

## Our Common Home belongs to all Generations

The defence of the weak members of society from the socio-political and economic forces which, in one way or another, have threatened their fundamental human rights, has been at the centre of the church's social teaching. The body of "social wisdom" on socio-economic, political, cultural and environmental matters which has developed in a rich fashion especially during the last one hundred years or so spells out the church's deep concern for "the joys and hopes, the sorrows and anxieties, of ... those who are poor or in any way oppressed."<sup>1</sup>

Christian social ethics is by no means a static collection of doctrinal social statements. Rather, it is a collection of social values and principles which are proactively applicable to the new challenges of the day. One may conclude that modern Christian social thought is characterised by three distinct perspectives. During the pre-conciliar era, the main concern of the church was how to resolve the conflict between advantaged and disadvantaged individuals or classes. Many workers and their families became poor, vulnerable and powerless as a result of the socio-economic and political structures created by the industrial revolution. Both Liberalism and Collectivism, as expressed in selfish capitalism and manifested in the theory of socialism, were vehemently criticized because they were an obstacle to the full and authentic development of the worker.

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<sup>1</sup> Vatican II, Pastoral Constitution, *The Church in the Modern World* (*Gaudium et Spes*), par. 1.

During the conciliar and early post-conciliar era, Christian social thought shifted towards an outlook that was more international or global. This shift was the result of the awareness of the interdependence and interconnectedness of all reality. The conflict between the developed and developing countries caused by the world economic order was the main concern of the Church during the sixties and seventies. In a shrinking world, everything is affected and everyone is responsible. It became unrealistic to speak simply of progress, without taking very seriously into account the limitations of natural and human resources, the ecological crises, the dangerous consequences of modern technology and the overgrowing difference in the standard of living between the rich and the poor countries. The pattern of development as it took shape after the industrial revolution has deprived whole nations from achieving an adequate standard of living. The Church pleaded for a new international economic order that does justice to the so-called underdeveloped nations which were powerless and vulnerable in a political and economic structure that advantaged and protected the already developed countries.

Since the early eighties, the Church's global outlook evolved to an intergenerational perspective. Without abandoning her concern for the integral development of the individual and her defence of the right of every poor country to development, the Church became more sensitive to the social problems resulting from the conflict of interests between advantaged and disadvantaged generations. During the last few decades, it became evident that solidarity must be shown not only with poor individuals or nations but also with unborn generations who are also poor and powerless in face of today's dominant technocratic paradigm and short-sighted political, economic and environmental planning and decisions. The Church's "preferential option for the poor" incorporates nowadays unborn generations who are disadvantaged and powerless in respect to present people since they are voiceless, "downstream" in time and vulnerable due to the long-term consequences of current myopic decisions and egotistical actions.

### **Solidarity with Future Generations**

Since post-conciliar years, the social teaching of the Church is characterised by an increasing sense of solidarity with generations yet to come. This was the result of a further development in environmental consciousness and conscientiousness which emerged in the late sixties. At that time it became increasingly evident that nothing exists in isolation. Everything affects everything else. Advances in technology and the pattern of development adopted by industrialised countries can have serious negative consequences not only on the global community but

also on generations yet to be born. Many began to realise that current political and socio-economic decisions can create future risks and burdens. In recent years, this social problem has become for the Church one of the most urgent “signs of our times” which demands immediate attention and action. In fact, many recent papal documents and speeches draw more and more the attention of all men and women of good will to examine their conscience on how they are using and sharing the goods of the earth and on their moral obligations to unborn generations.

Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si’* (*LS*), which “is now added to the body of the Church’s social teaching” (*LS*, 15), is a landmark document on intergenerational responsibilities. This encyclical, which elevates the theological status of the environmental issue to that of a new social issue, much as Leo XIII did for the industrial crisis with his encyclical *Rerum novarum* (1891),<sup>2</sup> is a strong appeal to “a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet” (*LS*, 14). The term “future” appears 29 times in the narrative of *LS*, including references extending the common good (*LS*, 159), solidarity (*LS*, 159), and rights (*LS*, 109) to future generations. By the term “future” Pope Francis does not mean the short-term future but the far-distant future which is called “the deep future” by Richard W. Miller.<sup>3</sup> He insists that the interface of scientific disciplines and moral values is a prerequisite for the broadening of the time horizon.<sup>4</sup> Miller rightly claims that “without opening up our imagination to the deep future, we will lack the capacity to grasp our deep responsibility.”<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis’ statement that “the effects of climate change will be felt for a long time to come” (*LS*, 170) is an unequivocal evidence of his deep concern for the long-term harmful consequences of the current short-sighted decisions and careless actions.

*LS*’s articulation concerning the future is sometimes equivocal and open to different understanding. Is Pope Francis referring to the short-term or long-term future? This can be evidenced by his reference to the major tropical forests that are vital “for the entire earth and for the future of humanity” (*LS*, 38). When *LS* refers to the future more specifically, it reverts back to this century: “if present trends continue, this century may well witness extraordinary climate change and

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<sup>2</sup> Pablo A. Blanco, “*LAUDATO SI’* Care for Creation at the Center of a New Social Issue,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 46, no.3 (30 September 2018): 425.

<sup>3</sup> Richard W. Miller, “Deep Responsibility for the Deep Future,” *Theological Studies* 77, no.2 (2016): 436-465.

<sup>4</sup> See *ibid.*, 443-444.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 437.

an unprecedented destruction of ecosystems, with serious consequences for all of us” (*LS*, 24). Even many times, *LS* refers to the future in terms to the impact on the coming generation and children. In broadening the concept of the common good to posterity *LS* cites the Portuguese bishops: “the environment is part of the logic of receptivity. It is on loan to each generation, which must then hand it on to the next. An integral ecology is marked by this broader vision” (*LS*, 159). Furthermore, paragraph 160 of *LS* opens with a reference to the future which sets the agenda of the entire encyclical, “what kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up?” (*LS*, 160). While these extracts denote the next generation (our children), that same paragraph pleads to the bequeathing of an inhabitable planet to future generations.<sup>6</sup> Yet, *LS* pleads continuously for far-sightedness and long-term policies in our care for the ecosystem (*LS*, 36, 28) and exhorts the current generation that “[w]e can be silent witnesses to terrible injustices if we think that we can obtain significant benefits by making the rest of humanity, present and future, pay the extremely high costs of environmental deterioration” (*LS*, 36). Hence, the encyclical letter clearly highlights the central ethical principle of solidarity among generations as a norm for public ethics, one that establishes a form of social responsibility towards future generations.

The intergenerational character of environmental matters is not a new reflection in Catholic social teaching.<sup>7</sup> However, *LS* inaugurates a paradigm shift

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<sup>6</sup> Miller, “Deep Responsibility for the Deep Future,” 441.

<sup>7</sup> Prior Popes emphasised this issue as well. See *Message of His Holiness Paul VI to Mr. Maurice F. Strong, Secretary General of the Conference on the Environment* (June 1, 1972), “[O]ur generation must energetically accept the challenge of going beyond partial and immediate goals in order to prepare a hospitable earth for future generations.” [http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/messages/pont-messages/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_mess\\_19720605\\_conferenza-ambiente.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/messages/pont-messages/documents/hf_p-vi_mess_19720605_conferenza-ambiente.html) (accessed on 4 September 2021). Pope Paul VI’s message for the occasion of the 1977 World Day of the Environment appeals “for a universal sense of solidarity in which each person and every nation plays its proper and interdependent role to ensure an ecologically sound environment for people today, as well as for future generation. ... It is our earnest prayer ... that all people everywhere ... commit themselves to a fraternal sharing and protection of good environment, the common patrimony of mankind.” [http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/messages/pont-messages/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_mess\\_19770605\\_world-day-ambiente.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/messages/pont-messages/documents/hf_p-vi_mess_19770605_world-day-ambiente.html) (accessed on 4 September 2021). Pope John Paul II’s address in 1985 to the United Nations Centre for the Environment, in Nairobi, “Exploitation of the riches of nature must take place according to criteria that take into account not only the immediate needs of the people but also the needs of future generations. In this way, the stewardship over nature, entrusted by God to men, will not be guided by short-sightedness or selfish pursuit; rather, it will take into account the fact that created goods are directed to the good of all humanity. The use of natural resources must aim at serving

to the understanding of the systemic crisis the current and future generations are facing. Indeed, what makes our environmental concern so convincing is the uncontested fact that the adverse impact of today's ecological abuse are unquestionably felt by the current generation as well as by generations yet to be born.

