



Laudato Si An Integral Ecology

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**Keynote Address by His Excellency Archbishop Bernardito Auza,
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*at the Panel on Youth Aspirations and Climate Urgency
Commonwealth Joint Office (685 Second Avenue at 44th)*

July 11, 2019

Your Excellencies, Distinguished Panelists, Dear Friends,

I am very happy to be here this afternoon to participate in this panel dedicated to the Don Bosco Green Alliance and the crucial role and work of young people in achieving SDG 13 and more broadly in the care of our common home.

I would like to thank Father Thomas Pallithanam and the Salesian Missions for their invitation this afternoon to share some thoughts on the challenges given by Pope Francis, both to the young and to the international community, to help bring about — and bring about with a sense of urgency — an integral ecology. During my participation in international conferences, like COP21, whose outcome is the Paris Agreement, or COP24, whose outcome is the so-called “Paris Accord Rulebook”, the sort of operating manual that should guide all the States Party to the Agreement, one constant observation that I have had has been the presence of young people representing civil society or non-governmental

organizations and the old people doing the negotiations! Joking aside, in international conferences, there are many young people also in the official delegations involved in the negotiations, and there are also not-so-young people among of civil society representatives. At COP24 in Katowice, Poland, last December, more than a hundred Catholic young people attended the Mass and conference we celebrated, representing many Catholic youth movements and organizations.

Pope Francis can hardly, if ever, be outdone when it comes to underlining the fundamental role of young people in caring for our common home, and in inspiring them to be more committed and active in that role and mission. The Pope knows that young people can really be great inspired and inspiring speakers, as we shall see with our panelists today.

In his encyclical *Laudato Si'* and in many other discourses, Pope Francis tells us how “everyone’s talents and involvement are needed” (LS 14) to confront the challenges we face. He has spoken about the need for an “intergenerational solidarity” in which people across the generations collaborate. But he has made a particular appeal to the young. “Young people,” he wrote in *Laudato Si'*, “demand change.” They can’t tolerate a situation, he says, when people “claim to be building a better future without thinking of the environmental crisis and the sufferings of the excluded” (LS 13). He praises them for having a profound “ecological sensitivity and a generous spirit” in general and has noted that “some of them are making admirable efforts to protect the environment” (LS 209). Today I would like to acknowledge the work being done by the young people in the Don Bosco Green Alliance, both present here as well as across the world. We also know of the work of those who form part of the *Laudato Si'* Generation, the advocacy of Greta Thunberg, and so many other bold young people who are leading their peers and awakening their elders far greater ecological awareness and action.

With regard to care for our common home, the growing involvement of the young is essential. At a time in which so many are living only for the present, in which consumerist lifestyles foster a culture of waste and a growing indifference to the sufferings of so many, young people play a crucial prophetic role. One of the essential characteristics of youth is to look toward the future. The young help everyone to grasp that the seeds we plant today we reap tomorrow. The fundamental question, Pope Francis writes in *Laudato Si'*, is not about the environment in isolation but rather, “What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up?” (160).

The young do not want to remain on the sidelines as that question is answered. They want to be, and rightly deserve to be, involved in the decisions being made. Pope Francis says that to answer that question about the world of tomorrow involves courageously asking other questions, deep ones that the young never cease to ask about the meaning of human life, like: “What is the purpose of our life in this world? Why are we here? What is the goal of our work and all our efforts?” These are fundamental questions, because what is at stake, he says, is

not just the future of the planet but “our own dignity” and “the ultimate meaning of our earthly sojourn” (160). The young help everyone not forget these questions. They remind everyone of the importance of never giving up the pursuit of the answers to these questions.

