

## **READING LAUDATO SI' IN THE LIGHT OF THE COMMON GOOD**

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*Abstract.* This paper contends that *Laudato Si'* would be better appreciated if understood in the light of the Church's teaching on the common good. More succinctly, it contends that although LS calls all persons to care for and defend the environment, such act would only be possible in a more genuine sense if understood in the light of the common good, that is, the collective vision for the future of humanity. In trying to explicate this claim, the article reviews the notion of the common good and its foundations in scripture, political thought, and Catholic social teaching. A constitutive aspect on the Church's teachings on the common is a sustained critique of capitalism and its repercussions to human dignity. This article ends with a reflection on the encyclical's challenge to the readers, particularly Christians, to be workers for the attainment of the common good and for the future of our common home.

*Keywords:* common good, capitalism, encyclical, environment, climate

### **Introduction**

When Pope Francis says, in *Laudato Si'*, that the climate is a common good that belongs to all and meant for all—he puts forward a challenge to two competing ideological camps which in recent times have been responsible for the world's current global landscape (be it economic, political, or even cultural).<sup>2</sup> On

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the one hand is an ideology that is rooted in the conviction that man possesses individual rights or liberties which, particularly in economic terms, must be allowed to pursue self-interest with little restraint that must be subject to the determination of the state. On the other hand is a contending conviction that people must be controlled to give way to the formation of a state where everyone is not deprived of the basic necessities of life. History tells us that since the last half of the century the former paradigm has been winning while the latter has been losing. The consequence of their tension is the current lifestyle which people are either enjoying or suffering: a world that has gradually diminished collective paradigm.

Some observers believe that the Holy Father, through *Laudato Si'*, has boldly criticized capitalist economies which, in more recent years, put so much emphasis on production and consumerism and thereby relegating the environment to a remote layer of concern. For this reason, the encyclical has gained admiration from environmental activities, policy makers and members of the scientific community. The document's popularity is evidenced not only by the support it has gained from some environmentally concerned sectors of society but also by the positive commentaries about it and the number of discussions that were and have been organized in order to expound its relevance in contemporary society.

It is this paper's contention that *Laudato Si'* would be better appreciated if understood in the light of the Church's teaching on the common good. More succinctly, it contends that LS is essentially about the common good and only "practically" about the environment. Thus, it is important to stress that the encyclical articulates more concretely the Church's teaching on the common good with the environment (conceptually inclusive of the ecology and the climate) as the field of application and explication.

### **Human Ecology and the Common Good**

The encyclical, in paragraphs 156-158, briefly explains the common good and its place in the Church's theology of the environment. Quoting the Second Vatican Council, LS defines the common good as "the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment."<sup>3</sup> In saying that it (common good) is inseparable from human ecology, the pope stresses that respect and care for the environment is in many ways the same with respect for other persons. Thus, an advocacy that seeks to defend nature must begin with or should be rooted in the notion of the common good which is, according to the encyclical, "a central and unifying principle of social ethics."<sup>4</sup>

At the heart of the common good is the value of the human person.<sup>5</sup> Already in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis reverberates the Church's teaching on the intricate connection between the common good and the dignity of the individual who is created in God's image. Thus, respect for creation is linked to respect for society which is founded on the imperative to respect the human person who is "endowed with inalienable rights ordered to his or her integral development."<sup>6</sup> Taken as a whole these interrelated points constitute the "fundamental parameters of reference for interpreting and evaluating social phenomena" which in this case is the environment – the encyclical's focus.<sup>7</sup>

But when can we say that a society or a particular institution lives or operates on the basis of the common good? The literature in Christian ethics or moral theology is unanimous in saying that justice is the hallmark of a people who lives on the principle of the common good. No society, institution, or groups of individuals can claim that they live in justice if their social, political, and economic activities are ordered towards benefiting only a particular group of individuals, most especially those who

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belong to the privileged ranks. That is why aware of the current status of global society where injustice abounds, the Holy Father stresses that the common good becomes a logical and inevitable “summons to solidarity and a preferential options for the poorest of the poor.”<sup>8</sup>

### **The Common Good: A Theoretical Background**

It is important to understand that the common good is a principle that developed through time from various sources that constitute the foundations of the tradition of Catholic social teaching. The encyclical’s footnotes show the genealogy of the Church’s concern for the environment drawn from various theological and philosophical sources. It is noticeable, for example, that the concern for the environment was articulated not just by the pope but also by the local Churches and other intellectual luminaries whose perspectives on the human person and society have enriched Catholic moral thought.