Also, and in a positive way, posterity will always reap the benefits of their predecessors. *LS* poses the following challenge to those concerned with dispute resolution: What sort of future for the Earth do we envisage? How does dispute resolution integrate intergenerational concerns? Who will speak on behalf of future generations? How should models concerning the impact of the present on the future be assessed? Should we be optimistic or pessimistic about technology's ability to resolve problems for posterity? How does intergenerational welfare conflict with intergenerational welfare? Whose interests should have precedence in those situations when the harm to those living now is foreseen while the potential damage to those in the future is less certain? What do we owe to ourselves, to future generations, and to other creatures? *LS* offers no straightforward answers to these questions. Yet, it makes it clear that ignoring these issues endangers both current and future generations.<sup>8</sup>

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the integral development of present and future generations.” [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1985/august/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_19850818\\_centro-nazioni-unite.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1985/august/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19850818_centro-nazioni-unite.html) (accessed on 4 September 2021). Pope John Paul II, *Peace With God the Creator, Peace With All Of Creation* (Jan. 1, 1990), “[W]e cannot interfere in one area of the ecosystem without paying due attention both to the consequences of such interferences in other areas and to the well-being of future generations.” [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_19891208\\_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19891208_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html) (accessed on 4 September 2021). Pope Benedict XVI, *If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation* (Jan. 1, 2010), warning that ecological exploration “is seriously endangering the supply of certain natural resources not only for the present generation, but above all, for generations yet to come.” [http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20091208\\_xliii-world-day-peace.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20091208_xliii-world-day-peace.html) (accessed on 4 September 2021). *Ibid.*, “[I]ntergenerational solidarity is urgently needed. Future generations cannot be saddled with the cost of our use of common environmental resources.” Both *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (par. 34, 1987) and *Centesimus Annus* (par. 37, 1991) specifically refer to our responsibilities towards unborn generations. In *Caritas in veritate* (2009) Pope Benedict XVI exhorts us to “recognize our grave duty to hand the earth on to future generations in such a condition that they too can worthily inhabit it and continue to cultivate it” (*CV*, 50).

<sup>8</sup> Lucia A. Silecchia, “Conflicts and *Laudato Si'*: Ten Principles for Environmental Dispute Resolution,” *Florida State University Journal of Land Use and Environmental Law* 33, no.1 (2017): 74. See also, Mary Ann Glendon, ed., *Intergenerational Solidarity, Welfare and Human Ecology*. The Proceedings of the Tenth Plenary Session of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, 29 April - 3 May 2004, *Acta 10* (Vatican City: 2004).

## Technological Power and the Interrelatedness of Reality

Two main factors are accountable for the contemporary ethical sensibility for future generations. “First, it has now become evident that technological power has altered the nature of human activity. Whereas previously human activity was viewed as having a small effective range, modern technology has reshaped this traditional view. Modern technology has given us an unprecedented power to influence the lives not only of those now living, but also of those who will live in the far-distant future.”<sup>9</sup> In his message for the 1990 World Day of Peace St John Paul II wrote that “we cannot interfere in one area of the ecosystem without paying due attention both to the consequences of such interference in other areas and to the well-being of future generations.”<sup>10</sup>

In *LS* Pope Francis is very critical to the globalisation of the technocratic paradigm and its undifferentiated and one-dimensional pattern of development (*LS*, 106-114) which is oblivious to the larger picture (*LS*, 110). Pope’s Francis’s appeal for action before it is too late is what makes this encyclical proactive and innovative. He acknowledges the urgency and extent of the ecological crisis which owes its roots to the short-sightedness of the modern technology and its false promise of unlimited growth (*LS*, 101). We need to embrace a broader vision for assessing the far-reaching impact of technology (*LS*, 112) on humanity as a whole which encompasses both present and future generations. Since “our common home” belongs to all members of the human species a paradigm shift is needed in today’s technological power in order to serve humanity as a whole rather than the market. According to the Pope, if present trends continue, we “may well witness extraordinary climate change and an unprecedented destruction of ecosystems, with serious consequences for all of us” (*LS*, 24). Moreover, “doomsday predictions can no longer be met with irony or disdain. We may well be leaving to coming generations debris, desolation and filth” (*LS*, 161).

Individualism, human greed, selfishness, arrogance and manipulation, which are the blind forces ingrained in today’s dominant technological paradigm, have to be replaced by fraternity and solidarity which guarantee posterity’s well-being. Pope Francis articulated this intergenerational ethical principle by warning us that “if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers,

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<sup>9</sup> Emmanuel Agius, “Germ-line Cells: Our Responsibilities to Future Generations,” *Ethics in the Natural Sciences. Concilium* 203 (June 1989): 293-313.

<sup>10</sup> *Message for the 1990 World Day of Peace*, 8: *AAS* 82 (1990): 152.

ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs” (*LS*, 11). He points out that “when our hearts are authentically open to universal communion, this sense of fraternity excludes nothing and no one” (*LS*, 92). Fraternity with all generations precludes any form of exclusion from our moral sensibility and concern. Technology’s internal logic of “possession, mastery and transformation” (*LS*, 106), which is “based on the lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth’s goods” and the false notion of “infinite and unlimited growth” (*LS*, 106) as a result of the dominance of the market economic forces, is sowing the wind of environmental degradation which future generations will harvest as a whirlwind. Quoting the German theologian Romano Guardini, Pope Francis notes that “contemporary man has not been trained to use power well” (*LS*, 105). Since “our immense technological development has not been accompanied by a development in human responsibility, values and conscience” (*LS*, 105), future generations will inherit an “earth less rich and beautiful, ever more limited and grey” (*LS*, 34).

Secondly, today’s apprehension about the future of humankind is the result of the discovery of the interdependence and interrelatedness of reality.

This truth has been known for centuries; but it is only lately that we are experiencing it in all its complexity. Never before has human experience shown so clearly that absolutely nothing exists in isolation. Everything affects everything else. Every action, decision and policy whatsoever has far-reaching consequences. Everything, from culture to genes, will be transmitted to posterity. It is therefore becoming more evident that our relations are not merely limited to those who are close to us, but extend to others globally and intergenerationally.<sup>11</sup>

The Anglo-American philosopher A.N. Whitehead once remarked that “[t]he modern tendency is to say ‘I am happy *now*. The future does not matter!’; but the ‘now’ is meaningless without a significant future. What is wanted is to relate all the ‘nows’ with the future.”<sup>12</sup> Needless to say, the ‘now’ is equally meaningless without a significant past. *LS* is a wake-up alarm to the present generation about its moral responsibility to guarantee a significant future to succeeding generations.

The phrases “everything is in relationship,” “everything is interrelated,” “everything is connected” are the expressions that run through *LS*. The terms “interconnected” and “interrelated” occur no fewer than fourteen times in the encyclical *LS*. It is no exaggeration to claim that *LS* is a beautiful meditation on

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<sup>11</sup> Agius, “Germ-line Cells: Our Responsibilities to Future Generations,” 293.

<sup>12</sup> Alfred N. Whitehead, *Dialogues with Alfred North Whitehead* (as recorded by L. Price) (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1954), 153.

the interconnectedness of the whole universe which is alive. Drawing in part upon the Genesis creation narratives, *LS* asserts that “[i]t cannot be emphasized enough how everything is interconnected” (*LS*, 70, 138, 240). Everything, from past, present, and future generations to all living creatures and the inanimate world, is joined together in a “splendid universal communion” (*LS*, 220; see also paras. 16, 22, 42, 92, 138, 190). “Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of his creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth” (*LS*, 92). God’s love includes all creatures in their intricate web of relationships extending over space and time. Hence, future generations cannot be ignored or disregarded from our fraternal moral concern and respect since they are also embraced by God’s love.

The encyclical situates the human person in an intertwined relationship with God, with our current and future generations, and with the Earth itself. If one of these relationships is ruptured, then the others are ruptured too. It insists that we have to remember and safeguard our interconnectedness to every being in the universe. When this connection is disregarded, Mother Earth is ravaged and the poor and future generations suffer the most from the consequences of this forgetfulness. Pope Francis points out that solutions proposed by technology and business frequently miss the “mysterious” interdependent web of existence of which we are a part, perhaps solving a single problem but causing many others. Creation is interdependent and worthy of respect. “Because all creatures are connected, each must be cherished with love and respect, for all of us as living creatures are dependent on one another” (*LS*, 42). As a response to the complexity and multifaceted dimension of the environmental crisis, Pope Francis introduced the novel concept of ‘integral ecology’ since “today’s problems call for a vision capable of taking into account every aspect of the global crisis” (*LS*, 137). “Integral” because every living organism and the environment in which they develop are related; everything is interconnected, and “[t]ime and space are not independent of one another” (*LS*, 138). The “integral ecology” perspective is not just a methodological approach to the environmental issue, it could also be considered an epistemological turn.

The leitmotif of *LS*, namely that “everything is interrelated,” opens the ecological dream of *Querida Amazonia* (*QA*): “This insistence that ‘everything is connected’ is particularly true of a territory like the Amazon region” (*QA*, 41). The Amazon region is a unique example concerning the interrelatedness of all reality. What happens there affects the global community!

