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An Apostolic Challenge: Organizing for an Integral Ecology

MEIC Assembly 2021

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Introduction: The Crisis of the Anthropocene

It is my real joy to be with you today. Thank you to Beppe and other members of the Presidenza. I had hoped to be with you last year in person and we had also planned to hold the Pax Romana Assembly this year with you in Rome. But COVID teaches us that we are not in control of our plans. I pray we can have a big celebration next year together after COVID!

Perhaps more than any other crisis, the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic reveals to us the Janus-faced nature of our world. On one side we can see a profound sense of global interrelationship. We have discovered in a dramatic way the interconnected dimensions of our economies, politics, and biology. A microscopic virus, which likely originated in a bat found its way into a person in China and within weeks it had spread to nearly every continent.

On the other side, however, the human family is increasingly divided and fractured. Consider the crisis of democracy worldwide from Honduras to Hong Kong, the weakening of the European project, increasing political and ecclesial polarizations, and rising incidents of racism and xenophobia. So much of this was captured recently in the failed insurrection in Washington DC. We are facing, as the anti-racist activist Errin Haines described in a Tweet, a pandemic within a pandemic.

On top of this, as a human species we are increasingly disconnected from the planetary ecosystem that sustains our life. We are now living in what scientists describe as the

Anthropocene, a new era where the actions of human beings threaten the future of entire species, including our own.

In his official teachings, especially *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis offers some helpful perspectives in laying out an integral vision, or an integral ecology. This vision draws heavily on the post-conciliar insights of our beloved Saint Paul VI on integral human development. What is needed, as Francis points out, is a new way, a new paradigm for how to relate to our planet and to other people.

To paraphrase Pope Paul's *Octogesima Adveniens*, a good vision by itself, however, is useless unless it is accompanied by a renewed sense of "personal responsibility and by effective action"ⁱ In other words, faith, as St. James wrote 2,000 years ago, without action, is dead. If this is true, if we are called to action in this moment, then what is the role and responsibility of lay Catholic communities like MEIC and Pax Romana in building this integral ecology? In this brief paper, I will try to respond to this question in two parts. Part one will briefly lay out Francis's vision for an integral ecology and highlight the connections between some of his major writings. Part two will then unpack what this all means for lay Catholic movements, like Pax Romana.

Towards an Integral Ecology

In July of 2013, just a few weeks after being elected pope, Pope Francis made his first official visit outside of Rome to the island of Lampedusa. This son of Italian immigrants was deeply moved by the experience of migrants in the Mediterranean. In his homily on Lampedusa, Francis speaks for the first time of the "globalization of indifference."ⁱⁱ Our worldwide community may be more interconnected, he argued, but that does not mean we have formed a sense of true fraternity. Using the biblical story of Cain and Abel, Francis emphasized our

responsibility to care for each other across borders. As children of the one creator God, we are all brothers and sisters. The pope develops these themes of indifference and fraternity a few months later in *Evangelii Gaudium* and his first three World Day of Peace Messages.

With *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis uses the Cantic of Creation prayer by Saint Francis to creatively extend our fraternal obligation to also include creation, sister earth. In the face of a “tyrannical anthropocentrism unconcerned for other creatures” Francis proposes an integral ecology, a new approach that looks to the flourishing and common good of all of creation, including future generations.ⁱⁱⁱ This approach takes seriously the multifaceted relationships of people with our creator God, with other people, with the world around us, and with our deeper selves. We are, as Francis insists, part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it.^{iv} This integral approach to ecology, much like Pope Paul VI’s integral approach to development, stands in contrast to the indifference and sinful self-referentiality that marks so much of the dominant culture.^v

In his latest encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, Francis returns back to the question of our relationship with each other. While he does not explicitly reference integral ecology in the text, *Fratelli Tutti* approaches human relationships in an ecological key. As we seek the development of the whole person and all people, we must recognize that we are all interconnected.

Instead of Cain and Abel, Francis uses the Parable of the Good Samaritan to affirm the universality of human fraternity and the challenge of working for integral human development across borders. The Jesuit spiritual writer, James Martin, SJ, made a useful connection in a tweet saying, “If the message of #Laudato Si was ‘Everything is connected,’ the message of #Fratelli Tutti is ‘Everyone is connected.’”