Together with the principles of the dignity of the human person, subsidiarity and solidarity, the Church in its social teachings believes and argues that its perspectives on the economy, politics and human rights among other areas of social concern – are not ideological platforms but viewpoints that seek, to use what Benedict XVI says in *Deus Caritas Est*, to purify reason from its pathologies that practically become concrete in political actions whether in the form of an international norm or a domestic policy.<sup>9</sup> Thus we can speak of the same description for the principle of the common good what Roland Minnerath says of Catholic social doctrine:

[It] is inspired by biblical anthropology and the theology of creation. Its elaboration derives from the rational level, by means of which men of various beliefs can communicate and seek the truth together. Biblical revelation does not consist in a heterogeneous given

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in relation to reason, but in a dialogue that stimulates reason . . . The discoveries of reason and the reception of revelation are located within a structuring osmosis, because reason and revelation have the same author and the same goal: the universe, its origin and end.<sup>10</sup>

As already mentioned, the common good is “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more and more easily.”<sup>11</sup> This view is rooted in the scripture (and thus theology) and the ethical discourses which the magisterium has developed in its engagement with various socio-economic and political issues which at their very core are philosophical. It is necessary to identify these sources in order to emphasize that the Catholic social teaching is not self-referential and, therefore, draws sources from the very tradition of humanity.

*a. Scriptural and Theological Basis*

Although the principle of the common good is not literally found in Scripture, it is thematically discernible not only in some passages but also in the entire spirit or theme of the Scripture itself. The theme of the common good in scripture is interwoven in the theme of justice in both the Old and New Testaments.

The narrative of salvation revealed particularly in the Old Testament’s stories of liberation and the prophets provide a rich scriptural basis for the notion of the common good. The OT is replete with stories that are apparently political but which from the perspective of faith, such as the Israelites’ struggles and experiences, are to be understood in the light of the covenant between God and his people. Israel was not just a collectivity of members but God’s people who entered into a covenant with their maker and whose lives should be lived in accordance with the laws of God. Thus, the common good can be read between the lines of the biblical narratives about God’s justice.

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Their agreement with God is an explicit expression of consent to God's sovereignty over mankind and thus an acknowledgment of the limitations of humanity's pursuit of self-gratification. Deuteronomy expounds and expands the application of God's justice through the Law. It would become "the basic theological framework for the life and witness of Israel."<sup>12</sup> As one exegete explains Isaiah 58:8, "a people cannot be just before the covenant [of] God, they cannot know or worship him, when they do not heed his call to take the cause and defend the rights of the poor and oppressed in the community."<sup>13</sup>

The story of creation itself provides the fundamental scriptural basis of the common good. God did not create the world for any specific class, race, or gender. It was given to Adam and Eve, that is, the entire human race. The universal destiny of earthly goods is all of humanity. This does not suggest that communism is the end of creation, rather this simply means that God did not intend creation to be monopolized by a certain group of individuals. In practical terms, we must be guided by an ethos that does not think of the self as the end. In God's moral blueprint, individuals may pursue activities and establish systems that may allow them to improve and even enrich their lives but they should not forget that their pursuit to self-fulfillment cannot be absolute. The limitation lies in the fact that humans do not truly own this world because they are not its creator.

In the New Testament, the reign of God proclaimed by Jesus points to a faith that expresses and lives not only for itself but also for others who are in need of God's mercy and compassion. The poor are at the heart of Jesus' message of liberation – to them is the reign of God promised. Jesus' ethos is not one of individualism. At the heart of it is the call to live a life dependent on the power of God (the realization of God's reign) and not upon human prejudices, divisions, cares and anxieties.<sup>14</sup>

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Jesus' preaching and message was a critique of individuals and institutions that create structures and systems that contribute to and sustain the various ways of undue advantage of those who are at the bottom of society. Jesus promised the kingdom of God to the poor and persecuted, to those who most and those who are marginalized. He did not favor the poor because he simply loved to condemn the rich. Thus, the scripture's message of preference for the poor should not be interpreted to mean that God through Jesus would like us to espouse a class struggle nor should it be used as a basis for a proposal to create or start a partisan movement. On the contrary it must be discerned as an articulation in the most concrete fashion that God's plan for this world is for all individuals to share in the dignity which the creator of the world intends for everyone. In the words of one NT scholar, "[w]hen Jesus preached about the reign of God, he was not only speaking about God's power in the future. He was also calling his disciples to experience what God's power could do to change their lives now."<sup>15</sup>

One can even interpret the death of Jesus as an ultimate gesture of solidarity for the common good. By allowing himself to be handed on to the authorities of his time, Jesus interrogated the lives and motives of those who believed that only those who possessed power were the rightful heir to God's reign. Jesus' death showed what great evil human can create when the sovereignty of God is forgotten and when political and religious authorities take into their hands the determination of society's destiny. Precisely, the death of Jesus, says Sagovsky, "offers a challenge to the normal, hegemonic workings of such earthly power and suggests 'a power beyond power' (cf. John 19.11) in which the exercise of justice may in the end be untainted by all suggestion that it is 'victor's justice'."<sup>16</sup>

