



## **Current challenges for the Christian Social Movement in the light of the Encyclical *Laudato Si'* of Pope Francis<sup>1</sup>**

Cardinal Peter K.A. Turkson

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Thank you for inviting me to speak to this important and inspiring conference. I say “inspiring” because I realize that your Christian Social Movement had its first conference 125 years ago, in Amsterdam. Our Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace will be a more modest 50 years old next January 6th, so you see why I am impressed.

Of course, 1891 was also the year that *Rerum novarum* appeared: a truly revolutionary teaching, in its time and still today. It resolutely inserted the Church into some of the most pressing social issues of the day, such as the impacts of industrialization on individuals and families.

By Divine Providence, we too are living such a *kairos* moment. For the astonishing encyclical of Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, has resonated strongly all over the world, and still resonates 15 months later, because of a similar revolutionary force. We can read it as the *Rerum Novarum* of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It offers guidance and guidelines for a different way of relating to each other and to Creation.

During these opening moments of your Conference, let the key question of **globalization** be raised with the inspiration of earlier **prophets** and of the epochal Council **Vatican II**. We can then consider changes and new forces, initially as **threats** but surely as challenging **opportunities**. And so we look forward to your **deliberations**, invoking God’s **blessing**.

### **The question of globalization**

With the interconnectedness of today’s world, and with the quick distribution of information and images, anyone with the slightest interest will instantly realize that the challenges for

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humanity – the challenges to be fully human – occur at every scale, from the global to the most intimate. The summary label for this highly powerful and ambiguous phenomenon is **globalization**. There are several forces nowadays that converge to make globalization an unprecedented threat to human progress. I am speaking here of the economic, financial, political and technological forces that raise the ominous spectre of the progressive robotization of men, women and children, in their outlooks and behaviour.

The haunting question is this: are we inescapably in the grip of these forces, powerless to control our destiny? Or can humanity shape and guide these forces? The Christian Social Movement affirms resoundingly that we can and must take charge. This is the perspective and spirit with which your conference raises its central concern: how to humanize globalization?

### **Prophets before us**

Thank God we are not the first to face daunting questions. It is with deep satisfaction that I recall the history of Christian social engagement in the Netherlands. It reflects two sides of Christian participation in social life: it is both intellectual and practical.

Your compatriots of past decades have provided some very important, diverse expressions of the vision of Christ in the actual social order. I am speaking of Mr. Jos Serrarens, Monsignor Wiel Nolens and Cardinal Bernard Affrink.

As Secretary-General of the International Federation of Christian Trade Unions, Jos Serrarens brought together Catholic and Protestant workers at the conclusion of the First World War in order to engage Christians in consolidating peace through social justice. Monsignor Nolens as Head of the Catholic Party played a major role on both the national and international stage to insert your nation in the world-wide effort to construct peace; this was just one of his achievements. And in the years after the Second World War, Cardinal Bernard Affrink, then President of Pax Christi International, launched the first initiatives that made Christians aware of the changes, or even the upheavals, that the world had begun to experience in this epoch due to human mastery of the forces of nature.

These outstanding names, along with many others, helped to define the past century through their ability to respond to the challenges of their time.

### **Vocation**

Christians today are called to continue the witness of the eminent prophets we honour. We recall them because of their resolute insertion into the major challenges of their time, and they did so as a necessary expression and application of their religious faith. This is the path of faith and action united, as the Second Vatican Council taught with all its authority. The pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world, *Gaudium et spes*, opens with a resounding embrace of the lived realities of humankind: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs

and the anxieties of the men and women of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ” (GS §1). And to truly follow Christ, we must accept our “earthly responsibilities”. The followers of Christ understand that their faith is incarnated in the world: “by the faith itself they are more obliged than ever to measure up to these duties, each according to his proper vocation.” Conversely, it is entirely erroneous for people to “imagine they can plunge themselves into earthly affairs in such a way as to imply that these are altogether divorced from the religious life” (GS §43.1). The only true path is that which unites faith and action.

First, the natural history of the world derives its meaning and direction from the supernatural history that Christ initiated. Christ gives world history an end, a goal, a *telos* and an *Omega*. Christ is our peace; he it is who makes reconciliation possible.

Second, it is the vocation of Christians in every era to translate Christ’s global vision into the *hic et nunc*, into the here-and-now. This is why we find such diversity in how Christians have engaged in society through the ages: the here and now in each situation differ from others, earlier or later, here or elsewhere. Thus it is that there is one consistent vision which finds expression in many different forms of social engagement.

### **Threatening changes**

Let me highlight two of the upheavals that face us as we put our faith into action. First, the unipolar world has disappeared. The world today is multipolar. This is a radical change. Too much social science and the derivative social policy make the mistake of reducing this change to an excessively quantitative matter, whereas in truth it is qualitative, cultural, spiritual. Until the 1980s and early 1990s, the world was dominated by the Cold War and the East-West confrontation. But following the policies of *détente* of President Reagan and Chairman Gorbachev – policies that were supported by Christian leaders such as Blessed Pope Paul VI, Cardinals Agostino Casaroli and Barnard Affrink – the international equilibrium of power began to shift. New forces were let loose, and their priorities diverged from those of the West where spiritual strength was drained away by hedonism.

Yet our present world is already so different from the heady days when the Berlin Wall came down and formerly repressed populations found a new freedom. Indeed, in some cases, that freedom allowed them to indulge in consumerism and hedonistic interests that had been unavailable or forbidden. But nowadays, with all-pervasive computer tools, worldwide communication and social media, people risk being lost amid noise and triviality. Pope Francis worries greatly about information overload and neglect of direct human relationship.

