

The Cultural Revolution: Ecological and Social

VINCENZO BALZANI

Emeritus Professor in Chemistry - University of Bologna, Italy

Member of the Accademia dei Lincei

Email: vincenzo.balzani@unibo.it

Our world is sick because of the bad relationship between human society and the planet and even more because of the discords within human society itself. We are slipping more and more towards ecological and social unsustainability. Both scientists and philosophers say it, and Pope Francis highlights these views in the *Laudato Si*: “Doomsday predictions can no longer be met with irony or disdain. [...] The pace of consumption, waste and environmental change has so stretched the planet’s capacity that our contemporary lifestyle, unsustainable as it is, can only precipitate catastrophes”.¹ Here then, as the Pope writes, “bold cultural revolution” is needed.²

The myth of a continuous and permanent growth has dominated human society for several years. An absurd myth that leads us to consider our planet only as a container of resources, without limits. The planet is actually a system with limited resources, consisting of chemical elements and their compounds, some relatively abundant, others scarce. In addition, resources are unevenly distributed across the planet, so there is a strong competition between peoples and between nations to get hold of them.

Investigations by the international agency Oxfam show that the gap in inequality between rich and poor, both at the level of people and nations, continues to widen without restraint.³ Thus, as Pope Francis wrote in the *Laudato Si*, “We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental”.⁴

In the most recent encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* Pope Francis explains that the cultural revolution that is necessary to achieve ecological and social sustainability cannot be accomplished through some partial changes in the human-planet relationship or in the international relationships. Instead, the basis on which our cultures rest must be radically changed. We must accept and appreciate diversity, acknowledge our limits and recognize that we are all children of God, brothers and sisters who are born, live and die in the same common home, planet Earth. In other words, the mandatory cultural revolution requires that humans and nations pass from the situation of inhabitants in the same planet, often engaged in commercial competition or even at war with each other, to that of brothers and sisters that love and esteem each other.

The main cause of ecological unsustainability is the use of fossil fuels. It is therefore necessary to resort to alternative energy sources, the renewable energies of the Sun (photovoltaic), wind (wind power) and water (hydroelectric) which, without generating pollution and without causing climate change, provide electricity, a form of energy much more valuable than heat produced by fossil fuels. Renewable energies are not only the answer to the climate crisis,

¹ Encyclical Letter “Laudato Si” of the Holy Father Francis on Fraternity and Social Friendship. 2015. Ch. IV, 161. (https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)

² Encyclical Letter “Laudato Si” of the Holy Father Francis on Fraternity and Social Friendship. 2015. Ch. III, 114. (https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)

³ <https://www.oxfam.org/en/reducing-inequality-what-your-country-doing-tackle-gap-between-rich-and-poor>

⁴ Encyclical Letter “Laudato Si” of the Holy Father Francis on Fraternity and Social Friendship. 2015. Ch. IV, 139. (https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)

but also the key to fighting energy poverty. As reported in *Avvenire* by the director of the Power Shift Africa,⁵ some developed nations, especially Italy and Germany, instead of supporting Africa in the development of renewable energy, push many African countries to pour their limited financial reserves into the development of an industry based on fossil fuel extraction.

In nature, the energies supplied by the Sun, wind and water are very abundant, but to convert them into electricity we need equipment (photovoltaic panels, wind turbines, dams, etc.) that must be built starting from the material resources that Earth provide. However, the amount of these materials is limited, so we must use them with maximum efficiency and recycle them. For this and other reasons it is necessary to abandon the disposable linear economy, powered by fossil fuels, and adopt a circular economy that uses renewable energy and that is based on reuse, repair and recycling of everything we produce.

Only in this way ecological sustainability can be achieved because the planet will be protected and not degraded, and its resources will be shared in sobriety. A wise policy can also be implemented to reduce inequalities through the development of common services (school, health, transport, etc.) and an economy based

on taxes and subsidies aimed at helping the weakest, as every person is worth and must not be forgotten. The awareness that in a globalized world no one is self-sufficient will allow us to undertake fruitful collaborations between nations and to give strength to peace.

Then there is another problem. The limited material resources needed to convert the energies of the Sun, wind and water into electricity are not equally distributed on Earth. For example, some fundamental chemical elements, such as lithium for batteries and neodymium for wind turbines, are not found in Europe, but mainly in Chile, the former, and China, the latter. A country can cope with the scarcity of an important resource in two ways: with war, as often happened in the past for oil, or with collaboration and trade agreements. Will nations continue to be so reckless that they wage wars to conquer the resources they do not have, or will they finally understand that every war is a defeat for all?

Here is another aspect of the mandatory cultural revolution, indicated by Pope Francis in the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*: promoting a “universal aspiration to fraternity”⁶ and “social friendship”⁷ to build a better world starting from the common belonging to the human family and recognizing that “as children of the one God, we are all brothers and sisters”.⁸

⁵ <https://www.powershiftafrica.org/>

⁶ Encyclical Letter “Fratelli tutti” of the Holy Father Francis on Fraternity and Social Friendship. 2020. Introduction, 8. (https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html)

⁷ Encyclical Letter “Fratelli tutti” of the Holy Father Francis on Fraternity and Social Friendship. 2020. Ch. III, 106. (https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html)

⁸ Encyclical Letter “Fratelli tutti” of the Holy Father Francis on Fraternity and Social Friendship. 2020. Ch. VIII, 279. (https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html)