Eco-Virtue Ethics and Anthropological Commitments of Laudato Si’ and Laudate Deum: Towards a Renewed Integral Ecology

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The Fourth Chapter of Laudato Si’ (LS) of Pope Francis deals with the theme of ‘Integral Ecology’ from a religious tradition. This chapter can be interpreted as the fulcrum of the encyclical because of the density of its anthropological and ethical considerations. The theme of this chapter has informed a more emphatic presentation in the apostolic exhortation Laudate Deum (LD) on the climatic challenges confronting humanity. Both documents, with incomparable courage and novelty, offer enriching ethical discourses for advancing social, cultural, and human ecology in consonance with social justice, common good, solidarity, and subsidiarity. They contain the magisterial appeal that shows the unity of the created order. This paper offers an anthropological reading of the two documents to establish an essential framework for forming ecological ethics and virtues that can guide the ongoing global politics and discussions on the urgency of safeguarding the environment. This paper also considers the imperatives of virtue ethics in the institutional and organizational proposals for caring for our common home and the poorest of the earth.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Common Good, Dialogue, Ecology, Responsibility, Technology

**Introduction**

The Encyclical Letter, Laudato Si’ (LS) of Pope Francis, published on 24 May 2015, offers a guide for understanding the perilous state of the natural environment and the daring consequences on human survival. Eight years after his first appeal on the danger our common home faces in the face of anthropological irresponsibility, the situation seems to have worsened. Thus, the inadequate attention and the collapsing state of the ecosystem have prompted the Pope to issue, on October 4, 2023, an Apostolic Exhortation Laudate Deum (LD), which continues the discussion of its predecessor document. LD is considered, according to the formulation of its author, as completing, through the feedback received from LS, the discussion initiated on the care for our common home.

The state of the climate has posed an anthropological emergency because “this is a global issue and one intimately related to the dignity of human life” (LD no.3). The anthropological effect of the climatic crisis occasioned by irresponsible lifestyles is evident in the hampering effects on the lives of many persons on the planet. The ecosystem has been pillaged and stripped bare by the reckless and irresponsible activities of human beings. Thus, “the earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth” (LS no. 21). Mother Nature’s degraded state portrays human tyranny and the image of humanity that lives in self-forgetfulness of the interrelatedness of the created order. Mother Nature’s protest, evident in phenomenal weather events and catastrophes, are signs of a “silent disease that affects everyone” (LD no. 5). Both documents take a prophetic stand to denounce the misery of nature and the poorest of the earth, highlighting the scandal of ecological marginalization and demeaning human status. In the age of technocracy and anthropocentrism, LS and LD offer a solid message for modern humanity on the recognition that “everything is (inter) connected” and “no one is saved alone” (LS nos. 91, 117, 240; LD no.19). This implies that an uninhabitable ecosystem begets a dying and vanishing human community. An
environmental philosophy of respect and recognition of the intrinsic value of nature that does not depend on the utilitarian relationship to humans is at the heart of LS, which preceded the UN Climate Change Conference, Paris 2015. In the same grammar of promoting an integral ecology, LD anticipated the next Conference of Parties (COP28) held in the United Arab Emirates (Dubai) from November 30 to December 12, 2023.

Following the spirituality of Saint Francis of Assisi, the Pontiff, through LS and LD, shows that nature is the common home “with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us” (LS no.1). Humanity receives bountiful sustenance from the fruits of Creation for its continued nourishment. Thus, the virtue of reciprocal care and concern demands that nature be treated with a sense of responsibility so that its fruitfulness can continually be perpetuated for future generations. This perception calls for an integral ecology predicated on the constant renewal of the philosophy of interdependence. One can vividly imagine that this was the task of LS in its appeal for “ecological citizenship” (no. 211) and “ecological conversion” (no. 217).

The ontological nexus between the natural environment and the human community is the hermeneutical key to understanding the thought progression in both documents. This connecting thread grounds the advocacy for integral ecology, climatic protection, and authentic human development. Thus, an ecology that metaphysically embodies the beauty of nature and enriches humanity must be fundamentally anthropological because even the crisis addressed by LS and LD is human, ethical, social, political, and environmental. The recognition that nature shares in the plight of the poor who suffer from the pervasive throwaway culture, selfish exploitation of aggressive consumers, and self-serving interest groups resonates throughout LS and LD. While the message of LS and LD is novel and thought-provoking in its style, appeal, and methodology, it is a continuation of the social Magisterium of the 20th century (John XXIII, 1963; Paul VI, 1970, 1971; John Paul II, 1979, 1987, 1991; Benedict XVI, 2009, 2010) because the question of the state of the environment is a fundamental aspect of social ethics and justice. Well inserted into this social ecclesiastical tradition, it offers the state of the question and vocal advocacy on the looming ecological catastrophes that result from human exploitation. Typical of social magisterial documents, they were addressed to people of goodwill (philosophers, environmentalists, economists, civil society groups, scientists, institutional bodies, and international organizations) because the question about the environment knows no boundaries, religious orientation, colour, or national biases because, in the face of ecological disaster, all survive or perish together. LS and LD strongly advocate that a plausible way out of the current environmental quagmire is a change of mentality and lifestyle, favouring an integral ecology founded on ecological ethics.

This paper attempts to interpret the anthropological commitments of both documents, especially the emphasis on ‘Integral Ecology’ as contained in the fourth chapter of LS. This emphasis on integral ecology can be seen as the pulsating engine driving the new insights enunciated in LD. This contribution examines the essential framework for forming ecological and anthropological virtues that can guide the ongoing global politics and discussions on the urgency of safeguarding the environment. Through the virtue ethics enunciated in these documents, this paper will highlight the urgency of an integrated approach toward combatting the misery of the poor of the earth and the cries of nature. It will consider the imperatives of virtue ethics in the institutional and organizational proposals and formulation of statements for caring for our common home.
I. LS and LD on the Question of Ecological Crisis

Both LS and LD have global appeal irrespective of religion and orientation because LS is addressed “to every person living on this planet” as a “dialogue with all people about our common home” (LS, nos. 3,4) and LD to “all people of goodwill on the climate crisis” (cf. title of document). The twin documents address the rupture of ecological harmony, tyrannical anthropocentrism that destroys other creatures, and the consumerist attitude that oppresses the poor and dejected. They analyse environmental problems by pointing out their anthropological, spiritual, and moral origins, thus connecting the wounds of the common home to the misery of the poor. Beyond being critical of global conditions of the environment and humanity in general, LS, for instance, lays the framework of considerations for global action defined by effective policies, legal frameworks, and sincere discussion, debate, and dialogue (Porras 2015, Longenecker 2015). This line of thought in LS was further deepened in LD through the recommendation of collaborative and forceful multilateralism.

