

# FROM THE CYRILLO-METHODIAN MISSION TO INTEGRAL ECOLOGY. A THEOLOGICAL-ETHICAL REFLECTION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE TEACHING OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH<sup>1</sup>

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DOI: 10.17846/CL.2025.18.1.144-153

**Abstract:** ĎURKOVÁ, Eva – KONDRLA, Peter. *From the Cyrillo-Methodian Mission to Integral Ecology. A Theological-Ethical Reflection on Sustainable Development in the Teaching of the Catholic Church.* The article explores the values of sustainable development within the context of the Catholic Church's teaching, tracing their historical roots to the mission of Saints Cyril and Methodius. The authors highlight the connection between the cultural, social, and moral legacy of the Thessalonian brothers and the contemporary Sustainable Development Goals defined by the United Nations. Core themes such as justice, equality, access to education, cultural diversity, and moral responsibility are examined through the lens of Church social encyclicals – from Leo XIII to Pope Francis. Special attention is given to *Laudato Si'*, which presents the ecological crisis as a moral challenge and calls for dialogue between faith and science. The article concludes that Christian tradition, when authentically lived, can offer relevant tools for addressing today's environmental and social challenges by fostering responsibility, respect, and an integral ecological perspective.

**Keywords:** *sustainability, Catholic Church's teaching, encyclical Laudato Si', pope*

## Introduction

Several studies indicate that the values associated with sustainable development were already present in the missionary work of Saints Cyril and Methodius. Their mission, as part of the Church's teaching, embodied moral principles that form the foundation of Christian doctrine. Among other values, the mission emphasized the importance of education, cultural identity, social justice, shared responsibility, and the preservation of traditions, as well as the sustainable governance of society.

These core values form the legacy of Saints Cyril and Methodius and remain relevant in the Church's teaching today. Moreover, they correspond to many of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by international organizations such as the United Nations.

This paper examines how these values are currently interpreted in the Church's teaching and compares them with contemporary sustainable development principles and documents. Ultimately, we aim to demonstrate that since the time of the Cyril-Methodian mission, the Church has consistently promoted a vision of society grounded in justice, cultural diversity, and human dignity (Šuráb et al., 2024).

<sup>1</sup> Funding: This research was supported by the Slovak Research and Development Agency under the project APVV-22-0204 and by the Cultural and Educational Grant Agency of the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic under the project KEGA 020UKF-4/2023.

## The roots of a culture of sustainability

It is widely accepted – supported not only by scholarly studies but also by the lived experience of communities – that the mission of Saints Cyril and Methodius left a significant civilizational, cultural, and social imprint on the Slovak and Central European context (Ivanič 2022).

Their mission was not limited to the transmission of Christian faith to Slavic nations. It also encompassed a political dimension (linking to the Byzantine Empire) and a vital cultural aspect, particularly in the development of writing, education, and broader cultural expression. It thus formed a foundational value matrix that influenced the character of Slovak culture as well as the cultures of neighboring nations (Maturkanič 2022).

A notable and lasting contribution of the Thessalonian brothers – one that resonates in the later teachings of the Church – is their emphasis on social justice and equality (Fila et al. 2024). Their mission aimed to make both spiritual and material values accessible to all. Justice and solidarity became central themes of modern social encyclicals, which now address sustainable development as a necessary condition for social justice (Murgaš 2023).

This notion includes not only material well-being and economic stability, but also equal access to education. In the Christian tradition, equal opportunity is rooted in the idea that each human being is a unique creation of God with a divine purpose: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). In the interpretation of Saints Cyril and Methodius, this may be understood as: there is neither Slav nor Byzantine, Roman nor Germanic – the dignity and uniqueness of each person are paramount. Then as now, efforts to realize these ideals often face resistance and misunderstanding in practice (Pavlíková – Tavilla 2023).

The religious mission of Cyril and Methodius was also grounded in moral principles that are inseparable from Christianity and essential for creating a just and functioning society. A sustainable future depends not only on addressing environmental concerns and resource scarcity but also on fostering healthy social relationships that shape the quality of life and the future development potential of society.

