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The World Is the Road to God: The Encyclical *Laudato Si'* and the “Ecological” Vision of Pope Francis [†]

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Abstract: Today, the response to the consequences of present and future environmental catastrophes tends to take three forms: one purely technological-productive coming from the alliance between States and the Market; another one, which is essentially movementist, is confusedly fragmented into initiatives, often contradictory to each other, without having a strong ideological-political vision at its base; and the third one refers to apocalyptic or posthuman messianisms of a philosophical-religious nature. None of the three forms envisions a radical transformation of the current political-economic system. In this context, the voice of the Catholic Church emerges strongly to denounce the systemic reasons for the environmental disaster and at the same time to oppose the current system another system, centered on alternative assumptions. This article will analyze the encyclical *Laudato Si'* (2015), which, sometimes mistaken for a simple text on Christian ecology, should actually be interpreted as a manifesto for a new world, based on the idea of a total anthropological and socio-political revolution. The analysis of the Encyclical is intended to highlight the historical-theological foundations and the ability to adapt some of the cornerstones of Catholicism (in particular of the Franciscan and Jesuit matrix) to the resolution of the current ecological emergency.

Keywords: encyclical; Pope Francis; Jesuits; Puritans; environmental catastrophe; ecology



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1. Introduction

The ecological question, linked to the technological potential for irreversible transformation of the world and its resources, has taken on enormous proportions in recent years, as it should. The immense process of globalization within which we are immersed, the decadence of traditional institutions (states, parties, trade unions, schools, and universities), the economic and pandemic crises, and wars, have determined a general climate of uncertainty¹, characterized by, on the one hand, the growing sense of imminent catastrophe, and on the other by a vague movementism whose goals cannot but appear sacrosanct to us, but whose strategies and prospects continue to prove somewhat vague.

Broadly speaking, in our opinion, these are the main recurring conceptions:

1. A generically movementist one: Let us think of the global experience of Fridays for Future, which started as a great wave of youth protest (2018), calling on politicians to act and limit carbon dioxide emissions according to signed international agreements, and to stipulate other and more stringent ones. But let us also think about the striking and provocative actions in public spaces developed by organized groups such as Just Stop Oil or Extinction Rebellion. The purpose of all this is to raise public awareness and urge politicians to intervene. While imagining the presence of a strong value base, and even deep spiritual sensitivities, it remains difficult to determine whether there is an equally solid ideological foundation underneath such movements that goes beyond the good intentions of “happy degrowth”, a current of thought advocating for,

precisely, a progressive “degrowth” of the economy to avoid catastrophe (Latouche 1989, 2006, 2010).

2. The second one, essentially technological-productive in nature, is shared by most Western political institutions, especially supranational ones such as the European Union, and by a significant sector of the global business and financial world. This is so-called “sustainable development”. The ecological turn, without questioning the principles of neoliberal economics in the slightest, is exclusively declined in a technical paradigm shift through the identification and use of new environmentally sustainable means of production and distribution.
3. Then there are a number of essentially philosophical–religious positions that see the environmental disaster, first, as one of the signs of the impending and in some cases desirable apocalypse (e.g., in a part of the American-based evangelical movements discussed later in this article). Second, as an opportunity to rethink humanism in a negative sense as a current of thought that, by proclaiming humankind’s dominion over nature, actually created the cultural preconditions for the current ecological catastrophe. The latter should be seen as an opportunity to transcend the human into new forms of post-human or trans-human existence (Adorno 2021) that allow, even through the use of technology no longer based on the mere will to power, a technological transformation of the human being himself and his “lowered” repositioning in nature (Braidotti and Bignall 2018; Grusin 2015; Kohn 2013)².

In essence, as we can see, the set of these ideas (especially the first two) does not radically question the current political–economic system but thinks, if anything (when not looking at definitive solutions of mutation), about a virtuous practice of rearranging the productive system, based on an unspecified desire for conservation.

In the Western world, especially Europe, which is now secular and secularized, it is surprising that one of the strongest voices raised to denounce the systemic reasons for the environmental disaster and at the same time able to oppose the current system with another system, centered on alternative assumptions, has been that of the institution of the Catholic Church. In this sense, the encyclical *Laudato Si’* (2015), sometimes mistaken for a simple text on Christian ecology, is actually the manifesto for a new world, based on the idea of a total anthropological and socio-political revolution³. Pope Francis’ attention to these issues appears deep and constant. This is demonstrated by the recent writing of the Apostolic Exhortation *Laudate Deum* (2023)⁴, which appears to be a reprise and confirmation of the main issues addressed in *Laudato Si’*. The need to return to these issues ten years later strongly reiterates the seriousness of the environmental problem and its underestimation by major national and international institutions, and especially markets.

