43.

*Laudato Si’ and Vocational Awareness*

Pope Francis’ encyclical *On Care for Our Common Home* has garnered a great deal of comment from economists, politicians, scientists, editorial commentators, and, of course, from religious writers. Some have criticized the whole of the encyclical, others take exception to parts of it, and some who simply failed to hear Francis’ invitation to dialogue and conversation have been mean-spirited and dismissive. And then there are those who agree with the Pope every step of the way. I heard someone complain that Francis is not an expert either in economics or political theory; so why listen to him? To which I answered, “Then what should we make of Jesus when he says no one can serve God and money? Should we dismiss him as well? After all, Jesus was no economist. He even preached about the kingdom of God without a degree in political science.” Yes, the encyclical says a great deal about the environment, about economics, about the responsibilities of governments. All of this arises from Francis’ deep and abiding concern for the poorest and most vulnerable among us and a vivid sense of the traces of God in the natural world. The encyclical is passionate, but not polemical. The word “dialogue” occurs in it twenty-four times, if I’ve counted correctly; it wants to engage. The Pope has issued an invitation for all of us to join an urgent conversation. Why? Because “the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor” (#2).

Although *Laudato Si’* is not directly about vocation, Francis writes: “It is my hope that our seminaries and houses of formation will provide an education in responsible simplicity of
life, in grateful contemplation of God’s world, and in concern for the needs of the poor and the protection of the environment” (#214). The “care for our common home” needs all the assistance that the world’s religions can provide, and religious assistance comes especially in the form of spirituality. He writes: “We lack an awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone. . .

A great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge stands before us, and it will demand that we set out on the long path of renewal” (#202). He then adds later: “The rich heritage of Christian spirituality, the fruit of twenty centuries of personal and communal experience, has a precious contribution to make to the renewal of humanity” (#216).

**Hearing the call**

Given the urgency of the environmental crisis, caring for our common home becomes a call which the earth itself addresses to all of us; those who respond to that call take up a mission. Francis writes: “The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development” (#13). The ecological spirituality that Francis outlines in *Laudato Si’* has to find its way into the formation programs of religious and priests. It needs to seat itself in our preaching, pastoral practice, catechesis, apostolic works, and our prayer. And it must do so, not simply as a series of concrete steps like recycling and carpooling, but as a fundamental orientation towards the created world—a creation-centered spirituality. Indeed, chapter two is entitled “The Gospel of Creation” (*El Evangelio de la Creación*). By setting creation in the spiritual foreground, the encyclical is attempting to correct the “excessive anthropocentrism” of modern times (#116). Our
understanding of evangelical living needs to expand, if creation itself is characterized as a “gospel.”

**Five principles**

There are at least five essential principles to the spirituality that Francis is setting out. The first is that God alone is the Creator; the universe and everything in it reflects divine handiwork. Forgetting this basic truth imperils our vision, our sense of spiritual balance. We are not owners but, at best, stewards. The second principle is that human beings are part of creation, despite the modern tendency to see ourselves as somehow standing outside the circle of created things over which we are achieving ever greater mastery. The third is that we are in this world together. We live in a network of relationships both with the natural and the human worlds; natural ecology and human ecology are linked. The fourth principle is that every human being has a right to those goods that are essential to living with dignity. And the fifth is that care for our common home and caring for the poor are inseparable. Why? Because the poor disproportionately suffer, economically and physically, from the ravages that have been inflicted upon the environment; and, from a biblical perspective, attentiveness of the poor and abandoned is the yardstick by which the rest of us are to be measured. The mystery of the Incarnation fixes Christian imagination on the poor: “yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9).

Each of these principles can be found in Scripture and within the “rich heritage of Christian spirituality.” They are not new. But what makes it so necessary for us to retrieve them now is the situation in which we find ourselves. For all its blessings, technology has also driven a wedge between human beings and the natural world. Thinking has become increasingly
calculative. Sadly, “our immense technological development has not been accompanied by a development in human responsibility, values and conscience” (#105). We have become so used to manipulating our environment that we have forgotten that we are part of the natural world. “Nature,” the Pope writes, “cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live” (#139). Human beings have no claim “to absolute dominion over the earth” (#75). Ecological conversion, Francis explains, “entails a loving awareness that we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures, but joined in a splendid universal communion” (#220). He repeats what he said in his Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium: “God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of species as a painful disfigurement” (#89).

Another symptom of the contemporary spiritual malaise is our “obsession with consumption.” We live in “a throwaway culture,” which is “based on the lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth’s goods” (#106). But looking for peace and fulfillment by giving in to the urge to consume more goods only makes our lives worse, since the consequence is an increasing sense of loneliness and isolation. “Compulsive consumerism” and “rampant individualism” run in tandem. Together they prevent the emergence of a truly human ecology.

**Ecological crisis and vocational awareness**

Now, how does all of this impact the way we are hearing and responding to God’s call today?

