



Panel-Conference on “Integral Ecology, Agriculture and Food”
FAO Headquarters, Rome, 26 October, 2015

Laudato si’ and the Vocation of Agriculture¹

Let me begin by expressing my gratitude to the organizers of the Symposium for the invitation to participate in this Panel- conference and to address our remarkable audience, here and elsewhere. My remarks draw from *Laudato si’* to reflect on an aspect of the mandate of this very vital institution, namely, “the vocation of Agriculture”.

I. INTRODUCTION

Gratitude is a fitting watchword for my remarks. As our Holy Father repeatedly emphasizes, the figure of Saint Francis of Assisi impels us to acknowledge the generosity of our loving God. We inhabit a most beautiful and bountiful earth. It provides for our needs most admirably, so long as we accept our responsibilities in cooperation with creation and in caring for each other. Gratitude and responsibility mark us as fully human.

We are grateful for our food.² Food sustains life itself. Unique and essential, it is not just another product. For Christians, providing food for all is a Gospel imperative, not just another policy choice. Eating is a moral act because it is human, and human acts can and must be morally evaluated.

But food and agriculture have become distant, abstract, anonymous. For many, food comes from a grocery store or fast food restaurant. We are disconnected from how our food is produced. This disconnection leaves us unconsciously dependent for our food on systems we

¹ I am grateful for suggestions and editorial help of Robert Czerny (Ottawa), Michael Swan (Toronto) and Anthony Annett (New York).

² Giving thanks before and after meals “reminds us of our dependence on God for life; it strengthens our feeling of gratitude for the gifts of creation; it acknowledges those who by their labours provide us with these goods; and it reaffirms our solidarity with those in greatest need” (LS § 227).

cannot see and do not understand.

As you may know, our Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI made *the logic of gift* the leit-motif of his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*. The topic we examine today is all about gift: food and agriculture that are possible because of the environment in which we live, the gift of faith to perceive the path to human action in goodness and truth, all in service of the gift of life itself. Gratitude for gifts, responsible response to those gifts – this is the essence of our calling, our *vocation*, to care for our common home.

II. *THE CRY OF THE EARTH*: OUR WORLD IN CRISIS

On June 18, Pope Francis released his Encyclical Letter on “Care For Our Common Home”, the environment. The home now cries out to us: It is in crisis; and within this home, so many people are hungry — millions upon millions of them.

A year ago, in October 2014, when Archbishop Bernardito Auza, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations, addressed the issue of the hungry on the world in the UN, he noted that 850 million people are suffering today from acute hunger. Then he went on to say: “This number is already shocking in itself, but what must shock us even more is the fact that behind those numbers are real people, with their fundamental dignity and rights. Thus eradicating hunger is not only a high priority; it is a moral imperative”. We owe this to our contemporaries, and especially the next generation, because “each year 51 million children under five years old waste away due to malnutrition, of whom close to seven million die.” As we sit here and according to a news item on Vatican Radio (22 October 2015), several thousands presently face hunger in South Sudan.

The lack of peace is an enemy to food production; but food has also not been distributed fairly in the world, and “an enormous quantity of food is wasted every day.” This is a symptom, said Archbishop Auza, of a “throwaway culture in affluent societies.” He also decried “deliberate large-scale destruction of food products to keep prices and profit margins high”.

III. FRAMING THE CHALLENGES

Last October, at a gathering of the world’s poorest and most vulnerable, Pope Francis said that “Hunger is criminal. Food is an inalienable right.” He told people from peasant movements,

landless farm workers and indigenous people that their fight for land, water and a sustainable environment is vital to all of us.

That meeting gathered participants of many faiths and of no particular faith background. Popes do not only talk to Catholics, particularly about crucial world issues. Saint John XXIII addressed *Pacem in Terris* to all people. Pope Francis cites this precedent and declares: “Now, faced as we are with global environmental deterioration, I wish to address every person living on this planet” (LS §3). Everyone – not just specialists or zealots or lobbyists – must consider some important, underlying ethical questions:

- How can hunger be overcome?
- How can safe, affordable, nutritious and sustainable food be ensured?
- How can farm workers and small farmers around the world live and work with dignity?
- How can rural communities survive and thrive?
- How can land, water and other elements of God’s creation be preserved, protected and used well in service to the common good?
- How do we respond to climate change?

