**Environmental education in religion classes as a source of hope in the light of the exhortation *Laudate Deum***

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Modern man experiences various crises. Children and youth are familiar with them as well. One of the issues encountered is the global climate crisis. Climate change is doing more and more harm to lives of many individuals and families. Its effects can be seen in health, jobs, access to resources, housing, forced migration and other areas. This is a global social problem closely related to the dignity of human life. Climate change is one of the major challenges our societies and the global community have to deal with. Effects of climate change are borne by the young generation, too. The exhortation *Laudate Deum*, properly used during religion lessons, can enhance environmental education of children and the young by pointing out sources of comfort and hope.

**1. Global climate crisis**

No matter how hard we try to deny them, signs of climate change are increasingly obvious. No one can ignore the fact that in recent years we have witnessed extreme natural phenomena, frequent periods of exceptional heat, droughts, volcanic eruptions,as well as floods and tsunamis. It is true that not all disasters can be attributed to global climate change. However, it must be acknowledged that some human-induced climate changes significantly increase likelihood of more frequent and intense extreme events. It is known that every time the global temperature rises by 0.5 degrees Celsius, the intensity and frequency of torrential rains and floods, severe droughts, extreme heat and heavy snowfall go up (IPCC, *Climate Change 2021*, *The Physical Science Basis*, Cambridge and New York 2021, B.2.2). If we have had heat waves several times a year so far, - what will happen with a global temperature increase of 1.5 degrees Celsius, which we are not far away from? Such heat waves will be much more frequent and intense. If 2 degrees are exceeded, the ice caps of Greenland and much of Antarctica will melt completely, and this will lead to far-reaching and very serious consequences for everyone (IPCC, *Climate Change 2023*, *Synthesis Report*, *Summary for Policymakers*, B.3.2).

Some claim, quite often, that the poor who have too many children. They try to solve the problem by mutilating women in less developed countries. As usual, it seems that the poor are to blame. But in fact, a very low percentage of the world's richest population pollutes more, compared to 50 percent of the world's poorest population, and the per capita emissions of the richest countries are much higher than those of the poorest ones (https://www.unep.org/resources/emissions-gap-report-2022).

It is often claimed that efforts to mitigate climate change by reducing the use of fossil fuels and developing cleaner energy sources will lead to a reduction in the number of jobs. The reality is that millions of people are losing their jobs due to various consequences of climate change. Rising sea levels, droughts and many other phenomena affecting the planet have caused many people to lose their jobs. On the other hand, the transition to renewable forms of energy, properly managed, as well as efforts to adapt to the damage caused by climate change, are capable of generating countless jobs in different sectors. Therefore, politicians and entrepreneurs must address this issue immediately (LD 10).

**2. Human causes**

The human – “anthropogenic” - causes of climate change can no longer be doubted. Concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, which cause global warming, remained stable until the 19th century, below 300 parts per million by volume. However, in the middle of this century, along the development of industry, emissions began to rise. The increase accelerated over the past fifty years, which has been confirmed by the Mauna Loa Observatory, which has been measuring carbon dioxide daily since 1958. In May 2015, carbon dioxide emissions reached an all-time high of 400 parts per million, reaching 423 in June 2023 (https://www.gml.noaa.gov/ccgg/trends/). More than 42 percent of total net emissions since 1850 occurred after 1990 (IPCC, *Climate Change 2023*, *Synthesis Report*, *Summary for Policymakers*, A.1.3).

At the same time, we note that over the past fifty years the temperature has been rising at an unprecedented rate, which has been unprecedented in the past two thousand years. During this period, the warming trend was 0.15 degrees Celsius per decade, twice as much as in the past 150 years. From 1850 up till now, the global temperature has risen by 1.1 degrees Celsius; the phenomenon is more widespread in the polar regions. At this rate, it is quite possible that in ten years we will reach the upper limit of 1.5 degrees Celsius. The growth has occurred not only on the surface of the Earth, but also several kilometers above, in the atmosphere, as well as on the surface of the oceans, and even hundreds of meters below. It has also increased the acidification of the seas and lowered oxygen levels. Glaciers are retreating, snow cover is decreasing, and sea levels are steadily rising (IPCC, *Synthesis Report of the Sixth Assessment Report (20/03/2023): AR6 Synthesis Report: Climate Change 2023*).

