

The spiritual essence of Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home

By the Maryknoll Affiliates Laudato Si' Working Group

Laudato Si' brings forth to our consciousness the importance of five things:

- Our connection with each other.
- Our connection with all living things.
- Our connection with the earth—to our planet and to the universe beyond.
- Our connection with God.
- The spiritual conversion required of us.

These are all things that indigenous people have known for millennia. *Laudato Si'* mentions their wisdom when it reminds us that

For indigenous people, “land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God and from their ancestors who rest there, a sacred space with which they need to interact if they are to maintain their identity and values.” (146)

Cooperatives are able to instill a greater sense of responsibility, a strong sense of community, a readiness to protect others, a spirit of creativity and a deep love for the land. They are also concerned about what they will eventually leave to their children and grandchildren. These values are deeply rooted in indigenous peoples.” (179)

1. Connection with each other

Pope Francis reminds us that the effects of environmental degradation and climate change are especially hard on the lives of the poor, but goes on to say that some of the effects can affect everyone. (20) He explains that “The climate is a common good, belonging to all and meant for all.” (23) However, the poor have less ability and resources to adapt to changes in climate than do the wealthy, so responding to the climate emergency is also responding to our responsibility for the least wealthy among us. (25) Pope Francis speaks eloquently about how environmental deterioration and the problems in human society mirror each other. Global inequality leads to more severe ecological effects in poorer parts of the world. A global economic system sees the global South as a source of resources to be exploited by wealthier countries, to the environmental detriment of the poor (and to all of us). This is what some refer to as the “ecological debt” that developed countries owe to developing ones—the need to help developing countries avoid environmentally destructive development such as took place over the last several centuries in the developed world. (51) Our connection with each other also extends to future generations, as we are responsible for the world we leave for our children and grandchildren. (159) Furthermore, “we cannot presume to heal our relationship with nature and the environment without healing all fundamental human relationships. (119) Taking up the challenge of *Laudato Si'* may help us both develop healthier relationships with both our fellow humans as well as the natural world we live in.

2. Connection with all living things

The encyclical tells us that “whenever he[St. Francis] would gaze at the sun, the moon or the smallest of animals, he burst into song, drawing all other creatures into his praise. He communed with all creation, even preaching to the flowers, inviting them ‘to praise the Lord, just as if they were endowed with reason.’... If we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their

immediate needs. By contrast, if we feel intimately united with all that exists, then sobriety and care will well up spontaneously.” (11) We understand that the biodiversity of our planet and its many simple and complex living organisms is necessary for life to continue, and considering species merely as resources to be exploited for human economic gain is shortsighted. (34, 36) But Pope Francis maintains that different species “have value in themselves.” After they become extinct, often due to human activity, “thousands of species will no longer give glory to God by their very existence, nor convey their message to us.” (33) Our faith should rouse us to indignation at the way humans have treated the rich biodiversity of our planet, and inspire us to try to do better.

3. Connection with our planet earth and to the universe beyond.

The first line of St. Francis’ canticle, which gives this encyclical its title, praises God ““through our Sister, Mother Earth.”” (1) For St. Francis, our planet earth was both our mother and our sister, which both birthed us and lives side by side with us. Thus, we are family members of the planet, and we need to love our planet as we would love our mother and sister. We are in relationship with the earth, and Pope Francis reminds us that “we have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. *Gen 2:7*); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters.” (2) Pope Francis explains that “Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it.” (139)

4. Connection with God

Our connection with God is at the center of our faith as Christians. *Laudato Si’* teaches that “the creation accounts in the book of Genesis... suggest that human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbor and with the earth itself. According to the Bible, these three vital relationships have been broken, both outwardly and within us.” (66) Because we live in a secular culture that has abandoned its connection to God and the sacred nature of every human being and all of God’s creation, we need to grow and stabilize our devotion and ecological commitment with regular prayer, reflection, and ecological reading. We especially need to read and reflect on *Laudato Si’*, both in private and in community. These are essential to support and sustain a simpler lifestyle and an ecological conversion. This is especially true due to the rapid increase in our pace of life which makes it difficult to resist the society’s ever-present temptation to consume more. We might see our personal sacrifices of convenience or unnecessary comfort as reminiscent of Simon of Cyrene carrying Jesus’ cross on the way to Calvary. The poor of the world are carrying the cross of climate change every day, and *Laudato Si’* calls us to a conversion in which we all shoulder the ecological burden which our advanced, fossil-fuel based technological society has created, as we move to more faithfully love our earth, all living things, our human family, and our God who created it all.

5. The spiritual conversion required of us.

Having come to understand the living connection we have with each other, all living things and with the Earth itself, it becomes clear that we must be aware of what this means in our everyday lives. Most of us live in a capitalistic society imbued with consumerism. This paradigm leads us to believe that our freedom is tied to “our freedom to consume.” *Amid this confusion, postmodern society has not yet achieved a new self-awareness capable of offering guidance and direction and this lack of identity leads to anxiety.*(203) This situation fosters a ‘seedbed for collective selfishness’ where a genuine sense of the common good disappears. (204) *But no system can completely suppress our openness to what is good, true and beautiful or our God-given ability to respond to his grace deep at work in our hearts.* (205)

Purchasing is always a moral as well as an economic choice. (206) The issue of environmental degradation challenges us to examine our lifestyles. We are faced with an educational challenge, including a critique of the myths of a modernity grounded in a utilitarian mindset (individualism, unlimited progress, consumerism, and the unregulated market.) We need environmental education that makes the leap toward the transcendent which gives ecological ethics its deepest meaning. (210) Only by cultivating sound virtues will people be able to make a selfless ecological commitment. We need all Christian communities *to provide an education in responsible simplicity of life, in grateful contemplation of God's world, and in concern and response to the needs of the poor and the protection of the environment.*(214)

The relationship between a good aesthetic education (which sees and appreciates beauty) and the maintenance of a healthy environment cannot be overlooked. (215) Without a spirituality capable of inspiring us, and without an interior impulse which encourages, motivates, nourishes, and gives meaning to our individual and community lives, we cannot make this commitment. (216) The ecological crisis is a summons to profound interior conversion. We must acknowledge the ways we have harmed God's creation through our actions and our failure to act. We need to experience a true conversion or change of heart. Living our vocation to be protectors of God's handiwork is essential to a life of virtue and not an optional aspect of our Christian experience. (218) We also need our Christian community to join in this ecological conversion and commitment to sustain and generate creativity, generosity, and enthusiasm in this sacred work. (220)

These ideas are summed up at the end of the final prayer from *Laudato Si'* which says:

Awaken our praise and thankfulness
for every being that you have made.
Give us the grace to feel profoundly joined
to everything that is.

The poor and the earth are crying out.
O Lord, seize us with your power and light,
help us to protect all life,
to prepare for a better future,
for the coming of your Kingdom
of justice, peace, love and beauty. (246)

References in parentheses are section numbers in *Laudato Si'*

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