



A HUMAN ECOLOGY

CARING FOR OUR COMMON HOME

Friday, October 30, 2015

In the first chapter of Genesis, we read a detailed account of the creation story:

*Then God said: Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness.
Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the tame
animals, all the wild animals, and all the creatures that crawl on the earth.*

*God created mankind in his image;
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.*

God blessed them and God said to them: Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that crawl on the earth.

God also said: See, I give you every seed-bearing plant on all the earth and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit on it to be your food; and to all the wild animals, all the birds of the air, and all the living creatures that crawl on the earth, I give all the green plants for food. And so it happened.

God looked at everything he had made, and found it very good. Evening came, and morning followed—the sixth day.

Gen 1:26-31

This passage sets the tone for the world we live in. We are part of God's creation, and we are called to "fill the earth and subdue it," to "have dominion" over everything around us. At first, these words may seem out of context with the loving God we know. What does it mean to subdue? How do we relate having dominion to our calling to live the Gospel?

Some people have interpreted this to mean that we have absolute authority over everything else. We can hunt, plant, drill, and build to our hearts' content. Others see these terms as the mantle of responsibility—we have a duty to care for the earth, as part of our participation in God's work.

In May 2015, Pope Francis published an encyclical titled *Laudato si*, in which he offers a new perspective on our relationship with the earth. *Laudato si* covers current issues like climate change and the disappearance of plant and animal species, but its true focus is the root of our environmental problems—an inadequate understanding of our place in creation, and our responsibility to the poor and most vulnerable.

The Pope states clearly that humankind is at fault in our current crisis, but he asserts that it's not people *per se* who are the problem, but rather the attitude of today's society. To change the environmental crisis, we must change the way we treat each other and our planet. We need to shift our understanding of human fulfillment—from a "want, take, have" mentality to a state of communion with God, others, and the world.

"The best way to restore men and women to their rightful place, putting an end to their claim to absolute dominion over the earth, is to speak once more of the figure of a Father who creates and who alone owns the world. Otherwise, human beings will always try to impose their own laws and interests on reality" *Laudato si*, 75.

Pope Francis revisits God's decree in Genesis, enriching the word "dominion" with an understanding that our rights to the goods of creation come only when we have the right relationship with creation, including humanity.



Many people blame overpopulation for the environmental depletion we're facing. However, the Pope vehemently opposes this view, looking instead at excessive consumption. Blaming population growth instead of extreme, selective consumerism bypasses the real issues, and excuses the current consumption model, in which a minority enjoys consumerism at a level the planet's resources cannot hope to match.

The most recent statistics on population density support Pope Francis' statements. Take California—if you travel from LA from San Francisco, you'll find plenty of uninhabited land. But sitting in traffic on the 405, you see people for miles. Other states across the country are similar—lots of open space without many people.

This is true of the rest of the world too. China has only 356 people per square mile. Southeast Asia has 430, and Latin America has 61. These places have some of the most highly populated cities in the world, but they also have large, open expanses of land. The World Bank recently predicted that earth's population will top out at about nine billion in 2040, and decline steadily from there.



We can't blame overpopulation, but we can blame improper distribution of earth's resources among the population. The motivation of excessive consumption – greed – has a practical, unsettling application.

Currently, 14% of people consume 82% of earth's energy. Virtually all of this energy is carbon-based, meaning whenever you drive, turn on the AC, or buy anything that takes energy to make, transport, or sell, you used carbon-based fuels, which creates greenhouse gases, and contributes to climate changes.

One billion of earth's people are responsible for the consumption that created the ecological crisis. But that same one billion can isolate themselves from the negative effects—we can turn on the AC, drive through smog in our cars, or buy houses inland. The other six billion face the negative impact of our consumption because they can't escape it.

Again and again, the Pope returns to what has become a key theme in his pontificate—the need to restore our sense of responsibility for others: 'We must regain the conviction that we need one another, that we have a shared responsibility for others and the world, and that being good and decent are worth it,' he insists.

As an antidote to consumer lifestyles and the culture of waste, Pope Francis proposes Christian spirituality. Our

faith, he says, leads to a lifestyle—'an attitude of the heart'—that is marked by moderation, humility, and gratitude; that finds happiness in the little things in life and 'accepts each moment as a gift from God to be lived to the full'" Archbishop Gomez, *The Tidings*, June 18, 2015.

