



A LIVING FAITH

A monthly column on the lay vocation and lay formation

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

SETTING THE STAGE FOR “LAUDATO SI”

“The Church has a responsibility towards creation, and she considers it her duty to exercise that responsibility in public life, in order to protect earth, water and air as gifts of God the Creator meant for everyone, and above all to save mankind from the danger of self-destruction.”

(Pope Benedict XVI, 2010 “World Day of Peace” message)

“In the beginning,” we believe, “God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). And so begins the beautiful story of a Creator’s love which takes form: in the light of the sun and the moon; in the dry land of the earth and the waters of the sea; in the vegetation and the plants that bear seed and fruit; and in “the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living creatures”. Finally, God creates “mankind in his image ... male and female” he creates them.

And, then, before he rested on the seventh day, God the Creator “looked at everything he had made, and found it very good” (Gen. 1:31).

Our earth and all of creation, and each of us, are the handiwork of God. This is the truth we learn from the very first words of our scriptures. And this truth comes to its fullest flowering and most radiant illumination in the birth of a poor child in a manger in Bethlehem. This Creator God so loves the world that he becomes part of his very creation – he takes on flesh – to give his life in love for our salvation.

This beautiful story of creation has continued to play out in the life and history of our Church. An early Church Father, Saint Cyprian, taught us that “whatever belongs to God, belongs to all.” We are called to share the goods of creation with all of our sisters and brothers. And Saint Francis, the patron saint of ecology and the namesake of our Holy Father, spoke of “our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us” in his lovely Canticle of Creation. The first phrase of this prayer is where Pope Francis’ recent encyclical receives its name – *Laudato Si*: “Praised Be You”.



In our own day, recent popes have reminded us of our responsibilities to be good and faithful stewards and caretakers of creation. Pope Paul VI warned us of “an ill-considered exploitation of nature” and that we are “creating an environment for tomorrow which may well be intolerable” (*Octogesima Adveniens*, #21).

The focus of Saint John Paul II's 1990 World Day of Peace message was our care for God's creation. Echoing Saint Cyprian, he reminded us that "the earth is ultimately a common heritage, the fruits of which are for the benefit of all." Looking at our world through this lens, his judgment of the present reality is clear: "It is manifestly unjust that a privileged few should continue to accumulate excess goods, squandering available resources, while masses of people are living in conditions of misery at the very lowest level of subsistence."

The consequence of such global social injustice is "the dramatic threat of ecological breakdown." The moral path is clear: "[G]reed and selfishness – both individual and collective – are contrary to the order of creation." Recognizing our "mutual interdependence," we must embrace a new ethos. "Simplicity, moderation and discipline, as well as a spirit of sacrifice, must become a part of everyday life."

Twenty years later, in his World Day of Peace message for 2010, Pope Benedict XVI revisited the theme of environmental stewardship. He speaks of "a growing crisis which it would be irresponsible not to take seriously," and names the various dynamics of this crisis: "climate change, desertification, the deterioration and loss of productivity in vast agricultural areas, the pollution of rivers and aquifers, the loss of biodiversity, the increase of natural catastrophes and the deforestation of equatorial and tropical regions."

In the face of this, we must not remain "indifferent" or "impassive." He states clearly, "The Church has a responsibility towards creation and she must assert this responsibility in the public sphere."

In doing this, the Church must provide the vision for a "human ecology" which recognizes the close connection between "the deterioration of nature" and "the culture that shapes human coexistence." Human ecology which respects the dignity and sanctity of each human life from conception to natural death cannot be separated from an environmental ecology which respects the inherent beauty and goodness of the natural environment.

He summarizes it in this way:

The book of nature is one and indivisible: it takes in not only the environment but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, social relations: in a word, integral human development. Our duties towards the environment are linked to our duties towards the human person, considered in himself and in relation to others. It would be wrong to uphold one set of duties while trampling on the other. (*Caritas in Veritate*, #51)

And, finally, on to this scene strides our present Holy Father, Pope Francis. His encyclical on our care for God's creation, "*Laudato Si'* ~ On Care for Our Common Home," comes out of this long and rich tradition of our Church's teaching and witness. Next month, we will examine the encyclical and its message for each of us.

With Saint Francis, let us always honor and praise our "All-powerful, good Lord God" for the beauty and wonder of His creation. *Deo Gratias!*