Ilia Delio: A new level of thinking about Creation

Posted by Hermanos Cristianos on 20 May, 2015 in Blog

“Why are we more enamored by consumer products than by our poor neighbors? Why do we spend millions of dollars on sports idols and pet food rather than on adequate housing for the poor or ensuring clean water worldwide? Why are car sales rising and Apple Watches appealing?”

In the coming weeks, Pope Francis will release his new encyclical on the environment. Bloggers and pundits alike have been speculating on what exactly the pope will say, while social justice advocates are almost dancing in the streets, exuberant that the highest ranking official of the church is taking Catholic social teaching seriously.

Although no other pontiff has devoted an official document to the environment, Pope Francis will likely build on the works of St. John Paul II and of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, who was known as the “green pope” because of his eloquent theological writings on creation. Pope Francis, however, brings a new spirit to the church’s stance on the environment. His is not an intellectual treatise but a mandate to work for a sustainable future, to care for the poor and create a more equitable flow of resources.

This is Catholic social teaching in action, and the feeling that emanates from this new encyclical reminds me of the late ’70s when liberation theologians passionately proclaimed that the cry of the Earth is the cry of the poor. There was a feeling then, as there is now, that a new day is dawning; a new, more just world is on the horizon.

Finally we have a pope who has two feet on the ground. This is a pope who is not tainted by Neoplatonic ideals and who clearly sees that faith must express itself in social action; we cannot live by faith alone. No, faith and good works must go together, and “good works” means developing an ethic of care and compassion and confronting the structural powers of sin. One cannot help admire this pontiff who, in his late 70s, is willing to travel the globe and speak to world leaders at the United Nations, in the United States Congress and to other heads of state, and will do everything he can to help create structures of justice. His peripatetic social justice is inspiring.

We long for a new world; we always have. I don’t think there was ever a time, since the axial age and the emergence of the modern human person, where there was a sense of satiety, common goodness and communal sharing – where everyone felt part of a whole. Once consciousness individualized and world religions emerged, tribal boundaries and competition for resources impacted the development of peoples.

Today, the desire for a new world order stems from the growing awareness that we cannot sustain our first world footprint far into the future. The costs on the poor are deeply inequitable, and we are running out of resources. The fact that a religious leader, such as Pope Francis, would make the environment a top priority is jaw-dropping incredible.
What makes Pope Francis so real is his lack of intellectual jargon; he expresses virtues of simplicity and compassion and sees the poor as real, suffering people. When he casts light on the poor and the environment, it is not a metaphysical light; these are not merely conceptual ideas. He wants to see real change take place in the way we care for one another and the things of the Earth. He wants the church to have a living doctrine of creation. He indicates that we must take science seriously; that much of the data is pointing to global warming and the disastrous impacts continuous warming will have up ahead.

We have a pope who truly appreciates science and the value of its knowledge. As St. John Paul II eloquently stated, “Science can purify religion from error and superstition. Religion can purify science from idolatry and false absolutes.” Similarly, Pope Francis is saying that we need to be attentive to what the sciences are telling us if we are to anticipate a future of sustainable life.

But wait – are we talking about science and creation, that is, about human persons, earthly creatures, brother sun and sister moon? Are we talking about the cosmos? If we are not talking about the cosmos, then discussion about humanity and the environment are mere abstractions; if the cosmos is at the heart of the discussion, then here is our dilemma. Catholic theology, for all practical purposes, lacks a viable doctrine of creation. The official theology of the church, formulated by St. Thomas Aquinas, was constructed according to the ancient Ptolemaic model of the cosmos. While this was a beautiful paradigm in its own day, providing a basis to understand God, heaven and Earth, the centrality of the human person as image of God, sin and evil, the need for redemption and the last four things – heaven, hell, death and judgment – it is a model that is no longer true, according to what we now know about the universe.

The late Raimon Panikkar wisely noted that there is no cosmos without God and no God without cosmos. When our understanding of the cosmos changes, so, too, must our understanding of God (and the things of God) change. Even Thomas Aquinas said that a mistake about creation is a mistake about God. As much as our beloved pope will do everything he can to instill into the minds and hearts of the Catholic faithful a new vision of the environment, it is not feasible without updating our theology of creation in light of contemporary science.

The integral relationship between cosmology and theology cannot be emphasized enough. Nancy Abrams and Joel Pribam have devoted their work to reconnecting cosmology and anthropology.

They write:
“There is a profound connection between our lack of a shared cosmology and our increasing global problems. We have no sense how we and our fellow humans fit into the big picture . . . without a big picture we are very small people.”

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin also recognized this disconnect when he said:
“The artificial separation between humans and cosmos is at the root of our contemporary moral confusion.”
What accounts for this “artificial separation”? It is simply the inability of world religions to accept the
insights of modern science, particularly evolution, leaving our core theological doctrines bereft of a
credible cosmology. Abrams states that
“the human race needs a coherent, believable picture of the universe that applies to all of us and gives
our lives and our species a meaningful place in that universe.”

The future of the Earth depends on a shared vision and shared life. The new science awakens us to our
connectedness to the stars and the swirling galaxies. Biology has discovered the miniature world of the
cell and through it we see a dynamic energy that weaves together all of life in a cosmic communion of
wonder and awe.
The question of human ecology must be placed within the wider context of evolution and Big Bang
cosmology, if it is to have any real traction. We cannot adequately address structural inequalities based
on ancient religious ideas that exclude women from full participation in the church or define the human
person as intrinsically evil or support unlimited population growth. Modern science gives us new insights
on the emergence of life, on the role of consciousness in evolution and the continuation of evolution in an
unfinished universe resting on the future.

God is not finished with creation; rather, God is creating and we are co-creators, participants in this
unfolding narrative of life. The question is: What are we creating? Why are we more enamored by
consumer products than by our poor neighbors? Why do we spend millions of dollars on sports idols and
pet food rather than on adequate housing for the poor or ensuring clean water worldwide? Why are car
sales rising and Apple Watches appealing?
The bottom line is, we do not have a consciousness of interrelatedness; we do not see ourselves related to
the poor, and thus we do not feel compelled to limit our consumer patterns to aid the poor or to develop
alternate economies. Until we have a new cosmological narrative that binds us together in a new way, we
will not change. In fact, we will continue to (implicitly) insist that the rest of the world become like us.
The tragic part is that Western civilization and its desire for progress is built on the fundamental
principles of the Judeo-Christian tradition, including the contingency of creation, the nobility of the
human person and the causality of events. The basic principles our beloved pope upholds to resolve the
environmental crisis, especially the human person as image of God, are principles that have, in a sense,
induced the crisis in the first place because they instilled a desire for discovery and progress. Albert
Einstein once said,
“We cannot solve our problems with the same level of thinking that created them.”

Similarly, Catholic theology, based on principles of ancient cosmology (and science) cannot resolve the
crises of our day.
As much as I anticipate Pope Francis’s encyclical, I expect that it will spark much discussion but evoke no
real change. To turn our human community in a new direction requires a new cosmological narrative
which, in turn, will mean radical changes for theology, ecclesiology and pastoral ministry. If we want a
different world, we must become a different church.

Ilia Delio, 11 May 2015