COMMENTARY

The Immense Cry Channeled by Pope Francis

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The audacity of the *Laudato si'* encyclical is equaled only by the multiple efforts to deaden as much as possible its message and effects.[1] Once again, ecological questions, as soon as they are introduced into the regular course of our familiar thought patterns, modify from top to bottom the attitudes of all the protagonists. *How can a pope dare to speak of ecology?* ask both the faithful—who expect an encyclical either to reinforce a doctrinal matter or to clarify some moral question—and the indifferent, who have never touched an encyclical in their lives nor expected anything at all from the magisterium of the church. Many of the faithful block their ears so as not to hear the voice calling for radical conversion ("All of this shows the urgent need for us to move forward in a bold cultural revolution" [§114]), while the indifferent prick up their ears to listen to the voice of someone whom they do not for a second imagine could be "on their side" ("The imposition of a dominant lifestyle linked to a single form of production can be just as harmful as the altering of ecosystems" [§145]).

Like all major religious or political texts, *Laudato si'* requires a realignment of all established positions and requires one to take a stand in the midst of battles that one did not know to be so violent and in which one did not know the Church could play a part. The Church has long been alienated from political, moral, or intellectual innovation and until now limited to a more or less strict preservation of the "treasure of faith" and to bringing in the moral police. And now it is sending a message, putting it at the heart of the most vital arguments, as if it were still present in history. What? Has the pope written a new *Communist Party Manifesto*? Some are scandalized, others rejoice. Everyone

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is surprised. We must shut this down immediately! The Vatican belongs to the past; it cannot be in the present.

And yet if the power of innovation of the *Laudato si'* is so strong, it is because its author—and this text, surprising as it may seem for an encyclical, does have an author, a pen, a voice—makes, it seems to me, two major innovations, namely: the link between ecology and injustice and the recognition of the power of the earth itself to act and to suffer. In a really interesting way, these two innovations are associated with the strange word *cry*, for which Francis is the channel, amplifier, and interpreter (*clameur* in French, *grido* in Italian): "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*" (§49; emphasis in original).

Here, already, is a turn of major importance. Ecologists, whether they are superficial or deep, remain obsessed by the "nature" that they want to defend or protect. They always seem less concerned by inequalities, injustices, or misery. To the point where, on the political scene, people continue to oppose those who are preoccupied by "ecological questions" and those who put "social questions" first—not to forget the strange opposition, on the left as much as the right, between ecology and economy. The encyclical fixes this with one phrase: there is only one cry, and it is not coming at all from the former clamorers of "ecology" and "society" but from "the earth" and "the poor." Every word matters. The earth is not just any corner of nature; the poor are not just any humans, any social beings. What makes their cry all the more violent for those getting ready to listen is that it still remains unarticulated.

But how can one speak of a cry coming *from the earth?* This is where we find the second innovation. The surprise is well crafted, no doubt about it. Jorge Mario Bergoglio seems only to have taken the name Francis to give a new theological weight to the *Canticle of the Creatures*, which for fifty years has been a fragile protection for all the Catholics who have been accused of embracing a theology justifying the pillage of the planet by reinforcing the idea of the "domination of man over nature." "Yes, yes," said the theologians up until now, quite embarrassed by the accusation of being indifferent to ecological destruction, "but just read the *Canticle* of Saint Francis, can't you see that we respect, we are even enchanted by, flowers, birds, wind, and the waters of rivers?" Hundreds of books written warning of the dangers of materialism, of immanence, of modernism, of technology, of science, or of the worship of matter; total indifference when it comes to corporate planetary destruction; enthusiastic destruction of all the ancient cultures mistakenly called "pagan," and, on the other side, a tiny little canticle.

I was quite well disposed, myself, reading the *Canticle*, but in the end, I found it quite bland, and I even made up a doctrine for myself: if one must speak seriously about ecological theology, then one has to refrain from citing it. Well! I was mistaken; Pope Francis puts me back on the right path with one little sentence: "These situations have caused sister earth, along with all the abandoned of our world, to cry out [*lamento* in the Italian version], pleading that we take another course" (§53). *Une clameur, un*

lamento: this is not a message, a doctrine, a slogan, a piece of advice, a fact; it is something in the territory of a cry, a signal, a rumor, a stirring, and an alarm—something, in any case, that makes one sit up and that effectively makes one listen to what is coming "from another direction." By definition, a clamor is an immense warning sound, and one has nothing with which to decode it. A clamor says nothing; it makes heads turn.

But how can it be about "pleading"?[2] The encyclical begins with this curious configuration borrowed initially from the very pages of the *Canticle of the Creatures*: "Praise be to you, my Lord, through *our Sister, Mother Earth*, who *sustains* and *governs* us, and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs" (§1; emphasis added). Which is then followed by this commentary:

> This sister now *cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her* by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. This is *why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she "groans in travail"* (Rom. 8:22). (§2; emphasis added)

It is this quite strange beginning that puts the stamp of originality on this combative text. Saint Francis's *Canticle*, and specifically this bizarre genealogy of mother and sister earth endowed with the capacity to "sustain and govern," had until now retained its poetic, bucolic, and medieval aspect; it was only a decorative historical detail, something pleasantly Franciscan. In any case, no one would have taken this curious metaphor for a literal description of a state of affairs. Descartes has been there already. It has been well more than three centuries since any good Catholic could speak of the earth as if she were his mother or sister (let alone "our Sister, Mother Earth"!). Why would the Church have sent missionaries around the world and asked them to topple the altars of all the cults to Mother Earth if it was to broadcast an elegy to this archaic power in 2015 from the very center of the Vatican? Really! We are not savages!

