

## **Laudato Si' Conference Keynote**

*April 23, 2016, St. Anne of the Sunset Church*

The whole point of our gathering today is to maybe educate ourselves better on the teachings of *Laudato Si'* and our responsibility for the care of the environment, but also to implement it. I really wanted to seize this opportunity to take an important document such as a Papal Encyclical, and not just read it and leave it on the shelf but implement it. *Laudato Si'* is the type of teaching in very practical and really important ways we can actually implement to begin making a difference. I'm looking forward to ideas coming from here and new motivation and energy to make our parishes - and our homes, for that matter, too - more green. Or as they say, more environmentally responsible, so we can share the proper care God calls us to have for our common home. This is the image Pope Francis uses, a very, I think, endearing and inspiring image of our common home. It speaks eloquently of the Christian understanding of creation and of our place within it. The Christian perspective, of course, places a primacy on the spiritual. Our natural and physical environment, then, we see this as God's creation and his expression of his love for us. We see it as his gift to us, a gift of our home, in which we work out our salvation.

The emphasis on the spiritual dimension of our nature is not to the diminishment of the other aspects of our human reality, the spiritual, the moral, and the emotional and so forth. I think there's a tendency today to separate these different aspects of our human nature into sort of different silos, but our Christian perspective sees the human person as an integrated whole, and all of these different dimensions are interconnected and influence each other. The image of our common home, maybe it's deceptively simple, but the Greek word for home, *oikos*, is the root of three very important English words: ecology, economy, and ecumenism. Thus already that one word points to how all of these different dimensions are interconnected. Pope Francis weaves together the need to respond to the environmental crisis, the economic inequities that create an ever-widening gulf between the rich and the poor, and the underlying spiritual hunger felt by so many today. We have something new with *Laudato Si'* for the first time we have a social encyclical devoted specifically to the environment. This has not been done before. There have been teachings on the environment but never an entire encyclical. At the same time, he's also building upon and expanding upon the teaching of his predecessors.

Pope, well Saint now, John Paul II spoke of the concept of human ecology in his social encyclical *Centesimus Annus*. He said there, "Although people are rightly worried - though much less than they should be - about preserving the natural habitats of the various animal species threatened with extinction, because they realize that each of these species makes its particular contribution to the balance of nature in general, too little effort is made to safeguard the moral conditions for an authentic human ecology." An authentic human ecology. And then he goes on to speak about how we must respect the original good purpose for which God gave us creation. This idea of human ecology, all this interconnectedness of life - we're here to speak specifically on the environment. Obviously we can see that immediately, how everything in the environment is interconnected. Water and air don't know political boundaries. Some of you may know that I grew up in San Diego. San Diego is right between Mexico and Los Angeles, so I know how water and air do not know political boundaries. If water is polluted in one community, it will pollute the community upstream from it or rather downstream from it. We know how this is all interconnected.

All of these other aspects, there's the environment, I mentioned the economy, *oikos*, the economy. We know how everything in this global economy is interconnected and we suffered the consequences of that with the meltdown, the economic meltdown in 2008. It applies to a level of our

physical health. The various systems of the body are interconnected. It applies on the spiritual and moral levels as well, and all of these different dimensions are among themselves interconnected. They influence each other, impact each other, the physical, the moral, the spiritual, the emotional, for that matter. This is why the Church calls our attention to the relationship between our moral order and the physical order; just as we must be concerned for the ecology of our physical environment, so we must also be concerned with human ecology, our own proper moral order. That's why John Paul speaks of the moral conditions for an authentic human ecology.

Next, Pope Benedict XVI elaborated more thoroughly on this in his social encyclical *God is Love*. In that, he first he uses the term in that encyclical in this passage. He says, "The Church has a responsibility towards creation and she must assert this responsibility in the public sphere. In so doing, she must defend not only earth, water, and air as gifts of creation that belong to everyone. She must, above all, protect mankind from self-destruction. There is need for what might be called a human ecology, correctly understood. The deterioration of nature is, in fact, closely connected to the culture that shapes human coexistence. When 'human ecology,'" and he puts that in quotes there referring to John Paul's *Centesimus Annus*, "When 'human ecology' is respected within society, environmental ecology also benefits. Just as human virtues are interrelated such that the weakening of one places others at risk, so the ecological system is based on respect for a plan that affects both the health of society and its good relationship with nature. In order to protect nature, it's not enough to intervene with economic incentives or deterrents, not even an apposite education is sufficient. These are important steps but the decisive issue is the overall, moral tenure of society." I think it's telling that Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* cites Pope Benedict early on in the encyclical. He emphasizes throughout, this idea of everything being interconnected.

