

"... the time has come to accept decreased growth in some parts of the world, in order to provide resources for other places to experience healthy growth."

*Laudato si'*, 193.

## Introduction

By now, the social encyclical *Laudato si'* (2015) by Pope Francis has become "the most cited Catholic text in the highest ranked and most influential journals dealing with scientific, social, economic development, and theological issues from a socio-environmental perspective".<sup>1</sup> However, before that, the document stood out in its most immediate context of Catholic Social Teaching (CST) because it has been innovative in multiple aspects. *Laudato si'* was the first encyclical letter entirely dedicated to environmental problems and their ethical roots. It expanded the notion of the common good by including non-human creatures and ecosystems. Moreover, the encyclical addresses all people in the world and is written in a language that is more accessible to the general, non-Catholic public. Some researchers<sup>2</sup> notice that there is one more new feature in the encyclical which has yet to receive scholarly attention. This novelty is a call to "decreased growth" (193), "decrescita" in Italian, "decrecimiento" in Spanish.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, this article sets out to analyze the argument of "decreased growth" in the encyclical and compare it to the principles of the degrowth movement.<sup>4</sup>

### 1. Technocratic Paradigm and Unlimited Growth

I will start analyzing the *Laudato si'* argument for "decreased growth" by tracing it to Pope Francis' critique of the "technocratic paradigm" (101), which "tends to dominate economic and political life" (109). In the encyclical the "technocratic paradigm" is described as a mindset that looks upon all objects to take control over them by applying scientific and technological power. Pope Francis is confident that this mindset is a cause of "many problems of today's world" since it "shapes the lives of individuals and the working of societies" (107). Technocratic power does not set any limits on individual interests or economic growth.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, it becomes easy to accept the illusion that unlimited economic growth is possible and even understand it as the only way to human well-being.

## The Argument for Economic Degrowth in The Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*

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### 2. Environmental Limits

Similarly, as in the degrowth movement,<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis rejects the idea of unlimited growth because "it is based on the lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth's goods" (106). In *Laudato si'*, such an idea is seen as disconnected from reality, directly related to the over-exploitation of the earth's resources (4, 78) and causing harm to the environment (26). This is also the first argument of the representatives of the so-called degrowth movement, especially after the publication of "The Limits to Growth" report, which claimed that with "continuous global growth most of the planet's ecosystem boundaries will be surpassed".<sup>7</sup> In fact, according to the most recent estimates,<sup>8</sup> we have already exceeded four out of the nine planetary boundaries. Moreover, both Pope Francis and degrowthers point to the devastating consequences caused by the over-exploitation of nature – pollution, extreme weather events (161), and environmental degradation (56). To sum up, "in nature there is a self-limiting logic to growth",<sup>9</sup> and, consequently, degrowth is needed first of all because of environmental limits.

### 3. Social Limits

To continue, *Laudato si'* rejects the idea of unlimited growth because it also ignores the social limits of growth. With "a more intensified pace of life and work" ("rapidification"), the quality of life of many people decreases because of anxiety (18), "bad psychological health, long working hours"<sup>10</sup> and other negative consequences on the mental well-being of persons. Moreover, the quest for unlimited growth is linked to overproduction (189), overconsumption (123), "superdevelopment" in some parts of the world, and corresponding "deprivation" (109) elsewhere. It is precisely in this context of global inequality that Pope Francis calls for "decreased growth":

In any event, if in some cases sustainable development were to involve new forms of growth, in other cases, given the insatiable and irresponsible

growth produced over many decades, we need also to think of containing growth by setting some reasonable limits and even retracing our steps before it is too late. We know how unsustainable is the behaviour of those who constantly consume and destroy, while others are not yet able to live in a way worthy of their human dignity. That is why the time has come to accept **decreased growth** [*emphasis added*] in some parts of the world, in order to provide resources for other places to experience healthy growth. (193)

Degrowth thinkers propose a similar argument. They believe that "degrowth in the North will liberate ecological space for growth in the South",<sup>11</sup> that is, give low-income countries more time to develop and reduce their emissions.<sup>12</sup> However, according to R. Puggioni, on "the issue of inequality and the poor, Francis is definitely more straightforward than degrowthers in putting in his socio-political agenda ecology and poverty as matters on the same level of importance that are somehow closely related".<sup>13</sup> Finally, in *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis connects the issue of increasing global inequality to the question of "ecological debt" (51) and the risk of "catastrophic consequences of social unrest" (204).

