



Connection, Disconnection, Reconnection: The Radical Vision of Laudato Si'

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This gathering asks participants to reflect upon those aspects of Pope Francis' encyclical Laudato Si' that seem most relevant to COP22 and beyond.[2] In this contribution, I will focus on the theme of interconnectedness, a theme that pervades the entire encyclical.

In this context, I would like to explore three key points:

- Laudato Si' posits a deep **connection** between human beings among themselves and with the created world, and these connections give rise to ethical responsibility.
- Yet the prevailing ideologies of the modern world instead emphasize a radical **disconnection** among people and between humanity and creation.
- Solving the grave problems that face us, then, will require a **reconnection**, which in turn calls for conversion at both individual and institutional level.

Connection

Connections between people and nature

"Everything is connected" is a common refrain of Laudato Si'. These connections are deep and mysterious, even extending between time and space, and between atoms and subatomic particles. At some fundamental level, the encyclical stresses, all living reality is part of a complex physical, chemical, and biological network, and human beings are embedded in this network, including by sharing a huge chunk of their genetic code with other living beings. As a result, nature is not simply "a mere setting in which we live." Rather, "we are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it" (LS 139). This is expressed in the theological idea of "integral ecology"—the notion that the relationship between human beings and the natural world is interconnected, inseparable, and part of a larger whole.

In turn, this has profound implications for human activity. It means that when we disrespect or disregard the natural balance, we end up disturbing the social balance too.

Nowhere is this more evident than with the delicate balance of the earth's core systems. As scientists tell us, human flourishing over the past 10,000 years was made possible by the ideal conditions prevailing in the geological epoch known as the Holocene. During this "long summer", a remarkably stable climate plus predictable natural cycles of biology, geology, and chemistry created the conditions for the rise of civilization in China, the Fertile Crescent, and the Indus Valley. The earth's ecosystems and their webs of life sustained and supported human life.

Yet this stability is now in peril, because we are disrespecting nature's harmonious balance. Because of the scale of human activity, we are bumping up against some vital "planetary boundaries" that threaten this balance. [3] This is the scientific background to Pope Francis' claim that we are doing irreparable harm to our common home. These boundaries include climate change; ocean acidification; overuse of freshwater resources; land-use changes; interference with the nitrogen and phosphorous cycles (caused mainly by fertilizers); ozone depletion; chemical pollution; airborne pollution from burning fossil fuels; and a rapid loss of biodiversity.

Scientists tell us that these boundaries demarcate the "safe operating space" of the Holocene. When breached, the stable relationships that characterized the earth's systems over the past 10,000 years can no longer be assumed. Instead, we should expect abrupt and unpredictable effects. And we should expect interconnections to work against us rather than for us, given the planetary boundaries are—unsurprisingly—deeply interconnected.

This is a stark reminder of integral ecology in action. It demonstrates that when we do harm to nature, we also do harm to human beings, especially the poor. As noted by Laudato Si', the poor are climate change's cannon fodder—they will feel the worst effects from ever more severe floods, droughts, and other natural disasters. This

is because they live in areas most affected by climate change, rely on livelihoods most vulnerable to climate change, and lack the resources and support systems to cope with such disruption. Laudato Si' warns about the effect on the poor from rampant pollution, water stress, deforestation, the depletion of fishing reserves, and the destruction of ecosystems and the loss of biodiversity.

Connections among people

There is another aspect to connectivity that is perhaps less obvious in Laudato Si', but nevertheless runs through it—the natural bonds that exist between human beings. This is the old idea—taught by philosophers like Aristotle in the west and Confucius in the east—that we are social animals, finding fulfillment primarily in the social context. And indeed, modern scientific evidence affirms the basic intuition of this ancient idea, tying human flourishing to such factors as the quality of relationships and sense of purpose.[4] For example, happiness studies point to the deeply relational nature of human beings, showing that social engagement and support is a primary determinant of well-being.[5] And the “positive psychology” movement links flourishing to such factors as relationships, engagement, meaning and purpose, and accomplishments and achievements. [6] In other words, the life of an individual only really makes sense in the context of its relationship to the broader community.

