

FROM DISCIPLESHIP TO FRESH AIR

*The Environment Is Only the Most Recent
Focus of a Long Tradition*

In many ways, *Laudato Si'* is unprecedented. Never before has the church addressed the environment in a way that invites the entire globe to reflection and action. Its focus on the environment is new, but its roots are deep. Far from an isolated moment, it is only the latest development in a long series of Gospel responses to social, economic and political change.



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Early Christians were focused on their identity, especially in distinguishing themselves from Judaism. They were primarily interested in forming a tight circle of discipleship around Jesus. By the 4th century, Christianity had become official. The church's focus began to shift from personal discipleship toward political and economic issues. Personal faith

remained important, but kingdoms, states, tension between civil and religious power, the rise of the profit economy, the appearance of the great universities of Europe and the "discovery" of new worlds raised new questions. The church began to develop a more global theology that would help it deal with these new frontiers.

The structures of this world began to crumble in the late 18th century when a series of revolutions swept across Europe, wiping out many of the royal families and instituting new forms of nonreligious government. Reason and democracy replaced faith and monarchy as the prevailing paradigms. The Catholic Church struggled, but

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eventually shaped a new political philosophy that addressed the problems of secularism.

The Industrial Revolution that followed created yet another set of challenges. Known collectively as "the social question," these problems started with the tension between capital and the rights of workers to share in the fruits of their labor (the word "socialism" grew out of this tension). Eventually the social question encompassed the dignity of work, the ownership of production, just wages and even the class structure itself.

The church went to work and gradually evolved a whole tradition of "social teaching" in response to these economic questions. Beginning in 1891 with *Rerum Novarum* (*Of New Things*), Pope Leo XIII used Scripture and philosophy and classic moral theology to develop a new body of teaching for political and economic systems that had been unimaginable only a few decades earlier.

Today we have the "environmental question." It is not brand new; in fact, the problems that produced it started about the same time that Leo XIII was writing about the rights of laborers. It is ironic that the authors of the church's social documents in the early 20th century never thought to address the environment, since they were literally choking on the byproducts of commerce as they wrote.

But it is new in the sense that we have only recently begun to see the impact of pollution on our health, our food supply and our working conditions. We have now explored every corner of the world and conquered much of it. We have come to see that the world in which we live is finite and cannot support us unless we protect it and cultivate it carefully. As Br. Keith Warner, OFM, points

out in his article (see page 14), new teaching on the environment builds on Catholic social teaching but goes beyond it. Just as early social teaching integrated care for the poor with economics, so *Laudato Si'* integrates care for the poor with the environment.

Our concern for the environment doesn't stop at the economic and social. It extends even to our spiritual lives. This is because in our view, creation is God's self-communication. As Pattiann Rogers shows in her beautiful poem on page 7 in this issue, creation is sacramental. It is a real, tangible thing, alive and growing. It has the ability to mediate God's presence to us.

This sacramentality is at the heart of the Catholic tradition. Just think of the centrality of water, oil and plants to Christian symbolism. We come to understand God's presence in our lives by the very elements of creation that are threatened. Is it possible that water is the means for baptism, which opens that door to eternal life, yet much of the world — even cities in the United States — lack drinkable water? Is it possible that bread and grapes are the basis of the Eucharist, yet millions do not have enough to eat or are forced to eat grass, as Syrian refugees have been forced to do?

Responding to changes in politics or the economy is one thing. But responding to changes in the environment is far more significant. It is literally a question of the air we breathe. The connections with population health and our ability to heal and cure are obvious.

Laudato Si' and the tradition that will develop from it are perhaps the most important challenges of all those that theologians and ethicists have faced thus far. It will require unprecedented collaboration and commitment to the common good. Let us consider ourselves privileged to be part of it.

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