

Presentation of *Laudato Si* **“Caring for Creation as a New Work of Mercy”**

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For many days I thought about how I would entitle this reflection that I have been requested to present during the 2017 General Assembly of the AIC. I wondered if it would be appropriate to entitle it: *caring for creation as a new work of mercy...* thus highlighting one of the messages of the Latin America Bishops as well as a message of the Pope.

Here I recall the film of Maurice Cloche, *Monsieur Vincent*, the scene where Vincent de Paul took charge of the parish of Clichy (1617).¹ He found great poverty there... the house of God and the people themselves has been neglected and thus Vincent saw ruin and abandonment. Reflecting on that brief scene we can imagine what has happened to our common home which is the creation of God. Because of our neglect, creation is falling little by little into disrepair. Yet, God saw that everything was good. We, human beings, are destroying the planet Earth. By nature we are intelligent beings... let us act in accord with our nature. Indeed, let us not act in a manner that is contradictory to our nature, in a manner that will not only destroy this planet but will also destroy ourselves. The solution is in our hands. Through our activity we can preserve our life, our planet and our common home... all of which are the creation of God. Such is the conclusion of the Book of Genesis and I also believe that is the conclusion of the many groups of volunteers of the AIC... men and women who work together in so many different countries throughout the world. I would imagine that when we help people rise above their situation of poverty and misery and when we see positive results flowing from our activity, then we also can conclude that everything is good. Yes, then we can also see that our common home is being built up (that common home that has been gifted to us to administer and for which, according to the gospel, we will have to render an account of our administration.

In his encyclical, *Laudato Si*, the Pope reflects on what he wants people to remember, namely, those situations that *have caused sister earth, along with all the abandoned of our world, to cry out, pleading that we take another course* (#53).² The Pope confronts all those who have been baptized and, therefore, confronts all the volunteers of the AIC: *Christians who do not protect creation, who do not allow creation to grow, are Christians who give no importance to God’s work, a work that originates from God’s love* (#64, 217). Thus, the first challenge: in our daily activity what can we do to take care of our common home... or, in the Pope’s words, what can we do to take care of creation?

¹ Translator’s Note: I am not sure what scene is being referenced, but Vincent became pastor of the parish in Clichy in 1612... in 1617 Vincent was ministering in the parish of Châtillon and it was there in 1617 that the first Confraternity of Charity was established, thus the origin of the Vincentian charism.

² The numbered references throughout this reflection refer to specific paragraphs of the encyclical, *Laudato Si*.

An anecdote: some years ago a family, that was visiting the United States, decided to go on an outing (it was a very hot day). The stopped to buy something to drink. The father of the family wanted a Coke ... and so he bought a can of soda and drank it in his car. When he finished the drink, he opened the car window and tossed the can on the highway. A policeman was traveling behind him and the officer got out of his car and picked up the can. A few miles further down the road, the officer pulled over the car and asked the man for his can of Coke. Since he could not produce the can, the officer told him to return and pick up the can. If, however, he could not find it, he would be given a steep fine. After searching for a long period of time, the man returned to the officer who was waiting for him. At that moment the officer handed the man the can that he had thrown on the highway and also gave him a ticket and then said: *perhaps in your country you can throw cans on the highway, but here you cannot do that!* I am sure that that individual would never again thrown something on the highway. When he had to pay a penalty, he became more careful.

What then can we do in order to transform and change our common home?

When we finish reading this encyclical, we find ourselves confronted by a question that experts feel should have been placed at the beginning of this document: *what kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are growing up?* (#160). The question is not concerned solely about the environment in isolation, indeed, that issue cannot be approached piecemeal. Thus, we are led to ask other questions about the meaning of life and the value of life in society: What is the purpose of our life in this world? Why are we here? What is the goal of our work and all our efforts? What need does the earth have of us? The Pope states: *unless we struggle with these deeper questions, I do not believe that our concern for ecology will produce significant results* (#160).

Let us think about that question: *what kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are growing up?...* or using the words of Saint Vincent: *what would Jesus do in this situation?* In other words, what would Jesus do to preserve this home that belongs to all people and what would he do in order to be able to respond with the words of the sacred scripture: *God looked at everything that he made, and he found it very good* (Genesis 1:31)? What can the volunteers of the AIC do in order to preserve this great common home that the Father has given to them to administer / Let us again listen to the words of the author of the Book of Genesis: *God looked at everything he made, and he found it very good* (Genesis 1:31).

