

2018 Bishop Otsuka's New Year's Letter.

## Ecological Conversion A Call from Pope Francis's Encyclical "Laudato Si"

Bishop Paul Otsuka Yoshinao,  
Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Kyoto, Japan

### **Introduction:**

In this year's New Year's Letter, I would like to introduce His Holiness Pope Francis's Encyclical "Laudato Si," which addresses the theme of Ecological Conversion. Saint Francis is the patron saint of all people who take up the problem of Ecology, and the mystic who lived a life in harmony with God, with others, with nature, and with himself, and is the model of ecological conversion. The title of the encyclical, "Laudato Si" is the ancient Italian equivalent to the verse, "May you be praised," his prayer, "Hymn to the Sun." The soul of this saint was filled with praise for the Creator, and concern for nature, and his spirit of holy poverty gave witness to intimate connection between justice for the poor and the individual's internal peace. Before God, the human being is not only concerned with the relationship with God and others, but also is concerned with nature.

The first one to call attention to the necessity for Ecological Conversion was Pope John Paul II, but Pope Francis, in his Encyclical "Laudato Si" opens up the topic to four distinct types of Ecological Conversion: 1) Conversion before God, 2) Conversion concerning others, 3) Conversion that concerns nature, 4) Conversion that concerns oneself. The Pope who bears the name of St. Francis calls for people to be attentive to the dangerous crisis in the destruction of nature, and pleads that everyone concern themselves with the acknowledge earnestly the problem of the destruction of the earth, which is the common dwelling of all peoples, and resolve to correct this problem with concrete action.

### **1. The Starting Point of "Laudato Si."**

The term "ecology," or its abbreviation "eco," has become so common that nearly everyone understands what it means, without further explanation. Just by mentioning "eco," people understand that it has to do with the study of human life, and the natural environment, or with movements that make an effort to improve them. This study, or movement, is extended to include, "being gentle toward nature," "easing the burden on the environment," "concern for the environment," as well as, "healthy," "natural." "Laudato Si" proclaims ecology from the broad perspective of seeing the human being as a member in the ecological structure, with the aspect of the mutual relationship of humanity and the natural environment, as well as material recycling, and the condition of human society.

The basis Pope Francis' idea is the point of view is that "various things are mutually related." For Christians there is nothing in this world for which we be disinterested. The ecological problem pertains to everyone in the world. He encourages all people involved in this field, who are striving to resolve this problem, such as philosophers, scientists, those leaders in the ecological movements, and various religious efforts, to practice dialogue.

## **2. Integral Ecology.**

In Laudato Si Pope Francis terms the phrase “integral ecology,” and applies it to Saint Francis as the model. This term “integral” is important, so please remember it. Originally it meant “wholesome,” or “without blemish.” However, lately it has been used in the sense “something perfect,” “holistic,” or “comprehensive.” The College of Bishops, in their translation of Laudato Si has translated this word as “comprehensive,” and left the original word “integral” as a reference.

When the Catholic Church uses the word “ecology,” it wants it to mean not only the ecology of nature, but also include all the aspects of people’s lives, without excluding the meaning of “holistic,” personal, mutual relationships, their relationship with God, and thus an “ecology” that is all- inclusive. Reading the Fourth Chapter of Laudato Si will shed some light on this. Now, let us look at the four types of “ecological conversion” in order.

## **3. Conversion in our relationship with God**

First of all, we take up our conversion in relation to God. This refers to our restoring of the harmony with our Creator. Please read the Second Chapter of Laudato Si, entitled “The Gospel of Creation.” Human beings have disturbed the harmony between themselves and God the Creator, as well as the harmony in all of creation. This is human beings’ sin against nature. This in turn caused a distortion of the mandate to “have dominion” over the earth, resulting in a misconception of the responsibility to “Fill the earth and subdue it,” (Genesis 1, 28) as well as His command to cultivate and care for the Garden of Eden. (Genesis 2, 15) Thus, man destroyed the harmony in the relationship between human beings and nature. God’s injunction to “Subdue the earth,” which was meant to preserve the harmony on earth, human beings misconstrued to abuse their authority over the earth, and used it to justify their tyranny and oppression of other creatures. It is only natural that human beings, should they look at the ecology in the scriptures, in no way can accept ideas that depreciate or deny the teaching that God is almighty and the Creator. Man has no right to limitlessly trample the wonders of God’s creation. Humankind must accept correctly the responsibility toward creation offered him by God. Discovering this truth is the first step in ecological conversion. In ecology, as creatures made by God human beings must never deviate from the basic principle that they depend completely on God for their existence, and in humility realize that a spirituality where they confront nature (other creatures) is indispensable.

