

John Paul II – a trans/political interpretation of the ecological crisis

 <https://doi.org/10.15633/9788363241032.03>

In his encyclical *Laudato si'* Pope Francis has called the Church, and Humanity at large, to an *ecological conversion*.² Some commentators have considered it as a break in the social teaching of the Church and have opposed the Pope to his predecessors and especially to St John Paul II.³

Some felt scandalized because of this break and others cheered it with the utmost enthusiasm.

In this paper I do not want to deny the novelty of the teaching of Pope Francis (the break, if you want to use this language) but I propose to highlight the elements of continuity in the teaching of these two Popes. In the history

1 Philosopher, professor of political science at the University of St Pius V in Rome, member of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, senator and former minister for European affairs of the Italian Republic.

2 Francis, Enc. *Laudato si'*. On care for our common home, 14.05.2015, 5.

3 How much this is unjustified results from the fact that the very idea of ecological conversion is to be found in John Paul II *Catechesis of January 17th 2001*, 4 and “*Insegnamenti*” 24/1 (2001) 179, explicitly quoted in *Laudato si'*, 5.

of the Church there is always novelty, because the eternal and unchanging truth needs to be expressed in the multifarious and always changing languages and cultures of the many peoples of the earth and of the various historical epochs. There is however also continuity, because God is faithful, He does not change, and His Word (that has taken human flesh in his son Jesus Christ) remains forever.

1. The novelty of Pope Francis' theo/ecological teaching has been prepared by John Paul II. We can find its foundation in the trans/political interpretation of modernity offered us in *Redemptor hominis*.⁴ The man of the classical civilization lived in a world inhabited by the divine presence. In each spring a naiad was hidden, in each tree a nymph. Entering in contact with the nature around him the man of the classical age was full of reverence and respect. He knew he could use nature to satisfy his needs, but he knew also that he had to take heed not to offend the spirits who dwelt in the natural objects and phenomena. He had to respect the dignity of all things, the measure of goodness and truth and beauty incorporated into each one of them. The ancient Greeks resembled the peoples of the Amazonas Basin much more closely than us, the westerners who consider ourselves as their spiritual heirs.⁵

Ancient philosophy has laicized this cosmo/vision but has substantially upheld it. In the *Physics* of Aristotle each thing has a form and in this form its specific level of participation to the beauty of the World is contained.⁶ To have a form means to have also a certain finality, a purpose that has to be fulfilled and man has a duty to respect this finality and to support it in pursuing its proper end.

In Aristoteles' *Physics* we have four kinds of causality: it has material causes, it has efficient causes (and these are maintained in modern science) but it has also formal causes and final causes, and in modern science they went lost.

The world of the Middle Ages is not very different from that of the ancients. Christianity struggled of course against the old divinities, eradicated the oaks

4 John Paul II, Enc. *Redemptor hominis*, 4.04.1979, 15 and 16.

5 See: Sinodo Panamazonico, Il *Documento finale: Chiesa alleata dell'Amazzonia*, 26 X 2019, III a., <https://www.vaticannews.va/it/vaticano/news/2019-10/sintesi-documento-sinodo-chiesa-alleata-amazzonia.html>

6 Aristotle, *Physics* I, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1969, 7, 190 a 13 and ff.

sacred to Wodan and demolished the sanctuaries of the ancient gods. But... were they really destroyed? More often than not a new Church occupied the place of the old temple and angels and demons and saints were substituted for the old naiads and nymphs and satyrs.

St. Thomas Aquinas appropriated the philosophy of Aristoteles (and his *Physics*) to catholic theology. His ileomorphic (hylomorphic) philosophy is a respectful laicization of the animistic intuition of the Greek cosmo/vision (that is also that of most or all natural religions).

Dante Alighieri offers us the most perfect presentation of this frame of mind:

Le cose tutte quante
 Hanno ordine fra loro e questo è forma
 Che l'Universo a Dio fa simigliante.
 Qui veggion l'alte creature l'orma
 dell'eterno valore il qual è fine
 Al quale è fatta la toccata norma.
 Nell'ordine ch'io dico sono accline
 Tutte nature, per diverse sorti,
 Più al principio loro e men vicine;
 Onde si muovono a diversi port
 Per lo gran mar dell'essere e ciascuna
 Con istinto a lei dato che la porti⁷

7 The things, all of them
 Have an order among themselves and this is the form
 That makes the Universe similar to God.
 Here see the higher creatures the imprint
 Of the eternal Maker who is the end
 To whom is aimed the aforementioned norm.
 In this order are inserted
 All natures, in different forms
 Some nearer to, some farther from their first principle.
 Therefore they move to different ends
 Through the great sea of being,
 Each one with its own principles that leads it.