An even deeper insight is that as social animals, human beings are endowed with strong pro-social inclinations such as altruism and fairness. Studies point to strong social norms of reciprocity, whereby people reward trust and kindness and punish cheating and callousness—even at a personal cost to themselves. They find that human beings are wired to seek cooperation for mutual benefit—this can often entail an element of sacrifice for the common good, trusting that such a gesture will be rewarded. In this way, social capital is generated and nurtured. Biologists tell us that these instincts come down to us as an inheritance of evolution. One popular theory is that, in the process of evolution, groups exceling at cooperating and upholding moral norms gained an advantage over other groups.[7] The implication is that we are not only social animals, but also moral animals.

And just as an environmental crisis severs the bonds between humanity and creation, a related social crisis breaks the bonds of community. Just as our human activity is crossing the planetary boundaries, it is also bumping up against the “boundaries of exclusion.” This is most evident in a pattern of economic development whereby great plenty co-exists with great poverty and deprivation. While global economic activity continues to expand rapidly, about 800 million people still live in extreme poverty, and an equivalent number of people are undernourished. According to Oxfam, a mere 62 people now own as much wealth as half of the world's population. And there is enormous deprivation in health, education, sanitation, land, housing, and energy access.

In this context, Laudato Si' gives special attention to the issue of employment. The ILO estimates that about 200 million people are unemployed, including about 70 million young people. And social scientists tell us that prolonged unemployment has pernicious social consequences—it leads to worse health, lower educational attainment for children, and an overall decline in trust and social cohesion.[8] This is because dignified work forms a core dimension of human flourishing. In the words of Pope Francis, “work is a necessity, part of the meaning of life on this earth, a path to growth, human development and personal fulfillment” (LS 128).

Tying this all together, Laudato Si' argues that the pattern of economic development over the past few centuries has proven to be, in a very real sense, self-defeating. For sure, it has brought great material advances and improvements in the quality of life. But by riding roughshod over the innate human capacity to act with fairness and unite in common purpose, it has also led to all kinds of social dysfunctions—including violence, social breakdown, criminality, drug use, and a loss of identity. It has led, in the words of Pope Francis, to “the silent rupture of the bonds of integration and social cohesion” (LS 46).

Ethical responsibility

At the heart of Laudato Si' is the idea that the connections animating integral ecology—between people and creation and among people themselves—give rise to ethical responsibility. It is therefore essential to respect these relationships, or to—in the words of Pope Francis—“hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” (LS 49).

It follows from this that both the poor and the environment have rights that must be respected. The rights of the poor, and indeed all human rights, stem from the innate dignity and worth of every human being knitted together by social and relational bonds. This gives rise to the imperative for integral human development—the development of the whole person and each person. This is an all-encompassing idea, summoning people to self-actualization across all dimensions of life—economic, social, political, emotional, intellectual, aesthetic, and religious. It is predicated on the agency and dignity of each person, and it insists that the requirements for universal human flourishing should be met—which goes far beyond material or economic advancement. And since as social animals, people can only really only flourish in the relational context, integral human

development does not permit the exclusion of any individual or group. This principle has been developed in the context of Catholic social teaching, but it has direct analogues in the other major religious and ethical traditions.

In a speech in Bolivia shortly after *Laudato Si'* was released, Pope Francis expressed this idea in terms of the ability to “live well”, so that all people are able to “find meaning, a destiny, and to live with dignity.” In other words, it is about a social life that coheres with the true nature of the human being. This in turn has implications for what is owed to the poor and excluded, the people most likely to have their paths to flourishing blocked. In that same speech, therefore, Pope Francis gave a full-throated defense of the rights of the poor: “Working for a just distribution of the fruits of the earth and human labor is not mere philanthropy,” he said, “it is a moral obligation...It is about giving to the poor and to peoples what is theirs by right.”[9]

And what of the rights of the environment? This was actually enunciated by Pope Francis a few months after the release of *Laudato Si'*, in the context of a major speech to the United Nations. Pope Francis argued that the environment had rights for two reasons. The first reason relates to the connectivity that motivates integral ecology—because human beings are part of nature and inseparable from it, harming nature harms human beings. The second reason is analogous to human dignity—the environment has rights because “every creature, particularly a living creature, has an intrinsic value, in its existence, its life, its beauty and its interdependence with other creatures.”[10] This is also a theme that gets heavy play in *Laudato Si'*—Pope Francis argues that each creature, as a reflection of God’s love, has worth in its own right, independently of human beings. Therefore nature must be respected—for its own sake and for our sake.

