

CREATURES



RADICAL ECOLOGICAL CONVERSION AFTER LAUDATO SI'

Discovering the intrinsic Value of all Creatures, Human & Non-human

Radical Ecological Conversion after Laudato Si': a practical exploration of the possibilities and challenges from a grassroots perspective (workshop & panel notes)

Linda Jones. Head of Theology Programme, CAFOD

Introduction

CAFOD stands for the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development. We are an international development charity and the official aid agency of the Catholic Church in England and Wales. We are a member agency of *Caritas Internationalis* and have a dual mandate – to support and enable international development and offer emergency aid in crises; and to educate and inspire the Catholic community in England and Wales to become involved in processes of positive change alongside people who are poor. The function of CAFOD's theology programme, which I lead, is two-fold. To facilitate theological analysis of issues related to and rooted in CAFOD's work practices and policies and to embed that in practice across the organisation and, through our work alongside the Catholic community in England & Wales. It is a multi-layered process of dialogue, practice and reflection. I am going to speak - from a very practical perspective - about radical ecological conversion. I will use examples to offer you some idea of what we have learned so far about the opportunities and challenges of trying to encourage and enable radical ecological conversion as an organisation. This process is far from finished!

Our process and goals

The process that I am going to reflect on began in 2015, with the publication of *Laudato Si'*. In fact, even before that, as we were preparing for a campaign about climate change and its impact on poor communities. Through our international programmes we had already seen the undeniable effects of climate change – for example, drought, flooding and increasingly severe

storms. And we had become aware of the consequences – such as reduced harvests, increased migration and the destruction of infrastructure and housing.

So, when we reflected as an organisation on *Laudato Si*, ' we could see how much it chimed with our own experience. But it seemed to us that - whilst highlighting environmental damage and its consequences - the document went far beyond this, to the heart of the joint economic and ecological crisis – ‘the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor’ – both interconnected and intertwined. Our reflection was that *Laudato Si* ' contained significant and far-reaching challenges for Catholic development agencies - indeed it questioned the very nature and meaning of progress. What is the purpose and meaning of development? How do we know what success looks like? What (if any) is the overarching vision and goal?

And so, we set out to respond to this challenge. Our theological adviser at the time was Rev Dr Augusto Zampini Davies, who is speaking in more detail here about the process and his findings. We began with the design of a long-term process, designed to influence the strategic direction of the whole organisation over at least 5 years and probably up to 10 years, by engaging in a period of reflection and dialogue, rooted in both faith and practical experience. We carried out a series of workshops in Sierra Leone, Bangladesh and Ethiopia and participated in dialogue in Colombia. We held workshops in England for volunteers, staff, clergy and parishioners. Rather than asking the direct question - what *is* progress? - the key questions we addressed were: ‘what are the *signs* of progress that you can see around you?’ and ‘What are the *barriers* to progress in your context?’

We were interested to find out whether there would be shared themes in different countries, or whether each context would be so different that common ground would be hard to find. We were convinced that even if each answer was different, we would still learn a huge amount from the process, because it would give us the opportunity to listen to a wide range of voices and experiences.

An interim report was drafted, then we carried out a second round of workshops to reflect on the report, firstly in Kenya with local partners, then in London with staff and finally at the Catholic University of Leuven with an expert seminar. I'm sure you can imagine that such a long and multi-layered process brings out many different themes and ideas, but it quickly became clear that one of our key recommendations would be around the need for radical ecological conversion. As an organisation we have committed to further work, with the desired outcome that: ‘A refined understanding of integral ecology, integral development and integral spirituality is forged, and an ongoing ecological conversion is promoted.’

How can we promote an ongoing ecological conversion?

In one sense, an ongoing process of ecological conversion is no different from other change processes, such as battling for fair trade. But in another sense, it seems to hit us much harder, because it requires profound personal change. It's not only about other people changing, or only about structural change. It requires us to change the way we live as individuals, communities and organisations. So, I would like to share 3 points that I think support the process of ongoing ecological conversion after *Laudato Si* ', for individuals, organisations and communities alongside 3 key challenges.

1. **Positive:** *Laudato Si* ' is an inspiring and motivational document, for Catholics and non-Catholics. It feels fresh, honest and authentic. It is challenging, but also full of joy and hope. We have found that when people are invited to engage with it, they

quickly become excited and open to considering its messages. People can understand and recognise their own lives and preoccupations throughout.

Challenges: There is still a great deal of work to do to ensure that all parishes and schools have the chance to engage with it. We have created resources for individuals, parish communities, and schools, which can be found on our website (www.cafod.org.uk). These aim to make the document easy to understand and engage with. People are very visually literate and have high expectations about the quality and relevance of the material that reaches them.

- 2. Positive:** A lot of information is available about both the science and the impacts of ecological degradation, as well as its links to consequences for international development such as drought, flooding, migration, poverty and hunger.