2. The Church as an Anti-Economic Institution

To better understand the reasons for such a position, we find it of great interest to return to an essay by Carl Schmitt (1923), *Römischer Katholizismus und politische Form*. In this extraordinary text, which follows by a year the publication of the seminal *Politische Theologie. Vier Kapitel zur Lehre der Souveränität* (Schmitt 1922), Schmitt locates the profound meaning of the Catholic “political” in its opposition to the techno-economic thinking already dominant in the early twentieth century. This is particularly interesting for our discussion, first because Schmitt bases the distinction between the Church of Rome and Protestantism on it:

The Huguenot or the Puritan (. . .) He can build his industry far and wide, make all soil the servant of his skilled labor and “inner-worldly asceticism”, and in the end have a comfortable home; all this because he makes himself master of nature and harnesses it to his will. His type of domination remains inaccessible to the Roman Catholic concept of nature. Roman Catholic peoples appear to love the soil, mother earth, in a different way; they all have their own “terrisme” [loyalty to the land]. Nature is for them not the antithesis of art and enterprise, also not of

intellect and feeling or heart; human labor and organic development, nature and reason, are one. (Schmitt 1996, pp. 10–11.)

Its enemy here is “the Protestant paradigm of productive secularization” (Galli 2010, p. 90), identified a few years earlier by Max Weber in his epoch-making essay *Die Protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* (Weber 1904–1905). The great Calvinist alliance between Christianity and capitalism, which enables the latter to equip itself for the future while at the same time re-functionalizing the meaning of the ancient religion, enabling it to live on with new sap, is seen as a fearsome enemy. Schmitt’s insight is decidedly prophetic. Indeed, if we were to identify the most staunchly anti-environmentalist positions today, we would find almost all of them in the Protestant and especially in the most traditionalist and reactionary sectors of American evangelicalism (Veldman 2019). It is no coincidence that it is an oilman and evangelical president like George W. Bush who refuses to ratify the Kyoto Agreements (2001); and it is still a president like Donald Trump (whose religious sincerity is all up for debate, but whose “cultural puritanism” seems clear (Ilardi and Tarzia 2017)), who ranks among the most openly denialist rulers in the world. The evangelical thinks the world, or in Trump’s case uses that thought, as a space given to human beings, and to the nation of the chosen, to be modified in the key of individual and collective success: once the work is done, the Apocalypse can come without any remorse. Indeed, accelerating the exploitation of resources brings closer the Day of Judgment and the fateful moment of the distinction between “wheat and darnel”. There is in all this a vision of the world as a dimension of evil that does not belong in an absolute sense to the Catholic (it will be appropriate to return to this point later).

It should be further specified that such a view is not typical of all Protestantism, which by its very identity appears varied and diverse, especially in the evangelical galaxy, and which in specific present-day cases shows a much more sensitive and open theoecological attitude (Conradie 2012, 2013; Chitando and Conradie 2022).

It is also true that the Lutheran idea of vocation connected to work (Beruf stands for both vocation and profession) refers to a vision of work precisely, and therefore of the human–environment relationship, that is much more discreet, almost intimate, and certainly less destructive. However, it seems to us that the great turn in the modern capitalist direction is generated by the Calvinist vision, which is much more relatable to the theme of money and profit rather than to the essential model of life regulated and rationalized by a profession.

When we speak of Calvinism, we do so in a “cultural” sense and refer essentially to the North American world. Above all, we think of the particular Puritan “patrist” Calvinism (Miller 1953, 1954, 1956), that of the great emigration to the New World that occurred in the mid-seventeenth century. Such a mindset, centered on strong religious assumptions of predestination and work ethic, but also of extreme economic and commercial freedom, underlies American identity (Bercovitch 1975). It is no coincidence that one of the emblematic examples studied by Weber is that of Benjamin Franklin and his autobiography (1790). In particular, it seems to us that the Puritan idea transplanted to America, as it encounters the infinite spaces of the frontier, goes on to find an extreme way of exploiting natural resources. In our opinion, it is precisely such an idea, which spurs the continuous search for spaces of exploitation (from space to the web), that is still active today (Tarzia and Ilardi 2015).

However, to attribute to Schmitt a view of the Catholic Church simply as anti-capitalist would be wrong. Rather, in his view, the real issue concerns the all-economic way of constructing the society of the era coeval with him. From his perspective, in fact, the techno-scientific paradigm dominates the world on both the capitalist and communist sides, to the point that “American financiers and Russian Bolsheviks find themselves in a common struggle for economic thinking, the struggle against politicians and jurists” (Schmitt 1996, p. 13). In short, between capitalists and communists, there would be the same basic approach and only a disagreement on how to achieve such material happiness.

