

Article

Is the “Common Home” Metaphor Adequate and Useful for an “Integral Ecology” Theology in Modern Times?

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Abstract: This essay argues that the “common home” metaphor, when applied to planet Earth, falls short in its ability to provide an accurate analogy with the complexity and diversity of the planet itself since it has a limited epistemological, heuristic, and hermeneutical horizon; it is an analogy that proves inadequate in expressing common human representations of home and the two principles that should inspire an Ecotheology: the ontological value of creatures (*Gaudium et Spes*) and the recognition of the intrinsic relationship between all beings (*Laudato Si'*). In order to methodologically support this enquiry, a reflexive analysis and a metadisciplinary discourse are used through Emmanuel Levinas, Hannah Arendt, and the concept of integral ecology, proposed in Pope Francis’s encyclical letter *Laudato Si'. On care for our common home*, 21 May 2015. The performativity of the “common home” metaphor is evaluated to review its use in Ecotheology. The conclusion reached is that the category of “common life” might be more appropriate than “common home” to characterize how humans inhabit the world for an Ecotheology, and to represent planetary and cosmic communion and interdependence.

Keywords: integral ecology; common home; metaphor; house; planet Earth; Ecotheology; relational ontology



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“A human being is a part of a whole, called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts, and feelings as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.”¹ (Albert Einstein)

1. Introduction

In July 2021, in a talk at the annual meeting of the Ecumenical and Francophone Society on the Theology of Ecology (SOFTE), I had the opportunity, for the first time, to present my reservations regarding the use of the “common home” metaphor to talk about planet Earth in Ecotheology. A second opportunity, this time in published record, took place the following year, in the fourth volume of the Portuguese Journal of Theology, *Ephata*. Edited by Fabien Revol and myself, this first volume of 2022 was dedicated to the theme of the *common home*, with the title: *The Concept of the Common Home in Integral Ecology. An Interdisciplinary and Ecumenical Approach*. In this issue’s editorial, alongside the recognition of the focus that the encyclical *Laudato Si'. On care for our common home*, published on 24 May 2015, brought to the expression, the question of its possible ambiguity was introduced, as was that of the relevance of inquiring into its value in the context of an Ecotheology:

“While it is true that the ‘common home’ metaphor can be useful and fruitful, it can also give rise to misunderstandings, starting with its first, basic and common meaning, which is the literal meaning of home. The human need to have a home leads to the development of strategies to obtain it, make it one’s own, fully possess, and claim property rights over it. As Pope Francis reminds us in the *Laudato Si'* encyclical ‘We are not God.

The earth was here before us and it has been given to us.’ (LS para. 67). We do not hold property rights over the land in the same way that we do over a house—a building that we purchase.” (Varanda and Revol 2022, p. 9).

On 1 September 2021, the leaders of three Christian Communion, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, Pope Francis, and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, joined together to mark the *Season of Creation* (1 September–4 October), and issued the 1st *Joint Message for the Protection of Creation* (Bartholomew et al. 2021). Anne Marie Reijnen, Professor of Systematic Theology at the Faculty of Protestant Theology in Brussels and at the *Theologicum*, at the Paris Theological Institute, commented critically on the *Joint Message*, on four main areas: a lack of ambition regarding the dialogue with other faiths, the illusion of consensus, the lack of self-critical elements in the Christian theology of redemption, and a fourth concern, regarding the potential ineffectiveness of the metaphorical structure of Creation as a ‘common home’, within the scope of “Christian ecology” (Reijnen 2022, pp. 9–11). Reijnen’s analysis culminates in this fourth concern, which explicitly meets our research question, and which provides the title for this essay: is the metaphorical structure of planet Earth as a “common home” adequate and useful for a Christian Ecotheology? The excerpt from Reijnen’s article, presented below, equates the issue with accuracy:

“The *Joint Message* raises, but does not resolve, the question of how to name the ‘non-human dimension of life.’ Shall we speak of ‘nature’, of ‘the environment’, of ‘Creation’, of ‘Gaia’, or indeed of ‘our common home’—and, in so doing, what connotations of each remain uncritically presumed? The last of these formulations seems to become more and more widely accepted, especially since the release of *Laudato Si’*, yet in my opinion this notion is inadequate and may even induce attitudes that are ecologically harmful. To invoke ‘our common home’ underlines the need to share fairly among all the people living on Earth all of nature’s ‘resources’ such as clean water, pure air, arable land, and so forth. Every person, all communities are stakeholders in the God-given *oikonomia*. But should we consider Creation, nature, the non-built environment. . . as a ‘common home’? The expression is misleading because it reinforces (even if unintentionally) the traditional view of human beings as ‘masters’ (of the household). Also, our houses are built by humans, whereas the web of weird and wild lives precedes us and exceeds us. So many living organisms cannot and should not be ‘domesticated’: plankton, the skylark and the eagle, the lichens that grow above the tree line.” (Reijnen 2022, p. 11).

