

# CARING FOR OUR COMMON HOME

---

## SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON THE UN 2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

---

*Paul R. Gallagher*

**T**HROUGHOUT the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in response to the social issues raised by the Industrial Revolution and the ideological movements of the time, the Catholic Church's social doctrine developed with the aim of providing ethical guidance for political and social activity. Although the term refers to the growing corpus of papal teaching, one can speak of a "Christian social doctrine." Apart from the theological and liturgical differences between the various Christian churches, all share a common faith in a transcendent, triune God and, consequently, the supreme and transcendent dignity of each man and woman—a dignity which must be respected and promoted by all forms of social organization.

This social teaching is marked both by great continuity and constant innovation, not only because concrete circumstances

change, but also because the human mind—which for Christians is enlightened by faith—can grow constantly in its understanding of social realities.

The social teachings of Pope Francis offer a practical and original approach to the global economic situation. The Pope is especially clear about the dramatic nature of two of the chief realities of our time: social exclusion and attacks on the environment. His teaching also provides an original approach to solutions: for Pope Francis, these cannot be ideological; they must rather involve everyone, based on a spirit of solidarity but also of mercy.

**I**n this article, I will attempt to bring out these two areas of originality. The Winter 2016 issue of *Horizons* focuses attention on the Global South. Here, perhaps, the adjective "global" is particularly fitting, since the traditional

---

*Archbishop Paul R. Gallagher is Secretary for Relations with States of the Holy See.*



Photo: L'Osservatore Romano

*Pope Francis with Archbishop Gallagher*

social distinction between North and South—based mainly on geography—has increasingly broken down. On the one hand, our world today is becoming more and more uniform along the lines of three social strata, independent of geographical differences: the relatively small group of the “super rich,” the global middle class, and the enormous numbers of the socially excluded. On the other hand, inexorable waves of migrants and refugees—the result of poverty and grave regional conflicts—together with the weakening of local systems of social security and aging populations, have led to a reemergence of poverty on the streets of a “North”

which had heretofore felt safe and contented. For these reasons too, this article will concentrate on the Pope’s global vision without descending to geographical particulars.

#### **AN ORIGINAL APPROACH TO THE INTERNATIONAL ECONOMY**

The two most important pastoral documents issued by Pope Francis—the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* published in November 2013 and the Encyclical *Laudato Si’* published in May 2015—as well as the Pope’s address to the United Nations in September 2015, offer a perceptive critical view of the present world economic situation,

while suggesting profound and in some ways innovative approaches for responding to the various current crises.

From the beginning of his papacy, Pope Francis has dramatically drawn attention to the phenomenon of social exclusion. Politicians and economists generally agree on the critical importance of exclusion. In the Pope's teaching, however, exclusion is not viewed through the lens of economics, but rather judged directly by its effects on individual persons and by its moral consequences. "Just as the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say 'Thou shalt not' to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills," the Pope wrote in *Evangelii Gaudium*.

For the Pope, the economy of exclusion is something new with respect to the unjust effects of twentieth-century social models such as industrial capitalism and statism.

In the past, victims of injustices continued to feel part of a broader social reality, and along with the more prosperous groups, they could at least hope for a correction of the imbalances in society itself.

"Exclusion ultimately has to do with what it means to be a member of the society in which we live; those excluded are no longer society's underside or its fringes or its disenfranchised—they are no longer even a part of it," the Pope concluded.

According to the Pope, the primary

*In the Pope's teaching, exclusion is not viewed through the lens of economics, but rather judged directly by its effects on individual persons and by its moral consequences.*

cause of exclusion is found in the mistake of assigning to the market an automatic role of social promotion or, at least, of smoothing out differences. Poverty has structural causes which need to be discerned and remedied decisively: "we need to reject a magical

conception of the market, which would suggest that problems can be solved simply by an increase in the profits of companies or individuals."

This is not to condemn outright a free market economy so much as to condemn the imbalance resulting from "ideologies which defend the absolute autonomy of the marketplace and financial speculation." Even so, the Pope argues, the critique of a magical conception of the market must be accompanied by a parallel rejection of an ideologically inspired defense of the poor. As he makes clear, even a state with central planning, faced with grave problems like those of the environment, can fall into the same errors as a pure market mentality.