Sometimes when we think about the challenges facing our common home, we can focus too much on the narrower, some would argue more urgent, technical and scientific questions. But I would urge everyone to resist that trend, because many of the problems we face are symptoms of much deeper causes that likewise must receive urgent attention. Often many look at Pope Francis’ words on care for our common home with these narrow lenses, trying to frame *Laudato Si’*, for example, as Pope Francis’ “climate change encyclical,” even though Pope Francis mentions climate change in just three of the document’s 246 paragraphs. They concentrate on various scientific points he made about pollution, the throwaway culture, and the loss of biodiversity; the economic assertions he gave about consumption, social debt, how the poor suffer from environmental degradation and how markets alone are insufficient to address environmental concerns; and the political opinions he proffered, saying that there has been a lack of sufficient leadership until now and that politicians need to stop making excuses and begin acting in such a way that future generations will applaud their action when the situation was urgent and necessary; and stop there.

But the true purpose of *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis said, goes beyond scientific, technological, political and economic considerations. He said it was to bring “every person living on the planet” into a “dialogue with all people about our common home” (3). And that dialogue must go beyond keeping temperature rises below 2.0 degrees Celsius “working towards 1.5 degrees Celsius” over pre-industrial levels, or shifting to renewable energy, or reducing pollution and waste. For him, it must include all of the elements involved in what he terms “integral ecology,” which focuses not just on our common home but on all of our roommates in that common home whom we are called to regard and treat as brothers and sisters.

When Pope Francis spoke to the United Nations General Assembly in September 2015, one of the main themes of his Address was about the interconnectedness between the environmental and human ecology. To harm the environment, he said, is to harm human beings. We see this, he stressed, in how environmental destruction is “accompanied by a relentless process of exclusion ... of the weak and disadvantaged,” who are treated almost like refuse to be discarded in a “widespread and quietly growing ‘culture of waste.’”

In *Laudato Si’*, he emphasized, “We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis that is both social and environmental.” Therefore, “strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature” (LS 139). He emphasized that there can be “no ecology without an adequate anthropology. ... Our relationship with the

environment can never be isolated from our relationship with others and with God. Otherwise, it would be nothing more than romantic individualism dressed up in ecological garb” (LS 118-9).

That’s why, Pope Francis says, that, on the one hand, we must be concerned with injuries to our planet and the irresponsible treatment of other living beings; on the other, however, we must resist the trends and ideologies that focus almost exclusively on protecting the planet or other species while allowing offenses against human dignity. He prophetically gives several examples of this ecologically-garbed individualism: when we combat trafficking in endangered species while remaining indifferent to human trafficking (LS 91); when we fight against genetically modified organisms but allow experimentation on the human genome and human embryos (LS 136); when we worry about cruelty to animals while justifying the ghastly practice of abortion of our younger, more vulnerable brothers and sisters (LS 117, 120); when we seek to keep natural environment intact as a gift, and care for the male and female members of endangered species, but then think we have absolute power over our created bodies, trying to cancel out human sexual difference through gender ideology (LS 155).

Integral ecology calls us to be consistent, to care for both our common home and our siblings. Young people have always had a great desire for integrity and a huge distaste for inconsistency and hypocrisy. Pope Francis is obviously hoping that the young, in assuming a leadership role in care for our common home, will demand the type of consistency he elucidates.

Pope Francis has given us many thoughts on the scientific, technological, economic, political and cultural dimensions of integral ecology, and those justly get a lot of attention. But sometimes his words about the ethical and spiritual dimensions do not get as much emphasis. At this event on the work of the Don Bosco Green Alliance, I think Pope Francis and Saint John Bosco both would want me to emphasize them, not only because we will achieve an integral ecology without them, but also because those involved in the Don Bosco Green Alliance would be highly capable of inviting their peers and everyone else into a dialogue about them.

Laudato Si’ was written to help bring what Pope Francis calls an “ecological conversion” (LS 216) leading to an authentic “ecological spirituality.”

Let’s begin with his call to conversion. Pope Francis says that the “ecological crisis is a summons to profound interior conversion” (LS 218), because, he notes, there are “ethical and spiritual roots of environmental problems, which require that we look for solutions not only in technology but in a change of humanity; otherwise we would be dealing merely with symptoms” (LS 9). This conversion requires each of us, he says, to take an honest look at ourselves, choose the good again, rise above ourselves and our habits, and make a new start (205).

There are three aspects of this ecological conversion I’d like to highlight and that young people can catalyze in the midst of the world.