The Church, on the other hand, is a deeply political institution and has its own rationality derived from the imprinting of Rome; that is, a rationality that is essentially

juridical. The pope is not a prophet, but the vicar—within a regulated institution—of Christ. Such “rationalism” cannot conceive of the “domination and exploitation of matter” (Schmitt 1996, p. 13). On the contrary, economic “rationalism” serves only to satisfy needs, since rationalized production is oriented toward irrational consumption. The Catholic is horrified by this because he sees a mechanism of purely satisfying material needs, without any reference to any other purpose.

The authority of the Church lies in its

power of representation. It represents the *civitas humana*. It represents in every moment the historical connection to the incarnation and crucifixion of Christ. It represents the Person of Christ Himself: God became human in historical reality. Therein lies its superiority over an age of economic thinking. (Schmitt 1996, p. 19)

Representation refers to something that is not there in immediately perceivable reality: God. And, in fact, “the representative of a noble value cannot be without value” (Schmitt 1996, p. 21). In contrast, economic society does not represent, but needs the “real presence of the thing” (Schmitt 1996, p. 22). Not surprisingly, the terms normally used to describe this economic relationship are “reflection” or “mirroring”, just as in the Marxist idea of the superstructure.

In Schmitt’s view, the “economic”, as opposed to the “political”, is impressed by the spectacularity of representation, but perceives it superficially, and does not understand its deeper meaning, which is the “kernel” that lies “in the linguistic capacity of a great rhetoric” (Schmitt 1996, p. 23).

3. World Is a Medium

It is this foundational idea that underlies *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis’ second encyclical (24 May 2015). It appears as a very powerful stance in the current discussion because, on the one hand, it explicitly identifies the causes of the crisis in the perverse combination of technology and finance, that is, in the current development of the pair that Schmitt described as economic–technical. On the other hand, he proposes a strategic solution based on a Christian idea of the man–world relationship, that is, linked to a basic anti-economic concept that sees humans as beings belonging to the world and not outside it. It is interesting that in order to theorize this concept it is necessary to deny, branding it as a misinterpretation, the biblical idea of creation as an act of donation of creation to humankind who would become its lord and master, legitimized to exploit its resources (*Laudato Si’*, II, 2)⁵.

The theological assumption is that the real is not an empty space (i.e., devoid of God’s presence) and therefore to be modified as “given” to human beings, and especially to predestined humans, as in the Calvinist–Puritan idea, but is, on the contrary, the manifestation of divine creation and its presence in reality and history.

Therein lies the profound expression of the Franciscan soul of Pope Bergoglio’s text: the world is a medium, Marshall McLuhan (1964) would say, that connects creatures (and human beings at the center, though no longer in a dominant position) with the Creator. In order to be able to look to God and return to Him, it is inescapable to take the way of the world, but for this to happen, it is equally inescapable to care for that environment, which was set up by God Himself in the act of His creation. Looking at it from another point of view, in order for communication to be possible, it is necessary that the medium be cared for and maintained in the best possible way; that is, that it be well functioning, and that each of its parts, that is, each of its creatures, be in its place and in health, exactly as at the moment of its primal placement. After all, the action of caring for the environment, which Bergoglio always considers as a whole (natural, social, economic), is nothing but a great communicative act:

85. God has written a precious book, “whose letters are the multitude of created things present in the universe”. [54] The Canadian bishops rightly pointed out that no creature is excluded from this manifestation of God: “From panoramic

vistas to the tiniest living form, nature is a constant source of wonder and awe. It is also a continuing revelation of the divine". [56] This contemplation of creation allows us to discover in each thing a teaching which God wishes to hand on to us, since "for the believer, to contemplate creation is to hear a message, to listen to a paradoxical and silent voice". [57] We can say that "alongside revelation properly so-called, contained in sacred Scripture, there is a divine manifestation in the blaze of the sun and the fall of night". [58] Paying attention to this manifestation, we learn to see ourselves in relation to all other creatures: "I express myself in expressing the world; in my effort to decipher the sacredness of the world, I explore my own". (*Laudato Si'*, II, 4)

And more:

86. The universe as a whole, in all its manifold relationships, shows forth the inexhaustible riches of God. Saint Thomas Aquinas wisely noted that multiplicity and variety "come from the intention of the first agent" who willed that "what was wanting to one in the representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another", [60] inasmuch as God's goodness "could not be represented fittingly by any one creature". [61] Hence we need to grasp the variety of things in their multiple relationships. (ibid.)