There is no denying the convergence of these global climate phenomena with the accelerated growth of greenhouse gas emissions, especially since the mid-20th century. The vast majority of climate scientists acknowledge this correlation. Unfortunately, the climate crisis is of no interest to the major economic powers, which are concerned with achieving maximum profit at the lowest cost and in the shortest possible time.

**3. Spiritual motivations of school religion lessons as a response to the crisis**

Surely authentic faith strengthens human heart and changes entire life, transforms personal goals, enlightens relationships with others and bonds with all of creation. Places where children and young people build authentic faith are, inter alia, school religious lessons. Undoubtedly, environmental education during religious lessons at school can be a source of hope in the face of today's environmental crisis. Therefore, it is worth proposing content and motivations that, implemented and presented by religious teachers, can help the modern generation build a new quality of care for our common home. Pro-ecological inspiration can be found in the apostolic exhortation *Laudate Deum*, which Pope Francis published eight years after signing the encyclical *Laudato si’*.

**3.1. In the light of faith**

The Bible tells us: “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” ( *Gen* 1:31). His is “the earth with all that is in it” ( *Deut* 10:14). Therefore, he tells us: For this reason, he tells us that, “the land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants” ( *Lev* 25:23). Hence, “responsibility for God’s earth means that human beings, endowed with intelligence, must respect the laws of nature and the delicate equilibria existing between the creatures of this world” (LD 62, LS 68). On the other hand, “the universe as a whole, in all its manifold relationships, shows forth the inexhaustible richness of God”. Hence, to be wise, “we need to grasp the variety of things in their multiple relationships” (LD 63, LS 107). On this path of wisdom, the fact that many species are disappearing and the climate crisis threatens lives of so many beings is critically important.

Jesus “was able to invite others to be attentive to the beauty that there is in the world because he himself was in constant touch with nature, lending it an attraction full of fondness and wonder. As he made his way throughout the land, he often stopped to contemplate the beauty sown by his Father, and invited his disciples to perceive a divine message in things” (LD 64, LS 97). At the same time, “the creatures of this world no longer appear to us under merely natural guise, because the risen One is mysteriously holding them to himself and directing them towards fullness as their end. The very flowers of the field and the birds which his human eyes contemplated and admired are now imbued with his radiant presence” (LD 65, LS 100). If “the universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely… there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person’s face” (LD 65, LS 233). The world sings of God's infinite love. One of the areas where children and young people discover such truth about God are school religious lessons.

**3.2. Walking in communion and responsibility**

God has united us with all His creatures. The Judaeo-Christian vision of the cosmos defends the unique and central value of the human being amid the marvellous concert of all God’s creatures, but today we see ourselves forced to realize that it is only possible to sustain a “situated anthropocentrism” (LD 67). This means that human life is incomprehensible and impossible to sustain without other creatures. “This is the basis of our conviction that, as part of the universe, called into being by one Father, all of us are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family, a sublime communion which fills us with a sacred, affectionate and humble respect (LS 89). This is not a product of our own will; its origin lies elsewhere, in the depths of our being, since “God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement” (LD 68). In this way, we put an end to the idea of an autonomous, omnipotent and unlimited human being and reflect on ourselves to understand ourselves in a more humble and richer way. Religion teachers should accompany the catechized on this journey of reconciliation with the world that hosts us, and encourage them to enrich it with their own contributions. After all, this involvement of children and young people has to do with personal dignity and great values. At the same time, students need to be made aware that the most effective solutions will not come only from individual efforts, but above all from major political decisions on the national and international level (LD 69). Nevertheless, anything that affects the entire issue and allows for avoiding a 0.1 degree Celsius rise in global temperature may already be enough to save many people from suffering. Yet what is important is something less quantitative: the need to realize that there are no lasting changes without cultural changes, without a maturing of lifestyles and convictions within societies, and there are no cultural changes without personal changes (LD 70). These are the basic tasks of environmental education in religious formation at schools.

Efforts by households to reduce pollution and waste, and to consume with prudence, are creating a new culture. The mere fact that personal, family and community habits are changing is contributing to greater concern about the unfulfilled responsibilities of the political sectors and indignation at the lack of interest shown by the powerful. Even though this does not immediately produce a notable effect from the quantitative standpoint, we are helping to bring about large processes of transformation rising from deep within society (LD 71). This is what religious instruction in school, among other things, is supposed to do today.

Summing up, another papal document, the apostolic exhortation *Laudate Deum*, properly used by catechists when teaching religion lessons can materially improve environmental education of the young generation and set new directions for caring for our common home.