*b. Philosophical Basis*

The common good however is not exclusively a theo-ethical concept. While it has a lot of basis in the revealed word of God, it also has basis in human reason, i.e., in the tradition of philosophy. Yet, not all philosophies support the notion of the common good. That is why, the Church, mindful of the fact that it does not have a philosophy of its own, teaches that genuine human reasoning is that which remains receptive to the universality of truth, is open to faith, and is basically constitutive of human tradition.<sup>17</sup> Human reason, which has the capacity to discern and understand fundamental and universal principles, tells us that things are designed for a particular end, and that the ultimate end is what is good for humanity.

A common denominator of the different philosophies that lend foundation to the notion of the common good is the view that society (and thus political and economic life), which is the locus of human activity, is structured not just to promote and protect individual liberties but also to defend the collective good. From Aristotle, we learn that all human activities aim at some good; thus, it is “that at which all things aim.”<sup>18</sup> The good in this sense, however, is not merely an individual pursuit as it has a communitarian dimension. Politics, understood as the highest form of human activity, is the collective activity that includes all the other human activities. The end of political life, that is the pursuit of the collective good, must be for the good of man.<sup>19</sup> Human organization, and thus political life, is essentially geared towards a good higher than any individual or group interest<sup>20</sup> so that the end of all human activities is communal life.<sup>21</sup>

The common good, however, cannot be equated to utilitarianism or the ideology that espouses that good is for that of the greater number. So that, and as an example, a government that seeks the good of all citizens but aims much at the well-being of some more than others does not actually promote the



common good and is in fact a defective regime.<sup>22</sup> Utilitarianism holds that how the good is distributed is not in itself a relevant moral consideration. It does not insist that in each of our actions we benefit all, for as we have just noted, there is no limit to who is included in 'all', and we are seldom, if ever, in a position to perform an act that does some good for everyone. Rather, the utilitarian's goal is to produce the largest possible aggregate of good or evil. It does not matter how many benefit and how many lose, so long as we achieve the highest sum, after subtracting losses from gains. Doing a great deal of good for just one person would be better than doing a small amount of good for many, if the benefit concentrated in the one is larger than the aggregate spread out over many.<sup>23</sup> Richard Kraut in his commentary on Aristotle's political thought elaborates that the common good means "the good of all citizens, not the highest aggregate of gains over losses. It must be emphasized that the common good at which the citizens ought to aim includes his own – it is not merely the good of others."<sup>24</sup>

In the Christian tradition, one can find in St. Augustine the spirit of the same philosophical explanation on the common good when he speaks of justice as the fundamental reason for the creation of the state. Although the Church Father considers the social and thus political life as a necessity brought about by humanity's fallen nature, still he believes that political activity is a vehicle towards salvation. Thus, the State which is practically an agency of human subordination is justified by the need for justice without which politics would be nothing but a bunch of robberies.<sup>25</sup>

Like Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas believes in the necessity of political life and thus of the state but unlike the Church Father he does not consider humanity's fallen nature as the postulate for social interaction. Thinking along the line of Aristotle, Aquinas believes in the social nature of man which means that even if humanity has stayed in paradise still there would be human

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association. For this reason political authority exists as “the specific organ of looking after the common good.”<sup>26</sup> An essential point in Christian thought, particularly Aquinas’s, is the contention that the common good is universal and that humanity is ordered towards knowing and working for it in the light of natural law. Alasdair McIntyre explains that for Aquinas the natural man even without revelation can know what is good.<sup>27</sup>

Centuries later, Jean Jacques Rousseau would discuss a closely similar theme in his political philosophy. In trying to understand and explain the reality of political obligation, he contends that the body-politic is

possessed of a will; and this General Will, which tends always to preservation and welfare of the whole and of every part, and is the source of the laws, constitutes for all the members of the state, in their relation to one another and to it, the rule of what is just and unjust.<sup>28</sup>

Like Aristotle, Rousseau’s general will (his articulation of the common good) does not operate within the framework of a majoritarian good. The general will is not the same as the will of all because the will of all, which is the sum of all wills, can be mistaken but the general will cannot. In the words of Ebenstein and Ebenstein:

[b]y introducing the concept of the General Will, Rousseau fundamentally alters the mechanistic concept of the state as an instrument (shared by both Locke and Hobbes) and revives the organic theory of the state, which goes back to Plato and Aristotle.<sup>29</sup>

