



### Pope Francis on "Our Common Home"

"Laudato Si," sang St. Francis of Assisi; "Praise be to you, my Lord." Pope Francis chose these words of his namesake to begin his encyclical on the environment because the beloved Poor Man "invites us to see nature as a magnificent book in which God speaks to us and grants us a glimpse of his infinite beauty and goodness."

Jesus of Nazareth made a similar invitation. Our Lord illustrated his parables with the flowers of the field and the birds of the air "because he himself was in constant touch with nature, lending it an attention full of fondness and wonder." And now the lilies and the sparrows "which his human eyes . . . admired are . . . imbued with his radiant presence" as victorious Lord of Life. In light of his Resurrection, "the creatures of this world no longer appear to us under merely natural guise because the Risen One is mysteriously . . . directing them towards . . . their end." Therefore, "our vocation to be protectors of God's handiwork is . . . not . . . optional or secondary": it is rather "essential to a life of virtue."

The virtuous life of St. Francis unforgettably brings together "concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace." From him we learn that "a true ecological approach . . . must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.*"

The earth cries out for the protection of human stewardship from the destructive overreach of human intervention in nature. "The ultimate purpose of other creatures is not to be found in us," the Pope says; "we are called to recognize that other living beings have a value of their own in God's eyes." Our God-given task as human creatures, "drawn by the fullness of Christ," is "to lead all creatures back to their Creator."

Toward that end Pope Francis proposes a wide-ranging agenda for the world of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. But he is quick to point out that "the Church does not presume to settle scientific questions or to replace politics." Rather, he wants "to encourage an honest and open debate [on climate change, economic growth, and international justice] so that particular interests or ideologies will not prejudice the common good." Therefore, although an encyclical is the most authoritative form of papal teaching, in *Laudato Si* the Holy Father proposes his prudential pastoral judgments, not infallible teaching, on the complex technical matters he deals with. About these, the Pope says, we have need of a "broad, responsible scientific and social debate" which will consider "all the available information," take account of "all the pertinent variables," and call "things by their name."

In that debate Pope Francis invites all Catholics to take part, informed "before all else" by "an appreciation of the immense dignity of the poor in the light of our deepest" Christian beliefs. My next column will explore how the Holy Father connects these to the Eucharist at the center of "ecological conversion."