

LAUDATO SI': On Care for Our Common Home

Towards a Theology of Care at the Heart of Theology of Mission

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Laudato Si' invites 'every person living in this planet' (n. 3) to enter into the spirit of the Sabbath, which deeply permeates it. According to Abraham J. Heschel, the Sabbath is 'a profound conscious harmony of man and the world, a sympathy for all things and a participation in the spirit that unites what is below and what is above' (19:2005). *Laudato Si'* calls us to reconsider our 'dwelling', that is, the way we are and we relate in this planet so that our 'common home' could be truly 'common' and a 'home' to everyone. From the very outset, *Laudato Si'* offers a rather disturbing apocalyptic vision of the world. Yet, apocalyptic literature, as a literature for times of *krisi* (in Greek 'judgement, choice, turning point in a disease'), aims at conveying hope to its intended readers: the whole cosmos is in a process of transformation and the current state of affairs has its days numbered. This reflection first underlines the caring responsibility intrinsic to God's mandates in the Creation accounts (Gen 1:28; 2:15). The biblical narrative provides the basis for developing a theology of care, which mainly focuses on (re)-generating relationships as an anticipation of God's eschatological kingdom. The integration of theology of care into the contemporary reflection on theology of Mission reveals the sacramental nature of our ministries and highlights their significance as means of participation in God's Mission and of proclamation of the Good News.

Two words stand out in the subtitle of *Laudato Si'* and in my opinion are intrinsically interconnected: 'care' and 'home'. Acts of 'care' make any place more hospitable, warmer, that is, a 'home'. At the same time, feeling at 'home' spontaneously leads us to 'care'. Footages of Homs after the siege are the best icon to represent the state of 'homelessness' in which many people currently live in our world. As one cannot but wonder whether Homs will be ever a home to anyone once again, one might wonder as well whether there is any metaphorical resemblance between Homs and our planet. Is the Earth still a home for today's millions of displaced people, for individuals of cultural and/or religious minorities, for the victims of trafficking and for its dwellers at large in growing fear of terrorist attacks?

Post-war reconstruction prompted Martin Heidegger to affirm that genuine dwelling does not necessarily occur in every residential building, even if the latter provides the basic physical conditions for a decent living. The brokenness which characterized the aftermath of the Second World War must have inspired Heidegger to develop an understanding of dwelling as 'the way in which *you are* and *I am*, the manner in which we humans *are* on the Earth.' In his view, dwelling entails 'to *cherish* and *protect*, to *preserve* and *care for*, specifically to *till* the soil, to *cultivate* the vine' (my emphasis 1971:1-2). Heidegger's insights echo Genesis 2:15, 'the Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to *till* it and *keep* it.' This understanding of human activity is based on 'being' rather than 'doing' and, therefore, privileges relationships, including the relationship with future generations. As *Laudato Si'* reminds us, the Creation accounts 'suggest that human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with the neighbour and with the Earth itself' and the 'rupture [of these three vital relationships] is sin' (n. 66). Interestingly, Heschel, translating the verb to till, *abad*, as 'to dress' (15:2005),

introduces a fascinating nuance to the understanding of human activity, which is meant to embellish Creation.

Unfortunately, the common understanding of the relationship of humankind with the created order has been shaped over the centuries by an absolutization of the 'dominion paradigm'. This paradigm is based on a male, western and dualistic interpretation of 'fill the earth and *subdue* it; and have *dominion* [...] over every living thing' (Gen 1:28). However, *Laudato Si'* affirms that 'we must forcefully reject that our being created in God's image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures' (n. 67). Applying a hermeneutic of suspicion, Richard Bauckham insists on reading Gen 1:28 in relation to Genesis 1 as a whole and, in particular, within the context of Gen 1:26-29. For Bauckham, the biblical narrative, emphasizing the 'goodness' God instils in the created order, 'and God saw that it was good' (Gen 1:10.12.18) 'it was very good' (Gen 1:31), draws readers into God's own delight and love for Creation. Therefore, Bauckham argues, when God entrusts Creation to humankind, the biblical author has already made clear her priceless value. Humankind's dominion over Creation is nothing else than a 'caring responsibility' for other creatures, which reflects God's own love for Creation (2012:5-6). Moreover, the call to subdue and dominate has its limits, since the Earth's fruits are meant to assure the existence of all living creatures (cf. Gen 1:29-30). Consequently, it might be argued that, since the beginning of Creation, God wants human beings to feel at 'home' in the cosmos and to establish caring relationships. The call to responsibly care for Creation not only is intrinsic to the call to life itself but also lies at the heart of God's Mission. Jesus Christ came to reveal humankind, through words, actions and fundamentally through his 'manner of being on Earth', God's care for Creation so that we 'might have life and have it abundantly' (Jn 10:10).