Thus the common good, in the light of Rousseau’s political thought, rests above the practical good (whatever is pragmatically favorable). In his own words, in *The Social Contract*,

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“[o]ur will is always for our own good, but we do not always see what that it; the people is never corrupted, but it is often deceived, and on such occasions only does it seem to will what is bad.”<sup>30</sup>

### **The Common Good in the Political and Economic Life**

There are two spheres in the practical (and by practical we mean the day to day living) life of man in which the common good finds actual application: the political and the economic. It is not the objective of this part to once again trace which of the two spheres precede over the other; neither is it the concern at this point of our discussion to identify which determines what. Basically, we are trying to stress the fact that if the common good is a principle that must be genuinely applied, its testing grounds are none other than the political and economic communities where human interaction and negotiation happen within the context of power, resources allocation and distribution.

The state (politics) and the market are two sides of one and the same coin. Both are social fictions (or constructions if we may), but to date they have remained to be the unifying concepts for purposes of theoretical analysis not only in the disciplines of political science and economics but also in various practical areas of human relations. Through time, the social sciences have clarified the distinctions in terms of membership, behavior, and jurisdiction of the state and the market. The distinctions are helpful but we must bear in mind that these distinctions are primarily conceptual or theoretical.

In what shall follow, this paper will elaborate how from a normative point of view political and economic life must be viewed and thus lived. As an extension, we shall try to explain how politics and economics can humanize humanity from the viewpoint of the Catholic social teaching that grounds itself on, among other principles of Catholic social teaching, the notion of

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the common good. We have presented earlier what philosophers thought of the *locus politicus* as the highest embodiment of man's desire for a good life.

The common good is a unifying concept of the state and market. To insist that life must ultimately be understood only in terms of politics or economics would consequently reduce humanity to mere citizens (or political actors) or consumers. In reality (and existentially), a human person is not merely a tax payer or a buyer. He or she has a history, a personal vision, a set of beliefs and values. To insist that the human person is merely a dot or a bar on a spread sheet would be to deny him or her the most fundamental dignity and identity that is proper to his nature. LS stresses this very clearly: “[u]nderlying 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.”<sup>31</sup>

A fundamental question in political science (or political thought) is: if political life is geared towards giving humanity the happiness it seeks then how must it be structured or arranged and what governmental principles should societies adhere to? Again, a disclaimer is imperative at this point and that is for this paper not to offer sweeping conclusions that a form of government is better than that of another. Rather, we go back to a more fundamental point and that is how citizens (who are human persons) to be governed and under what principles?

This now, necessarily, involves the question concerning how citizens would exercise their freedoms, that is, their basic liberties in relating with one another. The discussion of freedom or liberty is unavoidable in the discussion of politics, i.e., political systems. Precisely, the existence of freedom must be necessarily acknowledged before we can even appreciate the exercise of any activity that is political in nature. Without freedom it would be futile to proceed in any discussion about the government. In political thought, however, another topic that is explicated by

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philosophers is of equal importance to freedom, i.e., power. The bigger picture now poses a question as to how freedom (which properly belongs to the individual) should be exercised within the context of a body-politic which necessarily exercises power over its citizens.

At the risk of oversimplification, two general views have prevailed in contemporary societies in relation to the political question. As briefly presented above, on the one hand is an ideology that is rooted in the conviction that man possesses individual rights or liberties. Concrete in many democracies in the West, this view traces its origin to the liberal philosophies of Locke, Mill, and the American founding fathers. Blended with Adam Smith's economic thought in the light of his notion of the invisible hand, the combination brings out the foundation of liberal (and eventually neo-liberal) economic thought that provides the basis for modern day capitalism in various frameworks and applications. To rephrase what Wolff and Resnick say of Smith's economic thought: maximum wealth for [the] society corresponds to the maximum freedom given to each individual to pursue his or her own economic self-interest.<sup>32</sup>

As has been presented above also, the other (contending) conviction is that people's rights are determined by the political system's vision of itself particularly in terms of the production and distribution of wealth. Thus, there are limitations to rights and citizens exercise them, mindful of the system's collective political vision. This paradigm was concrete in many dictatorships and fascist regimes which in their desperation to eliminate poverties and injustices they also eliminated the humanity of man. Blended with the structural interpretation and application of Karl Marx, certain states, for example, imposed on its citizens reproductive policies that limit a family to one child only.<sup>33</sup> Restrictions on religion (which is perceived to be an ideological threat to the state) are continually imposed in some states that continue to insist on the sovereignty of the political collectivity

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over the individual. And, in its struggle not to fall into capitalism and its perceived errors, a few more states or regimes have remained closed in their market structure, convinced that competition is the portal to a number of problems in terms of the production and distribution of wealth.