## **4. Conversion in our relationship with Nature**

Because Laudato Si takes up the problem of environment which men have provoked, the theme of conversion in our relationship with nature runs through the entire encyclical. The problem is that people are ravaging and polluting the natural environment at a pace that far outstrips its capacity to renew itself. In Chapter One Laudato Si we read that “We all live in the same house where this is happening,” and that the terrifying reality of the destruction of the environment on earth has been explained by science. It is obvious that it is the selfishness, willfulness, “my country first” nationalist commerce that is causing this complicated and disastrous chain reaction. The problem of climate change, pollution of drinking

water, the extinction of species, the burdening of developing nations with unrepayable debt by advanced nations must be recognized.

The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis, which is addressed by *Laudato Si* in Chapter Three, where the Pope sketches several of the ecological crises, he stresses that it is meaningless to discuss these matters until human beings are ready to admit their causal involvement in the criticalness of the situation. This warped idea of the root of the crisis appears in the life and activities of people. The nucleus of this is the conception that science takes precedence over everything. In other words, the high level of scientific development, which people have attained, can be used to improve the economy and culture as well. But, the fact is that the blessings of an increase in usefulness does not necessarily often disrupts the harmony between people, societies, and nature all over the world, threatening the very life of people, and is the cause of self-complacency that results in unhappiness.

As the Scriptures tell us, not only human beings, but also all the creatures that God has made, are mutually involved in an intricate relationship. Therefore, since there is a harmony among the created things, the respective purpose of each creature must not be overlooked. On this point, the Pope quoted from the publication of the Japanese bishops entitled "Reverence for life". He said, "The Japanese College of Bishops exhibited enlightened observation on the subject saying that, 'The fact that each species sings its own particular song is related to us all, in that we live in the joy of participating in the love and hope of God.'"

## **5. Conversion in our relationship with others**

In present day, all people, whether they be believers or not, admit that essentially, we have a mutual inheritance in the earth, the fruits of which are for their particular wellbeing. This is the principle of "common good." Therefore, in considering integral conversion from the social point of view, we cannot omit consideration for the basic rights of the poor. There is a connection between poor people and the delicate state of the earth, since the problem human poverty and the problem with the environment share the same root. Pope John Paul II said, "In giving the earth to mankind, it was given to sustain the life of each and every one of us without exception. God did not intend to exclude anyone, nor give precedence to anyone." However, Pope Francis in an even stricter tone pointed out that, "Above all that which we should be enraged about is that we continue to overlook the situation where people believe that they are more valuable than others, ignore that there is grave inequality here in our midst. On the one hand, even though there are people in the depth of poverty, without any hope of escaping from this fate, on the other hand here are there are people, with an air of superiority, are squandering their possessions without the least remorse. Moreover, we don't seem to realize that if everyone did this, we would leave the planet covered with refuse to the point of destruction to ensuing generations.

Accepting the Pope's observations, when we Christians face up to the problem of the environment, we naturally must do it with a sincere love for our neighbor, and admit that we have a stringent obligation to address the social problem of the poor and discriminated. Therefore, especially, to foster an integral ecology, the solidarity of human beings is necessary. Included in this solidarity, we must take into consideration the justice between generations, including future generations. In this way, ecological conversion will be sought, not only for individuals, but also on a communal level. In the Fifth

Chapter, on “Guidelines for Directional Change and Overall View of the Movement,” various levels of solidarity are offered, but that which receives special emphasis is the necessity of sincere dialogue. On various levels of society, economics, a politics, a dialogue, which has a sincere transparency and only based on a responsible conscience, will the plan of action be valid.

## **6. Conversion toward oneself**

In this way, if we address the problems of environment from the viewpoint that all things are interrelated, we can understand that without a renewal of mankind, renewal in relation to nature will be impossible, and that without a suitable humanism, ecology, and so on, this will be unattainable. The present crisis in regard to the environment is a symptom of the rational, cultural and spiritual crisis, and without healing the basic relationships of mankind, and any superficial solution to the relations between nature and environment will be futile.