First, Pope Francis says, ecological conversion involves turning away from selfishness and rampant individualism and replacing “consumption with sacrifice, greed with generosity, wastefulness with a spirit of sharing” (LS 9). Many of the problems of society, Pope Francis says, come from today’s “self-centered culture of instant gratification” (LS 162) that leads us to exploit in a utilitarian way, rather than respect and revere, nature and others.

Second, ecological conversion involves a re-sensitization of conscience, because many consciences have become so numbed, Pope Francis says, that they can no longer hear “the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” (LS 49). This re-education of conscience not only involves diagnosing and overcoming past failures, Pope Francis says, but rejecting facile pseudo-solutions or partial solutions that are very common in some environmental circles, like some of the inconsistencies we spoke about before. This re-sensitization of conscience, he adds, involves listening more carefully to what God has said to us about the goodness of the world and of other persons and adopting an attitude of gratitude for the gift of the world and gratuitousness in imitating his generosity (LS 220-221).

Third, ecological conversion involves the recognition that we can, and the resolution that we must, make a difference. To do so, Pope Francis says, begins with a realization that a “new and universal solidarity” is needed to work together to build and rebuild our common home with an integral ecology (13, 14). Pope Francis gives lots of examples of places and countries that have shown great environmental improvement in terms of rivers cleaned, woodlands restored, landscapes beautified, and renewable energies advanced — all of which, he said, “show that men and women are still capable of intervening positively” (58).

I am sure of all of you present here have participated in many of such activities. We do every little and big act in favor of the environment, not for the souvenir picture with gloves on holding a bag of trash, and send it through Instagram or Facebook or WhatsApp; nor for the good feeling that comes from doing something good; it is above doing it prompted by the conviction of the moral and religious imperatives to be good stewards of God’s creation, co-creators with him in preserving and nurturing this wonderful gift of creation whose care he has entrusted to us.

Once we’ve turned away from old behaviors, re-sensitized ourselves to the proper attitudes, and resolved to work together, Pope Francis wants to help us grow in what he termed an enduring “ecological spirituality” that he hopes will gradually bring about a genuinely ecological culture.

For Pope Francis a genuine ecological spirituality involves several elements:

This first involves a sense of our limitations. “We are not God,” Pope Francis says. “The earth was here before us and it has been given to us” (66). This means that we cannot assert an absolute dominion over creation but rather must grasp that we’re summoned to exercise a stewardship over it. Without a

spirituality recognizing the primacy of a Creator, “we end up worshipping earthly powers, or ourselves usurping the place of God, even to the point of claiming an unlimited right to trample his creation under foot” (75).

Second, this ecological spirituality requires a proper ecological formation or education, which involves the passing on of an awe and wonder for the beauty and gift of creation (12); an acknowledgment that every other living being has intrinsic value and purpose (69, 84); and an “ethics of ecology” that helps people “to grow in solidarity, responsibility and compassionate care” (210).

Third, this ecological spirituality leads to a prophetic and contemplative lifestyle — an alternative understanding of quality of life — that acts on the ancient lesson that “less is more” (222). Such simplicity, sobriety and moderation allows us to be content with little, to appreciate the small things, to be grateful for and simultaneously spiritually detached from what we possess, so that freed from slavery to things, we can live life more fully (223).

Lastly, it leads to a capacity to live together as brothers and sisters in communion, recognizing that we need one another and have a shared responsibility for our common familial home (228-9). Without this fraternal solidarity, the foundations of social life are eroded and what will flow will be battles over conflicting interests that oppose a genuine culture of care for the environment and each other (229).

Such an ecological conversion and spirituality is challenging enough at a personal level; at a communal, cultural, social and global level, it’s obviously much more demanding. But Pope Francis urges us not to focus too much on the length of the journey needed to get from where we are to where we hope to be, but to focus on one step at a time. “An integral ecology,” he emphasizes, is comprised of “simple daily gestures that break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness” (230). It involves a “little way of love,” that doesn’t neglect a “kind word, a smile or any small gesture that sows peace and friendship” (230). Everything makes a difference.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.