Aristotle reminds us that moderation is a virtue, and the vision of a common good is deeply rooted in the virtue of each man and the body-politics. What is virtuous always lies in the golden mean, not necessarily a geometric mean but moderation itself. While this is apparently difficult to quantify, the core of the message is that any system that resorts to any extreme, ideologically speaking, is in danger of forming serious social problems for itself.

### **Capitalism and the Common Good**

Because *Laudato Si'* particularly focuses on the social effects of the global market which generally operates as a capitalist system, it is not only helpful but also necessary that we review some elementary points about this system and then proceed to what Catholic social teaching says about it. While we do not disregard that capitalism (like democracy) has models and that it would be theoretically simplistic to conclude that all capitalist systems are the same, it would be practical, nonetheless, for the purpose of this presentation to focus on the essential elements of a capitalist system.

Capitalism is founded on the conviction that the individual has the right to pursue his own interests which must not be constrained by the state on the condition that it does not violate the liberties of other persons. Since the days of Adam Smith, the theory of the invisible hand dogmatizes the autonomy of the market subject only to the regulatory powers of the government particularly with the externalities it would create. While it would not be fair to charge Smith for all the woes capitalism has brought upon contemporary society, it would not be inaccurate

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to also say that the evolution of economic thought that provides the theoretical basis of modern capitalism did come from his contention that the market must be left alone to operate by itself. In the very words of the father of economics:

All systems either of preference or of restraint, therefore, being thus completely taken away, the obvious and simple system of natural liberty establishes itself of its own accord. Every man, as long as he does not violate the laws of justice, is left perfectly free to pursue his own interest his own way, and to bring both his industry and capital into competition with those of any other man, or order of men.<sup>34</sup>

Smith however is not totally responsible for the current attitude prevailing in the current capitalist system. Various philosophies (or ideologies) contributed to the dogmatization of the individual's value to pursue self-interest. When applied in the macrocosm of society, businesses, and thus markets, become the individuals who are believed to be possessors of the same juridically sanctioned rights which individuals enjoy. Again, this belief is presupposed by a precipitation of philosophies that are responsible for the relegation of the common good to the periphery and consequently enthroning individualism couched in the language of political and economic liberalism. Vittorio Hosle points out that modern capitalism presupposes a certain kind of ethical value, which is traceable to the ideas of Machiavelli, Mandeville, and Malthus. Thus:

Machiavelli, Mandeville, and Malthus have contributed to the decline of our moral respect for certain traditional virtues, and thus of behavior inspired by them, by pointing out the negative consequences that

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can attend clemency in the political realm, temperance and charity in the sphere of economy, and the desire to have a large family on the demographic level. By obliging us to look at the negative consequences of virtues – the intrinsic positive values of which they do not really deny – they have rendered our moral evaluation more complex and difficult, for we now have to weigh the intrinsic and the extrinsic values of certain attitudes against each other, and there is no algorithm for doing so.<sup>35</sup>

The Church has not condemned capitalism, but it has not also endorsed it. In the very first place Catholic social teachings as a whole is not really concerned with proposing a specific economic or political system. As what LS says: “on many concrete questions, the Church has no reason to offer a definitive position.”<sup>36</sup> However, the creation and distribution of wealth is not merely an economic issue as it crosses the regions of human concern where the Church already has concern: ethics.

The documents of the magisterium from *Rerum Novarum* up to *Laudato Si'* have been apparently consistent in warning the possible dangers of capitalism.<sup>37</sup> In *Octogesima Adveniens*, Paul VI strikes the balance with his cautious advice that while people should not fall into the temptations of Marxism but neither should they be completely blind in following liberalism (and thus economic liberalism, i.e., capitalism) which at its very root is a philosophical liberalism that erroneously affirms the autonomy of the individual in his activity, his motivation and the exercise of his liberty.<sup>38</sup> In relation to this, *Populorum Progressio* points out that economic growth cannot be the only determinant of development and, thus, for development to be complete and authentic it must be integral. Here, the encyclical highlights the principle of the common good, saying that integral development must promote the good of every man.<sup>39</sup>



Although John Paul II in his *Centesimus Annus* seems less critical in his assessment of capitalism, the same cautious stance on capitalism by his predecessors has been sustained. He points out that while it is apparent that on the level of individual nations and of international relations the free market is the most efficient instrument for utilizing resources and effectively responding to needs; however, this is true only for those needs which are "solvent," insofar as they are endowed with purchasing power, and for those resources which are "marketable," insofar as they are capable of obtaining a satisfactory price.<sup>40</sup>

