Reshaping our Social Ecology

– a response to Andrew Cozens

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Andrew Cozen's article brings a fresh perspective to our understanding of people with dementia and their communities, and of the changes that have affected them in response to the pandemic. His central theme is that people with dementia must be understood as members of a delicate social ecosystem in which many actors and structures must work smoothly together. Only in this way can they be accorded care, dignity, status and a role in the communities of which they are a part. Implicit in this ecological approach is the assumption that a thriving ecosystem benefits *all* (or at least most) of its members: life breeds life in an interlocking web, and when one species or ecological niche is compromised, the whole system suffers. Analogously, the creation of dementia-friendly communities benefits us all, providing an enriched environment that we can all enjoy.

He goes on to detail some of the ways in which the pandemic has disrupted this social ecology and, in the process, demonstrated its fragility and lack of resilience. To use a rather confused metaphor, the pandemic has proved to be the 'canary in the coal mine', drawing attention to the imminent danger of individual and collective harm not just for people with dementia, but for all the more vulnerable elements in the social ecology: "It is clear that these weaknesses were inherent in the health and care system for people with dementia before the pandemic. The cracks in the system were found by the virus . . .".

Notwithstanding this bleak picture, Andrew Cozens ends with some glimmers of light. At the micro level, "in individual settings and communities, collective efforts have protected and enhanced the ecosystems of individuals and their families." The compromise and partial collapse of the macro-ecology has been somewhat mitigated at this more local level by the heroism, resilience and resources of individuals and small groups, not least faith groups, which have preserved a sense of value and priorities from being lost in the cracked system within which we live and move.

There are glimmers of hope, then, that provide us with a starting-point. However, they leave open the question of whether there is hope for a restored social ecology that includes and values people with dementia. Or is the best we can hope for, that individuals' and families' isolation may be protected from the worst of the damage wrought by a negligent social policy and the ravages of Covid-19?

So in this short response, I want to develop some themes from the encyclical of Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, which is by far the most authoritative Christian reflection on human existence from an ecological perspective to have been published since the beginning of the millennium; and to bring these themes into critical conversation with recent government attempts to reform social care.

Against the throwaway culture: *Laudato si'* and beyond

Laudato si' is often seen as mainly to do with the natural environment, but it is as much about human beings' treatment of each other as their treatment of the created order. The principles of right behaviour leak from one to the other and back again.. "It follows that our

indifference or cruelty towards fellow creatures of this world sooner or later affects the treatment we mete out to other human beings." (92); "the 'throwaway world' generates a 'throwaway culture"(43): it is this culture that treats people with dementia as dispensable, fit only to be warehoused in under-resourced and unsafe care homes while they wait to die.

The encyclical's diagnosis of this state of affairs begins with the human pursuit of power. Progress derives from this pursuit of power and our love affair with the technologies that give us control.(101ff) While technology is a wonderful tool in the service of human values, it has too easily become an end in itself: society becomes a series of problems to be solved by technology, which becomes overspecialized so that the 'big picture' is lost. Human goods become reduced to what can be measured, to financial profit and loss. The technocratic blindness to created goods becomes a blindness also to human values, "wherein a technocracy which sees no intrinsic value in lesser beings coexists with the other extreme, which sees no special value in human beings. But one cannot prescind from humanity. There can be no renewal of our relationship with nature without a renewal of humanity itself."(118)

This diagnosis of the problem has within it the seeds of a response, in renewed interpersonal relations: "If the present ecological crisis is one small sign of the ethical, cultural and spiritual crisis of modernity, we cannot presume to heal our relationship with nature and the environment without healing all fundamental human relationships."(119)

This analysis leads in Chapter Four to the concept of 'Integral Ecology' encompassing the environmental, the economic and the social. So Francis develops a family of ecologies. There is *cultural ecology* : " Attempts to resolve all problems through uniform regulations or technical interventions can lead to overlooking the complexities of local problems which demand the active participation of all members of the community. New processes taking shape cannot always fit into frameworks imported from outside; they need to be based in the local culture itself."(144). Then there is an *ecology of daily life*: "Authentic development . . . entails considering the setting in which people live their lives. These settings influence the way we think, feel and act. In our rooms, our homes, our workplaces and neighbourhoods, we use our environment as a way of expressing our identity."(147) And finally there is a *moral ecology:* "An integral ecology is inseparable from the notion of the common good, a central and unifying principle of social ethics."(156)

