



# Why should we care? Integral Ecology and the Reign of God

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Let's start with the bad news (like our ancient prophets), so we can get to the good news. In the West, and most especially in the United States, human beings have amassed great technological power<sup>1</sup>, and yet have given no consideration to what such power might mean to everything that lives on our planet. This is not an accident.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the adherence to religious traditions is declining at a precipitous pace.<sup>3</sup> How do these two realities intersect?

## THE LOSS

Let me draw on *la realidad*<sup>4</sup> to help us see: coral reefs are dying. As they describe a healthy reef, scientists note that: 1) when healthy, reefs are stunningly beautiful, 2) when thriving, reefs are diverse communities of multiple living organisms dependent on each other, 3) and because of this, reefs are fragile. What is happening to the corals? A marine researcher tells us,

“When the water heats up, corals become stressed.... we watched the corals turn white and start to die. It wasn't just small pieces of the reef that were bleaching – it was happening across hundreds of square miles.... They were left desperately weakened and more vulnerable to diseases. We could see diseases taking hold, and that's what finished them off. We were witnessing the death of a reef.”<sup>5</sup>

Now, imagine joining the image of coral reefs in their beauty and woundedness with the current reality of the Catholic community of the United States. Catholic communities can indeed be places of inviting beauty; they can nurture a way of living where a great diversity of people depend on each other to keep the whole community healthy, and because of this, they are fragile. Human technologies fueled by economic forces are stressing ecosystems, causing massive losses.

## THE STRESSORS

Consumerism drives over-fishing and it runs on fossil fuels, harmful chemicals, the destruction of forests, and a long list of toxic practices that contribute to climate change. This drive to prop up the global economic system on a disposable lifestyle built for personal convenience is attractive because it makes human beings feel invulnerable. If with the swipe of a card someone can satisfy their wants, this feels powerful. The world is at their service and thus, consumerism and individualism feed each other. Pope Francis singles individualism as the current world's erroneous "organizing principle."<sup>6</sup> Along with the deadly warming seas that over-consumption is causing, the primacy of profits is destroying humanity's sense that survival is a communal enterprise and that we are vulnerable beings.<sup>7</sup>

In this egoistical landscape, the rise of social media and Artificial Intelligence amplify a hyperfocus on the self as projected to the world, while eroding the possibility of an interior life and ethical discernment. The discouraging reactions to the pandemic flaunting a misguided sense of personal liberty may be one of the starkest examples that the contagion is also ethical. When we bring these things together, we see a toxic cycle. Economic dominance needs consumers, people are made to feel insecure so they will consume, in order to consume we must deaden our sense of community and empathy, so that we can strive for economic dominance, so we will not feel insecure. Is it any wonder that religious traditions that prioritize ethical considerations for others and a sense of humility in the face of creation are dying?

## THE GOOD NEWS

In the U.S., the myth of individualistic superiority has historically been at odds with religious institutions. This confrontation needs to be highlighted again. How can one care for the vulnerable (Luke 10:25-37, Matt 5:1-12, etc.) and exploit them? We can't, and Catholic Social Teaching is born precisely out of this disconnect. In *Rerum Novarum*, the gospel becomes enfolded as actual *good news to the exploited of the world*, "to misuse [people] as though they were things in the pursuit of gain, or to value them solely for their physical powers - that is truly shameful and inhuman."<sup>8</sup>

Where do I see hope? Consumerist individualism has lost its sheen with young people. They are victims of social media, being the loneliest generation ever measured<sup>9</sup>, they worry about others<sup>10</sup>, and they are excruciatingly aware of our dying planet.<sup>11</sup> By returning us to the Good News as liberating the whole planet from the forces that have been destroying it, *Laudato Si'*, proclaims loudly why a religiously informed worldview, where the dignity of all is respected

by all and where altruistic empathy is the norm not the exception, can provide a nurturing home for the young. They have a sense of what the Reign of God is not, and by helping them discern what it is in the midst of *la realidad* we can nurture their desire to transform our world's suffering.

Young people want a faith that does justice. Let's welcome them back precisely by doing justice, visibly, loudly, with the vigor of our prophets. When we do — when they see the Gospel proclaimed as God's loving embrace of them and the planet in the work of ecological restoration — they will be eager to join us. Like the marine scientist, I can give you an eyewitness account. As I work with young people to discover our religious tradition steeped with healing and transformative wisdom, I witness their maturing commitment to God's vision for all that is.

Like a coral reef returning to life, it is a most wondrously beautiful sight.

<sup>1</sup> The industrial revolution is generally dated to the late 18th century.

<sup>2</sup> González-Andrieu, Cecilia, "Laudate Deum is a call to end climate denialism." *U.S. Catholic*, January 2024, 89:1, 14-15.

<sup>3</sup> Asked about the importance of religion in their lives, White Catholics showed a decline of 50% in less than a decade. And although the influx of immigrants continues to replenish the ranks of Latina/o Catholics, the central position of Catholic faith in their lives saw an even more precipitous decline of 65%. "Religions and Congregations in a Time of Social and Political Upheaval," *2022 Health of Congregations Survey*, New York: PRRI, 6.

<sup>4</sup> The concept of *la realidad* in Latin American theologies insists that we be attentive to what is actually happening, not what we wish would change, but rather and starkly *what is*.

<sup>5</sup> Purkis, Sam. 2024. "Coral Reefs Are Dying as Climate Change Decimates Ocean Ecosystems Vital to Fish and Humans (Oct. 2021)." In *The Conversation: An Independent Source of Analysis from Academic Researchers*, [theconversation.com/coral-reefs-are-dying-as-climate-change-decimates-ocean-ecosystems-vital-to-fish-and-humans-164743](https://theconversation.com/coral-reefs-are-dying-as-climate-change-decimates-ocean-ecosystems-vital-to-fish-and-humans-164743)

<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future*. United States: Simon & Schuster, 2022, 6, 13, 35, 68, 103, 105.

<sup>7</sup> For example, see Camille May, "Custodians of Knowledge: 5 Reasons Indigenous Peoples Hold the Key to Our Planet's Future," *Global Citizen*, February 14, 2023. [globalcitizen.org/en/content/IFAD-indigenous-peoples-forum-climate-biodiversity/](https://globalcitizen.org/en/content/IFAD-indigenous-peoples-forum-climate-biodiversity/)

<sup>8</sup> Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, 1891, no. 20.

<sup>9</sup> Bowler, Abby, "Isolation Among Generation Z in the United States," *Ballard Brief*, Fall 2020. [ballardbrief.byu.edu/issue-briefs/isolation-among-generation-z-in-the-united-states](https://ballardbrief.byu.edu/issue-briefs/isolation-among-generation-z-in-the-united-states)

<sup>10</sup> See for instance, "The Israel-Hamas War: A Forum for Young People to React," *The New York Times*, October 10, 2023. This provides a place for young people to work out their thoughts along with a lesson plan for the teachers guiding them. [nytimes.com/2023/10/10/learning/the-israel-gaza-war-a-forum-for-young-people-to-act.html](https://nytimes.com/2023/10/10/learning/the-israel-gaza-war-a-forum-for-young-people-to-act.html)

<sup>11</sup> See example at "Young Leaders Taking Action for a Sustainable Future," *Laudato Si Action Platform*, August 7, 2023. [laudatosiactionplatform.org/young-leaders-taking-action-for-a-sustainable-future/](https://laudatosiactionplatform.org/young-leaders-taking-action-for-a-sustainable-future/)