“Everything is connected” denotes not only the people and the environment in this region. The planet’s equilibrium depends on a healthy Amazon which is



connected to the world (*QA*, 48). If in *LS* Pope Francis invited us to hear both the cry of the poor and future generations as well as the cry of all creation (*LS*, 46), likewise in *QA* he also invites us to hear the cry of the Amazon (*QA*, 48). This attentive listening goes far beyond the mere intention to safeguard endangered species. It goads us to halt the local and international actors who, because of their myopic economic and political interests, destroy the environment and its inhabitants (*QA*, 49-50). It exhorts also to appreciate the relevance of dialogue.

In the Amazon, it is particularly important to link ancestral knowledge and contemporary scientific and technical knowledge to pursue sustainability (*QA*, 51). The native citizens' saying that "we do not inherit the earth from our parents, we borrow it from our children" is very relevant and significant for today's economic and technological planning and decisions. The present generation is the custodian of planet Earth and its resources. This ancient wisdom about the interconnectedness of all reality and about the earth as "a shared inheritance, whose fruits are meant to benefit everyone" (*LS*, 93) endorses the intergenerational ethical insight that the earth is not given to current generations by the forefathers, but borrowed from future generations.

The ecological wisdom about the interrelatedness and interconnectedness of all reality runs counter to a reductionist anthropology that perceives humans in terms of mere consumers. Technology has an immense impact on the way one thinks and relates with others and nature. It "creates a framework which ends up conditioning lifestyles and shaping social possibilities along the lines dictated by the interests of certain powerful groups. Decisions which may seem purely instrumental are in reality decisions about the kind of society we want to build" (*LS*, 107). The "technocratic paradigm" is questionable because it "exalts the concept of a subject who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external world. This subject makes every effort to establish the scientific and experimental method, which in itself is already a technique of possession, mastery and transformation" (*LS*, 106). "This Promethean vision of mastery over the world (*LS*, 115) reflects the excessive individualism, the domination of instrumental reason and the structures of industrial technological society, which the Canadian philosopher of culture Charles Taylor, identifies as the three malaises of modernity."<sup>13</sup>

Since human activity can now, more than ever before, have consequences which extend far in space and time, a new meaning of human existence is

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<sup>13</sup> Emmanuel Agius, "The Technocratic Paradigm and its Ethos. Academic Oration delivered in the Graduation Ceremony (28 November 2016)," *Melita Theologica* 68, no.1 (2018): 108.

emerging. Can the relational standpoint of the ecosystem throw any light on the notion of the *humanum*? *LS* endorses an anthropological vision of the human person in relationship to God, other fellow human beings both living now and in the future, and Mother Earth. Pope Francis is critical to the fragmentation of reality for being the root of individualism, self-interest and consumerism which are accountable for the insensitivity to the needs of current and future generations. A key reflection of the Encyclical Letter is expressed in the statement that “there can be no ecology without an adequate anthropology” (*LS*, 118). The perception that the human person is just one living organism among others is no longer tenable. If we wish human beings to engage in taking care of the planet, we have to recognise and value “their unique capacities of knowledge, will, freedom and responsibility” (*LS*, 118). These unique human faculties, usually ignored by technology, underpin the relational dimension of personhood.

*LS*'s philosophical understanding of the ecosystem as an interconnected web of relationships, as well as the ontological nature of the human person as a relational self, denote a new paradigm of human society.

A glance at the history of social philosophy reveals that the concept of human society was always defined in accordance with a particular view of the nature of the universe in general, and of human nature in particular. During the classical period, a concept of human nature as social, based on a teleological picture of the universe, supported an organic model of the world and society. Then, during the modern period, a mechanical world-picture and an individualistic concept of human nature changed the whole perspective. Human society was no longer grounded, as a natural requirement, on the nature of the human person, since the human being in its 'state of nature' was constituted as a complete individual requiring no society to complete its nature. The political society was therefore conceived of as a voluntary association for a common purpose, this society being based on human contract.<sup>14</sup>

Technology's power to affect the well-being of far-distant unborn generations is not only consolidating the feeling of interdependence and shared humanity between generations but also evoking a new vision of a human community which is both global and intergenerational. Humanity is going through a novel ethical experience which is goading the current generation to redefine itself as one human family extending in space and time. As *LS* affirms, “all of us are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family, a sublime

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<sup>14</sup> Emmanuel Agius, “Environmental Responsibility and Business Styles: Ethical and Theological Perspectives,” in *Business Styles and Sustainable Development*, Fondazione Lanza, eds., L. Mariani et al., (Roma: Gregoriana Libreria Editrice, 2008), 19-42.

communion which fills us with a sacred, affectionate and humble respect” (*LS*, 89). Thus, openness to others is not limited to those who are proximate, nor to the existing humans who are distant in space. Our relationships extend in time to include the future generations of our species and to the natural system of which we are a part.

All generations are inherently linked to other generations, past and future, in using the common patrimony of earth. “We need,” Pope Francis remarks “to think of ourselves more and more as a single family dwelling in a common home” (*FT*, 17). Home is the dwelling place of a family. All the members of the family have a relation with one another. The others are not only the present generation but also generations yet to be born. The long chain of generations forms one single community. Every generation is a fraction of the whole. Thus, every generation is related to all preceding and succeeding generations which collectively form the community of humankind. Consequently, it is no wonder that the present-day broader and more inclusive sense of belonging to the entire family of humankind extending across generations is awakening a stronger sense of solidarity and fraternity with posterity!

The unity and commonality of the community of humankind articulated in *LS* and *QA* encompasses the entire human species, both present and future. This sense of human connectivity with the natural environment and with all members of the human species is broadening our moral consciousness and conscientiousness across space and time. The widespread embracement of this overarching vision of humanity is a prerequisite for counteracting “today’s self-centred culture of instant gratification” (*LS*, 162) which renders us oblivious of the larger picture of reality. Today’s fragmentation of knowledge proves helpful for concrete application, yet it often leads to a loss of appreciation for the whole, for the relationship between things and across generations, and for the broader horizon. A disintegrated perspective of knowledge and reality makes it hard to find adequate ways of solving the more complex problems of today’s world, particularly those regarding the environment, the poor and future generations (*LS*, 110).<sup>15</sup>

### **Today’s Poor are Future Generations’ Allies**

The immense threats to the environment and to humanity itself (posed by today’s globalisation of the “technological paradigm”) are becoming more and more evident.

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<sup>15</sup> Agius, “The Technocratic Paradigm and its Ethos,” 109.

Many began to realise that it was unrealistic to speak simply of progress, without taking very seriously into account the fact that the process of development, as it occurred in previous years, had produced a double imbalancing effect: between some parts of the world and others on the one hand; between present and future generations on the other.<sup>16</sup>

Both today's poor and future generations are disadvantaged due to the philosophy of unlimited growth based on the false assumption that "an infinite quantity of energy and resources are available, that it is possible to renew them quickly, and that the negative effects of the exploitation of the natural order can be easily absorbed" (*LS*, 106). Moreover, the gravity of the issues involved is alarming because "some circles maintain that current economics and technology will solve all environmental problems, and argue, in popular and non-technical terms, that the problems of global hunger and poverty will be resolved simply by market growth" (*LS*, 109).

Pope Francis captured the twin pillars of environmental concern when writing that "our inability to think seriously about future generations is linked to our inability to broaden the scope of our present interests and to give consideration to those who remain excluded from development. Let us not only keep the poor of the future in mind, but also today's poor, whose life on this earth is brief and who cannot keep on waiting" (*LS*, 162). "We need to strengthen the conviction that we are one single human family" (*LS*, 52) in order to address seriously the "globalisation of indifference" (*LS*, 52) and the "numbing of conscience" (*LS*, 49) to the needs of the poor and future generations. Linked to his vision of unity, Pope Francis makes steady references to the excluded, a term that appears at least a dozen times in *LS*. By "the excluded," Pope Francis means first and foremost the global poor and future generations. The excluded are "the majority of the planet's population, billions of people" (*LS*, 49), he points out. Yet, their problems are treated "almost as an afterthought, a question which gets added almost out of duty or in a tangential way" (*LS*, 49), as if their difficulties were mere "collateral damage" (*LS*, 123). Ironically, the excluded are those who contribute the least to problems like climate change while shouldering its greatest burdens! Pope Francis's protection of the poor underpins his concern for the planet which is also considered as "the poor," since the degradation of humans and the earth is intimately connected. "The earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor" (*LS*, 2).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Emmanuel Agius, "The Rights of Future Generations," in *Interfaces*, ed. Joe Friggieri (Malta: University Press, 1997), 165.

