

RADICAL HOPE AND INTERGENERATIONAL SOLIDARITY:
EDUCATION IN A TIME OF CLIMATE AND THEOLOGICAL EMERGENCY

A Talk at the Conference, “Giovani, Educazione Ed Ecologia”

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Good afternoon and thank you for inviting me to be with you, at Salesian Pontifical University. Thank you, very distinguished chairwoman. Thank you, skilled translator. Thank you, those who are in the live audience and special thanks to whomever brought the fresh flowers!

It is an honor to speak with you today regarding “Youth, Education and Ecology.” Allow me to acknowledge Professor Llanos, Claudia Giorgini, Claudia Pierini, and all who arranged my visit. I also wish to express my profound gratitude to Father Joshtrom Kureethadam. I admire his scholarship and his great work in the world. I imagine that he must be a gifted teacher... I continue to be moved by his inspiring humility.

Allow me to begin with a prayer from Laudato Sí, Mi Signore [“Praise be to you, my Lord”]. It is entitled, “A Prayer for Our Earth”. Let us pray...

All-powerful God, you are present in the whole universe and in the smallest of your creatures. You Embrace with your tenderness all that exists.

Pour out upon us the power of your love, that we may protect life and beauty.

Fill us with peace, that we may live as brothers and sisters, harming no one.

O God of the poor, help us to rescue the abandoned and forgotten of this earth,
so precious in your eyes.

Bring healing to our lives, that we may protect the world and not prey on it,
that we may sow beauty, not pollution and destruction.

Touch the hearts of those who look only for gain at the expense of the poor
and the earth. Teach us to discover the worth of each thing, to be filled with
awe and contemplation, to recognize that we are profoundly united with every
creature. As we journey towards your infinite light. We thank you for being
with us each day. Encourage us, we pray, in our struggle for justice, love and
peace.

Amen.

Building on our invocation prayer, let us begin to look at the challenges of the prayer for
education. The subtitle of my talk is “Education in a Time of Climate and Theological
Emergency.”

Allow me to describe how I see the context for our work in education – as students, as
professors, as people of faith who believe in the power of education as a responsibility to future
generations. We live in a climate-changed world. It is very difficult to face the prospect of the
coming disruption of life on Earth as we have known it. Clearly, we as a human society have not
made the economic and social changes necessary to avoid the predicted consequences of our
actions.

Now we face something even more difficult – the predicted consequences are already with us – we live in a climate-changed world. We are living in the greatest existential crisis humankind has ever faced.

A brief example from my countries... in the USA, one in three Americans have been directly impacted by fires, floods, drought, or extreme weather events caused by human-caused climate change. This comes at enormous human and economic cost. Even in the richest countries. And in Australia – I was there for the 2019 fires and the unbearable heat – and now, floods of biblical proportions! This is not the place to enumerate the conditions of climate collapse – but they are dire.

This month, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released the third and final section of its comprehensive review of climate science. This report takes seven years, so this is the last warning before we are good and truly set on the path to climate breakdown. With a massive effort by governments, business, and individuals, we can make changes – but it is now or never. And, as the report points out, there are many “climate-blocking activities” by the fossil fuel industry. This was not an unavoidable situation. Half of all the emissions in history have been in the last 25 years. The industry knew the consequences of their profit-making business model.

Consider for a moment this tragic thought – all the conditions that produced God’s creation as we have known it no longer exist. All the conditions that produced human civilization are no longer with us. Indeed, we face a civilizational crisis. This anthropogenic climate change has created a climate emergency.

At the risk of catastrophizing, I also speak in my subtitle of a “theological emergency.” Here, I am not speaking of theology of crisis, or neo-orthodoxy – I am not a theologian. I am

simply saying that the continuity of God’s creation is in jeopardy – and that this creates an emergency for faith study and faith practice. I am speaking as an educator interested in the study of faith and faith practice.

We also need, it seems to me, a practical theology to help us discern how to live in a climate emergency. Let me say that we are at a turning point in religious thought as we seek to find a worldview that guides us toward the loving of the world in crisis and the healing of the world in crisis.

For the purpose of today’s seminar, we need a theology that provides a foundation for reimagining education in a time of emergency. We need a theology that provides meaning and purpose for youth. We need a theology that can show the way toward the spiritual transformation needed to generate radical hope and intergenerational solidarity. I believe the current crisis has spiritual roots and must, therefore, have a spiritual resolution.

In the title, I identified two major ideas: radical hope and intergenerational solidarity. Allow me to take this second concept first – intergenerational solidarity.

Pope Frances has widely called for a “pact on education for and with future generations.” The key ethical principle for such a pact and for a sustainable future is that of “intergenerational equity.” The Earth Charter states that we must:

Secure Earth’s bounty and beauty for present and future generations.

- a. Recognize that the freedom of action of each generation is qualified for the needs of future generations.
- b. Transmit to future generations values, traditions, and institutions that support the long-term flourishing of Earth’s human and ecological communities (Principle 4).

As we think about what kind of education we need, surely we need that which valorizes the participation of younger generations and authenticates their absolute right to a future undiminished by the present generations in power.

By the way, I commend the full Earth Charter to you. It is an inspiration as we look to education for our times. The Earth Charter had a statement of ethical principles for sustainability. The Earth Charter Initiative is the most open and participatory consultation process ever conducted in connection with the drafting of an international document. Tens of thousands of individuals and hundreds of organizations from all regions of the world, different cultures, and diverse sectors of society participated. The Earth Charter was shaped by experts, government and civil society leaders, students, and representatives from Indigenous groups and grassroots communities. In addition to the credibility of the process itself, extensive consultations with religious and spiritual leaders illuminated the ethical principles. Through the remarkable eleven-year process of research into a variety of philosophical and scientific fields, law and soft law, Indigenous wisdom and treaties, and all the major faith traditions, the Earth Charter has tapped into deep truths about the universe.