Disconnection

So far, I have argued that human beings are deeply connected both to nature and each other, and that human well-being depends on these connections being tended and respected. But as *Laudato Si'* notes, the connections have in fact become frayed. The pattern of economic activity over the past few centuries has provoked rupture and disconnection. In this section, I will reflect on the sources of this disconnection.

The diagnosis of Laudato Si'

Laudato Si' pins the blame for this disconnection on what it calls the “technocratic paradigm.” This paradigm, so dominant in our modern global economy, invites people to think of all economic intervention in terms of utility, productivity, and efficiency—negating any inherent dignity or value either in the human person or in creation. It exalts the idea of managerial competence, predicated on the assumption that financial and technical expertise can solve all problems. In doing so, it sets aside the questions that used to task philosophers—questions related to the ultimate purpose or end of economic life. Instead of deliberating on the ends, it focuses narrowly on the means—or more accurately, it turns the means into the ends.

This technocratic paradigm dominates both politics and economics. It leads politicians to discount deeper questions related to collective purpose. It leads economists to brush aside ethical and other “normative” concerns based on the pretense that their discipline is value-neutral. This in turn justifies a narrow focus on efficiency and economic growth, paying no heed to the limits of, or fallout from, such a strategy—even though, as *Laudato Si'* suggests, the growth fetish is too often “based on the lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth’s goods” (LS 106). And the technocratic paradigm leads businesses and financiers to believe that their only goal is to maximize profits, squeezing out as much financial value as possible, while paying no heed whatsoever to any deeper notions of value.

This mentality prompts Pope Francis to conclude that “immense technological development has not been accompanied by a development in human responsibility, values and conscience” (LS 105). In essence, he is claiming that the technocratic paradigm dulls moral sentiments. It is an inherently confrontational vision, rejecting values such as care, compassion, and cooperation for an ethos of “possession, mastery and transformation” (LS 106). It looks upon creation as an external object to be manipulated and controlled, with no concern for its inherent value or limits—because the only “value” it acknowledges is monetary value. This leads to what Pope Francis terms “modern anthropocentrism”, predicated on a Promethean vision of mastery whereby human beings misunderstand their relationship to creation and their fellow human beings, thus causing them to “act against themselves” (LS 115). In other words, the technocratic paradigm sunders the connections that allow for harmonious human flourishing.

Delving even deeper, *Laudato Si'* argues that the technocratic paradigm in conjunction with its cult of unlimited human power gives rise to “a relativism which sees everything as irrelevant unless it serves one’s own immediate interests” (LS 122). This mentality gives absolute priority to immediate convenience, driving people to treat their fellow human beings—and indeed all of creation—as mere objects to be taken advantage of. It elevates self-centeredness and self-absorption as the guiding principles of human activity. It is a natural partner for the modern cult of individualism, which Pope Francis links to a “self-centered culture of instant gratification”—which he regards as the root cause of so many social problems (LS 162).

This relativism has many practical manifestations in today's world. *Laudato Si'* lists some of them: forced labor, modern forms of slavery, abortion, the sexual exploitation of children, the abandonment of the elderly, human trafficking, the sale of organs, organized crime, the drug trade, and commerce in blood diamonds and endangered species. These might seem like extreme cases, but this same mindset is active in more mundane situations too. We see it, for example, in the "disordered desire to consume more than what is really necessary" (LS 123). We see it in the mindset of those who put their full faith in "invisible forces of the market", regarding any harm done to society and to nature as acceptable collateral damage (LS 123). And we see it in the activities of powerful multinational companies that treat the environment in developing countries in a way they would never treat their own homes (LS 51). Once again, this is all connected and rooted in the same relativism.

All of this leads to one of Pope Francis' signature diagnoses—the throwaway culture, in which both people and things are used to satisfy gratification and discarded when they serve no further use. The throwaway culture gives rise to the ultimate economy of exclusion, to which Pope Francis gives a stinging rebuke: "those excluded are no longer society's underside or its fringes or its disenfranchised – they are no longer even a part of it. The excluded are not the 'exploited' but the outcast, the 'leftovers'" (EG 53). And the same throwaway culture leads us to turn the environment into "debris, desolation and filth" (LS 161).