Paradoxically, the ideology of the market, which creates exclusion, ends up as a denial of the market itself, seen as a normal expression of human social relations whose exercise should be accessible to all. As a result, the Pope has no difficulty in stating that the poor too have a “right to the property and to the market,” since in the end, free and prudent economic activity is part of the exercise of human dignity, which is shared by rich and poor alike, inasmuch as “the Lord is the maker of them all” (Proverbs 22:2) and “He himself made both small and great” (Wisdom of Solomon 6:7). It follows, as Pope Francis writes in *Laudato Si'*, that

*A free and prudent economic activity is part of the exercise of human dignity, which is shared by rich and poor alike.*

every *campesino* has the natural right to possess a reasonable allotment of land where he can establish his home, work for the subsistence of his family and a secure life. This right must be guaranteed so that its exercise is not illusory but real. That means that apart from the ownership of property, rural people must have access to means of technical education, credit, insurance and markets.

## REALISTIC FOUNDATIONS FOR ECONOMIC THOUGHT

The methodological approach taken by the Pope is that of moral theology and philosophical anthropology—one which seeks to understand

realities on the basis of the recognition of human dignity and a concrete acknowledgment of the different situations in which women and men, especially the poor, have to live.

The Pope does not claim to develop an economic theory or propose new technical models. His is a more profound and farsighted aim: that of awakening consciences to the personal dignity of every man and every woman, which then becomes the necessary premise for battling the tragic phenomenon of exclusion. Man cannot be reduced to a mechanism of the market—a means of production or a consumer or both—or of class struggle. Consequently, human activity cannot be reduced to the production and exchange of material goods. Such a reconsideration of the human person should lead to a reformulation of the foundations of economic thought. As he writes in *Laudato Si'*: “the principle of the maximization of profits, frequently isolated from other considerations, reflects a misunderstanding of the very concept of the economy.”

The reduction of human social relations to a network of economically quantifiable material exchanges means casting off the very best of ourselves. The Christian faith teaches

that God is love, and that human beings were created to love God and neighbor. Man attains the full measure of his dignity as the “image of God” by giving himself over to the service of others. Charity—understood as altruistic self-giving—is thus an indispensable part of human social relations. “We need to be convinced,” the Pope writes in *Evangelii Gaudium*, “that charity is the principle not only of micro-relationships (with friends, with family members or within small groups), but also of macro-relationships, social, economic and political.”

Charity cannot be measured in monetary terms, for it is essentially gratuitous; it asks for nothing in return. At the same time, its exclusion from social life leads necessarily to injustice, because the deepest foundations are lacking for an understanding of the dignity of others and our responsibility towards them. Lack of charity will always lead to discarding those who do not serve our interests or to an economic system based on selfishness. Those who lose commercial value as producers or consumers thus become leftovers in a society that automatically privileges those who, due to various and at times purely fortuitous circumstances, end up in situations of power or economic advantage.

*The reduction of human social relations to a network of economically quantifiable material exchanges means casting off the very best of ourselves.*

Taking up a classic concept dating back to Aristotle’s *Politics*, the Pope notes in *Evangelii Gaudium* that “economy, as the very word indicates, should be the art of achieving a fitting management of our common home, which is the world as a whole.” Economic science and activity are therefore primarily practical human sciences and techniques subordinate to politics and morality; they must be guided by the virtue of justice, which leads to seeing mankind as a true family.

Instead, the prevailing mindset tends to view economics as a phenomenological science—similar to the physical and mathematical sciences—charged with discerning the best way to guide human activity towards the goal of maximizing material ends.

A science so conceived easily turns into a relativistic ideology which reduces human activity to selfishness, hedonism, and utilitarianism. In this way, man himself, being merely a portion of matter with the ability to think, ends up becoming just another resource to be thrown out when no longer materially useful: “Human beings are themselves considered consumer goods to be used and then discarded.”

It is of course true that all economic reflection needs to formulate general theories and models of reality, also relying on the empirical sciences and technical instruments. Yet, if it is to be at the service of integral human development, such reflection can neither be disconnected from an integral vision of man and society, nor from constant interaction with the reality with which it deals: the administration of our common home.

Only in this way can economic science be faithful to its essence as a practical and moral science. Especially relevant for science and economic theories is what Pope Francis demands of all intellectual activities, namely that they must be in constant dialogue with reality in order that the idea does not become separated from the real world. “Ideas—conceptual elaborations—are at the service of communication, understanding, and praxis,” he writes in *Evangelii Gaudium*.

