



A LIVING FAITH

A monthly column on the lay vocation and lay formation

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

THE PRACTICAL AND SPIRITUAL WISDOM OF “LAUDATO SI”

“Many things have to change course, but it is we human beings above all who need to change. We lack an awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone. This basic awareness would enable the development of new convictions, attitudes and forms of life. A great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge stands before us, and it will demand that we set out on the long path of renewal.” (Pope Francis, “*Laudato Si’* ~ On Care for Our Common Home,” #202)

It is most fitting that the weekend I sat down to read Pope Francis’ encyclical, “*Laudato Si’* ~ On Care for Our Common Home,” was the weekend of the Gospel reading known as “The Rich Young Man.” When asked by “a man” what he must do “to inherit eternal life,” Jesus instructs him, “Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come follow me.” On hearing this, the man’s “face fell, and he went away sad, for he had many possessions.” (Mark 10:17-22)

I couldn’t help but feel, in reading our Holy Father’s encyclical, that he was echoing Jesus’ message to this man. Only, now, the message was being directed to me. And, I was being challenged to turn away from my many possessions, and to turn decisively to follow more truly the path of Christ. It is, as the Pope states clearly, a path of simplicity, a path of love for and commitment to the poor and marginalized, a path of service and self-sacrifice, and a path of care for all of God’s creation. And, ultimately, it is also a path of “joy and peace.”

It would be very difficult, in this short space, to summarize in any meaningful way the content of this encyclical – a 45,000+ word document! (I would very much encourage you to read the full text for yourself. But, if you aren’t able to do so, there are many fine summaries of the document available online. One such overview is available at the Vatican’s “news.va” web page.) My intention here, and in next month’s column, is rather to highlight some of the heart of its message, and to capture a little of its spirit and tone.

Having read my introduction, you might wonder – if you haven’t yet read the encyclical – what simplicity, service, self-sacrifice, and commitment to the poor have to do with environmental issues. In Pope Francis’ mind and heart, they have everything to do with how we live on and treat our earthly home.

At the core of this document is our Holy Father’s conviction that how we care for God’s creation cannot be separated from all of the other aspects of our faith. To live our faith authentically is “to

live in communion with God, with others and with all creatures.” At the heart of our faith is belief in “one God who is Trinitarian communion,” and that the creation of our Triune God reflects this divine communion by being fundamentally “a web of relationships.”

To be human is to live in relationship, and to be a follower of Christ is to live our relationships with the love, care, integrity, and respect which gives honor to the Father, the “Creator of All Things.”

With this theological foundation in place, it is important to note that much of this document is focused on the very practical and real situation we are facing today. The Pope writes that such “theological and philosophical reflections” must be “grounded in a fresh analysis of our present situation, which is in many ways unprecedented in the history of humanity.”

The topics in the first chapter, “What Is Happening to Our Common Home,” seek to develop such a “fresh analysis” of what we’re facing in today’s world: “pollution and climate change”; “the issue of water”; “loss of biodiversity”; “decline in the quality of human life and the breakdown of society.” It is not “a pretty picture,” as they say, and Pope Francis is clear and frank in his analysis of our environmental situation.

For example, with reference to pollution, he writes:

Each year hundreds of millions of tons of waste are generated, much of it non-biodegradable, highly toxic and radioactive, from homes and businesses, from construction and demolition sites, from clinical, electronic and industrial sources. *The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth.*” (#21) [italics added]

In what follows he seeks to trace a path forward that acknowledges honestly the dire situation we face and looks to draw on our best and truest human resources and instincts to address these most challenging issues.

In these chapters, Pope Francis:

- reflects on the call to care for creation as developed in the scriptures (Chapter Two)
- examines the roots of “the ecological crisis” as found in materialism, consumerism, and the dominance of a “technocratic paradigm” (Chapter Three)
- describes an “integral ecology” which affirms the interconnectedness of all creation (Chapter Four)
- outlines approaches and policy directions which seek to build a “dialogue” and “global consensus” needed to “help us escape the spiral of self-destruction which currently engulfs us” (Chapter Five).

In the final chapter, Pope Francis reflects on an “Ecological Education and Spirituality” which allow us to be formed in faith as good stewards of creation. It is a very rich reflection, and I will explore it in more detail next month. *Deo Gratias!*

“Yet all is not lost. Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new start, despite their mental and social conditioning. We are able to take an honest look at ourselves, to acknowledge our deep dissatisfaction, and to embark on new paths to authentic freedom. No system can completely suppress our openness to what is good, true, and beautiful, or our God-given ability to respond to his grace at work deep in our hearts.” (Pope Francis, “*Laudato Si’* ~ On Care for Our Common Home,” #205)