

‘A VOICE CRYING IN THE DESERT’

Laudato si’ as Prophecy

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LAUDATO SI’ ARRIVED in an impressive way. Awaited eagerly by Catholics and non-Catholics alike, it emerged as a long, theologically rich exhortation written in a strong, prophetic tone. Ambitiously, it tries to tackle a wide range of issues related to our environment, economics, politics and culture. As is often noted, it is the first encyclical to focus so directly on the environment, even as it sets this topic within a more comprehensive discourse about the created order as a whole.¹ But while it represents a development of Catholic social teaching, it nevertheless appeals forcefully and frequently to the past, especially to the magisterium of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, as well as to various bishops’ conferences all over the world.

Pope Francis’ frequent references to his predecessors challenge the thesis that claims his development of the social teaching on ‘our common home’—that is, the shared gift of the created order—represents a departure from the tradition. It was, after all, during the pontificate of Benedict, called the ‘The Green Pope’ in some media circles, that solar panels were installed on the roof of the Paul VI hall; and, as the citations in *Laudato si’* amply demonstrate, the social encyclicals of both John Paul II and Benedict contain several strong passages about the environment. And yet, Pope Francis, for a variety of reasons, has been able to focus attention

¹ Perhaps it would be better to say, following the title and content of the encyclical, that it is the first to focus so directly on ‘the care for our common home’ or the gift of the created order. These ideas evoke more in a theological discourse and therefore avoid narrowing our focus to scientific questions. On the other hand, the encyclical manifests an attempt to broaden our understanding of the ‘environment’ (and other related concepts), and so the word is appropriate, rightly understood. One sees this, for example, in Pope Francis’s definition of the environment as a relationship between nature and society (n.139), in his reference to the ‘social environment’ (n.6), and in what he has to say about ‘integral ecology’ (chapter four).



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Solar panels on the roof of the Paul VI Hall in the Vatican

on the issue in a way his predecessors had not. One important reason for this, I think, is the particularly prophetic character possessed by this pontiff and on display in this new encyclical.

There is much in the document worthy of careful consideration. In this space, I would like to consider what I refer to as its prophetic character. Pope Francis is reflective about his role in the discussion of environmental, economic and political issues. Simply stated, it could be described as the role of a universal pastor exercising his prophetic office of teaching and exhortation. One sees this role on display in certain stylistic elements of *Laudato si'* and in the manner and tone with which Pope Francis enters the discussion of environmental, economic and political issues. After a consideration of these stylistic elements and the manner and tone of his entry into the global discussion, I will conclude with a brief reflection on what appears to me to be the core of his message addressed to 'every living person on this planet' (n.3).

A Pastor in a Prophetic Role

The first stylistic element I would like to note is the curious first chapter, in which the Pope spends 44 paragraphs (nn. 17–61) attempting to summarise the environmental, economic and political situation of our times. These paragraphs are basically expository, though he adds commentary to what he presents. No other encyclical, as far as I know, attempts such an

extended survey of as many disciplines. His motive is to ensure that the theological and philosophical reflections he offers in the text are ‘grounded in a fresh analysis of our present situation’ and therefore preserved from sounding ‘tiresome and abstract’ (n.17). These paragraphs imbue the encyclical with a prophetic character inasmuch as they are styled as a warning, or as an effort to draw our attention down from the clouds of abstract ideas and ideological polemics in order to take an honest look at the concrete state of affairs in which we find ourselves.² To that end, they contain some rather provocative expressions—such as the easily and often quoted, ‘The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth’ (n.21).

The second stylistic element I would like to note is Pope Francis’ characteristically direct and colourful style of communication. As on other occasions, in *Laudato si’* he often employs concrete examples, images and descriptions in order to connect with his audience and to invite them, in a direct and practical way, to measure themselves and take action in the light of the gospel. This style could be called prophetic inasmuch as it renders the encyclical, from start to finish, a call to conversion, one in which doctrinal teaching is constantly mixed with moral exhortation and an emphasis on the concrete, practical relevance of the gospel. This style no doubt reflects his pastoral sensitivity to the immense dangers of ‘practical relativism’ or the sad spirituality that brings believers, who are either afraid or embarrassed before the world on account of the gospel, to forgo the tasks of evangelization and joyful engagement with the world, effectively behaving as if God did not exist.³

I believe an awareness of these two elements is valuable, since it can help us to discern correctly the manner of Pope Francis’s entrance into the discussion of environmental, economic and political issues. I suggest he wants to be understood as a pastor serving in a prophetic role: that is, in the role of one calling us back to reality and exhorting us to conversion. He

² This reflects Pope Francis’ desire to attribute greater importance to reality in the ‘constant tension’ between reality and ideas (see *Evangelii gaudium*, nn.231–233).