“True wisdom, as the fruit of self-examination, dialogue and generous encounter between persons, is not acquired by a mere accumulation of data which eventually leads to overload and confusion, a sort of mental pollution. Real relationships with others, with all the challenges they entail, now tend to be replaced by a type of internet communication which enables us to choose or eliminate relationships at

whim, thus giving rise to a new type of contrived emotion which has more to do with devices and displays than with other people and with nature” (LS §47).

New technologies of communication bring me to the second upheaval. As I said earlier, human beings risk turning into robots, into mere cogs in a worldwide machine. Against this threat, Christians need to marshal and explain their reasons for their faith in humanity. How do we regard the world today and its various trends? On the one hand, grounded in our religious vision of the world, our conception of freedom allows us to think independently about the world rather than constantly join the crowd. On the other hand, this religious vision also makes sense of the movement of history due to its confident expectation that, eventually and actually, we will all be gathered together, reconciled in God through Christ. “Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all” (Col 3:11). Christ, and his authentic disciples, exercise authority as service for others. “When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all” (1 Cor 15:28).

### **Opportunities of dialogue**

As you pursue your studies and discussions here, I urge you to embrace dialogue: dialogue among yourselves here, and dialogue in the work you do in the world. Pope Francis puts his faith and hope in dialogue “as the only way to confront the problems of our world and to seek solutions that are truly effective”.<sup>2</sup> Authentic dialogue is “open and respectful”; it requires “patience, self-discipline and generosity” (LS §201). It insists on open negotiation based on the principles which the social teachings of the Church vigorously promote: solidarity, subsidiarity, working for the common good, universal destination of goods, and preferential option for the poor and for the earth.

Pope Francis applies these principles, after briefly interpreting the story of Cain and Abel, to our real relationships. “Disregard for the duty to cultivate and maintain a proper relationship with my neighbour, for whose care and custody I am responsible, ruins my relationship with my own self, with others, with God and with the earth” (LS §70). On the contrary, “The human person grows more, matures more 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” (LS §240). This is the rich, integrated vision of the encyclical that you are about to study.

Let me give an example of new technologies at the service of networking for politics and democracy in action. Avaaz is an online network founded almost ten years ago; today Avaaz counts about 44 million members.<sup>3</sup> Using online petitions, it organizes citizens of all nations to close the gap between what exists and the world most people everywhere want. Avaaz and

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<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, Address on Environmental Justice and Climate Change, 11.09.15.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.avaaz.org/en/community.php>

the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace collaborated on activities around *Laudato si'*, the Pope's visit to USA last September, and the COP21 climate change meetings last December in Paris. Now just as Avaaz brings people of all backgrounds to discover shared concerns and undertake common action, so your Christian Social Movement has brought together people of good will of diverse backgrounds. The invitation, I suggest, is to open ourselves to the potential for good in the new tools that are available, even as we take a prudent or critical attitude towards excesses.

### **Your deliberations**

As this Conference gets underway, it makes me happy to know that you intend to pose “slow questions in swampy ground”.<sup>4</sup> To do this patiently and properly “rooted and grounded”, you re-read the *Imitatio Christi* in a contemporary, social key. This lived spirituality of encounter, as Pope Francis would say, sustains dialogue or conversation with various partners about current social issues very much on our agenda. Allow me please to remind you of the five great questions which will surely serve to focus this Conference as well as subsequent policy and action:

1. How can we give priority to responsive forms of the economy that are an answer to the needs of society instead of the wants of the individual (Chapter 4)?
2. How can we make room for vulnerability, imperfection, and improvisational skills, thus countering the push to perfection and uniformity and strengthening the vitality and quality of life in society (See chapter 5)?
3. How can we give priority to forms of inclusive politics which are, instead of just recurrent polling, a conversation, thus enhancing engagement by citizens in arranging their own life (Chapter 6)?
4. How can we cultivate forms of growth in quality, thus reducing the emphasis on quantitative growth, numbers and procedures (Chapter 7)?
5. How can we establish a culture of gratitude, reverence, and involvement, thus countering indifference, the throw-away culture, and cynicism (Chapter 8)?<sup>5</sup>

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I wish to share an overall observation about *Laudato si'*. Pope Francis has brought together a huge canvas, an immense landscape of topics, in his text. He wants to help people of goodwill of all backgrounds to clearly acknowledge the world's most pressing issues, and to embark on effective responses to them. People can do this if they embrace a transcendent understanding of the world's movement towards reconciliation, and if they accept the humble, generous, loving parameters of dialogue for working together. He commits the Church to accompany every level of decision-making, every form of governance, that is willing to pursue the common good. Thus, with this new *Rerum novarum*,

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<sup>4</sup> Piet Hazenbosch, *De kracht van verbondenheid: Perspectieven in een netwerksamenleving: Naar een visie voor het Christelijk-Sociaal Congres 2016*, Stichting Christelijk-Sociaal Congres, 2016, p.185.

<sup>5</sup> *De kracht van verbondenheid*, pp. 186-187.

the Church is manifestly willing to go out into the whole social order and accompany humankind as we urgently take stock and make decisions and re-tool. You can count on the Church as you work for justice and peace in your immediate neighbourhood, your country, across Europe and throughout the planet! In a complementary way, the Church counts on you to live out her vocation in the modern world.

May our Lord smile on your deliberations and guide you to continue the great work of Christian social movements: to redeem and build positive relationships among all peoples and with all of creation in a globalization of ever-increasing reconciliation and human fulfilment!