New Blackfriars

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Comment: Negotiating a Global Ethics for a Global Crisis

Looking back to the year that has just passed, we can see a world in crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic has of course dominated, taking such a toll on our physical and mental lives, as well as on the economic well-being of the countries of the world. But, alongside this, the challenges that global warming pose to the environment and to the long-term welfare of humanity have been present a concern that has moved over the years from being marginal to something mainstream and now to something urgent. This has brought us at year's end to the COP26 summit meeting in Glasgow from 31 October to 12 November. These global crises need a response that is both particular and universal: for individual nations to take measures that fit their own circumstances best, but also for all the nations to work together with a common vision and with agreed standards and goals, if an effective solution is to be reached.

Concern for the environment has been a central feature of the papacy of Pope Francis, from the issuing of his second encyclical, *Laudato Sì*,[1] in 2015, right up to the COP26 summit. In an audio message to the BBC on the eve of the summit, Pope Francis summed up the current sorry state humanity has reached:

> Climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic have exposed our deep vulnerability and raised numerous doubts and concerns about our economic systems and the way we organize our societies. We have lost our sense of security and are experiencing a sense of powerlessness and loss of control over our lives.
>
> We find ourselves increasingly frail and even fearful, caught up in a succession of "crises" in the areas of health care, the environment, food supplies and the economy, to say nothing of social, humanitarian and ethical crises. All these crises are profoundly interconnected. They also forecast a "perfect storm" that could rupture the bonds holding our society together within the greater gift of God's creation.[2]

Pope Francis points here to two levels in the crises facing humanity: on the one part, there is the material crises of 'health care, the environment, food supplies and the economy', but alongside this there are

[1] https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

[2] https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/events/event.dir.html/content/vaticanevents/en/2021/10/29/messaggio-bbc-cop26.html

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crises that have to do with attitudes and values, which are 'social, humanitarian and ethical' in character.

The sense that the crises in the current situation are not just a matter of material resources and of material responses, but have to be analysed and addressed in terms of underlying attitudes and values, was something that was emphasised by a wider meeting of religious leaders and scientific experts in the Vatican, which the Pope convened in the Vatican on 4 October 2021, shortly before the COP26 summit began.[3] In the joint appeal issued by them it is argued that it has been an approach to the world motivated by selfishness and an attitude of exploitation that has brought about the present environmental problems: 'Multiple crises facing humanity are demonstrating the failures of such an approach; these are ultimately linked to a *crisis of values, ethical and spiritual*'.[4]

If the fundamental problem is a crisis of values, ethical and spiritual, the question is: what are the values that are needed? And alongside this, in the face of such a diversity of traditions, religious and secular, comes the question of where the balance is between a search of universal values that can realistically guide the world community as a whole and the fact that values are embedded in the distinct and plural traditions .

In his own address to those present at the meeting of religious leaders and scientific experts in the Vatican, the Pope stressed three concepts that he felt should guide the reflection of all: *openness to interdependence and sharing*, *the dynamism of love,* and the *call to respect*. These are promoted for acceptance as universal concepts, but the Pope grounds them in the particular beliefs and values of his own particular Christian faith.

Thus, the concept of interdependence and sharing is grounded in the belief that the world is the creation of God. This is a fundamental principle in the Pope's environmental teaching, going back to *Laudato Sì*. In that document, the Pope teaches that belief in the world as created by God means that it should be recognised as a gift that still belongs to God and so human beings have to respect the laws of nature and equilibrium given by God, and the value everything else in the world has in the sight of God.[5] As created, the world itself is dependent on God and as created by the Trinitarian God, interdependence is grounded in the communion of the persons of the Trinity:

> For Christians, openness to interdependence springs from *the very mystery of the Triune God*: 'The human person grows more, matures more

[3] 'Faith and Science: Towards COP26' https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2021/10/04/0627/01342.html

[4] Ibid. para 5.

[5] *Laudato Sì* paras. 67-75.

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> and is sanctified more to the extent that he or she enters into relationships, going out from themselves to live in communion with God, with others and with all creatures. In this way, they make their own that Trinitarian dynamism which God imprinted in them when they were created'.[6]

The concept of the dynamism of love is also grounded in the fact that everything is created and therefore should reflect the creative love of God:

> These in turn are leading to the breaking of 'that covenant between human beings and the environment, which should mirror the creative love of God, from whom we come and towards whom we are journeying'.[7]

The call to respect is likewise rooted in the obligations and attitudes that spring from belief in the createdness of the world:

> That care is also a *call to respect*: respect for creation, respect for our neighbour, respect for ourselves and for the Creator, but also mutual respect between faith and science, in order to enter into a mutual 'dialogue for the sake of protecting nature, defending the poor, and building networks of respect and fraternity'.[8]

While grounding the call for care for the environment in the particularity of Christian belief about either the createdness of the world or the Trinitarian nature of God, the Pope is not assuming that that the principles of Christian faith are themselves universally accepted.[9] Rather, he is making clear that this is the position from which and within which a Christian will engage in a dialogue with those in other religious or secular traditions.

This, *mutatis mutandis*, is going to be the case for all other groups or traditions, religious or secular, as they seek to identify what the values are that are needed to establish a lasting solution to the present environmental crises. If the current global crises are rooted in crises of values, which require global solutions that are also rooted in particular cultures of value, then any such solution in terms of common attitudes or concepts is only going to have any weight if it is also rooted in what each group or tradition finds true and valuable for itself. Any global set of attitudes or concepts is, for this reason, always prone to be to some extent a conventional rather than an objective reality. This is not the affirmation of a relativism when it comes to values *per se*, but it

[6] Address of Pope Francis to participants in the meeting, 'Faith and Science: Towards COP26,' section 1.

[7] Ibid. section 2.

[8] Ibid. section 3.

[9] *Laudato Sì* para. 62

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is a recognition of the complexity of what is put forward as common ground. This will be as much a negotiated settlement as the one about material resources and their use.

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