The Enlightenment mindset

The question remains: where do these attitudes and mindsets come from? If it is true that the bonds among people and between people and the environment are natural and harmonious, then how did we go so wrong? *Laudato Si'* hints at the answer when it points toward the "myths of a modernity grounded in a utilitarian mindset"—which it lists as individualism, unlimited progress, competition, consumerism, and the unregulated market (LS 210).

The emphasis on modernity directs us to the sweeping changes that took place with the Enlightenment. Before the Enlightenment, most political philosophies were predicated on some notion of the common good, understood as the good arising from a shared social life that is not divisible into the sum of individual goods. For philosophers such as Aristotle, the social nature of the human being means that this is the highest good, while Confucius arrived at similar conclusions, regarding fulfillment as a public rather than a private pursuit.

This changed with the Enlightenment. The community was no longer seen as a body composed of connected parts that worked in harmony toward a greater good. Instead, people were regarded as radically disconnected from each other. The idea of the common good withered away, leaving only individuals with individual purposes directed by human power.

Breaking it down further, the Enlightenment was built upon two pillars.[11] The first is the emphasis on using science to gain knowledge and control over the natural world—and in doing so, achieve progress and better the lives of people. The second is the shift to the autonomous individual, where individual freedom is exalted for its own sake rather than directed toward the common good. These positions, for example, can be found in the thought of René Descartes, one of the fathers of modernity. So when *Laudato Si'* takes aim at the anthropocentrism that flows from the technocratic paradigm, or at the ethos of individualism, it is really taking aim at a mindset honed by the Enlightenment.

In a very real sense, this mindset has dominated western political philosophy over the past few centuries, influencing leading thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Karl Marx, Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, John Rawls, and the modern libertarians. And as the twentieth century progressed, the process of globalization was also accompanied by a form of intellectual globalization—such concepts of the person and society became the default option across the globe.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the triumph of neoclassical economics. This has become so ingrained that its assumptions are hardly ever questioned.

Yet they should be questioned. Neoclassical economics is founded on an ethic of egoism, assuming that individuals are motivated by self-interest rather than any altruistic or pro-social tendencies. From this starting position, individuals are assumed to maximize the satisfaction of subjective material preferences. These preferences are "material" in the sense that satisfaction comes simply from consumer goods and services. No value is given to the quality of human relationships, to meaning or purpose in life, to appreciation of nature, or to any development in a non-material dimension. And preferences are "subjective" in the sense that they are not open to scrutiny—any questions regarding their value or worth is prohibited under the assumption that people are free to choose their own desires. Accordingly, and at odds with the ancient Aristotelian and Confucian virtue traditions, there is no role whatsoever for self-improvement and ethical formation. Human flourishing, in its traditional sense, no longer has any meaning.

It is these assumptions that underpin the supposed virtues of free markets in neoclassical economics. In this framework, the market is praiseworthy to the extent that it exhausts all voluntary trades that can satisfy subjective material preferences. At the same time, firms are also supposed to be motivated by self-interest to maximize profits. Tying it all together, the invisible hand of the market is held to guide everyone to the best possible outcome—whereby self-interest is transformed into social virtue and the conflict inherent in competition transcends cooperation. It goes without saying that getting to this result involves a host of heroic assumptions that never occur in practice.

When we break it down like this, Pope Francis' critique of market ideology starts to make eminent sense. His criticism centers not so much on the market itself—which in its essence is merely a means for people to exchange for mutual benefit—but on this ideological baggage that weighs it down. Thus he condemns not the market but a “deified market” (LS 56) or a “magical conception of the market” (LS 190). He rejects the assumption that self-interest serves the common good, seeing instead a “seedbed for collective selfishness” (LS 204). And he explicitly rejects the lofty claims of market ideology: “In this context, some people continue to defend trickle-down theories which assume that economic growth, encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and inclusiveness in the world. This opinion, which has never been confirmed by the facts, expresses a crude and naïve trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power and in the sacralized workings of the prevailing economic system. Meanwhile, the excluded are still waiting” (EG 54).

