

Pope Francis and the Idea of Progress



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1. “Progress” is one of the most commonly used words. It is practically synonymous with improvement, refinement or evolution, while its correlative, “regression,” indicates a backward movement, decay or return to a less advanced or primitive stage. The need for progress is inherent in human nature. It takes place through human activities in the historical and social environment, which, in turn, is transformed and modified. History is made up of the relationships that people establish among themselves and with the environment, seeking to develop their potential, progressing. The limits of progress are ultimately the limits of human nature, which can always be moved further forward but never suppressed.

Alongside this generic meaning of progress, modernity has introduced the myth of indefinite progress, which postulates the final and total victory of humanity over pain, evil and death. Despite its refutation by experience and critical thought, it is a myth that preserves and exercises its power of sentimental suggestion and is destined to rise again in all would-be utopias. Today it is made more credible by the developments of science and technology.^[1]

The Second Vatican Council, which constitutes the highest expression of the Church’s Magisterium in the last century, recognized human progress made “especially with the help of science and technology,” which enabled humankind to extend its “dominion over almost the whole of nature,”^[2] such that “the major development of the material and human sciences”^[3] can be a prelude to “a more perfect temporal order.”^[4] The Church’s only concern is that “today’s progress in science and technology

can foster a certain exclusive emphasis on observable data, and an agnosticism about everything else. The methods of investigation which these sciences use can be wrongly considered as the supreme rule for guiding the search for the whole truth.”^[61]

As you can see, the Council speaks of progress in its most common and current sense. Other ecclesiastical documents almost always do likewise. So does ordinary preaching. It seems to us therefore that at the level of the Magisterium, for the first time, it is Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato si’* that examines clearly the idea, the meaning and the myth of indefinite progress. We do not intend here to comment on the encyclical and the six chapters into which it is divided, but only to excerpt from them what refers directly to that idea.

The technique of possession

When the American explorers set foot on the moon, that day when history was made, Paul VI wrote to NASA: *Vidimus et admirati sumus*. The same astonished admiration is embodied in Bergoglio’s judgment on progress: “We are the beneficiaries of two centuries of enormous waves of change: steam engines, railways, the telegraph, electricity, automobiles, airplanes, chemical industries, modern medicine, information technology and, more recently, the digital revolution, robotics, biotechnologies and nanotechnologies. It is right to rejoice in these advances and to be excited by the immense possibilities that they continue to open up before us, [...]. Technology has remedied countless evils that afflicted and limited human beings.”^[61]

However, “each age tends to have only a meagre awareness of its own limitations”^[62] and from the progress achieved (“nuclear energy, biotechnology, information technology, knowledge of our own DNA and other potentialities”) “tremendous power” is bestowed on “those who hold the knowledge and especially the economic power to exploit it.” Thus, “never has humanity had such power over itself, yet nothing ensures that it will be used wisely, particularly when we consider how it is currently being used.”^[63] The danger and fear arise from what the pope considers “a notable anthropocentric excess.”^[64] And he explains it thus.

The subject, or modern person, stands before any object with a logical-rational process and tends to possess it, dominating and transforming it with the experimentation proper to the scientific method, “as if the subject were in front of a shapeless reality totally available for its manipulation,” seeking to “extract everything possible from things through the imposition of the human hand”; and from here “one easily passes to the idea of infinite or unlimited growth,” which “supposes the lie about the infinite availability of the planet’s goods, which leads to ‘squeezing’ it to the limit and beyond the limit.”^[65] “The care of the common home,” which is the general theme of

the encyclical, does not require that we put a brake on human creativity, but certainly requires that we today reconsider the effects, the context and the ethical limits of our activity.^[11]

“Anthropocentric excess” or “deviant anthropocentrism” produces practical relativism. “When human beings place themselves at the center, they give absolute priority to immediate convenience and all else becomes relative. Hence we should not be surprised to find, in conjunction with the omnipresent technocratic paradigm and the cult of unlimited human power, the rise of a relativism that sees everything as irrelevant unless it serves one’s own immediate interests.”^[12]

In a dramatic paragraph, the pope inserts into his survey of this culture of relativism and this pathology of the subject the very sad phenomena that are before our dismayed eyes: social and environmental degradation, the overpowering of people who are reduced to forced labor or slavery, the sexual exploitation of children, the abandonment of old people, human trafficking, organized crime, drug trafficking, the bloody trade in diamonds and the skins of endangered animals. When interest and supposed necessity prevail over objective truths and stable ethical principles, political programs and the law itself are of little use, “because when it is culture that corrupts us [...], laws will be understood only as arbitrary impositions and obstacles to avoid.”^[13] And, “equally, when technology does not recognize the great ethical principles, it ends up considering any practice legitimate.”^[14] It would be otiose to give examples.

From the “awareness of the gravity of the cultural and ecological crisis,”^[15] the pope goes back with no illusions to the foundations of modern culture, to the “criticism of the ‘myths’ of modernity based on instrumental reason (individualism, indefinite progress, competition, consumerism, market without rules.)”^[16] Such a complex situation cannot be remedied by individuals, who “can lose their ability and freedom to escape the utilitarian mindset, and end up prey to an unethical consumerism bereft of social or ecological awareness.”^[17] What is needed is a community conversion that responds, in all sectors, from school to parish and politics, to the educational challenge and promotes behavior corresponding to the common desire to “move away from utilitarian pragmatism.”^[18]

The central moment of such a conversion consists in the conviction that we must now abandon “irrational confidence in progress” and develop “a sincere and painful concern about what is happening to our planet,”^[19] with a reconsideration of the ethical values within which science and technology research must be conducted.^[20] The value and fragility of nature are reasons and imperatives to “put an end to the modern myth of unlimited material progress.”^[21]