IV. FRAMING A GENUINE RESPONSE

There are very loud voices that urge partial answers, misleading answers, self-interested answers and non-answers to the key urgent questions of environment, agriculture and food. I believe that a genuine response may be built upon three perspectives:

- the inseparability of humanity and nature;
- the principles that underpin our common humanity ... *being neighbors*;
- and the primacy of *calling* or *vocation*.

a. We are in the world

In *Laudato Si'* the Holy Father emphasizes, “we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. Gen 2:7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters... We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it” (LS §2, 139). Human beings are part of nature. From conception to the moment of death, the life of every person is integrated with and sustained by the awesome

panoply of natural processes. This calls for a reciprocal response on the part of humanity – to nourish and sustain the earth that in turn nourishes and sustains us.

Agriculture is the practice of this reciprocity: *breaking open the earth, so that the earth may nourish our lives with its secret powers*. From the very beginning, the Creator asks us to till the earth and to keep it.

But we have not done a very good job of tilling and keeping the earth. Humanity has been a poor steward of the environment, to the extent that Pope Francis notes that “the earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth” (LS §21). And this environmental degradation has a direct impact on agriculture—through droughts and floods caused by climate change, depletion of freshwater resource, and loss of vital biodiversity.

b. We have neighbours

The biblical narrative teaches us that “human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself” (LS §66). When one of these relationships is broken, the others are broken too. This is the essence of what Pope Francis calls integral ecology. It is why he says we need to hear “*both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*” (LS §49).

The common good comes before serving narrower interests. The goods or resources of the world have a universal destiny. Creation is a gift to the whole of humanity, not just a part. We are called to act in solidarity with those who lack access to these goods – with the large portion of humanity who suffer in the midst of plenty, beginning with those millions who are hungry while so much food is thrown away. As Pope Francis notes, “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” (LS §93). With the Good Samaritan story, Jesus taught us that our common humanity is built on love and active compassion—not on commercial exchange and the individual’s ability to pay!

c. Accepting our calling

Every human being is born as a unique image of God. Yet we all share a common human vocation, which is how we acknowledge and engage our nature as humans. We have a vocation to develop our full humanity.

Work plays a large role in vocation. For Catholic social teaching, there is an innate dignity in the act of work itself. We share in the work of the Creator through decent and rewarding work. It cannot be ‘just’ a job, just a career and earnings, if we treat work as part of God’s plan of love in history. It is the primary way that one’s vocation is fulfilled in this world.

That is the fundamental message of a text our Council developed in 2012 on the *Vocation of the Business Leader*.³ And I am delighted that the International Catholic Rural Association (USA) is drafting a companion text on agricultural leadership. It aims to affirm the dignity of the farmer and agricultural leader. It wants to encourage their commitments to the common good of all, including the care of the earth. It would foster an understanding of their work as more than simply a necessary task or business undertaking. Rather, their work is a vocation, a form of life through which God can be known, served, and glorified. “This implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature. Each community can take from the bounty of the earth whatever it needs for subsistence, but it also has the duty to protect the earth and to ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations” (LS §67).

V. SPECIFIC RESPONSES

Laudato Si’ is too rich a document for me to effectively summarize all its major points. Let me highlight a few for your consideration.

A fundamental feature is that Pope Francis integrates the human and the natural. You will notice that the encyclical uses the terminology of *stewardship* only twice, but *care* comes up dozens of times. This bespeaks an intimate relationship that goes beyond management and accountability and the impersonal mechanics of the marketplace. There is more to agriculture than profits and losses. Putting the maximization of profit as the first principle contributes to environmental degradation: “Where profits alone count, there can be no thinking about the rhythms of nature, its phases of decay and regeneration, or the complexity of ecosystems which may be gravely upset by human intervention.... whatever is fragile, like the environment, is defenceless before the interests of a deified market, which become the only rule” (LS §190, 56). So Pope Francis criticizes the naive idea that “the problems of global hunger and poverty will be resolved simply by market growth” (LS §109) or the lure of what he calls “the magical

³ Eleven different language versions (and more coming) can be downloaded in PDF format at <http://www.iustitiaetpax.va/content/giustiziaepace/it/archivio/pubblicazioni/vocation-of-the-business-leader--a-reflection-.html>

conception of the market” (LS §190). For “by itself the market cannot guarantee integral human development and social inclusion” (LS §109).

