

Lectio Magistralis

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This year is characterized by the rapid and inexorable spread of Covid-19, which has put humanity to the test. The pandemic, in fact, caught us by surprise, upsetting our plans and plunging us into an unprecedented and global, “epochal” crisis. In a few months, the coronavirus has infected millions of people around the world and, with the same speed, amplified inequalities in our access to essential goods and services, with devastating consequences, especially for the most vulnerable. “In the very middle of our technological and managerial euphoria, we have found ourselves socially and technically unprepared for the spread of this contagion: it has been difficult for us to recognize and admit its impact. And now, we are rushing to limit its spread”.¹ The coronavirus has exposed the radical vulnerability of everyone and everything. It is raising numerous doubts and concerns, including around our economic systems and the way we organize our societies. Our securities have collapsed; our appetite for power and our craving for control have suddenly crumbled. We find ourselves weak and full of fear.

We live in an era full of contradictions. If, on the one hand, we are witnessing unprecedented progress in various scientific fields, on the other hand, the world is facing multiple humanitarian crises in different areas of the planet, each of which are strongly interrelated.

We are facing a *health crisis* that has and will have even greater repercussions especially when considering the environment, the economy, politics, nutrition and access to food. The World Health Organization (WHO) has already recorded more than 50 million people infected by Covid-19 worldwide and well over a million people who have lost their lives due to the pandemic.²

¹ Pontifical Academy for Life, *Global Pandemic and Universal Brotherhood*, 30 March 2020.

² Cf. WHO (World Health Organization): <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>.

A food crisis is already underway. It is and will be further exacerbated by the pandemic which has direct and indirect impacts on production, distribution and access to food, the availability of which has been compromised both in the short and long term, especially for the most vulnerable. Furthermore, the food and nutritional situation in the world was already alarming before the spread of Covid-19. According to the latest Report on *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World*, published last July by the United Nations agencies operating in the sphere of nutrition (FAO, IFAD, WFP, UNICEF and WHO), in 2019 almost 690 million people were undernourished.³ Unfortunately, for a few years now, the number of people affected by hunger, which was on the decline since 2010, is increasing once again. The spectre of famine is crossing our world once more. The causes are many and partly depend on an uneven distribution of the Earth's goods. They also include a lack of investment in the agricultural sector, increasing food losses and waste, as well as the proliferation of conflicts in different areas of the planet.⁴ Making matters worse, there is climate change, which especially affects small rural producers who live in countries more likely to be exposed to natural disasters and whose economy is based on the agricultural sector.

This last point recalls us back to the *environmental crisis* for which the scientific community, in the face of global warming and climate change, has provided us with countless pieces of evidence, all of which are well known and alarming. Climate change represents a multitude of threats, with the potential to push part of the world's population into extreme poverty in the coming years, nullifying the significant progress that was made in terms of development and that was achieved with great difficulty. The Special Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) dedicated to "Climate Change and Land" has shown that at least half a billion people live in areas at risk of further desertification.⁵ The result is inevitable: agricultural production and the security of food supplies are falling and the price will be paid by

³ Cf. FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020. Transforming Food Systems for Affordable Healthy Diets*, 2020.

⁴ Cf. Pope Francis, *Video-Message for World Food Day*, 16 October 2020.

⁵ IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), *Special Report on Climate Change, Desertification, Land Degradation, Sustainable Land Management, Food Security, and Greenhouse Gas Fluxes in Terrestrial Ecosystems. Summary for Policymakers*, 7 August 2019, p. 3.

the poorest populations, many of which will be forced to flee. In October 2018, the IPCC also found that, if no firm commitment is made to the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, by 2030 global average temperatures could exceed those recorded in the pre-industrial period by 1.5°C, with serious and widespread impacts on humanity both today and in the future.⁶ “These studies show that the current commitments made by States to mitigate and adapt to climate change are far from those actually needed to achieve the goals set by the Paris Agreement”.⁷

