

***Laudato Si'* and the Vow of Poverty**

In his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis takes stock of the attitudes and mentalities harmful to the environment, our "common home." (*Laudato Si'*, 13)

Among these harmful attitudes and mentalities, he mentions in particular a culture of impulsive and wasteful consumption. The Pope notes that, in countries where such a culture prevails, there is also a tendency towards self-interest, self-centeredness, where people care little or not at all about the harm they can cause to the environment and to future generations. What matters to them is increasing their profits and satisfying their hearts' desire for instant gratification with all available goods. The Pope writes:

Men and women of our postmodern world run the risk of rampant individualism, and many problems of society are connected with today's self-centred culture of instant gratification. (*Laudato Si'*, 162)

He adds:

When people become self-centred and self-enclosed, their greed increases. The emptier a person's heart is, the more he or she needs things to buy, own and consume. (*Laudato Si'*, 204)

In this context, the reality of the "common good" is forgotten. We no longer seek what is beneficial, in the long term, for the whole of humanity and for all the plant and animal species.

Seeking Primarily the "Common Good"

In response, Pope Francis proposes an "ecological conversion" (*Laudato Si'*, 219), which of course requires the practice of "ecological virtues." (*Laudato Si'*, 88) This conversion implies that individuals and companies put the search for the "common good" at the centre of their concerns. (*Laudato Si'*, 158–159) This makes individuals less centred on themselves and opens them up to solidarity, not only with the various types of poor people and endangered species, but also with future generations. The concept of common good is central to the environmental approach of the Bishop of Rome.

Learning to Be Satisfied With Little

Learning to be satisfied with little is at the heart of "ecological conversion." Francis urges us to opt courageously for moderation in consumption and for simplicity. This may seem paradoxical, but it has the conviction that "less is more." (*Laudato Si'*, 222) The Pope explains by saying that people who cease to focus on the pleasures of consumption actually open themselves up to other, greater types of enjoyment, which lead to happiness. He writes:

Christian spirituality proposes a growth marked by moderation and the capacity to be happy with little. It is a return to that simplicity which allows us to stop and appreciate the small things.

The Pope believes that "those who enjoy more and live better each moment" (*Laudato Si'*, 223) are those that can be satisfied with little and appreciate the little things. This leads him to these luminous affirmations:

Even living on little, they can live a lot, above all when they cultivate other pleasures and find satisfaction in fraternal encounters, in service, in developing their gifts, in music and art, in contact with nature, in prayer. Happiness means knowing how to limit some needs which only diminish us, and being open to the many different possibilities which life can offer. (*Laudato Si'*, 223)

The Importance of Community Networks

The Sovereign Pontiff is well aware that the path he is proposing is not obvious, it doesn't happen by itself. It is a demanding road that goes against the "throwaway culture" (*Laudato Si'*, 22) prevailing in many societies. He therefore considers that this change of mentality cannot be experienced without the support of a community. He thinks that belonging to a community network is essential:

[S]elf-improvement on the part of individuals will not by itself remedy the extremely complex situation facing our world today. Isolated individuals can lose their ability [...] and end up prey to an unethical consumerism bereft of social or ecological awareness. [...] Social problems must be addressed by community networks. (*Laudato Si'*, 219)

Ecological Conversion and the Vow of Poverty

Although he doesn't speak of it anywhere in his encyclical, doesn't ecological conversion strongly resemble what living the vow of poverty gives to us? How can one not think of the Rule of St. Augustine that has inspired so many Institutes? Indeed, for Augustine, the religious in good spiritual health is the one whose needs are minimal and who knows how to be content with little. He wrote: "For it is better to suffer a little want than to have too much." (*Rule III*, 5)

But, whatever the rule of our Institute and its precise formulations, those of us in religious life are all invited, by our vow of poverty, to adopt a moderate lifestyle and choose to restrain ourselves in terms of consumption.

In addition, our vow of poverty calls on us to pool our assets and our income. Normally, the practice of this vow should turn us towards others; it should halt our self-centeredness and lead us to seek the common good. And because we share the objects of everyday use among ourselves, we do not need to buy several copies of something that can be lent. In that way, we decrease our consumption.

When we look at it closely, we discover that religious life with its vow of poverty provides us with formidable tools for committing ourselves to the ecological conversion put forward by the Pope. In addition, our community and our Institute provide us with the community networks that Francis considers so important to keep us on this path.

An Invitation to Bear Witness

Don't the current environmental situation and the publication of this encyclical constitute an opportunity for religious life? Isn't this an occasion to enrich and renew the meaning

of our vow of poverty? Could this be seen as a way to take care of our common home and bear witness to an environmentally responsible (eco-responsible) lifestyle?

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