

Living Better with Less: Thirteen Proposals

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The current ecological crisis is rooted in the way that we relate both to the natural world and to each another. This shapes preferences and frames of mind which are shared by many across our planet.

However, values proposed in the encyclical *Laudato si'* could help us change things, and promote a different culture. Although, unfortunately, they are not always put into practice, these values found in humanism and Christianity are able to be shared by many other religious and ethical traditions. Here are some of them.

1 An ability to live wisely and to think deeply [47], as opposed to the noise and superficiality of the digital world. Wisdom and deep thought are not simply achieved by amassing information. Closely related to this is an ability to leave oneself behind and open to others, something without which other creatures will not be recognized for their true worth [208].

2 Extending the concept of ‘neighbours’ to future generations, in accordance with the golden rule of all the great religious traditions. Such a broadening focus ought to alert us to the ways in which our own deeds and omissions have consequences, and mortgage our descendants’ futures. We are talking here about mortgaging them in economic and in social terms, leaving our problems to be solved by those who come after us. The Pope sees this as a matter of justice [159]. Taking future generations into account involves generosity of spirit and thinking beyond immediate terms, and especially involves a critique of a political short-termism uninterested in the long-term common good and concerned only with electoral advantages as they present themselves for the time being [178].

3 Thinking in universal terms about what we do and how it affects the natural world; that is to say, asking ourselves what would happen if all hu-

manity behaved like us. This, we believe, would challenge the rich countries' present patterns of consumption and many of the ways in which we extract natural resources.

4 Promoting growth that is neither greedy nor irresponsible, and in turn redefining our notion of *progress*. No technological and economic development can be considered progressive unless it leads to a better world and a higher quality of life across the board [194]. The encyclical criticises talk of sustainable development and corporate on social and environmental responsibility. Talk of sustainable growth usually 'becomes a way of distracting attention and offering excuses. It absorbs the language and values of ecology into the categories of finance and technocracy, and the social and environmental responsibility of businesses often gets reduced to a series of marketing and image-enhancing measures' [194]. The Pope instead recommends us to 'accept decreased growth in some parts of the world, in order to provide resources for other places to experience healthy growth' [193].

5 Understanding the value of interdependence –the fact that humans depend on other species, and that there is a fundamental communion between all living beings. Our culture leads us to think of ourselves first, unaware of the interdependence of all living beings. Sadly, we have not learnt to see authentic living as a gift from others –be they people, animals or plants. When we do relate to others we often treat them as mere objects. We are thus incapable of accepting what they think, feel and suffer as part of ourselves; we simply relate to them as objects for

us to manipulate or observe, without any obligation on our side. An awareness of our interdependence ought to advance an ethics of universal compassion that links together everything that lives, especially those who are weakest and most vulnerable.

6 Understanding that our lives are given us as gifts. Something we have been given is something we should take care of, including the lives of others, and most of all, the lives of those who are most vulnerable. What we have freely received we should freely give to others. To *give* means to help create conditions in which lives may develop fully. Life is a gift; and so is nature, which helps us to live; it is the natural environment that makes our lives possible, and so we should take care of it instead of reducing it to the category of susceptible to human domination [82].

7 Learning to appreciate meanings of happiness that cannot be reduced to owning or possessing things. Our society encourages a way of life that is meaningless without symbols of ownership or status, notably characterised by individualism, a way of life that is fragmented and isolated. We ought instead to appreciate the worth of relational understandings of happiness that mean living more soberly and austere, living only on what we *really* need and curbing voracious and insatiable desires. This austerity means living more simply so that others can live too... 'Christian spirituality proposes a growth marked by moderation and the capacity to be happy with little' [222]. We need to learn more sustainable patterns of consumption. 'Christian spirituality proposes an alternative understanding of the

quality of life, and encourages a prophetic and contemplative lifestyle, capable of deep enjoyment free of the obsession with consumption' [222]. The encyclical warns us that 'a constant flood of new consumer goods can baffle the heart and prevent us from cherishing each thing and each moment' and observes that 'to be serenely present to each reality, however small it may be, opens us to much greater horizons of understanding and personal fulfilment' [222].