In July 2022, in the hallways of the annual meeting of the Ecumenical and Francophone Society on the Theology of Ecology, which took place at the Ecumenical Council of Churches in Geneva, I spoke with Anne Marie Reijnen; we were of a mind regarding our misgivings with the use of the expression “common home” to refer to planet Earth, an expression widely evoked and disseminated, mainly among Catholic Christians, shortly after the publication of the *Laudato Si’* encyclical. This critical reservation bears a clear and specific meaning: to think of planet Earth as a “common home”, whether within the scope of an integral ecology (a key concept of the *Laudato Si’* encyclical) or within the scope of a Christian theology of ecology, does not serve an episteme, neither ecological nor theological, in the 21st century. From the outset, it does not seem enough to evoke the etymological connections between the *house* metaphor (*domus*, *oikos*) and ecology (*oiko-logia*) with the economy (*oiko-nomia*), with ecumenism (*oiko-ménè*), as well as the facile use of this etymology to justify the use and value of the expression *common home* in ecology and within the scope of a Christian Ecotheology. Such etymological syntopies suggest, at the same time, a reserve of methodological caution when faced with the risk of being held hostage by one’s own etymology: “It (earth) cannot be the object of vulgar domestication, even if, curiously enough, the Latin word *domus* is used here” (Gesché 1994, p. 90). Study of the house, government of the house, construction of the house, and care of the house suggest an anthropological and anthropocentric mode that studies, governs, builds, domesticates, regulates, and cares for the planet as if it were a house, blurring the biological and cosmological identity of the Earth, etsi Terra non daretur. What is the nature of planet

Earth, what is its identitarian essence, beyond the anthropomorphic, instrumental, poetic, and aesthetic perceptions and qualifications that humans make of it?

The history of Christianity up to the 20th century, more precisely, up to the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican (1962–1965), is marked by the gnostic mentality that devalues matter, exalts the spiritual, and consequently values *fuga mundi* (Grant 1996; Filoramo 1990; Segal 1995; King 2003). At the same time, prejudice and suspicion regarding the Earth are consolidated, with Christians being urged not to think of planet Earth as their home but rather as a land of exile, of banishment, and as a valley of tears, as constantly reiterated in the *Salve Regina*.

On the other hand, and from a cosmic point of view, planet Earth is part of the Milky Way, in a cosmos that has been evolving and expanding since its birth. Everything is movement, “everything flows, nothing remains”, in the words of Heraclitus of Ephesus. The idea of movement, the idea of the body, the idea of flesh, the idea of process, of a planetary and cosmic living organism, that gained shape throughout the 20th century, in an exemplary way, with the works of James Lovelock and the *Gaia Hypothesis* (Lovelock 2000), suggests dynamism, movement, change, symbiotic networks, and not the immobility (however flexible) typical of a house, which is a human artifact. We tend to think that the *common home* metaphor can give rise to misunderstandings starting with the first basic and common meaning, at least in the West, which is the literal meaning of home, associated with the idea of a personal belonging that can be purchased. The human need to have a home leads to the development of strategies to acquire it, make it one’s own, fully possess it, and claim property rights over it. This can indeed become the identitarian point of reference that distinguishes, separates, excludes, and confronts. Think, for example, of the monarchies throughout the world of which the royal house is the symbolic institution, or of the great manor houses, palaces, mansions, farmsteads, which are distinguished through family heritage, business activity, class-based social prestige, or power.

When reading Hans Jauss, in his work *Pour une Esthétique de la Réception*, in the chapter “La douceur du foyer” (Jauss 1978, pp. 288–327), one follows, with interest, the author’s analysis of the communicational models of social norms in 20 lyrical poems from 1857, focusing on Victor Hugo’s *Les Contemplations* and Charles Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal*. In the ideological paradigm of *home sweet home*, idealized by poetry, the house is at the centre of the bourgeois world, but it is not always the locus amoenus; not; the happiness, or the simulation of happiness, of its inhabitants is hidden and revealed at the same time: “the ‘sweet home’ model of social interaction can only know characters from the interior, enclosed space; it does not encompass heroes from the exterior, open world” (Jauss 1978, p. 307). Rigorously delimited regions of meaning and circumscribed modalities of meaning and experience are defined, while the topologies of destitution and exclusion of the proletariat and the worker’s home are shown, to which the ideological epithet of *sweet home* does not apply.

Similarly, in the current moment, the numerous semantic codes and imagetic realism evoked by the expression ‘house’ represent topological borders between the familiar world and the strange world, between the inside and the outside, between the open and the closed, between the private and the public. Inside the house, different physical and relational places can also be identified, some separated by walls, others by relationships of power and subordination: the basement, the outbuildings, the attic, the kitchen, the bosses, the employees. The expression ‘house’, in contemporary semantics, also highlights the absence and precariousness of housing, for different reasons, both in rich and poor countries; it shows, at the same time, this part of humanity identified as without a fixed abode, homeless, houseless, migrant, refugee, for whom Pope Francis requests our attention, and in particular, climate refugees: “Changes in climate, to which animals and plants cannot adapt, lead them to migrate; this in turn affects the livelihood of the poor, who are then forced to leave their homes, with great uncertainty for their future and that of their children” (Francis 2015, para. 25).