Without the presence of and respect for moral principles – firmly rooted in Christian teaching – a meaningful future cannot be envisioned. The moral values in the work of Cyril and Methodius promoted ethical governance and long-term thinking. Their focus on education, especially through the development of a script for the Slavic language, was central to empowering future generations. Both in the 10th century and today, access to education is a crucial element of sustainable development (Hetényi 2019).

Another essential dimension of their mission was the promotion of cultural diversity. This was expressed through the development of written language, the use of vernacular in liturgy, and support for existing local traditions. Their legacy also includes the empowerment of communities and grassroots initiatives – principles echoed in today’s understanding of sustainable development (Zalec – Pavlíková 2019). The idea of unity in diversity has long been reflected in the Church’s self-understanding. In his encyclical *Ut unum sint* (1995), Pope John Paul II calls for Christian unity, but elsewhere he expands this call to include all people. Like Cyril and Methodius, his vision of unity respects multiplicity as an essential dimension of the human journey toward God.

The only domain where we find no clear parallel between the mission of Saints Cyril and Methodius and today’s sustainable development agenda is the environmental crisis. However, even this absence may be understood contextually. The current ecological crisis stems from a distorted interpretation of the meaning of existence – where both nature and humanity are treated as means to ends rather than ends in themselves (Máhrík – Králik 2024a).

The message of Cyril and Methodius can be described as a message of sustainable culture, which is permeated with respect for otherness, acceptance of cultural diversity and its promotion. Their aim was to bring tools by which an atmosphere of belonging and mutual cooperation is created in society, where each person is a child of God called to cooperate for the common good and to fulfill the will of God. Their vision of society is that of a cooperative community that, instead of polarization, seeks common ways to achieve justice and well-being (Máhrík – Králík 2024b). These ideas find their place in the teaching of the Church, which a few centuries later solves similar problems, but in fundamentally different conditions.

### From *Rerum novarum* to *Laudato si*

The Popes have addressed issues related to sustainable development and their social context continuously since the second half of the 20th century. However, already in the 19th century, the Catholic Church began systematically reflecting on social problems and advocating for a just social order that avoids deepening inequality and social tensions.

The encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, issued by Pope Leo XIII in 1891, is considered a foundational document of Catholic social teaching. It responds to the consequences of the Industrial Revolution, including the exploitation of workers, poverty, and tensions between capitalism and socialism. While the Pope rejects both extreme capitalism and the abolition of private property, he emphasizes the social function of ownership – property must serve the common good.

These ideas were further developed in the documents of later Popes, such as *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), *Laborem Exercens* (1981), and *Centesimus Annus* (1991).

In *Pacem in Terris* (1963), Pope John XXIII focused primarily on peace, justice, human rights, and international cooperation during the Cold War. Although it does not directly address environmental protection, the encyclical calls for ethical principles in scientific and technological development – an indirect appeal for a responsible approach to natural resources.

His successor, Pope Paul VI, continued this reflection in the apostolic letter *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971), written on the 80th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*. He addressed modern social and political challenges, including urbanization, poverty, alienation, and environmental degradation. He warned against ideologies such as Marxism and extreme capitalism, which produce injustice and exploitation, and called for increased social participation, particularly among minorities, women, and youth.

Pope John Paul II consistently emphasized the dignity of the human person and the pursuit of social justice in several encyclicals, including *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), *Laborem Exercens* (1981), and *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987). He addressed global injustice, the debt crisis of developing countries, and the widening gap between rich and poor nations. His vision of sustainable development is closely tied to the principle of subsidiarity, which supports the empowerment of communities and civil society. In *Centesimus Annus* (1991), he warned of the risks of unregulated capitalism – not only the disregard for human dignity but also the erosion of values and the transformation of people into instruments of profit. He emphasized that sustainable development requires decentralization and local self-determination, which are impossible in totalitarian or ideologically rigid systems.

John Paul II also drew attention to Saints Cyril and Methodius, presenting them as protectors of the Slavic peoples and founders of Christian culture and civilization. In his apostolic letter *Slavorum Apostoli* (1985), he emphasized their social contribution, especially their efforts to promote cultural identity and autonomy by introducing the Slavic language into the liturgy.

