

September 26, 2021

***Feast of St. Francis, Care for Creation, and Respect Life Month**

October 4th is the Feast of St. Francis. Pope Francis took his papal name in honor of this saint, in large part because of St. Francis' appreciation of all aspects of creation. He already had in mind the type of encyclical that he would eventually write—the encyclical *Laudato Si'* (in English the title is “Care for our Common Home”). The title of the encyclical is the start of St. Francis' famous canticle: “*Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs.*” Over the course of the next few weeks, I will be reflecting on this encyclical and the various initiatives that the Vatican is promoting from the standpoint of Catholic Social Teaching. In other words, not so much the political or economic debate on environment and climate, but the moral underpinnings to the Church's official doctrine on caring for creation.

October 3, 2021

***Laudato Si' and Catholic Social Teaching on Care for Creation**

October is “Respect Life” month, which gives us a chance to reflect more deeply on our commitment to the dignity of every human life. In Catholic Social Teaching the two bedrock moral principles are that the dignity of every human life is inviolable and that access to the basic goods necessary to live a dignified human life must be possible for everyone (the principle of the common good). Some Catholic commentators and teachers at times pit these two principles against one another. Some focus strongly on the intrinsic value of every human life—focusing exclusively on the issues of abortion and euthanasia—but ignore the social conditions necessary for life to be lived in a dignified way. Others are strong advocates for proper social conditions in the areas of health, education, just labor conditions, and individual human rights but seemingly are blind to destruction of human life in the womb or at the end of life. Catholic Social Teaching does not allow us to choose one or the other. It is only in honoring both aspects that we truly protect and promote the value of every human life.

Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'* touches on all the life issues. He sees the teaching letter as a way to add to the “social teaching” of the Church and so clearly wants his words to be seen as an authoritative understanding of our Catholic response to care for creation at the present time. In other words, though no one can be forced to agree with Pope Francis, from a Catholic teaching point of view, his words are not just one opinion among many but an authoritative guidepost for all of us.

In the introduction part of the letter, Pope Francis refers to his namesake, St. Francis who “*helps us to see that an **integral ecology** calls for openness to categories which transcend the language of mathematics and biology, and take us to the heart of what it is to be human. Just as happens when we fall in love with someone, whenever he would gaze at the sun, the moon or the smallest of animals, he burst into song, drawing all other creatures into his praise.... If we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs. By contrast, if we feel intimately united with all that exists, then sobriety and care will well up spontaneously. The poverty and austerity of Saint Francis were no mere veneer of asceticism, but something much more radical: **a refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled.***” [par. 11]

I have highlighted the last sentence because that is the key to Pope Francis' whole approach. Creation is not something that is “ours” to do with as we want. We do not “own” the earth. Creation is a gift given to us to be cared for so that all current and future human persons can become co-creators with God and live a dignified life within creation. Pope Francis calls this an “integral ecology.” All of creation is related.

The breakdown in one area of environmental, social or economic life affects the whole of life. As the Pope Francis develops some Scriptural themes and begins to reflect on certain principles that need to guide our care of creation, he immediately highlights the universal communion God intends for all creatures, not just humanity. But this communion must be integral and not one-sided. It is inauthentic to claim a deep concern for creation and non-human creatures but be indifferent about what is happening to human beings: *“A sense of deep communion with the rest of nature cannot be real if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human beings. It is clearly inconsistent to combat trafficking in endangered species while remaining completely indifferent to human trafficking, unconcerned about the poor, or undertaking to destroy another human being deemed unwanted. This compromises the very meaning of our struggle for the sake of the environment.”* [par. 91]