<sup>17</sup> Lisa H. Sideris, "Techno-Science, Integral Thought, and the Reality of Limits in *Laudato si*,"

In both *LS* and *QA* Pope Francis has drawn the attention of the international community to the cry of the earth, the poor and future generations (*LS*, 49). Quoting Pope Benedict XVI, *LS* exhorts that “in addition to a fairer sense of intergenerational solidarity there is also an urgent moral need for a renewed sense of intragenerational solidarity” (*LS*, 162). Certainly, Pope Francis broadens the perspective of Catholic environmental ethics to defend both the global poor and future generations, both of whom are at the margins of social consciousness and thus vulnerable to today’s rapid environmental changes. The preferential option for the poor encompasses future generations, who like today’s poor, are disadvantaged and vulnerable due the rapid environmental degradation. In *LS* Pope Francis advocates “an integral approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature” (*LS*, 139). Both the poor, particularly the poorest three billion people, and future generations are socially excluded due to “our inability to think seriously about future generations .... [and] ... our inability to broaden the scope of our present interests and to give consideration to those who remain excluded from development” (*LS*, 162).

The internal logic of technology is the maximization of profits, possession and mastery (*LS*, 106). This technological rationality overlooks “the larger picture” (*LS*, 110), thereby rendering it oblivious to the needs to the poor and posterity. Technology’s myopic and short-sighted vision as well as its fragmentation of knowledge:

Often leads to a loss of appreciation for the whole, for the relationships between things, and for the broader horizon, which then becomes irrelevant. This very fact makes it hard to find adequate ways of solving the more complex problems of today’s world, particularly those regarding the environment and the poor; these problems cannot be dealt with from a single perspective or from a single set of interests (*LS*, 110).

Being enslaved to the needs of technology, the global economic system and social institutions do not care for the needs of the poor and future generations, thus showing “no interest in more balanced levels of production, a better distribution of wealth, concern for the environment and the rights of future generations” (*LS*, 109). Today’s urgent challenge to protect our common home demands concerted efforts to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development to address the tragic effects of environmental degradation on the lives of the world’s poor (*LS*, 13). Moreover, when thinking about our “common destiny,” Pope Francis remarks that “we

cannot exclude those who come after us” (*LS*, 159). Intergenerational solidarity is not an option, but rather a “basic question of justice” (*LS*, 118). In this case, the excluded are truly unseen and invisible, for they do not yet exist.<sup>18</sup>

*LS* gives great prominence to the global issue of climate change and its adverse impact on the poor and future generations. Climate change “represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day. Its worst impact will probably be felt by developing countries in coming decades” (*LS*, 25). Moreover, “the effects of climate change will be felt for a long time to come, even if stringent measures are taken now” (*LS*, 170). Without creating the problem themselves, both today’s poor and future generations have to bear the burdens of the unprecedented destruction of the ecosystem, with serious consequences for their quality of life. Both are disproportionately affected without being responsible for the changed environmental conditions!

The encyclical on ecology calls for an immediate mitigation of unsustainable practices caused by climate change since “the warming caused by huge consumption on the part of some rich countries has repercussions on the poorest areas of the world” (*LS*, 51). The world’s response to global warming will define the legacy left for future generations. Pope Francis laments that there is an “intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet” (*LS*, 16) and that “the deterioration of the environment and of society affects the most vulnerable people on the planet” (*LS*, 48). In other words, climate change disproportionately affects not only the world’s poor countries but also the world’s poor people. “Many of the poor,” wrote Pope Francis “live in areas particularly affected by phenomena related to warming, and their means of subsistence are largely dependent on natural reserves and eco-systemic services such as agriculture, fishing, and forestry” (*LS*, 25). Moreover, as a consequence of climate change “there has been a tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation” (*LS*, 25). This ecological plight is stratifying people further into a society of haves and have-nots; it divides the global community into the wealthy, who are able to purchase protection from a deteriorating environment, and the poor, who are left to the capricious vicissitudes of a changing climate.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the climate change is separating the present from future generations. While present generations enjoy

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>19</sup> William N. Holden & William O. Mansfield, “*Laudato Si*: A Scientifically Informed Church of the Poor Confronts Climate Change,” *Worldviews* 22 (2018): 34, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323764490\\_Laudato\\_Si\\_A\\_Scientifically\\_Informed\\_Church\\_of\\_the\\_Poor\\_Confronts\\_Climate\\_Change](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323764490_Laudato_Si_A_Scientifically_Informed_Church_of_the_Poor_Confronts_Climate_Change) (accessed on 4 September 2021).

quality-of-life by their excessive use of natural resource, future generations will be exposed to long-term health harm by the unsustainable functioning of the planet's ecosystems (*LS*, 28, 50, 192).

## The Earth Belongs to All Generations

The import of recent Christian social teaching, particularly *LS*, on our responsibilities towards future generations cannot be fully comprehended unless situating it in the Church's traditional doctrine on the universal destination of created things. In an effort to reorient society to responsibility and long-term care of the natural environment, Pope Francis identifies the climate and the atmosphere as common goods "belonging to all and meant for all" (*LS*, 23). He also identifies the ocean and other natural resources as common goods that governments must protect (*LS*, 174). This view of the environment as a global commons is consistent with the universal access principle in Catholic social ethics, namely, the understanding that the earth is given to humankind in common and intended to benefit all, regardless of titles or ownership. *LS* captures this traditional Catholic social ethics as follows:

Each community can take from the bounty of the earth whatever it needs for subsistence, but it also has the duty to protect the earth and to ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations. 'The earth is the Lord's' (Ps. 24:1); to him belongs 'the earth with all that is within it' (Deut. 10:14). Thus, God rejects every claim to absolute ownership (*LS*, 67).

Thus, created things belong not to the few, but to the entire human family. It is for this reason that *LS* refers to the earth as 'our common home' because it belongs to both current and future generations (*LS*, 1). From a sense of ownership *LS* invites us to adopt an attitude of intergenerational stewardship.

Strictly speaking, this Catholic social teaching about the universal destination of created goods has biblical roots. In fact, the Bible reminds us that the earth is God's gift to all generations.<sup>20</sup> Section VI of Chapter Two of *LS* dealing with the "Gospel of Creation" is precisely entitled as the universal destination of goods (*LS*, 93) which reflects the words of the Second Vatican Council, "God destined the earth and all it contains for the use of every individual and all peoples" (*GS*, 69). All men of good will today believe "that the earth is essentially a shared

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<sup>20</sup> Gen. 1:1-31; 17:7-8: "I will maintain my Covenant between Me and you, and your offspring to come, as an everlasting covenant throughout the ages, to be God to you and to your offspring to come. I give the land you sojourn in to you and to your offspring to come, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession. I will be your God."

inheritance, whose fruits are meant to benefit everyone. For believers, this becomes a question of fidelity to the Creator, since God created the world for everyone” (*LS*, 93). Quoting St John Paul II’s *Centesimus Annus*, par. 31, Pope Francis forcefully reaffirmed this teaching, stating that “God gave the earth to the whole human race for the sustenance of all its members, *without excluding or favouring anyone*” (*LS*, 93).<sup>21</sup> This is the foundation of the universal destination of the earth’s goods (*CA*, 31). Consequently, he maintained that, “it is not in accord with God’s plan that this gift be used in such a way that its benefits favour only a few.’ This calls into serious question the unjust habits of a part of humanity” (*LS*, 93). Earthly goods are the common heritage of humankind, “the fruits of which are for the benefit of all.”<sup>22</sup> *LS* accentuates that “the natural environment is a collective good, the patrimony of all humanity and the responsibility of everyone. If we make something our own, it is only to administer it for the good of all” (*LS*, 95). The New Zealand bishops gave a broader interpretation of the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” (*LS*, 95). They rightly claim that it is inappropriate that “twenty percent of the world’s population consumes resources at a rate that robs the poor nations and future generations of what they need to survive.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> The 1971 Synod of Bishops had already observed that “men are beginning to grasp a new and more radical dimension of unity; for they perceive that the resources, as well as the precious treasures of air and water – without which there cannot be life – and the small delicate biosphere of the whole complex of all life on earth, are not infinite, but on the contrary must be saved and preserved as a unique patrimony belonging to all mankind” “Justice in the World,” in *Vatican Council II. More Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. A Flannery (Collegeville, Liturgical Press: 1982) 2:696. The Synod questioned “what right the rich nations have to keep up their claim to increase their own material demands, if the consequence is either that others remain in misery or that the danger of destroying the very physical foundation of life on earth is precipitated. Those who are already rich are bound to accept a less material way of life, with less waste, in order to avoid the destruction of the heritage which they are obliged by absolute justice to share with all other members of the human race.” *Ibid.*, 709. Moreover, in his message to the 1972 Stockholm Conference, Pope Paul VI insisted that “no one can take possession in an absolute and specific way of the environment, which is not a *res nullius* – something not belonging to anyone –, but a *res omnium* – the patrimony of mankind; consequently those possessing it –privately and publicly – must use it in a way that rebounds to everyone’s real advantage.” Pope Paul VI, “Man’s Stewardship of his Environment,” in *The Pope Speaks* 17 (1972): 102. Then, the Pope continued that “our generation must energetically accept the challenge of going beyond particular, immediate objectives in order to prepare a hospitable earth for future generations.” *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>22</sup> *Message for the 1990 World Day of Peace*, 8: *AAS* 82 (1990): 152.