³ Below I present Pope Francis’s description of practical relativism in *Laudato si’* (nn.122–123). In *Evangelii gaudium*, he describes it as a spirituality in which ‘the spiritual life comes to be identified with a few religious exercises which can offer a certain comfort but which do not encourage encounter with others, engagement with the world or a passion for evangelization’ (*Evangelii gaudium*, n.78); it is an ‘unhappy’ spirituality that lacks the ‘joy of mission’ since believers who practise it, ‘although they pray, develop a sort of inferiority complex which leads them to relativize or conceal their Christian identity and convictions’ (*Evangelii gaudium*, n.79). Ultimately, ‘This practical relativism consists in acting as if God did not exist, making decisions as if the poor did not exist, setting goals as if others did not exist, working as if people who have not received the Gospel did not exist’ (*Evangelii gaudium*, n.80).

does not enter as a scientist, economist or politician—or as anyone other than a pope, as the head of an ancient religious tradition with an important contribution to make in a global and interdisciplinary conversation.

As the encyclical shows, Pope Francis believes he belongs in this debate because the crises of our times have essentially spiritual dimensions. Citing his predecessor, he says 'The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast'; and therefore he adds, 'For this reason, the ecological crisis is also a summons to profound interior conversion' (n. 217). The 'deserts' of the world are growing. And one major reason for this is the vastness of the spiritual deserts in our hearts. There is, therefore, a pressing need today to hear a call to conversion, to listen, in other words, to 'the voice of one crying in the desert: Prepare the way of the Lord' (Mark 1: 3).⁴

The vastness of the spiritual deserts in our hearts

A Prophet Enters the Discussion

Laudato si' is, of course, an exercise of Pope Francis's magisterium; but it is about much more than teaching, at least so long as the word 'teaching' is thought to pertain only to what is cerebral, academic or abstract. It certainly contains a lot of intellectual and theological material; but in a very organic way the Pope extends this material into matters of spirituality and the moral life. He opens with a quotation from a prayer of St Francis, to which reference is made several times in the body of the text (see nn. 1–2, 87, 91–92 and 221); and he closes with two more prayers, the first offered to all those who believe in an omnipotent Creator and the second to all Christians. The entire sixth and final chapter is dedicated to 'Ecological Education and Spirituality' (nn. 202–246).

This concern for the concrete spiritual and moral implications of his teaching on the care for our common home is undoubtedly connected to Pope Francis's sensitivity to the threat posed by the 'practical relativism' typical of our age (nn. 122–123). He believes this is a relativism 'even more dangerous than doctrinal relativism' (*Evangelii gaudium*, n. 80); and it is precisely this threat that necessitates the entrance of a prophet into the discussion of environmental, economic and political issues.

Pope Francis describes practical relativism in *Laudato si'* as an anthropocentrism 'which sees everything as irrelevant unless it serves one's own immediate interests' (n. 122). For the practical relativist, there is

⁴ Biblical quotations are taken from the New Jerusalem Bible.



Rickshaw Kid, by Banksy

nothing objective to orientate life apart from immediate and personal convenience. It is a sickness which ‘drives one person to take advantage of another, to treat others as mere objects’ (n. 123). As a spiritual sickness underlying our contemporary humanitarian and environmental crises, this practical relativism renders inadequate merely technological or legal solutions to those crises. For, ‘when the culture itself is corrupt and objective truth and universally valid principles are no longer upheld, then laws can only be seen as arbitrary impositions or obstacles to be avoided’ (n. 123). Environmental destruction and human exploitation are thus ‘symptoms’ or ‘signs’ of a deeper crisis of culture (nn. 2, 9, 15, 101, 110–114, 145, 162 and 202). It is to the solution of *this* crisis—that is, the crisis of a culture in which, practically speaking, objective truth is ignored and other human beings are considered merely as objects in service of self-interest—to which the Pope hopes to contribute.