In short: if you burn the pages or disrupt the order of the great book of nature, you make communicative action, which in turn is central to the action of "returning to the Father's house", impossible.

And here we need to pick up the thread of the discourse left earlier concerning the Protestant idea of the world as an empty or evil dimension. It is not entirely true that in its slow historical process, Catholicism has been immune from this danger. It is no accident that in order to place the idea of the world as a medium at the center of his discourse, Bergoglio must actually "Franciscanize" Christianity. In fact, to schematize, Christian history is traversed by a double vision, a "Jewish" and a "Greek" one, whose substantial difference lies precisely in the opposite interpretation of worldly space. Hebraically such space is empty and dangerous; Hellenistically, on the other hand, it is beautiful and livable⁶. In short, here, we are measured against a foundational factor that for much of the history of the Church has considered the world as a negative dimension and therefore to be "skipped" (Tarzia 2022), assuming that the return to God can only occur by taking an opposite path, that is, one that starts from the interiority, from the fortitude of the soul that defends the divine flame left in human being.

It is with Francis of Assisi, and especially with his extraordinary stance in the *Canticle of Creatures* (1224–1226), that this idea is definitively abandoned. The praise of creation, which Francis introduces into the Christian tradition in such a powerful way, leads to God and acts as a conduit to God. It is no accident that some philologists have read the famous "per" (=for) of the text ("laudato si per sora luna e le stelle . . . per frate vento . . . per sor'acqua", etc.) as "medial" (dia = through) (Contini 1960, pp. 30–31).

These are the real reasons why that contained in *Laudato Si'* today represents something much more powerful and "revolutionary" than a mere ecological vision. Its ecological side is embedded in and is part of a powerful "ideological" system that is not simply moved by an individual or collective urge for physical survival, but on the contrary, derives from a precise worldview that puts at the center the principle of anthropological and spiritual regeneration of humankind: "There will be no new relationship with nature without a new human being. There is no ecology without an adequate anthropology" (*Laudato si*, III, III). It is precisely the anthropological aspect that guarantees a genuine revolution. Only the changed anthropology allows a healthy intervention in the economy. This is a vision capable of opposing both the humanistic-derived technological paradigm and the opposite side of post-human theorizing. A human being is no longer the ruler of the universe with the power to transform it at will, but neither is he a particle among billions of particles: in the Bergoglian vision, he is rather a kind of "responsible steward" of an "apartment building" within which God has placed him (ibid.). Thus, it is clear that the

economic system must follow the rules and boundaries of this house; indeed, it should be an instrument aimed at its care and preservation, thus recuperating its Greek root *oikonomia* (law/rule of the house).

4. Franciscans and Jesuits

Thus, the encyclical *Laudato Si'* expresses a structural position of the Catholic Church, as Schmitt explained to us, but it also subtends, as is obvious, a more historical root, traceable to a precise example: that of Francis of Assisi, of his personal story of conversion from wealth to poverty, and his extraordinary innovative drive within medieval Christianity. And not only that. The Franciscan assumption in itself does not fully explain Bergoglio's operation, except by assuming that in the figure of the pontiff two matrices converge, coinciding with the name adopted and the Order from which he actually comes, that is, between Franciscanism and Jesuitism.

That there are deep convergences between the two approaches is beyond doubt. Cardinal Marcello Semeraro has identified a "spiritual predisposition" of the Ignatian Jesuit with respect to the teaching of Francis of Assisi (Semeraro 2023) (see also: De Leturia 2021). It is well known since his autobiography (Loyola 1997) how much Ignatius was inspired by his figure, especially because he read in it the confirmation of the idea of God's presence in all things, and thus the clear indication of the way back to the Creator. In other words, Ignatius' great innovation would have been impossible without the openness to the world theorized and practiced by Francis and unimaginable in previous centuries.

Semeraro rightly quotes in this regard an interesting interview by Jacques Le Goff, given a month before his death to Fabio Gambaro, precisely in reference to the connection between Francis of Assisi and Francis-Bergoglio⁷. The great French historian identifies the strongest point of contact between the two figures in the lucid awareness of being part of an immense social, economic, and cultural transformation, which brings with it the tragic awareness of an enormous issue related to the growth of wealth and consequently of inequality. The "two Francises" have in common the fight against money and poverty, but while the former is moving in the era in which everything begins, the latter lives in the era of the crisis of that model.