<sup>23</sup> New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference, *Statement on Environmental Issues* (1 September 2006), <https://www.catholic.org.nz/about-us/bishops-statements/statement-on-environmental-issues/> (accessed on 4 September 2021),



This belief about the universal purpose of created goods which underpins our ecological duties towards unborn generations can be traced back to the heritage of patristic social teaching.

It is indeed remarkable that today's sense of global and intergenerational solidarity has already been developed extensively by the early Christian theologians. In the tradition of the church, there are two main tenets with reference to the resources of the world. The first is that by nature, *all* earthly resources have a universal destination, that is, they are intended for the good of humankind as a whole.<sup>24</sup>

God has given the fruits of the earth to sustain the entire human family, without excluding or favouring anyone. Since material goods of the earth are a common patrimony of all humankind, both present and future generations have the right not to be excluded from access to the earth's resources.

The earth is given as a gift from God for the nurture and fulfilment of all, not for the benefit of a few or to one particular generation. This implies that everyone has an inherent right to use the resources of the earth. Since the right of usage is primary in character, it ranks among fundamental human rights.<sup>25</sup>

The second is that some modes of appropriation are allowable and, in certain cases, required, to a limited extent. Since patristic times, the concept of the right to private property was discussed within the context of the universal right to use the resources of the earth. Property is seen as the institutional actualization of man's fundamental right to use the material goods of the earth. Property should always be administered for the benefit of all.<sup>26</sup>

"If we make something our own, it is only to administer it for the good of all" (*LS*, 95). Though the right of property is important, the universal right to usage is prior to and conditions the right to private property. Since private property is a means to an end, it must always remain subordinate to its proper end, namely the universal right of usage. Pope Francis in *LS* reiterates the Thomistic tradition<sup>27</sup> on private property:

The principle of the subordination of private property to the universal destination of goods, and thus the right of everyone to their use, is a golden rule of social conduct and 'the first principle of the whole ethical and social order.' The

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<sup>24</sup> It is interesting to note that the Koran also announces to all mankind that "all wealth, all things, belong to God" and thus to all members of the human community.

<sup>25</sup> Agius, "Environmental Responsibility and Business Styles: Ethical and Theological Perspectives," 19-42

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae, Secunda secundae*, "Theft and robbery," Question 66.

Christian tradition has never recognized the right to private property as absolute or inviolable, and has stressed the social purpose of all forms of private property (*LS*, 93).

According to the social teachings of the Fathers, ownership of material goods is not possession but stewardship. All creation is made available by God to all humankind and the rich are essentially its stewards. Those who have should imitate God's beneficence and generosity in sharing their material goods with others. It is only due to sin and greed that earthly goods have drawn into the present oppressive state of affairs in which there are such differences between the rich and the poor.<sup>28</sup>

The early Fathers of the church harshly attacked the idea of ownership as an exclusive and unlimited right of disposing of material goods. They attempted to develop an ethical perspective which aimed to safeguard those who were being deprived of their fundamental right to use the resources of the earth.

In one of his homilies, Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-216) proposes two guiding principles for the use and possession of earthly goods: *autarkeia* and *koinonia*. The first ethical principle, namely *autarkeia*, suggests that every possession is for the sake of self-sufficiency. *Autarkeia* denotes a standard of living that enables one to live a life consonant with human dignity. Beyond the limits of *autarkeia*, the holding of goods makes no sense in the patristic view. But the purpose of possessing earthly goods is also to attain *koinonia*, the equal fellowship that abolishes the differentiation between the few rich who live in luxury and the "many who labour in poverty." According to Clement of Alexandria, the ethical principle of *koinonia* should remind Christians of everyone's right to share or participate in earthly goods:

It is God himself who has brought our race to a *koinonia*, by sharing Himself, first of all, and by sending His Word (Logos) to all alike, and by making all things for all. Therefore everything is in common, and the rich should not grasp a greater share. The expression, then, 'I own something and I have more than enough; why should I not enjoy it?' is not worthy of a human nor does it indicate any community feeling. The other expression does, however: 'I have something, why should I not share it with those in need?' Such a one is perfect, and fulfils the command: 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.'<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), 1:116.

<sup>29</sup> As quoted by Charles Avila, *Ownership. Early Christian Teaching* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1983), 37.

One of the most important texts on social matters written of Cyprian (c. 200-258), bishop of Cartage, is *On Works and Almsgiving*. Cyprian wrote: “For whatever belongs to God, is for the common use of all, nor is anyone excluded from his benefits and gifts, nor is the human race prevented from equally enjoying God’s goodness and generosity.”<sup>30</sup> Another early Christian Father who affirmed that God entrusted the earth to all humanity was Lactantius (250-317) who was called “the Christian Cicero” on account of the elegance of his style. In his writing on *The Divine Institutes* we find that “... God has given the land for the common use of all men, so that all may enjoy the goods it produces in common, and not in order that some with grasping and raging greed may claim everything for himself, while another may be deprived of the things the earth produces for all.”<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, Ambrose (c. 337-397), bishop of Milan, wrote that “God has ordered all things to be produced, so that there should be food in common for all, and that the earth should be a kind of common possession for all. Nature, therefore, has produced a common right to all, but greed has made it a right for a few.”<sup>32</sup> Ambrose insisted that all things of the earth are created for the use of all human beings. All human beings have a natural right to make use of them. The right to private property is not unconditional, exclusive and absolute, but essentially limited. There is a strict duty of justice, and not merely of charity, to share these goods with others. In his writing *On Naboth*, Ambrose commented as follows:

When giving to the poor you are not giving him what is yours; rather you are paying back to him what is his. Indeed what is common to all and has been giving to all to make use of, you have usurped for yourself alone. The earth belongs to all, and not only the rich.<sup>33</sup>

In one of his writings, Ambrose referred also to “injuries done to nature.” What are these “injuries” of which Ambrose spoke about? He said that a few rich are trying to keep the earth for themselves so that, in consequence, “few are they who do not use what belongs to all than those who do.”

St John Chrysostom (c. 347-407) had also insisted that God created the earth for the common use and benefit of all humankind so that all should receive from it

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<sup>30</sup> CCL 111 a.71 (as quoted by Peter Phan, *Social Thought. Messages of the Church*, vol. 20 (Wilmington: Delaware, 1984), 91.

<sup>31</sup> CSEL 19.414 (as quoted by Phan. *op.cit.*, 95).

<sup>32</sup> *De Off.* 1, 132.

<sup>33</sup> CSEL 32.2.498 (as quoted by P. Phan., *op.cit.*, 173).

what they require. Everyone has therefore an equal right to use the resources of the earth. He explained the universal destination of the earth's resources as follows:<sup>34</sup>

Mark the wise dispensation of God ... He has made certain things common, such as the sun, air, earth, and the water, the sky and the sea ... Their benefits are dispensed equally to all brethren ... And mark, that concerning things that remain in common there is no contention but all is peaceable. But when one attempts to possess himself of anything, to make it his own, then contention is introduced, as if nature herself were indignant.<sup>35</sup>

### **The Whole is Greater Than The Parts**

Ecological problems, Pope Francis asserts in *LS*, need to be resolved concretely and with due attention to their specificity, but such solutions, to be lasting, cannot neglect a broader vision of reality (*LS*, 141). The repercussions of local environmental issues on all countries and their citizens, on the ecosystem as a whole and the far-distant unborn generations cannot be ignored. *LS* endorses an intergenerational perspective which transcends the local, regional and global boundaries. In fact, the challenge of focusing on the interests of the whole rather than on the individual parts is integral to Pope Francis' political vision. This principle is framed in *Evangelii Gaudium* (*EG*) in terms of the creative tension between the global and the local: "An innate tension also exists between globalization and localization. We need to pay attention to the global so as to avoid narrowness and banality" (*EG*, 234). More emphatically he asserts that "we constantly have to broaden our horizons and see the greater good which will benefit us all" (*EG*, 235). While on the one hand a vision that endorses a global and *a fortiori* an intergenerational perspective is in danger of proposing static abstractions, on the other hand, a local perspective, though grounded in concrete reality, risks narrow localism. The call to broaden our horizons to "see the greater good which will benefit us all" liberates us, Francis remarks, from obsession with "limited and particular questions" (*EG*, 235). This greater good, of course, is not utilitarian, because it has a place for everyone, including generations to come, and is not simply the greatest good of the greatest number.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Agius, "Environmental Responsibility and Business Styles: Ethical and Theological Perspectives," 19-42.