### CONFUSING MEANS AND ENDS

At the root of all economic issues is the deeper issue of anthropology: our understanding of what it means to be human. The confusion between ends and means originates in a limited conception of man, in which the meaning of life and happiness are found in “con-

sumption.” The result is an overestimation of technology and money.

Money is itself only a means within social relationships: a means for the exchange of goods, a unit of counting and comparing material worth, a reserve of economic value. Yet one of the most striking aspects of recent centuries has been that this means has become, in and of itself, the ultimate goal of all human activity and even an object of veneration, for it has come to be identified with the

*Lack of charity will always lead to discarding those who do not serve our interests or to an economic system based on selfishness.*

satisfaction of all yearnings and material desires. “One cause of this situation,” the Pope writes, “is found in our relationship with money, since we calmly accept its dominion over ourselves and our societies.” Hence his forceful insistence that we say: “no to a financial system which governs rather than serves; [...] money must serve not rule.”

Again, we can turn momentarily back to Aristotle and his warning against what he called a second form of “chrematistics,” which would turn all human abilities and activities into means of making money. As the Pope observes in *Evangelii Gaudium*, this age-old temptation has forcefully reappeared in the modern era. He vigorously denounces the fact that “we have created new idols. The worship of the ancient golden calf



has returned in a new and ruthless guise in the idolatry of money and the dictatorship of an impersonal economy lacking a truly human purpose.” We see signs of a “lack of real concern for human beings; man is reduced to one of his needs alone: consumption.”

But this erroneous relationship with money as a means is part of a broader misconception of man’s relationship with technology. This in turn is based on an error in our conception of man himself. “Technological” man considers himself potentially omnipotent, restrained only by the practical impossibility of obtaining certain desired results at the present time. Ethical thinking thus turns into an exercise of justifying what we do today, with the implicit conviction that we will also find moral arguments to justify what we do tomorrow. As the Pope writes in *Laudato Si’*:

The basic problem goes even deeper: it is the way that humanity has taken up technology and its development according to an undifferentiated and one-dimensional paradigm. It can be said that many problems of today’s world stem from the tendency, at times unconscious, to make the methods and aims of science and technology an epistemological paradigm which shapes the lives of individuals and the workings of society. Technology, which, linked to business interests, is

presented as the only way of solving these problems, in fact proves incapable of seeing the mysterious network of relations between things, and so sometimes solves one problem only to create others.

### A WRONG RELATIONSHIP WITH OURSELVES

When we think, or show by our actions, that “maximizing profits is enough” to ensure “integral human development and social inclusion [...] we fail to see the deepest roots of our present failures, which have to do with the direction, goals, meaning and social implications of technological and economic growth,” the Pope writes further in the same document.

And so we arrive at what Pope Francis considers the deepest cause of global imbalances. The past three centuries in particular have been marked by a disproportionate confidence in the physical and mathematical sciences and in technology. But these are limited to the knowledge and manipulation of phenomena and objects. Of themselves, they are unable to comprehend that, as he writes further,

human beings [...] possess a uniqueness which cannot be fully explained by the evolution of other open systems. Each of us has his or her own personal identity and is capable of entering into

*This erroneous relationship with money as a means is part of a broader misconception of man’s relationship with technology.*

dialogue with others and with God himself. Our capacity to reason, to develop arguments, to be inventive, to interpret reality and to create art, along with other, not yet discovered, capacities, are signs of a uniqueness which transcends the spheres of physics and biology. [Religion, on the other hand, regards] each human being as a subject who can never be reduced to the status of an object.

The exaltation of technology leads us to a distorted relationship with the rest of creation. Continuing with the same line of thinking, he writes that

it would also be mistaken to view other living beings as mere objects subjected to arbitrary human domination. When nature is viewed solely as a source of profit and

gain, this has serious consequences for society. This vision of ‘might is right’ has engendered immense inequality, injustice and acts of violence against the majority of humanity, since resources end up in the hands of the first comer or the most powerful: the winner takes all.

Human transcendence and the specificity of our broader relationship with nature are factors that cannot be quantified by physics, econometrics, or

financial calculations. Yet an acknowledgement of human transcendence is absolutely necessary for a well-ordered and well-functioning society. The failure to appreciate this reality lies at the root of the grave evils in the world today.