However, these common foundations do not exclude important differences between Francis of Assisi and Ignatius. In the former, going to the cities to preach, to work to procure necessities is combined with returning to the hermitage, in silence, to recharge oneself, to purify the conscience troubled by the evil one must nonetheless measure oneself against if one wants to be in the world. But such entry is still uncertain and hesitant. The geographic space that can be traversed is still small and limited; Ignatius', on the contrary, is now "globalized", and completely open. The Jesuit in fact no longer imagines a home; he cannot return to the hermitage, but rather is in perpetual motion, and, after all, the *Spiritual Exercises* are nothing more than a tool to empty and appease the conscience and make the mission possible without always having to return to the solitude of the mountain: they are a kind of transportable hermitage, in short⁸.

The Jesuit in this sense swims in the deep end: he is a sheep among wolves but also a wolf among sheep, or a hunter of souls. He has the Franciscan gentleness and the steadfastness of the soldier. And that is exactly how Pope Francis wants them:

Let them be brave, let them be tender. Don't forget that Ignatius was a great one for tenderness. He wanted Jesuits brave with tenderness. And he wanted them men of prayer. Courage, tenderness and prayer are enough for a Jesuit.

(Pope Francis in conversation with Jesuits in Congo and in South Sudan. "The Church is not a multinational spirituality corporation"—18 Feb. 2023)⁹.

In short, what changes between Franciscans and Jesuits is the world, and therefore the strategy of relating to it. The Franciscan looks at it, enters it timidly and happily absorbed, and re-enters it to recharge. The Jesuit is in it completely, and he cannot abandon it, even temporarily: he is an integral part of it.

In a recent speech, Pope Francis very well explained this difficult positioning.

Until a few decades ago

it was easier to distinguish between two rather well-defined realities: a Christian world and a world yet to be evangelized. That situation no longer exists today. People who have not yet received the Gospel message do not live only in non-Western continents; they live everywhere, particularly in vast urban concentrations that call for a specific pastoral outreach. In big cities, we need other “maps”, other paradigms, which can help us reposition our ways of thinking and our attitudes. Brothers and sisters, *Christendom no longer exists!* Today we are no longer the only ones who create culture, nor are we in the forefront or those most listened to. (Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia. Address of His Holiness Pope Francis—21 dicembre 2019)¹⁰

For Pope Bergoglio, there is no longer a safe space to return to and a foreign one to enter: the whole Church must learn (or relearn) “to move forward in a pagan context, which is not all that different from that of the early centuries” (ibid.)¹¹.

Laudato Si', in short, is more than a work of Franciscan Jesuitism; it is a work of Franciscanism that has become Jesuitical, prepared for an entirely new world in which one enters completely and in a minority position. In it, the Church is “a field hospital after the battle” (and perhaps during the battle), a global network (La Bella 2019) rooted deep in things, without hesitation, without tactical retreat. It is from this awareness that Pope Bergoglio’s encyclical draws its lifeblood.

5. The New Jesuit Model: Against Inequality, Poverty, and Resource Exploitation

There is, however, a second insight that allows the encyclical to be connoted in a Jesuit sense: the lucid, strategic, systematic (and firmly grounded from a theoretical point of view) stance that connects inequality and poverty to the ecological question¹². This is how Pope Bergoglio expresses himself, not surprisingly, in the paragraph devoted to the crucial question of the “Common Destination of Goods.”

93. Whether believers or not, we are agreed today that the earth is essentially a shared 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. Hence every ecological approach needs to incorporate a social perspective which takes into account the fundamental rights of the poor and the underprivileged. 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”. [71] The 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. Saint John Paul II (. . .) [73] clearly explained that “the Church does indeed defend the legitimate right to private property, but she also teaches no less clearly that there is always a social mortgage on all private property, in order that goods may serve the general purpose that God gave them”. [74] (*Laudato Si'*, II, 6)

The reference to Latin America is not accidental, immediately harking back to the Jesuits’ long missionary experience in that world:

94. The rich and the poor have equal dignity, for “the Lord is the maker of them all” (*Prov* 22:2). “He himself made both small and great” (*Wis* 6:7), and “he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good” (*Mt* 5:45). This has practical consequences, such as those pointed out by the bishops of Paraguay: “Every *campesino* has a natural right to possess a reasonable allotment of land where he can establish his home, work for subsistence of his family and a secure life. This right must be guaranteed so that its exercise is not illusory but real. That

means that apart from the ownership of property, rural people must have access to means of technical education, credit, insurance, and markets". [77] (ibid.)

The reference to the bishops of Paraguay is illuminating in its evocative power, if we consider how that very geographical area hosted in the 1600s and 1700s the experience of the so-called "Jesuit state" (which extended to the present-day states of Uruguay, Argentina, and Brazil), which, according to some, despite the heated historiographical controversy, produced highly advanced experiments in community politics (Hartmann 2001).

It is worth mentioning this very ancient evidence because it actually also tells us something about the current Jesuit strategic ways of intervening in socio-economic arrangements, and therefore, in the spirit of the encyclical *Laudato Si'*, in ecological arrangements.

