

A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

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Awakening an Integral Ecology

by Michael Nasello

The opening lines of Pope Francis' prayer from *Laudato Sí*, his encyclical letter on ecology, give the Church a template for our understanding of the ecological challenges before us:

“All-powerful God, you are present in the whole universe and in the smallest of your creatures. You embrace with your tenderness all that exists. Pour out upon us the power of your love, that we may protect life and beauty. Fill us with peace, that we may live as brothers and sisters, harming no one.”ⁱ

He proclaims God's presence everywhere, and in every creature, God's tender embrace of everything, and our need for the power of God's love to enable us to live peacefully with and protect all life.

This monograph explores catechesis, liturgy, and ministry in our Catholic schools - through the lens of *Laudato Sí*, and proposes a call to an ecological understanding awakening. May it be a small contribution to the “new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet.”ⁱⁱ

Catechesis & Teaching

Laudato Sí articulates important renewed principles for thinking and teaching about ecology for the Church and for the world. They are summarized by one writer as follows:

- “1. The spiritual perspective is now part of the discussion on the environment.
2. The poor are disproportionately affected by climate change.
3. Less is more.
4. Catholic social teaching now includes teaching on the environment.
5. Discussions about ecology can be grounded in the Bible and church tradition.
6. Everything is connected—including the economy.
7. Scientific research on the environment is to be praised and used.
8. Widespread indifference and selfishness worsen environmental problems.
9. Global dialogue and solidarity are needed.
10. A change of heart is required.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Pope Francis builds on the thought and writings of his predecessors, in particular Pope Benedict XVI who is sometimes referred to as ‘the Green Pope’.

Laudato Si connects spirituality, scripture and Tradition, the truths of science, a commentary on the social issues affecting and affected by the environment, and issues a challenge to the whole world for ecological conversion. What was formerly in the scientific or economic realm alone is now discovered in the realm of faith. Social realities are intertwined with science and religion. A new politics, a more conscientious economics, a global development motivated by a spiritually renewed sense of the beauty and power of the Earth and all its creatures – these are the energies that are required to confront the urgency of the ecological devastation we are bringing upon ourselves.

In Catholic schools in Ontario, we have a hidden treasure – a window into this renewed understanding of the Earth community and our place within it.

The Ontario curriculum contains a comprehensive and systematic plan of teaching and learning called *Environmental Education – Elementary and Secondary*^v through which all students can be brought to a deeper understanding of the very realities Pope Francis and others have been raising up for us. One of the primary goals of this curriculum policy document is: “By the end of Grade 12, students will acquire knowledge, skills, and perspectives that foster understanding of their fundamental connections to each other, to the world around them, and to all living things.”^v The document is comprehensive, spanning all grades including the Kindergarten programme and subjects. Its rich and interwoven connections are ripe with opportunities to deepen understanding and to motivate new ecological learning and behaviours.

Taking a more conscious view of the educational opportunities we have at our fingertips may assist us to reflect more deeply on the implications of our pedagogy.

Our pedagogical choices are ethical choices. What an awesome responsibility! When teachers give students an opportunity to feel the soil, air and water, to plant plants and care for their growth, to hear the birds and listen to the breezes blow through the leaves of giant trees, to smell the forest - relationships are formed, and care and concern are inspired. Indeed, that experience is what is needed in order to help us and our children feel the life that is all around us, and to be moved by that connection to care about that life, for its own sake and for the interdependence all humans enjoy with it, a kind of “intimate communion with the larger human community and with the universe itself.”^{vi}

Liturgy & Prayer

A prayerful approach to reconciliation with all Creation is an important motivator to deepening an ecological spirituality. In the Ignatian tradition, the Examen offers us a powerful tool for reflection and self-examination. This Ecological Examen comes from the 36th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus and may be helpful for adult or student reflection:

- “1. I give thanks to God for creation and for being wonderfully made. *Where did I feel God’s presence in creation today?*”
2. I ask for the grace to see creation as God does – in all its splendor and suffering. *Do I see the beauty of creation and hear the cries of the earth and the poor?*
3. I ask for the grace to look closely to see how my life choices impact creation and the poor and vulnerable. *What challenges or joys do I experience as I recall my care for creation? How can I turn away from a throwaway culture and instead stand in solidarity with creation and the poor?*
4. I ask for the grace of conversion towards ecological justice and reconciliation. *Where have I fallen short in caring for creation and my brothers and sisters? How do I ask for a conversion of heart?*

5. I ask for the grace to reconcile my relationship with God, creation and humanity, and to stand in solidarity through my actions. How can I repair my relationship with creation and make choices consistent with my desire for reconciliation with creation?

