



Integral Ecology and the Pursuit of Justice in Martin Luther King, Jr. and Catholic Social Thought

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EXPERIENCE

In the encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis describes Integral Ecology as “a vision capable of taking into account every aspect of today’s global crises.”¹ He writes, “We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature.”²



Similarly, the vision of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. contained an integrated approach to ending injustice in his day. Dr. King inspired the people of his time and subsequent generations with his passionate pursuit of justice. He taught us that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice,” and that “the time is always right to do what is right.” He inspired us to believe that a dream can capture the heart of a nation and motivate change.

As we celebrate Dr. King’s legacy this month, let us consider how he challenges us to see the interrelatedness of our contemporary social and ecological crises. Although it can be tempting to limit Dr. King’s influence to the explicit racial injustice prevalent in his time, and to congratulate ourselves on having come so far from the dark reality of forced racial segregation, oppression, and violence, Dr. King’s thought should inspire us to see the interconnections between injustices and to engage in solutions that address them accordingly.

In light of his influence, we must recognize that we have not come far enough.

ANALYSIS

When, as a whole, African-American people still lag far behind their white counterparts in education, wealth, health, housing, and job security; when they are targeted by police and community watch participants, incarcerated, and receive the death penalty at much higher rates than their white counterparts – we have not come far enough.

Although many people now reject overt racism, the societal institutions that developed when African-Americans were enslaved continue to be skewed in favor of white people. In a statement that applies just as much today as to 1967, Dr. King emphasizes that “when the Constitution was written, a strange

formula to determine taxes and representation declared that the Negro was 60 percent of a person. Today, another curious formula seems to declare [they are] 50 percent of a person. Of the good things in life [they have] approximately one-half those of whites; of the bad [they have] twice those of whites.”

When more than 40 million people are held captive in modern day slavery – we have not come far enough.

Today, many of us participate in perpetuating the exploitation of others in order to live more luxuriously. Businesses hold down costs through the use of slave labor, and we purchase goods such as coffee, chocolate, and clothing without pausing to look into their supply chains. Further, we often do not do all we can, personally or politically, to eradicate the insecurities – such as poverty and lack of education – that make a person vulnerable to trafficking. In the words of Dr. King, “We have deluded ourselves into believing the myth that Capitalism grew and prospered out of the Protestant ethic of hard work and sacrifice. The fact is that capitalism was built on the exploitation and suffering of black slaves and continues to thrive on the exploitation of the poor.”³ Elsewhere, he emphasizes, “Every [person] must decide whether [he or she] will walk in the light of creative altruism or the darkness of destructive selfishness.”⁴

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- MLK*

When migrants and refugees seeking refuge at our borders are profiled and denied humane treatment based on their economic status, skin color, and culture – we have not come far enough.

The refusal to hear asylum claims and reluctance to reform the immigration system to allow more

people to have an easier pathway to legal migration are often grounded in national security and cultural concerns: “They bring crime;”⁵ “They are uneducated and drain our resources;”⁶ “If we let them in, this nation would cease to be the nation we know and love.”⁷



However, these reasons fail when confronted with factual information. Immigrants are often forced to migrate because they are fleeing violence in their home countries – not bringing it with them, and studies show that the presence of immigrants in North American cities actually decreases the amount of crime.⁸ Immigrants, as a whole, have education levels that equal or surpass that of their North American counterparts, and by the second generation, most immigrant populations meet or exceed equivalent educational levels.⁹ Further, immigrants – both authorized and undocumented – significantly boost host economies.¹⁰ In light of this information, we can only assume that the worries about accepting more immigrants boil down to concern about the “integrity” of the host nation.

Thinking especially of the immigrants at the U.S. southern border – the color of their skin, language and cultural differences, and the fact that they might be poor motivate the diatribes and harsh policies toward them. While “open borders” is not a feasible or desirable outcome according to Catholic social thought (CST), closed borders must not be the result of selfishness, racism, or classism.¹¹ As Dr. King reminds us, “Cowardice asks the question, ‘Is it safe?’ Expediency asks the question, ‘Is it politic?’ Vanity asks the question, ‘Is it popular?’ But

conscience asks the question, 'Is it right?' And there comes a point when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but one must take it because [his or her] conscience [says] that it is right."¹²

Considering what is right concerning other nations and foreign people affected by poverty and violence, King reflects:

"Can we in America stand idly by and not be concerned about these conditions?" ... Oh no, because the destiny of the United States is tied up with the destiny of India. And, therefore, we should use our vast resources of wealth to aid these undeveloped countries that are undeveloped because the people have been dominated politically, exploited economically, segregated, and humiliated across the centuries by foreign powers. ... And I found myself saying maybe we in the United States have spent far too much money in establishing military bases around the world rather than establishing bases of genuine concern and understanding.¹³

There comes a point when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but one must take it because [his or her] conscience [says] that it is right. - MLK

When women are told that their worth depends on their sexuality and their productivity on whether they limit their child-bearing, we have not come far enough.

The "Me Too" movement has illuminated the oppression and objectification women experience throughout their lives. It has motivated changes that we hope will facilitate a restructuring of social norms and institutions to enable the flourishing of women. As Dr. King puts it, "There comes a time when people get tired of being pushed out of the

glittering sunlight of life's July and left standing amid the piercing chill of an alpine November." While there is contentious debate over whether women have a "right to choose," we never seem to address the core issue of creating a social and economic environment that guarantees women the capacity to care for their children with economic security, equal job security and potential for promotion, decent healthcare, housing, and quality education. A society that values women will value and promote the whole woman – capacity to bear children included.