But by establishing this amazing short-circuit with ecology, our Sister, Mother Earth (some would call her Gaia), in one fell swoop of incredible brutality becomes a power to act, a capacity to suffer, to be hurt, to groan, which this time becomes *literal* rather than metaphoric. What had until now sounded like an archaism of the Middle Ages and its generalized analogisms ("Through the greatness and the beauty of creatures one comes to know by analogy their maker" [Saint Francis again; §12]) becomes the urgent presence of a new entity, never before considered as such by Christian theology: "Among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor" (and therefore in the most honored position for Christianity, as Péguy would say) is found "the earth herself,

2. *Gémissements* in the French: "Ces situations provoquent les gémissements de sœur terre" (§53).

burdened and laid waste." And the theological innovation is further amplified by the citation from Romans 8:22, which comes to place the groans of the exploited earth at the same level as creation "groan[ing] in travail." It is an amazing amalgamation: creation, the earth, nature, the poor—all this in a genealogy of violence and painful childbirth. Certainly political theology has not stopped surprising us. It can still innovate by cutting the mythic cloth differently to dress for the present day.

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Could this be primitivization of theology? Could the Vatican be switching to a New Age style? It is true that unlike his predecessors, Pope Francis is spending scarcely any time condemning the "paganism" attributed until now to ecological sensibilities. He pays it lip service; the word *immanence*, usually used to beat up on naturalism, is only mentioned once ("It would be nothing more than romantic individualism dressed up in ecological garb, locking us into a stifling immanence" [§119]). And only just; he really only halfheartedly makes the classical condemnation of the divinization of the earth ("Nor does it imply a divinization of the earth which would prevent us from working on it and protecting it in its fragility" [§90]), a quite unstable term since he matches it with another use of the same term, this time positive, which is not so easy to differentiate from the precedent ("Creation is projected towards divinization, towards the holy wedding feast, towards unification with the Creator himself" [§236]). The distinction between earth and creation has become quite subtle. And yet that does not seem to embarrass Francis. After all, he is Latin American. The continent that suffered the most violent occupation on earth hears the cry of the Earth and the poor quite differently from Europe. The surprising thing is that the tonality of the text is (I scarcely dare write it) *pluralist* ("If we are truly concerned to develop an ecology capable of remedying the damage we have done, no branch of the sciences and no form of wisdom can be left out, and that includes religion and the language particular to it" [§63]). No, it is clear that the encyclical is not aiming to condemn doctrinal errors ("relativism" is certainly criticized, but in its practical dimension [§122]). It encourages science as much as respect (a belated respect, unfortunately) for other forms of wisdom. But what makes the text even more surprising, and what explains the profound annoyance of those who would in no way want to make ecology into a spiritual question—or who would, conversely, be prepared to give it lip service if this matter *remained* simply spiritual—is that Francis suddenly gets specific and names the names of the enemies responsible for the situation. The encyclical explicitly describes what it should not be: "Consequently the most one can expect is superficial rhetoric, sporadic acts of philanthropy and perfunctory expressions of concern for the environment, whereas any genuine attempt by groups within society to introduce change is viewed as a nuisance based on romantic illusions or an obstacle to be circumvented" (§54).

If he had stuck to a somewhat wild interpretation of the *Canticle of the Creatures*, he could have been forgiven, but the pope goes so far as to draw direct consequences from the positions of all and sundry (financiers, CO_2 emitters, industrialists, and other

polluters)! Whole passages of the encyclical read like summaries of articles on climate politics to do with oceans, soils, carbon trading, town planning, and waste. Like the banner displayed at the big climate change demonstration in Manhattan in September 2014, Bergoglio could also announce: "We know who is responsible!"

Could this encyclical not only be New Age but also anticapitalist? Where could we be heading? And here, once again, everything gets messy—I mean, everything becomes interesting again. We were used to *antimodernist* encyclicals; last century was full of them, even if less and less attention was paid to them each time. But here we have a revolutionary encyclical, in the doubly surprising sense that in criticizing once again the modern world, it links in its own way, via ecology, with that which is most contemporary! We are well aware that we will have to choose between modernization and ecologization, but what we did not know was that Sister Mother Earth could also become a way of analyzing, of observing, of revolutionizing the current situation.

In the seventeenth century, political theology invented a solution for the unstable separation of religion (which had become a private affair through abandoning all links with the cosmos) and the rest of the modern world (science, technology, economy), which filled up the world. But the irruption of ecology overturns this rickety solution by obliging religion to speak of the cosmos again, but in a quite different way, and therefore to rebuild politics quite differently as well! Yes, of course, *Laudato si'* is a funny kind of text—wordy, busy, contradictory, repetitive—but this is because it is itself channeling this immense cry, which is impossible to decode rapidly, which makes one prick up one's ears, turn one's head toward those other actors, so different from nature and from humanity: a Sister Mother Earth whom we had almost forgotten was herself capable of suffering, like the poor who are tangled up with her. It is up to the readers now to channel, in turn, this immense cry.

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