



THE CONTEMPL-ACTION PARADOX

(aka the Slow-Fast Paradox)

1. Introduction

LSM's charism embodies an intrinsic paradox, an inherent tension, a fruitful paradox. On one hand, we are grounded in a **contemplative** "ecological spirituality" (LS 216), a slow-paced spirituality that nourishes us in this challenging journey. On the other hand, we are engaged in bold **activism** and campaigning to drive "decisive action, here and now" (LS 161), in line with the dramatic urgency of the ecological crisis. In other words:

We are **contemplatives**. And we are **activists**. Simultaneously.

We strive to **slow down**. And we strive to **speed up**. Simultaneously.

We strive **to be**. And we strive **to do**. Simultaneously.

We strive **to be mystics**. And we strive **to be prophets**. Simultaneously.

This paradox is deeply embedded in our "LSM" name. "Laudato Si'" is all about contemplation – it's a prayer of praise to the Creator for the wonders of Creation. "Movement" is all about action – it's about *moving*, driving action, moving the Church and humanity to change course. In a nutshell, [LS+M = Contemplation+Action](#).

This Contempl-Action paradox is the natural response to the other paradox of "Creation's Song and Creation's Cry" that we reflect upon in LSM's Laudato Si' Retreats. It mirrors St. Paul's invitation to "rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15). That is to say, the sublime beauty of God's message in Creation (Creation's Song) invites us to slow down and develop an "ecological spirituality", to join the choir of Creation in praising God. On the other hand, becoming "painfully aware" (LS 19) of Creation's heartbreaking cry, that collection of human and non-human cries driven by the ecological crisis, leads us to fast-paced activism to drive decisive action at all levels to tackle this crisis with the extreme urgency it requires.

We must embrace this paradox, which is not a contradiction or a trade-off (i.e. we don't need to pick one over the other one). This tension has been part of the life of the Church since antiquity, as addressed by saints and scholars describing the *Vita*



Contemplativa and *Vita Activa* (contemplative and active life). In fact, some reframed this tension as a fruitful duo, *Mysticism* and *Prophecy*, which mutually enrich each other.

2. Visualizing the Paradox

A) The image of Breathing

For breathing, both **inhalation** and **exhalation** are essential. We don't choose one over the other, we simply do both. That is the way our bodies work.

Similarly, for us at LSM both our slow-paced eco-spirituality and our fast-paced activism are essential, as paradoxical as that might sound. On one hand, our ecological spirituality is like the act of inhaling, an act in which we "take in" and are nurtured by creation and our Creator. On the other hand, our activism is like the act of exhaling, an act in which we "give out" and aim to halt the abuse of creation.

Our lives are a constant back and forth, inhaling and exhaling, taking in and giving out, contemplating and mobilizing, slowing down and speeding up. It is a beautiful and fulfilling way of life.

B) The image of Music

Music is the harmonious combination of **sound** and **silence**. On one hand, if there isn't enough "silence" (interval) between the notes, then the song will be pure noise rather than music. On the other hand, if there is too much silence between the notes, then the song will be a random combination of solitary notes rather than music.

Thus, true music is the right balance of sound and silence. Both are essential and must be combined skillfully. Similarly, for us at LSM both our slow-paced eco-spirituality and our fast-paced activism are essential and must be integrated. Our activism is like the notes and chords in a song, the interventions of the musician. And our ecological spirituality is like the intervals between notes, the intentional silence and mindful pacing of the notes that makes them so enjoyable and fruitful.

C) The image of a Tree

LSM is like a tree in a windy location (like [this](#) or [this](#)), with strong **roots** keeping it grounded and ever-moving **branches** displaying a beautiful dance. The roots are our



ecological spirituality and the branches are our activism for climate justice, driven by the wind that is the Holy Spirit.

The roots might seem passive and slow, while the branches might seem active and fast. But they are complementary and interdependent. They need each other. Both have an essential role in absorbing the nutrients that the tree needs to thrive: the roots absorb the water and soil nutrients (*Sister Water and Sister Mother Earth*) while the branches' leaves capture the sunlight and carbon dioxide (*Brother Fire and Sister Air*). All elements are essential for the tree to thrive. Both the roots and the branches are essential, inseparable.

