dark downsides of their actions, and their co-responsibility for the crisis that emerged in the Anthropocene.

Pope Francis takes this a step further. He also criticizes the dominance of unbridled liberalism and the free market, but his emphasis on the intrinsic link between the purity of personal motives and morality and the dynamics of the market economy has been firmer and more explicit than his predecessors. The market economy can only be good if it is based and oriented on principles governed by the primacy of human dignity. But now, human dignity is placed within a larger attention for the care for the planet. Pope Francis has expressed such dreams, when writing about a restoration of ecological balance in the endangered Amazon region:

I dream of an Amazon region that can jealously preserve its overwhelming natural beauty and the superabundant life teeming in its rivers and forests. (*Querida Amazonia* 7)

The most urgent advice he gives us humans in the Anthropocene is that the whole of nature is not there for us to exploit, *uti* in Latin, but on the contrary, we must *frui*, enjoy it. Humans ought to realize again that they are part of a whole, and need to protect, preserve and pass on the natural reserves to future generations. For the pope, everything comes together and stands in a mutually reinforcing connection: care for the planet, human happiness, and the economy are all aspects of humankind's participation in an 'integral ecology'.

It is perhaps expressive of a deep understanding of the signs of our times that the pope is not just a prophet of doom, but is inviting us to dream. In a deep way, dreams represent the hopes and expectations of all those who are victims and all those who want things to be different. Contrary to the lyrics of a song by a popular Dutch singer, dreams are not deceptions but rather inspirational incentives to realize the good. In the line of such leadership, theology can be both an ancient and a relevant voice in the contemporary discourse on the Anthropocene and the climate crisis. Ideally, a keen *understanding of society* is rooted in a profound vision on human life as part of creation.