Obviously, to all of this is added the economic and social crisis. The pandemic continues to have significant economic repercussions with substantial effects on the labour market.⁸ It revealed and amplified many of the vulnerabilities and injustices that were already present. Regarding its impact on health, the virus does not discriminate. But in the world of work, it is the most disadvantaged and most vulnerable who are hit the hardest and with the most cruelty. The devastating consequences of inequality can no longer be ignored. For millions of workers, no income means no food, no security and no future. The poor, especially those working in the informal sectors, were the first to see their means of survival disappear. Living outside the margins of the formal economy, they do not have access to social safety nets, including unemployment insurance and health care. Thus, as their desperation increases, they are more likely to seek other forms of income, increasing the likelihood of their exploitation, including forced labour, prostitution and human trafficking. We must never forget that “in a genuinely developed society, work is an essential dimension of social life, for it is not only a means of earning one’s daily bread, but also of personal growth, the building of healthy relationships, self-expression and the exchange of gifts. Work gives us a sense of shared responsibility for the development of the world, and ultimately, for our life as a people”.⁹ Work also

⁶ Cf. IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), *Special Report on the Impacts of Global Warming of 1.5°C above Pre-Industrial Levels and Related Global Greenhouse Gas Emission Pathways, in the Context of Strengthening the Global Response to the Threat of Climate Change, Sustainable Development, and Efforts to Eradicate Poverty. Summary for Policymakers*, 6 October 2018.

⁷ Pope Francis, *Message to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP25)*, Madrid, 2 December 2019.

⁸ Cf. ILO (International Labour Organization), *ILO Monitor: Covid-19 and the World of Work*, 1st-6th edition, March/September 2020.

⁹ Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti* on Fraternity and Social Friendship, 3 October 2020, n. 162.

helps us to fulfil our duty of solidarity towards every social group and community, as well as towards future generations.

The health crisis, food crisis, environmental crisis and socio-economic crisis are all highly interrelated transversal crises, so much so that we can speak of a single and complex socio-health-environmental crisis.

Each crisis requires vision, planning and swift action, moving beyond both individualistic and more conservative approaches.

Taking up an aphorism attributed to Winston Churchill, “never waste a crisis”. Every moment of difficulty contains an opportunity. The catastrophic event of the pandemic can be seen as “social remodelling”, as a unifying moment in which common interests converge. As Pope Francis suggested while he presided over the extraordinary moment of prayer on March 27, this year, we must “take this time of trial as a time of *choosing*”.¹⁰

The Covid-19 pandemic can, in fact, represent a real moment of *conversion* (and not only in a spiritual sense), a real opportunity for transformation; however, it might also be a recipe for detours from the right path, or individualistic withdrawal and exploitation.

Pope Francis, speaking to the UNGA (United Nations General Assembly), stated: “We are faced, then, with a choice between two possible paths. One path leads to the consolidation of multilateralism as the expression of a renewed sense of global co-responsibility, a solidarity grounded in justice and the attainment of peace and unity within the human family, which is God’s plan for our world. The other path emphasizes self-sufficiency, nationalism, protectionism, individualism and isolation; it excludes the poor, the vulnerable and those dwelling on the peripheries of life. That path would certainly be detrimental to the whole community, causing self-inflicted wounds on everyone. It must not prevail”.¹¹

The response to Covid-19 can, in fact, give rise to the possibility of starting over, a second chance, animated by the hope that, while “the post-industrial period may well be remembered as one of the most irresponsible in history, nonetheless there is reason to hope that humanity at the dawn of the twenty-first century will be remembered for having generously shouldered its grave responsibilities”.¹² It is a challenge to civilization in favour

¹⁰ Pope Francis, *Extraordinary Moment of Prayer*, 27 March 2020.

¹¹ Pope Francis, *Video-Message to the 75th Meeting of the General Assembly of the United Nations*, 24 September 2020.

¹² Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato si’* on Care for Our Common Home, 24 May 2015, n. 165.

of the common good and to place human dignity at the centre of all our actions.

This requires a clear vision of what kind of society and economy we want to build and an accurate “reflection on the meaning of the economy and its goals, as well as a profound and far-sighted revision of the current model of development, so as to correct its dysfunctions and deviations. This is demanded, in any case, by the Earth’s state of ecological health; above all it is required by the cultural and moral crisis of man, the symptoms of which have been evident for some time all over the world.”¹³

This clear vision cannot fail to call for a careful evaluation and re-proposal of the concept of *security*. In 2019, global military spending continued to rise, reaching more than 1.9 trillion US dollars and equalling 2.2% of world GDP (Gross Domestic Product), the highest since 1988.¹⁴ The picture that emerges from this data is a world economy committed to spending more and more to arm itself. The paradox is that its ever-growing expenditure on arms does not contribute to reducing insecurity, but increases it. It confirms the logic of the classic “security dilemma”, according to which the search for a balance of forces pushes each State to try to secure some margin of superiority out of fear of finding itself at a disadvantage. However, weapons and armies will not guarantee greater security. This is particularly evident if we consider the fight against Covid-19, a non-military threat, which has shown the total ineffectiveness of military spending in guaranteeing integral security and which can only be resolved with increased global cooperation.

