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Towards an Integral Ecology

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The “globalization of the technocratic paradigm” (*Laudato si'*, no. 106) is one of the characteristic signs of our times, a testament to the enduring power of the ideal of technological mastery over nature. And yet for all its fascination, this ideal is far from uncontested. Consider the growing prestige of what we might call the “ecological paradigm,” which for some time now has been marching in noisy protest alongside the technocratic victory parade. Despite our attachment to the dream of technological dominion - or perhaps because of it - we seem unable to shake the feeling that the dream is at least part nightmare. The reign of technocracy, we sense, is not quite as liberating as its ideological champions would have us believe.

Ironically, mainstream environmentalism is less an alternative to technology than a shadow inevitably cast by the technocratic paradigm itself. As British filmmaker Adam Curtis pointed out in his documentary *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace*, the early environmentalist movement approached nature through the lens of computer technology, interpreting eco-systems as self-adjusting mechanisms whose smooth functioning was disturbed only by the ill-conceived meddling of human beings. In thus conceiving nature as a self-regulating biological machine system, the pioneers of environmental thought remained unconsciously beholden to Cartesian anthropocentrism. Their successors may have attempted to overcome this tacit Cartesianism, but the environmental movement still tends to isolate man from the rest of nature, even if only to dismiss him as an alien intruder or, alternatively, to strip him of the uniqueness that so-called “specieism” unjustly ascribes to *homo sapiens*.

In her comprehensive reading of Pope Francis' *Laudato si'*, Mary Taylor shows how the Pontiff transcends the dialectic between technocracy and environmentalism in the direction of an “integral ecology” that respects both the solidarity and the difference between the human being and the rest of the cosmos. Man is at once a part of nature and its steward, and natural ecology and “human ecology” therefore stand or fall together, as Francis' predecessor, Benedict XVI, notes in an address reprinted here: “Since faith in the Creator is an essential part of the

Christian creed,” Benedict writes, “the Church cannot and must not limit herself to passing on to the faithful the message of salvation alone. She has a responsibility towards creation, and must publicly assert this responsibility. In so doing, she must not only defend earth, water and air as gifts of creation belonging to all. She must also protect man from self-destruction. What is needed is something like a human ecology, correctly understood.”

In his *Rise of the Machines*, Stratford Caldecott offers a historically informed, philosophically rich account of the ecological question that anticipates the vision of “integral ecology” unfolded in *Laudato si’*. The ecological crisis, Caldecott shows, is rooted in a diabolical attempt to divide (and confuse) God and man, nature and grace, the human being and the environment. In response, Caldecott seeks to enlarge the scope of the ecological question, which, he suggests, concerns nothing less than the integrity of creation (human and non-human) as an image of the Trinity. Caldecott’s argument thus nicely complements E.F. Schumacher’s vision of the unity of ecology and economy (Schumacher’s influential book *Small is Beautiful* is reviewed in this issue, alongside William Cavanaugh’s ground-breaking *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire*). Both ecological and economic perspectives are seen by these thinkers primarily as matters of metaphysical and religious import, and only secondarily as problems of technique and management. This does not mean that their work has no practical application: indeed Cavanaugh has expressed the wish that his writing will contribute “to a kind of theological microeconomics”. If we take the principle of subsidiarity seriously, it becomes apparent that the good of the “common household” (*Laudato si’*, 1) is the matrix and measure of technical rationality, which is rational only to the degree that it submits to the gentle discipline of the *bonum commune*.

Like Popes Benedict and Francis, Caldecott also stresses the “close relationship between environmental ecology and the moral or ‘human ecology’ of the family.” This relationship forms one of the central motifs of Sophie Caldecott’s meditation on family, ecology and fair trade: “As my father wrote, ‘we need a humanistic ecological vision that takes account of the special nature of human beings, as well as the ecosystem in which we belong.’ This vision, as Pope Benedict said, should take in ‘not only the environment but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, social relations’; that is, our ‘duties towards the human person’ (*Caritas in Veritate*).” As Catherine Pakaluk and Angela Winkel confirm, in their review of current research into the factors triggering the environmental crisis, all these dimensions are interconnected, even if each problem is distinct. The living awareness of this differentiated unity must lie at the heart of any “integral ecology” worthy of the name.

Despite its continuing prestige, the technological ideal has failed to live up to its bright promise. Instead of giving us authentic rule over creation, it has yoked us to a caricature of rule—a program of loveless tyranny—instead. The solution, of course, does not lie in a renunciation of the human vocation to rule and to make, much less in some falsely humble self-erasure of mankind from the natural world. Rather, it lies in a recovery of the true ideal of dominion, whose characteristic note is not imperializing self-aggrandizement, but humble service for the good of our “common household.” It is the servant who reigns, just as it is *homo adorans* who is the truth of the *homo faber*.

Indeed, is there a way in which these two aspects of human nature, the spiritual and the practical, can be brought into greater harmony? This is a question which integral ecologists must address, for fear of remaining in the realm of ideals which are all too vulnerable to the impact of current realities. Michael Galdo's *Witness* describes the actual experience of living on the land and farming, according to both catholic and ecological principles. He describes what it is to hold a respect for the natural environment in tandem with a eucharistic sensibility: the work of human hands blessed by the sense of thanksgiving for divine gifts. His wife Carla Galdo, in her review of Father Thomas Dubay's book *Happy Are You Poor: The Simple Life and Spiritual Freedom* also injects an element of realism into the conundrums we face when we try to apply these principles in daily life. Like Sophie Caldecott, she asks a very important question: what, for those who need to engage deeply with the material dimension, can help us differentiate between an unhealthy consumerism, and an authentic engagement with the beautifully made products of human hands, designed to last, which a sane economy ought to be supporting?

Whatever the debates still to come, "Integral Ecology" cannot simply be another one-sided program; nor can it be a panacea inspired by an ultimately technocratic Prometheanism. It must be the fruit of Catholic humility and realism. If it succeeds in this, it will be a pedagogy for (re)learning the viceregal dominion reserved for us, the children of God: whose glorious freedom, Saint Paul reminds us, has been the goal of creation's longing from the beginning.