<sup>35</sup> *Commentary on St. Paul's First Letter to Timothy*. Quoted by Avila, *op.cit.*, 95.

<sup>36</sup> Ethna Regan, "The Bergoglio Principles: Pope Francis' Dialectical Approach to Political Theology," *Religions* (14 Dec 2019) School of Theology, Philosophy, and Music, Dublin City University. <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/10/12/670/htm> (accessed on 30 March 2021).

Pope Francis' axiom "the whole is greater than its parts" is complimented by another three principles (time is greater than space, unity is superior to conflict, reality is superior to an idea) which together enrich the long tradition of the Catholic social teaching by a broader time-horizon. *LS* and its central concept of integral ecology, incorporate these four principles which, according to *EG*, have the special role in calibrating our concerns, interests, life-style, and sense of community-belonging. In particular, they play an important role in orienting our moral consciousness and conscientiousness to go beyond the global level to embrace the entire family of the human species which includes all human beings in the long chain of generations.

The encyclical gives a clear message of hope. Since "[h]umanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home" (*LS*, 13), *LS* and *QA* exhort us to expand the horizon of our concern and reflect on the distant future. It is not only the near future but also the distant future which should concern us. It is our common responsibility to bear in mind the "ethics of time" which should be one of the main foundations for our daily behaviour at all levels if we want to prevent what would represent a true intergenerational and historical irresponsibility. This broad ethical approach endorsed by *LS* and *QA* is a wake-up call to take action now before it is too late to protect our common home. It is a roadmap to act in a way that will prevent us from taking a path that allows no return. Since things can change the whole human family shoulders together the responsibility to seek a sustainable and integral development (*LS*, 13). If the current generation does not take into account the well-being of generations yet to be born in its socio-economic, political and environmental decisions, its legacy to posterity would be a condemnation to a worst standard of living and a deprivation from exercising its distinctive capacities.

The past has already been written. It must now be accurately described. We must learn from the lessons of the past to be able to invent the future.<sup>37</sup> Among all species, it is only human beings who are able to anticipate, to use knowledge to foresee, to use knowledge to prevent. Moral responsibility is the fruit of foresight.<sup>38</sup> Thus, "[w]hat is needed is a politics which is farsighted and capable of a new, integral and interdisciplinary approach to handling the different aspects of the crisis" (*LS*, 197). Moreover, "caring for ecosystems demands far-sightedness, since no one looking for quick and easy profit is truly interested in their preservation. But the cost of the damage caused by such selfish lack of concern is

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<sup>37</sup> Federico Mayor Zaragoza, "The Ethics of Time in the Face of Global Challenges: The Time has come for Action," *CADMUS* 3, no.3 (October 2017): 7-23.

<sup>38</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventure of Ideas* (New York: The Free Press, 1933), 87-99.

much greater than the economic benefits to be obtained. Where certain species are destroyed or seriously harmed, the values involved are incalculable” (*LS*, 36).

Certainly, the collective subject underlying Pope Francis’ environmental concern in *LS* and *QA* denotes all humanity, present and future. When Pope Francis says that “[t]here is an interrelation between ecosystems and between the various spheres of social interaction, demonstrating yet again that ‘the whole is greater than the part’” (*LS*, 141), he has in mind the collectivity of human species who are all entitled to share our common home. Thus, all generations have the right to share the resources of the earth. But at the same time all members of the human species share the same responsibility to protect and care for the planet to pass on a healthy ecosystem to succeeding generations. Each generation, which is a fraction of the whole, is related to its preceding and succeeding generations. The greatest challenge is how to balance the concern of future generations with the demands of present-day humanity.

Pope Francis’ concept of integral ecology, which is marked by a “broader vision” (*LS*, 159), and his call for a new kind of humanism with “a more integral and integrating vision” redefine the traditional concepts of ‘common good,’ ‘justice’ and ‘solidarity’ (*LS*, 159-162) from a broader perspective “demonstrating yet again that ‘the whole is greater than the part’” (*LS*, 141). In *LS* these salient pillars of Catholic social ethics highlight our intragenerational and intergenerational connectivity and moral responsibility.

### *Intergenerational Common Good*

The concept of ‘common good’ has always been defined in accordance with a particular notion of society. For instance, in the individualistic and liberal theories of society, the common good is defined as the mere sum of individual goods. It is a state of equilibrium in the interplay of individual goods. By contrast, in a collectivist social theory, the common good is that state of society in which a certain social status is planned and ensured for every individual by directing and contributing his/her activities.<sup>39</sup>

In contrast to these traditional views, Pope Francis redefines the concept of common good in the light of his axiom “the whole is greater than the part” which reflects Whitehead’s ethical insight that “morality of outlook is inseparably

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<sup>39</sup> Emmanuel Agius, “Intergeneration Justice,” in *Handbook of Intergeneration Justice*, ed. Joerg Chet Tremmel (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2006), 328.

conjoined with generality of outlook.”<sup>40</sup> The larger vision of reality one adopts, the deeper and broader ethical insights one achieves. For this reason, Pope Francis concludes that “integral ecology cannot be separated from the notion of the common good, a central and unifying principle of social ethics” (*LS*, 156). From the standpoint of integral ecology, the notion of common good assumes a broader scope than a national or supranational perspective. In the ecological wisdom of *LS*, the notion of common good goes beyond the good of the person, a particular society, and even that of the global community. As Pope Francis states “the notion of the common good also extends to future generations” (*LS*, 159) since we “cannot exclude those who come after us” (*LS*, 159). It was

during the sixties that the concept of common good evolved from a national to a supranational level. This was the result of the newly awakened sense of interdependence that led to the notion of the ‘family of nations.’ Then, during the late seventies the concept of common good was redefined from a yet broader perspective. Environmental issues have shown that the common good of a particular society cannot be separated, first from the common good of the global community, and secondly from the common good of the human species. The interrelatedness of all reality links every particular reality to the whole, which encompasses the past, the present and the future. Since the ultimate community to which every human person belongs is the whole community of humankind, the common good of a particular society cannot be separated, firstly, from the common good of the global community, and from the common good of all humankind.<sup>41</sup>

“Traditionally, the common good has been defined as that order in the community by virtue of which, every member of society can experience an adequate quality of life. Recent ecological awareness has made it quite evident that the concept of common good must include also the natural resources of the earth.”<sup>42</sup> Since “underlying the principle of the common good is respect for the human person as such, endowed with basic and inalienable rights ordered to his or her integral development” (*LS*, 157), posterity’s right to a healthy environment cannot be neglected. It is for this reason that Pope Francis pleads that “in the face of possible risks to the environment which may affect the common good now and in the future, decisions must be made ‘based on a comparison of the

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<sup>40</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, Corrected Edition, eds., D. Griffin and D. Sherburne (New York and London: The Free Press, 1978), 15. See also, John W. Lango, “Does Whitehead’s Metaphysics Contain an Ethics?” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 37, no.4 (2001): 515-536.

<sup>41</sup> Agius, “Intergeneration Justice,” 329.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

risks and benefits foreseen for the various possible alternatives” (*LS*, 184). Every species-being, both living now and in the future, needs an adequate natural environment for one’s well-being. As we read in *LS*: “Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it” (*LS*, 139). Thus, the human species is not apart from nature, but a part of nature. Every human species, therefore, needs natural resources for one’s own survival and quality of life.

The natural resources should not be the privilege for some and a source of frustration for many, but the good of humankind as a whole. Pope Francis is quite clear on this issue when stating that “[t]he natural environment is a collective good, the patrimony of all humanity and the responsibility of everyone” (*LS*, 95). The atmosphere, the oceans, the outer space and all the natural resources belong to all generations. This belief in Catholic social ethics led Pope Francis to affirm that “the climate is a common good, belonging to all and meant for all” (*LS*, 23). Hence, our ownership of these resources is only ours in so far as we form part of the human species. In the use of these global common goods, we cannot ignore the interests of the poor and future generations who are both disadvantaged. Current decisions are to be taken on the basis of the widest notion of the common good possible since we “cannot exclude those who come after us” (*LS*, 159). The present generation must not engage in economic activity, consume resources, undermine the functionality and efficiency of the economy, run into debt and pollute the environment at the expense of the poor and future generations. They, too, have the right to live in an intact environment and to enjoy its resources.

The intergenerational notion of common good opens up the door for deeper and broader reflections on solidarity and justice. On the basis of the rights of future generations, the intragenerational scope of these two social concepts is extended to an intergenerational perspective.

