

(Artwork by Ricardo Levins Morales)

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Chapter 1, Section 5: Global Inequality

In the section about global inequality, Pope Francis points out the distance between the "professionals, opinion makers, communications media and centres of power" and the problems facing the world's poor, who make up the majority of the world's population but whose voices are often excluded from international political and economic discussions. "This lack of physical contact and encounter… can lead to a numbing of conscience and to tendentious analyses which neglect parts of reality." Even when this attitude takes on environmental issues, "we have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor" (49).

Francis then introduces the concept of ecological debt. He describes how the people who "blame population growth instead of extreme and selective consumerism on the part of some," are the same people who refuse to do the actual work of "resolving the problems of the poor and thinking of how the world can be different." Indeed, this mindset "is an attempt to legitimize the present model of distribution, where a minority believes that it has the right to consume in a way which can never be universalized, since the planet could not even contain the waste products of such consumption" (50).

REFLECT

Consider the ecological debt that exists "between the global north and south, connected to commercial imbalances with effects on the environment, and the disproportionate use of natural resources by certain countries over long periods of time" (51). Francis offers several examples of this phenomenon. Perhaps the biggest one is the fact that wealthy, industrialized countries have contributed the most to climate change, but it is poor countries – those most reliant on agriculture and other natural resources for their GDP – who will become poorer as global temperatures and sea levels rise.

ACT

Overcoming the impacts of today's neoliberal structures that leave wealthy countries indebted ecologically to poorer ones, in a way we can never repay, can be overwhelming. Whenever I get bogged down by existential issues like this, I like to lean into the "think global, act local" mindset. One simple action Americans can take to overcome inequality at home is fill out the census. The census is a way for tallying up how many Americans live where, which comes with many benefits, including ensuring your community gets appropriate representation within federal and state legislatures, as well as funding for social programs and services.

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