Furthermore, both LS and LD decry the technological paradigm that aims at short-term economic profits and gains; the lack of political will to engage in long-term projects that protect humans and their environment; the problems of global warming, depletion of the ozone layer, the loss of biodiversity; the dastard effects of nuclear arms; environmental pollution; the lack of potable water for the less developed territories of the world; the substandard human lives of many in the Global South as a result of the exploitative activities of some greedy interests of the Global North. LS did not neglect to denounce the growing culture of death through the legalization of abortion because “since everything is interrelated, concern for the protection of nature is also incompatible with the justification of abortion” (LS no. 120). The current crisis is fuelled by injustice, irresponsibility, and self-aggrandizement that have characterized the relationship between the ecosystem and human beings. It is not uncommon to see that we live alongside the politics of the powerful who, with vested interests, approach ecological issues with “superficial rhetoric, sporadic acts of philanthropy and perfunctory expression […]”, whereas any genuine attempt by groups within the society to introduce change is viewed as a nuisance based on romantic illusions or an obstacle to be circumvented” (LS no. 54; cf. LD nos. 6-10).

On the reception of the two documents, I will dwell on LS. Since its publication eight years ago, the message of LS has been ambivalently received in the academy, political circles, and among ecological activists. One could distinguish two forms of reactions: positive and negative. For some, it was a timely document, courageous in naming the ills of modern humanity and discussing a symbiotic relationship between human and natural ecology. Unlike some institutional and organizational statements on the same theme, LS gives a new impetus and perspective to the question in its twin emphasis on protecting and caring for the natural home and human dignity.

Some of these reactions bordered on the question of ethics and moral leadership the encyclical offers or not. Nicholas Stern, the Chairperson Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment, succinctly remarks: “The publication of Pope’s encyclical [LS] is of enormous significance. He has shown great wisdom and leadership. Pope Francis is surely absolutely right that climate raises vital moral and ethical issues […] Moral leadership on climate change from the Pope is particularly important because of the failure of many Heads of State and government around the world to show political leadership” (Stern 2015). On his part, the erstwhile (former) UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan commented that the encyclical’s message on climate change demonstrated Pope Francis’ courageous, moral, and ethical leadership, which is very much desired in the perilous moments of global changes.
Another commendable move in the reception of the encyclical is the formation of *Laudato Si’* movement to spread the message of integral ecology and care of the planetary home. Guided by the virtue of justice, the movement has the mission “to inspire and mobilize the Catholic community to care for our common home and achieve climate and ecological justice, in collaboration with all people of goodwill”⁶. The movement has inspiring initiatives named after the encyclical, such as LS Generation, LS Animators, LS Week, LS Circles, and LS Retreats. A common element in all the positive receptions is the emphasis on the ethical framework provided by *LS* with a balanced vision of anthropology for the progress of global politics and discussion on the environment.

Conversely, the document falsely has been represented as a political statement on climate change. Much of the criticisms against *LS* from economists, technologists, and environmentalists appear to miss the core of the encyclical and betray an ignorance of the dynamics of social change. For instance, R.R. Reno represents a critical voice on *LS*. He considers it antimodern⁷ in its tone and enunciations and lacks the openness to modern science envisioned in *Gaudium et Spes*. The author of *First Things* says:

In this encyclical, Francis expresses strikingly anti-scientific, anti-technological, and anti-progressive sentiments [.....] *Laudato Si* does not explain how modern science can recover a sense of humility and wonder, nor does it lay down a natural-law framework for the proper development of Technology. There’s no application of Catholic social doctrine to help us think in a disciplined way about how to respond to environmental threats or how to reform global capitalism. That would have reflected *Gaudium et Spes* Agenda as carried forward by the last two popes (Reno 2015).

This opinion of Reno does not represent an attentive reading of *LS* because all criticisms raised appeared to have been addressed by the author of *LS*, especially in the progressive development of thought in *LS* to arrive at unified principles and demands of integral ecology. Pope Francis’ anti-technological designation is *argumentum ad hominem* because the author of *LS* shows he is not a Luddite. After all, he keenly appraised the many contributions of Technology in advancing the human condition and resolving ecological problems. He is clearly vindicated by Reno’s diatribe and similar critics in the following submission and query: “Technology has remedied countless evils which used to harm and limit human beings. How can we not feel gratitude and appreciation for this progress, especially in the fields of medicine, engineering, and communications? How could we not acknowledge the work of many scientists and engineers who have provided alternatives to make development sustainable?” (*LS* no.102). In berating *LS* as not indicating how modern science can recover the sense of humility and wonder in nature, Reno misses the essential words of Francis: “If we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs” (*LS* no. 11).

A reading of *LD* shows that the Pope is aware of some of these skeptical positions on *LS* and other meaningful contributions being made to arrest the ecological crisis. He devotes some paragraphs in *LD* to responding to the scientific naysayers and conspiracy theorists who try to use alleged scientific data to eliminate the inherent dangers humanity faces in the face of climate change. Such theorists can be seen as giving out incomplete data that can be deceptive about the actual state of the crisis. This audience forms the focal point of LD’s clarification
on the need to put the record straight and approach the climate issues as they are (cf *LD* no. 6-10). Heaping the problem of the climate crisis on the poor, population increase, and possible mutilation of women in some areas of the world is considered by *LD* as a way of begging the question and turning the eye over the damages the wealthy countries of the world do to the ecosystem through environmental pollution. The poor suffer and bear the brunt of the consumer culture of the rich.