Benedict XVI in his *Caritas in Veritate* reverberates the Church's stance on economic activity particularly capitalism, saying that it (economic activity) cannot solve all social problems through the simple application of commercial logic and that it needs to be directed towards the pursuit of the common good, for which the political community in particular must also take responsibility.<sup>41</sup> In the same document, Benedict stresses that economic activity reductively turns into a mere engine of wealth creation that is detached from political action the goal of which should be the pursuit of justice.<sup>42</sup>

### **Reading *Laudato Si'* in the Light of the Common Good**

In view of the foregoing discussion, we now understand that the encyclical basically stresses the principle of the common good with the environment (or the climate) as the field of application. This means that from the viewpoint of Catholic social doctrine, the concern for the environment and thus the advocacy against global warming cannot and should not be separated from a collective vision of a just and humane society.

Here we are brought back to paragraph 158 of the encyclical which emphasizes the connection between the importance of ecological consciousness and protection and the preferential

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options for the poor. Basically, the destruction of the environment would affect those who are most vulnerable in society, that is, those who do not have the means to access medicine, transportation and food. To be concerned about the environment only from the viewpoint of aesthetics, that is, to be worried about the beauty of the earth is, practically, to miss the whole point of the encyclical. A Christian, therefore, should be concerned about the earth not just because he is concerned about himself and his future but because the world's problems are his problems. He shares in the burden of others just as they too share in his burden. In the words of LS, "[w]e need only look around us to see that, today, this option is in fact an ethical imperative essential for effectively attaining the common good."<sup>43</sup>

Paragraphs 159-162 expounds and expands the discussion of the common good as the foundation of the Christian calling to care for the earth. Precisely, the communal spirit cannot just be applied to the people of the here and now but also to those who belong to the future generations. Pope Francis stresses that we cannot speak of sustainable development apart from intergenerational solidarity.<sup>44</sup> He further stresses the significance of the dialogic between a sustainable environment and intergenerational solidarity by saying that it is not optional and that it is a basic question of justice.<sup>45</sup>

### **More than Just an Advocacy**

LS is not merely a sentimental or emotional call for green advocacy rather it is a reasoned discourse that argues that our environmentally related problems are caused by those people who only think of their gains as well as those countries who have exploited those who are weak for their personal enrichment. As a constitutive discourse of the Church's social teaching on the environment it must be read and understood in the light of the

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Church's sustained teaching on the human person, political and economic life and development among others.

Thus, when LS points out that the climate is a common good, it basically argues that the destruction of the environment and climate change are not just scientific matters or issues to be resolved. At the core of these problems are political and economic issues and problems that are connected to our problems of production and distribution of wealth. A more serious root cause of the environmental problem is the value system that presupposes capitalism, and that is individualism. LS stresses that the degradation of our environment and the destruction of our ecosystem is linked to "a throwaway culture which affects the excluded just as it quickly reduces things to rubbish."<sup>46</sup> The bottom line is: the degradation of our world is an indication of humanity blurring vision of the common good.

There are many paragraphs that stress the theme of the common good within the context of the environment. A true ecological approach, says the encyclical, always becomes a social approach. Precisely, the questions concerning environmental protection as well as its destruction are ultimately questions connected to justice, i.e., the common good.<sup>47</sup> Drawing insights from the OT account of creation (Gen. 1:26, 28, 31) as well as other passages that speak of God as the creator of the world (e.g. Jer. 1:5, Ps. 24: 1, Lev. 25: 23 etc.) the encyclical underscores the importance of the common good pointing out that "the earth is essentially a shared inheritance whose fruits are meant to benefit everyone."<sup>48</sup> For this reason, LS stresses once again the social dimension of the environment by pointing out that "every ecological approach needs to incorporate a social perspective."<sup>49</sup>

### **A Critique of Individualism and Conscienceless Capitalism**

Although the Church (as stressed above) does acknowledge the contributions of a free market, given that she also respects

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private property as constitutive of man's God-given freedom, nevertheless the encyclical intensifies its cautions on the excesses of capitalism and its serious repercussions on humanity. A more insightful reading of LS would be to look more closely into its critique of capitalism. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis calls our attention to the fact that a cause of our current situation (dehumanization etc.) is found in our relationship with money, since we calmly accept its dominion over ourselves and our societies. Speaking about the financial crisis (that prevailed at the time of EG's writing), he points out that too much concern for profit can make us overlook the fact that it originated in a profound human crisis: the denial of the primacy of the human person.<sup>50</sup>

Here, we are not suggesting that the encyclical is not really about the environment. Indeed it is. It must be clear, however, that the pope comes from a particular context and that the profound message of the LS cannot be removed from such a context if it is to put forward a sensible and distinct contribution to the current discussions on the environment particularly climate change.