These introductory elements suggest that *home* may not be an inclusive image, equal to the scope and depth of integral ecology, as conceived in Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical; the spontaneous representations of the noun *house* seem very far away and in contradiction, even, with what can be thought of as a common home, not to mention very distant, above all, from the image of planet Earth as a *common home*. In the words of Hannah Arendt,

"Human life as such requires a world insofar as it needs a home on earth for the duration of its stay here. Certainly, every arrangement men make to provide and put a roof over their heads—even the tents of nomadic tribes—can serve as a home on earth for those who happen to be alive at the time." (Arendt 1972, p. 269).

This is because the planet does not meet the needs of shelter and housing of humans and of all living creatures. Therefore, we all build habitational worlds—planetary niches in permanent interaction with individuals of the same species and with individuals of other species and with the environment. This dynamic is subject to the laws of entropy, in a permanent search for homeostasis by ecosystems, which themselves have an impact regarding the evolution and development of species and of the planet itself (Damásio 2020, pp. 35–37).

This essay thus aims to identify some of the arguments that significantly contribute to substantiate the thesis that thinking of planet Earth as a common home does not serve an ecological episteme, nor is it suitable for an integral Ecotheology in the 21st century. The absence of a metaphorical conceptualization of the expression in ecology has contributed to this state of affairs. We do not ignore, nor do we exclude the possibility that inquiries, for instance, in the areas of political anthropology, theological anthropology, or even cultural ecology and human ecology, may reveal the performativity of the metaphor. This is evident, for example, in the address given by Mikhail Gorbachev to the Council of Europe on 6 July 1989, outlining his idea of a "common European home" (Gorbachev 1989).

Regarding the use of the 'common home' metaphor to ecologically contemplate planet Earth, such performativity does not seem to occur. This essay aims to examine this. From the outset, the markedly anthropocentric traits of the expression do not favour its relevance in the context of the so-called Great Turning evident in the second half of the 20th century. "There are many promising signs that humanity is turning toward life. Awareness and concern for the threat to our environment have never been greater" (Schindler and Lapid 1989, p. 9).

In fact, we find ourselves at a time when epistemologies, worldviews, and specifically earth theologies and ethics, show a progressive sensitivity and shift from anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism to the consideration of the lives of all creatures, in all their actualisations and expressions. This shift and extension are quite understandable as life in general, and the condition of being alive, are the most fundamental and common experiences of humans (Damásio 1999). Therefore, thinking ecologically about common life makes immediate sense for humans, more so than contemplating the *common home*. It is not about replacing one metaphor with another, nor about exaggerating the shift from an anthropocentric approach to biocentrism. A third way is conceivable from the Christian theology of creation and an integral ecology. The reference of all creatures to God the Creator of Life opens a "theocentric path"—a situated theocentrism, I would argue—which considers the life of each and of all creatures and the common life with the Creator (Edwards 2015, p. 161).

Pope Francis himself, in his most recent document on the global ecological issue, the apostolic exhortation *Laudate Deum*, from 4 October 2023, realized the following:

"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". To recognize, in other words, that human life is incomprehensible and unsustainable without other creatures." (Francis 2023, para. 67).

It is this reference that presides over the systematization of the criticism of the *common home* trope when applied to planet Earth and with the purpose of building an integral Ecotheology.

2. From the Cave to the Smart Home: Humans Seek Shelter on Earth

The need for shelter, although not exclusive to the human species, is experienced by humans as a basic need. While Martin Heidegger states that humans inhabit Earth as builders, Hannah Arendt distinguishes the world, built by humans, from planet Earth, the matrix of biological life:

“The world, the man-made home erected on earth and made of the material which earthly nature delivers into human hands, consists not of things that are consumed but of things that are used. If nature and the earth generally constitute the condition of human life, then the world and the things of the world constitute the condition under which this specifically human life can be at home on earth.” (Arendt 2007, p. 269).

The generic and universal expression *shelter* has been shaped over time, space, and cultures in the form of necessity, in concrete configurations and constructions, namely houses: housing, address, home, shelter, refuge. Over the millennia, humans have invested their creativity and power into building shelters, from the most rudimentary to the most sophisticated and complex, investing in them all their ingenuity and idealization and construction skills, from the cave to the smart home. From philosophy, theology, and politics, through biology, painting, sculpture, music, literature and poetry, the idea of home/refuge/housing/address has been the object and a superlative muse for the most fascinating human productions. The three poems we transcribe below are exemplary in the way they express what the house is and what the house is not. In the poetry set to music by Vinicius de Moraes, the house is so enigmatic and full of contradictions that it becomes dramatically funny as you cannot inhabit it; in Louis Rams’ poem, it is not always a home, nor is it a metaphor for a living being, as Emma Bolden writes.

“It was the funniest house/It didn’t have a ceiling; it didn’t have a thing.

No one could enter it, no one could sleep in it/Because there wasn’t even a bed in it.

It was the funniest house/It didn’t have a door; it didn’t have a wall.

To keep out the people who passed by/who didn’t stop to think, who just wanted to see.

In the dark of night, in the light of day/The house is open, wide open, no one can get in.

No one could leave it/no one could enter it/because there wasn’t even a floor in it.