It is abundantly clear that agriculture commands influence over immense resources – the land that feeds us and houses us, the water, the soil and its nutrients. Is it legitimate to worry that humanity may now have tilled too much and kept too little? The relationship between human beings and creation has become confrontation, says the Pope, based on mastery and dominion rather than wise stewardship—let alone faithful care. This leads to the idea of “infinite or unlimited growth” which is “based on the lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth’s goods” (LS §106).

Turning to big business, the position of Pope Francis is nuanced. He sees it as a “noble vocation” that needs to put its creativity and ingenuity at the service of humanity and the common good. But he has harsh words for businesses that prioritize their own short-term profit in a way that harms people and the earth. For instance, some multinationals in developing countries can “leave behind great human and environmental liabilities such as unemployment, abandoned towns, the depletion of natural reserves, deforestation, the impoverishment of agriculture and local stock breeding, open pits, riven hills, polluted rivers...” (LS §51). Surely large agricultural interests can practice subsidiarity! If so, they will allow and even assist other farming structures – family farming in some regions, subsistence farming in others – to flourish alongside agribusiness. Is our system more geared to produce money than food? One difficult case is how local food production is curtailed in favour of growing crops to produce ethanol for use in cars – a clear impact of the global economy.

Advanced technologies also receive attention in the encyclical. Technology is not all bad. The technical ability to increase crop yields has done wonders for health and nutrition—think of the “green revolution”. But Pope Francis is making that point that technology unmoored from morality can lead to domination over people and the earth, especially when technology is in the hands of people with great resources. What results is a technocratic paradigm that tends to dominate economics and political life.

Pope Francis talks specifically about these new biological technologies. Can genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and chemical fertilizers make their contribution without endangering God’s creation, with all its species – God’s original gift to us all? And are long-term risks such as the growth of resistance to herbicides and pesticides, the destruction of an eco-system, ingestion of toxic material included in how we assess technological innovations?

The Pope paints an ambiguous picture. He frames the debate by noting that those who

possess particular gifts for the advancement of science and technology should use these God-given talents to serve others. Talking specifically about genetic modification, it is difficult to offer a general judgment. On one hand, there is no conclusive proof that GM cereals are harmful to human beings. But on the other hand, GMO agribusiness can create problems—such as the concentration of productive land among a few owners, the disappearance of small producers, the destruction of ecosystems, and the loss of opportunities for rural workers. So this issue must be handled prudently.

Displaying his broad grasp of actual practices, Pope Francis also points to avenues of hope. He calls for a move to “more diversified and innovative forms of production which impact less on the environment” (LS §191), and he is particularly concerned about small-scale production: “For example, there is a great variety of small-scale food production systems which feed the greater part of the world’s peoples, using a modest amount of land and producing less waste, be it in small agricultural parcels, in orchards and gardens, hunting and wild harvesting or local fishing. Economies of scale, especially in the agricultural sector, end up forcing smallholders to sell their land or to abandon their traditional crops” (LS §129).

Pope Francis offers several more practical, feasible suggestions: “Agriculture in poorer regions can be improved through investment in rural infrastructures, a better organization of local or national markets, systems of irrigation, and the development of techniques of sustainable agriculture” (LS §180). He specifically encourages cooperatives of small producers

CONCLUSION

These are global issues; their urgency and scale are apocalyptic. Pope Francis calls for a global consensus that would lead “to planning a sustainable and diversified agriculture, developing renewable and less polluting forms of energy, encouraging a more efficient use of energy, promoting a better management of marine and forest resources, and ensuring universal access to drinking water” (LS §164).

Our human bond with the earth is foundational. “Adam” comes from *adamah* or ground, earth. So too, “human” is grounded in humus, soil. Humanity was not created *ex nihilo* but *ex adamah* and out of humus. Without earth, there is no human being.

Moreover, our human story begins in a garden, not in the wilds. And it involves more than the inexorable laws of nature. Humanity is the factor that opens the earth up to new possibilities. Will there be blessed innovations and new harmonies, or new imbalances and cumulative

decline? The outcomes depend on human choices.

Our lives and the entire world we inhabit are gifts freely given by God — gifts that should inform how we act. If we permit it, God's gifts will humanize and civilize our economies. Where agriculture undergoes conversion to the *integral ecology* of Pope Francis—where farmers, traders, buyers and sellers see their wealth as common goods rather than just private property, and see the food they produce, prepare and distribute as sustenance we share—then the whole enterprise will sustain our human being and our common home.

Thank you very much.

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