In this light, we need to confront the inconvenient truth that the disposal of the resources of the earth such as the wastage of water and the devastation of natural resources is rooted in a belief that individual gain or profit justifies the actions and that therefore human decisions in the form of legislations or policies are relatively good (or evil) depending on the output they would yield. In the absence of the vision of the common good, people swing to mere pragmatism where the good is determined or defined in terms of positive results. If the mining industry, for example, would lead to the creation of more jobs and more so money, then there would be no point talking about its other effects which do not have anything to do with economics such as dehumanization, destruction of marine life and the (damaged) future which is beyond quantification. Forgotten if not

intentionally disregarded by a profit driven paradigm is what LS says of the natural environment as a collective good, the patrimony of all humanity and the responsibility of everyone.<sup>51</sup>

Any environmental advocacy would not succeed if it is not coupled with a genuine critique of the economic paradigm that has made the exploiters of the world's resources temporarily victorious. LS frankly remarks that international arrangements and policies are weak and futile in the face of "powerful financial interests" that remain resistant to political efforts (to defend the environment). Thus, our fragile environment is utterly defenseless before the interests of a deified market, which become the only rule.<sup>52</sup>

### **Conclusion**

*Laudato Si'* basically re-echoes a fundamental principle in Catholic Social Teachings: the common good. Contextualized in the condition of contemporary society, the encyclical argues that the environment is a locus (not merely a social construction) where justice and solidarity are truly applied and measured. The pope's views on climate change, environmental destruction, and international policy on the environment among many others are not mere verbal gymnastics couched in a language of pastoral advocacy. The call to take action on the problems of the climate is a challenge posed to all men and women who are advocates or believers of two ideological extremes: those who, on the one hand, think that life must be lived to each his own, and those who, on the other hand, are convinced or at least tempted to control and manipulate all lives for the sake of an unfounded utopian vision of a world free from oppression.

There are people suffering due to increasing water levels or food crises or pollution not just because of technological glitches or failures in policy but also because some others are strongly convinced that they do not have any obligation to the social collectivity. In the first place, these people do not believe that

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there is such a thing as the common good. On a more profound level, therefore, *Laudato Si'* is a critique of the ideological roots of the present human crisis which is the crisis of the environment: individualism, unbridled economic liberalism, philosophical relativism, and utilitarianism among others. All these have one thing in common, the conviction that society does not or cannot have a shared vision as well as a shared future.

Institutions including Catholic schools, parishes and even Non-government Organizations have lauded the Pope (Francis) who through this recent encyclical made a strong discourse in defense of the environment. At the very least, the document has attracted admirers and would surely run through the years as (probably) a quote-worthy document. Students in theology, philosophy, or even the social sciences would surely make good theses or dissertations about the document. However, if we seriously support what the Holy Father truly advocates – it is not enough to say or cry “save mother earth!”

The environmental advocacy of *Laudato Si'* is not just any soft-stance green movement. It consistently continues what the Church has said about the values that presuppose or underlie the excesses of capitalism. In fact, it stresses, in bolder terms especially in an age of heightening globalization, its critique of an economic system dominated by a technocratic paradigm, of a system where cultural relativism drives one person to take advantage of another, where the rich have reached a scandalous level of consumption in the face of poor countries that continue to wallow in hunger and intergenerational poverty.<sup>53</sup>

On the surface, LS calls us to defend the environment but at its very core it is a call for all of us to think of our common future – to go back to a fundamental principle of the Church’s social teaching where each and every person has a responsibility to his or her own kind. It is a challenge for all Christians to review their faith in the light of what the Scripture tells us about God who is

the source of our life and whose plan for all of us is solidarity and communion not just in the *eschaton* but even in the here and now. The encyclical interrogates our kind of Christianity, one which has become blind to its responsibilities to society and humanity. LS is a call for all of us not only to be sharers of but also workers for the attainment of the common good.

## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> *Laudato Si'* (henceforth LS) 23. All citations of LS in this article are taken from the text published by Paulines Publishing House (Pasay City, Philippines: 2015).

<sup>3</sup> LS, 156; Also see *Gaudium et Spes* 26 and the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* 164. Shall be cited henceforth as GS and CSDC respectively.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> LS, 157.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium*, 221. Henceforth shall be cited as EG.

<sup>8</sup> LS, 158.

<sup>9</sup> For details on the principles of human dignity, subsidiarity, and solidarity see Russell Hittinger, "The Coherence of the Four Basic Principles of Catholic Social Doctrine: An Interpretation" in *Pursuing the Common Good: How Solidarity and Subsidiarity Can Work Together* Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, *Acta 14* (Vatican City 2008). In his essay, Hittinger says that a "social doctrine is particularly interested in the social virtues of charity and justice by which the person is right with God and neighbor. But being right with God and neighbor includes membership in societies which need to be rightly ordered both within and without" (pp. 75-76); *Deus Caritas Est*, 28a and 29. Henceforth shall be cited as DCE.

