

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS, PLANETARY BOUNDARIES AND THE COMMON GOOD

This contribution assesses the radical update of Catholic Social Teaching in Francis's encyclical Laudato Si' that extends intrinsic value (independence from the usefulness for humans) to non-human creatures. While Francis does not explicitly refer to the notion of Anthropocene, nor provide an answer concerning how development's "reasonable limits" should work, his contribution can nevertheless be seen as compatible with Rockström's planetary boundaries concept. The article starts by examining the criticism directed against some strains of Christianity as co-responsible for the new geological epoch called "Anthropocene", proceeds with evaluating the new understanding of sustainable development that considers planetary boundaries, and finishes with a reinterpretation of the common good in that light. If at the core of human economic, social, and developmental activities there is not progress, but a safe space in which humans can operate and flourish, and if the dichotomy between human beings and the natural world is replaced by an integral vision of everything as interconnected and interwoven, then the traditional Catholic concept of "bonum commune" receives another meaning: genuine human development that protects both human dignity and God's creation.

Keywords: planetary boundaries, Anthropocene, Laudato Si', sustainable development.

I. The Anthropocene in the Debate

Ecology is a recent concern in Catholic Social Thought¹. In fact, none of the documents of the Second Vatican Council concentrated on environmental issues, although some will disagree². Some, like Giampaolo Crepaldi, Secretary of the Pon-

¹ G. Crepaldi. Presentation. // *From Stockholm to Johannesburg: An Historical Overview of the Concern of the Holy See for the Environment 1972–2002* / ed. M. Keenan. Vatican 2002, p. 9.

² V. Punzi. A Social Responsibility Guide for Engineering Students and Professionals of All Faith Traditions: An Overview // *Science Engineering Ethics* 24 (2018) 1255; J. Hart. *What Are They Saying About Environmental Theology?* New York 2004, p. 7.

tifical Council for Justice and Peace from 2001 to 2009, are of the opinion that the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (1964) and the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) are not completely devoid of concern for God's creation. These conciliar teachings contributed to providing "solid roots of a formal and informal teaching concerning care for the environment that has consistently grown over the years"³.

Also critical is William French, who is of the opinion that *Gaudium et Spes* seems to fall short because of its inability "to situate the social question inside the larger frame of the ecological question"⁴. Since *Gaudium et Spes* explores the concept of the "signs of the times" within modernity, one would have expected that it should include some environmental issues in order to "broaden the understanding of human dignity, solidarity and responsibility" more explicitly towards ecology, but this was not the case⁵. It rather appears to concentrate on "a human-centred personalist philosophy, but fails to envision a broader sense of creation-centred, ecologically-informed frame of understanding"⁶. Indeed, Protestant theologian John Hart believes that the Council statements are very anthropocentric in nature. They present "a hierarchically structured pyramid, with humanity at the top as the ultimate and appropriate beneficiary of the goods of the earth"⁷. Despite the fact that many consider *Gaudium et Spes* to be a "ground-breaking document on Catholic Social Teaching (CST)"⁸, it places a too exclusive emphasis on the dignity of the human person, created in the image of God, at the expense of non-human creation.

Anglican theologian Michael Northcott joins French's criticism. Drawing upon Thomas Aquinas's impact in Roman Catholic thought after the Council of Trent, he states that the Latin rite for more than "five hundred years [says] that, the purpose of creation, and species, was an instrumental one, which is to serve and facilitate the redemption of human souls"⁹. The argument holds that

³ Crepaldi. Presentation, p. 9. See also, Hart. *What Are They Saying About Environmental Theology?*, pp. 2–3.

⁴ W. French. *Greening Gaudium et Spes // Vatican II: Forty Years Later* / ed. W. Madges [= The Annual Publication of the College of Theology and Society, 51]. New York 2006, p. 198.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ J. Hart. *Care for Creation: Catholic Social Teaching on the Environment // Josephinum Journal of Theology* 9/1 (2002) 120–145. See also, Punzi. *A Social Responsibility Guide*, 1255.

⁸ Ch. F. Hinze. *Straining Towards Solidarity in a Suffering World // Vatican II: Forty Years Later*, p. 165.