In his latest encyclical, *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis develops these themes with respect to human relations. It is explicitly written in the shadow of the pandemic:

"As I was writing this letter, the Covid-19 pandemic unexpectedly erupted, exposing our false securities. Aside from the different ways that various countries responded to the crisis, their inability to work together became quite evident. For all our hyper-connectivity, we witnessed a fragmentation that made it more difficult to resolve problems that affect us all. Anyone who thinks that the only lesson to be learned was the need to improve what we were already doing, or to refine existing systems and regulations, is denying reality."(7) On the contrary, "the gap between concern for one's personal well-being and the prosperity of the larger human family seems to be stretched to the point of complete division between individuals and human community."(31) Covid-19 has unmasked our social poverty: "the storm has exposed our vulnerability and uncovered those false and superfluous certainties around which we constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities…" (32) The threat of an individualist 'free-for-all' is worse than any pandemic.(36)

Here the diagnosis of *Laudato si'* is being applied to the needs of older people, exposed to the 'storm' of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is not difficult to see its relevance and importance for the social ecology of dementia, as developed in Andrew Cozen's article. For example, it indicates that the ideal of 'Dementia-friendly Communities' is for the benefit of all, and not just people with dementia: it is an expression of the search for a robust cultural and social ecology that can adjust to the changing capacities and needs of all its members; and it is an act of resistance against a fragmented and alienated worldview that considers 'dementia care' as just one more problem to be solved.

The contrast between the two approaches – of a worldview that sees human society as integrally connected versus one in which the pursuit of power and technology reduce human concerns to a set of problems to be solved – can be seen in the contrasting responses to Covid-19. Societies promoting solidarity and connectedness in many cases found timely and flexible collective responses, whereas those with more competitive and fragmented approaches have often responded poorly. This is seen in, for example, the competitive scramble for PPE and the Prime Minister's 'whack a mole' response to local outbreaks (Kevern et al 2020; Mormina and Nsofor 2020)

The Social Ecology of dementia and a fragmented social care system

Older peoples' social care was the Cinderella of the post-war Labour government's grand reforming vision (Timmins, 2001). Unlike health care, the need for a national system of residential care was never securely established, and the duty of providing or commissioning such care was left in the hands of local government. As both the budgets and the political influence of local government bodies has waned, so residential care provision has become increasingly precarious. At the same time the 'demographic timebomb' of an ageing society has generated an unprecedented demand for care services, both for people living with dementia and to support very frail older people. As Andrew Cozens has pointed out, care may receive national (NHS) funding where an identified health condition is at stake, but this only serves to underline the lack of support for those 'healthy' older people in need of care.

Faced with this challenge, local authorities have had to resort to a range of strategies to manage both costs and expectations. These typically include heavy reliance on private providers in the 'social market', cross-subsidy of poorer recipients by differential charging, private contributions and limited options for those without the ability to pay. All concerned parties accept that the system is unjust, inefficient and at times inhumane: the repeated incidences of elder abuse in care homes point to the pressures encountered by those who work in and those who use the services, as an undertrained and underpaid workforce struggles to provide person-centred care in a sector grievously starved of funds and status.

In response, successive governments have promised to initiate a reform of adult social care, only to quietly shelve proposals as the scale and complexity of the challenge became apparent. The current state of affairs is summed up succinctly by Clive Chapman thus:

"Over the last twenty years, there have been twelve Green and White Papers on social care, and five independent commissions, leading to little reform in the care system. In July 2019, the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee described successive governments' abandonment of adult social care to a market that could not safeguard the ageing

population, and their failure to address the urgent need for radical funding reform, as a 'national scandal'." (Chapman 2019, 11)

The political perils of attempting to engage with this issue may be seen by reference to the Conservatives' 2017 election manifesto, where reactions to a proposal for funding adult social care by what was quickly dubbed a 'Dementia Tax' led to a rapid retraction by Theresa May (Asthana and Elgot, 2017). It has been the same with Boris Johnson's August 2019 pledge "that we will fix the crisis in social care once and for all, and with a clear plan we have prepared to give every older person the dignity and security they deserve." (Campbell 2019). This has been followed by no concrete action, although this is perhaps understandable given the intervening pressures of the pandemic and Brexit.

