

Integral Ecology & Communication in the Digital Era

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The Covid-19 pandemic, which began in Wuhan (China) at the end of 2019, has caused a huge socio-economic crisis and, once again, has uncovered our vulnerability, the absurdity of our despotic anthropocentrism, and the falsity of our claim "to be like gods" (Gen 3:5). One tiny and inert element of nature has been enough to bring into disarray the entire technocratic society of competitive individualism and globalized indifference. Fascinated by technological advances, we have neglected fraternity and relational goods, that are "the very things that nourish, sustain and strengthen our lives"ⁱ. As the Bible illustrates: "in his prime, man does not understand" (Ps 49, 21). The Covid-19 is reminding us that "everything is connected", that we are beings-in-relation, deeply dependent on one another.ⁱⁱ

Some authors have recently maintained that, through biotechnological progress, we will be able to overcome the physical limitations that are linked to our belonging to the Web of Life. They claim that we will achieve a self-sufficient post-human condition. "The era when humankind stood helpless before natural epidemics is probably over."ⁱⁱⁱ This claim of increasing superiority and autonomy over the rest of creation has fallen away with the Covid-19 pandemic. A small virus has been enough to uncover "once more that (blessed) common belonging, of which we cannot be deprived: our belonging as brothers and sisters."^{iv} We are joined in a common fate and we can only survive if we collaborate for the common good, eagerly accepting the fact of being dependent on each other.

In the first part of my presentation I will analyze the essentialist anthropology that has led us to a conflicting vision of reality and to the current ecological crisis. In a second moment, I will offer some indications on the need to change this mentality in order to restore communication and integral ecology. I will assert the important role that the media can play in this regard

1. An essentialist anthropology that blocks communication

In Western culture, the relationship between humans and the environment has been interpreted usually from the viewpoint of an anthropocentric ideology. With Modernity, this perspective receives new impetus, to the point of defending the absolute dominion of man over nature and over his own body. In the nineteenth century, Scientism reinforces still further this anthropocentrism, as it replaces ethical rationality with instrumental rationality,^v thus giving way to the technocratic paradigm^{vi} and the throwaway culture.

The current socio-environmental crisis is a consequence of that essentialist anthropology that divides man internally and separates him from the other living beings. It is necessary to assume an integral anthropology, overcoming "such unhealthy dualisms that left a mark on certain Christian thinkers in the course of history." [98]

1.1. Ontic dualism

Western philosophy has appealed to creation or evolution to develop an essentialist anthropological conception that emphasizes the separation between man and all other creatures. The thesis of human exception postulates an ontic rupture between man and the rest of creation, which would belong to another order of being. Consequently, man does not attribute any rights to animals and does not feel obliged by any duties towards them. He even considers nature as pure neutral matter, without any intrinsic value, totally available at his disposal.

This thesis of human exception is based not only on the ontic and ontological dualisms, but also on the exclusive human capacity to access epistemic and ethical knowledge in ways that are out of reach for all other creatures. According to J.M. Schaeffer, the major forms of this theory are three: 1) *Philosophical*: man is considered an “ego”; i.e. a “subject” radically autonomous and founder of his own being. Therefore, human identity does not depend on biological or social life. 2) *Social*: human identity is substantiated in the social. Man is considered “non-natural” or even “unnatural.” Biological life would be only “the substratum of humanity.” 3) *Cultural*: the real human identity is based on culture, which shows human’s capacity of creating symbolic systems. That “cultural transcendence is opposed to 'nature' and to the 'social.’”^{vii}

Ontic dualism was already present in ancient Greece, where man was supposed to bring order (cosmos) out of chaos, both in things and inside himself, through an always painful and difficult relationship with natural forces and with his own body.^{viii} Man is seen as an essentially different being from the other animals, because he is endowed with the *logos*, (word, reason) while all other living creatures are irrational and their actions do not go beyond the level of instincts or habits.

Centuries later, René Descartes (1596-1650) accentuates that dualistic separation. Descartes had already said that the body of each animal is a machine made by God, and so it “is incomparably better arranged, and possesses in itself movements which are much more admirable than any of those which can be invented by man.”^{ix}

In line with the Cartesian epistemology, the Enlightenment movement, which began at the end of the seventeenth century, asserts that reason is the essence of the human being (*res cogitans*) and so he is clearly different from the rest of the universe. (*res extensa*) Humans are rational and free, whereas all non-human creatures respond to the rigid laws of dynamics. The animals would be like machines, irrational and determined by biological mechanisms.