The specific character of Pope Francis’s concern should shape how we understand his entrance into the discussion of environmental, economic and political issues. His concern for the spiritual crisis of practical relativism shows how misguided it is to describe him with the categories of political ideology, such as the suggestion that he is a ‘left-winger’ who denies the role of a market economy, or that he is a ‘socialist’ calling for heavy-handed regulation and other ‘statist’ solutions. It is true, he rejects the idea that the invisible hand of the market will magically solve all problems

(nn. 123, 190); and he, following his predecessors, sees a role for the formal cooperation between governments (nn. 173–175) balanced by subsidiarity (n. 196). But his point throughout *Laudato si'* is precisely that such things—that is, the technical solutions of markets, laws and states—are simply not enough to solve the crises of our times given their spiritual dimension (n. 14, 110, 144 and 181).⁵ Such solutions do not address the deserts of the heart and are therefore inadequate.

In other words, even supposing 'private vice' would lead to 'public benefit' (a questionable supposition), could anyone expect Pope Francis—or any Christian—to settle for a market solution that leaves us with private vice? Or supposing the most watertight laws and sweeping redistributions of wealth were enacted, could anyone expect him to settle for a solution that compels 'charity' (or rather, in this case, simply financial contributions) and fails to heal the heart? Pope Francis is convinced of the 'inseparable ... bond ... between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace' (n.10, and see nn.11–12, 92). Technical solutions which leave us with practical relativism ignore our need for interior peace—for a solution capable of orientating our hearts and forming us to live freely according to truth and charity in our relations with others.

Technical solutions will not work so long as they ignore our need for 'interior peace'—for a heart committed to an objective truth that establishes it securely in a life of charity. Full bellies and solar panels cannot, in themselves, put an end to our selfishness and exploitation of the planet, since these things come from within the human heart and will continue to reassert themselves:

For it is from within, from the heart, that evil intentions emerge: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, malice, deceit, indecency, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within and make a person unclean. (Mark 7:21–23)

You cannot paint a rotten apple red and expect to enjoy its taste. While a selfish heart can drive industry and innovation, it can also drive stagnation, exploitation and aggression. Private vice, whether let loose in a liberal market or caged by an overbearing state, remains just that—private vice, looking for ways to assert itself. 'We have only one heart, and the same wretchedness which leads us to mistreat an animal will not be

⁵ 'Even the best mechanisms can break down when there are no worthy goals and values, or a genuine and profound humanism to serve as the basis of a noble and generous society' (n. 181).

long in showing itself in our relationships with other people.’ (n.92) A vicious heart is a restless and depressed heart, ever seeking loopholes in the laws and ways to turn power and capital towards the maximisation of self-interest, even at the expense of others. A true solution must heal this heart. Neither the selfishness of economic liberalism nor the heteronomy of a tyrannical state, nor any mixture of technical solutions between these two extremes, addresses this deeper issue. For this reason, Pope Francis insists that we need a culture which commits itself to ‘objective truth and universally valid principles’ (n. 122), where laws can be received as coherent expressions of authentic human values and not as ‘arbitrary impositions or obstacles to be avoided’ (n. 123), and where the human heart can be formed to give itself over freely to what is true, beautiful and good.

That is why, for Pope Francis, a true solution to our crises will promote a culture capable of resisting this anthropocentrism which ‘drives one person to take advantage of another, to treat others as mere objects’ (n. 123); our hearts must be converted to ‘a new and universal solidarity’ before we can expect men and women across the globe and through the generations to live as brothers and sisters and thereby discover solutions to the global humanitarian and environmental crises of our times:

Obstructionist attitudes, even on the part of believers, can range from denial of the problem to indifference, nonchalant resignation or blind confidence in technical solutions. We require a new and universal solidarity. (n. 14)