Fundamentally, this ideology blinds people to the reality that the market alone—guided only by the ideology of profit and possession, and cut loose from ethical principles—does not facilitate human flourishing or integral human development. It cannot solve the crucial problems of social inclusion and environmental sustainability. It can indeed create wealth, but it can also create exclusion and do immense harm to the rhythms of nature, biodiversity and the viability of ecosystems.

Yet the damage actually runs even deeper, as this market ideology can actively encourage the inculcation of harmful habits. Putting it simply, if the message sent by society is that traits such as selfishness, greed, and materialism are to be valued, then people will take the cue and start valuing them—even if at some deep level these values do not cohere with the truth about human nature. As Pope Francis puts it, “Almost without being aware of it, we end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people's pain, and feeling a need to help them, as though all this were someone else's responsibility and not our own...the culture of prosperity deadens us” (EG 54).

The problem is that social norms turn out to be highly malleable. There is plenty of evidence for this in the context of these market values. For example, evidence suggests that economists and students of economics are more selfish and less pro-social.[12] Evidence suggests that richer people tend to behave less generously, display less empathy, and are more likely to lie or cheat—because they have internalized the idea that self-interest and greed are acceptable, even virtuous.[13] And evidence suggests that bankers are more likely to act dishonestly when they think of themselves as bankers than when they are inhabiting other social roles.[14]

More generally, while people—as social animals—might be naturally inclined to civic virtue and cooperation, this tends to be fragile and prone to manipulation. The intrinsic desire to uphold these kinds of social norms needs to be habituated because, alas, they can easily be undermined by the encroachment of market values. [15] For while *homo economicus*—the person as conceived by neoclassical economics—might be alien to human nature, he can nonetheless feed parasitically off of it.

Solidarity and the common good

Where does this leave us? It leaves us with Pope Francis's forceful condemnation of modern market/technocratic ideology: “Let us say NO to an economy of exclusion and inequality, where money rules, rather than serves. That economy kills. That economy excludes. That economy destroys Mother Earth”.[16]

The solution clearly involves a re-embrace of the common good in the context of the modern market economy. Pope Francis follows the modern Catholic definition of the common good from the Second Vatican Council: the “sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment.” For Pope Francis, this is the “central and unifying principle of social ethics” (LS 156). The common good presupposes the participation and inclusion of all. It seeks to lay down the preconditions for human flourishing, to promote integral human development so that all can “live well” through a life of meaning, purpose, and dignity.

It follows that the common good entails “a summons to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters” (LS 158). Solidarity is the glue that holds the common good together—its role is akin to that of self-interest in neoclassical economics. But solidarity, defined as the idea that all are responsible for

all, is actually the opposite of self-interest—and it is more in accord with the pro-social inclinations of human nature. This moral imperative extends especially to the people most excluded from the common good—in the words of Pope Francis, solidarity “must be lived as the decision to restore to the poor what belongs to them” (EG 189). And an increasingly interdependent world where economic, social, and environmental problems do not respect national borders, this solidarity must have a global dimension. Without such solidarity, globalization becomes—in the prophetic words of Pope Francis—a “globalization of indifference.”

Laudato Si’ also argues that solidarity should extend across time as well as space, to encompass future generations. This is because, once again, everything is connected—since creation is a common inheritance of all, those who have not yet been born have a claim upon it. Just as solidarity compels us to respect the rights of today’s poor, it compels us to respect the rights of tomorrow’s poor. And it also compels us to respect the rights of the environment, given the deep interconnections between the health of the planet and the health of society and the fact that all creatures have their own inherent value.

All in all, solidarity is the correct response to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor, and solidarity embodies connectedness.

Reconnection

If disconnection between human beings among themselves and with nature lies at the source of the inter-related social and environmental crises, then surely the solution involves reconnection. Sure enough, Laudato Si’ calls for the restoration of the “various levels of ecological equilibrium, establishing harmony within ourselves, with others, with nature and other living creatures, and with God” (LS 210). On the one hand, reconnection entails recognition of “a loving awareness that we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures, but joined in a splendid universal communion” (LS 220). And at the same time, “we cannot presume to heal our relationship with nature and the environment without healing all fundamental human relationships” (LS 119).