The roots are hidden to the observer's eye, but they are as important and as big as the more visible branches. Both are needed to tap into the wind of the Holy Spirit, that force that moves the branches to display their beautiful rhythms and motion.

3. The case for a Slow-paced Eco-Spirituality

We need to slow down for several reasons: to make time for stillness and silence, which are essential to deepen our "ecological conversion" (i.e. our activism will dry out without it); to regenerate ourselves, as activism is tough on our bodies and souls; and to break the "rapidification" logic (LS 18) of modern society, which is at the core of the ecological crisis.

Some relevant quotes:

- *"The continued acceleration of changes affecting humanity and the planet is coupled today with a more intensified pace of life and work which might be called "rapidification". Although change is part of the working of complex systems, the speed with which human activity has developed contrasts with the naturally slow pace of biological evolution." (LS 18)*
- *"We need to slow down and look at reality in a different way" (LS 114)*
- *"If someone has not learned to stop and admire something beautiful, we should not be surprised if he or she treats everything as an object to be used and abused without scruple." (LS 215)*
- *"Ecological culture cannot be reduced to a series of urgent and partial responses to the immediate problems of pollution, environmental decay and the depletion of*



natural resources. There needs to be a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies, an educational programme, a lifestyle and a spirituality which together generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm.” (LS 111)

- *“I would like to offer Christians a few suggestions for an ecological spirituality [which] can motivate us to a more passionate concern for the protection of our world.” (LS 216)*
- *“The ecological crisis is also a summons to profound interior conversion... an ecological conversion” (217)*
- *“Christian spirituality proposes ... a return to that simplicity which allows us to stop and appreciate the small things, to be grateful for the opportunities which life affords us.” (LS 222)*
- *“Nature is filled with words of love, but how can we listen to them amid constant noise, and interminable and nerve-wracking distractions?” (LS 225)*
- *“Contemplative rest... protects human action from becoming empty activism” (LS 237)*

4. The case for Fast-paced Activism

On the other hand, we need to speed up and catch up with the ever-accelerating ecological crisis we face. “Our house [our common home] is on fire”. And the only acceptable response to a house on fire is an extremely quick and decisive response to get as many water buckets poured into the fire as possible, in the least amount of time. Every minute that is lost means that irreversible damage is inflicted to this home and its inhabitants (God’s creation, the poor and future generations). At the same time, it should be extremely thoughtful, to avoid an unreflective response in which you don’t realize that you are using a small glass instead of the big water bucket that is behind the door. So fast, very fast, but thoughtful.

At LSM we have a big responsibility. The combined potential of the Laudato Si treasure and the size of the Catholic community is gigantic. We must leverage this potential and put it to good use as quickly as possible, and at the largest scale possible.

Some relevant quotes:

- *“Our common home is falling into serious disrepair . . . we can see signs that things are now reaching a breaking point” (LS 61)*
- *“Doomsday predictions can no longer be met with irony or disdain... The effects of the present imbalance can only be reduced by our decisive action, here and now” (LS 171)*



- *"A countless array of organizations work to promote the common good and to defend the environment... These community actions, when they express self-giving love, can also become intense spiritual experiences." (LS 232)*
- *"We are at the limit! We are on the verge of suicide!" (30 November 2015)*
- *"Faced with a climate emergency, we must take action accordingly, in order to avoid perpetrating a brutal act of injustice towards the poor and future generations." (14 June 2019)*

5. Even Slower, Even Faster: The paradox will deepen as the crisis worsens

More of both will be needed as the ecological crisis continues to worsen. We will need to slow down even more, to deepen our ecological conversion and regenerate ourselves. And we will need to accelerate our efforts even more, to keep up with the ever-accelerating ecological crisis.

Rather than needing to go slow and fast, as stated in the introduction, **we need to go slower and faster.**