This need—the need for a culture that champions a new and universal solidarity—is what justifies the contribution of religious communities, according to Pope Francis; and it is why he believes the prophetic voice of the Church, respectful of the legitimate (but relative) autonomy of the sciences, has the right to enter the discussion of environmental, economic and political issues (see nn.62–64, 199–201). We need a strong, metaphysically coherent justification for this solidarity if we are to take it seriously and if we are to set it in relation to other truths and values. The whole of chapter two—‘The Gospel of Creation’—is an attempt to offer the world just such a justification, to teach us to believe intelligently in the unity of the human family and in our connection to all of creation.⁶

⁶ In this chapter, Pope Francis offers ‘some principles drawn from the Judaeo-Christian tradition which can render our commitment to the environment more coherent’ (n. 15).

He continues his reflections on the Christian tradition in chapter six, showing how 'The rich heritage of Christian spirituality ... has a precious contribution to make to the renewal of humanity' (n.216, and see 216–245). These chapters show the unceasing power of the gospel to address the human condition, offering a compelling and hopeful vision of our world and its challenges in the light of the Jesus Christ.

An understanding of the Pope's prophetic role can overcome certain objections to the encyclical. Not a few politicians and writers, Catholics included, misunderstand this role and therefore question his right to speak. After all, what does he know about science, economics and politics?⁷ Some Catholics, adamantly professing to follow him on all matters regarding faith and morals, nevertheless dismiss *Laudato si'* for failing to remain within his sphere of competence. What, they wonder, do these issues have to do with faith and morals?

In the first place, such a position reflects a dubious conception of 'faith and morals' and their relationship to reason and culture, one in which the sphere of faith and morals ends before it can encompass the relationships in which believers live out the vast majority of their lives—relationships with neighbours, co-workers, citizens of other countries and the whole created order. In any case, I suggest such objections to the encyclical can be overcome by an attention to its prophetic character.

Consider, for example, the manner in which Pope Francis discusses such a politically sensitive issue as global warming. He does not discuss the issue as a scientist; that is, he offers no independent evaluation of the scientific data. On the contrary, he submits himself to the judgment of scientists within their own realm of competence, faithfully representing to his audience 'a very solid scientific consensus' (n.23). He does not deny the existence of contrary opinions (nn.61, 188); but he does choose to take seriously the strong consensus that exists on this undoubtedly consequential issue. Could anything less be expected of someone seeking to comment responsibly? Readers who think the importance of the encyclical lies in whether or not the Pope is personally convinced about global warming miss the point. *Laudato si'* is not a forum for his own scientific musings. Rather, in order to ground the encyclical 'in a fresh analysis of our present situation' (n.17), he tries to report faithfully what is happening to our common

⁷ Interestingly, Pope Francis worked as a chemical technician before joining the Jesuits and served in high administrative positions (some with political dimensions) both as a Jesuit and as a bishop.

home according to an undeniably significant consensus of contemporary natural scientists.

As a pastor serving in a prophetic role, Pope Francis does not try to convince the reader about the realities of climate change, the effects of the loss of biodiversity or the continuing exploitation of vulnerable nations by some transnational corporations. All this he takes for granted as a more or less well-documented reality, admitting that on some issues there is still debate (nn.61, 188). That means the reader should feel free, within his or her realm of expertise, to enter into dialogue with the expert consensus that the Pope attempts to represent. He is not a scientist, economist or politician; but he wants to say what he thinks in *Laudato si'* in light of the scientific, economic and political reality. And so he must, to the best of his ability, show his awareness of that reality. He has such respect for other disciplines and their contributions to our understanding that he considers the world as it appears in the light of their methods before offering his own contribution. And yet he is eager to move beyond such methods. For while he is certainly alarmed by the growing deserts in our environment, his ultimate concern as a prophet is to address those other deserts—the ones in our hearts.

A Prophetic Tone

Laudato si' calls our attention to the crises of our age in order to inspire effective conversion, dialogue and action. This can be seen throughout the encyclical in its prophetic tone: the direct and sometimes unsettling way in which Pope Francis invites individuals and communities to measure themselves and their actions against the standards of the gospel. For example, while in the opening paragraphs the Pope addresses himself to 'every person living on this planet' (n.3), throughout the text there are myriad explicit and implicit appeals to specific, though always unnamed, groups of people. Several examples will illustrate the variety and force of these appeals.