On being anti-progress, as noted by the same Reno, it must be underscored that *LS* is inserted in the social Magisterium with a positive perspective on progress. For instance, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace noted years before the emergence of *LS*:

> [...] the Magisterium has repeatedly emphasized that the Catholic Church is in no way opposed to progress, rather she considers “science and technology are a wonderful product of a God-given human creativity since they have provided us with wonderful possibilities, and we all gratefully benefit from them”. For this reason, “as people who believe in God, who saw that nature which he had created was ‘good’, we rejoice in the technological and economic progress which people, using their intelligence, have managed to make (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 2004 no. 457. Hence cited as CSDC).

A keen reading of *LS* shows that it follows the line of appeal for the virtue of prudence and discernment in the use of applied Technology, which can be a tool for the upliftment or degradation of the human person. Against being anti-progress and technological, through *LS*, Francis excoriates the manipulative use of Technology that lacks prudence and ethical considerations and the reductionist tendency of seeing the whole reality of life from the technological prism. In *LD*, he further notes that the technological paradigm has expanded rapidly with a monstrous view of the person and natural environment, with interests in consumerism, profit, and immediate wants. He notes, “Artificial intelligence and the latest technological innovations start with the notion of a human being with no limits, whose abilities and possibilities can be infinitely expanded thanks to Technology. In this way, the technocratic paradigm monstrously feeds upon itself” (*LD* no. 21). The problem lurking here is the concept of progress without limit, given to manipulating nature and humans as objects to be used and discarded. This tendency yields to the trap of “the ideology underlying an obsession: to increase human power beyond anything imaginable, before which nonhuman reality is a mere resource at its disposal” (*LD* no. 22).

The considerations of ecological ethics that this paper examines in the subsequent sections offer a reply to the skepticism of Reno, even though Francis anticipated such critical voices when he notes that “Whenever these questions are raised, some react by accusing others of irrationally attempting to stand in the way of progress and human development” (*LS* no. 191).

**II. Constitutive Dimensions of Integral Ecology in Chapter IV of *LS***

This chapter can be interpreted as the fulcrum of the encyclical because of the density of its anthropological and ethical considerations. It synthesizes the critical points of integral ecology, especially the phenomenology of interaction and interdependence between ecosystems and human and social systems. It offers enriching ethical discourses for advancing social, cultural, and human ecology in consonance with social justice, common good, solidarity, and subsidiarity. It contains the magisterial appeal that shows the unity of the created order. An integral ecology is one “which respects our unique place as human beings in this world and our relationship to our surroundings” (*LS* no. 15). It is grounded in the

II (a) Social Ecology
Everything shares the bond of closeness in the created order. The survival of both human and non-human life in the ecosystem is predicated on the ontology of interconnection and social cohesion. Nothing exists in isolation. Social ecology, as explained by LS (no. 139), understands the environment as a “relationship existing between nature and the society which lives in it. Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from us or a mere setting in which we live”. The engine of social systems connects with natural systems. Thus, the crisis of one is invariably that of the other because environmental depletion is a source of concern for the continued survival of the social order. The distress of Mother Nature translates fittingly into the misery of the discarded and dejected of society. In this sense, a one-dimensional approach to the problem certainly cuts off a fundamental lung because an environmental crisis is social at the same time.

Only an integrative approach can achieve a social ecology that addresses environmental and economic problems. Those advocates who concentrate their policy on the ecosystem and neglect the deeper wounds of society may miss through ignorance or naivety the big picture or state of the question. Pope Francis could reply to such shallow eco-advocacy by insisting that “[…] Every ecological approach needs to incorporate a social perspective which takes into account the fundamental rights of the poor and the underprivileged” (LS no. 93). To think of the environment is to give ample consideration to the economy, social order, peace, and human flourishing. It implies illuminating the understanding of a necessary confluence between the sustenance of the natural and social systems through academic research. The healthy functioning of the social order depends to greater existent on the state of the natural habitat because it offers a protective and curative shield to the human systems. For “if everything is related, then the health of a society’s institutions has consequences for the environment and the quality of human life” (LS no. 142). The Pope considers social ecology as significantly institutional because its concerns stretch through the micro and macroscopic dimensions of society, from the family as the primary societal cell to the international community. This justifies the regulatory roles that various institutions play to maintain social equilibrium and a safe environment. The force of institutional policies is vital for curbing injustice and violence that weakens social ecology.

LS considers social ecology as intimately linked to economic ecology. This form of ecology offers a ‘broader vision of reality’ and the developmental process in which the protection of the environment maintains a prime position. The June 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development is very clear on this: “In order to achieve sustainable development, environmental protection shall constitute an integral part of the development process and cannot be considered in isolation from it” (Principle 4). Similarly, the Pontiff observes: “We urgently need a humanism capable of bringing together the different fields of knowledge, including economics, in the service of a more integral and integrating vision” (LS no. 141). An interdisciplinary perspective enriches the common search for a lasting solution to the problems bedeviling social ecology.

II (b) Cultural Ecology
An essential task of integral ecology “involves protecting the cultural treasures of humanity in the broadest sense” (LS no. 143). Like the natural environment, cultural identity is threatened by a “throwaway” and cancel culture. The superficial aesthetics of uprooting and
attempting to reconstruct without consciousness of ‘preserving original identity’ is an existential problem. Just like some organisms are going into extinction because of human recklessness on the ecosystem, so too native languages, customs, and architectural identities of people are vanishing. Consequently, there is utter forgetfulness of origins and roots. Some cultural and anthropological studies have shown that many local forms of identity, especially language, will go extinct before the end of the current century. The rush to embrace the virtual life of digital Technology without proper discernment appears to confirm this hypothesis.

