

Stewardship of Creation

Prayer Breakfast

March 28, 2015

Marian University

Introduction

Good morning. I would like to thank Andy Pike and the Creation Care Ministry at St. Thomas Aquinas Parish, Sister Maureen Irvin and the Sisters of St. Francis, Oldenburg and Dr. Karen Spear and Marian University's Center for Organizational Ethics for sponsoring this prayer breakfast.

A few weeks ago, an article in the Science Section of the *New York Times* offered a salutary caution regarding talks on the environment. Former Vice-President Al Gore admitted that his presentation on climate change and the environment occasionally lasts eight hours! Let me assure you, I will not be speaking for eight hours. That would be more hot air than any of us could withstand, let alone the fragile environment.

That article on the former vice president had some interesting information about recent advances in "green" technology, but it also highlighted how politically charged the topic of climate change and environmental stewardship can be and that Mr. Gore remains a lightning rod for vicious criticism.

A great tragedy of our time is that practically nothing can be discussed without it being filtered through the lens of politics that quickly reduces to us versus them sound bites.

In particular, when the subject is climate change, too often people are branded as either alarmists or deniers.

Believe me, Catholics are just as likely to get caught up in the polemic around this issue. You may be aware that Pope Francis plans to publish an important statement on our responsibility to care for the environment. I have already received letters and emails from folks who violently denounce the document, which Francis has not yet published.

What difference does faith make?

What does the Catholic Church have to offer on the topic of stewardship of creation in these polarizing times? Does belief in God give us a unique perspective when approaching this issue? Can a world that often intentionally denies the existence of God truly care for and protect creation?

These questions may seem tantamount to asking: can a person who does not believe in God be a good person? I know people who do not believe in God. Most of them are nice people who do plenty of good. Many of them probably recycle and have replaced the light bulbs in their house with energy efficient bulbs. This is admirable. So where does God fit into this discussion?

Stewardship of creation is more than something we just do. Stewardship of creation is a response. It is a way of being and understanding our place in the world. Stewardship of creation is integral to what we are all called to do as Catholics: To respond in love to God who loved us first.

As Pope Francis has said:

A Christian who doesn't safeguard creation, who doesn't make it flourish, is a Christian who isn't concerned with God's work – that work born of God's love for us."

Stewardship of creation is also a call for justice and this call should demonstrate a preference for the poor and the most vulnerable, who are affected the most by this crisis even though they did the least to create the problem and have the fewest resources to adapt.

For example, in the United States, power plants have often been located near low-income neighborhoods and communities of color. Air pollution from these plants contributes to health problems, especially in the young and the elderly. Around the world, the effects on the poor and vulnerable are even more severe. Catholic Relief Services is helping the most vulnerable people respond to increasing floods, droughts, food and water insecurity, and conflict over declining resources. All these are making the lives of the world's poorest people even more precarious.

For people of faith, this environmental crisis is more than just a scientific or technological problem. It is a moral problem. It is not a marginal matter, but a fundamental priority that must be addressed now and to our children or grandchildren to resolve.

In their 1991 pastoral statement, "Renewing the Earth" the Catholic bishops of the United States wrote:

Our mistreatment of the material world diminishes our own dignity and sacredness, not only because we are destroying resources that future generations of humans need, but because we are engaging in actions that contradict what it means to be human. Our tradition calls us to protect the

life and dignity of the human person, and it is increasingly clear that this task cannot be separated from the care and defense of all of creation.

We have to look beyond ourselves and our own selfish needs. We are to love one another not only because God commands it, but because it's just—because God made those other people, and keeps them in being, and loves them, and thereby infuses them with their own value.