Certain passages of Pope Francis’s address to the United Nations stress this truth. For the Pope, there are sectors that are

*Economic science and activity are primarily practical human sciences and techniques subordinate to politics and morality; they must be guided by the virtue of justice, which leads to seeing mankind as a true family.*

closely interconnected and made increasingly fragile by dominant political and economic relationships. That is why their rights must be forcefully affirmed, by working to protect the environment and by putting an end to exclusion. [...]The environment itself entails ethical limits which human activity must

acknowledge and respect. Man, for all his remarkable gifts, which are signs of a uniqueness which transcends the spheres of physics and biology, is at the same time a part of these spheres [...] The misuse and destruction of the environment are also accompanied by a relentless process of exclusion. In effect, a selfish and boundless thirst for power and material prosperity leads both to the misuse of available natural resources and to the exclusion of the weak and disadvantaged... Economic and social



exclusion is a complete denial of human fraternity and a grave offense against human rights and the environment. The poorest are those who suffer most from such offenses, for three serious reasons: they are cast off by society, forced to live off what is discarded and suffer unjustly from the abuse of the environment. They are part of today's widespread and quietly growing culture of waste.

### **FAITH IN MAN & DEVELOPMENT**

This critique of an ideology of the market and of technology does not imply an ultimately negative or pessimistic judgment. The Pope, in full accord with Christian social teaching as a whole, takes a very positive view of the potential of human freedom—provided that human activity is guided by a solid anthropology. “We can once more broaden our vision. We have the freedom needed to limit and direct technology; we can put it at the service of another type of progress, one which is healthier, more human, more social, more integral,” he writes in *Laudato Si'*. “All of this shows the urgent need for us to move forward in a bold cultural revolution. Science and technology are not neutral; from the beginning to the end of a process, various intentions and possibilities are in play and can take on distinct shapes.”

It is possible to create models of production which are more inclusive and less polluting. This can also be accomplished by the poor, organized in

cooperatives or small business groups. The Pope maintains that “business is a vocation, and a noble vocation, provided that those engaged in it see themselves challenged by a greater meaning in life; this will enable them truly to serve the common good by striving to increase the goods of this world and to make them more accessible to all,” as he writes in *Evangelii Gaudium*.

In his writings, the Pope praises the efforts and creativity of all those—governments and businesses, non-governmental organizations, cooperatives, local communities, and social movements—who work to create new forms of production and distribution of wealth which are not only respectful of the environment but also help to renew it, as in the case of the so-called circular model of production. It can be said that, in general, the Pope speaks to everyone—the great and small, the rich and poor—and shows great confidence in their spirit of initiative and social responsibility.

### **POLITICS & THE DANGER OF CORRUPTION**

To view economics as a practical science—the art of achieving a fitting management of our common home—leads to a rethinking of the activity of governments. For the Pope, once more in agreement with the Church's social doctrine, this cannot be excluded *a priori*. Inequality has struc-

tural causes. Consequently, the right of states to oversee, and even in certain cases to regulate, economic activity cannot be denied given that governments are charged with watching over the common good.

Nonetheless, precisely in upholding this principle, Pope Francis speaks repeatedly in rather demanding and insistent terms about corruption: it is an authentic cancer of society. It can be said that corruption is the third great social evil, together with exclusion and the destruction of the environment. The deplorable phenomenon of corruption is mentioned by the Pope no less than six times in *Laudato Si'*. It must be rejected if any real political and social reform is to come about. "Changing structures without generating new convictions and attitudes will only ensure that those same structures will become, sooner or later, corrupt, and oppressive and ineffectual," he writes in *Evangelii Gaudium*.

*It can be said that corruption is the third great social evil, together with exclusion and the destruction of the environment.*

order to bring about decisive political action. Society, through non-governmental organizations and intermediate groups, must put pressure on governments to develop more rigorous regulations, procedures and controls," the Pope concludes in *Laudato Si'*.

**THE 2030 AGENDA & COP21**

All these considerations have led the Pope and the Holy See to a relatively positive assessment of the Paris climate accords (COP21) and the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The broad spectrum of themes covered by the 2030 Agenda—with its 17 goals and 169 targets—is not a defect, but a realistic acknowledgment of the complexity of the problems associated with poverty, exclusion, and the protection of the environment. For its part, COP21 ended with the adoption of an ambitious agreement whose implementation will call for unified commitment and generous effort on the part of all.