Cultural ecology advocates for an incorporated approach and methodology in the expositions of history, culture, architectural, and symbolic representations to retain originality and identity because “culture is more than what we have inherited from the past; it is also, and above all, a living, dynamic and participatory present reality, which cannot be excluded as we rethink the relationship between human beings and the environment” (LS no. 143). Cultural anthropologists should aim to foster a culture of dialogue and encounter, not exploitation, disdain, and superiority, in investigating local traditions, cultures, and environmental challenges. Against the consumerist mentality and the dangers of global uniformism, cultural ecology is to be fostered through grassroots solutions to local challenges and not through the imposition and importation of uniform regulations that do not address local circumstances.

Taking note of the cultural context in the proposal of remedies to crisis creates an anthropological dynamism that respects the rights of local and indigenous peoples, their cultures, symbolic rites, and historical identities. This attitude of respect fosters integral development and a system of fruitful engagement, even on questions that concern the environment on a global scale. Local cultural communities often have been on the receiving side of ecological hazards because they face the constant threats of losing their source of sustenance and system of support and identity. Any “disappearance of a culture can be just as serious, or even more serious, than the disappearance of a species of plant or animal” (LS no.145). It must be decried that cultural ecology is greatly hampered by some selfish requirements that some countries of the Global North impose on those of the Global South as a condition for assistance in resolving their pressing challenges. Often, these requirements are against the cultural sensibilities of those who are forced to receive them. These local populations also suffer from the dastard impact of multinational companies on mining sprees within local communities. The lands of the natives are despoiled and rendered uninhabitable, resulting in increased migration. Care and respect should be the guiding principles in any interface with these communities because they are not less human but have the constitutive human rights we describe as fundamental, universal, inalienable, and inviolable. Degradation of the natural environment has an overwhelming effect on the cultural systems.

II (c) Human Ecology
The integral development of the human person is closely bound to the care given to Creation. The ecological crisis has roots in human actions and attitudes. That is why “the human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation” (LS no. 48). Humans are not created to live in isolation because an endangered nature impacts social cohesion and foundations of life that were originally meant to be bound with the natural order. LD echoes strongly that “Human beings must be recognized as a part of nature. Human life, intelligence, and freedom are elements of nature that enrich our planet, part of its internal workings and its equilibrium” (no. 26).

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The environment contributes to the anthropological formation of personal identity because it constitutes the fulcrum of our human existence. However, the tyrannical activities of human beings could induce the thought and feeling of being external to the environment, which is the common home. A serene environment offers a good platform for contemplation on the meaning and values of life, but a chaotic one can create personality disarray. Pope Francis calls this ‘being - in - touch with one’s environment’ and making it habitable even when the ‘ecology of daily life’ appears undesirable. It is a mode of being at home with the natural order and overcoming the unavoidable difficulties present within an environment through proper human integration and solidarity. Human ecology creates a supporting community for victims of ecological hazards, especially the poor, by adding beauty to their quality of existence. The problem of housing and displacement of people and lack of the necessities of life constitute severe problems for the ecology of daily life because it touches the core of personal dignity.

Human ecology involves good integration within the environment, using it as a point of contact to foster fraternal communion and relationality; “a healthy ecology is also the result of interaction between human beings and the environment” (LD no. 27). The integrative process also involves caring for the weak of our common home and offering dignifying status while not excluding anyone based on prejudice, for “there is a need to place ever greater emphasis on the intimate connection between environmental ecology and ‘human ecology’” (CSDC no. 464; John Paul II, 1991 no. 40). Human ecology calls for the language of social fraternity, which mitigates all forms of ruthlessness, exploitation, and domination.

Furthermore, “human ecology also implies another profound reality: the relationship between human life and the moral law, which is inscribed in our nature and is necessary for the creation of a more dignified environment” (LS no. 155). The care of Creation should commence from the equal care one shows to the body as a point of contact with the environment. This respect for the body’s identity constitutes an essential dimension of human ecology. Benedict XVI (2011) describes this attitude as an “ecology of man”, for “man too has a nature that he must respect and that he cannot manipulate at will”. The ecology of the human body and sexual identity find another echo in LS (no. 155):

Learning to accept our body, to care for it, and to respect its fullest meaning, is an essential element of any genuine human ecology. Also, valuing one’s own body in its femininity or masculinity is necessary if I am going to be able to recognize myself in an encounter with someone who is different. In this way, we can joyfully accept the specific gifts of another man and woman, the work of God the Creator, and find mutual enrichment.

Against the cancel culture of sexual identity, Pope Francis further observes, “It is not a healthy attitude which would seek to cancel out sexual difference because it no longer knows how to confront it” (Catechesis, 2015: 8). Human ecology teaches that all human activities, especially concerning fellow human beings and the environment, are to be informed by moral considerations. This is what Aristotle meant in the Nicomachean Ethics when he avers that human beings are distinguished by a function (ergon), which is a rational activity that must be in accordance with virtue: “If any action is well performed when it is performed in accordance with appropriate virtue: [then] human good turns out to be the activity of soul exhibiting virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete” (Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, I.7, 1098a15).
III. Virtues Ethics in *Laudato Si’* and *Laudate Deum*

The content of *LS* and *LD* is illuminated by the predominant presence of virtue ethics that foster an integral ecology and care for the climate bound intimately with the principles of the common good. One could argue that Francis was convinced that safeguarding the environment can only be achieved by forming and cultivating (ecological) virtues (*LS* no. 88), which indicates ecological conversion and change of lifestyle from aggressive consumption to conscious safeguarding. This ethical sensibility of *LS* and *LD* continues the tradition and advocacy of social ethics as contained in the social Magisterium. Dale Jamieson recognizes the ethical orientation of *LS* in the following words: “[…] *Laudato Si’* is primarily a work of moral theology focusing on the human relationship to God and nature. Its politics flows from its ethics, and its concern with climate change comes from its broader focus on ‘care for our common home’” (Jamieson, 2015: p.122). Francis initiates a subtle hermeneutical and conceptual turn in the encyclical (*LS*) to align the environmental discourse with the agelong social ethics fundamental to the social Magisterium. The concept of *integral ecology* gained currency over *sustainable development*, which has been the pet concept of international advocacy of organizations like the United Nations. But what is ethically different from the two concepts? Sustainable development is founded on principles that compete: economic development, environmental protection, and social equity. These three indices are to be weighed equally in any developmental project, otherwise, it will amount to nothing. However, a thorough examination of these three competing values shows that they have, at various points, yielded disappointing fruits and disadvantaged a section of humanity. In current global politics, one can think that emphasis on economic values and maximizing profit reign supreme over the fate of the environment and equity. Francis understands this ambiguity in politics and economics at the expense of integral ecology. Hence, he advises: “Politics must not be subject to the economy, nor should the economy be subject to the dictates of an efficiency-driven paradigm of technocracy. Today, in view of the common good, there is an urgent need for politics and economics to enter into a frank dialogue in the service of life, especially human life” (*LS* no. 189). Because “Politics and the economy tend to blame each other when it comes to poverty and environmental degradation” (*LS* no. 198), Francis thinks more of an integral ecology whose politics and economic values are premised on the common good and virtue ethics. This conceptual switching from sustainable development and integral ecology in *LS* is well delineated by Ileana M. Porras:

