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## **Pope Francis on the Environment**

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“God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good” (Gen 1:31). During the months of spring and summer, I have travelled across the Diocese of Fargo and often marveled at the beauty of the land. Especially in recent weeks, the crops have ripened and the harvest has begun. One can’t help but praise God for the grandeur of his creation and for his generosity in entrusting it to us.

It was this same sense of divine grandeur that moved St. Francis of Assisi to compose his *Canticle of the Creatures*, a hymn of praise to God for all his creation: the sun, the moon, the wind, the waters, and all God’s creatures. “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.” This refrain of praise also gives the title to the recent encyclical letter of Pope Francis, “*Laudato Si*,’ On Care for Our Common Home.” This widely anticipated document offers a challenging meditation on the sacredness and beauty of God’s creation and our responsibility to it.

The Holy Father builds this letter upon the biblical writings on God’s creation and our place within it. This “Gospel of Creation” begins with the creation accounts of Genesis, when our first parents were called to “till and keep” the earth. And then, in the mystery of God’s plan, he sent his only Son into this created world, and he became flesh (Jn 1:14). As the Pope says, “From the beginning of the world, but particularly through the incarnation, the mystery of Christ is at work in a hidden manner in the natural world as a whole...” He also writes in continuity with the earlier teachings of his predecessors: Popes Paul VI, St. John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

But the Holy Father also pointedly tells us that all is not well. The creation that God has given us is threatened, largely because of our disregard for its goodness and for God’s law. In recent decades, the human family has increasingly behaved as if there were no limits on our activities in the world. Technology has given us great powers for good, but it also has led to tragic abuses of the environment. The unbridled desire for profit has driven individuals and larger organizations to exploit this earth, often at the expense of others. A spirit of consumption and waste has become commonplace in our modern culture, which Pope Francis often calls the “throwaway culture.” And, although he does not claim to make scientific conclusions, he also cites the findings of environmental science that bring to light the looming threats to this common home of ours.

Pope Francis notes in a particular way that wounds to the natural environment harm us all, and in particular they harm the poor. Those who live in developing countries are most vulnerable to the effects of damage to the earth. Thus, there is a need for a new mindset, a new understanding of solidarity among the peoples of the earth. We cannot be indifferent to those who suffer from environmental degradation, even if they live on the other side of the world. We also must consider the kind of world we wish to hand on to our children and to the generations that will follow. This world is not ours alone to do with as we please. It has been given into our care and must be protected and cherished by those who live in it now. The Pope says: “Let us be protectors of creation, protectors of God’s plan inscribed in nature, protectors of one another and of the environment.”

Some commentators have read this encyclical with a hope that Pope Francis will give his approbation to their take on reality. But the Pope’s encyclical rises above political and ideological agendas. He certainly challenges certain currents of culture, economics and politics throughout the document. He says some provocative things about fossil fuels and climate change. *But he seems primarily to challenge us.* He calls us to recognize that the earth is our “common home,” the divinely constructed dwelling that God has given as a gift to all of humanity.

So what exactly does Pope Francis ask of us? Among other things, he asks us to be aware of an “integral ecology” of things. In other words, he reminds us that everything is connected. We are intimately connected to all of creation. “We are part of nature, included in it, and thus in constant

interaction with it” (par.139). Our decisions have an effect on the environment and on each other, so we must act in a way that is always reverent toward the created world and the brothers and sisters who share it with us. He also urges us to rediscover a simpler way of life, one that does not rely merely on acquisition of possessions and profit, but that looks to the needs of others and to our eternal destiny. He urges against rampant consumption and waste, not only because this harms the environment, but also because it disregards the needs of others who are poor. He points out that Christian spirituality through the ages has been marked by “moderation and the capacity to be happy with little” (par.222). The Pope also encourages us to make our own small contributions to the preservation of our common home in the everyday actions of our lives. In short, he calls us to “ecological conversion,” a change of heart and renewed awareness of the links we have with God and his creation.

Here in North Dakota, where working the land is such a singular part of the culture, the Pope’s encyclical should be received with open minds and hearts. Who could deny the common relationship we share with the land, no matter our state in life? Those who are directly involved in agriculture already know that the land and its fruits must be cared for. And the rest of us should remember this too.

Obviously these brief thoughts are insufficient to do justice to the words of our Holy Father in *Laudato Si,* and I hope to return with some further reflections in this space at a later date. But in the meantime, taking our cue from Pope Francis, let us be mindful of God’s earth and how we live in it. And let us always be mindful of each other.