



SERENE ATTENTIVENESS TO GOD'S CREATION

When we fall in love, become parents, or enter into any significant relationship, it is not uncommon to experience a shift in worldview that shapes our actions.

Consider parents holding their first newborn son or daughter. While there is no instruction manual for all the possible circumstances they may encounter, their guiding framework is the loving, parental relationship with their child. With his encyclical *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis invites us to understand more deeply our relationships with God, one another, and the rest of creation, and to live accordingly. "Everything is connected," he reminds us (LS 91).

God uses creation to bring us into loving relationship with himself, most notably through the sacraments. We experience this most powerfully in the Eucharist, the true body and blood of Christ, received under the appearance of bread and wine, where "all that has been created finds its greatest exaltation" (LS 236). God invites us to embrace creation on this deeper level through our worship of himself (LS 235). Our relationship with Christ—strengthened by receiving him worthily in Holy Communion—helps us understand our relationships with one another and with creation.

Pope Francis warns against placing ourselves "at the center," thinking we don't need God and lacking concern for other creatures (LS 122, 68-69). But he also rejects the view that "the presence of human beings on the planet should be reduced and all forms

of intervention prohibited" (LS, 60). The Holy Father affirms, instead, that human beings possess "a particular dignity above other creatures" and share a distinct responsibility for the world entrusted to us (LS 119, 242). When any of our relationships are out of balance—with God, one another, or the rest of creation—all our relationships suffer.

We see evidence of this imbalance on a large scale today. Building upon the teaching of his predecessors, the Holy Father discusses in great detail the disrepair apparent in creation. Our distorted relationship with God has infected our relationship with the earth, evidenced by pollution, lack of clean water, toxic waste, and immense material waste. For example, "approximately a third of all food produced is discarded, and 'whenever food is thrown out it is as if it were stolen from the table of the poor'" (LS 50).

What the Holy Father often calls a "culture of waste" or a "throwaway culture" even goes so far as to see and treat human life as disposable. The elderly are marginalized, and the lives of persons with disabilities are deemed less worth living (LS 123). The fundamental truth that "the inalienable worth of a human being transcends his or her degree of development" is forgotten—leading to the destruction of unwanted babies in the womb and experimentation on embryonic children in the lab (LS 136, 123).

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Sometimes, even efforts to alleviate the suffering of certain populations lead to offenses against human life. Pope Francis warns, for example, against international pressure which makes the promotion of contraception, abortion, and other harmful practices a condition for economic aid.

At times, efforts seeking to protect the environment and other creatures disregard or even attack the particular dignity of human beings. Although we are called to care for creation, the Holy Father makes clear that this approach is not only inconsistent, it “compromises the very meaning of our struggle for the sake of the environment” (LS 91). Quoting Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclical *Charity in Truth*, Pope Francis explains further:

Since everything is interrelated, concern for the protection of nature is also incompatible with the justification of abortion. How can we genuinely teach the importance of concern for other vulnerable beings, however troublesome or inconvenient they may be, if we fail to protect a human embryo, even when its presence is uncomfortable and creates difficulties? “If personal and social sensitivity towards the acceptance of new life is lost, then other forms of acceptance that are valuable for society also wither away” (LS 120).

Pope Francis isn’t endorsing a secular environmentalism—he has a broader idea in mind—one that echoes the sentiments of another predecessor, Pope St. John Paul II. In his 1990 World Day of Peace message, the great saint reminded us that “no peaceful society can afford to neglect either respect for life or the fact that there is an integrity to creation” (emphasis original, 7). He later addressed

Catholics directly, reminding us of our “serious obligation to care for all of creation” (16).

If we are filled with the love of God, a culture of encounter and solidarity will begin to bloom. Pope Francis stresses, “We are speaking of 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” (LS 226). With this attitude of heart, we neither treat other humans as disposable, nor neglect to care for God’s creation at any level. Through a conversion of heart, repairing our relationships with God, one another, and all of creation, we can combat the many pollutants that poison our hearts and our world.

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