In the reductions and cities of the seventeenth-eighteenth century "Jesuit state", indigenous peoples scattered throughout the territory were in fact "concentrated" (some of these urban centers came to house 120,000 people). These city-states formally in the hands of the king of Spain were actually subject to the provincial of the Jesuits, and in fact, represented enclaves of protection from the enslaving oppression of the large landowners of the *encomiendas*. As is evident, the main purpose of such concentration of souls was not only to defend but to rally in order to facilitate the work of conversion and Christianization. For the Jesuit fathers, however, this was not enough: that is, it was also necessary to identify an attractive and therefore innovative urban organization. First, they adapted the state structure and worship practices to the customs and traditions of the indigenous peoples. Since they had not established a local police force, they worked to have the indigenous peoples trained in the use of firearms to defend themselves against slave hunters. Economic organization promoted the distribution of equal shares of land and building areas, community property, and a system of controlled trade and exchanges in kind, while working hours, by coeval standards, proved to be rather short (maximum eight hours). Social equality was pursued, and free schools and performances were offered. The judicial system appeared very advanced for the time: it excluded the death penalty and torture and imposed limited prison sentences that were revisable through public pardons and penances. Of course, we are not dealing with an actual theorization and implementation of a communistic economy, but with a wise socio-economic structure aimed at Christianization, organized and coordinated paternalistically and in a communitarian sense by a handful of highly trained and charismatic Jesuit fathers. However, it is hard not to see here a true alternative Christian practice to the colonial model based on the oppression and genocide of indigenous peoples (Hartmann 2001).

This example just mentioned seems to demonstrate the Jesuit Order's innate predisposition for concrete and, above all, "systemic" intervention on the political, social, economic, and cultural order of the realities it is confronted with, especially when these appear oppressed by injustice and inequality.

Trying to abstract a standard model of intervention, we could for clarity identify four main stages: (1) prior theoretical analysis; (2) definition of the purpose (conversion or simple witness to Christ); (3) stabilization at the core of the milestones (dogma; hierarchy; sacraments); and (4) adaptation to the specific situation through the use of appropriate tools adequately prepared (Ilardi 2022).

Well, this "standard" approach has had some very interesting developments in the years just before Pope Bergoglio's encyclical that have likely fed its spirit and ideological framework. In our opinion, the most significant appears to be the one promoted by Gaël Giraud, a Jesuit economist, mathematician, and theologian, one of the originators of the concept of ecological transition¹³.

First, his *destruens* analysis of financial neoliberalism is striking, and is, by the way, fueled by even personal and professional knowledge that almost led him, prior to joining the Bar, to become a Wall Street trader.

Its frontal attack is on the idea of capitalism based solely on the concept of unlimited growth, which destroys not only the planet's resources but also the modern idea of equality. Any attempt at partial reform of the system can only be superficial and instrumental.

The greenwashing increasingly embraced by banks and the practice of “sustainability” is nothing more to Giraud than banking marketing and propaganda. The problem is structural and mainly concerns one of the cornerstones of neoliberal thinking: the fact that GDP is the only true indicator of well-being.

According to Giraud, this system cannot be reformed but only radically changed, or, in fact, overturned. And here we come to the *pars construens* (which, as is often the case, is the weakest and most debatable moment). The strategy of change is pointedly stated: ecological transition, which cannot be the prerogative of mere technology, but can only be achieved through radical economic–political transformations such as the cancellation of public debt, the redistribution of wealth and expenditures made by states, a strict regulation of banking finance, and the replacement of private property with an economy based on common goods, according to Stefano Rodotà’s (2013) theorization. Although his thought does not differ much from that of the “degrowth” theorists, and although degrowth discourse often fails to take into account the potential political and economic conflicts that such a productive transformation might entail, what really matters (and therein lies its radicality) is that it comes, not from the world of movementism or associationism, but from within the very interior of an institution that is simultaneously religious, political and state, and that on Giraud’s thought, he has even based an encyclical of the Pontiff.

The system change aims at building an arrangement that we could call communitarian, neither individualistic–capitalistic nor communist, but rather tending toward the replacement of absolute private property with the “common good” (energy, health, water, labor, nature, etc.). It should be based on an economy of flow (i.e., producing according to the needs of the moment) and not on stock and therefore waste (according to an economic vision based on the concept of commodity accumulation, consumption, and profit).

