

# A Letter From Rome: *Laudato Si'* as a Catalyst for Societal Transformation?

Workshop on Pope Francis' Encyclical on the Environment at the IASS  
Potsdam

“Ecological culture cannot be reduced to a series of urgent and partial responses to the immediate problems of pollution, environmental decay and the depletion of natural resources. There needs to be a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies, an educational program, a lifestyle and a spirituality which together generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm.”

Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 111

## INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2015, the Vatican published Pope Francis' long awaited encyclical letter *Laudato Si'*, which in light of the ecological crisis calls “every person” to “a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet.”<sup>1</sup> This dialogue, the Pope argues, needs to be a conversation that “includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all.”<sup>2</sup> Already before its release, the encyclical had generated a widespread conversation among Catholics and non-Catholics, Christians and non-Christians, religious and secular thinkers about the state of the planet and the role religion may play in addressing the issue of our ecological crisis. Given its universal intent and broad reception, *Laudato Si'* warrants careful assessment, especially by those committed to a transdisciplinary research process aimed at a societal transformation to just, equitable, and sustainable futures.

Echoing his predecessors, Francis maintains that the warming of the planet and the loss of biodiversity are not simply scientific issues best resolved by science, but rather phenomena indicative of a far-reaching moral and spiritual crisis that demands an appropriately extensive response. To this end, he proposes an *integral ecology*, which combines scientific with economic and social, and also cultural considerations evaluated within the ethical context of the common good. Accordingly, an integral ecology has to always focus on the sum of those conditions allowing social groups and every individual “relatively thorough and ready access

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On the Care for Our Common Home* (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2015), 3 and 14.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

to their own fulfillment.”<sup>3</sup> In order to establish it as a paradigmatic approach to a general response to the ecological crisis, Pope Francis advocates an open and transparent dialogue between all stakeholders both on the international and the national level. Part of this larger conversation, the pontiff insists, must be the exchange between politics, economics, religion, and science. Any attempt at gauging the theoretical and practical potential of the encyclical has to take its central idea of integral ecology quite seriously. It is here that the text offers a framework for how to respond comprehensively to the challenges of laissez-faire capitalism embedded in a globalized technocratic paradigm.

This proposal outlines a workshop to be held at the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies (IASS) in Potsdam on the encyclical and its potential for offering a theoretical and practical, as well as ethical framework for personal and societal transformation to behaviors that support the development of more sustainable futures. The objective of the workshop would be to evaluate the Pope’s encyclical, its analysis of the underlying causes of the ecological crisis, and its proposal of integral ecology as a way of addressing the crisis in a transdisciplinary context on the international and national level.

## A WORKSHOP ON *LAUDATO SI’*

### **Objective and Guiding Questions**

By now, virtually all of the major world religions have released statements regarding the ecological crisis, making particular reference to the challenges of climate change and its extensive effects on human and nonhuman life across the planet. What all of these declarations have in common is an emphasis of the religious dimension of the problem as well as the conviction that religions with their spiritual and moral foundations will prove indispensable to finding a solution. The fact alone that 84% of the world population declares some affiliation with a religious tradition is reason enough to evaluate whether this claim is indeed adequate and to reflect on the role religion can play in facilitating societal transformation to sustainability. Given that with 1.2 billion followers Catholicism is the world’s largest single religious body, *Laudato Si’* offers an excellent case with which to

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<sup>3</sup> Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et spes*, 26. For an in-depth discussion of the common good as an ethical principle in Catholic social teaching see also David Hollenbach, S.J., *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

begin. The proposed workshop at the IASS would allow thinkers from a diverse background to do so in the necessary detail a document of this importance deserves.

The proposed workshop will revolve around integral ecology as the central framing concept of the encyclical and, using it as a starting point, engage three general guiding questions: First, is the analysis of the given social and environmental situation and its underlying causes offered by *Laudato Si'* accurate? Second, does integral ecology along with the specific actions Pope Francis suggests provide a helpful and workable strategy in response to the ecological challenges we face? Third, to what extent can charismatic religious figures or statements offered by religious leaders catalyze societal transformation?

### **Workshop Arrangements**

Held under the auspices of the IASS, the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research (PIK), the Catholic University at Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, and the Federation of German Scientists (VDW), the workshop will bring together Church officials, theologians, as well as representatives from religious studies, the natural and social sciences, economics, politics, and the arts (35 participants total) over 3 days. Framing talks of 20 minutes will be followed by 20 minutes of extensive discussions. These talks will set the stage for group conversations on specific questions regarding different aspects of the encyclical as a potential stimulus for group behavior change both within and outside the Church.

Overall, the workshop will be divided into five sessions, each aimed at addressing a particular guiding question:

#### **DAY 1: Monday, September 12, 12:00 - 6:00 pm**

##### **1. The Document**

An introductory lecture by a Church representative on.

Guiding Question: What might be the ecclesiological and political implications of the encyclical?

##### **2. The Problem**

Guiding Question: Is the description of the current situation adequate?

#### **DAY 2: Tuesday, September 13, 9:00 - 5:30 pm**

##### **3. The Analysis**

Guiding Question: Are the identified cultural and social phenomena – e.g., spiritual and moral crisis, the fetishization of technology, the technocratic paradigm, and an irresponsible capitalism – indeed responsible for

the ecological crisis (and could religion itself in all its various forms and expressions bear part of the responsibility)?

#### **4. The Proposal**

Guiding Question: Is integral ecology within an ethical framework of the “common good” a workable strategy to bring about collective behavior change both, within the Church and without?

### **DAY 3: Wednesday, September 14, 9:00 - 1:00 pm**

#### **5. The Potential**

Guiding Question: To what extent can charismatic religious figures or statements offered by religious leaders catalyze societal transformation?

### **Deliverables**

The output of the workshop will include a joint report to be made available through the IASS and a collection of essays published in a book. A public panel conversation on the encyclical and its potential role in stimulating conversation on such issues as the technocratic paradigm, the contemporary spiritual and moral crisis, and an integral ecology as an antidotal framework for societal transformation might be held either in Potsdam or Berlin later in the year or early 2017. The panelists could include key workshop participants such as Klaus Töpfer, Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker, Reinhard Kardinal Marx, and Hans Joachim Schellnhuber.