Underlying Commitment to Sustainability

Although other aspects of the Common Home Project will be significant to its success, the underlying sustainability theme of this project is particularly important because it is expected to be pervasive in all initiatives that arise from it.

The study of ecology has become a religious, social, and political concern because every area of life is affected by careless use of our environment. The creation is in crisis. We believe that ecology and justice, stewardship of creation, and redemption are interdependent.

Pope Francis' Encyclical **Laudato Si'** goes beyond a wake-up call to humanity to help us understand the destruction we are rendering to the environment and to our fellow humans.[1] While addressing the environment directly, the document has a very striking call to conversion for those in the Church – and for all of us who are part of the Jesuit apostolate – as well:

> *"The ecological crisis is also a summons to profound interior conversion. It must be said that some committed and prayerful Christians, with the excuse of realism and pragmatism, tend to ridicule expressions of concern for the environment. Others are passive; they choose not to change their habits and thus become inconsistent. So what they all need is an 'ecological conversion', whereby the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them.* ***Living our vocation to be protectors of God's handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience****" (#217, emphasis added).*

Today's environmental crisis is qualitatively different from any crisis humanity has faced in history. In the past, environmental problems were essentially local in nature - one river or watershed was contaminated and could be fixed; one city had substandard air quality, and regulations could be imposed. What is clear now is that *the crisis we face is global.* It is worldwide in extend, and interconnected systems that we do not fully understand are being impacted. The threat is to life in general. The life of the planet is endangered. The ecological crisis raises the problem of survival itself. Moreover, there is a growing awareness of the organic link between the destruction of the environment and socio-economic and political Justice – the poorest people living at the margins of society, who have the fewer resources and therefore, harm the environment the least, suffer the consequences of environmental degradation proportionately the most.

We who are Christians are troubled by this because we place a high value on human life. Every person in precious in God's sight; all are created in God's image. We could go further: every human being should be able to live and eat and love and worship. All human beings created by God deserves the opportunity to know and love their Creator.

[1] Available in full text at https://laudatosi.com/watch

The Jesuit Universal Apostolic Preferences were articulated within this framework.[2] Therefore, the Common Home Project seeks to also understand – and live out - sustainability within that framework.

Within the space of just a couple of decades, sustainability has become one of the defining features of the 21st century reality. The term "sustainability" encompasses a whole paradigm shift to our understanding of the world and our place in it. This new paradigm of sustainability is set to have a fundamental and pervasive effect on how we design and manage systems in the 21st century as it will affect all aspects of our economy. The Common Home Project will pay special attention to the ongoing transformation of the structure of world economies as a new form of sustainable economy emerges.

*The **Common Home Project's** fundamental engagement with environmental and poverty issues emanates form a belief that God created and loves the world. By this very fact, human beings, bear the image of God and as an integral part of that creation should imitate the concern of God for maintaining and taking care of earth. In imitating this loving and caring attitude of God, humans are called to live in a wholesome relationship with the rest of creation so as not to cause such destruction that species, ecosystems and indeed large number of people are threatened. We are called to respect its integrity and honor its creator and owner.*

Within this view, the environment represents the whole created ecosystem that a society depends upon for various services, such as water, materials, food and energy. When we refer to the environment in the Common Home Project, we are really talking about a combination of natural ecosystem and human economy - what is called a socio-ecological system. The explosive technological change of the Industrial Revolution in the late 18th century represented a radical dislocation between society and the ecosystem. Starting with mechanization, the chain of effects can be traced as machines gave farmers the ability to cultivate larger areas of land and to reduce the use of humans and animal labor for work such as plowing fields and harvesting crops. The mass of society moved from working the land into the newly industrializing urban centers where large markets for goods and labor became the organization structure prevailing over their daily subsistence. A new way of life, divorced from the ecosystem, emerged.

A major part of this changing dynamic was the harnessing of new energy sources that were greatly more powerful than anything humans had used to fuel their economies before. The large-scale combustion of coal, oil and gas enabled the transition to new mass manufacturing process as they shifted from manual to mechanical. These initial changes in technology, economy, society and ecology set in motion a series of changes, such as increasing economies of scale, commodification, and urbanization that continues to this day in many countries around the world through interconnected feedback loops.

Although it is apparent that the Industrial Revolution ushered in an unprecedented global impact on the planet, it has since been dwarfed by the extraordinary exponential growth of human economic activity that began in the mid- to late-Twentieth Century. This growth gave rise to a new era that scientists call the "Anthropocene" as human industrial activity has become the primary driver of changes within earth systems. The Anthropocene represents a new form of socioecological system – one that is truly global in nature – with an unprecedented scale of alternation to the Earth's core systems, such as overall biodiversity, climate, or ocean acidity.

[2] See https://jesuits.global/en/about-us/universal-apostolic-preferences for details.

Changes in major Earth systems can now be directly linked to changes largely related to the global economic system. This is a new phenomenon - a truly profound transformation in our socioecological systems – the consequences of which we are far from understanding. Within the course of just a few decades we have transitioned from being a small world on a big planet to being a big world on a small planet.

How "sustainable" something is can be understood in terms of its overall efficiency or how effective the whole organization is at operating within its environment. When a system becomes inefficient at operating within its environment it consumes more of the available resources and produces more waste, rendering it unsustainable. However, sustainability is not a property of a thing. Things in isolation cannot be sustainable. Sustainability is better described as an emergent feature of whole systems. It is not so much about the parts, but how the parts work together to enable effective overall outcomes. For example, an electric car is not really sustainable if the power system it runs on imports coal from the other side of the planet to provide it with electricity. Likewise, if we build an eco-home in the middle of suburbia where inhabitants must drive a long distance to go shopping or take their children to the park, it will not achieve sustainable outcomes because we are simply optimizing individual parts without optimizing the whole. It is precisely because sustainability is about a relationship between a whole system and its environment that it cannot be achieved through optimizing individual parts. Instead it requires us to look how whole systems work, how all the parts are interrelated to enable the emergence of an efficient overall system, and thus of sustainable results.

This is why sustainability presents such an intractable challenge to our existing institutional framework. Traditionally we take a very analytical approach to management – we break systems down to their parts, analyze these parts, and try to optimize them, thinking that if all the parts are working, then the whole will be working. In relatively simple systems this reductionistic approach can work, but in something as complex as an entire economy or global supply chain, what matters more is how the parts are interrelated into the whole. Sustainability is a complex and wholistic challenge that is not amenable to this reductionistic management method. Although optimizing the parts is important in many circumstances, it is really designing and managing for the whole system that is ultimately required to achieve the end result of overall sustainability.

The Common Home Project recognizes that while much can be accomplished by considering the functioning of structures within the University, our responsibility is to also understand – and manage – within a broader, global system. Managing for the whole means managing the connections between things in light of planetary limits. The Common Home Project seeks to formalize connections between institutions across the globe so that all institutions can improve the way in which they manage their sustainability and educate their students for the continued flourishing of humanity.

The value of sustainability is distributed throughout the whole system. It is not one species that maintains the diversity within an eco-system, it is all of them. It is not the closely-knit bonds between people of a similar background that maintains a resilient multicultural society, it is more the distributed weak ties between people of different backgrounds that ensures the overall integrity, resilience and sustainability of the community.

Sustainable development is a form of development where we manage both at the level of individual technologies and organization, but also at the level of system as a whole. A feature of sustainable development is returning ecological care to the center of management of any system. Whereas in the past ecological systems were commodified by the monetary utility that could be extracted from their components, sustainable development considers the ecosystem as the glue that holds elements of the economy

together. This requires that industrial age economic structures evolve into more complex, multi-dimensional forms.

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