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Navigating  
Structural  
Change in the  
Irish Church:  
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# Navigating Structural Change in the Irish Church:

## *Reading the Signposts in Laudato Si'*

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Dympna Mallon

Most readers of this journal will be aware that the regular calls for reform of various aspects of the Church as an institution took centre stage recently in a most public way. Demand for structural change in the Church is unrelenting as lay people engage more with theology and pastoral ministry. As a result, they inevitably question why their learning and experience does not warrant some input in the decision-making processes of the institution which they too serve. Most recently attention shifted to strong, assertive criticisms of the institutional Church and its tardiness in addressing the place and role of women within its structures. Although the former President of Ireland, Mary McAleese, might have been portrayed as the sole voice, she was in the vanguard of a very comprehensive body of female theologians who had convened a conference on the role of women in the Church. Having no forum or channel of engagement within which to seriously dialogue and explore the issues which concern them, the only alternative was to self-organise and have their own conversation. Such action is a frequent response in the face of frustration and disengagement and is certainly not the exclusive experience of women within the Church. The majority of lay people, with only limited exceptions, have neither clear channels for engagement and dialogue, nor do they enjoy or exercise any established rights or authority. This reality seems at odds with Church which is committed to social justice, human dignity and more recently, promoting global solidarity on care for creation.

*Laudato Si'* has been described as “one of the most important documents to come from a Pope in the past 120 years.”<sup>1</sup> It outlines its’ position in the particular context of climate change, the urgent need to address the deterioration of eco-systems and the loss of

1 Sean McDonagh, “*Caring can be Costly*”, The Irish Times, 26 June 2015

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biodiversity. In the absence of a coherent and responsible attitude, at both national and international levels, to the ongoing ecological crisis *Laudato Si'* has a hugely significant contribution to make. Significantly, as part of the canon of church teaching, its emphasis on the question of environmental degradation and destruction highlights how the behaviour of a minority of humanity impacts negatively on the majority of life on earth. These issues are placed centre stage in local, national and international debate and decision-making using the lens of Integral Ecology. This is a concept which, although neither new nor innovative in church thinking, assumes a new scope and relevance as it is elaborated within *Laudato Si'* (LS II).

The Encyclical, is also said to have a ‘disruptive influence’<sup>2</sup>, and this article will consider that “disruptive influence” within a less obvious context. By emphasising the interconnectedness of all living beings, its promotion of integral ecology, its call for individual and collective conversion, and for structural change, *Laudato Si'* holds the potential for even more profound possibilities. Recognising that all things are interconnected, the Encyclical proposes a dialogue to address the global challenges which threaten the integrity of creation. This dialogue, it insists, must result in structural change and include all voices especially the weakest and the most vulnerable. This call for structural reform permeates every area of social and economic relationship considered by *Laudato Si'*, except, somewhat conspicuously, ecclesial structures. If integral ecology which the Encyclical promotes is to be authentic, this article argues that it also creates the space to initiate a programme of real, meaningful structural and ideological Church reform.

Using six headings, this article will, consider how *Laudato Si'* can contribute to the debate on church reform, suggesting as it does, particular approaches and principles within which to consider change. In the section “Everything is Connected” we will review what is meant by integral ecology and the implications of this “new” approach to our relationships with God, with each other and with the earth. “A New Planetary Solidarity” reinforces the need for an integral ecology, highlighting the need for greater awareness of, and responsibility for the choices we make, and their consequences, especially for the creation and for those with whom we share it. “The Cry of the Earth and the Cry of the Poor” explores the influence of liberation theology on the ideas and principles promoted in the Encyclical and the implications for structural

2 Lorna Gold, “The Disruptive Power of *Laudato Si'* – A ‘Dangerous Book’” in *Laudato Si': An Irish Response – Essays on the Pope's Letter on the Environment*, (Dublin, Veritas:2017).

change to alleviate exclusion and oppression. In the section “Profound Interior Conversion” a review of the fundamental values of conversion, which underpin so much of the Encyclical, and their significance for personal and communal conversion will be undertaken. “The Whole is Greater than the Part” will connect the threads of integral ecology, liberation theology and conversion and suggest that there is no place for dualism of any kind, nor for the preservation of structures which support it. Finally, “A Strategy for Real Change” will, based on much of what has been explored, extrapolate a number of suggested reforms for the structure of the Irish Church.