The suspicion arises that reform of social care is just too hard for 21stcentury governments, wedded as they are to a rhetoric of the freedom of the individual, low taxation and the marketisation of core government services. However, there are glimmers of new thinking emerging from the response to Covid-19. The most recent of these is the report by Danny Kruger MP, in response to a request from the Prime Minister for "proposals to sustain the community spirit we have seen during the coronavirus pandemic." This gives the most reliable hints of current government thinking on how to build or maintain a social infrastructure, which will include how vulnerable older people may best be supported (Kruger 2020).

The key concept is one of a new 'Social Covenant'. "For 40 years we have tried to drive economic and social progress by varying mixtures of the market and the state. We have relied on the power of government and of business to help the UK as a whole and left-behind towns in particular. It hasn't worked, because there is something missing in the mixture.   What is missing in our current model is community power: the role of local people, acting together spontaneously or through enduring institutions, to design and deliver the kind of neighbourhood they want to be part of". (Kruger 2020, 12)

"In a sentence, the social covenant is the mutual commitment by citizens, civil society and the state, each to fulfil their discrete responsibilities and to work together for the common good of all. This ambition is at heart profoundly radical, entailing transformation of our political, economic and social model. But it is radical in a conservative way, working with the grain of British history, public opinion and the reality of our communities today." (Kruger 2020, 13)

Space does not permit a detailed analysis of Kruger's proposals here, but in the light of our discussion some observations may be made.

Recovering Solidarity

The first is that this proposal recognises that (for an admittedly brief and limited period) the success of the government's lockdown strategy hinged upon high levels of social solidarity and mutual support. It uses this as a template for how a range of social issues may be addressed at community level. It may well be that an approach to social care through social solidarity and community participation is the *only* available way to address our fragile and rickety care system, given the complexity and political difficulties encountered by government failures and the profound structural problems exposed by the Covid-19 crisis. In this respect, Kruger's instincts may be sound.

However, his model seems jarringly naïve in the face of the declining levels of social solidarity evinced in British culture during 'normal' times (Lima de Miranda and Snower, 2020) as well as the rapid decline (in the second half of 2020) of the exceptional levels of solidarity encountered early in the pandemic.

Drawing on the ecological analysis underlying *Laudato si'* above, we can perhaps see why this proposal seems naive. Social solidarity can't be conjured up by government fiat or by ingenious structural manipulation, if the overarching ideology is one of the individual pursuit of power in a technocratic, problem-based social framework. No tweaking of a social market based upon individual competition for scarce resources will yield increasing solidarity, and it follows that a starting-point must be the recognition of mutual interdependence in a complex world of overlapping ecosystems. Specifically reflecting the themes of this issue of *Crucible*, solidarity with **people with dementia and their carers** arises from the recognition that we share resources and enrich each other in the whole of society, and this will not emerge by an exhortation to local, small-community loyalties.

To conclude, the learning points from Covid-19 may lie not in the collective 'Thursday evening clapping' – the distinctive UK gesture of solidarity during the pandemic's first wave (as old people with dementia died in isolation in care homes). They lie rather in the way it was dealt with in less individualistic societies with fewer resources. Some striking collaborative, coordinated responses were developed in resource-poor but less individualistic societies (see Mormina and Nsofor, 2020). My own research with the PPI in Brazil as the pandemic ripped through the country bears this out: flexibility, resilience and commitment to the wellbeing of others can compensate for a fragile and under-resourced social infrastructure, if the social ecology of the community is fundamentally healthy (Kevern *et al.*, 2020).

To return to the words of *Fratelli tutti*, "If only we might keep in mind all those elderly persons who died for lack of respirators, partly as a result of the dismantling, year after year, of healthcare systems. If only this immense sorrow may not prove useless, but enable us to take a step forward towards a new style of life. If only we might rediscover once for all that we need one another and that in this way our human family can experience a rebirth, with all its faces, all its hands and all its voices, beyond the walls that we have erected." (35) Then, perhaps, the sufferings of people with dementia during the Covid-19 pandemic will have had some positive outcome.

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