It was the funniest house/It didn’t have a ceiling; it didn’t have a thing/

No one could enter it, no one could sleep in it/because there wasn’t even a bed in it.

It was the funniest house/it didn’t have a door; it didn’t have a wall

To keep out the people who passed by/who didn’t stop to think, they just wanted to see. It was the funniest house.”

(Vinicius de Moraes, *The House*)

“A house is not a home- but just a place to rest your head

a house is not a home- when your heart and soul feels dead.

You go to that empty house with no one to greet you at the door

and with all the riches that you have-‘you still feel poor’.”

Louis Rams

“House is not a metaphor.

House has nothing to do with beak or wing.

House is not two hands held up and angled towards each other. House is not its roof or the pine straw on its roof.

At night, its windows and doors look nothing like a face. Its stairs are not vertebrae. Its walls may be white, but they are not pale skin.

House does not appreciate your pun on its panes as pains.

House does not appreciate because house does not have feelings.

House has no aesthetic program.

House does what it does, which is not doing. House does not sit on its foundations.

House exists in its foundations, and when the wind pushes itself to full gale, house is never the one crying." (Emma Bolden 2018).

While it is true that we *inhabit as builders*, we do not build in order to inhabit, Heidegger believes; building itself *is* inhabiting: "building, we want to say, is not only a means of dwelling, a path leading to it, building is already, in itself, dwelling" (Heidegger 1954, p. 171). To Emmanuel Levinas, we live as interiority, the retreat of the self in one's home:

"The primordial function of the home does not consist in orienting being by the architecture of the building and in discovering a site, but in breaking the plenum of the element, in opening in the utopia in which the 'I' recollects itself in dwelling at home with itself." (Levinas 1994, p. 167).

For Arendt, we inhabit the *common world* that we built on the planet; a world that humans build, not to the extent that they consume things, but to the extent that they use things and outlive them, thus giving birth to the world on the planet, a home: "the world and the things of the world constitute the condition under which this specifically human life can be at home on earth." (Arendt 2007, p. 147). To what extent can *inhabiting*, considering at least the semantic scope proposed by Heidegger, Levinas, and Arendt, legitimately identify the planet as a home or qualify it *as a home*? The question is thus raised: a home that is common to whom? To the great human family? To all earthly creatures? Does this concept not involve a phenomenical promiscuity, *domus publica*, that calls into question, in the case of humans, the possibility of separation, withdrawal, intimacy, and privacy? If so, the planet's equivalence to a common home may suggest that, in some way, the *Earth home* is a kind of perpetual prison; everything is home; the outside of the home is the void of infinite spaces, Pascal would say. On the other hand, with Levinas, and in light of the essential dimension of separation and interiority for humans, which the home entails, it makes sense to ask whether humans can easily avoid a particular feeling of claustrophobia when they think of planet Earth as a *home* and a "common home." "The separated being must be able to recollect itself (*se recueillir*) and have representations. *Recollection* and *representation* are produced concretely as habitation in a dwelling or a Home" (Levinas 1994, p. 161). Is it a happy image to envision billions of living beings in a *giant doorless house* through which one cannot exit (to an exteriority) and enter (an interiority), contrary to the experience of the physical house dwelling with doors and windows that ensures the dynamics of alterity essential to human life: of recollection (one's own) and of welcoming (of the other)?

"Man abides in the world as having come to it from a private domain, from being at home with himself, to which at each moment he can retire. . . But he does not find himself brutally cast forth and forsaken in the world. Simultaneously without and within, he goes forth outside from an inwardness (*intimité*). Yet this inwardness opens up in a home which is situated in that outside for the home, as a building, belongs to a world of objects. But this belongingness does not nullify the bearing of the fact that every consideration of objects, and of buildings too, is produced out of a dwelling. Concretely speaking the dwelling is not situated in the objective world, but the objective world is situated by relation to my dwelling" (Levinas 1994, p. 163).

In Levinas' thinking, the home is precisely the opposite of common. His thoughts about *La Demeure* (Levinas 1994, pp. 162–90) highlight the vital need for interiority and exteriority, felt by human beings, and, consequently, highlight the essential importance of separation and withdrawal from the planet and the world, which the home provides:

“The home does not implant the separate being in a ground to leave it in vegetable communication with the elements. It is set back from the anonymity of the earth, the air, the light, the forest, the road, the sea, the river. . . . With the dwelling the separated being breaks with natural existence, steeped in a medium where its enjoyment, without security, on edge, was being inverted in care.” (Levinas 1994, p. 167).

We can see, therefore, that this outlook—the house as separation—weakens the consideration of the planet/world as a common home, even in the case of a common home in the context of the Galaxy or the Milky Way, of which planet Earth is part. The critical question remains at the level of the adequacy and, therefore, the performativity of the concept when applied to planet Earth. What does such a designation add?