#### EVERYTHING IS CONNECTED

Although it appears almost simplistic in its message, the more consideration which is given to the principle within *Laudato Si'* that everything is connected the more complex and significant the issues become. Rarely has the recognition that all things are connected achieved such prominence within Church teaching. Real significance can be attached to the crafting of a Papal document which is focused solely on the current ecological crisis and humanity's contribution to its escalation. No previous pontiff adopted the term “Integral Ecology” or promoted its understanding in the broader social and political mentality. Francis, however, sets out his stall in the opening lines of the document, addressing its content to “every living person on this planet” (*LS 3*). In so doing, he establishes that no one is excluded or exempt from the conversation or dialogue which he is seeking to initiate, nor the changes which are urgently needed. This inclusive dialogue is reinforced by the references to wisdom and traditions as diverse as the Muslim mystic Rumi, Native American spirituality, the Eastern Orthodox Church and various regional Episcopal Conferences.

The notion of integral ecology proposed by the Pope impacts on several distinct but related areas. Concerned as it is with human ecology, social ecology and environmental ecology, and the relationships between them, of necessity it places great emphasis on caring for the earth. It also requires us to be concerned for those with whom we share it and to accept responsibility for the ways in which decisions, actions and structures impact on the poorest peoples. Francis is clear that the ecological crisis is a cause for major concern and that urgent action is needed. He also issues an appeal to address the threat of ongoing damage and the unprecedented loss of species, affording a new recognition to the inherent value of ecosystems in their own right (*LS 36, 42*). *Laudato Si'* proposes that only through embracing an integral ecology is there any possibility of rehabilitating our relationship with the earth and all the life it

## THE FURROW

sustains. This requires us to reframe the participation of humanity in a unified system of interconnectedness and interdependence which includes and values all living beings. Such ideas represent a significant shift in church thinking and teaching with implications for our perception of our place within creation. It is a perspective which challenges us to reorder our value systems. There is an expectation that we respect and protect all life on the basis that it has its own purpose and significance, whether or not we may recognise or appreciate it.

### A NEW PLANETARY SOLIDARITY

Central, therefore, to the message in *Laudato Si'* is the call to change; the document has been referred to as “a clarion call” to conversion.<sup>3</sup> Emphasising its importance, Pope Francis integrates the view that change and conversion are non-negotiable with the idea that everything is interconnected and interdependent. Insisting that current ecological challenges require more than individual or one-dimensional responses, *Laudato Si'* makes it clear that the necessary changes are inextricably interlinked with the promotion of inclusion and co-responsibility. Two centuries of industrialisation and development have resulted in human detachment from the natural environment and *rapidification* of our lifestyles. The Encyclical suggests this has resulted in an “excessive anthropocentrism” which has dictated our thoughts, priorities and actions as well as the policies which shape international relations and regulations. (*LS 116, 122*). Arguably, the full realisation of integral ecology will be determined by the degree to which we human beings are willing to undertake a process of reflection and conversion in all our interactions, decisions, and activities.

Acknowledging our shortcomings, Pope Francis encourages us to deepen our emotional connection to the issues and realities with which we are faced, using St Francis of Assisi as the model. Pinpointing the widespread misinterpretation of the Genesis account of creation and the disregarding of the Scriptural relationship of covenant, *Laudato Si'* offers an alternative vision (*LS II, 67*). Rather than seeing ourselves as a dominant species, for whose benefit the rest of creation represents a resource to be used, *Laudato Si'* proposes an approach which is primarily relational. It recommends the nurturing of authentic love between humanity and the rest of creation. Such love must become the foundation on which all our relationships are based and from which our attitudes and actions emerge. By refocusing on love the Encyclical encourages a shift from unrestrained consumption of the earth's resources back

3 Agnes Brazal, “Looking at *Laudato Si'* from the Global South”, *America Magazine*, 18 June 2015

to the Old Testament values of living in right relationship with God, our neighbour and the earth itself. This shift can effect real change both in how we see ourselves and the rest of creation, as well as in our sense of responsibility to the most vulnerable living beings. Moreover, it identifies intergenerational responsibility as an antidote to individualism, challenging abdication of our common duty to preserve the earth and its resources for those who are not yet born. It is this combination of relationships based on love and caring and a justice orientation to human, social and environmental ecology which gives real depth and substance to integral ecology as a vision and aspiration. Adopting this approach not only challenges us to view our relationship with and behaviour towards creation in terms of justice; it also highlights the rights and the needs of the poor and most vulnerable. Moreover, it challenges us to evaluate whether we contribute more to their continued oppression and degradation or to honouring their dignity.