Pope Benedict XVI developed this line of thought in *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), where he stressed that development must be both ethical and rooted in solidarity. He criticized the unchecked pursuit of economic growth and its devastating consequences for the environment and for social cohesion. According to him, environmental protection is a moral duty and a matter of human conscience. He viewed technological progress as potentially beneficial, but emphasized the need for its responsible and ethically guided use.

Benedict XVI also warned against the misuse of biotechnology and genetic manipulation, which he saw as violations of human dignity. He called for fairer global distribution of resources and criticized the mechanisms through which wealthy countries exploit poorer ones without sharing the benefits. In his view, traditional capitalism has reached its limits – not only in terms of resource exhaustion, but also in its creation of a global system marked by injustice, environmental degradation, and disregard for future generations.

## LAUDATO SI': A CHRISTIAN–SECULAR DIALOGUE

The Earth is facing a multifaceted environmental crisis, characterized by climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and the depletion of natural resources. These phenomena pose serious threats to human well-being and the stability of ecosystems (Agenda 2030, IPCC, UN Environment Programme).

In his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis writes: “*If someone were to observe our planet from the outside, they would be amazed at behaviors that sometimes appear self-destructive*” (*Laudato Si'*, §55). As already noted, this behavior is centered on individual interest, treating both nature and people as means to satisfy immediate needs (Kralik 2024).

Pope Francis continues the legacy of Saints Cyril and Methodius as well as the social teaching of the Church by calling for a renewed form of evangelization – one that includes environmental, social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions. These dimensions are rooted in the missionary principles of the Thessalonian brothers and are echoed in modern documents such as *Laudato Si'*.

For example, the Pope underscores the importance of respect for cultural diversity, a theme also central to Cyril and Methodius. Dialogue and respect represent a new dimension of evangelization and inter-cultural communication. Without these, there can be no real sustainable development or shared future.

Another essential point is the spiritual reflection on the environmental and social crises – something that was already present in the mission of Cyril and Methodius and is now revived in *Laudato Si'*. The encyclical invites Christians to become agents of social change – just as the Thessalonian brothers once did – particularly through renewed responsibility toward nature.

At the beginning of the encyclical, Pope Francis sets out his intention: “*I would like to enter into dialogue with all people about our common home*” (*Laudato Si'*, §3). As with the efforts of Pope John Paul II, the promotion of diversity and pluralism remains a central element. This intention is most clearly reflected in the first chapter of *Laudato Si'*, where the Pope presents a comprehensive overview of scientific findings related to the environmental crisis.

The encyclical follows a logical framework built on three pillars:

1. Confronting the facts of scientific research;
2. Interpreting them through ethical and spiritual reflection;
3. Proposing an ecological vision based on human relationships with reality.

Ultimately, this reflection is meant to inspire an educational process grounded in the richness of Christian experience (Laudato Si', §15). Accepting the results of scientific research becomes a foundation for the Church's dialogue with the secular world – acknowledging the complexity of the crisis while promoting honest and respectful debate.

The acceptance of the findings of scientific research in the environmental field is an essential part of the Christian–secular dialogue. In the view of Pope Francis, this dialogue must be framed by a willingness to listen and to respect diverse perspectives. As he states: *„On many specific issues, the Church has no reason to offer a definitive opinion; she must instead encourage honest debate among experts and respect the variety of views.“* However, he immediately adds: *„It is enough to take a frank look at reality to see that our common home is falling into serious disrepair“* (Laudato Si', §61).

When presenting the facts about the socio-environmental crisis in the first chapter of *Laudato Si'*, the Pope emphasizes that the aim is not merely to collect information or satisfy intellectual curiosity, but to foster a deep, even painful, awareness – and a sense of personal and moral responsibility for contributing to solutions (Laudato Si', §19).