As I argued above, consistent with the diagnosis of Laudato Si’, such reconnection will require a renewed orientation toward the common good brought about by the habituation of the virtue of solidarity. But how can this take place? What kinds of changes will it entail? This is the topic for this third and final section.

Even though I argued above—again, consistent with Laudato Si’—that the source of much of the dysfunction can be traced to the Enlightenment mentality, it is fruitless to begin by simply rejecting the Enlightenment project. This shapes our modern world, for good or for ill. And a lot of it is for good—we must be honest about its achievements. Its scientific and technological advances have brought enormous improvements in human health and well-being. And the turn to the individual paved the way for the slow-but-steady advance of human rights, forcing the adherents of the older common good traditions to admit that they had sometimes suppressed the dignity of the individual in favor of the collective.

Similarly, rejecting the modern market economy is equally fruitless and unwise. The market can be a locus for genuine cooperation and reciprocity, meeting real human needs and strengthening social capital. It is vastly superior to the forms of brutal collectivism that unfortunately held sway over too much of the world during the twentieth century. But the market needs to be restrained by moral boundaries. It needs to be humanized and civilized, seasoned more by solidarity and less by self-interest, oriented more toward human flourishing than the accumulation of wealth and possession of material goods.

A new type of progress

In this context, Laudato Si’ calls for a broader and more holistic vision of progress, one that escapes the restrictive confines of the technocratic paradigm and the cult of individualism. It stresses that “a technological and economic development which does not leave in its wake a better world and an integrally higher quality of life cannot be considered progress” (LS 194). Instead, it calls for a concept of progress that is “healthier, more human, more social, more integral” (LS 112).

What does this mean in practice? What Laudato Si’ calls for is integral and sustainable human development. Integral human development, as we have seen, is predicated on the flourishing of all. It embodies a profound sense of solidarity oriented toward the common good.

In turn, this is closely related to the more popular notion of sustainable development, which rests on three pillars: the economic pillar, calling for rising living standards and the elimination of poverty; the social pillar, calling for the inclusion of all and an end to deprivation; and the environmental pillar, calling for a sustainable use of the earth’s resources, including by combating climate change and protecting the web of life. In the context of policy, it is the best roadmap to reconnection and the best way to uphold the rights of the poor and the rights of the environment. This is why Laudato Si’ urges “an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature” (LS 139).

If the answer is sustainable development, then the world has already chosen it. In 2015, the nations of the world endorsed the Sustainable Development Goals as a policy roadmap for the next decade and a half; and they signed the Paris Agreement on climate change, which commits them to peaking greenhouse gas emissions as soon as possible, and moving to (net) zero emissions in the second half of the century. Yet now that the ink is dry, attention must shift from aspiration to implementation—and this is where the daunting scale of the challenges become manifest.

Many devotees of sustainable development assume that all problems can be solved with the right type of technology and the right amount of resources. But this is wishful thinking. It is simply the same old technocratic paradigm dressed up in new clothes. If, as I have been arguing, the problems spring from misguided mindsets, flawed values, and corrupted norms of behavior, then we need change that is deeper and more transformative.

Laudato Si' states this well: "Many things have to change course, but it is we human beings above all who need to change. We lack an awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone. This basic awareness would enable the development of new convictions, attitudes and forms of life" (LS 202).

This will enable us to change the way we look at the world, so that we can "recover the values and the great goals swept away by our unrestrained delusions of grandeur" (LS 114).

Individual and institutional conversion

Laudato Si' is ultimately urging a conversion toward a new type of lifestyle, and conversion is always predicated on a change in values. But this presents difficulties for us moderns. In perhaps the most trenchant modern critique of the Enlightenment project, the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre argued that it contains within in an inbuilt coding error, a bug in the system. This is because, in its different manifestations, the Enlightenment project views human nature as it is, rather than as it could be. In contrast, the pre-Enlightenment moral tradition was founded on the need to "correct, improve, and educate" human nature through the exercise of the virtues. [17]

This means that the kind of conversion called for by Laudato Si' will require recovering elements of this older tradition. Different varieties of this "virtue ethics" tradition arose organically in different cultures. In the west, the Aristotelian variant holds that exercising the virtues in accord with excellence is a prerequisite for human flourishing. In the east, we can find a similar emphasis on self-improvement in a way that builds up the common good and is in turn supported by it. Confucius, for example, urged his followers to reject greed and self-centeredness by cultivating the virtue of *ren*, typically translated as benevolence. This idea of self-cultivation is also an essential element of the Buddhist tradition.