⁹ M. Northcott. *Planetary Moral Economy and Creaturely Redemption in Laudato Si' // Theological Studies* 77/4 (2016) 898. See also, F. Benzoni. *Thomas Aquinas and Environmental Ethics: A Reconstruction of Providence and Salvation // Journal of Religion* 85 (2005) 446–476.

non-human creatures “lack intellectual souls, and have no place in the state of the renewal of the universe since they are designed by God for human use”¹⁰.

In this sense, Lynn White’s accusation that Latin Christianity has been one of the backbones of the “Anthropocene” should gain more attention. Although Roman Catholicism is not directly responsible for the ecological crisis, it has supported a modern instrumentalist view of nature via its “*dominium terrae*” theory, which has put nature at the service of humankind. As such, Roman Catholicism has been an objective partner and even defender in creating a new epoch, which is called the “Anthropocene”¹¹. The notion “Anthropocene”, a term coined by ecologist Eugene F. Stoermer, became popularized by atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen, who states that the influence of human behaviour on Earth’s atmosphere has been so significant as to constitute a new geological epoch. The new epoch has no agreed start-date, but many scientists propose to let it start with the Industrial Revolution ca. 1780, on the occasion of the invention of the steam engine. The Anthropocene has to be linked to the increasing human impact which differentiates this epoch from the previous period, the Holocene.

Despite the fact that the Industrial Revolution brought about many innovations in technology and mechanization, manufacturing, and drastically improved agricultural food productivity, its aftermath has been blamed not only for encouraging rapid changes in social and economic imbalances within the global community but also for destabilising atmospheric conditions¹².

To that effect, we assess in this article *Laudato Si*’s view on sustainable and integral development, thereby postulating that protecting both the human and natural environment is vital for the sustainability of our common patrimonial home.

¹⁰ Northcott. Planetary Moral Economy, p. 899. See also, Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologiae*, part III, q. 91, a. 5 // *Summa Theologiae. Supplement* / tr. Fathers of the English Dominican Province. New York 1947, p. 6644.

¹¹ J. L. Imanaka. *Laudato Si*: Technologies of Power and Environmental Injustice: Toward an Eco-Politics Guided by Contemplation // *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 31/6 (2018) 677–701, available from link.springer.com. The term “Anthropocene” refers to the epoch that follows the Holocene. It is the human age when anthropogenic activities are transforming the earth’s systems in an extraordinary way, unlike the Holocene epoch, which promoted relative stability and a civilization that encouraged agricultural production. See the article of W. Steffen *et al.* The Anthropocene: From Global Change to Planetary Stewardship // *Ambio* 40 (2011) 739–761; J. Rockström *et al.* A Safe Operating Space for Humanity // *Nature* 461 (2009) 472–475; W. Steffen *et al.* The Trajectory of the Anthropocene: The Great Acceleration // *The Anthropocene Review* 2/1 (2015) 81–98; J. Rockström. The Anthropocene: Control and Responsibility: A Reply to Andy Stirling // *Steps Centre: Path to Sustainability* (steps-centre.org).

¹² J. Mertl & R. Valenčík. The Socioeconomic Consequences of Industrial Development // *Central European Journal of Management* 3/1 (2016) 37.

II. *Laudato Si'* View on Sustainable and Integral Development

There is no doubt that our common home – Mother Earth – is being confronted with massive environmental challenges¹³. This is reflected by Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'* when it speaks of “the harm we have inflicted on her [our Mother Earth] by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and master, entitled to plunder her at will”¹⁴. Modernity has drastically exploited the natural world in the name of development and progress, according to Pope Francis.

He speaks about “arrogance” and an ideology that makes humanity “assume the place of God”¹⁵, thereby turning against nature and nonhuman creatures. The proponent of this narrative (“Anthropocene”) appears to be unaware of the importance of nature for supporting the whole creation.