In the Beginning

If we are privileged to attend the Mother of All Vigils next Saturday night, the first words from the Bible that we will hear are:

In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss, while a mighty wind swept over the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light." God saw how good the light was. God then separated the light from the darkness. God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night". Thus evening came, and morning followed – the first day. (Genesis 1, 1-5)

The first chapter of Genesis highlights the goodness of creation and the divine desire that human beings share in that goodness. God brings an orderly universe out of primordial chaos merely by uttering a word. The account reveals that God created human beings in the divine image, then blessed us and gave us dominion over what God had created. God's commission to the first humans:

Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. (Genesis 1, 28)

The stewardship of creation is rooted in our God-given dignity. As rational beings, we have a primary responsibility to protect human life, a duty that acknowledges the dignity of the human person who is created in God's image. Our responsibility to care for the earth follows secondarily from this dignity, and, as such, presupposes it. We alone, of all God's earthly creatures, have the power and intelligence as well as the responsibility to help order the world in accord with divine providence.

In "subduing the earth", however, we need to keep in mind that we are not God, even though God has made us his co-workers in caring for creation. We need to be clear about what dominion does and does not mean. God has not granted us permission to do whatever we want.

To "subdue" the earth is to be a good steward of creation. Here the simple definition I propose for stewardship might be helpful: Stewardship is what I do with what I

have when I believe in God. We should rule over creation in a manner that is in harmony with God's own manner of governance. Since the first moment of creation, God has provided for the needs of his creatures, and has ordered all of creation to its perfection. Man's dominion over creation must serve the good of human beings and all of creation as well. This is God's plan. To exploit the created world for selfish gain is really a form of idolatry.

When talking about the environment I imagine that many sophisticated pragmatists will dismiss references to the Bible and its account of creation story as naïve and foolish. On the other hand, I am confident that Pope Francis's coming encyclical on the environment will communicate a vision that is rooted in biblical faith.

Pope Francis

Pope Francis is not the first pope to talk about the environment. Both Saint Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI wrote and talked extensively about the stewardship of creation. You may recall that journalists even referred to Pope Benedict as the "green pope" after he had solar panels installed in the Vatican and ordered other measures to reduce the Vatican's carbon footprint.

What is different with Pope Francis is that this will be the first time a pope has written an encyclical on the environment. An encyclical carries considerable weight, because its purpose aims to inform the bishops and faithful throughout the world on a significant issue.

Pope Francis made it clear right from the beginning of his papacy that the stewardship of creation would be a priority. He inaugurated his papacy two years ago on the feast of Saint Joseph (March 19, 2013). During the homily, he spoke about the role of Joseph as protector of Mary and Jesus.

In Joseph, Pope Francis said,

We learn how to respond to God's call, readily and willingly, but we also see the core of the Christian vocation, which is Christ! Let us protect Christ in our lives, so that we can protect others, so that we can protect creation!

The Holy Father went on to say

The vocation of being a 'protector', however, is not just something involving us Christians alone; it also has a prior dimension which is simply human, involving everyone. It means protecting all creation, the beauty of the created world, as the Book of Genesis tells us and as Saint Francis of Assisi showed

us. It means respecting each of God's creatures and respecting the environment in which we live. It means protecting people, showing loving concern for each and every person, especially children, the elderly, those in need, who are often the last we think about.

A preview of coming attractions

So what can we expect Pope Francis to say in this upcoming encyclical on the environment? I am going to ask a couple of brother bishops to give us a sneak preview

Thomas Wenski, the Archbishop of Miami, provided a few clues during a recent briefing for members of Congress and their staffs on the theme of religion and climate change. The briefing took place on February 20, 2015 in Washington, D.C. and was sponsored by the *National Religious Partnership for the Environment*.

Archbishop Wenski observed:

Pope Francis for the past two years has been challenging us to build a culture of solidarity and encounter, one capable of addressing the great ethical challenges of our time. His upcoming encyclical will be, I am sure, another iteration of this challenge.

Given his past statements, I think that he will call us to prudent action that promotes the common good for present and future generations, and respects human life and dignity while always giving priority to the poor and vulnerable. Care for creation should engage us all — and thus I also think that the pope will tell us also to be mindful of and heed the voices of the poor who are impacted most by climate change, and certainly will be impacted either for good or ill by the policies proposed to address climate change.