D. Alighieri, *Divine Comedy, Paradise 1*, Penguin Books Ltd, London 2004, 103/114. Pay attention to the two key words form and end (fine). The modern science is characterized exactly through the exclusion of formal and final causality. Hans Urs von Balthasar dedicates

I do not mean that there is no qualitative difference between Christianity and the old mythologies and religions: All spirits, good and bad, are in christianity subordinated to the one God who created earth and sky. This God, moreover, loves men and all creatures. He does not like the blood of sacrifices (the human but also the animal ones). He has shed His blood for the forgiveness of sins. The difference with the natural religions does not however touch upon the all pervasive experience of the Sacred.⁸

2. Things will change with the modern age. There have been many different proposals to determine the starting point of the modern age: the discovery of America, the protestant reformation, the formation of the modern state... Without any pretense of exclusivity we want now focus our attention on the coming into the world of modern science.

Between the end of the XVI and the beginning of the XVII Century Fermat e Descartes discover the analytical geometry and Galileo discovers the experimental method: the modern science of physics is born. This science is concerned with the movement of bodies in space and time. The bodies of modern science do not have (or, rather, are considered as if they did not have) any inherent qualities. They do not have a form or a finality of their own. They are just matter, matter without form, prime matter. Modern physics offers us a world of pure objects, objects without a form of their own, prime matter. The movements of this prime matter can be precisely calculated and mathematics offers the adequate instruments for these calculations. The objects without form are just means for human ends. They have no form and receive their form through the manipulative action of man. Man learns to live in a world of pure objects. Whenever it discovers a rest of subjectivity in the world of pure objects the modern science denounces it as an epistemological obstacle and an impediment to the triumphal progress of science.⁹

A world of pure objects presents many advantages: it endows men with an amount of power that the men of the world of yesterday could scarcely have dreamt of. Man has completely subjugated the earth, and this is good because

the introduction to his theology exactly to the vision of the form. H. U. von Balthasar *The Glory of the Lord I Seeing the form*, Ignatius Press 1982. The title of the German original is the first volume is *Die Anschaaung der Gestalt* that is the vision of the form.

8 R. Otto, *Naturalism and Religion*, Williams and Norgate, London 1907.

9 G. Bachelard, *The new scientific spirit*, Beacon Press, Boston 1985.

this is the command God gave him in the Garden of Eden. But... did we at the same time eat the forbidden fruit?

In the world of pure objects there is no place for subjects: nymphs and naiads and satyrs and centaurs are dead but men also are withering away. Other men different from myself are increasingly seen as mere objects, instruments for my will.¹⁰ And I myself am becoming in my own eyes a pure object. The only generally recognized value is power and then... would you accept to become more of an object in order to master more power? This is the challenge of the so called trans humanism.

In the last stage of this process man identifies himself with God. He despises the old world created by God and wants to create a new world that would belong only to himself.¹¹ Man conceives himself no more as a administrator of the created world who can use it but cannot destroy it, must preserve it for the future generations and must give it back to God, when he dies, undamaged and, if possible, made a bit more beautiful through his labor.

The destruction of the world of nature is the consequence of the hybris of men who have refused to recognize themselves as creatures and have pretended the power of using nature without respecting the level of beauty, goodness and truth given by God to each created being, its ontic dignity.

Heidegger has described the dehumanizing power of technics. In one of his last writings he said that only a God can save us.¹² I shall formulate this desire in a slightly modified form in order to save man and the world we must bring God back into the world. This seems to be the program of the ecological conversion to which Pope Francis calls. St. John Paul II helps us to understand better the meaning of this conversion.

The center of christian faith is and will remain forever the person of Jesus Christ. There is no true conversion that is not a conversion to Him. The ecological conversion is not a conversion to ecology that becomes a new pagan religion but rather a turn towards the theology of creation. Let us remind the Gospel of St John: "Through Him all things were created...". Creation and

10 See R. Buttiglione, *Die Wahrheit im Menschen*, Springer 2019.

11 In German culture this attitude is exemplified in Goethe's interpretation of the myth of Prometheus. This is also the essence of Marx' atheism. See W. Sheasby *Anti-Prometheus, Post-Marx: the real and the myth in green theory* in "Organization & Environment" 12 (1) March 1999, 5 and ff.

12 See Th. Sheenan (ed.), *Heidegger, The man and the thinker Piscataway*, Transaction Publishers, Piscataway NJ 1981, 45 and ff.

