



A LIVING FAITH

A monthly column on the lay vocation and lay formation

by Todd Graff, Director of Lay Formation (December, 2015)

“*LAUDATO SI*” – LIVING A “THEOLOGY OF ECOLOGY”

“The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast.”

(Pope Benedict XVI, “Homily for the Solemn Inauguration of the Petrine Ministry”)

In last month’s column, I provided an overview of Pope Francis’ recent encyclical, “*Laudato Si*: On Care for Our Common Home.” It is a document which offers us both a very practical and a truly spiritual wisdom. God’s creation, our “common home,” is under assault, Pope Francis warns us, and a conversion of our hearts and of our public and political life is critically needed to address this ecological crisis.

It is essential, though, that we do not understand “ecology” to be the world outside of ourselves. Our Holy Father speaks again and again of an “integral ecology” which unites the world of matter and created realities to the world of the spirit and transcendent meaning.

If our hearts and our understanding of the meaning of our lives are disordered, then the way we live in relation to one another, to creation, and to God will be disordered. The disorder of the “internal desert,” as Pope Benedict described it, leads directly to the “external desert” of a world threatened by environmental destruction.

So, what is the way out of the desert? Pope Francis reflects on this in the final chapter of his encyclical which is entitled, “Ecological Education and Spirituality.” In the chapter, he outlines a “theology of ecology” (my phrase, not his) to bring our Catholic and Christian teaching, tradition, and spirituality to bear on the contemporary needs and challenges facing us and our world.

Creation and Incarnation. Our world, in all its wonder and beauty, reflects its Creator. God, our Creator, is both “one” and “three.” The unity of the “one” and the “three” is found in the communion of the persons of the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Creation reflects its Creator, who is a Trinity of divine relationships. To honor God’s creation is, then, to recognize and honor our relatedness to God, to one another, and to the entire created world. This is a sacred responsibility.

But, the Creator not only loved his creation into being. He became one with it – “And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14). Thus, the matter (or material) of creation becomes a means of embodying and revealing the divine Creator. As Pope Francis writes, “He [God] comes not from above, but from within, he comes that we might find him in this world of ours” (#236). How essential, then, that we honor Christ in the creation he became part of.

Sacramental Signs. Our understanding of Creation and Incarnation leads us naturally into our Church's sacramental celebration. "The universe unfolds in God.... The ideal is not only to pass from the exterior to the interior to discover the action of God in the soul, but also to discover God in all things" (#233). Through our sacramental worship of God, the elements of the natural world – water, oil, fire, touch, bread and wine, etc. – become the transcendent signs of God's redeeming love.

The Eucharist is the fullest expression of our sacramental life. Not only did God "become flesh," he offers his flesh, his body, "as food for his creatures. The Lord, in the culmination of the mystery of the Incarnation, chose to reach our intimate depths through a fragment of matter.... The Eucharist joins heaven and earth; it embraces and penetrates all creation" (#236). And so, as in the Eucharist, we cannot separate our earthly lives and our home in this world from our eternal lives and our heavenly home.

"Ecological Conversion" ~ "Joy and Peace". Given the foundation of our Church's teaching regarding Creation and the Incarnation, and given our worship of our Creator through sacramental signs, how should we then live in our common home?

We need, in Pope Francis' words, to develop an "ecological spirituality." As with any authentic spirituality, conversion is needed. We must first turn away from "compulsive consumerism," and from "every form of self-centeredness and self-absorption." Recognizing our "errors, sins, faults and failures" in this regard, we must then seek and pray for the grace which "leads to heartfelt repentance and desire to change." And, this conversion must take place both within the individual and within the community.

Such a conversion will foster within each of us, and within our communities, "a spirit of generous care, ... 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, ... [and] a loving awareness that we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures, but joined in splendid universal communion" (#220).

The fruits of this conversion are most practical in our "daily actions," as Pope Francis describes them: dressing warmly so as to use less heat; not using disposable dinner ware; conserving our water resources; recycling and reusing items; car-pooling and taking public transportation; planting trees; etc. (#211). Such individual actions must necessarily be accompanied by communal actions (in terms of business practices, civic life, and public policies) that seek to "halt environmental degradation" and "encourage a 'culture of care'."

Though some "tend to ridicule" such concerns and actions, and others remain "passive," Pope Francis states clearly that "living our vocation to be protectors of God's handiwork is essential to a life of virtue" (#217). But, more than this, to choose the path of simplicity and to practice Saint Thérèse's "little way of love" – i.e., the "simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness" (#230) – is to truly find "the joy of our hope." *Deo Gratias!*

"Even now we are journeying toward the Sabbath of eternity, the new Jerusalem, toward our common home in heaven.... In the meantime, we come together to take charge of this home which has been entrusted to us, knowing that all the good which exists here will be taken up into the heavenly feast. In union with all creatures, we journey through this land seeking God.... Let us sing as we go. May our struggles and our concern for this planet never take away the joy of our hope."

(Pope Francis, "Laudato Si' ~ On Care for Our Common Home," #243, #244)