Pope Francis wrote in Laudato Sí,

The Earth Charter asked us to leave behind a period of self-destruction and make a new start, but we have not as yet developed a universal awareness needed to achieve this. Here, he says that courageous challenge, “as never before in history, common history beckons us to seek a new beginning... Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening for life, the firm resolve to achieve

sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace, and the joyful celebration of life (para. 207).

In explicitly citing one of the most stirring passages from the Earth Charter, Pope Francis calls us to the educational and spiritual challenges we must meet for such “a new beginning.”

Part of the challenge we face in education is distress about the climate emergency felt by young people. A recent unpublished 2021 study by Caroline Hickman, and others, titled “Young People’s Voices on Climate Anxiety, Governmental Betrayal and Moral Injury: A Global Phenomenon,” shows how deep the crisis of climate concern among youth is. The authors conclude:

Distress about climate change is associated with young people perceiving that they have no future that humanity is doomed that governments are failing to respond adequately, and with feelings of betrayal and abandonment by governments and adults. These are chronic stressors which will have significant long-lasting and incremental implications on the mental health of children and young people. The failure of governments to adequately address climate change and the impact on younger generations, potentially constitutes moral injury. Nations must respond to protect the mental health of children and young people by engaging in ethical, collective, policy-based action against climate change.

As educators and education policy-makers, we face a dual crisis with regard to climate. Authors of the study say, “failure of governments to prevent harm from climate change could thus be argued to be a failure of ethical responsibility to care leading to moral injury.” The

response of education can be informed by the hopeful and sound vision of a sustainable future provided by Earth Charter principles, especially to work in solidarity across generations.

So I argue that education can be based on the ethic of intergenerational equity. This includes, of course, intergenerational learning and the concept that we in education can engage in intergenerational collaboration. The future is now! Youth are the present, not the future! We must stand in solidarity across generations to rethink education.

The other notion I would like to advance for transformative education is that of radical hope. What reasons do we have for hope? How do we construct hope in times of emergency?

As American environmental studies leader David Orr says, we must do our best to equip young people to do heroic things. For, surely, we know that hope is not a given and that is remains to be constructed. But hope on a distant horizon is still hope... In order for hope to be strong, we must, I believe, acknowledge our despair and grief. The American Buddhist philosopher Joanna Macy analyzes our repression of feelings of fear-for-the-future. These range from resistance to painful information to a sense of powerlessness. Her despairwork draws its theoretical strength from the insights that the pain we feel for the world is natural and that the unblocking of our repressed feelings can not only can be cathartic, but also a way to reconnect us to the web of life.

I have seen this for decades with my students, ranging from my time as an elementary school principal to my time as a college professor. And I have seen this very powerfully in my recent work with sacred sites around the world and reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples. I believe we need to go to where the pain is. We need to go to where the wounds are. There, we can find healing and reconciliation and we can find a wider consciousness with all of the

elements. We must find ways to fire our prophetic, poetic imagination. Then, we can, I think, work through this indifference, this despair.

Joanna Macy says, “Don’t be afraid of your grief.” Your pain for the world is the other face of your love for the world. As she asks, “What else is a heart for?” She argues that our love for the world is not contingent upon its condition. Our love for the world is not contingent upon its degree of health. For me, informed radical hope arises from an unconditional love for the world and is grounded in the prophetic and poetic spiritual imagination.

Pope Francis’ integral ecology is also a source of hope. It is not defined exactly in Laudato Sí, but, as you know, it includes a commitment to the common good, intergenerational equity, and a preference for the poor. Father Joshtrom Kureethadam defines it as the “interrelatedness of the whole of reality and the interdependence of all created entities.” It responds to what Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff calls “the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor.”

Pope Francis’ integral ecology provides a dramatic, holistic, and new dimension to traditional Catholic social teaching. It provides a foundation for ecology education. Pope Francis offers an inspiring way forward – allowing spirituality to “motivate a more passionate concern for the protection of our world.” This concern arises from a love relationship to God’s creation and from an ongoing commitment inspired by spirituality in keeping with integral ecology.

This passionate concern leads directly to action based on spirituality. What has come to be called spiritual activism is one of the most promising sources of hope that I see. In my work with Indigenous Peoples – theirs being the oldest human heritage of spirituality – and with grassroots activists, and with faith communities, I see the power of spiritual activism.

There is an awakening, perhaps a reawakening, of the wisdom that faith requires action. In my experience over 50 years of teaching, I see that taking action based on our ethics and spiritual beliefs is the antidote to despair.

As educators we can study this tradition – but we must not stop there. Learning how to take action is a perfect opportunity for intergenerational solidarity. It is, also, as American climate activist Bill McKibben, quoted by Jim Antal has said, “an opportunity for which the church was born.” But we do not have to have a church to do this. Spiritual activism can take place at the individual, institutional, or community level.

Action, then, is a source of hope. Together with the power of imagination and with the profound wisdom of integral ecology, we can construct the radical hope needed to reimagine education.

In closing, we are at an inflectional point in the history of education and, indeed, in human history. In this overwhelmingly challenging time of climate and theological emergency, we are called to respond. My thesis is that a way forward is through intergenerational equity, collaboration, and what I call intergenerational solidarity. And that together we can construct radical hope through imagination, integral ecology, and spiritual activism. Thus, we can find a way through the current emergency and, with God’s help create a just, peaceful, humane, and sustainable future. May we be so blessed at Salesian Pontifical University and in the larger world we love so much.

Laudato Sí!

Grazie Mille...

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