

**The cry of the earth**  
**by Enzo Oliviero Verzeletti sx**

Last May the "Laudato sii's Week" was celebrated, providing us an important opportunity to explore and better understand the richness of Pope Francis' five years old encyclical.

If we read that text now, knowing about the thousands of people affected by the virus and aware of the painful consequences of the pandemic also on the globalized economy, perhaps, we realise better the urgency of planning and acting in the direction indicated by the Pope.

During the mandatory confinement, necessary to limit the spread of the disease, we have witnessed very particular processes: on the one hand, the decrease or total cessation of many activities and on the other, the noticeable reduction of pollutants. Yet we do not feel consoled by breathing cleaner air. Indeed, the price paid to the virus in terms of human lives has been terrible and absolutely out of proportion.

We have also seen the exponential growth in the use of internet, apps of all sorts and social networks; yet, the suffering caused by social distancing has not been spared to anyone. Being constrained within the walls of the house has allowed more time to reflect on ourselves and our lifestyles. From different places, spaces and perspectives, the positive sense of this reflection has dawned on many: in order to live to the full, the idea of planning and realizing a better society than the present one has eventually surfaced.

Uncertainty about the future could even be a provocation to creativity and a stimulus to new solutions. "What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to the children who are growing up?" From this question, Pope Francis renews his "urgent appeal to respond to the ecological crisis: the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor can no longer wait." The question, centred on the expression "what kind of world", forces us to reflect on the quality and articulation of the relationship that each of us maintains with the world, both individually and in community.

It is a question of starting, or re-starting to ask ourselves what kind of relationship we have with ourselves, with others, with nature and lastly - or primarily - with God. It is a question of how much and what attention, passion and energy we are willing to invest in the care of these relationships. The complexity of the present forces on us all a common reflection and action, focused on the theme of human solidarity, not only at the levels of family, neighbourhood and nation, as the health crisis has already determined, but also at the global level.

Social distance, however sad, had the merit of making us feel concretely the lack - and therefore the importance - of the tangible relationship with those who were far away among our strongest affections. However, to be able to feel the real and constant distance, compassion and a feeling of true solidarity with those who do not belong directly to the circle of our loved ones, is indeed much more difficult.

Feeling sympathetic to the rest of humanity, in order to build a better world than the present one becomes a challenge for Christianity at large and, primarily, for us missionaries. We love, especially in Italy, to stand out from each other, each in defence of its own way of life. It is necessary to understand that "solidarity" is not the same as "uniformity", because solidarity, both at a community and world levels, can only be born out of exchanges, of an authentic, non-ideological dialogue, which proceeds from mutual trust. This may be the starting point of a "human ecology".

During the forced isolation, the increased use of digital systems, even within religious communities, has highlighted, in my opinion, the lack of a real dialogue, in which everyone is willing to listen, evaluate and discuss the proposals of others. There have been many good and beautiful initiatives, but now we need to work to establish a genuinely dialogical climate, something capable of leading to concretely operational choices, for the good of all.

Let me explain better. Many Internet users show the typical volatility of static thought. This feeds on the enunciation of principles and theories or of audio and video performances, which have little to do with the direct commitment to the solution of the central issue increasingly evident: the urgent appeal to respond to the ecological crisis, to the cry of the earth and to the cry of the poor who can no longer wait.

Often, principles and theories crystallize and, transformed into pale and poor slogans, end up separating word from action, saying from doing. Discourse and practical action are like the two wheels of a gear: if they begin to rotate unrelatedly, without the movement of one driving or engaging that of the other, the gear turns up empty, risking stopping or, worse, jamming. This situation is evident in many areas of human interaction.

A tragic example of this can be seen in the events of Minneapolis. There, social bonds are threatened and the whole system is in danger of becoming jammed simply because those who should be guarantors of respect for justice seem instead to be instruments of iniquity.

In the questions most closely related to the natural environment, if we do not act concretely to adapt production and consumption to the declared need to safeguard the environment, we risk, as it were, the jamming of gears in the entire ecosystem. If an oil depot, as it has happened recently, by mistake or by human neglect, dumps twenty thousand tonnes of crude oil in some unknown river of the world, or if a nuclear power plant, as it has happened more than once in the past, disperses its radioactive waste into the surrounding environment, who will be able to solve this "problem" and really repair the damage?

In the current system of mass communication, the backbone of capitalist societies, nature has been relegated to the background, like the wall poster of an elegant décor: it hardly disturbs our well-being, because it remains distant, similar to an optional ornament, avoiding us a direct comparison with its roughness, its resistances, and its surprises.

To date, nature has been "disnatured", turning it into a sort of ornamental "concept", which is often not representative of reality, while in practice its resources are used indiscriminately, not for the good of the entire world population. As a result, what could be less "natural" for humans than choosing to act to save a "concept"? Why abandon our "comfort facilities" for something that always looks wonderful, when comfortably seen in photos, videos or visited through pre-planned, spectacular trips? In rich and "developed" societies, where "happiness" revolves around both a fantasy of unlimited growth and the elimination of annoyances, the value unanimously recognized is that of "well-being".

It is the prerogative of developed and privileged societies, such as ours, to be able to allocate a good part of our work's proceeds to remove obstacles, hardships and efforts, from the most painful to the minutest, and create functional and smart environments where we then spend most of our time. Most of the products and services to be found on the market are shown either as suppliers of comfort or as facilitating use, exchange, assembly, storage, payment, transfer, preparation, delivery, replacement,

choice, meeting etc. All of this more and more at the click of a mouse or at the touch on a screen, through an app especially designed.

In the name of this "protecting comfort", most of us have isolated, not so much from our fellows, but from what I would call the sense of the reality of nature, of its balance and of the absolute interdependence of all natural phenomena, human life included.

The natural environment poses an inescapable question to man: the world does not belong to anyone, while all human beings are an integral part of it: we are the ones who are included in the earth's ecosystem. We are also the only ones, until proven otherwise, characterized by a discursive intellect, by the capability of expressing thoughts in verbal language. The ability to assemble words in the form of speech is the main wheel of a much larger mechanism, in which other representative human systems participate.

If we continue to replace reality with concepts, without feeling on ourselves the wounds inflicted on nature and without transforming our lifestyles, the ecosystem will be irreversibly damaged; this wonderful vital mechanism will no longer be able to function harmoniously, it will move around disorderly and ecological disasters will continue to occur here and there as a result.

It will take a great deal of effort to link theory to practice and make life in community, solidarity and social bonding three non-negotiable experiences. Indeed, "community", "solidarity" and "social bond", as much as "fraternity", "compassion" and "love" are not abstract concepts, they are real experiences. It is thus necessary, I believe, to experience once again the rough and slow materiality of nature, to abandon, even for just a short while, the straight flows of our roads and our volatile digital crossroads, to get out of our comfortable burrows or cages, in order to forge a new certainty, that of our interdependence with, and among, the rest of living beings. Is this not also the outgoing Church?

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