According to the Pope, there is a 'minority' which 'believes it has the right to consume in a way which can never be universalized' (n.50); the 'increasing use and power of air-conditioning' is, for him, a 'simple example' of the failure of people in 'some countries' to change their 'harmful habits of consumption' in spite of a growing ecological sensitivity (n.55). There is a 'part of humanity' whose 'unjust habits' turn the benefits of creation to the favour of only a few (n.93). There are 'some circles' who maintain 'current economics and technology will solve all environmental

problems' (n. 109). There are 'countries which have clear legislation about the protection of forests' but which 'continue to keep silent as they watch laws repeatedly being broken' (n. 142). There are countries 'which place their national interests above the global common good' (n. 169). When faith in a 'magical conception of the market' (n. 190) and in the power of the unfettered pursuit of profit to solve all humanitarian and ecological problems is questioned, there are 'some' who 'react by accusing others of irrationally attempting to stand in the way of progress and human development' (n. 191). There are 'some business groups' which 'can come forward in the guise of benefactors, wield real power, and consider themselves exempt from certain rules, to the point of tolerating different forms of organized crime, human trafficking, the drug trade and violence' (n. 197). There are 'some committed and prayerful Christians' who 'tend to ridicule expressions of concern for the environment' and there are 'others' who are simply 'passive; they choose not to change their habits and thus become inconsistent' (n. 217). All these are really existing groups of people, some of whose members could be easy to identify. For many of us could probably find grounds to accuse ourselves at one time or another of some participation in at least a few of them—at least I can!

One also finds more abstract descriptions in the light of which the reader is invited to measure his or her own life. For example, the Pope praises the 'person who could afford to spend and consume more but regularly uses less heating and wears warmer clothes' as someone who 'shows the kind of convictions and attitudes which help to protect the environment' (n. 211). He goes on to list several similar actions,



... such as avoiding the use of plastic and paper, reducing water consumption, separating refuse, cooking only what can reasonably be consumed, showing care for other living beings, using public transport or car-pooling, planting trees, turning off unnecessary lights, or any number of other practices (n.211).

He speaks in the abstract about ‘someone’ who ‘has not learned to stop and admire something beautiful’ and says we should not be surprised if such a person ‘treats everything as an object to be used and abused without scruple’ (n.215). Positively, he refers to:

... 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 (n.226).

These specific descriptions, though perhaps a little tedious to read in the form of a list, are helpful in order, once again, to reveal the prophetic character of the encyclical. First, they illustrate how concrete Pope Francis is in his call to conversion. He does not speak in those vague generalities which leave enough space for everyone to feel comfortable and protected from all judgment. On the contrary, the vast majority of his readers—if not all his readers—are likely able to find in his descriptions some thorn to awaken the conscience. Second, these descriptions never include a name; thus, the freedom for self-accusation and genuine conversion remain. The Pope uses a strong tone, but it is ultimately respectful and pastoral. He raises the prophetic call for judgment, but he does not condemn. He describes attitudes and actions in ways that may hit close to home, but he always leaves space for the reader to make the final judgment of whether or not he or she fits the description.

Most of these passages give *Laudato si'* a decidedly negative or critical tone. To be sure, there are many positive and optimistic passages as well (see nn.71, 80, 83, 112–113, 148–149, 165–168, 179–180, 192, 205, 208, 212), but the most memorable ones for readers are likely be the stark, prophetic ones. The encyclical is, as Pope Francis himself admits, a reflection that is ‘both joyful and troubling’ (n.246). And so it is safe to say that the reception of his message will be strongly influenced by the effort to harmonize its piercing critique of sinful attitudes and structures with the joyful promotion of business and politics where they are done well. Those who serve the promulgation of the Pope’s message will want to combine both aspects if they are to avoid one-sided or misleading

exaggerations. It should be kept firmly in mind that the Pope, naturally, does not loathe business and politics. On the contrary, he has a deep and sincere appreciation for both of these 'lofty' and 'noble' vocations (see *Laudato si'* n.129; *Evangelii gaudium*, nn.203–205).⁸ These wonderful vocations, which are in a position to serve innovation, investment, industry, labour, good order and the encounter between peoples, are essential for human development. But when they refuse their call (and thereby undermine their character as *vocations*, as incredible invitations to cooperate with the redeeming work of God), choosing instead to serve exclusively private interests, either frustrating or simply ignoring the integral development of the human person and the common good, the Pope can be trusted to raise a call for conversion.