More generally, the world's major religions tend to be rooted in their own particular version of a "virtue ethics", giving rise to a moral imperative to develop personal and social virtues. Each of them expresses its own obligation, grounded in its own beliefs and traditions, to care for the earth and nourish the common good. Certainly in the context of Christianity, Pope Francis argues that "living our vocation to be protectors of God's handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience" (LS 217). Most other religions would take a similar position.

For each of these "virtue ethics" traditions, a virtue is quite simply a habit that can only be perfected by practice. A key point is that virtue can be infectious—the good habits of one person can encourage good habits in others, which can in turn mold better social norms. This is what lies behind the call in Laudato Si for a new "ecological citizenship" infused with virtues designed to reconnect us to one another and to the earth—virtues such as solidarity with present and future generations. This is why Pope Francis argues that small gestures and limited daily actions can have significance—they allow people to live more fulfilled lives and they "call forth a goodness which, albeit unseen, inevitably tends to spread" (LS 212). And this is why he argues that without this kind of conversion and transformation, laws and regulations alone will not be sufficient to curb bad behavior (LS 211). It is why Laudato Si' puts such a premium on what it calls "ecological education", to inculcate these good habits.

Yet despite all of this, individual action by itself will not be enough. As Laudato Si' says, "self-improvement on the part of individuals will not by itself remedy the extremely complex situation facing our world today" (LS 219). The ability of uncoordinated individuals to solve collective problems is always limited, and this is especially true in the context of the modern globalized economy where power tends to be concentrated in corporate and bureaucratic structures.

What this means is that institutions must change as well as individuals, and that ecological conversion must also entail community conversion. But this immediately runs into hurdles. Under the sway of the technocratic paradigm, political and economic leaders focus instinctively on short-term economic growth and financial health rather than on longer-term sustainable development, and on narrow concepts of material progress and

consumerism rather than on wider notions of flourishing and integral human development. And politicians are reluctant to take bold steps to protect our common home, given the likelihood that change will provoke uncertainty and political backlash—especially since some individuals and groups are likely to lose out.

Aside from this fear of backlash, there is a more insidious force behind political paralysis—the power of vested interests. For example, vested interests are comfortable with spreading misinformation about the causes and effects of climate change, in an effort to sow confusion and prevent a consensus from emerging. *Laudato Si'* is especially critical of this stranglehold: “There are too many special interests,” it says, “and economic interests easily end up trumping the common good and manipulating information so that their own plans will not be affected” (LS 54). And it notes that “many of those who possess more resources and economic or political power seem mostly to be concerned with masking the problems or concealing their symptoms” (LS 26). And in too many countries of the world, corruption is a blight that poisons institutions—by causing virtuous social norms to wither and die.

Just as with politics, there are also major institutional impediments to changing behavior in the business world. Too often, thanks to the technocratic paradigm and the values of neoclassical economics, it is simply assumed that business has one function only—to maximize profits, typically equated with shareholder value. But this is self-defeating—it leads to a strategy that favors short-term recklessness over longer-term innovation, and it harms workers, communities, and the environment.[18] Fundamentally, it undermines virtue and contributes to the development of harmful social norms—the economist Luigi Zingales, for example, argues that the drop in ethical standards in the world of business and finance can be traced to the values inculcated by business schools.[19]

Not surprisingly, the Catholic social tradition has a very different approach to the role of business, starting from the premise that—just like the public sector—the private sector must also orient its activities to the common good. When it does so, says Pope Francis, business can be a “noble vocation” (LS 129). This implies that business must embrace a broader and wider sense of responsibility—including toward the environment and society at large. It must produce goods and services that meet real human needs. It must prioritize employment and wages over profits. And it must create wealth sustainably, including by limiting its environmental impact and deploying its creativity toward sustainable development solutions. This is the kind of conversion that is needed in the business world.

The role of civil society

How, then, can we persuade political and economic leaders to orient their activities toward the common good? How can we instill a greater sense of civic virtue and public responsibility among these actors? How can we get these institutions to adopt a different set of values, so that a more virtuous way of thinking becomes second nature?