### 4. The Problem of the One-Dimensionality of Growth

In addition to environmental and social limits that demand decreased growth, *Laudato si'* problematizes the one-dimensionality of economic growth as the dominant way to see development. Economic growth as mere wealth accumulation is not enough for authentic human development (progress). In section 46 of the encyclical, it is observed that "the growth of the past two centuries has not always led to an integral development and an improvement in the quality of life", because of the reductionist understanding of progress "measured in terms of economic growth".<sup>14</sup> Pope Francis points to this one-dimensionality of economic growth as lying "at the deepest

roots of our failures” and invites us to rethink “the direction, goals, meaning and social implications of technological and economic growth” (109) in relation to the common good.

The critique of the one-dimensionality of economic growth can be paralleled to the objective of the degrowth movement to “permanently leave behind a situation in which all policies are dictated by the imperatives of expansion, growth, and efficiency”.<sup>15</sup> By itself, such an objective is not to decrease the gross domestic product (GDP) or make it negative. Both the degrowth philosophy and *Laudato si’* state that the objective is to put the economy “at the service of another type of progress, one which is healthier, more human, more social, more integral” (112), to come up with “new meanings of wealth and happiness that downsize the assumptions of the *homo oeconomicus* on self-interest, maximization of profits, accumulation, and competition”.<sup>16</sup> It is noteworthy that such international organizations as the United Nations (UN), the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the World Bank are also starting to acknowledge the need to go beyond growth and stop seeing it as an end in itself.<sup>17</sup>

## 5. The Search for Autonomy

In Part VI (“Weak Responses”), Pope Francis expresses his concern about the possibility that the dominant technocratic paradigm, focused exclusively on power and unlimited economic growth, “may overwhelm not only our politics but also freedom and justice” (53). This happens when powerful special interests are allowed to take precedence over the common good and resist any effort to introduce social change. In such situations, alternative views, which are necessary for reflections and debates about the “conditions required for the life and survival of society”, are viewed as “romantic illusions” (54) and dangerously not accepted. For degrowth thinkers, the word that addresses this type of concern about freedom is “autonomy.” Indeed, I. Illich, in his book *Tools for Conviviality*, published in 1973, interprets the quest for autonomy as a question of survival. Today, when climate change poses a real danger to humanity, I. Illich’s words about freedom and the possibility of every interest to contribute to the common good are especially relevant:

Survival depends on establishing pro-

cedures which permit ordinary people to recognize these ranges and to opt for survival in freedom, to evaluate the structure built into tools and institutions so they can exclude those which by their structure are destructive, and control those which are useful. Exclusion of the malignant tool and control of the expedient tool are the two major priorities for politics today.<sup>18</sup>

Likewise, Pope Francis seconds the *Aporecida Document*<sup>19</sup> in urging against the loss of freedom of various groups and the domination of powerful economic interests over natural resources (54). Furthermore, in the reflection on the consequences of the dominant consumerist paradigm, *Laudato si’* warns about a possible loss of personal freedom and a risk to mental well-being:

This paradigm leads people to believe that they are free as long as they have the supposed freedom to consume. But those really free are the minority who wield economic and financial power. Amid this confusion, postmodern humanity has not yet achieved a new self-awareness capable of offering guidance and direction, and this lack of identity is a source of anxiety. (203)





To conclude, the question of autonomy demonstrates that the paradigm of unlimited growth, besides disregarding the environmental and social limits, itself becomes a limit to personal freedom and autonomy.

## 6. Growth Paradigm and Tendency Towards Depoliticization

In addition to powerful economic interests, freedom is diminished through the impossibility of offering and adopting alternative development approaches or policies. *Laudato si'* describes how it is difficult or even impossible to go against the established epistemological paradigm (107) of unlimited growth: "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. [...] Our capacity for making decisions, a more genuine freedom and the space for each one's alternative creativity are diminished" (108).

While degrowth thinkers also address the hegemony of the growth paradigm, they view it through a prism of depoliticization. According to them, the growth paradigm replaces political dialogue with "business rationality, market competition, and innovation".<sup>20</sup> Consequently, they see degrowth as an attempt to "re-politicize environmentalism and end the depoliticizing consensus on sustainable development".<sup>21</sup> Degrowthers make an effort to re-introduce the political debate about the visions of the future one would like to inhabit and are against seeing environmental problems as merely technical. In the same vein, *Laudato si'* emphasizes the importance of debate, which should include everyone directly or indirectly affected "in order to make decisions for the common good, present and future" (135).

## 7. Ecological Conversion

Pope Francis refers to Patriarch Bartholomew's teaching in pointing out that at the deepest level, environmental problems have "ethical and spiritual roots" (9). Therefore, the solutions should aim at changing humanity. Hence the whole of Chapter III of the encyclical *Laudato si'* is dedicated to *ecological conversion*. Pope Francis writes that ecological conversion is an effect of a person's "encounter with Jesus Christ," which be-

comes visible in one's "relationship with the world" (217). Moreover, because of the difficulty mentioned above in overcoming the dominant technocratic paradigm, the ecological conversion also has a communal dimension: "Isolated individuals 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. Therefore, social problems must be addressed by community networks and not simply by the sum of individual good deeds" (219).