It's at number 6 early on where he picks up on this passage from *Charity and Truth* that I just cited, and he underscores how important this is for taking a holistic approach when addressing the environment. He says in that passage of *Laudato Si'*, "My predecessor Benedict XVI observed that the world cannot be analyzed by isolating only one of its aspects since the book of nature is one and indivisible, and includes the environment, life, sexuality, the family, social relations, and so forth. It follows that the deterioration of nature is closely connected to the culture which shapes human coexistence. Pope Benedict asked us to recognize that the natural environment has been gravely damaged by our irresponsible behavior. The social environment has also suffered damaged. Both are ultimately due to the same evil, the notion that there are no indisputable truths to guide our lives and hence, human freedom is limitless. We have forgotten that," in quotes, "man is not only a freedom which he creates for himself. Man does not create himself, he is spirit in will but also nature.' With paternal concern Benedict urged us to realize that creation is harmed where we ourselves have the final word where everything is simply our property and we use it for ourselves alone. The misuse of creation begins when we no longer recognize any higher instance than ourselves, when we see nothing else but ourselves."

Also critical of this sense of human ecology is understanding what our place is within the order of creation. We are not strangers visiting this Earth from outside as if we need to insulate ourselves from the environment, from creation, but rather God has entrusted creation to us for our stewardship. Indeed, the Church proposes that there is a covenant between us and our physical world. Pope Benedict sets out the profound responsibilities of our environmental stewardship. He also says in *Charity and Truth*, "Human beings legitimately exercise a responsible stewardship over nature in order to protect it, to enjoy its fruits, and to cultivate it in new ways with the assistance of advanced technologies so that it can worthily accommodate and feed the world's population." This is why Pope Francis spoke of our coming home. This is our home. We are an integral part of this creation and God entrusts this creation

to our stewardship. This is an awesome responsibility. Pope Francis of course, he also speaks about what our place is in coming home in *Laudato Si'*.

In one passage, number 139, he says this, "When we speak of the environment, what we really mean is a relationship existing between nature and the society which lives in it. 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. Recognizing the reasons why a given area is polluted requires a study of the workings of society, its economy, its behavior patterns, and the ways it grasps reality. Given the scale of change, it is no longer possible to find a specific, discrete answer for each part of the problem. It is essential to seek comprehensive solutions which consider the interactions within natural systems themselves and with social systems. We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, destroying dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature." The principle, do what is right and all will be well. If it is good in the moral order, it will be good everywhere else, the physical order, the social order, the spiritual order and so forth. Everything will be rightly ordered, and that's how we really reflect the image and likeness of God in which God created us.

Remember that story of creation in Genesis. When God created the world, it describes God creating order out of chaos. We participate in God's creation when we do the same, so all of these the very spheres of our life must be rightly ordered. We begin with the moral, doing what is right, then all else will fall into place. It will be more economic, more economically responsible, not so much cheap, but economically responsible and less expensive. It also will lift up the poor. Pope Francis, of course we know has great concern for the poor and he speaks at length in *Laudato Si'* about how environmental degradation most especially affects the poor, makes it harder for family life, and the problem keeps spinning out of control. Father will speak more at length about that.

I'll just leave us with one last thought. Right now it seems that there's an awful lot that divides our nation. The polarization seems to be getting sharper, and the rhetoric seems to be getting harsher, much more bitter. There's so much vitriol. It's very distressing. I really believe that this is a cause that can unite us all, no matter where you are on the political spectrum or the Church spectrum, whether you are the type that's always on the lookout for the latest insight and ready to run with the newest development in Church teaching, or if you're more of an old-fashioned type.

We have newness with this encyclical. As I said, it's an encyclical dedicated exclusively to the environment. Francis gives an extra thrust and development to this area of application of Church and social teaching. At the heart of putting these principles into practice are really old-fashioned values: conservation and recycling. Like many of you, I was raised by parents who grew up in the Great Depression. Recycling, conservation, hand-me-downs, these were drilled into us. They learned it by necessity at the time when they grew up. We now need to learn it by choice so that we can be wise stewards of the common home the Lord has entrusted to our care. I look forward to a new thrust of energy coming from our gathering today so that we can begin taking practical steps to be responsible stewards of creation.