We can affirm with great certainty that the inspiration for this encyclical can be found in the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. Pope Francis is convinced of those words that are found in *Gaudium et Spes: nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in the heart of the Church* (Gaudium et Spes, #1). In light of that conviction the Pope speaks freely and courageously about climate change, immigration, social inequality and the responsibility of political leaders with regard to the problems that confront the world. Those problems cannot and are not ignored by the members of the AIC and in fact a response is given whenever the volunteers engage in projects that promote the dignity of women, of children, and of the elderly in various countries on the five continents. The process that led the Pope to publish this encyclical was begun many years before the actual publication of that document. We should remember that on

March 13th, 2013, when Jorge Bergoglio was elected Pope, he chose the name, Francis (in honor of this model saint who ministered among the poor and was concerned about the environment). Unfortunately, he did not choose the name Vincent who also opted for the poor and the marginalized. A close friend of the Pope, Bishop Jorge Lozano has stated that during May 2013 Pope Francis expressed in a public manner his plan to develop an encyclical that would address some of the urgent environmental issues. Two years later, when the encyclical was published, it became clear that this document was not written while sitting alone at his desk... rather the Pope had entered into dialogue with moral theologians, with leaders of other religions, and with scientists and experts in various fields of study.

Nevertheless, the concern of the Pope was also the concern of Vincent de Paul. When the Pope speaks about the land being abused and neglected, it was as if he were listening to Vincent talking four centuries before when he stated: *the poor are my worry and my sorrow*. The Pope is concerned about the manner in which we care for the earth and encourages people to change in order that our surroundings might also change. Therefore, we might ask if we ourselves are willing to change so that we might change our surroundings.

There are seven parts to the encyclical, an introduction and six chapters. It is not a very long document even though it has 246 numbers. The encyclical concludes with two prayers (a prayer for the earth and a prayer in union with creation). The title of the document is taken from the first words of the encyclical, *Laudato si, mi signore...* words taken from the Canticle of Creatures that was written by Saint Francis Assisi in the thirteenth century.

Four months after the publication of the encyclical, Pope Francis addressed the United Nations. There he went to the very heart of the matter and referred to the words of his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, as well the ideas he expressed in *Laudato Si*. He stated: *The ecological crisis, and the large-scale destruction of biodiversity, can threaten the very existence of the human species. The baneful consequences of an irresponsible mismanagement of the global economy, guided only by ambition for wealth and power, must serve as a summons to a forthright reflection on man: "man is not only a freedom which he creates for himself. Man does not create himself. He is spirit and will, but also nature". Creation is compromised "where we ourselves have the final word... The misuse of creation begins when we no longer recognize any instance above ourselves, when we see nothing else but ourselves". Consequently, the defense of the environment and the fight against exclusion demand that we recognize a moral law written into human nature itself, one which includes the natural difference between man and woman, and absolute respect for life in all its stages and dimensions* (Address at the United Nations, September 25, 2015).

The publication of the encyclical occurred before the UN Conference on Climate Change that was held in Paris (December 2015).

Speaking to the press, Ban Ki-moon highlighted the fact that humanity has the obligation to protect the planet, Earth and to enter into solidarity with the most poor and vulnerable members of society, those individuals who suffer most as a result of the consequences of climate change.

Therefore, three months before the statement of Ban Ki-moon, Pope Francis stated: *The common home of all men and women must continue to rise on the foundations of a right understanding of universal fraternity and respect for the sacredness of every human life, of every man and every woman, the poor, the elderly, children, the infirm, the unborn, the unemployed, the abandoned, those considered disposable because they are only considered as part of a statistic. This common home of all men and women must also be built on the understanding of a certain sacredness of created nature* (Address at the United Nations, September 25, 2015).

In his encyclical letter, *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis made it clear that the root causes of poverty must be confronted and no one should be marginalized. It was that same line of thinking that led the United Nation in 2015 to adopt the Objectives for Sustainable Development and to raise questions about economic and general inequality and the unsustainability of our present mode of life.

Ban Ki-moon stated: *Pope Francis and I are in agreement that climate change is a moral question that demands urgent and global action. It is a question of social justice, human rights and fundamental ethics.* That is the understanding of the 150,00 volunteers who are involved in more than 10,00 projects as they continue to examine concrete steps that will enable them to manifest their solidarity with Pope Francis. The members of the AIC want to contribute to the building up of creation and not to its destruction. Indeed, if God created the world in six days and saw that everything was good, the members of the AIC do not want to move in an opposite direction and engage in any activity that would not be good`. Some concrete examples: *avoiding the use of plastic and paper, reducing water consumption, separating refuse, cooking only what can reasonably be consumed, turning off unnecessary lights* (#211) ... recycle. In other words, we can do small things that contribute to the betterment of our planet and the betterment of the life of humanity: *an integral ecology is also made up of simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness* (#230).