In the U.S. alone, we spend tons of money on things that we don't need—\$18 billion per year on pet food, and \$7 billion per year on cosmetics. Talk about first world problems! Eliminating childhood hunger worldwide would cost only \$21 billion. \$14 billion could provide prenatal care to women who don't have any. \$12 billion would give everyone safe drinking water.

It's easy to see that if we reallocate funds and resources, we can provide basic human necessities to billions of people. Foregoing a few luxuries can literally change someone else's life...and that puts a trip to Target in a whole new perspective.

People are at the center for God's plan for creation. Each person is called to be in communion with all others, as the Trinity is in the communion of three persons. That membership in the human community places responsibility on each of us for our brothers and sisters.

The Pope's encyclical reminds us that we are part of the created order. We each have a unique dignity, but we are still created beings with an inherent nature, just like everything else in creation. If we can't respect ourselves or other people, how we can respect the rest of creation? Pope Francis cites situations in which we throw away our most vulnerable members—the unborn, old, sick, and poor. This is contrary to our human nature, which calls us to respect life and help those in need.



“Since everything is interrelated, concern for the protection of nature is 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?” *Laudato si*, 120.

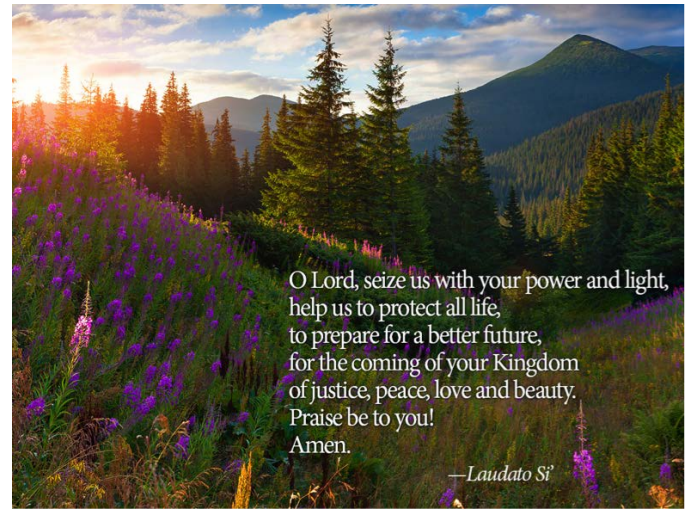
This may seem like a lot for any one person to do to keep the world turning, and to keep harm from the rest of the population. Pope Francis touches on some of the international and political solutions, but he ultimately comes back to establishing a personal relationship with God, and with each other.



“In the name of Jesus, Pope Francis is issuing a call to conversion—a call for all of us to look at the earth and all its creatures with the eyes of Jesus. Because ‘the earthly Jesus’ is also the Creator and Lord of the universe, the world has been transfigured. The Pope writes: ‘Thus, the creatures of this world no longer appear to us under merely natural guise, because the risen One is mysteriously holding them to himself and directing them towards fullness as their end. The very flowers of the field and the birds which his human eyes contemplated and admired are now imbued with his radiant presence.’” Archbishop José H. Gomez, *The Tidings*, June 25, 2015.

The more we seek to be like Jesus, the more we will see his hand in our creation, and in the creation of the world. He walked on earth, just like we do now, and if we come to love him more, we can see him in everything around us. We can come to understand appropriate consumerism, and

our responsibilities to the less fortunate. The Pope calls us to grow in our relationship with Christ, so that we may respect creation, not as an imposition, but as a privilege.



The Pope doesn’t intend this to be the announcement of the end. There is great hope in the innovation and creativity of humankind when we come together for a common purpose. As Christians, we are called to work together in a song of thanksgiving to our loving Father for his gift of creation, and for the leadership role he has given us.

DISCUSSION

1. What does Pope Francis say is at the basis of our current global climate crisis?
2. What suggestions does he give to fix this? Do you agree with his suggestions?
3. Is there evidence to support Pope Francis’ claim that overpopulation is not an ecological problem?
4. If you were asked to devise a plan for redistribution of goods to serve the world’s developing nations, what would you recommend?
5. What is one thing you personally can do to care for God’s creation?