Redemption cannot be opposed to one another because Creation is ordered to Redemption since the beginning and the man Jesus of Nazareth is the Logos through Whom all things were made. When today we experience a growing feeling of alienation in the unmercifully rationalized world we live in, when we see a growing demand for spirituality in our societies, when we are confronted with an unexpected return of the sacred, we should not feel afraid. The return of the sacred may of course be misdirected towards a reactualization of pagan religions but it expresses fundamentally a human longing for a true theology of creation and for the experience of being creatures that stand in front of their Creator.

3. There is today a double rebellion against the rationalized world of modern scientism. On the one hand nature rebels against a man who does not recognize the dignity and rights of the natural environment and mismanages the creation. This mismanagement finds its expression in the destruction of irreplaceable resources, in the pollution of river and lakes, in the reduction of the disposable quantities of drinking water, in the deforestation and desertification of large areas of the earth, in the climate crisis, in the enormous growth of dangerous waste... Man is destroying the earth and making it unsuitable for human life. The ecological movement nowadays is an answer to this state of affairs. We are called to change our way of life if we want to survive.¹³

But do we want to survive, we as humankind? The answer is not so easy. Does it really make sense to speak of us as a we? The dominating ideology sees man as an individual and not as a member of a community. The great communities in which the life of man is ordered, first of all the family and the nation, seem to be shattered. This changes of course the way in which we perceive the flowing of time and our relation to the future. I have a family, I am a grandfather and have grandchildren. I am interested in what will happen in this earth at least for the next eighty or ninety years, that is the probable lifespan of my grandchildren. But in my fantasy I can go even further and imagine the children of my grandchildren. I have a carnal interest into the future of the earth. Many men however today do not get married, they do not have children, the span of their interest does not reach beyond the time of their death. In order to assume a collective responsibility for the future of the earth

¹³ Francis, Enc. *Laudato si'*, op. cit., 17 and ff.

we must acquire a renewed consciousness of being a we, member of communities, families, nations and in the last instance of mankind. This is one of the many reasons why the earth ecology is essentially linked with and dependent upon the ecology of the heart, with human ecology.

Karol Wojtyła taught that man is an individual and as such is free. His liberty finds however its proper fulfillment in love and in the construction though love of a true human community.¹⁴ Man cannot live only for himself. The evils of the present state of affairs derive from the fact that men consider nature and themselves as pure objects and use of science in the service of their selfish individual interest. In this way we lose the capacity of controlling and regulating the economic activity (that is the organic interchange between man and nature) according to a general interest. We do not exist as a community and therefore cannot govern our societies according to an idea of common good.

4. We have now identified to roots of the ecological crisis. The first one is a human vision unilaterally regulated by modern science that has lost the capacity of seeing the Sacred in nature. The second is a science of economy that, built largely upon the model of natural sciences, has seen the fundamental engine of the practical relation of man to nature only in the self interest of man. To be sure we cannot make Adam Smith entirely responsible for this defect of unbridled capitalism. In his *Inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations*¹⁵ Adam Smith sees as the principal of those causes the well understood self interest of men. If we inquiry more in depth into the difference between the well understood and the selfish self interest we can come to the conclusion that Smith does not fail entirely to integrate into his vision some aspects of the communitarian nature of man.¹⁶ Some years before the *Wealth of Nations* Antonio Genovesi published however in Naples another book equally important for the foundation of an independent science of economy. It is the *Lezioni di Economia civile*¹⁷ in which he clearly sets as the roots of the

14 K. Wojtyła, *The person: subject and community* in “*The Review of Metaphysics*” 33 (2) December 1979 273 and ff.

15 A. Smith, *An Inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations: A selected edition*, Oxford University Press 2008 (1776).

16 V. L. Smith, *The two faces of Adam Smith* in “*Southern Economic Journal*” 65 (1) 1 and ff.

17 A. Galliani, *Lezioni di economia civile*, “*Vita e Pensiero*” Milan 2013 (1765/1767). See the *Introduction* of Stefano Zamagni e Luigino Bruni.

economic action two interconnected motivations: the care for the individual welfare and the preoccupation of the common good. The common good is not just a sum of individual utilities: it is rooted in the fact that I am passionately interested into the destiny of other human beings and cannot determine my good without implying in it their good. Only the idea of common good and the vision of the human community that is its presupposition can constitute the adequate subject for taking care of the earth. The education of human personalities who live in their self consciousness the communion with other human beings is therefore a first and fundamental contribution to the defense of the earth. This personality is educated in the family. The family is the environment of man where he learns to see himself as a member of the community.¹⁸ We must recover the communitarian dimension of human personality and we must not sever the defense of natural environment from the defense of that natural environment of man that is the family.