In fact, the current crisis has revealed that this model too, is unsustainable. Despite enormous military investments, the crisis has highlighted the inadequacy of the concept of “security” understood only from a military perspective. An alternative to this unsustainable model is to strengthen multilateralism, while insisting on the commitment to disarmament and arms control, not as an end in itself, but with a view to contributing to common security and peace. This should not be understood as the absence of war, but the absence of fear, and therefore the promotion of social well-being in the common good. Indeed, it is necessary to combine our efforts to inspire dialogue, diplomatic initiatives and common

¹³ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in veritate* on Integral Human Development in Charity and Truth, 29 June 2009, n. 32.

¹⁴ Cf. SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute), *SIPRI Yearbook 2020: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*, 2020.

security policies. “The international community is called upon to adopt forward-looking strategies to promote the goal of peace and stability and avoid short-sighted approaches to national and international security problems.”¹⁵

“Everything is related”, “everything is connected” – this is one of the main threads running through the Encyclical *Laudato si’*. The Holy Father uses it in the awareness that the whole world is intimately connected. The defence of ecosystems, the preservation of biodiversity and the management of the global commons¹⁶ will never be effective if it is not considered together with politics and economics, migration and social relations. “Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature”.¹⁷

From this perspective emerges the need “to convert the model of global development”¹⁸ into an approach that is more respectful of the common good, of creation and of the integral human development of peoples, including present and future generations. We need to adopt a new vision of the world, anchored in an integral ecology. This implies that we promote a more complete understanding of our common home that brings together the scientific, environmental, economic and ethical dimension, and that is open to an “integral vision of life that can inspire better policies, indicators, research and development processes and criteria for evaluation, while avoiding distorted concepts of development and

¹⁵ Pope Francis, *Message to the United Nations Conference to Negotiate a Legally Binding Instrument to Prohibit Nuclear Weapons, Leading Towards their Total Elimination*, New York, 27 March 2017.

¹⁶ *Global commons* have been traditionally defined as those parts of the planet that fall outside national jurisdictions and to which all nations have access. Stewardship of the global commons cannot be carried out without global governance. Global commons include the Earth’s shared natural resources, such as the high oceans, the atmosphere and outer space and the Antarctic in particular. Cyberspace may also meet the definition of a global commons. Due to the impossibility to manage effectively global commons at national level, the key challenge of the global commons is the design of governance structures and management systems capable of addressing the complexity through multiple public and private interests. The management of the global commons requires pluralistic legal entities, usually international and supranational, structured to match the diversity of interests and the type of resource to be managed, and stringent enough with adequate incentives to ensure compliance. Such management systems are necessary to avoid, at the global level, the classic tragedy of the commons, in which common resources become overexploited.

¹⁷ Pope Francis, *Laudato si’*, n. 139.

¹⁸ Benedict XVI, *Angelus*, 12 November 2006.

growth”.¹⁹ Here the image of the “polyhedron whose different sides form a variegated unity, in which ‘the whole is greater than the part’”²⁰ is very effective.

The development of a polyhedric and interdisciplinary approach to integral ecology has, as its pivot point, the centrality of the human person. The consequence is the promotion of a culture of *care*.²¹ This is in contrast to the culture of waste, so widespread in our society today, whose object “is not only food and dispensable objects, but often human beings themselves”.²²

It is therefore essential to adopt an integral point of view that favours an intimate knowledge of nature and its processes. This is a fundamental prerequisite for a better understanding of the current crisis and for the development of effective solutions aimed at correcting the dysfunctions of the current model of development, which has negative impacts on people’s lives and on the environment. “A technological and economic development which does not leave in its wake a better world and an integrally higher quality of life cannot be considered progress”.²³ The ethical and social dimensions of development must be adequately considered.