Challenges: A. Despite years of evidence there is *still* some scepticism about the science behind climate change, and some groups feel the need to acknowledge the doubts before they even begin to consider a process of change. Our volunteers and staff must often start from the very beginning when talking about ecological conversion and can assume nothing. B. Although evidence is very necessary, sometimes too much information is a hindrance, people may feel that they are not 'experts' and therefore can't engage. C. Information alone never changes anything, knowledge on its own doesn't often lead to long-term behaviour change.

- 3. Positive:** There is public awareness already about the need for change, and some examples of simple changes being made e.g. a reduction in plastic carrier bag use in supermarkets or a ban on plastic straws in drinks. There are simple ways of encouraging change, for example by focusing on family life and future generations. People care about their families and want to see their children and grandchildren grow up in a safe and sustainable world, where the air is clean, and water is fresh and available.

Challenges: A. There is very little awareness of the scale of change needed, and the challenge to a whole way of life to which many of us have become accustomed. I have heard many people talk about *Laudato Si'* only as a 'green' encyclical, or as a 'climate change' encyclical. So there is a long way to go before people accept the underlying challenges to our way of life, our reliance on the technological quick fix, our obsession with economic growth at all costs, and our constant focus on *doing* at the expense of contemplation, prayer or time spent in nature B. Ecological conversion requires long-term thinking, and we live in a very 'quick fix' society. C. there is considerable distrust of political leaders, and a wariness about 'fake news'. We need to **build trust** before change is possible.

Responding as an organisation

As an organisation we aim to engage with the Catholic community in England and Wales in a process of radical ecological conversion. We had a good start some years ago, during a year's celebration of the 40th anniversary of *Populorum Progressio*, when we invited the Catholic community to 'live simply and sustainably in solidarity with the world's poorest.' This led us to the development of a 'livesimply' award scheme for parishes and schools that is still running and requires each community to decide on practical actions. But, as I said, just *telling* people something is not enough. As an organisation we too must change. So, we have had to set up a long-term plan that involves all parts of the organisation. We need to be sure that our practices and policies truly reflect our commitment to ongoing ecological conversion. Way back in 2008 we had to move from our offices into a new building. So, we took the

opportunity to design and build to high environmental standards. Heating and cooling is by ground source heat pumps, we have roof mounted solar panels and solar water heating, a natural green sedum roof, rainwater harvesting and low water settings on taps. All the lights are controlled by motion sensors, so nothing is on when it's not needed. We also included 50 cycle bays, and only 2 car parking spaces for disabled access. All the furniture is made from recycled products – including *PlayStation* and seat belts, waste is recycled or composted. In this way we have reduced emissions by 72% compared to the previous building. However, we know that there is far more to do. For example, do we consider the long term environmental impact of all our programmes? Do emergency responses design in long term protection and care for the environment?

One of our responses has been to develop a guide to the SDGs, called *Engaging in the 2030 Agenda through the lens of Laudato Si'*. Secondly, we have produced a guide and toolkit for resilience, informed by the principles of *Laudato Si'*. This would help us to discern whether programmes help to develop resilient, flourishing and sustainable communities. What does a development programme that responds to *both* the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth look like? We are also reviewing our emergency responses, to consider how they might best respond in the light of the same principles.

Two organisational challenges that have created most discussion are: a. flying, and b. the use of time. To respond to donor demands for accountability it seems that flights to visit programmes and work alongside local partners are crucial. That face to face interconnectedness makes for good long-term relationships and sustainable change. However, flying is a major contributor to climate change. Do we stop flying? What would the costs be in terms of relationship and accountability? Could we use technology more to communicate? (*in fact, we do*) but how do you use technology without disadvantaging communities who have little access to reliable Wi-Fi, for example?

Secondly, the use of time. The culture we inhabit asks that proper and effective use of time can be demonstrated. To do this, we need to show 'what we did' and 'what we achieved' in that amount of time. However, long-term ecological conversion requires us to **do** less to use up less resource. Can any organisation in today's culture of constant productivity risk 'doing less' or 'slowing down'? How can that be explained to donors and supporters?

Conclusions

Radical ecological conversion is possible. I feel very hopeful when I reflect on the process that we have begun. The scale of change needed makes it very daunting, but the urgency of that change requires us to begin. Communities in the global South are already being hit, first and worst, with the consequences of our failure to take the need for profound change seriously. We are experts in denial, and in diversion, when our lifestyles are under threat. We like comfort, and we don't like change. And the consequences until now have all seemed far away from us in both time and in geography.

But there are pockets of the community where there is great enthusiasm for and commitment to change. It only takes a few people, with enthusiasm, faith and commitment to change everything. It only takes a few organisations with the energy and belief to change the way they work, to make a difference. We can shine a light to show what's possible, and to inspire others to join us as we learn how to live simply, sustainably and in solidarity with the world's poorest people.

Questions

1. What have you heard here that resonates with your own experiences?
2. What have you found has most inspired individuals, communities and organisations to begin the process of ecological conversion?
3. What challenges have you found most difficult to overcome?
4. What ways have you found to overcome those challenges?