[…] the concept of integral ecology, introduced in the encyclical, shifts the balance in a subtle but important and potentially radical way. The key is the emphasis on “ecology,” rather than “development.” The choice of “ecology” signals a new sensibility, attentive to the web of relationships that exist between living things, nature, and matter. The ecological sensibility is, in a sense, anti-anthropocentric. It stands for the proposition that human beings are not autonomous but must understand themselves as part of multiple interlocking webs of ecological relationships. The encyclical does not abandon the Christian doctrine that human beings are unique in that they are created in the image and likeness of God, which is the source of their human dignity. At the same time, however, it insists on the intrinsic value of nature, a value that does not depend on the utility of nature for man (Porras 2015, p.139).

In *LD*, it is clear that the lack of ethical orientation is fundamental to the current climate problems. Ethical decadence (*LD* no. 29) has favoured the dissemination of false information about the climate situation and the harmful effects of human activities in
the ecosystem. Humans tend to consider themselves as autonomous entities far removed from natural realities. Consequently, nature becomes an object for manipulation.

The first ethical virtue severally mentioned in LS and LD is responsibility and co-responsibility in the relationship between humans and their environment. Responsibility has roots in the Latin responsibilis, respons-, the past participle of respondere, which means to respond, to give account, to answer to, to pledge, and to promise in return. Etymologically, responsibility invokes a sense of accountability for one’s action, being answerable for the consequences of an act performed, a sense of trust and reliability, and a sense of obligation. This is a moral nuance Francis has in mind when he notes “that international negotiations cannot make significant progress due to positions taken by countries which place their national interests above the global common good. Those who will have to suffer the consequences of what we are trying to hide will not forget this failure of conscience and responsibility” (LS no. 169; LD no. 52. My emphasis).

Responsibility as a virtue implies a commitment by the human and moral agent to the ecosystem and authentic human flourishing realizable through political and institutional organizations. Responsibility as a virtue for the political institution in establishing regulations that foster integral ecology and ensuring their responsible implementation (Williams 2008, p.455) is very much present in LS and LD. To underscore the indispensable role of responsibility in the governance of human action, especially in modern liberal societies, Williams argues that “the virtue of responsibility occupies a distinctive place in the moral needs, and moral achievements of liberal societies; and this, in turn, explains why it now occupies such a prominent place in our moral discourse” (Williams, 2008, p. 455). The virtue of responsibility helps individuals to make informed and trustworthy choices. Many scholars like Alison Hills (2023, p.734) have postulated that “trustworthiness is [a] responsibility and very plausibly a kind of moral virtue”. Affirmatively, the virtue of responsibility belongs to the category that Aristotle considers essential and recommends to the students and subjects of political science who are to be brought up in good habits through the formation and good upbringing to reach the period of moral discretion (Nicomachean Ethics, I. 3, 4).

From these philosophical enunciations, one can argue that caring for Creation is a shared responsibility with moral, legal, individual, collective, and institutional dimensions, as highlighted in LS and LD. As an expression, ‘responsibility’ appeared thirty (30) times and ‘irresponsible’ six (6) times in LS. This index shows the currency of the expressions in the ethical framework for an integral ecology. Responsibility as a virtue of accountability is to be cultivated in relating to the environment as a common good for all, which deserves protection and care. For “responsibility for God’s earth means that human beings, endowed with intelligence, must respect the laws of nature and the delicate equilibria existing between the creatures of this world” (LS no. 68; LD no. 62).

The subtitle of the encyclical (LS) ‘On care for our common home’ underlines this sense of obligation and commitment that humanity, from grassroots engagement to international politics, cannot evade under any pretense. In exercising responsibility towards the created order, there is a confluence of aspects of the teleological, deontological, and consequential orientations in ethics. Teleologically, both natural and human systems have elements of finality and intrinsic values in themselves fashioned by the Creator. Maintaining discretionary rapport with fellow human beings and the environment is a sense of duty and obligation incumbent on the person. At the same time, a reckless and tyrannical relationship has dire consequences as we experience them through the many revolts of nature.
The call for forming the virtue of responsibility in both *LS* and *LD* is not limited to the now but equally for the good of the future generation. It is well expressed in *LD* by the Pope, who says, “What is being asked of us is nothing other than a certain responsibility for the legacy we will leave behind, once we pass from this world” (*LD* no. 18). In this aspect, the message of both documents connects with the social Magisterium that believes that “responsibility for the environment, the common heritage of mankind, extends not only to present needs but also to those of the future” (CSDS no. 467). Francis is clear that the present humanity needs to be accountable to the future generation for its actions toward our common home. In this, he agrees with his predecessor, Paul VI, who underscored the necessity of this obligation: “We have inherited from past generations, and we have benefited from the work of our contemporaries: for this reason, we have obligations towards all, and we cannot refuse to interest ourselves in those who will come after us, to enlarge the human family” (Paul VI, 1967 no. 17). Preserving a safe and healthy environment is the core of human responsibility. The Pope in *LD* calls for a “broader perspective” in handling ecological issues responsibly.

