

Embracing a New Anawim – Reflections on *Laudato Si'*

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Understanding Earth as God's sacred gift to humanity, Pope Francis' recent encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, invites the entire world into an inspiring and challenging dialogue that recognizes the environment's centrality as a partner in human flourishing. In fact, both our environment and the human family must flourish together. Pope Francis facilitates this dialogue by acknowledging humanity's double-edged power: to exploit in destructive ways that impose suffering upon the Earth and to heal our environment in transformative ways that enable human flourishing. Furthermore, Pope Francis calls for recognizing the ways in which healing both Earth and humanity brings about the Kingdom of God, a cause the Catholic health ministry has been about since its earliest days. Thus, this encyclical offers the Catholic health ministry numerous opportunities for reflection and integration. We will focus on two.

At the encyclical's outset, Pope Francis invites Earth to be known as "barren and laid to waste, among the most abandoned and

maltreated of our poor" (2). Pope Francis reminds us that this ecological poverty is felt most acutely in some of the most economically vulnerable and disadvantaged areas of the world and demands a response. Our Earth is fast becoming the ecological anawim within and surrounding our human communities. In Hebrew, the anawim are the poorest of the poor, the outcast, those without any recourse for salvation other than the mercy and grace of God. The encyclical points out that humanity's apathetic inaction and abusive action has created our ecological anawim. The notion of the anawim is familiar to us because the healing ministry was founded in response to humanity's anawim. Pope Francis invites us to reframe our healing mission suggesting that healing our human anawim cannot occur unless we also heal our ecological anawim. In fact, they are inseparable.

The Catholic health ministry may also find value in that Pope Francis wrote this encyclical in the tradition of Saint John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris*, intent on all people

hearing its message. Its purposeful release on Pentecost demonstrates trust and hopefulness in the Spirit's presence to transform the diverse peoples of the world into a single human community. This community should be disposed towards advocacy and justice for God's creation, recognizing that the environment and humanity are perennially intertwined as two of God's most precious gifts. *Laudato Si's* prophetic message also invites collaborative healing action, recognizing that the Catholic Church cannot address the problems of Earth unilaterally yet emphasizing the Church's capacity to be an excellent collaborative partner with others equally intent on innovatively healing the wounds that humanity has caused.

The Catholic health ministry knows well the value of collaborative innovation. Its leadership in passing the Affordable Care Act is one of the ministry's most powerful recent accomplishments. Furthermore, numerous efforts in our local and regional communities to address population health, mental health, human trafficking, and physician-assisted suicide (to name only a few) are epitomes of the Catholic health ministry's leadership in communities of concern seeking innovative healing solutions for God's human anawim.

Responding to Earth's isolation, abandonment, suffering, and pain demands reimagining the day to day lived integration of our mission statements that operationalize healing for both humanity and the environment. Our internal and external efforts to apply a healing balm to our ecological anawim should be characterized by collaborative innovation with community partners with integrated strategies addressing population health, human trafficking, and

mental health. Collaborative efforts to respond to these vulnerable populations should explicitly address the environmental factors contributing to their suffering. Gratefully, Dignity Health's healing ministry has a tremendously positive track record for healing through collaborative innovation. For example,

- With millions of people world-wide lacking access to adequate medical care, we are ensuring that our excess medical supplies and equipment are distributed to health care facilities in the developing world and safety net clinics in the U.S. and abroad.
- Recognizing that access to high quality potable water is necessary for the flourishing of all life, that water scarcity affects public health and the economic sustainability of the region where Dignity operates, we are conserving water by retrofitting existing plumbing fixtures, improving landscaping choices, and implementing water saving technology throughout our facilities.
- Chemical use, another critical area for our industry, impacts human health, water quality, and marine life. Simultaneously with our work to purchase products containing chemicals and/or materials that are the least toxic throughout their lifecycles, we continue to advocate at the local, state, and federal levels for safer chemicals.
- How we dispose of our waste impacts not only the communities we serve, near and far, but our very life support systems. We dispose of our trash

responsibly and work to reduce the amount of materials we use in the first place.

We are aware that the issues of water, chemicals, food, energy, waste, and so many more that we in the health care industry deal with everyday are inextricably linked to each other, to public health, and to climate change, which is one of the defining challenges facing the world today. We seek to address them in order to meet the needs of a growing population in a resource-constrained world.

May Pope Francis' message further inspire us to embrace our ecological and human anawim as one single community and apply our passion, perseverance, and inspired love of all that is vulnerable towards a new and invigorated harmonious relationship between our human and environmental family. Surely, doing so will lead our environment and us into achieving God's hope for human flourishing for millennia to come.