Pope Francis next turns to another principle of Catholic Social Teaching: **the universal destination of all goods which leads to a preferential option for those who would otherwise be excluded from their fair share in such goods:** *“Hence every ecological approach needs to incorporate a social perspective which takes into account the fundamental rights of the poor and the underprivileged. The principle of the subordination of private property to the universal destination of goods, and thus the right of everyone to their use, is a golden rule of social conduct and ‘the first principle of the whole ethical and social order’ [quoting John Paul II]. The Christian tradition has never recognized the right to private property as absolute or inviolable, and has stressed the social purpose of all forms of private property. Saint John Paul II forcefully reaffirmed this teaching, stating that ‘God gave the earth to the whole human race for the sustenance of all its members, without excluding or favoring anyone’ These are strong words. He noted that ‘a type of development which did not respect and promote human rights – personal and social, economic and political, including the rights of nations and of peoples – would not be really worthy of man’”* [par. 93].

Pope Francis suggests that the roots to our current ecological crisis go back to a shift in the relationship between humanity and nature that occurs as the modern world develops what the Pope and others have called a “technocratic paradigm”: *“This paradigm exalts the concept of a subject who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object. This subject makes every effort to establish the scientific and experimental method, which in itself is already a technique of possession, mastery and transformation. It is as if the subject were to find itself in the presence of something formless, completely open to manipulation. Men and women have constantly intervened in nature, but for a long time this meant being in tune with and respecting the possibilities offered by the things themselves. It was a matter of receiving what nature itself allowed, as if from its own hand. Now, by contrast, we are the ones to lay our hands on things, attempting to extract everything possible from them while frequently ignoring or forgetting the reality in front of us. Human beings and material objects no longer extend a friendly hand to one another; the relationship has become confrontational. This has made it easy to accept the idea of infinite or unlimited growth, which proves so attractive to economists, financiers and experts in technology. It is based on the lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth’s goods, and this leads to the planet being squeezed dry beyond every limit.”* [par. 106] This paradigm devalues long term care for humans and creation and focuses instead on immediate gains. It devalues the intrinsic dignity of human labor, turning it into a commodity. A technocratic paradigm puts a lot of energy into creating new biotechnologies. Though not necessarily bad, these turn too easily into technologies that treat the human person as a machine or a commodity.

So, what then is the Pope’s understanding of how to turn this ecological crisis into a moment of openness to God’s grace? He does this in three steps. First, he goes more deeply into what he means by “integral ecology,” especially looking at it through the lens of the Catholic Social Teaching principle on

the common good. He then discusses some concrete suggestions for ways to take action in terms of caring for creation (Chapter Five, par.162-201) and ends with a reflection on “ecological education and spirituality” (Chapter Six, par. 202-246). I will delve into these during the course of October. I will also post some links on the stregis.org website under “News/News Briefs” that you can use to read and understand the encyclical, as well as links to some of the concrete initiatives that the Vatican has been sponsoring in light of *Laudato Si’* to help guide and support groups who are addressing these environmental issues.

Although there is a lot of heated debate about climate change, especially in the United States (less so in much of the rest of the world), Pope Francis in this encyclical, using Catholic Social Teaching, puts the Church squarely on the side of those who call for us to change our habitual ways of consuming and manipulating nature. He calls this an **“ecological conversion”**: *“The ecological conversion needed to bring about lasting change is also a community conversion. This conversion calls for a number of attitudes which together foster a spirit of generous care, full of tenderness. First, it entails gratitude and gratuitousness, a recognition that the world is God’s loving gift, and that we are called quietly to imitate his generosity in self-sacrifice and good works....It also entails a loving awareness that we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures, but joined in a splendid universal communion. As believers, we do not look at the world from without but from within, conscious of the bonds with which the Father has linked us to all beings. By developing our individual, God-given capacities, an ecological conversion can inspire us to greater creativity and enthusiasm in resolving the world’s problems and in offering ourselves to God ‘as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable’ (Rom. 12:1). We do not understand our superiority as a reason for personal glory or irresponsible dominion, but rather as a different capacity which, in its turn, entails a serious responsibility stemming from our faith.”* [par.219-220]. More next time.