All of this implies the education and training of new generations. Indeed, when it comes to integral ecology, particular attention must be paid to the importance of the education process. The transforming power of education in integral ecology requires the patience to generate long-term processes, aimed at shaping genuinely sustainable policies and economies which promote quality of life, in favour of all peoples and the planet, especially the disadvantaged and those in situations of greater risk. Spaces for education and formation are central to this model. They should become more than simply places for the transmission of knowledge; they should be poles for the promotion of integral human development, working with new generations to adopt more sober and responsible lifestyles.

The fact that in an increasingly globalized world everything is interconnected, requires that our centres of education address our

¹⁹ Interdicasterial Working Group of the Holy See on Integral Ecology, *Journeying Towards Care for Our Common Home: Five Years After Laudato si’*, LEV, 31 May 2020, p. 9.

²⁰ Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, n. 215.

²¹ Pope Francis, *Laudato si’*, n. 231; Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, nos. 17, 79, 96, 117, 143, 188.

²² Pope Francis, *Address to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See*, 13 January 2014.

²³ Pope Francis, *Laudato si’*, n. 194.

interdependence not only at the commercial, economic and technological level but, even more importantly, at the level of our interpersonal, intergenerational and social relationships.

The Covid-19 pandemic revealed problems that had already existed for years and that can no longer be avoided, “The world was relentlessly moving towards an economy that, thanks to technological progress, sought to reduce ‘human costs’; there were those who would have had us believe that freedom of the market was sufficient to keep everything secure. Yet the brutal and unforeseen blow of this uncontrolled pandemic forced us to recover our concern for human beings, for everyone, rather than for the benefit of a few”.²⁴ The current situation requires us to reflect on the need for a new solidarity, a conversion of mentality and gaze. It requires the promotion of an ethic of change that is capable of preparing the way for personal and social rebirth. We have experienced both uncertainty and fragility as collective, constitutive dimensions of the human condition. We need to respect these limits and to keep them in mind in every development project, while also caring for the most vulnerable.

After all, “solidarity is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all. It is above all a question of interdependence, sensed as a system determining relationships in the contemporary world, in its economic, cultural, political and religious elements, and accepted as a moral category”.²⁵ The most important lesson that this pandemic has left us with is that, whatever the emergency we face, it is only by being united, only by showing solidarity, that we can overcome the most trying of circumstances.

The various global problems that we have to face in the 21st century, and of which the Covid-19 pandemic is only the latest clear expression, call for a new ethics and a new kind of international relations. Both must be capable of facing the fact that, as “a society becomes ever more globalized, it makes us neighbours but does not make us brothers”.²⁶

²⁴ Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, n. 33.

²⁵ St. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 30 December 1987, n. 38.

²⁶ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, n. 19.

For this reason, the process of strengthening international cooperation is even more important and can no longer be postponed, nor can anyone avoid being implicated or remove themselves from it. It is necessary to build it together because no borders, barriers, or political walls can hide or protect anyone from the effects of this socio-environmental-health crisis. There is no room for the globalization of indifference, for an economy of exclusion, or for the throwaway culture so often denounced by Pope Francis. “Today, no State can ensure the common good of its population if it remains isolated.”²⁷ The current circumstances clearly show that goods such as health, the environment, the climate, and security are not just individual or national goods, but public and collective goods. They require an integral and collective approach, both at a substantive and geographical level. This approach depends on responsible behaviour, that is, a behaviour that is aware of others and that is oriented towards “us” and “we”. Internationally this approach takes the name of “multilateralism”.

Building together presupposes a commitment to pursue constructive dialogue that is interdisciplinary and genuinely oriented towards the universal common good.

Therefore, we cannot overcome an emergency such as that of Covid-19 if we do not combine technical solutions with a vision that places the common good at its centre. Political decisions must take scientific data into account, but interpreting human phenomena solely through a scientific lens would mean producing answers at a purely technical level.

This pandemic has helped us discover that we must start again to think and plan together the future of the planet.

For this reason, a new alliance between science and humanism is indispensable. They must be integrated and not separated and should not be opposed to one another. The health and the economic and social development of our community depend on them. Concerning the latter, “the development of a global community of fraternity based on the practice of social friendship on the part of peoples and nations calls for a better kind of politics, one truly at the service of the common good. Sadly, politics today often takes forms that hinder progress towards a different world.”²⁸

Better politics means an inclusive politics that is at the service of everyone, where the health of the political system is determined

²⁷ Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, n. 153.