5. We need to recover the self consciousness of the human community and we need to recover the dimension of the Sacred. This implies a theology of Communion and a theology of Redemption. We must now face two possible objections that need to be carefully examined. The first one is: in order to recover the dimension of the Sacred are we obliged to renounce to the advancement of learning brought by the modern science? The answer is emphatically no. It is true that the world is made of object and it is good that we learn to see the world from the point of view of pure objectivity. The scientific frame of mind that is based on this habit of objectification represents a genuine progress of human culture. The world is not made however only of pure objects. It is made at the same time of subjects and men are subjects. We cannot therefore treat men as if they were pure objects and we cannot either disown that facet of the human spirit that interprets natural objects as a sign of a mysterious sacred underlying reality and ultimately as signs of God.¹⁹

St Augustine has clearly distinguished two different forms of exercise of human reason. One of them he calls *scientia*. *Scientia* is the knowledge

18 John Paul II, Adhort. *Familiaris consortio*, 22.11.1981, 15.

19 R. Buttiglione, *Wojtyła i punkt wyjścia filozofii. Wykład wygłoszony na sympozjum z okazji 50. rocznicy publikacji pracy Osoba i czyn zorganizowanym przez Uniwersytet Papieski Jana Pawła II w Krakowie w dniach 22–23 października 2019*. Acts to be published in the next future.

of the objects as objects and allows us to transform the objects into instruments for the satisfaction of our needs and of our desires. *Scientia* is not however the highest form of human knowledge. Higher than *scientia* stands the *sapientia* (wisdom).²⁰ Wisdom tells us what it is worth the while to desire. In one sense wisdom is the art of love and without this art all the power gathered by science can easily be used for the destruction of the earth and for the annihilation of the human race. *Scientia* and *Sapientia* are two modalities of exercise of human reason and they are both needed in order the human mission of governing over the earth as a shepherd of being that makes use of the world of nature for his needs preserving at the same time its dignity and its beauty. We must not renounce to modern science. We must only learn to put it at the service of the authentic good of man.²¹

The second objection that must be confronted can be formulated more or less in the following way: shall we renounce to affirm the creative power of man, that modernity has so clearly exalted, and shall we reabsorb man in the order of being as one among the other objects of this world? Will we not lose in this way the particular dignity of man that is based on his creativity that makes him similar to God?

We do not want to reabsorb man in the order of nature. Man is a part of the order of nature but at the same time stands over and above this order because he has received from God the power to govern nature and to lead it towards its perfection... or towards its destruction.

Man creates the world we live in, that is to a large extent a result of human labor and human creativity. In the wonderful landscapes of central Italy, that we see in the paintings of Perugino or of Raffaello the labor of generations and generations of human beings is incorporated. It is however a labor that has recognized and respected the gift of God contained in the first creation of the earth and has conceived human creativity as a cooperation with the creativity of God. Modern atheism has on the contrary negated the sovereignty of God and has seen man not as a trustee and steward but as an absolute lord with the right to use and also to abuse, to destroy the form God has given originally to the created beings in order to substitute it with a different form imposed by the arbitrary will of man.

20 Augustin St, The Trinity: *De Trinitate* XII, transl. Edmund Hill, New City Press, Hyde Park 2015, 14.

21 On a similar wave length: M. Horkheimer, *Eclipse of reason*, Martino fine books, 2013.

Once again St Augustine helps us to see the crux of the matter. He says that there are two different ways to make use of things. One corresponds to the latin word *uti*. *Uti* is the way of handling the object that corresponds to the master who can do with the object whatever he wants and even destroy it if it him so pleases. The other way corresponds to the latin word *frui*. *Frui* is the way of using an object we have received as a loan. We cannot destroy it, we cannot damage it, because we have to give it back to the owner in a condition at least not worse than that in which we have received it.²² We receive the earth as a loan from God and from the generations that preceded us and we have to give it back to God and to the generations that will come after us. Our creativity has to be exercised in conformity and not in contradiction with the intention of God who has created the earth and wants it to be the home of man but also of plants and animals and has given this earth not only to one generation of men but to the whole of mankind in the succession of all the generations of the inhabitants of this earth.

The ecological conversion demands us to go back to the religious and christian roots of our civilization not in order to refuse modernity but to save it and make it more fruitful and more human.²³



22 Augustine St, The Trinity: *De Trinitate* X, transl. Edmund Hill, New City Press, Hyde Park 2015, 11, 17 and ff.

23 John Paul II, Enc. *Centesimus annus*, 1 V 1991, 17.