When our consumeristic habits trump natural life, and we are willing to destroy ecosystems and expedite climate change for the sake of financial gains or expediency – we have not come far enough.

The refusal of corporations and governments to curb their emissions and environmental footprints, and the reluctance of many individuals to live more sustainably, put the Earth and all creatures – including human beings – at tremendous risk. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has issued a report stating that human beings have approximately twelve years to significantly limit our environmental impact, or we will change our planet irrevocably.¹⁴ This not only will affect the environment, but it will leave a vastly different and more unstable world for the next generation. One effect will be that mass migrations will occur as people – especially the poor in developing nations – are forced to leave their homes because climate events make their land untenable. In turn, economies will be forced to address the crisis of

mass migration and increased property destruction from weather events, which will limit the funds available for economy-building and social initiatives. As Dr. King recognizes, “Without ... spiritual and moral reawakening we shall destroy ourselves in the misuse of our own instruments.”¹⁵ Later, he explains,

We become so involved in getting our big cars and our big bank accounts and our beautiful homes that we unconsciously forget about this third dimension. We become so involved in looking at the [human]-made lights of the city that we unconsciously forget to look up and think about that great cosmic light. It gets up early in the morning in the eastern horizon and paints its technicolor across the blue, a light that [humans] could never make. We become so involved in looking at our skyscraping buildings, and we unconsciously forget to think about the gigantic mountains kissing the sky, something that [humans] could never make.¹⁶



REFLECTION

Each of these examples expresses the influence of the lie that in order to flourish, we must dominate other creatures of God. St. Augustine recognized that a lust for domination is at the root of all sin¹⁷ – human beings always seek to control others, instead of encountering them as

fellow creatures of God. Every instance of domination feeds this lie and perpetuates the tendency to dominate others across all spheres of life.

Fortunately, CST maintains the dignity of every creature and reassures us that our flourishing depends not on our ability to subjugate a more vulnerable creature, but on our participation in bringing all creatures to fullness. In the words of Pope Francis, we are called “to accept the world as a sacrament of communion, as a way of sharing with God and our neighbours on a global scale. It is our humble conviction that the divine and the human meet in the slightest detail in the seamless garment of God’s creation, in the last speck of dust of our planet.”¹⁸ Dr. King advances this perspective, as well: “It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. ... Whatever effects one directly, affects all indirectly. ... We aren’t going to have peace on Earth until we recognize this basic fact of the interrelated structure of all reality.”¹⁹

This concept in CST is called “integral ecology” – it expresses this sense that all of creation is interconnected, and our pursuit of justice depends upon a commitment to this reality. Further, integral ecology calls us to a conversion of consciousness that is “radical: a refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled.”²⁰ We are called to live in communion with other human beings and all of creation, recognizing the reflection of God in the tallest mountain and the smallest person, and recognizing that, as Dr. King would put it, “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”²¹

*The Triune God impels us into the heart of the world
to be women of peace, hope, and love.
– SSND 24th Directional Statement*

ACTION

As SSNDs, “The Triune God impels us into the heart of the world to be women of peace, hope, and love.” Below are some ways you can work for justice and peace in all of creation:

1. Commit to living more sustainably and humbly to counter the culture of domination and to facilitate justice for the Earth and all creation. Take time to check for supply chain transgressions, and [adopt more habits that enable the flourishing of others and the Earth](#).
2. Find initiatives in your community that address areas of local concern, and commit to joining their efforts.
3. Pray for peace and justice for all of creation, and repent for succumbing to the “lust to dominate.” Participate in the prayer service, [Praying with Martin Luther King, Jr.](#), or pray this [Rosary for Justice and Peace](#).

¹ *Laudato Si'*, 4.

² Ibid.

³ cite

⁴ King, *Strength to Love*, “Sermon: Three Dimensions of a Complete Life.”

⁵ Cf. Donald Trump, <http://time.com/5497569/donald-trump-oval-office-address-transcript/>

⁶ Cf. Donald Trump, <http://time.com/5497569/donald-trump-oval-office-address-transcript/>

⁷ Cf. Laura Ingraham, <https://thehill.com/homenews/media/401044-laura-ingraham-america-as-we-know-it-doesnt-exist-anymore-due-to-demographic>

⁸ <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2018/03/30/the-myth-of-the-criminal-immigrant>

⁹ <https://www.aacu.org/aacu-news/newsletter/immigrants-and-higher-education>

¹⁰ <https://www.brookings.edu/research/a-dozen-facts-about-immigration/>

¹¹ <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/immigration/catholic-teaching-on-immigration-and-the-movement-of-peoples.cfm>

¹² http://www.aavw.org/special_features/speeches_speech_king04.html

¹³ http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/Vol06Scans/28Feb1960TheThreeDimensionsofaCompleteLife.pdf

¹⁴ <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>

¹⁵ King, *Strength to Love*, 73.

¹⁶ http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/Vol06Scans/28Feb1960TheThreeDimensionsofaCompleteLife.pdf

¹⁷ Cf. Augustine, *City of God*, I.

¹⁸ *Laudato Si'*, 9.

¹⁹ King, “Christmas Sermon on Peace.”

²⁰ *Laudato Si'*, 18.

²¹ King, *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*.