Earlier this month Cardinal Peter Turkson, the president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, spoke at length about the upcoming encyclical during a lecture at Saint Patrick's Pontifical University in Maynooth, Ireland. Cardinal Turkson believes that the encyclical will focus on the notion of "integral ecology" — the intertwining of economic, ecological and social concerns.

Cardinal Turkson noted that the timing of the encyclical is significant, observing that 2015 is a "critical year for humanity."

Later this year, the U.N. General Assembly is expected to agree on a new set of goals for sustainable development running until 2030.

In Paris this December, the Conference on Climate Change will receive the plans and commitments of each Government to slow or reduce global warming.

With these two events in mind, Cardinal Turkson said “The coming 10 months are crucial ... for decisions about international development, human flourishing and care for the common home we call planet Earth.”

In that lecture, Cardinal Turkson outlined four principles that are grounded in the notion of integral ecology and reflected in the ministry and teaching of Pope Francis. The basic principles are:

1. The call (to all people) to be protectors is integral and all embracing.
2. The care for creation is a virtue in its own right.
3. It is necessary to care for what we cherish and revere.
4. A new global solidarity is a key value to direct our search for the common good.

Regarding that last principle, Cardinal Turkson said that, in order to make the changes needed, everyone has a part to play, no matter how small. These actions reach to the fundamental pillars that govern a nation, he said: “life, family, integral education, health, including the spiritual dimension of well-being, and security.”

In responding to the threats that arise from global inequality and the destruction of the environment, Cardinal Turkson reiterated that every action counts. “We all have a part to play in protecting and sustaining what Pope Francis has repeatedly called our common home.”

An integral approach to ecology, he said, is not limited to scientific, economic or technical solutions.

At the heart of this integral ecology is the call to dialogue and a new solidarity, a changing of human hearts in which the good of the human person, and not the pursuit of profit, is the key value that directs our search for the global, the universal common good.

Conclusion

The revelation of God both in nature and in salvation history does not lead us to believe that we should return to some garden in the earth’s distant past. Angels with

flaming swords block that way forever (Gen. 3:24). As Saint John Paul II pointed out, ecological responsibility “cannot base itself on the rejection of the modern world or on the vague wish for a return to a ‘lost paradise.’” Human dominion over nature is not necessarily evil; yet our task lies before us. We must always be on guard against a two-fold temptation that is denounced repeatedly by God: first, making idols of nature or creatures that, in so doing, exalts them above our primary duties toward God; and, second, neglecting the needs of our human neighbor.

We are awaiting the New Jerusalem, a city to be given to us at the end of time out of God’s free bounty, which will descend upon a New Heaven and a New Earth. In the meantime, we must combat the evil in ourselves and in our world. We must seek better ways to love God by keeping his commandments and loving our neighbor as ourselves. In a sense, the love for our neighbor can be extended to the non-human world. However, we will have to make prudential judgments about many complex questions and expect inescapable tradeoffs along the way.

Finally, we should always have faith that God never abandons his people. Our talents were given to us for a reason: to enable us to love God and our neighbor in Christian freedom. We may be confident that God will also provide us with the gifts and graces that are needed to care for both nature and ourselves.

Nonetheless, we should still not expect that any of our many pursuits in the coming years—let alone complex activities such as environmental stewardship—will be without new problems of their own. As the great Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar has reminded us, Jesus said that the wheat and the weeds grow together: believing that we can uproot all evil may threaten the goods on which we all depend.

Catholic teaching about the Fall is a realistic, not a pessimistic view, in this perspective. There is much bad and much good in our world, but the persistence of evil should not discourage us. Until the Lord comes in glory, total perfection for us as a species and perfect harmony within nature are beyond our reach, but we know that someday he will come. In the meantime, we seek salvation and our human future amid great uncertainties, but also in joyful hope that the Creator who brought this world and the human race into being is certainly still at work in it—and in us.