<sup>10</sup> Roland Minnerath, “The Fundamental Principles of Social Doctrine, the Issue of their Interpretation” in *Pursuing the Common Good: How Solidarity and Subsidiarity Can Work Together*, Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, Acta 14 (Vatican City 2008): 45-46.

<sup>11</sup> CSDC, 164.

<sup>12</sup> Nicholas Sagovsky, *Christian Tradition and the Practice of Justice* (London: SPCK, 2008), 29.

<sup>13</sup> John Donahue, “Biblical Perspectives on Justice” in John Donahue, ed., *The Faith that does Justice: Examining the Christian Sources for Social Change* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 77.

<sup>14</sup> PHEME PERKINS, *Reading the New Testament* (Makati: St. Paul’s, 1978), 89.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Sagovsky, *Christian Tradition and the Practice of Justice*, 67.

<sup>17</sup> *Fides et Ratio*, 49.

<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I.1 in W.D. Ross, *The Pocket Aristotle* (New York: Washington Square, 1958).

<sup>19</sup> NE I.2

<sup>20</sup> See Aristotle, *Politics* III.7 1279a.

<sup>21</sup> C.C.W. Taylor, “Politics” in Jonathan Barnes, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 234.

<sup>22</sup> See Richard Kraut, *Aristotle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 388-389. Kraut explains further the distinction between the common good and utilitarianism:

The willingness of utilitarianism to sacrifice some for others, if doing so maximizes the good, is one of its troubling features. Since it looks only to the sum total of good accomplished, it permits the thought that the world should be divided into winners and losers, if the combination of gains and losses produces that largest sum. By contrast, Aristotle’s idea that the polis should promote the good of all citizens does not allow a division of the city into winners and losers. Such factionalism would be the death of a city. (p. 212).

<sup>23</sup> Kraut, *Aristotle*, 211-212.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>25</sup> As cited in DCE, 28a. It would be a mistake to sweepingly say that the earthly city is the state. Although there may be similarities in both but Augustine believes that politics has its good in this world. See William



Ebenstein and Alan Ebenstein, "St. Augustine" in *The Great Political Thinkers* (Singapore: Wadsworth, 2000), 184.

<sup>26</sup> William Ebenstein and Alan Ebenstein, "St. Thomas Aquinas" in *The Great Political Thinkers* (Singapore: Wadsworth, 2000), 224. That is why the Church, basing its description of the common good on St. Thomas Aquinas' moral philosophy, teaches that the common good "is based on a logic that leads to the assumption of greater responsibility." See CSDC, 167.

<sup>27</sup> Alasdair McIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 118.

<sup>28</sup> Ebenstein and Ebenstein, *The Great Political Thinkers*, 448.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 459.

<sup>31</sup> LS, 157.

<sup>32</sup> Richard D. Wolff and Stephen A. Resnick, *Economics: Marxian versus Neoclassical* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1987), 39. Smith was a moral philosopher and although he has been more known as the father of modern Economics, the foundation of his thought was at best philosophical. One can better understand his economic thought of self-interest and thus his liberal perspective on the economy by reading *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. In this work Smith has this to say: "How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it, except the pleasure of seeing it." See Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (New York: Dover, 2006), 3.

<sup>33</sup> For details on Marxian Economics see chapter 3 of Wolff and Resnick, *Economics: Marxian versus Neoclassical*, 38-124.

<sup>34</sup> Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* IV.ix.51.

<sup>35</sup> Vittorio Hosle, "Ethics and Economics, or How Much Egoism does Modern Capitalism Need? Machiavelli's, Mandeville's, and Malthus's New Insight and its Challenge" in *Crisis in a Global Economy. Re-planning the Journey*, Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, Acta 16 (Vatican City, 2011): 504.

<sup>36</sup> LS, 61.

<sup>37</sup> In *Rerum Novarum*, 28 Pope Leo XIII points out the importance of labor saying that capital cannot do (production) without it.

<sup>38</sup> *Octogesima Adveniens*, 35-36.

<sup>39</sup> *Populorum Progressio*, 14.

<sup>40</sup> *Centisimus Annus*, 34.

<sup>41</sup> *Caritas in Veritate*, 35.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>43</sup> LS, 158.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> LS, 22.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> EG, 55

<sup>51</sup> LS 95.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 56-57. Also cf. EG, 56.

<sup>53</sup> LS, 109, 123, and 172.