Since the promulgation of Vatican II’s Nostra aetate some forty years ago, the spiritualities underpinning religious and priestly life have been adjusting to the religious diversity that is so evident in today’s world. We are, I believe, less
absolutist in our claims, more inclined to recognize the presence of the Spirit in other religious traditions, more open to meet the religious other and enter into dialogue. People who know God also know that they do not own the divine mystery. They cannot limit God’s Spirit, the way Joshua wanted to when Eldad and Medad began to prophesy (Numbers 11:26-30). Another example of spirituality readjusting itself can be seen in the way the Church has owned the connection between faith and justice in terms of the preferential option for the poor, and how it has appropriated the notion of solidarity. The effect of this adjustment can be seen in the very strong attention being given to social justice, not so much in official documents (of which there have been many) as in the everyday life of parish communities and religious houses.

But we have not yet integrated into the practice of faith a spirituality that is deeply earth-centered. We have yet to appropriate, as a corrective for the critical ecological situation in which we find ourselves, a contemplative vision that fastens on the beauty of creation and which re-positions the human being so that we are no longer the center of everything. Perhaps the reason for this failure is that the environmental crisis has not yet forced itself into our daily life in the same way that religious diversity or consciousness of the immediate needs of the poor has. This paragraph from the encyclical is sobering:

The current global situation engenders a feeling of instability and uncertainty, which in turn becomes “a seedbed for collective selfishness”. When people become self-centered and self-enclosed, their greed increases. The emptier a person’s heart is, the more he or she needs things to buy, own and consume. It becomes almost impossible to accept the limits imposed by reality. In this horizon a genuine sense of the common good also disappears. As these attitudes become more widespread, social norms are
respected only to the extent that they do not clash with personal needs. So our concern cannot be limited merely to the threat of extreme weather events, but must also extend to the catastrophic consequences of social unrest. Obsession with a consumerist lifestyle, above all when few people are capable of maintaining it, can only lead to violence and mutual destruction. (#204)

Perhaps this is the point at which we need to think about integrating concern for the environment into vocational awareness. Do we feel, as part of our calling to consecrated life or ordained ministry, the urge to live a preferential option for the poor? Do we feel, as part of the same calling, that the earth itself is groaning for relief from the way human beings have abused it? Do we feel, as a confirming grace, the presence of God in all things? We might not all be Franciscans (just think of Pope Francis himself), but the spirit or vision of Francis of Assisi is something all of us need to share. The mission before us has an urgency that cannot be overestimated. We would doubtlessly take whatever steps were necessary in order to defuse a situation that was heading towards a world war. We would take whatever steps were necessary in order to safeguard people from a ravaging virus. If we grasp the wisdom of political de-escalation and medical prevention, then why would we not take the same steps when it comes to the environment?

Towards a planetary mindfulness

Mindfulness of human dependence upon the earth is a major feature of many indigenous religions. In some cases, the earth bears an almost divine status. Among the Aymara people of the altiplano of Bolivia, for instance, the Pachamama—the earth-mother—is sacred. I have been to a liturgical service that begins with a rite of reconciliation that seeks forgiveness, first of all, from the Pachamama for the way the earth’s resources
and gifts have been abused. Our relationship with the Pachamama, just like our relationship with the community, is vitally important to living well; we must be reconciled with both. Francis of Assisi would have been at home among the Aymara. But Christian spirituality brings something to the religious table as well, as Laudato si’ makes clear: “Christian spirituality proposes an alternative understanding of the quality of life, and encourages a prophetic and contemplative lifestyle, one capable of deep enjoyment free of the obsession with consumption” (#222).

The encyclical offers a series of spiritual prescriptions for improving the quality of life. One is “a return to that simplicity which allows us to stop and appreciate the small things,” “the capacity to be happy with little” (#222). Another is humility, “not being enthralled with the possibility of limitless mastery over everything” (#224). A third is inner peace, “an attitude of the heart, one which approaches life with serene attentiveness, which is capable of being fully present to someone without thinking of what comes next, which accepts each moment as a gift of God to be lived to the full” (#226). And one way of living out this third prescription is to “stop and give thanks to God before and after meals” (#227). These three prescriptions belong to the contemplative side of our lives, and they apply to all believers. A lived solidarity with the poor and most vulnerable belongs to the prophetic side of our Christian lives; it too applies to all believers.

Yet the believing community also needs leadership and inspiration from those who have dedicated their lives to the people of God in the intense and dramatic way we associate with ministry and consecrated life. Care for our common home carries more than economic, political, and moral challenges; it
also poses a major spiritual challenge. The harm that we are doing to the earth, together with the suffering we are bequeathing to the generations that will follow us, is calling out for people who are both prophetic and contemplative—people who can show us what it means to live counter-culturally and who can help us embrace a contemporary form of evangelical asceticism. Perhaps we could even say that an authenticating sign of vocational awareness today ought to be a sense of responsibility for the earth. Harm done to the earth is harm done to God’s people, especially those who are poorest. The promise to follow the Jesus who accompanies the poor will be reshaped the more aware we are of how the earth itself—our common home—has been impoverished too.

[2015]