All of this will be easier if our starting point is rooted in contemplation that is derived from faith: *as believers we do not look at the world from without but from within, conscious of the bonds with which the Father has linked us to all beings. By developing our individual, God-given capacities, an ecological conversion can inspire us to greater creativity and enthusiasm* (#220). The encyclical communicates a clear and hopeful message to everyone: *humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home* (#13); *men and women are still capable of intervening positively* (#58); *yet all is not lost ... human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good and making a new start* (#205). Pope Francis addresses all Catholics and repeats the words of John Paul II: *Christians in their turn realize that their responsibility within creation and that their duty towards nature and the Creator, are an essential part of their faith* (#63) and the Pope furthermore expresses his desire *to enter into dialogue with people about our common home* (#3).

The general outline of this encyclical, which has become part of the Church's Magisterium, is described in paragraph #15. The encyclical, which is addressed *to every person living on this planet* (#3), is divided into six chapters.

The objectives of the encyclical are the following:

1. *To enter into dialogue with all people about our common home (#3).*
2. Such dialogue will help us understand the greatness, the urgency and the beauty of the challenges that confront us.
3. *The work of the Church not only seeks to remind everyone of the duty to care for nature, but at the same time she must, above all, protect humankind from self-destruction (#79).*
4. There is an invitation *for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet (#14).*
5. *A broad, responsible scientific and social debate needs to take place, one capable of considering all the available information and of calling things by their name (#135).*

Chapter One: what is happening to our common home or that which we might refer to as the reality of our situation? What is described in this chapter is the result of listening to the best scientists of the present era. Here we find a description of what is happen and the starting point is the following: *our common home is falling into serious disrepair (#61).*

1. Pollution, waste and the throwaway culture;
2. The issue of water;
3. The loss of biodiversity;
4. Decline in the quality of human life and the breakdown of society;
5. Global inequality;
6. Weak responses;
7. A variety of opinions.

Chapter Two: The gospel of creation or that which we might call spirituality. An analysis of biblical texts and the Judeo-Christian tradition.

- Creation – Genesis 1-3
 - creation is good,
 - the dignity of all creation,
 - the human person is called to care for the earth.
- Relationships and inter-relationship with God, with our neighbor and with the earth (#66).
- Sin has broken those three relationships (#66).
- To till and keep the earth --- to cultivate, to guard, to be mindful of, to protect, to care for, to preserve and to value.
- To respect the laws of nature.

Chapter Three: The human roots of the ecological crisis or that which we might call our concerns. Here there is a focus on the dominant technocratic paradigm and the place of human beings and of human activity in the world.

- The need to recognize the deeper cause (#101).
- The values and limits of technoscience (#103-105).

- The technocratic paradigm... the result being that *human beings and material objects no longer extend a friendly hand to one another; the relationship has become confrontational* (#106).
- The culture of relativism (#123).

Chapter Four: Integral ecology or that which we would refer to as the practical aspects of the encyclical. The encyclical proposes *an integral ecology, one which clearly respects its human and social dimension* (#137) and one that is inseparably connected to the environmental situation.

Chapter Five: Lines of approach and action or that which we might refer to as the things that must be done. Pope Francis proposes engaging in an honest dialogue at every level... a dialogue that will facilitate processes of transparent decision making.

Chapter Six: Ecological education and spirituality... and I leave the title of this section to the imagination of each individual... you can give it your own title. I do believe, however, that this chapter is closely related to the previous one, especially with regard to the presentation of various proposals. Here we recall that no plan will be effective unless it is grounded on a formed and responsible conscience... thus we propose certain principles in order to deepen our education, spiritual, ecclesial, political and theological formation:

- Seek the best means of dialogue which can help us escape the spiral of self-destruction which currently engulfs us (#163).
- Look for ways to eliminate extreme poverty (#172).
- Dialogue about the environment in international political forums (#164).
- Value and learn from positive steps and experiences (#168).
- A great concern about the far less significant progress with regard to the protection of biodiversity and issues related to desertification (#169).

The text concludes with two prayers: one that is intended for those who believe in an all-powerful Creator-God and the other for those who believe in Jesus Christ (the words, *praise be to you*, appear at the beginning and the conclusion of the encyclical).

