

Homily: June 27-28, 2015

Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

On the Holy Father's Encyclical *Laudato Si'*

There was a lot in the news over these past ten days, from the Supreme Court decisions to terrorist bombings to the Charleston church shootings. But only one item had worldwide importance, not just for the present but for the future of our planet: Our Holy Father's encyclical on care for the earth and the earth's poor.

Its theme fits well with the readings we just heard: The Book of Wisdom on the goodness of God's creation; Paul on the need for equity among all the congregations he's responsible for; and Jesus in the Gospel as a healer, a source of renewed life. We find all of these themes in the Holy Father's encyclical letter.

For the rest of my homily I'm going to read a few sections to you. You should read the whole thing: you can get a copy from the Vatican website; today's Bulletin column tells you how.

1. "LAUDATO SI', mi' Signore" – "Praise be to you, my Lord". In the words of this beautiful canticle, Saint Francis of Assisi reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us. "Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs".

2. This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air, and in all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor. 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.

The Holy Father then turns to the words of the Patriarch of Constantinople, leader of Orthodox Catholics throughout the world:

8. Patriarch Bartholomew has spoken in particular of the need for each of us to repent of the ways we have harmed the planet, for "inasmuch as we all generate small ecological damage", we are called to acknowledge "our contribution, smaller or greater, to the disfigurement and destruction of creation". He has repeatedly stated this firmly and persuasively, challenging us to acknowledge our sins against creation: "For human beings... to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation; for human beings to degrade the integrity of the earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the earth of its natural forests or destroying its wetlands; for human beings to contaminate the earth's waters, its land, its air, and its life – these are sins". For "to commit a crime against the natural world is a sin against ourselves and a sin against God".

Our Holy Father goes on:

14. I urgently appeal, then, for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. Regrettably, many efforts to seek concrete solutions to the

environmental crisis have proved ineffective, not only because of powerful opposition but also because of a more general lack of interest. Obstructionist attitudes, even on the part of believers, can range from denial of the problem to indifference, nonchalant resignation or blind confidence in technical solutions. We require a new and universal solidarity. All of us can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation, each according to his or her own culture, experience, involvements and talents.

After reviewing and affirming the evidence for humanity's part in changing the climate in dangerous ways, the Holy Father begins to describe what we as the human family have to do:

165. We know that technology based on the use of highly polluting fossil fuels – especially coal, but also oil and, to a lesser degree, gas – needs to be progressively replaced without delay. Until greater progress is made in developing widely accessible sources of renewable energy, it is legitimate to choose the lesser of two evils or to find short-term solutions. But the international community has still not reached adequate agreements about the responsibility for paying the costs of this energy transition.

After speaking of necessary actions on the national and international levels, the Holy Father turns to personal choices:

209. An awareness of the gravity of today's cultural and ecological crisis must be translated into new habits. Many people know that our current progress and the mere amassing of things and pleasures are not enough to give meaning and joy to the human heart, yet they feel unable to give up what the market sets before them.

Only by cultivating sound virtues will people be able to make a selfless ecological commitment. A person who could afford to spend and consume more but regularly uses less heating and wears warmer clothes, shows the kind of convictions and attitudes which help to protect the environment. There is a nobility in the duty to care for creation through little daily actions, such as avoiding the use of plastic and paper, reducing water consumption, separating refuse, cooking only what can reasonably be consumed, showing care for other living beings, using public transport or car-pooling, planting trees, turning off unnecessary lights, or any number of other practices. All of these reflect a generous and worthy creativity which brings out the best in human beings.

The Holy Father then quotes Pope Emeritus Benedict:

"The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast". For this reason, the ecological crisis is also a summons to profound interior conversion. It must be said that some committed and prayerful Christians, with the excuse of realism and pragmatism, tend to ridicule expressions of concern for the environment. Others are passive; they choose not to change their habits and thus become inconsistent. So what they all need is an "ecological conversion", whereby the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them. Living our vocation to be protectors of God's handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience.

218. In calling to mind the figure of Saint Francis of Assisi, we come to realize that a healthy relationship with creation is one dimension of overall personal conversion, which entails the recognition of our errors, sins, faults and failures, and leads to heartfelt repentance and desire to change. The Australian bishops spoke of the importance of such conversion for achieving reconciliation with creation: "To achieve such reconciliation, we must examine our lives and acknowledge the ways in which we have harmed God's creation through our actions and our failure to act. We need to experience a conversion, or change of heart".

There's much more: read it all. You can find what I think is an excellent summary reprinted in my Bulletin column today. But you should read it all for yourself, and reread it, and pray over it. It is now formally part of Catholic teaching, but beyond that it is a wonderful, beautiful vision of the worth and the challenge of being Catholic today.

The crux of the issue is well said by commentator Jennifer Fitz:

The difficulty, the dreadful, unspeakable, shield-your-eyes difficulty with the Pope's new encyclical on the environment comes down to one nasty problem: The man is right.

For Catholics it's even worse. The man has gone and summed up the entirety of Catholic social teaching, folding in *Rerum Novarum* [an encyclical from 1891 on the rights of laboring people that is considered the foundation of Catholic social thought] and *Humanae Vitae* [the 1968 encyclical by Pope Paul VI on the sanctity of life] and the Church Fathers and everything, and then done the unthinkable and pointed out that this actually requires us to change the way we live. Christianity is something more than a Jesus-flavored quest for the American Dream.

She goes on:

This is the terrible problem. When a pope writes about the Trinity, we can nod and smile and adjust our prayers to make sure we've got three Persons with one Divine Nature and our work is done. But when he says, rightly, that actually we need to change the way we live all the other hours of the week, that gets uncomfortable.

Because either we have to change the way live, or we have to decide we're not going to do the Catholic thing after all.