

LAUDATO SI'

The Latest Chapter In Catholic Social Tradition

The social tradition of the Catholic Church consists of three important dimensions: teaching, thought and practice. Pope Francis' encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si'*, demonstrates how these three elements come together.



BRIAN SMITH

Like other church teachings, *Laudato Si'* is grounded in sacred Scripture. Pope Francis uses the story of Genesis and other passages from Hebrew Scripture and the New Testament as the foundation of his teaching.

Catholic social tradition also draws on Catholic thought that informs and is informed by the work of dedicated, faithful people in the fields of theology, philosophy, economics, political science, business and sociology. *Laudato Si'* draws from these disciplines and others demonstrating how Scripture, theology and the expertise of other fields can come together.

Finally, Catholic practice shows how the teaching and thought of the church is acted out on behalf of justice in society. We know the recommendations for action made in *Laudato Si'* have won Pope Francis praise from some who welcome concrete steps to address global warming and sustainability, but also criticism from others who think the church should stay out of politics and economics.

The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace is the Vatican office charged with developing and

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— CARDINAL TURKSON, quoting *Laudato Si'*

promoting the social teaching of the church, fostering dialogue with other disciplines to promote and deepen the Catholic social justice tradition and coordinating activities among international organizations and church agencies to manifest works on behalf of justice and peace. Cardinal Peter K. A. Turkson, the current president of the pontifical council, gave a Lenten lecture in Philadelphia that weaves together the encyclical's themes of creation and care of creation with the church's Jubilee Year themes of mercy and the works of mercy.¹

THE CREATOR AND CREATION

The biblical foundation of *Laudato Si'* is found in the story of creation. Quoting Pope Francis, Cardinal Turkson reminds us, “Human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbor and with the earth itself.”² The cardinal goes on to say, “When one of the relationships is broken, the others are broken, too, and our insertion into the universe is no longer integral — it is fractured and partial.” The implication of understanding creation as the unfolding of God's love is that there is a moral dimension to how we treat all of these relationships — including creation.

“The story of creation continues today,” the cardinal said, “and our engagement in it has failed to cooperate with God's design: ‘The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life.’”

CARE OF CREATION

Cardinal Turkson calls our attention to the fact that in *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis refers only twice to humans being stewards of creation. Pope Francis prefers to use the phrase, “care of creation”

because it implies an intimate relationship and connection. Good stewards can faithfully fulfill their obligations to manage and render an account for what is entrusted to them, but without any sense of feeling and commitment. Caring allows us to be in relationship and to become vulnerable — this totally changes our priorities. When we care for creation, we move beyond the technological and economic issues of ecology and see that our choices are about being in relationship with people and the environment. We move from being a steward over something to being like the Good Shepherd or a parent, willing to lay down our life for the sake of those entrusted to our care. This leads Cardinal Turkson to his next theme — mercy.

MEANING OF MERCY

The cardinal reminds us of the etymology and historical development of the word mercy. Mercy comes from the Latin word *merces*, which means “reward” or “gratuity.” The English word takes on a theological meaning, in that mercy means “to freely offer clemency to someone worthy of punishment.” Like grace, mercy is an unmerited

gift. But “mercy” also comes from another Latin word, “*misericordia*,” which translates into “having a heart for those who are miserable, poor and in need.”

The cardinal suggests that we keep in mind all of these kinds of mercy — gratitude, unmerited forgiveness and a feeling of compassion that springs from within. These concepts are what the Jubilee Year of Mercy is about — gratitude for the debt God has forgiven us, while at the same time moving out of ourselves towards those in need.

WORKS OF MERCY

In the fourth section of his address, Cardinal Turkson brings a fresh, modern-day view to the actions that make up the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. Drawing on an idea he attributes to Bill Patenaude of the Global Catholic Climate Movement, the cardinal adds “care for our common home” as the eighth work of mercy in each category. He reminds us of the everyday, concrete actions we can take that make us good ecological citizens — from the choices we make as consumers, to the advocacy efforts we engage in to pressure governments and businesses to care for the planet and

TRANSLATING THE WORKS OF MERCY IN LIGHT OF LAUDATO SI'

Corporal Works of Mercy

- Feed the hungry; especially those who suffer from poverty and drought.
- Give drink to the thirsty; especially those who lack clean abundant water.
- Clothe the naked; especially those exposed to the cold of winter and the sting of indifference.
- Shelter the homeless, especially victims of war, storms and rising seas.
- Care for the sick, especially those who have been poisoned by the waste of our industries.
- Ransom the captives; especially those oppressed by cruel economic and political systems, or from addictions to the pleasures of the world.
- Protect the dignity of the human person; especially in reverently burying the dead.
- Care for our common home.

Spiritual Works of Mercy

- Teach those who do not see how their lifestyles harm others.
- Offer hope to those who despair for the future of loved ones or the future of the world.
- Admonish those who sin against neighbor, the natural order or the laws of nature.
- Patiently bear the sufferings inflicted by gluttony and greed.
- Willingly forgive offenses committed against humanity and the goodness of creation.
- Comfort those afflicted by corruption, by changes to the climate and by unwholesome desires.
- Desire always to pray for the living and the dead and future generations.
- Care for our common home.

What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up?

reverse the negative effect unbridled consumerism has on the poor.

He asks his listeners specifically to encourage the United States to live up to its pledge to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 26 percent to 28 percent below the 2005 level by 2025. Recognizing the Obama administration's pledge is being challenged in the U. S. Supreme Court, Cardinal Turkson encourages us to let our voices be heard so the promise is kept, otherwise "this concrete corporal work of mercy is in jeopardy."

Care of creation as an eighth spiritual work of mercy comes from the central question of *Laudato Si'*: What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up? This question forces us to face the fact that our individual and collective choices have implications far into the future. Sin not only impacts one's personal relationship with God, it has communal implications as well. The Catholic theology of original sin applies here. The choice of Adam and Eve has affected every human being. Even before we are old enough to make our own moral decisions, we are born into a sinful world. Our sins against the earth have communal and generational impact.

CARE OF CREATION AND CATHOLIC HEALTH CARE

Even before Pope Francis' encyclical on the environment, Catholic health care has asked what impact our facilities and processes have on the environment and those people most vulnerable to climate change and pollution. For several years,

The Catholic Health Association has partnered with other Catholic agencies, as well as with national and international groups committed to caring for the environment. Among the publications and resources available on CHA's website are practical examples from CHA members that include system policies on recycling, composting, "green" practices, buying locally grown food and other helpful information to help a facility become more reflective about making choices that impact the earth and its inhabitants.³

It is our job within Catholic health care to live in the Catholic social tradition by contributing to the ongoing development of Catholic thought and practice as it relates to the environment and care for the most vulnerable on our planet.

As Cardinal Turkson reminds us, this has deeper implications when seen in the context of the Jubilee Year of Mercy. Our works of mercy are not only an extension of God's mercy to other humans, but towards creation as well. Creation, mercy and works of mercy suddenly become facets of the same reality — the unfolding of God's love. We are the beneficiaries of this gift, but also the ones expected to care for it and pass it on to the next generation.

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NOTES

1. Peter K. A. Turkson, "Care of Creation as a Work of Mercy," (lecture, St. Thomas of Villanova Church, Villanova University, Philadelphia, Feb. 25, 2016.)
2. Francis, *Laudato Si'*, paragraph 66.
3. Catholic Health Association website, www.chausa.org/environment/overview.

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