But, remarkably, he makes a significant contribution by referring to nonhuman creatures as our “fellow creatures of this world”¹⁶, thereby extending “intrinsic value” to all nonhuman creatures¹⁷, which is a radical shift from previous CST documents. With this, Pope Francis opens a new chapter about a “theology of the natural world”¹⁸ in the magisterial teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, which hitherto was reluctant to convey explicitly an intrinsic value to nonhuman creatures of the world. This serves as a new dawn and a break in tradition from the time of Thomas Aquinas. What Pope Francis implies now is that nonhuman creatures have “value in themselves”, “in the eyes of God”, in each one of them, which is “independent of their usefulness”¹⁹. The exceptional message is that nonhuman creatures should no longer be seen as mere objects to be drastically exploited, since they can equally be “the locus” through which we meet and relate with and praise God²⁰. All creatures are looking forward to participate in the New Creation, when everything will be restored and made whole²¹.

¹³ Ch. Wamsler *et al.* Mindfulness in Sustainability Science, Practice, and Teaching // *Sustain Science* 13 (2018) 143.

¹⁴ Francis. *Laudato Si'*, § 2 // *The Holy See* (www.vatican.va).

¹⁵ P. Scherz. Living Indefinitely and Living Fully: *Laudato Si'* and the Value of the Present in Christian, Stoic, and Transhumanist Temporalities // *Theological Studies* 79/2 (2018) 360.

¹⁶ Francis. *Laudato Si'*, § 92.

¹⁷ J. De Tavernier. *Laudato Si'*: Pope Francis' Ecology // *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 56/3 (2016) 218–243.

¹⁸ D. Edwards. Sublime Communion: The Theology of the Natural World in *Laudato Si'* // *Theological Studies* 77/2 (2016) 377.

¹⁹ Francis. *Laudato Si'*, § 33, 69, 76, 140.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, § 11, 72, 88, 91.

²¹ N. O'Halloran. Each Creature, Resplendently Transfigured: Development of Teaching in *Laudato Si'* // *Theological Studies* 79/2 (2018) 376–398.

In his integral ecology, Pope Francis promotes a sustainable and integral development that seeks the wellbeing of both the human and the natural environment. The word “integral” makes a “huge” and “substantial” difference.

Furthermore, by “sustainable and integral development”, Pope Francis demonstrates that, “everything in the world both human and other nonhuman creatures are closely connected and interconnected”²². This means that everything is directly or indirectly interwoven and interdependent on everything else for development, survival, and existence.

So, according to Pope Francis, in order to eschew the deterioration of the earth’s community and prevent the abuse done to our common home, there is need to “seek for a sustainable and integral development” which allows for the development of the human person and at the same time promotes the wellbeing of the natural environment²³. This is very much in line with the Sustainable Development Goals.

Furthermore, for Pope Francis, in pursuing a sustainable and integral human development, the principle of the common good, which allows for inclusion with regard to accommodating everybody’s social and cultural backgrounds, should always be seriously considered in order to benefit the interests of all humanity, both present and in the future. In that sense, the notion of the common good and the tenets of integral ecology and human development cannot be separated from each other in showing ‘intergenerational solidarity’, especially in the administration and consumption of the natural resources of the earth²⁴. Thus, in considering the wellbeing of both the present and future generations, he calls on the international community to always support the initiatives of the sustainable development project. This support should continue even though there is a “lack of political will ... lack of suitable mechanisms for oversight, periodic review” and no way to punish offenders with regard to those countries which do not fulfil their commitments²⁵.

As a result, for sustainable development to be effective, it must strive towards “containing growth by setting some reasonable limits that should help to retrace our steps before it is too late”²⁶. However, *Laudato Si’* does not seem to show explicitly how these “reasonable limits” are expected to work. Nonetheless, with regard to establishing conscientious limits that will guide human and economic development in order not to destabilise the resilience of our common home in our contemporary times when a “misguided anthropocentrism” is encouraging

²² Francis. *Laudato Si’*, § 6, 16, 42, 70, 73, 91, 92, 111, 117, 137, 162.

²³ *Ibid.*, § 13, 18.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, § 18, 156–159.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, § 166, 167.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, § 193.

ecological crisis, it rather becomes indispensable to integrate and evaluate human development into the wider framework of newer visions of sustainable development, such as the Planetary Boundaries concept.