### *Intergenerational Solidarity*

The common good as a foundational principle of Catholic social ethics is closely intertwined with solidarity. As Pope Francis notes, “the principle of the common good immediately becomes, logically and inevitably, a summons to solidarity. ... This ... entails recognizing the implications of the universal destination of the world’s goods” (*LS*, 158). In the contemporary world, where “injustices abound and growing numbers of people are deprived of basic human rights and considered expendable,” working for the common good means to



make choices in solidarity based on “a preferential option for the poorest” (*LS*, 158). This preferential option for those who are in a disadvantaged position, namely the poor and future generations, “is in fact an ethical imperative essential for effectively attaining the common good” (*LS*, 158). He quotes Pope Benedict XVI by saying that “in addition to a fairer sense of intergenerational solidarity there is also an urgent moral need for a renewed sense of intragenerational solidarity” (*LS*, 162).

Pope John Paul II also reiterated the inseparable link between these two social concepts:

When interdependence becomes recognized in this way, the correlative response as a moral and social attitude, as a ‘virtue,’ is solidarity. This then is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* 38).

Thus, the common good is the good that comes into existence in a community of solidarity among active, equal agents. Since “every violation of solidarity and civic friendship harms the environment,” (*Caritas in veritate*, 51) Pope Francis claims that “we require a new and universal solidarity” (*LS*, 14) that extends to future generations. This is the point that Hans Jonas discusses when referring to the new categorical imperative of the ethics of responsibility towards generations yet to be born.

Pope Francis notes that intragenerational and intergenerational solidarity needs to be the standard for framing environmental policies. He calls the world community to draw plans for sustainable development which gives due importance to the dignity of every person, social equity and environmental protection. Intergenerational solidarity calls for a development plan which balances the welfare of both the present and the future generations.<sup>43</sup> Political leaders and scientists need to formulate policies and plans which do not destroy the eco-systems to bring quick profits to the local communities but may rob the future generations of their legitimate right of existence. Thus, in addition to a fairer sense of intragenerational solidarity, Pope Francis emphatically alludes to intergenerational solidarity because this world is a gift for all generations and not any one-generation. He notes that “we can no longer speak of sustainable

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<sup>43</sup> See Sandor Fulop, “The Institutional Representation of Future Generations,” in *Human Rights & Sustainability: Moral Responsibilities for the Future*, eds., Gerhard Bos and Marcus Duwell (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 195-211.

development apart from intergenerational solidarity. Once we start to think about the kind of world we are leaving to future generations, we look at things differently; we realize that the world is a gift which we have freely received and must share with others” (*LS*, 159).

Sustainable development cannot be realised without solidarity across generations. *LS* endorses something broader and more encompassing than what the world means by sustainable development. He appeals for “integral and sustainable human development” (*LS*, 18). The word “integral” makes a lot of difference! True development must rest on three pillars in order to be integral; it must include economic, social, and environmental aspects. And if one pillar is neglected, then the entire structure collapses. It must “transcend the language of mathematics and biology, and take us to the heart of what it is to be human” (*LS*, 11).

In Catholic social teaching, integral human development refers to the development of the whole person and every person. It encompasses the cultural, social, emotional, intellectual, aesthetic, and religious dimensions. It is an invitation for each person on the planet, living now or in the future, to flourish, to use the gifts given to them by God to become who they were meant to be. Development should not be conceived of in purely technocratic terms that set aside moral considerations. *LS* strongly condemns the dominance of the “technocratic paradigm” precisely for this reason. Pope Francis appeals to all people of good will to pursue a kind of progress that is more integral and more sustainable out of a sense of solidarity with creation, the current generation and posterity. This is one facet of the Pope’s integral ecology: the value of integration, solidarity with all members of the human species and harmony of our lives with the natural world (*LS*, 225). It comprehends “our unique place as human beings in this world and our relationship to our surroundings” (*LS*, 15), in the varied aspects of our life, in economy and politics, in various cultures, in particular those whose life and essence are most threatened.<sup>44</sup> Thus, the “integral ecology” approach in *LS* rests on the three social principles of the common good, solidarity and justice.

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<sup>44</sup> Peter Cardinal K.A. Turkson, “Catholic Social Teaching, Integral Ecology and Sustainable Development,” Conference: “Global Responsibility 2030: The MDGs and the Post-2015-Process as a challenge for the Universal Church,” Katholisch-Soziales Institut, Bad Honnef, Germany, 5 March 2016,). [https://ordosocialis.de/pdf/Turkson/2016.03.04\\_Turkson\\_CST\\_SDGs\\_Honnef.pdf](https://ordosocialis.de/pdf/Turkson/2016.03.04_Turkson_CST_SDGs_Honnef.pdf) (accessed on 4 September 2021)

### *Intergenerational Justice*

Human beings have differed greatly in the accounts they have given of the concept of 'justice.' They have spelt out the meanings and the practical implications of such phrases as "giving everyone his due" in many different ways. But they have always agreed on a number of basic points. The first is that justice is essential to human conviviality; secondly, that justice is not merely a matter concerning the relations between one individual and another; in traditional terms, "commutative justice." It also implies duties of individuals towards the community or communities to which they belong; in traditional terms, "social justice." Thirdly, the concept of justice is logically connected with the concepts of "equality" and "proportion"; hence the requirement that an individual contributes to the welfare of the community has particular relevance to the question of proper conduct towards the needier and weaker members of humankind.

Thus, social justice refers both to the duty of every member to contribute to the common good of the community, and to the responsibility of the community to all its members, with particular regard to those in a disadvantaged situation. Social justice demands the respect to everyone's right to share in the common good. Moreover, social justice appeals to the principle that a community has the moral duty to give particular help to its handicapped or weaker members – not in terms of 'desert' or 'reward' for their contribution to the productive process, but simply because of human solidarity. Future generations can also be seen as 'handicapped,' and the claim to reserve resources for their quality of life is based on similar ground to that on which it is argued that the State is bound in justice to make welfare provisions for the aged, the physically and mentally handicapped, and so on.<sup>45</sup>

It has already been argued that the resources of the earth belong to all generations. No country, continent or generation has an exclusive right to the natural resources of the earth. These resources have been handed over from past generations; it is therefore our responsibility to pass them on in good and enhanced condition to posterity. Moreover, we have an obligation grounded on social justice to share the common heritage with all the present population as well as with future generations. Social justice forbids any generation to exclude other generations from a fair share in the benefits of the common heritage of humankind. In other words, social justice demands a sense of solidarity with the whole family of humankind. We have an obligation to regulate our current consumption in order to share our resources with the poor and with unborn generations.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Agius, "Intergeneration Justice," 329.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 30

Pope Francis extends Catholic environmental ethics to advocate for those at the margins of social consciousness, namely, those who are most vulnerable to rapid environmental changes – the global poor and future generations. In fact, both *LS* and *QA* give due importance to intergenerational justice. *LS* claims that “true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*” (*LS*, 49). In *QA*, recalling his own encyclical *LS*, Pope Francis begins his first chapter on social issues by affirming that “a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” (*QA*, 8). Though these two citations do not refer specifically to posterity, the content of the encyclical and the post-synodal apostolic exhortation implicitly refer to the perilous plight of future generations. Even though future generations are voiceless and non-existent, their voice should be heeded because they, as today’s poor, belong to the category of the periphery. Due to their disadvantaged and marginalised position, their interests and rights are often disregarded in today’s socio-economic, political and environmental planning. Thus, justice has to be both intragenerational and intergenerational.

Intergenerational justice is not an option, but rather a basic question of fairness, since the world we have received belongs also to those who will follow us (*LS*, 159). Pope Francis’ model of integral ecology reinvigorates and extends Catholic ethical discourse on sustainability by addressing ecological concerns through the prism of care for the poor and future generations who are at the margins of social consciousness. Pope Benedict XVI has also asserted that intragenerational and intergenerational justice are inseparable:

The environment is God’s gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations and towards humanity as a whole. [...] Consequently, projects for integral human development cannot ignore coming generations but need to be marked by solidarity and intergenerational justice (*CV*, 48).

The model of unlimited economic growth has unfairly caused unprecedented destruction of ecosystems to the detriment of current and future generations. Pope Francis warns us that:

when nature is viewed solely as a source of profit and gain, this has serious consequences for society. This vision of ‘might is right’ has engendered immense inequality, injustice and acts of violence against the majority of humanity, since resources end up in the hands of the first comer or the most powerful: the winner takes all (*LS*, 82).

Integral progress is not merely technological innovation or the increase in economic growth rates, as conceived in the traditional understanding of progress. Instead, Pope Francis correlates integral progress above all with “an improvement in the quality of life” (*LS*, 46). This shifts the focus onto the fact that human well-being means more than satisfying material needs, and includes “the way to a better future” (*LS*, 113).

