



SESSION FOUR

Integral Ecology

137 Let's turn our attention now to understanding more fully what integral ecology is in its human and social dimensions.

I. ENVIRONMENTAL, ECONOMIC, AND SOCIAL ECOLOGY

138 Ecology is the study of the relationship between living things and the environment in which they live and grow. This leads, of course, to considering the conditions required for life. Everything in such a study is interconnected, one organism affecting the next. Even the smallest things such as atoms and subatomic particles are connected with everything else. **139** When we speak of the environment, we refer to the relationship between nature and the community of creatures that lives in it. We are not outside of nature looking in; we are in nature, and nature is in us. To understand pollution, for example, one must understand who lives in the polluted area and how they behave.

140 Our goal is to move to a sustainable use of natural resources, one in which each organism in the ecosystem, no matter how small, is able to sustain itself and regenerate. **141** We urgently need an economic ecology in which all the elements of a particular ecosystem can be considered as interconnected, including the human dimension. **142** Likewise, a social ecology would also contribute to the connection between the environment and various institutions, such as governments and the degrading of nature. Having laws on the books to protect forests does not mean, for example, that the government will enforce them; we know that many governments ignore lawbreakers who ravage woodlands.

II. CULTURAL ECOLOGY

143 Ecology also involves protecting the historic and artistic culture of a people. When solutions are being sought for ecological problems, local people and their culture should be consulted with an eye to what they can contribute. **144** Consumerism tends to level culture because everything is uniform. Our care for the world must match the flexibility and dynamism of local cultures. **145** The loss of a local culture, in which people have found identity and meaning, often for centuries, is as bad as losing a species of plant or animal. **146** Hence the need to respect indigenous communities. When large development, mining, or agricultural projects are being considered, the indigenous communities should be the primary voice in the planning.

III. ECOLOGY OF DAILY LIFE

147 Another factor to consider in development decisions is the place where people live their daily lives. If it becomes crowded, noisy, polluted, or dangerous, humans suffer. **148** The poor, living in the worst

of conditions, often show a remarkable ability to find contentment and happiness. They build support systems, community, and mutual care in the midst of great adversity. Such human ecology is admirable. 149] But such areas can also be breeding places for brutality, criminal activity, and great sadness. Still, love can overpower hate and often does. 150] Those who manage neighborhoods should take all this into account as part of a program of ecology.

151] Urban planners, too, practice good ecology when they plan transportation, services, and open areas for all to use. 152] Housing is an element of this. Owning or having a home is a large part of human dignity. In places where shanty towns have emerged, planners should develop those areas while retaining those neighborhoods as much as possible. 153] Likewise, urban transportation systems must be considered part of the solution, ones in which pollution is reduced and ease of use increased. 154] And finally, we pay attention to the rural poor, who often work without rights, property, or hope.

155] A final element of the human ecology is our bodies. Our bodies connect with nature in very direct, daily ways. Accepting our bodies as God's gift is essential. We do not have absolute and final control over our bodies, and thinking we do leads to thinking we also have such power over all of nature. Learning to love who we are in our masculinity and femininity makes us able to love more fully.

Group or Personal Process

Reflect: Look back at the material from article 137 to this point. Make a list of the elements of an integral ecology as Pope Francis defines it. What are our largest challenges in this area?

IV. THE PRINCIPLE OF THE COMMON GOOD

156] Having just considered human ecology in all its dimensions, we turn now to the common good, which is the shared situation in which we all live and the way in which that gives us a sense of well-being and fulfillment. 157] First and foremost, we respect the human person with the rights and dignity that belong to each, especially the family. Second, social peace is a major factor in the common good and is based on distributive justice. 158] In today's world, the principle of common good becomes a call for solidarity with the poor throughout the world.

V. JUSTICE BETWEEN THE GENERATIONS

159] Future generations also have a stake in this conversation when we speak of the common good. We must consider the world we leave behind us. The world is a gift and we share it with others, including those who come after us. 160] So we must ask: what do we want our children to inherit from us? This question shapes our behavior and speaks to meaning and purpose in life.

161] We have already consumed and wasted so many of the earth's resources, stretching the planet's ability to provide for us and leaving behind piles of debris and filth, that we must take decisive action now if we are truly to leave behind a world worthy of human life. 162] But we have also had a simultaneous decline in will. Modern men and women can be individualistic, self-centered, and focused on immediate gratification. Parents pass these new "values" on to their children. We cannot think about the next generation because we have a hard time being generous to each other. And in this situation, the poor are left out completely.

Group or Personal Process

Reflect: What role do you, or does anyone have, in maintaining the "common good"? In your own words, what exactly does the pope mean by the phrase "common good"?

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Reflect: What is your response to articles 160-161? Answer the pope's question here for yourself.