

Life Issues Forum: Integral Ecology

by Aaron Matthew Weldon

“Everything is connected.” This phrase echoes throughout the recent encyclical from the Holy Father, *Laudato Si’* . . . Pope Francis presents a comprehensive vision. Our attitude toward our common home is inseparable from our attitude toward the unborn, poor, and all who are vulnerable. The crises of our age have arisen because we refuse to receive created things in humility, simple joy, and awe at the work of God.

Pope Francis proposes an “integral ecology”—an approach to creation care rooted in the Christian conviction that the earth, and everything in it, is a gift from our gracious Father. Everything is connected, and so we must resist the temptation to see the problems that we face today as piecemeal. We can’t build a culture of life and trash the planet at the same time. We can’t clean up the mess left by a consumer society if we disregard the preciousness of human life.

Care for creation flows naturally from our commitment to protect all human life. For example, polluted drinking water causes birth defects. We who march for life ought also to do our part to make sure that families have clean water for their children. In our different places in life, we can build up a human ecology by taking account of how our actions affect the lives of the most vulnerable.

Most fundamental is our need to examine ourselves and how we receive God’s good world. We are immersed in a throwaway culture, which exerts its force on us. In our consumer society, we are prone

to think of our surroundings, and even the people in them, as objects to help us fulfill our selfish desires. The habits formed in the throwaway culture need to be reformed and redirected. We must tend to our interior life and learn to receive created things as gifts, always remembering the unique dignity of each human being.

Pope Francis reminds us that everything comes from God and can point to God. A fish or a grasshopper, a prairie or a canyon, each thing has its own loveliness and is to be admired as a creation of our Creator—not only for what benefit it brings us. When we can behold created things in their own particular glory, we move closer to an integral ecology. In the throwaway culture, land is only good as an energy resource. In a culture of life, it is seen as an integral ecosystem, pointing to a loving God who delights in making a world filled with diverse creatures and landscapes.

The pope offers simple suggestions for developing gratitude and reverence. He suggests that praying before and after meals might help inspire thankfulness for the food we receive. He notes the importance of resting on the Sabbath. In this spirit I offer a possible exercise. Choose some seemingly simple object, and consider the complexity and grandeur of it. Consider doing this with a different piece of creation each day. Let us take time to cultivate a spirit of gratitude and awe at the beauty of the earth, which reaches its pinnacle in that most marvelous of creatures, the human person. Such an attitude animates a culture of life.