The need of “global regulatory norms ... to impose obligations and prevent unacceptable actions” (*LS*, 173) is a matter of intergenerational justice. Pope Francis appeals that “we can be silent witnesses to terrible injustices if we think that we can obtain significant benefits by making the rest of humanity, present and future, pay the extremely high costs of environmental deterioration” (*LS*, 36). Given the destructive outcomes of current consumption patterns and the use of inappropriate technology for the world’s poorest three billion people and for future generations (*LS*, 23-26), it is therefore a matter of intragenerational and intergenerational justice to implement a strategy of immediate mitigation of unsustainable practices since the “environment is part of a logic of receptivity. It is on loan to each generation, which must then hand it on to the next” (*LS*, 159). The present generation has a moral obligation to raise the level of its moral consciousness and conscientiousness towards posterity since “the effects of the present imbalance can only be reduced by our decisive action, here and now. We need to reflect on our accountability before those who will have to endure the dire consequences” (*LS*, 162). One of the decisive actions recommended by *LS* for changing harmful habits of consumption is circular economy:

We have not yet managed to adopt a circular model of production capable of preserving resources for present and future generations, while limiting as much as possible the use of non-renewable resources, moderating their consumption, maximizing their efficient use, reusing and recycling them (*LS*, 22).

Moreover, it is a matter of intergenerational justice to avoid the long-term threats of harm that will adversely affect future people. One of the moral obligations ensuing from intergenerational justice is to take immediate action if environmental damage is foreseen with a reasonable degree of probability. *LS* defends the precautionary principle when stating that “if objective information suggests that serious and irreversible damage may result, a project should be halted or modified, even in the absence of indisputable proof” (*LS*, 186). According to *LS* “the precautionary principle makes it possible to protect those who are most vulnerable and whose ability to defend their interests and to assemble incontrovertible evidence is limited” (*LS*, 186). This echoes the precautionary principle as endorsed in the Stockholm Declaration and the Rio Declaration.

Pope Francis advocates this principle as an ethical guide in the decision-making process which can be paralysed by lack of information or confidence. It is a call for a comprehensive risk management assessment at the appropriate time before harm is done (*LS*, 183).

## Concluding Reflections

“What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up?” (*LS*, 160). This question is at the heart of *LS*. It is interesting to note that Pope Francis contextualizes his ecological concern within a broader context about the issue of self-identity, the meaning of human existence and the purpose of human life. He pleads that:

Unless we struggle with these deeper issues, I do not believe that our concern for ecology will produce significant results. But if those issues are courageously faced, we are led inexorably to ask other pointed questions: 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? What need does the earth have of us? It is no longer enough, then, simply to state that we should be concerned for future generations. We need to see that what is at stake is our own dignity. Leaving an inhabitable planet to future generations is, first and foremost, up to us. The issue is one which dramatically affects us, for it has to do with the ultimate meaning of our earthly sojourn (*LS*, 160).

These existential questions are raised in *LS* because “it would hardly be helpful to describe symptoms without acknowledging the human origins of the ecological crisis” (*LS*, 101). The roots of the present ecological crisis lies within the human person! We are failing to understand our place in the ecosystem; we have lost our pride and the spirit of our dignity; we have become insensitive to the human dignity of those generations yet to be born; we have become deaf to the cries of nature, the poor and future generations; we have become blind and ignorant to the environmental degradation; we are exclusively driven by short-term interests; we forgot who we are; we have lost our sense of awe and wonder of the beauty, intrinsic worth, value and sacredness of creation, the purpose and meaning of everything; we have become indifferent to those who are vulnerable; we have become enslaved by the technocratic paradigm; and we are being misled by the myth of unlimited economic growth!

Pope Francis observes that humanity, with its exultation of superficiality, has changed profoundly; it has become “difficult to pause and recover depth of life” (*LS*, 101). He laments that it is indeed sad that “people no longer seem to believe in a happy future; they no longer have blind trust in a better tomorrow

based on the present state of the world and our technical abilities” (*LS*, 113). In the malaise of today’s throwaway culture “a certain way of understanding human life and activity has gone awry, to the serious detriment of the world around us. Should we not pause and consider this?” (*LS*, 101).

The current generation cannot respect the dignity of those generations yet to come unless it rediscovers its own identity and dignity. Both philosophy and the Judeo-Christian tradition can be a source of inspiration for understanding who we are, our place in the creation, our connectivity to the ecosystem, and our moral sensitivity to the value and dignity of others as well as the intrinsic worth of creation, no matter whether they are living close to us or distant in space and time. Kant’s writings produced the most profound changes in modern philosophy and in modern thinking about ourselves. His definition of human worth ultimately became the exclusive definition in philosophy. The German philosopher defined the special value of the human species residing in the human being’s autonomy. The dignity, or the worth, of the human being is not based on our reasoning powers, although he acknowledged that they are quite different from other animals, but is based on our freedom, our autonomy. Since future generations belong to the human species, they have also inherent dignity and the right to have their dignity respected and protected. Even though they do not yet exist and we do not know what they want, we can safely say that they want their freedom to be esteemed and safeguarded and their right to enjoy a healthy environment to be respected. Legitimate claims by the current generation for respect of its dignity cannot be segregated from the respect owed to posterity. The more we learn to respect the dignity and rights of generations yet to come the more we become what we are supposed to be, thus becoming fully authentic.

Moreover, the Judeo-Christian tradition renders the concept of human dignity more coherent by asserting that every single human being has dignity because it is loved by the Creator, made in His image, and destined for eternal friendship and communion. In the Christian tradition the concept of human dignity assumes a universal perspective. Human dignity does not apply solely to those living now but also to generation to come in so far as they are also members of the human species. God’s plan of salvation encompasses all generations. “I will make my promise to you and your descendants for generations to come as an everlasting promise. I will be your God and the God of your descendants” (Gen 17:6-7). God’s promise of cosmic and universal salvation made to Abraham is fulfilled in Jesus Christ who redeemed the entire creation and all generations. *LS* refers to the task of the Judeo-Christian tradition in our soul-searching process on the true meaning, purpose and destiny of human existence as follows:

The ultimate destiny of the universe is in the fullness of God, which has already been attained by the risen Christ. .... The ultimate purpose of other creatures is not to be found in us. Rather, all creatures are moving forward with us and through us towards a common point of arrival, which is God, in that transcendent fullness where the risen Christ embraces and illumines all things. Human beings, endowed with intelligence and love, and drawn by the fullness of Christ, are called to lead all creatures back to their Creator (*LS*, 83).

The dignity of future generations cannot be bargained on the pretext that we do not know their wishes or interests, nor ignored under the excuse of their ‘non-identity’. Since everything is interconnected, a “genuine care for our own lives and our relationship with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice and faithfulness to others” (*LS*, 70). Intergenerational fraternity based on respect for human dignity is realised when we learn:

to cultivate and maintain a proper relationship with my neighbour, for whose care and custody I am responsible, ruins my relationship with my own self, with others, with God and with the earth. When all these relationships are neglected, when justice no longer dwells in the land, the Bible tells us that life itself is endangered (*LS*, 70).

When we rediscover and embrace our own dignity, then we “recognise that other living beings have a value of their own in God’s eyes” (*LS*, 69). One understands Pope Francis’ call for a profound interior ecological *metanoia* (*LS*, 217) and for a renewal of ecological spirituality “grounded in the convictions of our faith, since the teachings of the Gospel have direct consequences for our way of thinking, feeling and living” (*LS*, 216). As individuals, institutions, and people, we need a change of heart, a renewal of the meaning of our existence, and a reawakening of our identity and purpose of life, to save the planet for our children and the far-distant unborn generations. Real global change towards environmental sustainability requires a series of “conversions” whose dimensions are personal, social, and cultural. The political and economic conversions necessary for an effective transformation of unjust realities are also necessary.

*LS* is a profound call to change habits and to embrace virtues (*LS*, 217) to heal, protect and care for our planet, to save the ecological system on which life depends, and to assure a sustainable future for posterity. Reconciliation with creation, others living now and future generations can be realised by a personal conversion, a change of heart. The healing of our relationship with nature, others and posterity is the fruit of a new life-style. “If we feel intimately united with all that exists, then sobriety and care will well up spontaneously” (*LS*, 11). So vast are the ecological problems that are so intertwined with our economy and way of



life that nothing except a wholehearted and ever more profound turning to God, Father of all generations and the Maker of Heaven and Earth, will empower us to carry out our responsibilities as faithful stewards of God's creation.

The ecological conversion of humankind is a necessary step towards sustainability. Let us hope that future generations will show some form of gratitude to their previous generations for their efforts to change in order to bequeath to them a liveable Earth!

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