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Caring for our common home

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This year continues to be the warmest on record. Wild fires have been burning on the west coast after a warm dry winter and years of drought in California. Here in Vermont, my garden has dried out after a wet spring, and it was a bumper year for raspberries. I finally have the weeds under control, and I have replanted lettuce, peas, and spinach in the hope of a fall crop.

The severe storms that have caused damage and flooding across Vermont and New Hampshire blew down a couple of trees that I cut up for the winter. Tropical storm Irene severely eroded the small valley by our house and with continuing heavy rain it will not recover. The roots of many trees have been undercut and the trees are leaning, waiting to fall in storms.

All summer I have been reflecting on the recent papal encyclical on our responsibility to care for our common home, the Earth. It is a remarkable and sweeping document that addresses the deep interconnected issues that face humanity. It gracefully embraces the 21st century, accepts scientific reality, and maps out the social, economic, political, moral and spiritual challenges that need to be addressed to care for the planet and to care for the poor. It recognizes that the exploitation of the Earth and the poor by the rich nations are both driven by the amoral materialistic market system, linked to the skillful manipulation of our selfishness. It is a message no one wants to hear and discuss, and one that is heresy to Congress.

It is thorough and beautifully written, but it is too long and deep for the media to deal with. Indeed sheltered North American audiences will find a few sections hard to grasp, because they address issues that have been hidden from them. It correctly suggests that it is an anthropocentric fantasy that technology can remold our planet to serve the interests of the rich and powerful and the global market.

It starts with an appeal to humanity to protect our common home, calling for a sincere dialog about how we are shaping the future of the Earth. It recognizes that irrational confidence in progress and human abilities has led to critical environmental issues that we can no longer sweep under the carpet. It maps out from a scientific perspective the issues of pollution of air and water, climate as a common good, shrinking fresh water supplies, the loss of biodiversity, the decline in the quality of human life, the breakdown of society and global inequity. You know all these issues, but you should read this first chapter for its breadth and global clarity.

It asks why we have chosen this path, and why we, and those with economic and political power, cannot hear the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor.

Skipping for this audience the second chapter on the gospel of creation, the third chapter addresses the human roots of the ecological crisis: the role of technology, creativity and power

and its globalization. How the rise of modern anthropocentrism has led us to prize our technology so highly that we ignore the reality of the damage to the natural world and to global society.

The fourth chapter introduces integral ecology: the understanding that we are all an integral part of the ecology of the Earth. In fact environmental, economic and social ecology now determine the future of the planet. They are inseparable and must be considered as a whole. This is a sweeping step forward. The document moves from this to the ecology of daily life in our cities, to the principal of the common good and justice between generations.

The fifth chapter outlines the many dialogs needed to address the profoundly human roots of our environmental crises: international, national and local, and the need for transparency in decision making. It suggests that human fulfilment is not dependent on the efficiency-driven paradigm of technocracy, nor should we be the slaves of financial markets. It recognizes that technical solutions without moral values will not solve our global problems.

The sixth chapter asks what is needed to face the cultural, spiritual and educational challenge before us. It proposes a new covenant between humanity and the environment, and offers suggestions for an ecological spirituality. In a touching way it recognizes that the sobriety and humility needed were not favorably regarded in the last century!

I suggest you take the time to read it carefully and discuss it with friends. These issues are ours.

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html



Pope Francis in St. Peter's Square, the Vatican, earlier this year.