The encyclical aligns closely with the issues outlined in the 2030 Agenda and related international documents. It discusses, for example, the ambiguous effects of technological innovation – how it can both solve and create environmental problems. Other challenges include the throwaway culture, which stands in stark contrast to the balanced functioning of ecosystems; rising global temperatures, sea level rise, extreme weather events, increasing concentrations of greenhouse gases, deforestation, and the scarcity of essential resources such as clean water, energy, and food. The Pope also highlights livelihood threats for coastal populations, and the complex, simultaneous migration of animal and plant species. Further issues include urban overcrowding, the lack of green spaces, and air pollution (UN 2025). Similar to the 2030 Agenda, the encyclical repeatedly draws attention to the principle of differentiated responsibility, especially the moral and historical responsibility of developed countries. As Francis writes: *„There is a need to maintain a clear awareness that climate change entails differentiated responsibilities“* (Laudato Si', §52).

He also criticizes the behavior of multinational corporations and industrialized nations that exploit weaker countries – doing things abroad that would not be allowed in their own regions. He highlights the imbalance between financial debt and ecological debt: *„The foreign debt of poor countries has become a way of controlling them, yet nothing is said about the ecological debt owed to them“* (Laudato Si', §52). He further insists: *„It is essential that developed countries help resolve this debt by reducing the consumption of non-renewable energy.“*

The Pope points out that the problems of the most vulnerable – the excluded – are often overlooked (Laudato Si', §49). He also addresses the issue of social fragmentation and the lack of integral development, warning that emerging “green” urban areas are too often accessible only to privileged social groups.

In describing the state of the contemporary world, *Laudato Si'* is consistent with the findings of science and with the priorities articulated in the 2030 Agenda (UN 2015). However, the encyclical also introduces a more psychological and anthropological dimension. For example, Pope Francis reflects on the personal impact of environmental degradation: *„The environment in which we live influences the way we see life, feel and act. In our rooms, homes, workplaces and neighborhoods, we express our identity through our surroundings. When these environments are chaotic or filled with visual and noise pollution, our attempts to live a balanced and happy life are challenged by an excess of stimuli“* (Laudato Si', §47).

In addition to visual and acoustic pollution, Francis also addresses the concept of mental pollution, which he links to the dynamics of digital media. This form of pollution arises when

people consume vast amounts of data without the necessary space for emotional or spiritual processing (Slobodová Nováková et al., 2024).

## Spiritual Reflection on the Environmental Crisis - Integral Ecology

In the third chapter of the encyclical, Pope Francis outlines the ambition to propose a philosophical and theological vision of the human person and creation (*Laudato Si'*, §130). This vision builds on the awareness of the current ecological crisis and reflects on how humans relate to the world around them. The Pope notes that people are often disturbed by the extinction of large, visible animals such as mammals, but remain indifferent to the disappearance of smaller components of biodiversity, such as insects, fungi, or algae (*Laudato Si'*, §34).

As a counterexample, Pope Francis points to St. Francis of Assisi, who experienced even the smallest parts of creation as his brothers and sisters, bound to him by deep emotional ties. The Pope's choice of St. Francis is deliberate, as this emotional relationship with creation is at the heart of the encyclical's proposed concept of integral ecology.

Integral ecology is not merely an intellectual framework – it transcends rational categories and the language of science. It is built on a sense of affective connection, which encourages moderation and care in our use of natural resources. This emotional and spiritual bond prevents us from treating creation merely as a resource to be used and consumed (*Laudato Si'*, §11).

According to the Pope, a major cause of the absence of truly ecological behavior today is not a lack of information, but rather the absence of deep emotional attachment to nature. Intellectual understanding alone is insufficient if it is not accompanied by inner transformation and personal connection. This insight is confirmed by studies on religiosity in postmodern societies, which suggest that people have access to vast knowledge about environmental degradation, but still fail to act because they lack inner motivation (Maturkanič et al., 2023a).

As the Pope rightly observes, “*Some people show more sensitivity than others; some do not grasp the social dimension of ownership; others deny the existence of others through non-ecological behavior*” (*Laudato Si'*, §§90–95). Thus, integral ecology is not only about environmental preservation – it is about redefining our relationship to reality, beginning with ourselves. It calls for a new way of thinking, living, educating, and engaging spiritually with the world (*Laudato Si'*, §§15, 101, 111, 141).

