

## Christian Discipleship and the Care for the Created Order

*The teaching of Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si'* represents an urgent call for Christians to apply the Gospel to the current problem of the degradation of the natural and human environment. This essay is designed to outline in broad fashion how it is that the Christian tradition informs the world-wide dialogue about the environment. And it seeks to describe briefly the reasons why this is a responsibility we as Christian disciples all share.*



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Some aspects of the faith require time to manifest their full impact on our way of life. Circumstances have a way of bringing to the forefront those vital implications of the Gospel that are most urgently needed to address our moment in history. Cardinal Newman expressed this as a dynamic of necessary development of Christian doctrine over time. Our responsibilities to care for creation is just such a truth of the faith that has taken on greater clarity in our time.

### Part of the Social Teaching of the Church

The Social Teaching of the Church is itself a relatively recent development in Church doctrine. Church teaching regarding the obligations of society to ensure a just wage for laborers, educational opportunities for children, and most of all, suitable living conditions for families, have all basically been about applying the Gospel to the emerging complexities of the economic life of the modern age. Without this kind of faithful application of the Gospel to the conditions of the world, the faith would become a mere museum-piece for the historically curious.

The gradually clearer expression of the Church's concern for the protection of the natural environment forms part of this development of modern social teaching. It may have sounded like a new thing when

people heard that Pope Francis had written an entire encyclical on the subject of care for the natural environment. Yet, it is the development of a long tradition that is rooted in the Scriptures and in the patristic and medieval traditions. The book of Genesis, for example, speaks of how God rejoiced in the goodness of what he had created, and of how he gave to us a dominion over it (cf. Gen 1:27-31). This dominion has always been understood as a responsibility, a respectful care and use for what God gives. In his recent encyclical letter Pope Francis outlines this tradition, and specifically points out how Saint John Paul II, and Pope Benedict XVI spoke about contemporary dangers to the created order with ever greater urgency throughout their social teaching. Yet, in a real sense *Laudato Si'* is also a first. The Papal magisterium has never before addressed the issue of a Christian's responsibility to care for the created order so comprehensively. In this way, the living Christian tradition rises to meet the circumstances we are currently living.

### What we are facing

An important aspect of our modern world is its technological, industrial and economic power. Never before have human beings been so dominant on the planet. Our industry and technology can do things in the world that no previous generation has been able to do. For example, we can harvest tremendous amounts

of biological and mineral resources to meet our energy needs; we can clear huge forests to create farms, or build factories. Yet, a Christian must pause to ask about the wisdom of what we do and how we do it, keeping in mind that our technological and industrial power has effects on the world we live in, the world we share with other people and with an abundance of other living things.

The Holy Father provides a summary of some of the latest scientific research about the threats that currently menace the world (cf. *Laudato Si'*, 17 ff.). Obviously, scientific research is a work in progress, subject to revision and improvement through more accurate study. That is the way of science. Still, the Catholic faith has always welcomed the contribution of human reason in the dialogue about what is good and just in human life. Even if there is disagreement about one aspect or another of the research, it is clear that irresponsible exploitation of the natural environment has had disastrous effects on our world. Chemical contaminations, thoughtless destruction of natural habitats, wastefulness, and selfish appropriation by some of what is meant as a gift to all is neither respectful of the goodness God gave to humanity by creating this world for us to live in, nor is it a legitimate exercise of human "dominion."

## Why should we care?

From a purely secular point of view, it matters how we take care of the world we live in. After all, we have to live in it. If irresponsible care for the world results in famine or drought due to global warming, or if contaminants in the air and the water make it impossible for us to breathe or raise crops, or have drinking water, then we are signing our own death-warrant or the death-warrants of future generations. And so it is that as Catholics we can unite our voices to many non-Christians and many non-believers who have serious and grave concerns about the state of the environment. Yet, as Catholics, we are custodians of a great and deep tradition that draws its strength from both reason and revelation. Our perspective on this matter lends depth and vigor to this world-wide concern about the state of the natural environment.

First of all, the Gospel insists that we not think only of ourselves; rather that we consider the effects of our

decisions and actions on others. Thus, the Lord's teaching to us that we must "*love our neighbor as ourselves*" requires of us that we consider the state of the environment from the perspective or its effects on others. And the great Gospel question "*who is my neighbor?*" further impels us to think about the good of creation as a good given by God for the whole of the human family. The goods of creation are a gift meant for all and not just for the exploitation of a few. This is to say, it is not just that someday we may not have suitable water to drink, it is that today many of our brothers and sisters in far reaches of the globe are suffering as a result of decisions about the use of the created order that are unwisely made in other parts of the world.

Often this is due to exploitation of the third world's natural resources for the benefit of the more affluent first world. Our consumerist lifestyle can affect the poor in South America, or in Africa and elsewhere. We live in an interconnected world. We always have. It is just that now that interconnectedness, coupled with our greater capacity to affect the environment, has created a greater need to think beyond our own circumstances, or those of our own country, and to think more in terms of the global effects of our industrial, technological and economic decisions.

But there is another aspect of this issue that Christians are called to consider. God made the world and all that is in it. The great beauty of creation is a gift that reflects the glory of God. Here, Pope Francis urges us to learn from Saint Francis (cf. *Laudato Si'*, 10 ff.). Saint Francis rejoiced in the gift of the created world. He thanked God for it, and lived in respectful communion with it. He treated it with great care and respect. Thus the extinction of animal and plant species cannot be measured only in terms of how it affects human beings economically. Each extinction that is brought about because of loss of natural habitat, or unrestricted harvesting of living things is a loss of an irreplaceable part of that beauty, grandeur and variety that gives glory to God.

## Conversion of heart

The fact is, though, that sin has always clouded our judgment. We tend to think only of what is good for us, here and now. We are especially tempted today to look

at creation only in terms of how it can benefit us personally. We must hear the Church's ever-present call to conversion. Christ the Son came to turn us away from self-centeredness and to engage us in the great unfolding of the Kingdom of God, which, among other things, involves our conscious ordering and rejoicing in the world as the Father intended when he gave it to us. The converted heart sees life and creation as a gift: "*Behold the lilies of the field*" Jesus said (Mt 6:28), reminding us that creation is a mirror that reflects God the Father's love and care for us. Thus, we are called to cultivate a spirit of gratitude for the gift of creation. We cannot treat it as a throwaway commodity. Conversion calls us to recognize that the gift of creation, if respected and used wisely, can both flourish in its beauty and can provide for the human needs of the world's inhabitants.

Care for the created environment is inseparable from our care for the human environment. This means that the Church rejects the notion that the destruction of creation is inevitable unless we promote artificial population control or encourage anti-human life policies such as abortion (cf. *Laudato Si'*, 50 and 120). Both of these measures are themselves manipulations of family and human life, and are part of the same temptation that technology unrestrained by ethical and moral judgment, can present. Just because we have the power to do something, does not mean that we should. The problem is not that there are too many people in

the world, rather the problem is that the control and distribution of the world's resources is badly out of balance. Thus societies, governments and industry must enter into an urgent world-wide dialogue about how to moderate the wholesale commodification of creation and of people. The poor must also have a voice in this dialogue. We are called to look for ways to weigh our economic decisions against their effects on the environment and on human populations across the world. Not to do so would be a grave injustice.

This is, as Pope Francis says, *our common home*. That God created this world is a sign of his love for us; that we care for it responsibly is a sign of our love for our neighbor and our desire to give God glory.

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