Such a communitarian vision (reconnectable, as recalled by Pope Bergoglio himself, to the experience of the early Church) appears as a cornerstone not only of economics but also of the Jesuit political vision. The seventeenth-century archetype, that of the “Jesuit state”, suggests precisely such a solution. Latin American Jesuit social and political organization was based on a kind of federation of autonomous centers in contact with each other. And it is precisely to such an archetype that Giraud’s model seems to look: a decentralized democracy (as opposed to that of the centralized strong state, believed to be allied with the financial system), based locally on nonprofit cooperative societies in which a strong role is played by individual towns, the only ones able to understand the true peculiarities and needs of the territory and at the same time (just as in the 1600s) to unite and protect individuals from the dangers of the system.

Of course, this new structure would have to restore a truly democratic organization, in which the civil and movementist thrust would be responsible for bringing politics to work and continue to interact with it, even through a profound rethinking of the network and digital¹⁴. The various communities should not be commanded from above (neither external nor internal) but promote discussion, common decision making, “synod”, what Pope Francis calls “community discernment”, a neologism that combines the first term, typically Ignatian and individual, with a collective concept¹⁵. The charism of some individuals is not annulled but put at the service of the community discussion, which is always open.

At present, it appears difficult to measure the actual and precise practices of transition from a paternalistic to a more obviously collegial view. It is likely the very Jesuit way of proceeding, by its nature very empirical and adaptable to individual cases, that makes it difficult to extrapolate a model. Indeed, economic choices are still partial and scattered, and their application appears difficult except within free zones carved out within the global neoliberal system. Instead, in this context, it seems clearer what should be the political and representative model of reference, namely the democratic-synodal model adopted within the Church institution itself.

The paternalistic idea of seventeenth-century experiences is here explicitly overcome through a more collegial vision¹⁶, typical of a Church whose purpose, unlike 400 years ago, is no longer that of immediate conversion, but that of witness in care. Pope Francis himself

has repeatedly shown both in his actions and in his speeches¹⁷ that he no longer wants a Catholic Church that is Eurocentric, both from an identity and political point of view, and that, therefore, thinks of the world as a space to be colonized. Taking up the best of the Jesuit apostolic tradition, but purging it of colonial and centralist connotations, he aspires to a Church dispersed throughout the world and capable of horizontal dialogue with all cultures and ethnicities. It is also in the search for this great mediation that his ecological message should be understood.

6. Conclusions

Eight years after the publication of *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis felt the need to return to these issues so crucial to him with the Apostolic Exhortation *Laudate Deum* (4 October 2023)¹⁸. It is precisely from this last writing that it is possible to draw some conclusions with respect to the reasoning that we are pursuing, precisely because the Pontiff himself emphasizes and reiterates the fundamental points of his original speech, having observed, on the part of governments, of politics but also of a more widespread mentality, an inadequate reaction to the terrible climate changes. And all of this is in the face of a progressive worsening of the general situation and a deterioration of the Earth's ecosystem.

The first emphasis is related to the direct responsibility of humankind, not generically considered, but as a technological and economic man:

20. In *Laudato Si'*, I offered a brief resumé of the technocratic paradigm underlying the current process of environmental decay. It is "a certain way of understanding human life and activity [that] has gone awry, to the serious detriment of the world around us". [13] Deep down, it consists in thinking "as if reality, goodness and truth automatically flow from technological and economic power as such". [14] As a logical consequence, it then becomes easy "to accept the idea of infinite or unlimited growth, which proves so attractive to economists, financiers and experts in technology". [15]

21. In recent years, we have been able to confirm this diagnosis, even as we have witnessed a new advance of the above paradigm. Artificial intelligence and the latest technological innovations start with the notion of a human being with no limits, whose abilities and possibilities can be infinitely expanded thanks to technology. In this way, the technocratic paradigm monstrously feeds upon itself. (*Laudate Deum*, 2)

It is the exclusively economic and technological principles that govern the world that determine its potential end.

Hence, a second statement: Change must be structural and anthropological. Any other kind of solution that contemplates only the reform of that system, or worse, its improvement only through more sustainable technologies, would be doomed to failure. In short, for Pope Francis, in the expression "sustainable development", the truly critical term is "development", where "sustainable" runs the risk of appearing only as a kind of greenwashing of an economic system that does not want to change in its foundations. It is the overweening power of capital and consumerist satisfaction thought of as unlimited that leads to the exploitation of resources without discernment and thus to catastrophic consequences:

57. I consider it essential to insist that "to seek only a technical remedy to each environmental problem which comes up is to separate what is in reality interconnected and to mask the true and deepest problems of the global system". It is true that efforts at adaptation are needed in the face of evils that are irreversible in the short term. Also some interventions and technological advances that make it possible to absorb or capture gas emissions have proved promising. Nonetheless, we risk remaining trapped in the mindset of pasting and papering over cracks, while beneath the surface there is a continuing deterioration to which we continue to contribute. To suppose that all problems in the future will be able to be solved

by new technical interventions is a form of homicidal pragmatism, like pushing a snowball down a hill.