3. Common Home—A Poor Analogy Regarding Planet Earth

The nominative *common home* appears, from the outset, as a reductive heuristic and hermeneutic horizon due to the poor analogy it provides with planet Earth; a poor analogy, too, between the *common* and almost intuitive concept of home and the two principles that must structure any and all theology of creation and all phenomenical experience that humans may have: the non-instrumental value of creatures, “For by the very circumstance of their having been created, all things are endowed with their own stability, truth, goodness, proper laws and order” (Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* para. 36) and the recognition of the intrinsic relationship, interconnection, interdependence, between all beings:

“The created things of this world are not free of ownership: ‘For they are yours, O Lord, who love the living’ (Wis 11:26). 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.” (Francis 2015, para. 89).

This recognition justifies the importance of setting out a methodological precautionary principle when using the *common home* metaphor, in three criteria:

- (a) The inquiry into the essential and functional identity of the subject to whom the attribute of *home* is applied, that is, planet Earth, must precede and be present, in critical articulation, in any discourse that conceives of the planet as a home.
- (b) The identification and naming of all subjects whom the *common* comprises must precede any and all inquiries, whether about the content or the architecture of the *common*.
- (c) The identification and characterization of the bond and connection between all subjects to whom the *common* encompasses must be explicit in the processes identified in (a) and (b).

The planet as a *common home* may in addition prove an inadequate and contradictory metaphor when considering the semantic scope of the concept of integral ecology, which is at the heart of the *Laudato Si'* encyclical and which will be explored further below. To think of the planet as a home suggests an anthropocentric perspective that reduces the planet to a mere *apparatus*, in the sense of a strategic utilitarianism described by Michel Foucault and which Agamben so clearly explains in his text about *what an apparatus is* (Agamben 2009, pp. 25–51).

“I said that the nature of an apparatus is essentially strategic, which means that we are speaking about a certain manipulation of relations of forces of a rational and concrete intervention in the relations of forces, either so as to develop them in a particular direction, or to block them, to stabilize them, and to utilize them. The apparatus is precisely this: a set of strategies of the relations of forces supporting and supported by certain types of knowledge” (Foucault 1980, pp. 94–96).

These concurrences lead us to think that viewing planet Earth as a home may not simplify the ontological consideration of all created reality. Such a representation tends to favour a utilitarian and instrumental vision and relationship, which reifies the planet and reduces many of its elements to mere household furniture, mere *utensils*, to use Heidegger's term, or mere human artifacts, an idea from which Arendt distances herself, clearly distinguishing between world and planet:

"This world, however, is not identical with the earth or with nature, as the limited space for the movement of men and the general condition of organic life. It is related, rather, to the human artifact, the fabrication of human hands, as well as to affairs which go on among those who inhabit the man-made world together" (Arendt 2007, pp. 39–40).

Now, it is precisely this anthropocentric utilitarian relationship that integral ecology seeks to moderate, by making room for the consideration of the planet in its creaturely essence; it is this ontological consideration that leads Albert Schweitzer to formulate an *ethic of reverence for life* (Schweitzer 1971, pp. 25–32) or Aldo Leopold to propose a *land ethic* (Leopold 1989, p. 204), while Leonardo Boff, one of the precursors of the use of the expression "integral ecology", recognizes *earth dignity*, an expression he employs in one of his most emblematic works (Boff 2000).

From this essentialist angle, the term *home* used as a metaphor for the planet is a poor metaphor; whether used as a noun, *the home*, or attached to a possessive pronoun, *our home*, it places us, I would argue, on the linguistic horizon of equivocation, geographic, cultural, and social ambiguity, and pseudo-familiarity, which can enhance rhetorical ideology. The *Laudato Si'* encyclical itself clearly distances itself from a reductive, utilitarian, and instrumental vision of non-human creatures: "Yet it would also be mistaken to view other living beings as mere objects subjected to arbitrary human domination." (Francis 2015, para. 82).

4. Occurrences and Semantic and Lexical Range of the Expression *Common Home* in *Laudato Si'*

In the encyclical *Laudato Si'*. *On care for our common home*, the expression *common home* is neither defined nor thematized. It takes shape in a broad and plural semantic and lexical range, which sometimes comprises the Earth, the planet, the world, a horizon of something to be built, while other times it refers to mega-urbanizations, buildings, cities, towns, neighbourhoods, or the heavenly home. Without a doubt, it has an impact as a title—*on care for our common home*—because it is appealing and suggestive, both from a literary and cognitive point of view, and from an affective and ideal point of view, but, in the body of the encyclical, this emphasis is diluted, as can be seen from the scarce number of incidences of the expression throughout the 246 paragraphs of the document:

common home: 12; *home*: 17; *planet*: 35; *world*: 148; *universe*: 28.

Note that the occurrences of *planet* (35 occurrences) exceed the occurrences of *common home* and of *home* collectively (29 occurrences).

The distribution of literal occurrences in each chapter also highlights the limited recourse to the expression, with chapters in which no occurrence is recorded.

Chapter I—What is happening to our common home: 7 occurrences.

Chapter II—*The Gospel of Creation*: 0 occurrences.

Chapter III—The human roots of the ecological crisis: 0 occurrences.

Chapter IV—*Integral Ecology*: 1 occurrence.

Chapter V—Lines of approach and action: 1 occurrence.

Chapter VI—Ecological education and spirituality: 2 occurrences.

It may be of interest to complement this quantitative survey with all the excerpts from the papal document where the expression is used, whether as a metaphor, in its literal sense, or in the underlying locutionary intention.

