

Laudato Si' and Vowed Religious

Since its publication on the Feast of Pentecost 2015, the Church has been reflecting on the Pope Francis' encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, subtitled "On Care for our Common Home." Harkening back to Pope John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris* promulgated in 1963, the encyclical is addressed to all persons of good will and calls for a dialogue "with every person living on the planet." (*Laudato Si'*, 3)

Impacts on Vowed Religious

For Francis, the stakes could not be higher. The very existence of life on the earth is imperiled by environmental degradation and our callous disregard for the ecological implications of our economical system. Still, as he reaches out to a global audience on questions of such import, one can reasonably ask how his teaching impacts vowed religious in a particular way.

Consecrated persons in North America are of course subject to the same post-modern economic and cultural forces as everyone else: an obsession with technology and superficiality in relationships; a wasteful and compulsive consumerism; a rampant individualism coupled with a privatized spirituality. Consciously or subconsciously, our lives can incarnate such disvalues that we find ourselves more and more distant from an integral ecology and from the poor and marginalized, even in our own cities.

Prophetic Witness in the Area of Ecology

In his now famous conversation with major superiors of men, Pope Francis has called on all religious to be prophetic in their vocation. (Antonio Spadaro. "Wake up the world." November 29, 2013) I would suggest that how we achieve a prophetic witness in the area of ecology and environmental practice is a valuable subject for our common reflection and action.

Religious often live and serve on the periphery; in places where the environment is often degraded; in urban slums and places lacking safe drinking water or public spaces. The international character of many of our communities means that we have an awareness of the particular challenges of life in the developing world, where economic exploitation is often rampant. In the first instance, we need to bring that awareness of life at the margins to the forefront within our own communities and then to the broader society.

Quoting the Bolivian bishops' conference, Pope Francis reminds us of a simple and obvious truth: "Both everyday experience and scientific research show that the gravest effects of all attacks on the environment are suffered by the poorest." (*Laudato Si'*, 48) As well, given their special relationship to the environment, aboriginal communities are to be principal dialogue partners with industry in projects affecting the land and water. And always, a preferential option for the poor should include concrete action to protect the environment.

Opting for the Poor is Essential

The central thesis of the encyclical shows Pope Francis' clearest expression of the relationship between the common good, the environment and our option for the poor:

In the present condition of global society, where injustices abound and growing numbers of people are deprived of basic human rights and considered expendable, the principle of the common good immediately becomes, logically and inevitably, a summons to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters. This option entails recognizing the implications of the universal destination of the world's goods, but, as I mentioned in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, it demands before all else an appreciation of the immense dignity of the poor in the light of our deepest convictions as believers. We need only look around us to see that, today, this option is in fact an ethical imperative essential for effectively attaining the common good. (*Laudato Si'*, 158)

In building up the common good, the measure of any public policy must be its effect on society's most poor and marginalized citizens.

Conversion of Heart and Ecological Spirituality

I found the sixth chapter on ecological education and spirituality particularly inspiring. Here Francis draws from our Christian heritage to call for a conversion of heart rooted in a contemporary ecological spirituality: from Benedict of Nursia, the value and dignity of a balance between work and prayer "ora et labora;" from Francis of Assisi, a Trinitarian cosmology that explores our deep relationship with all living things; from John of the Cross, a mystical consciousness that all created things reveal God; from Thérèse of Lisieux, an invitation to practice the "little way of love," sowing peace and friendship in the smallest gesture.

Francis then considers the relationship between the sacramental character of creation and the Church's understanding of the sacraments. Quoting Pope Benedict, he describes how mystical theology reaches its apex in the Eucharist, by which: "[C]reation is projected towards divinization, towards the holy wedding feast, towards unification with the Creator himself." (*Laudato Si'*, 236; see Benedict XVI. Homily for the Mass of Corpus Domini [15 June 2006])

Invited to Enter into a Dialogue

The encyclical constitutes an invitation for vowed religious to respectfully and courageously enter into a dialogue with other persons of good will. The fruits of scientific research and contributions from varied faith traditions can move our pluralistic society toward a consensus on the urgent need for action. The common good will be enhanced as religious give voice to the poor and marginalized. Finally, by their actions, they will offer a prophetic witness on the value of interpersonal communion and an ecologically sensitive relationship with all creation.

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