III. The Planetary Boundaries Concept: A New Vision of Sustainability

It is outstanding that eminent scholars in science have welcomed the publication of *Laudato Si'*, despite some open “reservations”²⁷. Among them is Johan Rockström of the Stockholm Resilience Centre in Sweden, who praises “the encyclical for supporting the science of climate change”²⁸. Rockström introduced a couple of years before the Planetary Boundaries concept within the broader discussion on the Anthropocene. *Laudato Si'* does not mention the term “Anthropocene” but highlights humanity as the driving force within the natural. In fact, the term “Anthropocene” represents, concisely, “that humanity is the dominant force of change”, with its consequential negative effects on the Earth System²⁹. Maybe the omission could be explained as a kind of avoidance of blaming humanity’s role too much?

Rockström and colleagues introduced in 2009 the concept of Planetary Boundaries in their epoch-making article “A Safe Operating Space for Humanity”³⁰. This scientific essay aims to offer a new way of understanding sustainable development that will address, scrutinize and assess humanity’s activities within the process of development of Planet Earth, taking into consideration that there are planetary boundaries which may not be transgressed in order to avoid unprecedented environmental changes towards destabilizing the Earth System.

Planetary Boundaries should be considered as “a new framework to redefine global development by reconnecting economics and societies to the planet; and to create a tool providing a practical and comprehensive way to measure the human impact on Earth, and guide our common endeavour toward a sustainable world development, before it is too late”³¹. Its focus is to provide “a new paradigm for development, one that pursues alleviation of poverty and economic growth while

²⁷ P. Lynch. On Care for Our Common Discourse: Pope Francis’s Nonmodern Epideictic // *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 47/5 (2017) 465.

²⁸ J. Rockström. Why the Pope’s Embrace of Science Matters // *TED* (www.ideas.ted.com).

²⁹ J. Rockström. Bounding the Planetary Future: Why We Need a Great Transition // *Great Transition Initiative: Towards a Transformative Vision and Praxis* (www.greattransition.org), April 2015.

³⁰ Rockström *et al.* A Safe Operation Space for Humanity, p. 472–475.

³¹ J. Rockström & M. Klum. *Big World Small World: Abundance Within Planetary Boundaries*. New Haven – London 2015, p. 9.

staying within the safe planetary boundaries that define a stable and resilient planet³². While the Planetary Boundaries concept does not place a premium on economic growth and humanity's advancements with regard to progress, it rather identifies "a safe space in the planetary system within which human beings can operate and flourish indefinitely"³³.

The framework provides boundaries and limits on the environmental ceiling that are "safe and just" within the perimeters that humanity is allowed to perform activities without mounting undue pressure to the planetary system³⁴. The nine environmental boundaries include: climate change, biodiversity loss, change of land use systems, chemical pollution, nitrogen and phosphorus cycles, stratospheric ozone depletion, ocean acidification, global freshwater use, and atmospheric aerosol loading³⁵. According to their last update, the first four boundaries have already exceeded their proposed limits if one wants to keep the rise in temperature below 2°C³⁶.

Planetary Boundaries presumes that anthropogenic factors caused the transgression of natural boundaries, and, consequently, humankind runs the risk that human developmental activities might reach a tipping point that will drastically affect the environmental capacity of the natural world. To that effect, there is an urgent concern to "reconnect human development and progress to the biosphere" so that human economic growth and development must be within a safe operating space in order to uphold the resilience of the Earth System³⁷, thereby avoiding triggering an unprecedented ecological catastrophe.

³² Rockström & Klum. *Big World Small World*, p. 8.

³³ M. Lynas. *The God Species: Saving the Planet in the Age of Humans*. Washington, D.C. 2011, p. 9.

³⁴ K. Raworth. A Safe and Just Space for Humanity: Can We Live within the Doughnut? [= Oxfam Discussion Papers]. Oxford 2012, p. 8. See also, D. O'Neill. A Good Life for All within Planetary Boundaries // *Nature Sustainability* 88/95 (2018) 1–16.

³⁵ W. Steffen *et al.* Planetary Boundaries: Guiding Human Development on a Changing Planet: (Summary) // *Science* 347/6223 (2015) 736–746.