Politics is an outstanding expression of charity and the Christian life. Hence the Pope calls for a political class which is responsible, honest, forward-looking, and generous. But this is not enough. In order for government activity to serve the common good, "public pressure has to be exerted in

In his December 2015 Angelus Address, Pope Francis urged "the entire international community to persevere on this path, in a spirit of ever more effective solidarity" and "in the hope that it will ensure that special attention is paid to those who are most vulnerable." As he put it in his November 2015 Nairobi

address, this is a path which seeks to attain “three complex and interdependent goals: lessening the impact of climate change, fighting poverty and ensuring respect for human dignity.”

On the other hand, good intentions and solemn commitments are not enough. Just as Pope Francis cited Aristotle’s definition of economics in *Evangeli Gaudium*, so too, in speaking to the United Nations about the 2030 Agenda, he referred to the classic definition of justice, which contains as one of its essential elements “a constant and perpetual will to respect the rights of every person”: *Iustitia est constans et perpetua voluntas ius suum cuique tribuendi*. As a result, the Pope insists on the need for “a will which is effective, practical and constant” and for “concrete steps and immediate measures for preserving and improving the natural environment and thus putting an end as quickly as possible to the phenomenon of social and economic exclusion.”

A critical evaluation of the 2030 Agenda or COP21 would be concerned less with their content than with the eventual lack of practical will to implement them, or the idea that any one economic or social formula will “magically” solve every problem. To quote further from the Pope’s address to the United Nations:

we must avoid every temptation to fall into a declarationist nominalism which

would assuage our consciences [...] the number and complexity of the problems require that we possess technical instruments of verification. But this involves two risks. We can rest content with the bureaucratic exercise of drawing up long lists of good proposals—goals, objectives and statistics—or we can think that a single theoretical and aprioristic solution will provide an answer to all the challenges.

### AGENTS OF ONE’S OWN DEVELOPMENT

The success of the 2030 Agenda and of the Paris climate accords depend on the extent to which men and women can be dignified agents of their own destiny. Development must take place “for each individual, for every family, in communion with others, and in a right relationship with all those areas in which human social life develops—friends, communities, towns and cities, schools, businesses and unions, provinces, nations, etc.,” as he stressed in his UN address. This includes the right to education, the rights of families and the Church to provide education, as well as the right of all social groups to take part in the educational process.

“At the same time,” he added, “government leaders must do everything possible to ensure that all can have the minimum spiritual and material means needed to live in dignity and to create

and support a family, which is the primary cell of any social development. In practical terms,” he concluded, “this absolute minimum has three names: lodging, labour, and land; and one spiritual name: spiritual freedom, which includes religious freedom, the right to education and all other civil rights.” Access to these goods is the best measure of the effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the Paris climate accords.

*The success of the 2030 Agenda and of the Paris climate accords depend on the extent to which men and women can be dignified agents of their own destiny.*

The result is a mindset grounded in the assertion of power, where no room is left for the weak and the vulnerable—despite repeated statements in support of human rights. This power-oriented mindset loses all reference to justice and views norms solely as instruments of balance and coordination, capable of being overlooked or infringed whenever “the risk of non-compliance” is worth taking. This way of thinking, or, rather, of acting, has dire consequences on the international plane; it ends up as a cause of exclusion, of all kinds of poverty, and of environmental destruction.

### A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION

The Encyclical *Laudato Si'* is, as Pope Francis has frequently pointed out, part of the Church's social doctrine. The Encyclical develops and completes the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. The Pope's critique of the current global economy as deleterious to man and the environment is directed to certain aspects of its underlying anthropological vision: a hedonistic definition of man, seen as a being who finds meaning and fulfillment in insatiable consumption; a distorted relationship with technology, which is called upon to provide solutions to every problem; and a wrong relationship with the physical and mathematical sciences, which are called upon to provide a thorough explanation of reality.

Instead, the Pope affirms that the economy—national and international—and politics at the international level can only grow and develop on the basis of a renewed vision of man. A vision which, while rejecting every Promethean pretence, acknowledges its own limits and discovers its identity and fulfillment in the transcendent meaning of life and in the weaving of lasting relationships with others. These principles and attitudes, which the Pope set forth in his address to the United Nations, have as their aim the good of each human person. It is his hope that they will prove to be a source of inspiration for the entire international community and for each individual person. ●