The intergenerational consciousness calls all stakeholders in State and International politics to be attentive and responsible in formulating and implementing guidelines that show the care for the poor and the environment as the business of all. The negligible littering of our habitation with filth to the use of chemical and nuclear weapons is a collective indictment and offers an opportunity for reflection on the internalization of the virtues of responsibility and accountability. Responsible stewardship includes taking note of the limit on how nature can be modified to enable human flourishing because nature is not absolute but a gift of the Creator to the human community. Eco-radicals miss the point when they absolutize nature. All that is needed is a responsible use of earth’s resources and a change of mentality and lifestyle.

Another virtue delineable in *LS* and *LD*, which grounds social ethics, is the care for humans and non-human beings “because all creatures are connected, each must be cherished with love and respect, for all of us as living creatures are dependent on one another” (*LS* no. 42). All true ecological advocacy must have its fulcrum as the advancement of the common good and the protection and respect of the fundamental rights of persons. The virtue of solidarity is intricately connected with care because both aim at championing the integral development of persons in the social order, maintaining social peace and stability as recipes for human progress. In fostering the common good as a principle of a just society, solidarity calls attention to the wounds inflicted on human society and the ecosystem by human injustice and marginalization. It emphasizes the need to give global care to the poor and the needy who bear the brunt of societal ills and other hazards. Also, the dignity of the poor is to be acknowledged, respected, and often treated with preference because they are not sub-humans. In the spirit of solidarity, preferential option for the poor is “[…] an ethical imperative essential for effectively attaining the common good” (*LS* no. 158).

Pope Francis, in *LS* and *LD*, shows a conviction premised on the need for global justice in dispensing the world’s resources and considering the plight of the biosphere and the poor of the earth. Man’s governance of the earth is to be inspired by the virtue of justice. The principles that favor the flourishing of the common good in human ecology can only remain letters of a document if there is a lack of justice and political will in implementing decisions and bringing culprits to book. *LS* and *LD* decry the lack of requisite political will to enforce regulations for the common good. Both texts continue the appeal to the conscience of humanity, especially political authorities, to think of global justice and fraternity in the administration of common patrimony. Justice that guides integral ecology must consider
radical changes in “lifestyles, models of production and consumption, and the established structures of power which today govern societies” (John Paul II, 1991 no. 58). The place of distributive justice as the catalyst for fair consideration of humans and their environment cannot be overemphasized. Jamieson reads the message of LS in this light when he notes:

It [LS] builds on thirty years of work in environmental philosophy, putting it in the context of Catholic moral theology, drawing on statements by recent popes and conferences of bishops, many of which Pope Francis cites. Global justice and compassion for the poor are at the center of this vision. Pope Francis implores us to see the faces of the poor and dispossessed and not just the political and policy challenges they pose when we contemplate them as abstractions (Jamieson, 2015: p.124).

Pope Francis links the virtue of justice to solidarity when addressing concerns between present and future generations. A sustainable environment and an integral ecology are to be predicated on “intergenerational solidarity”. In LS (no. 159), we read, “‘Intergenerational solidarity is not optional, but rather a basic question of justice, since the world we have received also belongs to those who will follow us’. This virtue constantly raises the question of the type of life we wish to bequeath every generation. This query provides a framework for normative and legislative guides that look beyond the present to offer a future for the not-yet. If taken for granted, the spate of ecological catastrophes precipitated by human activities could only bequeath a ruptured and unstable ecosystem to future generations. The environment remains a gift to be transmitted to every human generation with care and tenderness. Its destruction by a particular epoch smacks of egoism and irresponsibility. If the ecology of the economy is not characterized by these virtues and the ecosystem is allowed to wither away, the successive human generations suffer terribly. The following expressions in LS (no. 36) address the present generation passionately: “We can be silent witnesses to terrible injustices if we think that we can obtain significant benefits by making the rest of humanity, present and future, pay the extremely high cost of environmental deterioration.” This deterioration is connected to an ethical and cultural crisis that extols individualism, consumerism, and the attitude of destroying and not repairing. Renewed intergenerational solidarity and justice bring healing and succor not only to the life yet to acquire the present human habitation but also to the poor of the now “whose life on this earth is brief and who cannot keep on waiting” (LS no. 162).

Virtues like honesty, political (civil) love, and social charity are essential in confronting the paradigms of progress and development, production, and consumption as they affect human ecology. For example, “reducing greenhouse gases requires honesty, courage, and responsibility, above all on the part of those countries which are more powerful and pollute the most” (LS no. 169; cf LD no. 9). Social charity and civil love foster social interaction between the whole and the part. All environmental discourses take their point of departure from human activities, evidently portraying an interaction between the ecosystem and various aspects of social existence. Greater awareness of this interconnection of created things has become essential in mending the broken order because, as LS no. 70 notes, “[...] everything is interconnected, and that genuine care for own lives and our relationships with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice, and faithfulness to others.” The environment is related to human habitation, work, family etc.; thus, “every violation of solidarity and civic friendship harms the environment” (Benedict XVI, 2009 no. 51).

Pope Francis highlights that prudence, humility, and sobriety are essential in halting environmental degradation and violence against human life. He thinks that “once we lose our
humility and become enthralled with the possibility of limitless mastery over everything, we inevitably end up harming society and the environment. It is not easy to promote this kind of healthy humility or happy sobriety when we consider ourselves autonomous” (LS no. 224). He advises in LD: “Let us stop thinking, then, of human beings as autonomous, omnipotent and limitless, and begin to think of ourselves differently, in a humbler but more fruitful way” (no. 68).

An essential point that emerges from LD is the insistence on the necessity of rethinking how human power can be used to benefit humanity. This matter has both ethical and anthropological relevance. If properly understood, it can help to mitigate the creation of an elite group that wields excessive power to the detriment of all. History has consistently shown that the misapplication of technological or economic power has damaged the human race. The horrors are always irreparable. This control of power is essential and urgent because “our immense technological development has not been accompanied by a development in human responsibility, values, and conscience […] we stand naked and exposed in the face of our ever-increasing power, lacking the wherewithal to control it. We have certain superficial mechanisms, but we cannot claim to have a sound ethics, a culture, and spirituality genuinely capable of setting limits and teaching clear-minded self-restraint” (LS no. 105, LD no. 24).