The world is not seen as a communion of subjects but as a bunch of objects,^x described in mathematical and geometric terms. More specifically, it is defined as clock, machine, workshop, experiment.^{xi} To understand its operation, it is enough to consider the principles of matter and movement. The works of Isaac Newton (1643-1727) and Gottfried Leibniz, (1646-1716) among others, reinforced this mechanical model of the world, that is observed and perceived in a functionalist and utilitarian way.

H. Bergson (1859-1941) affirms that the thesis of human exception is “the architrave of modern philosophy, at least from the Copernican revolution onwards.”^{xii} However, in recent decades, the socio-environmental crisis is forcing us to change our way of conceiving nature and relating to it. In 2007, Schaeffer announced the “end of human exception.”^{xiii}

Ontic dualism is also behind the disembodied spiritualism that avoids any personal involvement in the solution of social and ecological problems. Instead of trying to change the structures of injustice and domination, it appeals to resignation in front of the “inevitable” evils of this “valley of tears.” It also accentuates a hierarchical and dualistic vision of reality. The material world would be an obstacle that has to be overcome, because it blocks our pilgrimage and hinders our ascent towards God. Rather than “coordinating,” it insists on “subordinating,” on “subjugating.” The path to holiness would demand to subdue the body, with its sensuality, and to deprecate all material things.

1.2. Ontological dualism

Ontological dualism distinguishes clearly between the body and the spiritual/rational dimension of man. The latter would be the most authentically human and, therefore, the body should be subordinated to it. Man is described using “multiple oppositional pairs: body/soul, rationality/affectivity, need/freedom, nature/culture, instinct/morality, etc.”^{xiv}

Francis of Assisi had to face the ontological dualism that was very present in his times, for example among the Cathars. This heretical, Manichean, and Gnostic movement despised everything visible and material, including the human body, which would have been created by Satan, the evil god of the Old Testament. The human soul would belong to a completely different realm, as it would have been created by the good god of the New Testament. Consequently, the Cathars deprecated the body as an undesirable prison for the soul, and as something material, completely alien to it.^{xv}

Later on, Descartes makes a net separation between the rational soul and the body. The first would be the essence of man, who is characterized by his ability to think (*res cogitans*), while his body would be a material addition that does not differ substantially from those of animals.^{xvi} Both dimensions of the human being would come into contact through the pineal gland.

The emphasis on one of these two elements (body/soul) will give rise to two opposing trends in the understanding of man (idealism and materialism), both characterized by a strong dualism. Idealism focuses on rationality and neglects the corporeal dimension. On the other hand, materialism reduces man to the materiality of his body, considering the body as a mere cosmic element. In fact, the Modern anthropocentric affirmation and the Enlightenment optimism coexist with reductionist anthropologies that deny the spiritual dimension of man and declare him a necessary prisoner of both his impulses and social conditioning. Man could be fully understood by observing his explicit behavior, using the stimulus/response method, as he always reacts in a reflexive mode to environmental stimuli (behaviorism).

Aristotle had affirmed that some people are slaves by nature or condition of soul.^{xvii} Slavery and colonizing imperialism were also justified by denying that the barbarians and the “discovered” Indians had a soul.^{xviii}

The ontological dualism keeps being very present today. Frequently, the body is seen as an object to be possessed and manipulated at will; i.e. something that we must shape and control, because it can hinder the development of our own identity. The different kinds of arbitrary dominion over one's own body “turns, often subtly, into thinking that we enjoy absolute power over creation”. [155]

1.3. Domination and throwaway culture

Ontic and ontological dualisms have fostered the “tyrannical anthropocentrism” [68], the technocratic paradigm, and the throwaway culture. Even human rights, which should empower our intrinsic capacity for donation, have been reduced to mere defensive barriers that protect the individual from the other human “wolves.”

The poor and abandoned, along with our sister mother earth, [53] suffer the consequences of this distorted^{xix} and Promethean [116] anthropocentrism that exalts self-sufficiency and despises everything that is fragile and weak.

On a subjective level, this concept of the self has led to a compulsive consumerism, [203] which reduces everything to irrelevance; that is, to a bunch of products compulsively used and hastily thrown away. Thus, it has favored the throwaway culture, which “affects the excluded just as it quickly reduces things to rubbish.”^{xx} Even labor has been reduced to a commodity, with no more value than the salary it provides. Having forgotten its relational dimensions, labor has also lost its Christian sense of joyful encounter with nature and collaboration with God’s creative work.

2. Restoring communication and fostering integral ecology

The current epidemic has highlighted the need for an integral ecology and a universal fraternity. The Covid-19 virus knows no boundaries, no social classes, no other type of division or limit. Any stranger I meet on the street is bound to me so closely that he/she could be essential to my own survival. The same can be said about the rest of the creatures. Recently, Pope Francis repeated that “we have no future if we destroy the very environment that sustains us. [...] The earth does not forgive: if we have despoiled the earth, its response will be very ugly^{xxi}. And he added: “I do not know if this crisis [of Covid-19] is nature's revenge, but it is certainly her response”^{xxii}. John Paul II had already affirmed that when the human being does not follow the Creator's plan, “nature rebels against him and no longer recognizes him as its «master»” (SRS 30).