58. Once and for all, let us put an end to the irresponsible derision that would present this issue as something purely ecological, “green”, romantic, frequently subject to ridicule by economic interests. Let us finally admit that it is a human and social problem on any number of levels. (*Laudate Deum*, 5)

The third point stressed by Pope Bergoglio concerns the weakness of international politics, lost in a kind of empty zone between old diplomacy based on the balance of power, and effective multilateralism. It is the latter that is the real solution for Bergoglio. But for it to be realized, a true process of democratized decision making is needed:

43. All this presupposes the development of a new procedure for decision-making and legitimizing those decisions, since the one put in place several decades ago is not sufficient nor does it appear effective. In this framework, there would necessarily be required spaces for conversation, consultation, arbitration, conflict resolution and supervision, and, in the end, a sort of increased “democratization” in the global context, so that the various situations can be expressed and included. It is no longer helpful for us to support institutions in order to preserve the rights of the more powerful without caring for those of all. (*Laudate Deum*, 3)

In conclusion, Bergoglian “ecology” appears quite different from any other secular approach. It is based on a profound conviction: that of the need for a radical anthropological (and, consequently, economic–political) turn detached from any purely technological reform ambitions. It is a technology that derives from human beings, not vice versa. Such an idea also appears opposed to extreme Protestant views, so steeped in an economic mentality as to justify even the total exploitation of resources to their exhaustion, within an archaic apocalyptic vision of final destruction aimed at ideologically justifying such a direction. In contrast, Bergoglio’s Franciscan–Jesuit Catholicism exalts matter as an expression of God, and therefore as an absolute value to be preserved and protected.

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Notes

¹ For a discussion of the broad and complex issue of globalization, see (Appadurai 1996; Bauman 1999, 2000; Beck 1997, 2008; Castells 1995, 1997; Van Dijck et al. 2018).

² Consider, for example, the “anti-speciesist” movements (Maurizi 2021).

³ For further discussion, see (Pelletier 1992; Morandini 2005; McKim 2019; Malavasi and Giuliadori 2016).

⁴ The Exhortation can be read at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html (accessed on 15 May 2024).

⁵ The encyclical can be read at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html (accessed on 5 May 2024).

⁶ Geography and climate also intervene in such a worldview, both on the symbolic and identity and worldview levels. To see how geography and environment condition the general conception of culture, see the classic text by Lucien Febvre (1922).

⁷ It can be read at https://www.repubblica.it/cultura/2014/05/01/news/i_due_francesco_1_ultima_intervista_di_jacques_le_goff-84949294/ (accessed on 12 May 2024).

⁸ For all this reasoning, see Tarzia (2022, pp. 198–211).

- ⁹ In *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 4144 (18 February 2023). The text can be read at <https://www.laciviltacattolica.com/pope-francis-in-conversation-with-jesuits-in-congo-and-in-south-sudan/> (accessed on 21 May 2024).
- ¹⁰ The text can be read at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/december/documents/papa-francesco_20191221_curia-romana.html (accessed on 2 May 2024).
- ¹¹ *ibid.*
- ¹² The debt Pope Francis owes to Liberation Theology is evident, especially to that side represented by Leonardo Boff (1995), which sees environmental care and ecology as impossible activities in a capitalist and competitive system.
- ¹³ See, for this approach (Giraud and Renouard 2009; Giraud 2014, 2022; Giraud and Petrini 2023). From this very “dialogue”, and thanks to the thrust of *Laudato si’*, there has been a proliferation of theoretical and field experiences in recent years, starting with the establishment of the team of *The Economy of Francesco* (EoF) (Rozzoni and Limata 2023) to the operational practices of the “Laudato si’” communities, and the action of the Frontier Churches.
- ¹⁴ For more on the issues related to the relationship between the Catholic Church, Christianity, monotheistic religions, and new and social media, see (Tarzia and Ilardi 2022).
- ¹⁵ On the meaning and practices of the synod experience, see (Asti and Cibelli 2020; Salato 2020).
- ¹⁶ See the Address of his holiness Pope Francis Opening of the works of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops “For a Synodal Church: communion, participation and mission” (4 October 2023). The Address can be read at <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2023/october/documents/20231004-apertura-sinodo.html> (accessed on 13 May 2024).
- ¹⁷ See again the 21 December 2019 Address at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/december/documents/papa-francesco_20191221_curia-romana.html (accessed on 21 May 2024).
- ¹⁸ see note 4 above.

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