Against the resistance of megalomaniacs littering the corridors of power, rethinking the meaning and limits of human power is essential to avoid further existential catastrophes.

**IV. Formulating an Ethical Framework for Institutional Advocacy for Integral Ecology**

*LS* and *LD* have global appeal and show acquaintance with the ongoing discussions, scientific postulations, and consensus (LS no. 23) on climate change, as reflected in the footnote citations of the various international charters on the protection of the ecosystem⁹. Against the opinion of some critics, the acknowledgment of the scientific consensus and data on climate change shows the unbiased contribution of *LS* and *LD* and their capacity to enter into dialogue with all stakeholders and partners about this all-important subject (Jamieson, 2015, p. 122 offered a critical remark on LS).

*LS* and *LD* offer insight into how safeguarding the ecosystem can dialogically move from the local to the international community with the involvement of stakeholders, academic researchers, and interest groups to reach a consensus that can advance the common search for a lasting solution. Francis believes “a consensus should always be reached between the different stakeholders, who can offer a variety of approaches, solutions, and alternatives” (LS no. 183). Some frameworks are necessary for the efficiency of all policies and regulations being proposed by experts in global summits. I will examine some of these essential elements.

The first factor is the encouragement of visionary leadership from the State and International community with justice as its bedrock. This form of leadership shows political sagacity in tackling problems with promptness. Recently, the resolutions of various world summits on environmental issues have been poorly implemented and followed up with little or no concrete action because of a lack of political will. This lack has made reaching a global consensus on implementing important policies impossible because of contrasting national and political interests. In setting new paths in achieving integral ecology, the place of strong-willed legislation is incontrovertible because “the establishment of a legal framework which can set clear boundaries and ensure the protection of ecosystems has become indispensable; otherwise, the new power structures based on the techno-economic paradigm may overthrow not only our own politics but also freedom and justice” (LS no. 53).
The second element is the formation of public morality, constituting ethical standards enforceable in society. Technological developments must be accompanied by relevant ethical principles to make all innovations human-centered and eco-friendly. That is to say, moral and authentic humanistic principles must accompany progress, otherwise, it becomes destructive and annihilating. The insistence on a functioning public morality increases the awareness of individual, collective, and institutional responsibility. Only in this way can policies that promote human ecology be value-based. Public morality emphasizes the need for political and administrative mechanisms prioritizing the sense of being, dignity, and disinterested concern for the created order and not profit, power, self-absorption, self-centeredness, having, and doing.

The third perspective is the urgency of fostering dialogue, global commitment, and solidarity, considering the interdependence of the one and all. The effort must be characterized by altruism and sincerity of purpose in seeking a common remedy to global problems and ought to be an effort freed of all forms of partisan interests for the few influential individuals and countries of the world. The dialogue at the international level is to arrive at a ‘global consensus’ that sees all men and women of our earth as one in the search for justice for the common home. *LS* recommends what principles can guide this dialogue: “An open and respectful dialogue is […] needed between the various ecological movements, among which ideological conflicts are not infrequently encountered. The gravity of the ecological crisis demands that we look to the common good, embarking on the path of dialogue which demands patience, self-discipline, and generosity” (*LS* no. 201). The spirit that should guide ecological movements, civil society groups, activists, and organizations is “[…] a greater sense of responsibility, a strong sense of community, a readiness to protect others, a spirit of creativity and a deep love for the land” (*LS* no. 179).

The fourth element is the need for transparency and diplomacy in international relations. It is possible to see a transparent search for remedies to the problems that affect all, yielding strong ethical principles that make international politics and negotiations more formidable. The indispensability of transparency in drafting regulations by institutions and organs of administration cannot be overemphasized. A strong multilateralism that recognizes all voices, allowing old diplomacy to reconfigure itself and be part of the solution to the problem, is strongly recommended (cf. *LD* nos. 40-42). Transparent, straightforward methods and intentions are essential because “[…] the forms of corruption which conceal the actual environmental impact of a given project, in exchange for favors, usually produce specious agreements which fail to inform adequately and to allow for full debate” (*LS* no. 182; cf. *LD* nos. 29-31). All hazardous impacts of an ecological problem on the population are to be stated in detail and not presented with deceits. The effects and risks on the economy and social order, whether long or short-term, should be adequately formulated. Decision-making must involve all parties of interest and not be the exclusive reserve of the wealthy and most powerful. Thus, there should be an effective and widespread representation because we are interconnected, and the issues of environment, integral ecology, and human development concern all. *LS* (no. 183) recommends that “honesty and truth are needed in scientific and political discussions; these should not be limited to the issue of whether or not a particular project is permitted by law”. Because society is becoming “multipolar” and “complex” especially as regards international negotiations and regulations, *LD* recommends:

All this presupposes the development of a new procedure for decision-making, and legitimizing those decisions since the one put in place several decades ago is not
sufficient, nor does it appear effective. In this framework, there would necessarily be required spaces for conversation, consultation, arbitration, conflict resolution and supervision, and, in the end, a sort of increased “democratization” in the global context, so that the various situations can be expressed and included. It is no longer helpful for us to support institutions in order to preserve the rights of the more powerful without caring for those of all (no. 43).

The fifth point of consideration is addressing education challenges as regards the environment. More than ever, there is an urgency to make obligatory environmental education to form the new generation in ecological ethics and to avoid oppressive tendencies arising from consumerism and egoism. The formation in ecological ethics has to include seeing Creation as the work and gift of the Creator to humanity (cf. LD no. 22) to be cared for and protected against unlimited progress and the false idea of nature as something to be hammered into shape, to be used and thrown away. Environmental education today “needs educators capable of developing an ethics of ecology, and helping people, through effective pedagogy, to grow in solidarity, responsibility, and compassionate care” [LS no. 210]. Ecological education must go beyond forecast and scientific information to instill virtue ethics and good morals in the care of Creation. This can make the environmental policies translatable and implementable in real-life circumstances. Cultivating a sense of responsibility in maintaining an integral ecology can be a step towards changing lifestyle and mentality, thus, amounting to the ecological conversion that the Pontiff recommends to all. For “only by cultivating sound virtues will people be able to make a selfless ecological commitment” (LS no. 211).

