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Laudato Si': An Encyclical of Re-Membering

Molloy College in Rockville Centre, Long Island, offered a new course this past spring semester that I designed and co-taught. It was entitled, "The Rights of Nature." The course description explained that students would examine various paradigms for understanding the Earth / Human relationship from "biblically inspired" dominion, through conservation and protection, and ending with kinship paradigms which promote the rights of mother Earth.

After viewing the outstanding new video entitled "*Green Fire*" chronicling the life of the founding father of Land Ethic, **Aldo Leopold** (1887-1948), the students were asked about their relationship with their homeland of Long Island. One student spoke out boldly, "We have an abusive relationship with all land, not only Long Island. All we do is take from the land." I didn't expect that response and with a sigh of relief thought to myself, "Well, something is getting through."

School is out for the summer, so I have no way of bringing the class back to explore the **Pope's new encyclical**, but I wonder, if the tables were turned, what grade my students would give Francis for his encyclical. I have a strong hunch they would be pleased with the pope's "whole-making" or "re-membering," otherwise known in the encyclical as "integral ecology."

It's a clever extrapolation of Paul VI's phrase "integral development," which appeared in the 1967 encyclical, "*On the Progress of Peoples*." The concept was the brain child of the French Dominican economist, prophet and missionary to fishermen of Northwestern France, **Louis-Joseph Lebret** (1897-1966). Paul VI, citing Lebret's work in a footnote, explains it this way: "In order to be authentic, development must be complete; integral that is, it has to promote the good of every person and the whole person" (14). This is an important back-drop for an understanding of the Pope Francis's "integral ecology."

Francis references Paul VI's work in the early pages of his encyclical, pointing to his prescient warning about a potential ecological catastrophe (4). This pope's contribution is to enshrine forever in Catholic social thought the connection between "the good of every person and the whole person," and Earth and an articulation of our identity as "Earthlings" with all its subsequent implications. As he writes, ". . . how inseparable the bond between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society and interior peace"(10).

In a kind of lament, he tells us in the opening paragraphs, "We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the Earth; our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters" (2). In the fourth chapter devoted in its entirety to

“Integral Ecology,” he reminds us once again: “Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it” (139). I would hope my students give the pontiff credit for his elaboration of one of Thomas Berry’s “Principles of a Functional Cosmology,” namely, “Earth is primary, and the human is derivative.”

So, whole-making number one for the pope: Earth and human are re-membered.

Another example of Francis’s whole-making is to be found in his statements in Chapter One about not only climate change, which has received the lion’s share of attention and rightly so, but also water, loss of biodiversity, decline in the quality of human life, breakdown of society and global inequality. It is an impressive “body scan” of the planet and most timely in its utterance. Not only does the world await the U.N. conference in Paris in December with hopes of a binding global treaty to reduce carbon emissions, (the pope does make several veiled references to this fact without directly mentioning the coming meeting), but the evening before the official release of the encyclical, the news carried reports about the [dire state of the world’s aquifers](#). Twenty-one of the world’s 37 largest aquifers – in locations from India and China to the United States and France – have passed their sustainability tipping points, a NASA report tell us. The report goes on to elaborate that this means more water was removed than replaced during a decade-long study period. Later on in the encyclical, in a comment sure to raise the ire of some, the pope in speaking about the governance of the oceans, calls for “agreement on systems of governance for the whole range of the so called global commons”(174). The inclusion of the full range of issues indicates that the Pope recognizes that again as Thomas Berry would say: the Earth is a whole and cannot be saved in fragments.

More points from my students for sure and whole-making number two for the pope: Earth, her one water system, diversity of species, flora and fauna, and human life are re-membered.

Whole-making number three: more than once in the encyclical the pope reminds us, “that it is not enough to think of different species merely as potential resources to be exploited while overlooking the fact that they have value in themselves” (33). “In our time,” the pontiff boldly states, “the Church does not simply state that other creatures are completely subordinated to the good of human beings, as if they have no worth in themselves and can be treated as we wish;” rather, “ . . . other living beings have a value of their own in God’s eyes: by their mere existence they bless God and give him glory” (69).

The “biblically inspired” dominion model of relating to creation has been permanently retired with the words: “ . . . we must forcefully reject the notion that our being made in the image of God justifies absolute domination over other creatures” (67). The “other-than-human” has been re-membered in the affirmation of its worth in God’s eyes.

Yes, more points for the pontiff from my students, for as they would know from studying Berry, “The Earth is a communion of subjects not a collection of objects.”

The pope turns to the bishops of Bolivia for yet another area for whole-making, which is a lynch-pin of the entire document: “Everyday experience and scientific research shows that the greatest

effects of all attacks on the environment are suffered by the poorest"(48). It is a “no-brainer” for some, but in a global society like our own where the poor are institutionally and systematically marginalized and kept out of sight and thus out of mind, more points go to the pope for making the invisible visible. He tells us, “ . . . 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 Earth and the cry of poor” (49). He reinforces this point in ways too numerous to list. Two stand out for their far reaching implications: Profit cannot be the sole criterion (187), and “ . . we need to think of containing growth . . . the time has come to accept decreased growth in some parts of the world, in order to provide resources for other places to experience healthy growth”(193).

Whole-making number five: The poor are re-membered into the one community of life. They are not other, they are us.

Integral development and now integral ecology are all about making wholes where artificial and fallacious divisions have grown up over centuries. I recall vividly an experience I had years ago. I began to feel as if I was bringing more of myself to prayer than ever before. It felt strange at first but then really right. It was an experience of alignment and integration, a re-membering of myself even. I came to understand it as born of my growing embrace of the Universe Story. I knew then that as I came to prayer in the morning, and as I moved throughout day, I carried the 13.8-billion-year story with all its unfolding – other-than human and human life – in my very body. I walked with a new integrity and joy. I carried the pain of centuries as well. This is what happens as we approach wholeness. This is how I feel after reading the encyclical.

In the first chapter Francis articulates the goal of the encyclical. He says, “Our goal is not to amass information or satisfy curiosity, but rather to become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus discover what each of us can do about it” (19). It certainly had that impact on me. I am not sure about how my students would grade the encyclical, but I would give it an “A.”

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