Science and Technology

A good part of the encyclical is a meditation on the nature and tasks of science and the applications of technology. Both of them, in fact, heavily influence both people's lives and the functioning of society and are at the root of many difficulties in today's world. One need only think of their products, not at all harmless, which govern lifestyles and, without thinking, orient the lives of all according to the desires of certain powerful interests.^[22] "The technological paradigm has become so dominant that it would be difficult to do without its resources and even more difficult to utilize them without being dominated by their internal logic. It has become counter-cultural to choose a lifestyle whose goals are even partly independent of technology, of its costs and its power to globalize and make us all the same."^[23]

The overwhelming power of science and technology becomes dominant when, in the current fragmentation of knowledge that takes away the sense of the totality and of the relationships that exist between the sciences and what they purport to explain, it becomes an ethical horizon of reference and a unique criterion to interpret existence.^[24] The "megalomaniac unbridledness"^[25] of contemporary society does not seem to favor confidence in the future among the people, who nevertheless make use of the progress of science and technology. On the one hand, they do not dream of renouncing what progress makes available to them; on the other, they feel "a superficiality that pulls us in one direction," without being able to stop "to recover depth in life."^[26] The result is "an ethical and cultural deterioration, which accompanies the ecological one." It is a danger that the pope alerts us to: "Men and women of our postmodern world run the risk of rampant individualism, and many problems of society are connected with today's self-centered culture of instant gratification. We see this in the crisis of family and social ties and the difficulties in recognizing the other."^[27] And he concludes: "A technological and economic development that does not leave in its wake a better world and an integrally higher quality of life cannot be considered progress."^[28]

In order to heal and prevent, one task among others is more urgent: "Dialogue among the various sciences is likewise needed, since each can tend to become enclosed in its own language, while specialization leads to a certain isolation and the absolutization of its own field of knowledge."^[29]

Then there is a decisive task that must particularly engage religions: "Any technical solution that science claims to offer will be powerless to solve the serious problems of our world if humanity loses its compass, if we lose sight of the great motivations that make it possible for us to live in harmony, to make sacrifices and to treat others well."^[30]

It would be a mistake to think *Laudato si'* is a mere list of complaints, concerns and warnings, or as the expression of preconceived pessimism. Instead, it arises from the very religious mission of the Church, among

which are numbered “the tasks, the light and the forces that can contribute to building and consolidating the human community according to divine law.”^[31]

This evangelical and apostolic mission includes an unfailing hope. “Yet all is not lost. Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new start, despite their mental and social conditioning. We are able to take an honest look at ourselves, to acknowledge our deep dissatisfaction, and to embark on new paths to authentic freedom. No system can completely suppress our openness to what is good, true and beautiful, or our God-given ability to respond to his grace at work deep in our hearts.”^[32]

An authoritative comment

In the paragraphs that deal with the theme of indefinite progress – the only ones we have dealt with here – *Laudato Si'* continues the Church's teaching on progress, broadening the concept, taking into consideration what has been established in Western culture since the 18th century. The pope offers an authoritative comment on this modern idea of progress based on the following statements.

Science, technology and applied research are good in themselves. The result of human ingenuity, they create resources that promote integral human well-being and are at the service of all. They reach this goal when they respect in the human person the limits of their action and accept the rule of moral values. On their own, that is, without comparison with other knowledge, the experimental sciences do not possess the capacity to indicate the meaning of existence and the very progress they produce. Science, technology and applied research are not morally neutral activities. The worth of their activity cannot be evaluated and justified only for their practical usefulness for some, forgetting the damage suffered by others, and for the support they receive from dominant ideologies. They are asked to be at the service of the human person and our inalienable rights: which, for believers, means conformity to God's plan and will.^[33]

It has rightly been noted that the Holy Father, with this encyclical of his, calls everyone to individual and social responsibilities, to a conversion, a *metanoia* of thinking and acting, to an integral anthropology that conceives the person as a being in relation and interdependence, co-responsible for the world and other people, and open to transcendence.^[34]

[1] See N. Petruzzellis, “Progresso”, in *Enciclopedia Filosofica*, vol. III, Florence, Sansoni, 1957, 1656-58.

[2] Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 33.

[3] *Ibid.*, No. 54.

[4] *Ibid.*, No. 4.

[5] *Ibid.*, No. 57.

[6] Francis, Encyclical *Laudato Si'*, No. 102.

[7] *Ibid.*, No. 105.

[8] *Ibid.*, No. 104.

[9] *Ibid.*, No. 116.

[10] *Ibid.*, No. 106.

[11] *Ibid.*, No. 131.

[12] *Ibid.*, No. 122.

[13] *Ibid.*, No. 123.

[14] *Ibid.*, No. 136.

[15] *Ibid.*, No. 209.

[16] *Ibid.*, No. 210.

[17] *Ibid.*, No. 219.

[18] *Ibid.*, No. 215.

[19] *Ibid.*, No. 19.

[20] *Ibid.*, No. 60.

[21] *Ibid.*, No. 78. See also C. Casalone, “Una ricerca etica condivisa nell’era digitale”, in *Civ. Catt.* 2020 II 30-43.

[22] See *ibid.* No. 107.

[23] *Ibid.*, No. 108.

[24] *Ibid.*, No. 110.

[25] *Ibid.*, No. 114.

[26] *Ibid.*, No. 113.

[27] *Ibid.*, No. 162.

[28] *Ibid.*, No. 194.

[29] *Ibid.*, No. 201.

[30] *Ibid.*, No. 200.

[31] Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 42.

[32] Francis, Encyclical *Laudato Si'*, No. 205.

[33] Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Nos. 2293 f.

[34] Cf. F. J. Froján Madero, "Brevi pontifici scomparsi", in *Oss. Rom.*, July 23, 2015, 5