October 10, 2021

****Laudato Si’* and Catholic Social Teaching on Care for Creation**

Please see the previous bulletins for earlier remarks on this topic. Chapter Five of Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si’* is titled “Lines of Approach and Action.” It could easily read as a series of suggestions (dialogue on international, national, and local levels) that really have no chance of happening. But out of this encyclical the Pope appointed a commission to implement these ideas more concretely. A Vatican website has been set up to help this happen and I would encourage you to peruse the website and its resources (<https://www.laudatosi.va/en.html>). If there was energy and leadership from a few of us in this parish, I would love to see us start a *Laudato Si*-inspired circle of support, which would explore these ideas more fully and offer educational and outreach opportunities to the parish.

For me the real gift of this encyclical comes in the sixth chapter on “Ecological Education and Spirituality.” Pope Francis encourages a type of education parallel to how we try to form our young people in the responsibilities of citizenship. He uses the term “ecological citizenship” as the goal for this kind of education. Instead of raising children and young adults to consume more and the newest and the latest, such an education can show the value of choosing less and only what is necessary, recycling and re-using what we already have: *“A person who could afford to spend and consume more but regularly uses less heating and wears warmer clothes, shows the kind of convictions and attitudes which help to protect the environment. There is a nobility in the duty to care for creation through little daily actions, and it is wonderful how education can bring about real changes in lifestyle. Education in environmental responsibility can encourage ways of acting which directly and significantly affect the world around us, such as avoiding the use of plastic and paper, reducing water consumption, separating refuse, cooking only what can reasonably be consumed, showing care for other living beings, using public transport or car-pooling, planting trees, turning off unnecessary lights, or any number of other practices. All of these*

reflect a generous and worthy creativity which brings out the best in human beings. Reusing something instead of immediately discarding it, when done for the right reasons, can be an act of love which expresses our own dignity. We must not think that these efforts are not going to change the world. They benefit society, often unbeknown to us, for they call forth a goodness which, albeit unseen, inevitably tends to spread. Furthermore, such actions can restore our sense of self-esteem; they can enable us to live more fully and to feel that life on earth is worthwhile.” [# 211-212].

So many of you who are our oldest generation grew up with that awareness after the Great Depression. You integrated a type of frugal lifestyle into your daily habits. You developed an aversion to wasting anything needlessly, a desire to recycle what can be recycled, a satisfaction with buying things of quality that can last a long time rather than constantly replacing things, and so forth. The generations after that (Baby-boomers and their children) were the beneficiaries of that older generation's hard work and frugal lifestyle. Some of us embraced the same virtues and focused on what we needed, but many of us simply took the availability and ease of obtaining whatever we wanted for granted, without thinking about the future costs to the environment and to human well-being on this planet. The current generation coming of age is now faced with the challenge of leading the way to a new embrace of the virtues that can help protect and heal some of these devastating consequences. It is not accidental that many of those organizing national and international gatherings calling for limits in use of non-renewable resources and penalties for damaging the environment are precisely this youngest generation. But all of us, especially my generation of Baby-boomers, can be part of the solution, if we are willing to embrace what Pope Francis calls an 'ecological conversion': *“This conversion calls for a number of attitudes which together foster a spirit of generous care, full of tenderness. First, it entails gratitude and gratuitousness, a recognition that the world is God’s loving gift, and that we are called quietly to imitate his generosity in self-sacrifice and good works.... It also entails a loving awareness that we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures, but joined in a splendid universal communion. As believers, we do not look at the world from without but from within, conscious of the bonds with which the Father has linked us to all beings. By developing our individual, God-given capacities, an ecological conversion can inspire us to greater creativity and enthusiasm in resolving the world’s problems and in offering ourselves to God.... We do not understand our superiority as a reason for personal glory or irresponsible dominion, but rather as a different capacity which, in its turn, entails a serious responsibility stemming from our faith.” [#220].*

How is each of us called to better practice such an 'ecological spirituality'? We can look to those who already do so and join them in simplifying our lifestyles, choosing quality over quantity, and resisting the market's lure of the newest and latest when we have no need of it. But it really needs to be a conversion, something that becomes habitual and lasting.