Let me conclude this section with the following words of Vincent de Paul: *let us love God, my brothers and sister, but let it be with the strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows.*³

³ CCD:XI:32; CCD refers to Vincent de Paul, *Correspondence, Conference, Documents*, translators: Helen Marie Law, DC (Vol. 1), Marie Poole, DC (Vol. 1-13b), James King, CM (Vol. 1-2), Francis Germovnik, CM (Vol. 1-8, 13a-13b [Latin]), Esther Cavanagh, DC (Vol. 2), Ann Mary Dougherty, DC (Vol. 12); Evelyne Franc, DC (Vol. 13a-13b), Thomas Davitt, CM (Vol. 13a-13b [Latin]), Glennon E. Figge, CM (Vol. 13a-13b [Latin]), John G. Nugent, CM (Vol. 13a-13b [Latin]), Andrew Spellman, CM (Vol. 13a-13b [Latin]); edited: Jacqueline Kilar, DC (Vol. 1-2), Marie Poole, DC (Vol. 2-13b), Julia Denton, DC [editor-in-chief] (Vol. 3-10, 13a-13b), Paule Freeburg, DC (Vol. 3), Mirian Hamway, DC (Vol. 3), Elinor Hartman, DC (Vol. 4-10, 13a-13b), Ellen Van Zandt, DC (Vol. 9-13b), Ann Mary Dougherty (Vol. 11-12); annotated: John W. Carven, CM (Vol. 1-13b); New City Press, Brooklyn and Hyde Park, 1985-2009. Future references to this work will be inserted into the text using the initials [CCD] followed by the volume number, followed by the page number, for example, CCD:XI:32.

We cannot deny the coincidence between the adoption of the document, *Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, (a document that was signed on September 2015 by the heads of state and the representatives at the United Nations) and the publication of *Laudato Si* on June 18th, 2015.

This encyclical of Pope Francis has been a beacon of light that has illuminated decisions of great importance: the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals together with the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) are a universal call to adopt those means that will eradicate poverty, protect the planet and guarantee that all people can enjoy peace and prosperity. We can feel proud that the members of the AIC have had such an experience in each of the places where the Association is present.

The 17 SDGs are based on the Millennial Development Objectives but they include some new areas, for example, climate change, economic inequality, sustainable consumption. Peace and justice, innovation. The objectives are interrelated and frequently the key to success in one area involves questions related to another area. The heart of these objectives is a human ecology. This paradigm has been clearly presented by the Church in *Laudato Si*. The cries of humanity and of the earth are inseparable because they have one and the same structural origin and only in that way can they be resolved in an effective manner. Once again let us listen to the words of Vincent who stated: *the poor are my worry and my sorrow*.

The SDGs envision a spirit of collaboration and a pragmatic approach, both of which are proper to our charism and therefore, proper to the AIC. This, then, involves us in opting to find the most effective way to better life in a sustainable manner to that future generations can also rejoice in this gift of life. The UN document provides clear guidelines and goals that each country, in accord with their own situation, can adopt.

The SDGs are an inclusive agenda that attack the fundamental causes of poverty and that unite us in our common struggle to achieve positive change that will benefit all men and women and also benefit our planet.

The seventeen objectives for sustainable development are inseparably related to the Vincentian charism and to the aspirations of the Catholic Church as outlined in the teachings of Pope Francis. As we read those seventeen objectives we become aware of the fact that they refer to matters that all of us are concerned about and therefore, matters that we are attempting to change. What can we do to implement those objectives in the areas where we live and work? What are the significance of those objectives for the volunteers of the AIC? What can we do to in order to adapt our work to a systemic change approach that is also in line with the sustainable objectives? What type of formation do we need in order to connect our local agendas with the global agenda of humankind? Let us simply take some time to consider the 12th objective: to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns...

Let us attempt to respond to all these questions during the workshops that will follow this presentation.

Finally, let us allow the following three references to the encyclical to touch our hearts:

- *There is a nobility in the duty to care for creation through little daily actions. Let us examine our conscience and reflect on the activities that we engage in so that we might preserve our common home. It is wonderful how education can bring about real change in lifestyle... all of these reflect a generous and worthy creativity which brings out the best in human beings (#211)*
- *The ecological crisis is also a summons to profound interior conversion (#217),*
- *The ecological conversion needed to bring about lasting change is also a community conversion (#219),*

Translated:
Charles T. Plock, CM