THE CRY OF THE EARTH AND THE CRY OF THE POOR

From the first pages of *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis equates the mistreatment of the earth, and the damage inflicted on it with the life experiences of the poor; “that is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of the poor” (*LS 2*). Such affinity with the poor is not wholly unexpected given his affiliation with St Francis, his ministry in the favelas of Buenos Aires and his experience of liberation theology. Emphasising the option for the poor in *Laudato Si'* demonstrates an awareness of the need for a solution which is not simply a response to one aspect of the issue but truly challenging in its inclusiveness. It also highlights the equal importance of the human, social and cultural ecologies which comprise the Encyclical’s foundational framework of integral ecology. Given the disproportionately negative impact of our lifestyles on the most vulnerable people, places and species Francis insists that only by hearing and responding to “the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” can real and positive change be achieved, (*LS 49*). This position is essential to that “disruptive power” mentioned earlier, emphasising the need for dialogue and engagement on the challenges and issues which are facing all life on earth, presently and into the future. Pope Francis pinpoints the impact of changing weather patterns and landscapes on indigenous peoples and in parts of the developing world where poverty remains a threat to life. Expressing the option for the poor within Catholic Social Teaching he calls on the global community to recognise its responsibility to those who are suffering the effects of a problem which they did not create.

Prioritising the “cry of the poor” clearly resonates with liberation

## THE FURROW

theology and its promotion of inclusive and mutually responsible relationships. Within the development of that theology, the exploitation of nature and the earth's resources were quickly seen as central to the various injustices which compounded the systemic poverty in which millions of people existed. All of this helped to crystallise the subsequent demands for change and reform. Francis, too, seeks to place the poor and the earth at the centre of both the problem and of any possible solution. He is unequivocal in reminding us that "the human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation" (*LS 48*). The Encyclical insists that whatever changes are made must occur through dialogue and consultation with those people whose lives and traditions are being sacrificed at the altar of capitalist growth and consumption. The presence of the themes and spirit of liberation theology within the text is unsurprising considering the Pope's Latin American origins and the fact that he consulted Leonardo Boff's work prior to the writing of the Encyclical. The underpinning of *Laudato Si'* with liberation theology does have significant implications however, particularly when juxtaposed with the issues of structural change and systemic reform. For example, there is a recognition among liberation and feminist theologians that poverty is a much broader concept than pure economics and, in a church context, spiritual poverty is very real. Much is said in the Encyclical about the imbalance between those who have power and influence and those who do not, and the suffering which results. Such observations have clear application to the place of lay people within the church. Many experience spiritual poverty by virtue of oppressive structures which prevent their full participation in the life of the church and inhibit their flourishing and fulfilment despite their creation "*imago dei*".

### PROFOUND INTERIOR CONVERSION

As a subject, conversion has both secular and religious associations; it has been defined in one instance as a "radical reorientation that informs our goals and therefore guides our choices".<sup>4</sup> Conversion is sometimes perceived as a turning away from one idea or activity, a rejection of an original position such as political opinion, or consumer habit. Traditional biblical images and accounts of conversion, such as that of Paul the Apostle, often appear to portray a radical and dramatic change, a turning away from a

4 Ileana M Porras, *Laudato Si', Pope Francis' Call to Ecological Conversion: Responding to the Cry of the Earth and the Cry of the Poor – Towards an Integral Ecology*, AJIL Unbound (2015) Vol 109, 137

practice or attitude or pattern, a leaving behind. Despite its' papal origins, there is nothing distinctly religious about the treatment of conversion within *Laudato Si'*. Instead it is presented as something rather less dramatic, but with universal relevance. As closely connected to societal and political renovation as it is to personal change, conversion is an "interior impulse which encourages, motivates, nourishes and gives meaning to our individual and communal activity" (*LS 216*). Both the tone and the language of the Encyclical present conversion as a journey upon which the whole human family is encouraged to embark. The purpose of the journey is not only to halt the acceleration of climate breakdown and ecological chaos, but also to rebalance humanity's relationship with creation and itself (*LS 219*).

Such might appear as a predominantly secular thrust, were it not for the constant interweaving of conversion with integral ecology. This interdependence serves to reinforce a focus on relational engagement, meaningful change, emphasising shared values and human experience through our mutual belonging to creation. Framed in this way conversion suggests a turning back towards "Christian spirituality...a return to that simplicity which allows us to stop and appreciate small things, to be grateful for the opportunities which life affords" (*LS 222*). By focusing on the harm being inflicted on creation as the imperative for action and change, *Laudato Si'* anchors the necessary changes in values which have universal appeal and resonance. This approach ensures that the call to conversion is as much about acknowledging attitudes which have proved their worth in the past as it is about seeking out new and creative approaches moving forward.