§1. "Saint Francis of Assisi reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us."

§3. "I would like to enter into dialogue with all people about our common home."

§13. "Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home."

§ 17. “I will briefly turn to what is happening to our common home.”

§53. “Never have we so hurt and mistreated our common home as we have in the last two hundred years.”

§ 61. “But we need only take a frank look at the facts to see that our common home is failing into serious disrepair.”

§ 155. “The acceptance of our bodies as God’s gift is vital for welcoming and accepting the entire world as a gift from the Father and our common home. . .”.

§ 164. “Beginning in the middle of the last century and overcoming many difficulties, there has been a growing conviction that our planet is a homeland and that humanity is one people living a common home.”

§ 232. “In this way, the world, and the quality of life of the poorest, are cared for, with a sense of solidarity which is at the same time aware that we live in a common home which God Has entrusted to us.”

§ 243. “Even now we are journeying towards the sabbath of eternity, the new Jerusalem, towards our common home in heaven.”

A broader survey also leads us to isolated occurrences of the noun *home*, that is, without associated adjectives, sometimes referring to planet Earth, and also to *feeling at home*; at other times, it refers to the houses and niches that living beings build to inhabit, also to insist on the right of all individuals to a piece of land where they can raise their house; at the same time, the drama of the scarcity of housing and the quality of housing is denounced, in certain geographies and social contexts, causing serious imbalances in the organization of individuals’ lives and dramatic constraints on projects to create a family.

§13. “Here I want to recognize, encourage and thank all those striving in countless ways to guarantee the protection of the home which we share.”

§ 21: “Each year hundreds of millions of tons of waste are generated, much of it non-biodegradable, highly toxic and radioactive, from homes and businesses. . . The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth.”

§ 25: “For example, changes in climate, to which animals and plants cannot adapt, lead them to migrate; this in turn affects the livelihood of the poor, who are then forced to leave their homes . . .”.

§ 51: “There is also the damage caused by the export of solid waste and toxic liquids to developing countries, and by the pollution produced by companies which operate in less developed countries in ways they could never do at home, in the countries in which they raise their capital.”

§ 94: “Every campesino has a natural right to possess a reasonable allotment of land where he can establish his home . . .”.

§ 146: “in various parts of the world, pressure is being put on them (indigenous community) to abandon their homelands to make room for agricultural or mining projects which are undertaken without regard for the degradation of nature and culture.”

§ 147. “In our rooms, our homes, our workplaces and neighbourhoods, we use our environment as a way of expressing our identity.”

§ 148. “People show great care for the interior of their homes . . .”.

§ 151. “There is also a need to protect those common areas, visual landmarks and urban landscapes which increase our sense of belonging, of rootedness, of ‘feeling at home’ within a city which includes us and brings us together.”

§152. “Lack of housing is a grave problem in many parts of the world. . . Not only the poor, but many other members of society as well, find it difficult to own a home. Having a home has much to do with a sense of personal dignity and the growth of families.”

§ 162. “Parents can be prone to impulsive and wasteful consumption, which then affects their children who find it increasingly difficult to acquire a home of their own and build a family.”

§ 244. “In the meantime, we come together to take charge of this home which has been entrusted to us, knowing that all the good which exists here will be taken up into the

heavenly feast. . . May our struggles and our concern for this planet never take away the joy of our hope.”

In short, thinking of planet Earth as a home—the object under discussion in this essay—whether it is built or under construction, biological or spiritual, does not seem to be an adequate substantiation and adjective for planet Earth. From the outset, the “common home” metaphor as applied to the planet comes under suspicion. Its metaphorical function reveals itself to be fragile within the scope of an integral ecology (Sadowski 2016, pp. 21–44), which is at the heart of the encyclical: centred on common life, on the ontological value of the lives of all creatures, and on the deep and intricate bonds that connect everything and everyone.

5. Integral Ecology in *Laudato Si'*

Pope Francis, with the unprecedented encyclical of 24 May 2015, discards the purely instrumental view of nature and recognizes the intrinsic value of all creatures and the interdependence of all creatures; this is a step of immense value, which strengthens us in the critical distancing from the metaphorical structure of *common home* when applied to planet Earth. Francis’s effort towards an ecological epistemology, informed by the Christian gospel, culminates in the idea of *integral ecology* that translates, at the same time, the acknowledgment of the value of all creatures and the acknowledgment that all creatures are connected and interdependent, as well as the scope of everything that concerns the human: personal, religious, social, environmental, cultural, political, spiritual, and everyday life dimensions (Francis 2015, para. 138–62).

The concept of integral ecology in *Laudato Si'* was broadened and deepened in the *Fratelli Tutti* encyclical, published five years later, in the semantics of an anthropological and social nature, around the concepts of *fraternity* and *social friendship*, which constitute, in effect, the subtitle of the document (Francis 2020). These are concepts that, beyond the relational anthropological spectrum, it would make sense to extend to the entirety of creation, in recognition of the fraternity of origin of all creatures and of the “unbreakable bond of friendship” with which the Creator unites all of creation, in line with the thought already expressed in the 2015 encyclical: “Moreover, when our hearts are authentically open to universal communion, this sense of fraternity excludes nothing and no one.” (Francis 2015, para. 92). “Todos, Todos, Todos” (“Everyone, Everyone, Everyone”) was the Pope’s exclamation in unison with 1.5 million young people, from 180 countries, at the 2023 World Youth Day, held in Lisbon, from 2–6 August.

