

The Church's Rich Teaching about Creation

God has given humans the inexpressible privilege of working with Him to perfect and complete His work of creation. The Church teaches that the end of the universe is its final destination in Christ, and that God has given us, His creatures made uniquely in His image, the vocation to bring it as a final offering to the Lamb at the end of time. "The universe was created "in a state of journeying (*in statu viae*) toward an ultimate perfection yet to be attained, to which God has destined it." *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #302. "The ultimate purpose of other creatures is not to be found in us. Rather, all creatures are moving forward with us and through us towards a common point of arrival, which is God, in that transcendent fullness where the risen Christ embraces and illumines all things. Human beings, endowed with intelligence and love, and drawn by the fullness of Christ, are called to lead all creatures back to their Creator." *Laudato Si'* #83.

Pope St. John Paul II has positioned our stewardship of the natural world squarely within the commands of the Gospel of Life. In *Evangelium Vitae* he teaches us that "[t]o defend and promote life, to show reverence and love for it, is a task which God entrusts to every man, calling him as His living image to share in His own lordship over the world As one called to till and look after the garden of the world (cf. Gen 2:15), man has a specific responsibility towards the environment in which he lives, towards the creation which God has put at the service of his personal dignity, of his life, not only for the present but also for future generations. It is the ecological question –ranging from the preservation of the natural habitats of the different species of animals and of other forms of life to 'human ecology' properly speaking--which finds in the Bible clear and strong ethical direction, leading to a solution which respects the great good of life, of every life. In fact, 'the dominion' granted to man by the Creator is not an absolute power, nor can one speak of a freedom to 'use and misuse,' or to dispose of things as one pleases. The limitation imposed from the beginning by the Creator himself and expressed symbolically by the prohibition not to 'eat of the fruit of the tree' (cf. Gen 2:16-17) shows clearly enough that, when it comes to the natural world, we are subject not only to biological laws but also to moral ones, which cannot be violated with impunity." *Evangelium Vitae*, Section 42 (1995).

Similarly, Pope Benedict XVI taught that to live in obedience to God, human beings must act toward nature in accordance with God's precepts. "Man too has a nature that he must respect and that he cannot manipulate at will He is intellect and will, but he is also nature, and his will is rightly ordered if he respects his nature, listens to it and accepts himself for who he is, as one who did not create himself." Benedict observes that this same principle also governs our relationship with the natural world. While we can use creation for our good, we "cannot manipulate [it] at will," he says, for "matter is not just raw material for us to shape at will, but . . . the earth has a dignity of its own and . . . we must follow its directives." *Speech to the German Bundestag, 2011*.

These teachings follow the line of the Church's great tradition of reverence for the natural world. St. Francis of Assisi, named by Pope St. John Paul II as the patron saint of ecology, recognized

Creation as God's handiwork and gift, and saw the entire material world as having been sanctified by the Incarnation.

St. Hildegard of Bingen, Doctor of the Church, reminds us that the earth sustains our lives: "Glance at the sun. See the moon and the stars. Gaze at the beauty of earth's greenings. Now, think. What delight God gives to humankind with all these things All nature is at the disposal of humankind. We are to work with it. For without we cannot survive."

Thirty-one years ago, our United States Bishops called us to recognize the moral dimensions of the coming ecological crisis in their pastoral statement, *An Invitation to Reflection and Action on Environment in Light of Catholic Social Teaching: A Pastoral Statement of the United States Catholic Conference, 1991*. In it, they state plainly that "[a]t its core, the environmental crisis is a moral challenge. It calls us to examine how we use and share the goods of the earth, what we pass on to future generations, and how we live in harmony with God's creation."

Our bishops recognized even then that our treatment of nature must spring from love and respect for the God who created it and for His creative design. They call us to penance and conversion. We face serious issues in order to arrive at solutions that value both people and the earth, and to secure protection for all God's creatures, including the poor and the unborn. These, they tell us, "constitute an exceptional call to conversion. As individuals, as institutions, as a people, we need a change of heart to preserve and protect the planet for our children and for generations yet unborn."

The bishops teach us that we humans "bear a unique responsibility under God: to safeguard the created world and by their creative labor even to enhance it. Safeguarding creation requires us to live responsibly within it, rather than manage creation as though we are outside it [H]umanity stands responsible for ensuring that all nature can continue to thrive as God intended. After the flood, God made a lasting covenant with Noah, his descendants, and "every living creature." We are not free, therefore, to use created things capriciously."

Ten years later, the bishops again urged that the ecological crisis be addressed seriously because our Catholic call to solidarity with the poor and vulnerable demands it. In their 2001 statement *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good*, the bishops observed that "[a]long with Pope John Paul II, church leaders in developing countries—who fear that affluent nations will mute their voices and ignore their needs—have expressed their concerns about how this global challenge will affect their people and their environment. We also hear the call of Catholic youth and other young people to protect the environment. Therefore, we especially want to focus on the needs of the poor, the weak, and the vulnerable in a debate often dominated by more powerful interests. Inaction and inadequate or misguided responses to climate change will likely place even greater burdens on already desperately poor peoples. *Action to mitigate global climate change must be built upon a foundation of social and economic justice that does not put the poor at greater risk or place disproportionate and unfair burdens on developing nations (italics added).*

Following and consolidating the Church's consistent teaching, Pope Francis promulgated the encyclical *Laudato Si'* in 2015, in which, speaking of Saint Francis, he tells us that the saint "shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace." *Laudato Si'* #10. The Pope reminds us of the profound interconnectedness between care for the environment and care for vulnerable people: "When we fail to acknowledge as part of reality the worth of a poor person, a human embryo, a person with disabilities—to offer just a few examples—it becomes difficult to hear the cry of nature itself; everything is connected." #117.

The Holy Father grounds our relationship with the earth solidly in the Incarnation of Jesus and in the Eucharist, which he left us as the Sacrament of unity. "It is in the Eucharist that all that has been created finds its greatest exaltation. Joined to the incarnate Son, present in the Eucharist, the whole cosmos gives thanks to God. The Eucharist is also a source of light and motivation for our concerns for the environment, directing us to be stewards of all creation." #236.

How are we responding to God's invitation to join Him in bringing creation to its ultimate perfection in Christ? What will we return to Christ at His second coming—a gift that we have used, preserved and developed for His glory and the salvation of His people, or a wasteland that we have despoiled, stripped of its richness and its ability to sustain human life? What will we say when we look into the face of the glorified Christ? Will we have fulfilled our divine call "to lead all creatures back to their Creator," as Pope Francis beautifully puts it? Let us study and reflect soberly on these questions so that we may have life, and have it in abundance.