8 Allowing ourselves to be ruled by the principle of caution, as enunciated in the 1992 Rio Declaration. According to this, when faced with the possibility of grave and irreversible harm, we should not need to be certain of it before taking steps to protect ourselves. The encyclical links this to a preferential option for the poor, protecting 'those who are most vulnerable and whose ability to defend their interests and to assemble incontrovertible evidence is limited' [186].

9 Promoting close connections between social and ecological questions. Some writers on ecology have already expressed this in terms of *environmental justice*, considering ecology to be part of a new and complex concept of justice. 'Today we have to realize that a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*' [49].

Additionally, the encyclical sees respect for cultural diversity to be part of the notion of complex justice, since it is the poorest people and cultural minorities who most suffer from ecological problems. And it criticises cultural homogeni-

sation: 'The disappearance of a culture can be just as serious, or even more serious, than the disappearance of a species of plant or animal' [145].

The encyclical thus speaks of an *integral ecology*: 'We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature' [139].

Integral ecology includes human ecology, itself inseparable from the classic notion of a common good, which in turn, plays role in social ethics [156]. And it refines the principle further, saying that 'In the present condition of global society, where injustices abound and growing numbers of people are deprived of basic human rights and considered expendable, the principle of the common good immediately becomes, logically and inevitably, a summons to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters', adding that 'this option entails recognizing the implications of the universal destination of the world's goods' [158].

10 Promoting rediscovery of the sanctity of the natural world, together with less anthropocentric understandings of the cosmos, such as may be found in those several religious and philosophical traditions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Amerindian cultures and Taoism, that run counter to the powerful dualism that characterises Western thought. One finds a comparable emphasis also in more Holy-Spirit-conscious expressions of Christianity, according to which no

reality is, strictly speaking, profane, but all is filled with the Spirit, and is for that reason worthy of respect.

11 Recovering simplicity and the ability to see that ‘less is more’. We return to ‘that simplicity which allows us to stop and appreciate the small things, to be grateful for the opportunities which life affords us, to be spiritually detached from what we possess, and not to succumb to sadness for what we lack’ [222]. This opposes consumerism, and contemporary techno-economic paradigms that seek to fill the void within the human heart [203]. Sobriety freely chosen in accordance with one’s conscience liberates us [223]. And this is linked to the fact that ‘no one can cultivate a sober and satisfying life without being at peace with him or herself’ [225]. Further, ‘inner peace is closely related to care for ecology and for the common good because, lived out authentically, it is reflected in a balanced lifestyle together with a capacity for wonder which takes us to a deeper understanding of life... Many people today sense a profound imbalance which drives them to frenetic activity and makes them feel busy, in a constant hurry which in turn leads them to ride rough-shod over everything around them.’ As the pope so splendidly puts it, ‘We are speaking of an attitude of the heart, one which approaches life with serene attentiveness, which is capable of being fully present to someone without thinking of what comes next,

which accepts each moment as a gift from God to be lived to the full’ [226].

12 Placing emphasis on the value of small and unspectacular gestures. ‘An integral ecology is also made up of simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness’ [230]. And, the encyclical reminds us, ‘Love, overflowing with small gestures of mutual care, is also civic and political, and it makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world’ [231]. In addition, ‘We must not think that these efforts are not going to change the world. They benefit society, often unbeknown to us, for they call forth a goodness which, albeit unseen, inevitably tends to spread. Furthermore, such actions can restore our sense of self-esteem; they can enable us to live more fully and to feel that life on earth is worthwhile’ [212].

13 Valuing leisure, and the celebratory dimension of life, a receptive, ‘pointless’ dimension rather different from just doing nothing. This ‘protects human action from becoming empty activism; it also prevents that unfettered greed and sense of isolation which make us seek personal gain to the detriment of all else’ [237].

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