It was not long before Pope Francis expressed himself in even more incisive terms regarding the ontological links between all creatures. He did so in the apostolic exhortation *Laudate Deum*, of 4 October 2023:

“This itself excludes the idea that the human being is extraneous, a foreign element capable only of harming the environment. Human beings must be recognized as a part of nature. Human life, intelligence and freedom are elements of the nature that enriches our planet, part of its internal workings and its equilibrium.” (Francis 2023, para. 26).

Perhaps it might be said that the human capacity to think and be conscious should no longer be seen only as a potentiality that separates, that puts humans outside the chain of living ecosystems and elevates them to the top of the ontological pyramid, in a hierarchical ontology (Damásio 2020, p. 50). More than that, this capacity originally denotes that humans are a “unique” entity that can know, invent, and create possible and unprecedented worlds as part of a relational ontology.

“For ‘as part of the universe . . . 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’”. (Francis 2023, para. 67)

Reversing the path of separation and making the irreducibility of the bond of belonging existentially conscious may be a possible path for the generations of the 21st century, valuing belonging, deep bonds, and empathy for all creation, as so ingeniously noted in the 4th century by Church Father Basil of Caesarea (329–379). In one of his homilies in the

Hexaëmeron, he expresses himself as follows: “God closely binds the entire creation by the law of an indissoluble friendship, in communion and harmony” (Basile de Césarée 1968, p. 149). In the present time, Pope Francis writes in the *Laudato Si'* encyclical:

“It cannot be emphasized enough how everything is interconnected. Time and space are not independent of one another, and not even atoms or subatomic particles can be considered in isolation. Just as the different aspects of the planet—physical, chemical, and biological—are interrelated, so too living species are part of a network which we will never fully explore and understand. A good part of our genetic code is shared by many living beings. It follows that the fragmentation of knowledge and the isolation of bits of information can actually become a form of ignorance, unless they are integrated into a broader vision of reality.” (Francis 2015, para. 138).

These words undoubtedly constitute one of the foundations for Francis’s perspective on “an integral ecology”, as presented in the encyclical and which is the culmination of the evolutionary thought of Catholic teaching in matters of ecology throughout the 20th century and up to the present moment.

If until the Second Vatican Council a *creational ecological* perspective prevailed, in which the human is thought of as the lord of creation, with the Council, significant changes took place in the consideration of created reality. The Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* recognizes the intrinsic value and autonomy of earthly realities, as is explicitly stated in number 36: “For by the very circumstance of their having been created, all things are endowed with their own stability, truth, goodness, proper laws and order.” (Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* para. 36). The focus progressively moves away from the human, expanding to the ontological and ethical consideration of creatures *other than humans* and to the relationships that humans and non-humans interweave; it is thus in tune with what we can call *environmental ecology*; this focuses attention on human life but also on its relationship with all other forms of life, common life, in constant search for harmonization of the rules and regulations of homeostasis (Damásio 2020, pp. 49–57).

With the pontificates of Popes John Paul II (1979–2005) and Benedict XVI (2003–2013), the perspective broadened to a *human ecology*, which takes into account human subjects, societies, and cultures in interactions with each other and interactions with the natural environment:

“In addition to the irrational destruction of the natural environment, we must also mention the more serious destruction of the *human environment*, something that is by no means receiving the attention it deserves. Although people are rightly worried—though much less than they should be—about preserving the natural habitats of the various animal species threatened with extinction, because they realize that each of these species makes its contribution to the balance of nature in general, too little effort is made to *safeguard the moral conditions for an authentic ‘human ecology’*”. (John Paul II 1991, para. 38).

In the 21st century, this process of progressive awareness that ecology cannot be reduced to preservationism (with the creation of ecological reserves to preserve species), or to conservationism (conservation, for example, of endangered species), or to environmentalism, which is easily reduced to the natural environment without taking into account that human beings are also part of this natural environment, Pope Francis has led the thinking of the Catholic Church’s magisterium to an “integral ecology”.

6. Integral Ecology: Brief History of the Concept

This is not a new coinage, even if there are no records of the expression in documents of the Catholic papal magisterium before the 2015 encyclical. As far as we were able to ascertain, the concept of “integral ecology” was introduced by Hilary Moore, in the work *Marine Ecology*, published in 1958. Realizing the limitations of an ecology focused on autoecology (the study of interactions between an organism or a single species and its environment) and synecology (the study of interactions between several species and relationships with the environment in an ecosystem or community) and influenced by advances from the discipline of ecology into the scope of social and environmental justice

issues, it forges the concept of integral ecology to highlight that all aspects of life are connected. (Moore 1958, p. 7). In addition to this first occurrence of the concept, the expression appears twice at the end of the 20th century, associated with the Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff and with Ken Wilber, thinker and creator of integral psychology and the integral movement and author of *A Theory of Everything*, whose first edition dates back to 2000.