How might theology of care inform the contemporary theological reflection on Mission? *Laudato Si'* underlines that we cannot pretend to heal our relationship with the environment 'without healing all fundamental relationships' (n. 119). Our ministries, expressions of God's own love and care for Creation, render us partakers of God's regenerative Mission. They possess a sacramental worth, which is not to be underestimated, since through them we communicate the very life of God. Our ministerial engagement encapsulates the manner in which *we are* in the world and 'dress' it by cherishing, protecting, preserving and caring for life. What is more, Post-Holocaust feminist Jewish theologians, based on the gestures of solidarity among women in ghettos and concentration camps, have developed an extremely profound theology of relation or care. Melissa Raphael argues that relationships of mutual care anticipate God's eschatological *shalom* of transformed relationships. Their reflection is rooted in Jewish mysticism and, particularly, in the concept of *Shekhinah*, from *shakhan* (to be present or to dwell). *Shekhinah* is an image of the female aspect of God wandering with her people in the exile and caring for them. Raphael claims that women in Auschwitz through their 'quasi-maternal' acts of solidarity and mutual care, *hessed*, at the expense of their own lives, invited *Shekhinah* into an otherwise world voided of God. Their caring for one another, nourished by Jewish ethical values, allowed them to resist the profanation of their female personhood and increased their chances of survival (1999:54-63). 'Women's holding, pulling and pushing the other from death back into the slender possibility of life were means of carrying God into Auschwitz under a torn shelter: an improvised Tent of Meeting in which women could

meet God in the face-to-face relation' (Raphael 2003:7). Our way of being in the world has the potential of making God present to others and, therefore, is in itself proclamation.

Acknowledging the sacredness of our ministries, their sacramental value, might free us from the constant concern of not 'doing enough pastoral' or not being 'enough pastorally minded'. Our social commitment to making of this world a home for everyone and to restoring broken relationships, as continuation of Jesus' own ministry, might become the space where those we daily encounter experience the divine. Additionally, the reconsideration of the sacramental nature of our ministries might lead us not only to foster a deeper reflection on dialogue but also to favour more our commitment to it. Paradoxically, although dialogue still lies on the margins of our missionary endeavour, the cutting edge of theology of Mission comes from Asia, where proclamation exclusively takes the form of dialogue. The multi-religious and multicultural character of today's world urges us to develop an approach to Mission based on the convictions that religious pluralism is a manifestation of God's creative Spirit and that the encounter with different experiences of the divine enhances our own spiritual experience. Engagement in dialogue, therefore, should not be only a priority for the Arab-Oriental GIP but for all of us, as Pope Francis' gestures continue to remind us.

Finally, it is worth noting that, in *Laudato Si'*, education prominently features as a precious means of creating an 'ecological culture' (n. 111), which could also be called a 'culture of care'. *Laudato Si'*, emphasizing the need for humankind to change, indicates the cultural, spiritual and educational challenge of raising awareness of 'our common origins, of our mutual belonging, and our future to be shared with everyone' (n. 202). First and foremost, education equips individuals to develop independent and critical thinking, which is essential to become responsible citizens. There is a pressing necessity of acquiring a 'genuine sense of the common good' (n. 204) and deep ethical values which could be translated into a more relational and caring lifestyle (cf. n. 206-208). In this regard, the Western Christian tradition, despite its 'rich heritage' (n. 216), has much to learn from Eastern Christian and non-Christian ancient religious and cultural traditions, which retain a strong communal and relational aspect, almost unknown in the West. Ultimately, a culture of care cherishes and preserves the plurality of the world, which Hannah Arendt defines as 'the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world' (1998:7), so that every living thing in Mother Earth 'might have life' and feel at home.

To summarize, *Laudato Si'* reminds us that the current state of brokenness of our world urges individuals to change their way of dwelling so that everyone could once more call the Earth 'our common home'. The analysis of God's mandates to 'subdue and have dominion' (Gen 1:28) and 'to till and to keep' (Gen 2:15) reveal a notion of human activity which, privileging relationships, is fundamentally a caring responsibility. Placing theology of care or relation at the heart of the current theological reflection on Mission enable us to acknowledge the sacramental nature of our ministries, through which we communicate the very life and love of God, and therefore, our collaboration in the eschatological renewal of humankind.

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