The last point is the development of an ecological culture that cares for the poor. The concept of the poorest of earth can refer both to the wounded environment and helpless human beings. An ecological culture is a culture of preservation and civilization of love. It is against the cancel, throwaway, and death culture. There is a sense of an “ecological debt” of the Global North to the Global South because of the effect of high industrialization in the world’s peripheries, excessive exploitation of the natural resources of underdeveloped countries, and the neglect of their ecological woes. Unfortunately, the sufferings of these victims often go unrecognized, with no concrete policy statements at the international and national levels. Issues about third-world countries feature in global summits and meetings, but often, they are given less attention. This shows how immensely the poor suffer at the hands of the rich. Pope Francis cautions: “The local population should have a special place at the table; they are concerned about their own future and that of their children and can consider goals transcending immediate economic interest. We need to stop thinking in terms of ‘interventions’ to save the environment in favour of policies developed and debated by all interested parties” (LS no. 183).

An ecology that preserves the poor is against an obsession with economic and political benefits and interests. The fate of the poorest of the earth hinges on the consistent effort to confront the injustice against them, what John Paul II calls the ‘structures of sin’. This is an attitude of indifference to the plight of the victims of all forms of human exploitation. It is the continuous neglect of their lack of resources to repair ecological damages and the inability to give them a place in the global agenda. All we can do to foster an ecological culture that cares and shows concern for the crimes that lead to human alienation is “to strengthen the conviction that we are one single human family. There are no frontiers or barriers, political or social, behind which we can hide, still less is there room for the globalization of indifference” (LS no. 52). If allowed to fester, the culture of indifference can destroy social, cultural, and
human ecology and the desire “to care for our brothers and sisters and the natural environment”.

An ecological culture is encountering, healing, and asking pardons for wrongs done to humans and their environment. An integral ecology becomes possible through various gestures that change the narrative of violence, exploitation, aggressive consumerism, and dispossession to acts of civil friendship and prudence in encounters with others. It entails the renewal of social and political love that can elevate the consciousness of the care of humans and their environment and avoid treating the poor as collateral damage to more significant projects that yield economic dividends. It becomes necessary that political governance must be founded on the principles of love that are geared toward the authentic development of the person. Some environmental activists can misconstrue the essence of this ecological culture, as has recently happened. However, LS explicitly stated what ecological culture cannot be interpreted to be:

Ecological culture cannot be reduced to a series of urgent and partial responses to the immediate problems of pollution, environmental decay, and the depletion of natural resources. There needs to be a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies, an educational programme, a lifestyle, and a spirituality which together generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm. Otherwise, even the best ecological initiatives can find themselves caught up in the same globalized logic. To seek only a technical remedy to each environmental problem which comes up is to separate what is in reality interconnected and to mask the true and deepest problems of the global system (LS no. 111; LD no. 57).

Conclusion
An integral ecology must fly on the wings of ethical principles and balanced anthropology. This is the only way to achieve an ecological conversion for a renewed relationship between humanity and nature. A sincere concern for the environment must find resonance in the selfless care shown towards the ‘other’ - fellow human beings - as proof of the determination to eliminate ecological and societal problems. A true ecological culture that prizes virtues must be integrative, human, and social in approach because the sense of justice ought to dominate public debates about integral ecology and authentic human development so as to hear “both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.”

Well-cultivated virtue ethics and adequate anthropology help to mitigate the visible tendency among eco-radicals and movements to absolutize or divinize nature and give it primacy over the human person. It also checks the tyranny of exploiting and manipulating nature. In this way, the crises of anthropocentrism, ecocentrism, and biocentrism can be avoided. An integrative system informed by virtue ethics can help combat the misery of the poor of the earth and the cries of Mother Nature.

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So much political discussion surrounds the relationship of LS and the Paris Climate Change Summit in 2015 and the subsequent Paris Agreement that was the fruit of the meeting. Some think that LS was politically motivated to anticipate the discussion and be a roadmap, or a useful position paper (Porras 2015: 136).

2 Laudato Si’ is the title of the Canticle of the Creatures by Saint Francis of Assisi (c. 1181 – 3 October 1226). The Pope justifies the choice of the title of the encyclical by highlighting the venerable care the Saint showed to Creation and through advancing an integral ecology that also preserves the poor through commitment to justice. Cf. LS no. 10.

3 Cf. LS no. 139; LD nos. 11-14.

4 The social Magisterium of the Church since the last century has been very attentive to issues affecting the well-being and integral development of the human person. The Pontiffs have taken turns to restate and reinforce the question of human progress.

5 At the time of its publication, it was well received by eminent church personalities, faith communities, world political leaders (UN secretary general, World Bank president, the heads of UN climate and UN environment programme) and environmental movements.

6 Cf. https://laudatosimovement.org/who-we-are/

7 R. R. Reno (2015) the editor of FIRST THINGS observes about LS “[...] This is perhaps the most anti-modern encyclical since the Syllabus of Errors, Pius IX’s haughty 1864 dismissal of the conceits of the modern era, [...] LS is verbose. But in a roundabout way Francis makes his own case against the modern world”.

8 The citation include some direct expressions of John Paul II as can be found in the following sources: Cf. John Paul II, Address given at Mercy Maternity Hospital, Melbourne (28 November 1986): L’Osservatore Romano, English edition, 9 December 1986, p. 13; ID., Meeting with scientists and representatives of the United Nations University, Hiroshima (25 February 1981), 3: AAS 73 (1981), 422; ID., Meeting with employees of the Olivetti workshops in Ivrea, Italy (19 March 1990), 5: L’Osservatore Romano, English edition, 26 March 1990, p. 7.


10 Cf. LS no. 211 on the impact of environmental education in the change of lifestyle.


12 The emphases are original to the text.
References


Francis. (15 April 2015). *Catechesis. L’Osservatore Romano*, 16 April 2015, p. 8