6. I offer a closing prayer for the earth and the vulnerable in our society.”^{vii}

A perfect opportunity to raise this consciousness through prayer and celebration is during the Season of Creation from September 1st to October 4th. September 1st is the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation declared by Pope Francis in 2015. We can use the gift of these days to pray for ecological conversion, a conversion to which the whole world is called.

Ministry & Eco-Justice

In the Spring of 2021, as we celebrate the 5th anniversary of *Laudato Si*, the Institute for Catholic Education and the Ontario College of Teachers co-published a resource for eco-justice and consciousness. The nine eco-placemats link the Ethical Standards for Teaching and the Standards for Professional Practice to a reflection on how the educator is called to bring those standards to a renewed ethical consideration of an integral ecology. In each case, the educator is called to “See, Judge, and Act”.

See: We listen to the experience of other educators and Indigenous artists and consider our own personal experience and the experience of students.

Judge: We place those experiences in dialogue with church teaching, such as *Laudato Si* and ask questions for understanding that experience in light of faith.

Act: We consider the concrete actions to which we may be called.

What we do as a Church in response to the ecological crisis before us is central to putting our faith into action. How powerful it would be for our children to hear the same message proclaimed in their homes, their schools and their parishes, and to see the same joyful witness, inspiring a new consciousness of and responsibility for the Earth and all its creatures. Here are some thoughts about how the OCT-ICE resources can move us to put the calls of *Laudato Si* into action:

Teachers and Education Workers

- Be the advocates of the ecological curriculum: provide opportunities for deep and transformative learning.
- Seek ways to incorporate the ecological expectations into your planning for teaching and learning, assessment and evaluation.
- Participate with students in ecological activities. Make them a priority.



ECO PLACEMATS
EXPLORING ETHICAL PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE:
ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS & ECO JUSTICE

Chaplaincy Leaders

- Support the school community in hearing the prophetic call to care for our common home.

Principals & Vice Principals

- Support teachers in ecological teaching and learning.
- Inspire the entire school community to be ecologically minded - be intentional, clear, and public.
- Seek ways to support student learning in the outdoors: to experience nature, to become comfortable in the natural elements, to be awed and inspired by the beauty and majesty of all Creation.

Supervisory Officers & Directors

- Be leaders in raising awareness of ecological issues and curriculum. Keep the Earth and the impact of school / system actions as a focus in decision making.

The Ontario Catholic School Trustees Association have published a collection of practices from the 29 Catholic School Boards called “Together in Faith: Collection of School Board Practices.” It is a summary of Catholic schools great works in collaborating, communicating and celebrating their stewardship for creation.

By experiencing a Catholic community exercising a ministry of eco-justice, students may be well supported to become the voice of the future, and the living witnesses of a new integral ecology. When all in the home-school-parish relationship witness to care for our common home in words and everyday actions, we can affirm that “today that the earth is essentially a shared inheritance, whose fruits are meant to benefit everyone.”^{viii} In the tradition of many First Nations peoples, we can ask what the effect of any decision will be seven generations into the future.

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Conclusion

Often it is the younger generations who feel the environmental crisis so urgently. There are many examples of youth advocates for the environment, some very close to home. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit*, Pope Francis writes to the youth of the world:

Dear young people, my joyful hope is to see you keep running the race before you, outstripping all those who are slow or fearful. Keep running, “attracted by the face of Christ, whom we love so much, whom we adore in the Holy Eucharist and acknowledge in the flesh of our suffering brothers and sisters. May the Holy Spirit urge you on as you run this race. The Church needs your momentum, your intuitions, your faith. We need them! And when you arrive where we have not yet reached, have the patience to wait for us.”^{ix}

As we awaken to the needs of the Earth and all of God’s Creation, let us listen attentively to our own experience and the experience of others. Let us dialogue with the wisdom of our Tradition and the traditions of other knowers, especially our Indigenous brothers and sisters, and let us take concrete action to love and care for our common home. Let us join together in this awesome moment of possibility.

References

- i *Laudato Si*, 246
- ii *Laudato Si*, 14
- iii Martin, SJ, James, June 15, 2018, “Top Ten Takeaways from ‘*Laudato Si*’ in <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2015/06/18/top-ten-takeaways-laudato-si>
- iv See curriculum *Environmental Education*, 2017 Edition www.edu.gov.on.ca
- v *ibid.* p. 2
- vi Berry, Thomas. *The Dream of the Earth*. San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1988, pp. 126-138
- vii Found in <http://www.ecologicalexamen.org/>
- viii *Laudato Si*, 93
- ix *Christus Vivit*, 299