2.1. Nature is a network of relationships

“Everything is interconnected” (240). Interaction and communication are constitutive aspects of the entire ecosystem. Nature is a network of relationships and the human person, created in the image of the Trinitarian God, is also a dialogical and relational person. Being in relationship is not an option, but an unavoidable requirement, both for us and for other creatures. In some way, all human activities can be interpreted as processes of relationship, communication, and interaction.^{xxiii}

Much scientific data confirms that, in nature, collaboration prevails over struggle and “unity is greater than conflict.”^{xxiv} Lynn Magulis, for example, questions the Darwinian concept of evolution and affirms that collaboration has been more decisive than aggressive competition: “Life did not take over the globe by combat, but by networking. Life forms multiplied and complexified by co-opting others, not just by killing them.”^{xxv} The numerous forms of symbiosis and dependence among different organisms are a good example of this collaboration that has made evolution possible.^{xxvi}

We also share with other living beings the same physical-chemical substratum and a “good part of our genetic code” (138) Even inside the human body, the bacterial flora helps us to digest and protects us from other harmful microorganisms.^{xxvii}

Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen “an awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone” (202) In other words, we need to promote a holistic perspective, which emphasizes the relationships and interdependencies that exist among all beings, including us.

2.2. Towards an integral ecology

The encyclical *Laudato si'* invites us to assume an integral ecology “which considers the interactions within natural systems themselves and with social systems” (139). Indeed, all beings “are linked by unseen bonds” (89), depend on each other (86), and no one is self-sufficient. The encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* had already linked the natural environment with the social environment, the physical ecology with the human ecology, the defense of the environment with the protection of life.

“The book of nature is one and indivisible. [...] Our duties towards the environment are linked to our duties towards the human person, considered in himself and in relation to others. [...]. The way humanity treats the environment influences the way it treats itself, and vice versa (*CV* 51).

We need to assume an integral and holistic vision, “drawing on the results of the best scientific research” (15) and accounting for “the various cultural riches of different peoples, their art and poetry, their inner life and spirituality.” “No form of wisdom can be left out” (63).

Francis of Assisi is a model of integral ecology (10), because “he communed with all creation” and “every creature was a sister united to him by bonds of affection” (11). Communication and integral ecology always go together. Growing in our union with Christ, we strengthen the bonds that unite us to the poor, to sister mother earth, and to the whole creation. We are one in Christ. (Eph 2:11-16).

2.3. Digital Media at the service of dialogue and socio-environmental education

Digital technologies can facilitate collaboration and respectful dialogue at various levels: between intermediate social groups and public authorities, between citizens and institutions, between humanity and the rest of creation. In this way, they can strengthen the Web of Life; that is, the natural ties that bind us to all beings.

The encyclical *Laudato si'* includes the media among the educational environments, together with the school, the family, and the catechesis (213). It also warns about the risk of misusing them, because there is so much at stake. They condition our lifestyle, our way of perceiving, thinking, acting, and relating.

The media are not simply neutral instruments that we can use for specific purposes,^{xxviii} but powerful configurators of reality, to the point of conditioning the entire ecosystem. We are all immersed in the environment they create, and we must inhabit it in a responsible way.^{xxix} Unfortunately, quite often the media ignore values, promote consumerism (215), and present biased views of the socio-environmental problems (49).

Conclusion

The Church reminds us that the earth is our common home and that everything in it is related. Therefore, "greed and selfishness - both individual and collective - are contrary to the order of creation, an order which is characterized by mutual interdependence" (*WDP* 1990, 8).

We need to revise the dualistic and conflictive anthropological conception which has led to despotic anthropocentrism, to the ecological crisis, and to a disembodied experience of spirituality, conditioning also our way of relating in the digital environment.

The Covid-19 pandemic has reminded us that "we can overcome global challenges only by showing solidarity with one another and embracing the most vulnerable in our midst,"^{xxx} because "everything is connected."

We are all immersed in the ecosystem "which the digital era has made possible" (*WCD* 2011). The Church invites us to live this network of relationships in a responsible way. These new media can lead us to establish narcissistic relationships and to anxiously seek pointless fun, but also, "if used wisely, they can contribute to the satisfaction of the desire for meaning, truth and unity which remain the most profound aspirations of each human being" (*WCD* 2011). In this way, human beings and all other creatures will be able again to "extend a friendly hand to one another" (106).

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