To continue, concerning nature, ecological conversion should imply a rejection of a distorted "tyrannical anthropocentrism" for which "the Bible has no place" (68), which prioritizes "being useful" over "being" (69). It is easy to notice how the obsession with unlimited growth and overexploitation of the earth's resources stems from this "tyrannical anthropocentrism."

Finally, ecological conversion is not only a change of the way of thinking, but it is also a transformation of life – living "more sober lifestyles" (193), reducing consumption, and "the natural and moral structure" of the earth (115), sharing "the gift of the earth" and "its fruits" (71) with everyone. Such changes in people's lifestyles will probably hurt economic growth, that is GDP. However, this is interpreted as a positive thing. Pope Francis reminds us that decreased economic growth does not indicate "a lesser life or one lived with less intensity" (223). On the contrary, "it is a way of living life to the full" (223). People, who live such sobriety freely and consciously,

...experience what it means to appreciate each person and each thing, learning familiarity with the simplest things and how to enjoy them. So, they are able to shed unsatisfied needs, reducing their obsessiveness and weariness. Even living on little, they can live a lot, above all when they cultivate other pleasures and find satisfaction in fraternal encounters, in service, in developing their gifts, in music and art, in contact with nature, in prayer. Happiness means knowing how to limit some needs which only diminish us, and being open to the many different possibilities which life can offer. (223)

Degrowthers do not write about degrowth as a spiritual transformation. However, their understanding of its effects on the quality of life is very similar to the perspective of *Laudato si'*. De-

growth "speaks of good living for all, social justice, redistribution, sustainability, ecology, recycling, anti-utilitarianism, conviviality, happiness, free-time for writing, reading, studying, and artistic expressions".<sup>22</sup> To sum up, in both – in Pope Francis' teaching and in the degrowth approach – shifting the focus away from unlimited production and consumption towards cultivating more authentic relationships with oneself, other persons, and the environment would result in a fuller and happier life for each.

## Conclusions

This article has analyzed the argument for degrowth in the encyclical letter *Laudato si'* of Pope Francis and compared it with the corresponding concept in degrowth scholarship. The analysis revealed that the main difference between the two approaches is the depth of understanding of this epoch's social and environmental failures. While both the encyclical and degrowth thinkers identify the paradigm of unlimited growth as being at the root of many contemporary environmental, social, and political problems, *Laudato si'* goes deeper in including the spiritual dimension and urging ecological conversion. Moreover, *Laudato si'* is much more sensitive to the social dimension of environmental problems.

While the term "degrowth" is not present in the English version of *Laudato si'*, the arguments for "decreased growth" are very similar to the principles discussed by degrowth thinkers. They both address the need to consider growth's environmental and social limits and criticize the technocratic paradigm's one-dimensionality. Besides problems stemming from these limits, both traditions are concerned with how the dominant paradigm of unlimited growth decreases a person's and social group's autonomy, freedom, and capacity to propose and decide on political alternatives.

Signaling the need for decreased growth, Pope Francis has introduced an "element of novelty into Roman Catholic social doctrine that has never before addressed growth with such forcefulness".<sup>23</sup> However, there is still only a little attention to this new aspect of Catholic Social Teaching in the academic world. As we have glimpsed in this article, further comparative studies between these two traditions could result in fruitful cooperation on theoretical and practical levels.

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15. R. PUGGIONI, cit., p. 14.

16. *Ibidem*.

17. OECD, *Beyond Growth: Towards a New Economic Approach, New Approaches to Economic Challenges*, OECD Publishing, Paris 2020; WORLD BANK, *The Changing Wealth of Nations 2021: Managing Assets for the Future*. Washington, DC: World Bank 2021.

18. I. ILICH, *Tools for Conviviality*, Marion Boyars 1973. Kindle Edition, p. 115.

19. FIFTH GENERAL CONFERENCE OF THE LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN BISHOPS, *Aparecida Document*, 29 June 2007.

20. H. KREININ, *Typologies of "Just Transitions": Towards Social-Ecological Transformation*. Institute for Ecological Economics, 2020, p. 5.

21. G. D'ALISA et al. (eds.), cit., p. 36.

22. R. PUGGIONI, cit., p. 13.

23. Ivi., p. 21

## NOTE

1. M. C. MOLINA – M. PÉREZ-GARRIDO, "Laudato si' and Its Influence on Sustainable Development Five Years Later: A First Look at the Academic Productivity Associated to This Encyclical", *Environmental Development*, 43, September 2022, 100726, p. 1.