Pope Francis ends his letter with two prayers. Here is the first one:

A Prayer for Our Earth

All-powerful God, you are present in the whole universe and in the smallest of your creatures. You embrace with your tenderness all that exists. Pour out upon us the power of your love, that we may protect life and beauty. Fill us with peace, that we may live as brothers and sisters, harming no one.

O God of the poor, help us to rescue the abandoned and forgotten of this earth, so precious in your eyes. Bring healing to our lives, that we may protect the world and not prey on it, that we may sow beauty, not pollution and destruction. Touch the hearts of those who look only for gain at the expense of the poor and the earth. Teach us to discover the worth of each thing, to be filled with awe and contemplation, to recognize that we are profoundly united with every creature as we journey towards your infinite light.

We thank you for being with us each day. Encourage us, we pray, in our struggle for justice, love and peace. Amen.

I invite you to pray this prayer with me through the rest of October, our month of Respect Life. To conclude these reflections, I will try to integrate the Pope's ideas into what I would call a "spirituality based on Catholic Social Teaching." More next time.

October 17, 2021

****Laudato Si'* and Catholic Social Teaching on Care for Creation (conclusion)**

Pope Francis' important encyclical, **Laudato Si'**—in fact all of Catholic Social Teaching—can inspire us to embrace a "justice-centered" spirituality. So often we tie spirituality to our one-to-one relationship with God. This encyclical challenges that as too narrow of an understanding. If we want to grow in our relationship with God, we need to grow in our integration of what it means to live and act justly in our world today. To conclude these reflections on the encyclical, here is how I would characterize such a justice-centered spirituality.

1) We become most fully who we are when we grow more deeply in relationship to the Triune God. God is that inexhaustible gift of Love who is given to, received by, and responded to by us in and through the created world. Our relationship with the created world and our care for our common home, the earth, is integral to an authentic relationship with the Triune God.

2) Creation, the earth and its resources, are finite and limited. Respecting that finitude creates within us and our human communities a gratitude for the precious gift that creation, the earth and its environment are for us. We become better able to be stewards of creation rather than owners or exploiters. We begin to act for the long haul and not just short-term profits or power.

3) This means that we need to see our efforts at protecting the environment as a way of practicing preferential solidarity toward the young and vulnerable. The future is everyone's concern. The vulnerability of the earth and its environment is a moral issue. The two core principles which are at the heart of all Catholic Social Teaching—the principle of the intrinsic, inalienable dignity of every human person and the principle of the common good so that the least among us has access to the goods and services necessary to live a dignified human life—are at the heart of any justice-centered spirituality. To protect that dignity and to promote that common good, we need to continually look at the most vulnerable and make sure our actions do not leave them behind. Care for our common home, the earth, is caring for the youngest amongst us, as well as future generations. Such care is a way to show preferential solidarity. Another way to put it: care for creation is very pro-life. Just as we advocate for the dignity of the unborn child, the elderly person in nursing care, the refugee and immigrant in need—because of their vulnerability—so we need to advocate for the earth and its environment, if we are truly pro-life.

4) Finally, a justice-centered spirituality embraces a renewed and appropriate asceticism. The idea of "mortification" or "disciplining our bodies" through ascetic practices seems a bit antiquated. And, too often it was a terrible understanding of authentic spirituality, as though our bodies are near occasions of sin and need to be beaten into submission. But properly understood, asceticism is part and parcel of any authentic Christian spirituality. The deliberate and intentional limiting of our own consumption, of "doing without," of respecting the preciousness of resources, and rationing their use in our life (water, gas, electricity, amount of food and clothing and recreational toys, etc.), is a good type of asceticism, if

we see it as a way to practice solidarity with those who have limited access to those goods and a way to not consume more than what is just in terms of the world's limited resources.