²⁸ Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, n. 154.

precisely by the kind of care received by the most vulnerable, because it is the way in which they are treated that reflects the true health of society as a whole and, therefore, of each one of us that makes up the community.

In the current globalized world, such policies cannot be limited to any one nation or region. Instead, it is necessary to have better policies at the international level, bearing in mind, as has already been said, that no country can go forward alone.

While today's problems must be solved by taking into account the entire international community and all of humanity, the world is larger than a single country. The right solutions must also take into account the many complexities that exist. This requires that we engage in scientific collaboration that is truly interdisciplinary and that does not ignore any type of knowledge. "Given the complexity of the ecological crisis and its multiple causes, we need to realize that the solutions will not emerge from just one way of interpreting and transforming reality. Respect must also be shown for the various cultural riches of different peoples, their art and poetry, their interior life and spirituality. If we are truly concerned to develop an ecology capable of remedying the damage we have done, no branch of the sciences and no form of wisdom can be left out, and that includes religion and the language particular to it".²⁹ Let's make the world great again!

Often, in our technologically advanced world, there is the temptation to seek solutions to problems through science and technology alone. The sciences equip the human intellectual with power that can be used for the common good, or that can be used in a selfish way, leaving others behind. For this reason, the sciences must be guided and oriented by ethical principles, as well as grounded in human nature, in all of its richness. An approach disconnected from the human person cannot reach a solid, just and human solution. It risks being partial, relative and ideological. In recent years, technological development has made it possible to achieve incredible progress for our societies; however, it has also led to the belief that technology itself can predict all human activity using only data and algorithms. Instead, in order to face the consequences of the pandemic, I would argue that we must engage in innovative scientific and institutional models based on the sharing of knowledge and cooperation between different disciplines.

²⁹ Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, n. 63.

Life is bigger than science. The study of the laws of nature and wide-ranging scientific investigations can benefit significantly from in-depth and interdisciplinary dialogue. For example, this could include engaging with philosophers and theologians with the aim of building an ethical framework that encourages each of us, with our different skills, to take more responsibility in caring for and cultivating creation³⁰, building an economic system that will improve, rather than destroy, our world.³¹ I am thinking, for example, of the various circular models of production and consumption,³² capable of contrasting and reversing the perverse dynamics set in motion by the current throwaway culture.

In this time of uncertainty and anguish, the pandemic has amplified the injustices and inequalities in our world, many of which stem from unequal economic growth that disregards fundamental human values and that is indifferent to the damage inflicted on our common home. No country has been spared, no population has come out unscathed and no one is immune to its impact. The spread of the virus has shown us that human health is intimately connected with the health of the environment in which we live.

This chance to start over should be founded in a complex vision and a systemic approach that relies on a renewed sense of solidarity, and respect for the common good and the environment. The international community can no longer pursue a market-based logic, seeking profit at any cost. Instead, it has the moral duty to promote measures and decisions that are ethically founded and that put the human person at the centre. It is necessary to create a fraternal society that promotes education in dialogue and that allows everyone to give their best. The appeal not to leave anyone behind must be a warning, that human dignity should never be neglected and that the hope to build a better future should never be denied to anyone.

I would like to conclude with the words that the Holy Father addressed to the participants of the 75th session of the General Assembly of the United Nations, “We never emerge from a crisis just as we were. We come out either better or worse. This is why, at this critical juncture, it is our duty to rethink the future of our common home and our common project. A complex task lies before us, one that requires a frank and coherent dialogue aimed at strengthening multilateralism and cooperation between states.

³⁰ *Genesis*, Ch. 2, Verse 15.

³¹ Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, n. 129.

³² Cf. Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, n. 22.

The present crisis has further demonstrated the limits of our self-sufficiency as well as our common vulnerability. It has forced us to think clearly about how we want to emerge from this: either better or worse. The pandemic has shown us that we cannot live without one another, or worse still, pitted against one another. The United Nations was established to bring nations together, to be a bridge between peoples. Let us make good use of this institution in order to transform the challenge that lies before us into an opportunity to build together, once more, the future we all desire”.³³

³³ Pope Francis, *Video-Message to the 75th Meeting of the General Assembly of the United Nations*, 24 September 2020.