³⁶ Steffen *et al.* Planetary Boundaries: Guiding Human Development. See also, J. Carey. The 9 Limits of Our Planet ...and How We've Raced Past 4 of Them // *TED* (ideas.ted.com); E. Furman *et al.* A Future the Planet Can Accommodate [= Syke Policy Brief], 1–4 // *Helda* (www.helda.helsinki.fi), 30 May 2018; P. Lucas & H. Wilting. *Using Planetary Boundaries to Support National Implementation of Environment-Related Sustainable Development Goals: Background Report*. The Hague 2018.

³⁷ C. Folke *et al.* Reconnecting to the Biosphere // *Ambio* 40 (2011) 719–738. See also, Rockström. Bounding the Planetary Future, 2.

IV. Conclusion: Re-interpreting the “Bonum Commune”

CST was for a long time preoccupied with highlighting the unjust conditions and inequalities between the rich and the poor. Pope Francis’s notion of integral ecology takes as starting point that, “everything in the world is connected, interconnected and interdependent”. Therefore, without any intent to deny the unique and distinctive dignity and identity of the *imago Dei* in human beings, there is no dichotomy between humanity and the natural world³⁸. The new vision rather asserts that human ecology and natural ecology are interwoven. To that effect, anything that affects either of the ecologies leads to the deterioration of both ecologies.

Furthermore, for a sustainable and integral development which promotes the wellbeing of both human and natural environments to be possible, authentic human development must recognize that “a misguided anthropocentrism” that generates “a misguided lifestyle” and a technocratic paradigm that places a premium on “maximization of profits” must be rethought, since they cannot guarantee a true, genuine, and conscientious human development that cares for and protects both human dignity and all God’s creation.

More significantly, as Pope Francis updates the social teachings of the Roman Catholic Church by remarkably extending “intrinsic value” to nonhuman creatures as our “fellow creatures”, it calls for all human beings to be more conscious about their relationality with the natural environment, especially in the pursuit of economic and developmental processes. In addition, for *Laudato Si’* to advocate for the establishment of “setting some reasonable limits” as guiding principles towards achieving a sustainable development makes Pope Francis’s position synonymous with the core message of the Planetary Boundaries framework, although not offering concrete steps towards respecting planetary limits.

Further on, since establishing a reasonably safe operating space for humanity is the basis of Rockström’s Planetary Boundaries concept, it is becoming indispensable in that human, economic, social and developmental activities in the Anthropocene respect “a safe operating space”. This is to make sure that human activities must be within the planetary boundaries and limits of the environmental ceiling in order not to transgress nor destabilise the resilience of the Earth System that has encouraged civilization over the years.

³⁸ K. Ndubueze. Responsible Environmental Stewardship for Sustainable Development in Africa: Edward Schillebeeckx’s Co-Humanity and Creatuality and Pope Francis’ Integral Ecology // *African Ecclesial Review* 60/1–2 (2018) 119.

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ЦІЛІ СТАЛОГО РОЗВИТКУ, ПЛАНЕТАРНІ МЕЖІ ТА СПІЛЬНЕ БЛАГО

Автор цього доробку дає оцінку радикальному оновленню католицького соціального вчення в енцикліці папи Франциска «Славен будь» (Laudato Si'), яке розширює поняття внутрішньої цінності (коли щось є цінним незалежно від своєї утилітарності) на не-людей. Хоч папа Франциск прямо не посилається на поняття «антропоцен» та не дає відповіді на те, як мають функціонувати «розумні межі» розвитку, його внесок можна розглядати як сумісний із концепцією планетарних меж Рокстрема. Стаття починається з аналізу критики, спрямованої проти деяких течій християнства як частково співвідповідальних за нову геологічну епоху під назвою «антропоцен». Далі дано оцінку нового розуміння сталого розвитку, яке враховує планетарні межі. У світлі цих спостережень наприкінці статті автор пропонує оновлене розуміння спільного блага. Якщо в основі людської економічної та соціальної діяльності, а також діяльності задля розвитку лежить ідея не прогресу, а безпечного простору для людської діяльності та процвітання і якщо дихотомія між людьми і природним світом замінена цілісним баченням усього як взаємозалежного й взаємопов'язаного, то традиційне католицьке поняття «bonum commune» означає не що інше, як справжній людський розвиток, котрий захищає як людську гідність, так і Боже творіння.

Ключові слова: планетарні межі, антропоцен, Laudato Si', сталий розвиток.