This approach, of course, offers new perspectives on the many artificially constructed borders that divide the human family. As Francis teaches, Jesus' parable summons us to rediscover our vocation as citizens of our respective nations and of the entire world, builders of a new social bonds... the Good Samaritan showed that 'the existence of each and every individual is deeply tied to that of others: life is not simply time that passes; life is a time for interactions.'^{vi}

II. Bold Cultural Revolution

But what does this integral vision mean for us as Pax Romana, including MEIC? What does an integral ecology mean when so many new borders and divisions are emerging? With both *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti*, Francis offers some guidance. Following the see, judge, act method, both texts include calls to action. Francis is clearly aware that this shift toward an integral ecology is not easy. In *Laudato Si'* Francis calls for a bold cultural revolution, which necessitates changes in the ways we relate to technology, culture, consumer goods, the earth, and each other.^{vii}

A few months after promulgating *Laudato Si'*, Francis is a blunter in his call for change in a meeting with popular movements in Bolivia:

Let us not be afraid to say it: we want change, real change, structural change. This system is by now intolerable... We want change in our lives, in our neighborhoods, in our everyday reality. We want a change which can affect the entire world, since global interdependence calls for global answers to local problems.^{viii}

How do we do bring about this change? How do we get a better sense of our interrelationships? *Laudato Si'* speaks of conversion at least two different levels.

A. Personal Conversion: The first level is at the personal level. *A true integral ecology demands personal conversion and changes in lifestyles.* Chapter Six of *Laudato Si'*, for instance, highlights the power of education and spirituality in promoting an environmental responsibility. Small actions, from car-pooling to turning of unnecessary lights, Francis teaches, can be “acts of love.”^{ix} Similarly, in *Fratelli Tutti*, Francis wants people, especially Christians, to be formed in a sense of responsibility to the other. Not in an abstract way, but in a way that foster real relationships between people. “Our relationships, he says, “if healthy and authentic, open us to others who expand and enrich us.”^x Authentic love calls us to go out beyond our small circles and to cultivate a “a social friendship that excludes no one and a fraternity that is open to all.”^{xi}

Such personal conversion is not easy. Experience shows that communities play a critical role in helping individuals to learn about what changes are needed and in supporting them as they undertake such a process. For Pax Romana, many of our member affiliates, like MEIC, consist of communities of Catholics who share life and find ways to support each other as we seek to witness to the Gospel in this divided world. If we are truly going to inspire lay Catholics to a deeper personal conversion or even if we are going to simply educate them better on the church’s social tradition, parish structures, by themselves, are not enough. We need other forms of communities to support each other.

But communities also need the support of other communities at the national and international level. Such relationships and programs, like this very assembly, can help us go beyond the temptations to self referentiality and the comfort bubbles that usually serve to reinforce the status quo. This moment should challenge all members and groups associated with Pax Romana, including MEIC to think how we can renew the missionary spirituality that the

pope affirms in *Evangelii Gaudium*.^{xii} How can we not only strengthen our existing communities but work to build new ones and support others on our common path to an integral ecology?

B. Political Conversion: While necessary, changes in individual lifestyles by themselves are insufficient to address the real threats facing people and planet today. *A true integral ecology demands structural and political conversion.* Consider climate change. While individual choices, like recycling, do matter, they do not account for the bulk of the carbon emissions. To truly address climate change we urgently need, as *Laudato Si'* affirms, “Enforceable international agreements” and new changes how we approach technology, the economy and politics.^{xiii} In *Fratelli Tutti*, Francis calls for a renewed approach to “politics which is far-sighted and capable of a new, integral and interdisciplinary approach to handling the different aspects of the crisis.”^{xiv}

To focus on only individual choices and personal responsibility can be a distraction that easily benefits those in power. One could feel very good about the ways they recycle their own garbage yet overlook the way their lifestyle and political inaction reinforces the wider system. We can also see this with racism in the United States. Here, for example, it is common for white people to claim that racism is a question of personal responsibility and thus not an issue that demands policy change. What they fail to admit are the many ways in which the structures of the society uphold racial disparities. Until these sinful structures that impact our housing, healthcare and educational systems are changed and some effort of reparations are made, no amount of changes of hearts will be sufficient.