Charles Taylor has defined religious conversion as the experience where "one feels oneself to be breaking out of a narrower frame into a broader frame, which makes sense of things in a completely different way".<sup>5</sup> This interpretation is clearly echoed by the call within *Laudato Si'* for a shared vision of common care and responsibility for creation and those with whom we share it. Such a change of heart and behaviour must, it argues, begin at a personal level, before extending its influence to others and to social, political and economic structures.

Bernard Lonergan SJ has looked extensively at conversion, or metanoia, and, as with Boff's work on Ecology and Care for Creation, the influence of Lonergan's ideas can be found in the call to conversion within *Laudato Si'*. A key dimension of Lonergan's work is the identification of the levels of conversion through which we can move, and the fact that our experience of these various

5 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge, MA, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: 2007) P 768



## THE FURROW

levels of conversion is usually sequential. Lonergan understands conversion as a journey through religious, moral, intellectual and ultimately, with Robert Doran's contribution, psychic conversion. This approach seems to dovetail with the invitation in *Laudato Si'* to move beyond ourselves, our comfort zone and our individualism, to embrace a more communitarian and globally orientated perspective. It is, Lonergan argues, a dimension of our human instinct to seek self-transcendence and in doing so we are more likely to eschew what he terms *radical lovelessness*. This is a state which "distorts one's cognitional performance in that it closes or narrows the horizon, the range of one's interests and concerns, the range of what one will even question in the first place".<sup>6</sup> This vision of conversion is essentially forward looking, turning towards rather than back, and focused on consciousness and emotion as fundamental to the person. Pope Francis articulates such values throughout *Laudato Si'* in his invitation to discard the globalisation of indifference (*LS 25,52*); to generate solidarity (*LS 85*); to value every living being by virtue of its creation by God (*LS 69, 77, 78*), and to honour both the dignity of the poor and the common good (*LS 156-8*). Moreover, if the existence of spiritual poverty is acknowledged this call to abandon that *radical lovelessness* and embrace conversion also demands a response from within the church, both in terms of attitude and in terms of action.

### THE WHOLE IS GREATER THAN THE PART

To recap briefly, *Laudato Si'* promotes a new vision for our relationships with ourselves, with God, with our neighbour and with the earth. It does so through an integral ecology which emphasises the interconnection and interdependence which exists between all living things. By virtue of that interdependence, and our interconnectedness, we are called to change. Our attitudes, our perspectives, our choices and our behaviour must change to reflect a deep respect for the inherent value of each created being, rather than regarding everything as resources at our disposal to sustain our consumerist lifestyles. We are challenged to effect real change beyond ourselves too, in the formulation and implementation of policies and the structures which facilitate those decisions and activities. Furthermore, the corporate, political and economic worlds are required to undergo the same process of conversion. This means adopting more just, democratic, equitable and sustainable approaches to their multinational and international activities. A key principle in liberation theology, reflected in *Laudato Si'*, is

6 Robert M. Doran, *What Does Bernard Lonergan mean by Conversion?* (2011) [www.lonerganresources.com](http://www.lonerganresources.com)

## NAVIGATING STRUCTURAL CHANGE

that any solution to the oppression or exploitation of the poor must be developed in partnership with those for whom it is intended. In other words the poor, as agents of their own liberation and elevation, are facilitated through their participation in resolving the oppressive conditions and situations. Pope Francis is clear that the development and imposition of solutions on the poor and excluded, without their participation, is unacceptable; the very essence of integral ecology demands that the process of resolution must be inclusive. The one glaring omission in this manifesto for real, meaningful and lasting change is the absence of any reference to the flawed, undemocratic and oppressive structures which are upheld and protected within the Church itself.

Reflecting on the need for a different approach to relationships between those in positions of power and those who are powerless or voiceless, there are obvious parallels with the position of lay people, and particularly women as recently highlighted, within the Church as it is currently structured and continues to function. Aspiring to the ideals and objectives of *Laudato Si'* demands a critical and honest appraisal of who we are as individuals, of how we relate with others, and of how we exercise our rights and responsibilities in the wider social, political, economic sphere. Is it reasonable to expect that, having asked serious questions of ourselves and the various structures and systems within which our lives are contained, we will not also ask the same questions of the structure within which our spiritual lives are to be anchored? More urgently, is it acceptable that the very institution and structure from which these challenges and ideas are emerging is somehow immune or detached from the process, that it is simply drawing the map and pointing the way, with no intention of making the journey itself?