In connection with this, Pope Benedict XVI spoke about “Human Ecology.” The human being’s body itself is placed in a direct relationship with the environment and other animals. Therefore, to accept the body as a gift from our Father, In no way can man consider that he has an unconditional right to his body, but rather he must accept is body properly, and treat it well. In this way, in order to encounter the environmental problems, human beings themselves are called to restore their internal harmony through conversion. This is the internal ecological conversion that Francis is calling for. Even though we pray fervently, we must not be Christians who make a pretense of realistic or expedient justice, for this would make our concern for the environment ridiculous. Nor should be conservative Christians who refuse to change their life style. Believers must in humility admit the need for ecological conversion, and promote “ecological education,” in an effort to deepen “ecological spirituality.”

## **7. Searching for a new life style**

In all things, the Christian must return to the call of Christ, believe the gospel, and convert, because the Kingdom of God is near. “Conversion” must not be mistaken for simple regret of the way one has lead his/her life up until now. What Jesus is calling for is that, in order to respond to the call of God, we are called to a reorientation that will point us to that calling.

It is the same with ecological conversion. In order to confront ecological problems on a faith level, the Christian must reflect on the various activities of his/her life, and search for a new life style that will be in conformity with integral ecology. Especially, it is exigent that the Christian experience of being liberated from consumerism, so that one may experience the detached life style, to have the conviction that “less is more” which is the key to growth in moderation, the life of poverty where we can experience being filled with just a little, and for that reason, in order to restore harmony with creation, and making an effort to spend more time to do this. We may contemplate the Creator who lives among us and within us. Thus we will perform the prayers before and after meals naturally. Concretely let us use Chapter Five as a guideline to reorientation and a plan for action.

## 8. Prayer

The Encyclical “Laudato Si” calls us to face up to the problems of environment, and challenges us to pursue a more fundamental inquiry. This is an inquiry into what kind of environment we want to leave to the following generation, the children who are growing up now. This enquiry is not simply about environmental problems, but about the very reason for our existence, the meaning of life, and the meaning of human work, all of which is intimately connected with life style. Therefore, as believers, in order to deepen our understanding of “ecological conversion,” we must direct our hearts to God, our Creator, and offering up everything to Him, together with all of creation, pray enlightened and encouraged by the Blessed Trinity.

The Pope ends his encyclical with the injunction “that we pray for the earth,” and “with the prayer of Christians, together with all of creation, we offer all up to Him.” The intense desire of Pope Francis found in the Encyclical “Laudato si” is contained in these prayers.

## Appendix

### Ten Themes and Five Points Reiterated in Laudato Si.

1. The relationship between the poor and the frailty of the earth.	The problem of poverty and that of environment share the same root.
2. The relationship between various things.	
3. Tracing the structural authority of technology.	Directing politics that envelop the economy.
4. Original economy? Genuine progress.	
5. The unique value of each creature.	The position and responsibility of human beings in nature.
6. Ecology suitable for human existence.	
7. Frank and honest discussion.	Dialogue that supports healthy communal decision making.
8. The gravity of the responsibility international and local strategy.	
9. Throw-away culture.	Life-styles that can change culture.
10. A new lifestyle.	

## A Christian prayer in union with creation

Father, we praise you with all your creatures.  
They came forth from your all-powerful hand;  
they are yours, filled with your presence and your tender love.  
Praise be to you!

Son of God, Jesus,  
through you all things were made.  
You were formed in the womb of Mary our Mother,  
you became part of this earth,  
and you gazed upon this world with human eyes.  
Today you are alive in every creature  
in your risen glory.  
Praise be to you!

Holy Spirit, by your light  
you guide this world towards the Father's love  
and accompany creation as it groans in travail.  
You also dwell in our hearts  
and you inspire us to do what is good.  
Praise be to you!

Triune Lord, wondrous community of infinite love,  
teach us to contemplate you  
in the beauty of the universe,  
for all things speak of you.  
Awaken our praise and thankfulness  
for every being that you have made.  
Give us the grace to feel profoundly joined  
to everything that is.

God of love, show us our place in this world  
as channels of your love  
for all the creatures of this earth,  
for not one of them is forgotten in your sight.  
Enlighten those who possess power and money  
that they may avoid the sin of indifference,  
that they may love the common good, advance the weak,  
and care for this world in which we live.  
The poor and the earth are crying out.  
O Lord, seize us with your power and light,  
help us to protect all life,  
to prepare for a better future,  
for the coming of your Kingdom  
of justice, peace, love and beauty.  
Praise be to you!  
Amen.