Here too, global Catholic communities like Pax Romana can play a role in facilitating reflection on new models and on advocating for change in places like the United Nations and Council of Europe. In *Laudato Si'*, Francis puts it this way:

“Isolated individuals can lose their ability and freedom to escape the utilitarian mindset, and end up prey to an unethical consumerism bereft of social or ecological awareness. Social problems must be addressed by community networks and not simply by the sum of individual good deeds.”^{xv}

In short, we cannot solve the problems alone. We need to organize in national and international networks. This type of networking and support across borders has been at the heart of the Pax Romana vision since our foundation a century ago in 1921. We are continuing it today with a series of dialogues on crisis of democracy. Already this year we have organized online forums on democracy with inputs from lay Catholic leaders Hong Kong, Italy, the United States, and Myanmar, to name a few places. In the coming months, we hope to deepen these dialogues to go deeper and we welcome all MEIC members.

C. Ecclesial Conversion: In addition to the personal and political, we can also see a third area for change in the writings of Pope Francis and this is the ecclesial space. *A true integral ecology, I would argue, also demands a corresponding integral ecclesiology.* Like an integral ecology, an integral ecclesiology would be holistic and encompassing. It would recognize the varied connections and relationships that make up the church. An integral ecclesiology would view the church through an ecological lens. This would help us to better see the church as a community of the baptized with varied and complex social relationships internally and externally, rather than only as a institution centered around the power of ordained men.

Such an ecclesiological lens stands in contrast to both the clerical and consumeristic models of the church which seek to pacify the voices and roles of lay people. This may be what

Francis is getting at with his proposals for synodality. Recent experiments in Australia, Germany, and soon in Ireland highlight some interesting possibilities but also some serious questions. How will the voices of lay people be heard? Are they really representative or are they only reflective of a small sector of the church? More critically perhaps, what are the structures of synodality in place to ensure that Francis's vision of a "listening church" can be developed at all levels of the church.

Such questions are not new for us. As Pax Romana we have been advocating for more structures of lay participation in church decision making since Vittorio Veronese, then vice president of ICMICA, called for the World Congress of the Lay Apostolate in the 1950s.

Instead of a traditional in-person Assembly, as we had planned, Pax Romana is launching a synodalal path for us as a movement. What we are hoping is that rather than five days of meetings, we will begin a process of listening. Listening to the experiences of Catholic professionals and intellectuals, of you, our members, over the course of the next six months. These reflections will culminate in a series of online meeting meetings from September to December. Listening and being open to where the Holy Spirit is calling us as a global lay movement, I hope, will help to direct us on how to better bring about an integrated ecclesiology.

Conclusion

As a global institution, the Roman Catholic church has an enormous potential to transform our broken ecology of indifference into a just and thriving integral ecology. Unfortunately, in many places the church seems unaware or unwilling to take up the challenge offered by Francis to build an integral ecology.

Herein lies the responsibility of movements like Pax Romana, including MEIC.

Movements like ours, I believe, have a real opportunity and responsibility to work together to promote this new vision of integral ecology and to support individual lay Catholics and local communities in bringing about new models for our church and society. As Pope Francis affirmed in 2015, “the future of humanity does not lie solely in the hands of great leaders, the great powers and the elites. It is fundamentally in the hands of peoples and in their ability to organize.” Given all of our privileges as Catholic professionals and intellectuals, are we truly willing to take up the apostolic challenge of organizing a new model? Are we really willing to support each other in this journey ahead?

ⁱ Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1971), no. 48, www.vatican.va.

ⁱⁱ Pope Francis, *Visit to Lampedusa: Homily of Holy Father Francis* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), www.vatican.va.

ⁱⁱⁱ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si', On Care for Our Common Home* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), no. 68, www.vatican.va.

^{iv} Pope Francis, 139.

^v Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1967), www.vatican.va.

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- ^{vi} Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti, On Fraternity and Social Friendship* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020), nos. 66-67, www.vatican.va.
- ^{vii} Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, no. 114.
- ^{viii} Pope Francis's Address to Popular Movements, 9 July 2015.
- ^{ix} Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, no. 211.
- ^x Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 89.
- ^{xi} Pope Francis, no. 94.
- ^{xii} Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), www.vatican.va.
- ^{xiii} Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, no. 173.
- ^{xiv} Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 117.
- ^{xv} Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, no. 219.