### A STRATEGY FOR REAL CHANGE

Reference has already been made to the undercurrent of liberation theology in the principles expressed in *Laudato Si'*. In fact, it is impossible to engage with the document and not recognise within it the presence and influence of those ideas. The development of liberation theology facilitated an emphasis on the importance of structural change, recognising that existing structures were responsible for much of the oppression being experienced by the poor. Assuring those being oppressed of God's enduring love for them in the midst of their hardship and suffering is at the core of liberation theology, as well as empowering them to become agents of their own change. As a result, the principle of Jesus as Liberator demanded practical responses to the injustices which prevailed. Liberation theology has, from the outset, enshrined praxis and

## THE FURROW

the shared journey of encountering God in the everyday mess of life. For many in the western church of the developed world a connection between God, faith practice and everyday life is an alien experience. Discouraged or prohibited from meaningful participation, lay people find themselves confined to jaded ritual and practice of the faith, giving rise to a diminishing sense of connection between that faith and the realities of life. *Laudato Si'* does not address these issues, and this could be considered a shortcoming in the Encyclical. A better position, perhaps, would be to consider it an open book, which invites a deeper and less prescribed engagement with the themes and ideas contained within it.

Over twenty years ago Leonardo Boff, whose writings have been influential in the content of the Encyclical, proposed a series of principles. He believed such principles were key to the church discarding its monarchical, and authority-wielding role and returning to the authenticity of the Gospel and the simplicity of its values. Those principles are *participation, solidarity, equality, diversity* and *communion*. Each of these principles might form the basis for changes which would be easily established and implemented and which, while not sparking a bold cultural revolution, would nonetheless indicate a change, an openness and the willingness to move into a new relational context.

*Participation* would demand first and foremost, the development of a theology of ministry and mission embracing each baptised person. In order to counteract the widespread lack of spiritual self-esteem which pervades the mentality of the faithful, a re-education is needed on the inherent value and dignity of each person as created in the image and likeness of God. Reinforcing this identity will not only empower but encourage the recognition of each person's potential, by themselves and by others. Such education must give full emphasis to the *Sensus fidelium*, and must be accompanied by the organisational scope and openness to embrace real participation of lay people at parish, diocesan and national level.

*Solidarity* can only be nurtured by an unconditional public acknowledgement from the Irish hierarchy on behalf of the Church of the hurt, anger and exclusion which the unsatisfactory nature of church structures have caused, and continue to cause many people. A sincere expression of humility and remorse would at least provide a genuine basis for dialogue or engagement. It must be supported by a pastoral approach predicated on openness and compassion, as modelled by Pope Francis, rather than business and authority.

*Equality* cannot be achieved without addressing the place and role of women, an issue which has, in recent weeks, assumed a new

momentum within the Irish church. Addressing the place of lay people as a whole is also a significant challenge. As the numbers of priests rapidly diminishes, any efforts to involve or include lay people risks appearing as a last resort, rather than a recognition of their vital role in nurturing, preserving and transmitting faith. The negligible presence of the *Sensus fidelium* in teaching and practice reinforces this perception.

*Diversity* is already a fact of life in Ireland in terms of culture, ethnicity, sexual orientation, family structure and economic status. This reality represents both a huge challenge and a huge opportunity for the Catholic Church to nurture, through its words and its actions, an inclusive faith community. Such a community can be unified in its belief in the Jesus of the Gospels, rather than confined by subscription to doctrine and dogma. The stranger, the homeless person, the prisoner, the outcast and the downtrodden are everywhere to be seen. Long term commitment to a fully resourced and structured social justice agenda is needed more than ever. To be the hands and feet of Christ on the streets, it must be shaped and led by lay people.

For *Communion* to be realised in the spirit of *Laudato Si'* necessitates the experience by each person of God's unconditional love for them personally and individually. Authentic communion is closely connected to the new anthropology which Pope Francis encourages in *Laudato Si'*, where there is space for everyone, a role for everyone and an openness to everyone's contribution. The development of small groups of people reflecting on the presence of God in their lives, similar to the model used in South America, may be one way of enabling these experiences. Key to their success, however, is that they meet the needs of those participating rather than simply conforming to tried and tested formulae.

The message of *Laudato Si'* is for everyone and everything; there is no ambiguity about that. Implementing the principles above will hardly initiate the "bold cultural revolution" to which Pope Francis has referred. However, any recognition of the need for mature and respectful dialogue and engagement would certainly indicate a sea change within the Irish Church which is long overdue. What is less clear is how the challenge of conversion will be received and what response it will evoke. The signposts are there, the people are restless, the journey is inevitable.