Leonardo Boff, together with Virgil Elizondo, use the expression *integral ecology* in the editorial of a special issue of the magazine *Concilium* (International Journal of Theology), published in 1995, where they articulate, at the end of the 20th century, a progressive trend towards an *integral ecology* that articulates conservation, preservation, environmentalism, human, social, mental ecology, and deep ecology with a vision that seeks a new alliance between societies and nature:

“Today, an integral ecology is increasingly sought that articulates all these moments with the perspective of founding a new alliance between societies and nature, with the socio-cosmic common good and with the maintenance of the conditions that allow the process of evolution to follow its course.” (Boff and Elizondo 1995, pp. 743–44).

According to them, ecological complexity is not merely biological or physical complexity. From the holistic perspective of an integral ecology: “society and culture also belong to the ecological complex. Ecology is, then, the relationship that all bodies, animate and inanimate, natural, and cultural, establish and maintain among themselves and with their surroundings” (Boff and Elizondo 1995, p. 744).

For his part, Ken Wilber developed an integral model based on four irreducible perspectives: objective, inter-objective, subjective, and intersubjective (Wilber 2001, pp. 66–73). The *objective* perspective examines the makeup and outward behaviour of the individual; the *inter-objective* examines the external structure and behaviour of the collective phenomenon, from ecosystems to political and economic systems; the *subjective* and *inter-subjective* constitute the inner aspect of the phenomenon and are traditionally associated with aesthetic experience and cultural and religious values. For the author, each of these perspectives is fundamental in an integral model; if any of them are excluded or neglected, the understanding obtained is partial, leading to partial solutions (Wilber 2001, pp. 97–99).

In short, an integral ecology indicates a new vision of the world. It has to do with a possible holistic vision (Wilber 2001, pp. 33–58), open, inclusive, full, expanded, comprehensive, necessarily rooted in a dimension of interiority and ontological depth, a holistic vision suggestive of a possible dialogue between ecology and all scientific knowledge and with the spiritualities and religions of the world. “A great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge stands before us, and it will demand that we set out on the long path.” (Francis 2015, para. 202): on behalf of all, all, all creatures in the astonishing adventure of life.

7. Conclusions

From the perspective of Emmanuel Levinas and Hannah Arendt, the world, and not planet Earth, can be thought of as a home, insofar as it is built by homo faber culturalis, according to Arendt, and insofar as it separates, according to Levinas, providing humans the possibility of recollection. Note that, as the world separates from the planet, the hypothesis of the *common* also weakens. As for the planet, on which humans build the world, it is not *like a home*; it is admirable living matter (Botkin and Keller 2011).

Admirable living matter such that, for this reason, from the point of view of planet Earth, it is not appropriate to think of as a home, not even with the characteristics we attribute to a house. Biological human families recognize and care for *blood ties*. Likewise, the universal family needs to recognize and care for the *earthly ties* that unite all forms of life on the planet.

If the holistic vision, suggested in the concept of integral ecology, may denote some harmony with the *common home* metaphor, this essay did not reach any evidence of significant reasons and benefits that justify the use of this metaphor: neither to think about planet Earth, in itself, in its creaturely essence, nor in the context of the global ecological crisis,

nor in the context of an integral ecology, nor, consequently, in the context of a Christian theology of integral ecology.

From the point of view of the planet, from the point of view of human beings and all forms of life, it is legitimate to think of the Earth as a mother, body, womb, surrounding and support, throughout the life of each human being and throughout the life of all other life forms. Regarding “Mother Earth”, as Pope Francis states in *Laudato Si'* (Francis 2015, para. 1), in line with Michel Egger: “There is a true umbilical cord between human beings and nature . . . We are nature. We are part of it . . . The earth is our mother . . . we leave it, we return to it.” (Egger 2012, p. v).

It is also in this sense that Pope Francis is understood when he uses anthropomorphic characteristics to talk about what *is happening* to planet Earth. Francis chooses the two-voiced cry, which rises across the planet, as one of the compelling images of the *Laudato Si'* encyclical: the cry of poor Earth and the cry of the poor of Earth. With the poor of Earth, the living planet also cries, groans, screams, weakens, asks for care, is sick, agonizes (Francis 2015, para. 2, para. 16, para. 53).

The language of the Earth appears to be the mother tongue of humans. Experts that we are regarding the sophisticated languages of the world, perhaps we can outline here what, in Portugal, is called Educational Territory of Priority Intervention (ETPI)—*Território Educativo de Intervenção Prioritária* (TEIP): to learn and teach humans, from the cradle, the original mother tongue. “We are children of God, the stars, and the earth at the same time. We share a community of being and destiny with creation.” (Egger 2012, p. 19).

Since life is the most immediate experience of human beings, either of their own or of other creatures, future research can reorient either Christian reflection on an integral ecology or a theology of creation or an ethics of the Earth, increasingly towards the care for the *common life*, the total gift of the Living God, rather than for the care of the *common home*.

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Note

¹ This passage is found in a letter written by Einstein in 1950, as quoted in *The New York Times*, 29 March 1972.

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