This is perhaps the greatest challenge, and there are no easy answers. But perhaps the best hope lies with the community networks that form the bedrock of civil society. By providing a channel for the unlocking of civic virtue, civil society can help counteract the forces of inertia, indifference, and ideology that inhibit virtuous action in politics and economics. *Laudato Si'* endorses this strategy, urging civil society organizations to “draw public attention to these issues and offer critical cooperation, employing legitimate means of pressure” (LS 38).

What might this pressure entail? It could include organizing, advocating, and lobbying—especially to influence public opinion and hold politicians accountable for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement.

It could include an insistence on giving much higher priority to ethics and ethical training across the board, starting with children—and with a special focus on reforming the curricula of economics and business programs.

It could include deploying the “power of the wallet” to hold corporations accountable, based on the premise that every economic act has a moral consequence. Some argue that this kind of pressure can induce profit-maximizing companies to act more responsibly, leading to better social outcomes without the need for government intervention.[20] Pope Francis seems to agree. In *Laudato Si'*, he argues that consumer boycotts can change the way businesses operate, “forcing them to consider their environmental footprint and their patterns of production” (LS 206). These kinds of consumer boycotts have a good track record of success, as demonstrated by their role in the global anti-apartheid movement and the civil rights movement in the United States.

This logic can easily be extended to financial investment, by insisting that funds favor enterprises that respect human dignity, protect the environment, and prioritize sustainable development. One example of such a strategy, growing in popularity, is the fossil fuel divestment movement. Divestment is both a sound financial strategy and a sound moral strategy to aid the shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy. This is especially

important because the path laid out by the Paris Agreement implies that 80 percent of all oil, coal, and gas reserves—amounting to \$20 trillion of assets—must not come on line.[21] These are profits that the energy companies will not willingly part with—and yet they must.

In all of this, religious communities have a special role to play in providing leadership, role models, and positive reinforcement. This is because the world's religions have always been the most fruitful seedbeds for nurturing personal and social virtue, and they remain the most respected moral voices in many regions of the world. Even more, when the religions collaborate in common purpose, this can magnify their moral authority—and it can also deepen the religious commitment of each particular faith.

At the end of the day, this is not just about lobbying or “naming and shaming”. It is about promoting a revolution in values, a change in how we view the world and our role in it. And all “virtue ethics” traditions agree that this requires leadership, education, role models, positive reinforcement, a vigorous civil society, and quality public discourse and deliberation. It is an organic bottom-up approach to change, conversion—and reconnection.

Conclusion

In this submission, I have argued that the dominant theme of *Laudato Si'* is that of connection. Human flourishing is predicated on a respect for the bonds that bind people to one another and to creation; on a respect for the dignity of each person and the value of all created beings. Yet thanks to a disordered ideology and flawed mindset, these bonds have become frayed, and this disconnection lies at the source of our economic, social, and environmental crises.

Reconnection requires a new orientation, a conversion to the values that animate integral and sustainable development—chiefly a deep and broad notion of solidarity. This conversion must take place at the individual level, which is hard, and the institutional level, which is harder. Yet it is really the only viable solution to our collective problems.

Initiatives with shallow roots are bound to fail. And to make sure the roots run deep, we need to civilize and humanize our economic and social interactions. This is why Pope Francis calls for a “cultural revolution” that transforms our notion of progress and the way we look at the world. This is the true radical vision of *Laudato Si'*.

End Notes

[1] Email: aannett@ei.columbia.edu. I thank Robert Czerny for helpful comments.

[2] References to either *Laudato Si'* (LS) from 2015 or Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG) from 2013 will be made in the text by paragraph number. All other references will be footnoted.

[3] Johan Rockstrom and others, “A Safe Operating Space for Humanity,” *Nature* 461 (1999): 472-475.

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[5] See John Helliwell, Haifang Huang, and Shun Wang, “The Distribution of World Happiness,” in *World Happiness Report 2016 Update* (Vol. I), ed. John Helliwell, Richard Layard, and Jeffrey Sachs (New York: UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2016).

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- [20] Leonardo Becchetti, "Voting With the Wallet," (University of Rome, Tor Vergata, Working Paper No. 94, 2011).
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