## The Encyclical's Ambitions for the Positive Impact of the Christian Faith on the Environmental Crisis

In addition to describing the symptoms and root causes of the environmental crisis, *Laudato Si'* also articulates a strong ambition: to offer a pathway for motivation and education grounded in the Christian faith. Pope Francis suggests that religious belief can serve as a powerful force for fostering ecologically responsible behavior.

The Pope argues that faith offers not only a moral framework, but also noble motivations that can inspire believers to engage more deeply with ecological concerns (*Laudato Si'*, §64). He presents biblical foundations for this dialogue: from the Book of Genesis and its call to responsible stewardship (interpreted beyond reductive anthropocentrism), to Old Testament practices such as the Sabbath year and the sharing of harvests with the poor.

In the Pope's view, human freedom, when exercised in a universe of interconnected relationships, has the potential to contribute positively to the evolution of creation (*Laudato Si'*,



§79). The Christian tradition, in this context, encourages believers to understand that they are not the final purpose of creation – and that by recognizing their own sacredness, they also discover the sacredness of the world.

The encyclical can thus be seen as a pastoral appeal to the faithful, calling them to active participation in resolving the environmental crisis. Since human behavior stems from how people see themselves in relation to their environment, this appeal is deeply spiritual and existential. As White (1967) noted, what people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them.

Some critics have argued that Christianity, through its misinterpretation of Genesis, has historically contributed to an exploitative view of nature. The encyclical seeks to correct this by emphasizing that human dominion does not mean domination. Pope Francis warns against literalist readings of Scripture that ignore the relational and moral responsibility embedded in the biblical message.

Librová (1994) contrasts Christian views with ancient pagan traditions, which expressed awe and reverence toward the natural world. In this sense, *Laudato Si'* becomes a theological corrective – acknowledging the spiritual dimension of nature and the moral failure of purely utilitarian attitudes toward it. As White concluded, “*Since the roots of our ecological crisis are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious*” (1967, 1205).

Therefore, the encyclical does not merely analyze environmental challenges – it mobilizes spiritual and ethical resources within the Christian tradition to foster a renewed moral commitment. If this message reaches beyond Church documents and is lived out by Christian communities, it may contribute meaningfully to global ecological renewal.

## Conclusion

The intellectual and spiritual legacy of Saints Cyril and Methodius has left a lasting imprint on the cultural and religious history of Europe. This article has sought to demonstrate the continuity between their mission and the contemporary values and principles of sustainable development as articulated in the social teaching of the Catholic Church.

Central to this legacy are values such as respect for pluralism and cultural diversity, personal responsibility, and the inviolable dignity of the human person. These principles remain foundational to any effort aimed at building a just and sustainable future (Pavlíková – Zalec 2019).

In this context, both Pope Francis and various secular thinkers call for a departure from inadequate anthropocentric interpretations of the Book of Genesis. Instead, they advocate for a transformative process of moral motivation and education, inviting the Christian community to acknowledge its responsibility and take action in addressing the ecological crisis. However, the effectiveness of the encyclical *Laudato Si'* will depend not only on its presence in Church documents but also on its implementation in everyday life – by bishops, priests, religious communities, parishes, Catholic schools, and Christian families. A truly religious response to the challenges of sustainable development requires two key elements: visibility in Church discourse and embodiment in concrete daily practice.

As Librová (1994) aptly notes: “*Christian communities, and especially their leaders, can become instruments for spreading ecologically beneficial forms of thinking, feeling, and acting. When a priest leaves his car in the garage and takes a bicycle, it does not merely spark conversation – it also inspires reflection and imitation.*” Of course, personal involvement brings risks, as the Thessalonian brothers themselves experienced. From the very beginning, the Gospel message has met with resistance and misunderstanding (Blaščíková – Nemec 2023). Yet, ideas rooted in the Christian

tradition – when linked to real ecological challenges and consistently lived – can help repair the spiritual distance between humanity and nature.

Ultimately, living according to the Gospel and its values presents a meaningful path toward a sustainable future. It is a path that challenges us not only ecologically, but also morally and spiritually.

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