In a way not unlike John the Baptist or Jesus—'Brood of vipers!' (Matthew 3: 7; 23: 33)—Pope Francis deploys some dramatic words in order to awaken the conscience of his readers and invite them to conversion. But his prophetic tone is balanced by affirmations of hope and joy, essential aspects of a comprehensive pastoral strategy that aims to lead and inspire in the global discussion of the crises of our times.

A Prophetic Message

John the Baptist was not a popular man, but such is the fate of Christ's prophets (John 15:18–19). For the gospel challenges the world as it redeems it. Redemption is an *exodus* out of one way of life into another that is fundamentally new. Perhaps the most challenging 'stumbling block' in *Laudato si'* is the universal solidarity it proclaims. This solidarity challenges our vision of ourselves and the world in several ways.

Against a world-view that privileges the autonomous and unattached individual, Pope Francis says that reality, a creation of the Holy Trinity, mirrors its Creator as a network of interdependent relations, as a locus of communion (see nn.238–240). Against an ethic that defends a subjective and uncommitted freedom as the highest value of human action, Pope Francis insists we must rediscover the objective purpose for which our freedom exists—a life of charity that extends to our neighbours, to the whole of creation and to our Creator (see n.83). Against an intellectual culture tempted to rely on specialisation to shield itself from an interdisciplinary dialogue that would reveal to each his or her limitations,

⁸ On his gratitude for science and technology, see nn. 102–103, 131.

Pope Francis has the courage to think in an ‘integral’ way: to listen, digest and respond to the conclusions of others as he works towards real, comprehensive solutions to the problems present in the decidedly unspecialised—that is, unified and integrated—reality in which we live.

‘We require a new and universal solidarity.’ (n. 144) Affirmations of our connectedness and interdependence are a refrain in the encyclical.⁹ This message of solidarity is, for Pope Francis, central to the contribution of Christian faith to a solution to the crises of our time (chapter two). For it is an antidote to the individualistic and anthropocentric roots of these crises (chapter three). And, ‘Since everything is closely interrelated’ (n.137), it is a presupposition of the ‘integral ecology’ that considers all aspects of our society and environment (chapter four). It is the basis of his call for cooperation and dialogue among all disciplines, governments and peoples of the earth (chapter five). Finally, solidarity, or the ‘awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared by everyone’ (n.202), enables us to learn the new heart necessary for renewal (chapter six).

Pope Benedict once described a prophet of Israel in these words:

His task is not to report on the events of tomorrow or the next day in order to satisfy human curiosity or the human need for security. He shows us the face of God, and in so doing he shows us the path that we have to take He points out the path to the true ‘exodus’, which consists in this: Among all the paths of history, the path to God is the true direction that we must seek and find.¹⁰

It is therefore fitting to conclude with a word from Pope Francis about the face of the one God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—as an antidote to practical relativism or as a ‘translation of this faith into the everyday life of a community before God and on the way to him’.¹¹

The divine Persons are subsistent relations, and the world, created according to the divine model, is a web of relationships. Creatures tend towards God, and in turn it is proper to every living being to tend towards other things, so that throughout the universe we can find any

⁹ Pope Francis says explicitly that ‘the conviction that everything in the world is connected’ is a theme of the encyclical which reappears again and again (n. 16).

¹⁰ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 4.

¹¹ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 4.

number of constant and secretly interwoven relationships. This leads us not only to marvel at the manifold connections existing among creatures, but also to discover a key to our own fulfilment. The human person grows more, matures more and is sanctified more to the extent that he or she enters into relationships, going out from themselves to live in communion with God, with others and with all creatures. In this way, they make their own that trinitarian dynamism which God imprinted in them when they were created. Everything is interconnected, and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity. (n.240)

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