

“Caring for Our Common Home”

August 16, 2015

Colossians 1:15-17 New International Version (NIV)

The Supremacy of the Son of God

15 The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 16 For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

“A Christian who does not protect creation is a Christian who does not care about the work of God; that work that was born from the love of God for us,” Those were the words of Pope Francis, earlier this year, My message today is based on his recent encyclical: “Praise to you O Lord – On the Care for our Common Home”

Back in April I was invited to Quebec City to address the Green Churches of Canada, an ecumenical group, Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox grappling with the big issues of our time. Among other things they were preparing themselves for the Papal Encyclical on our Common Home that was coming in June. It was a big challenge for me to explain what is happening to the Earth and Creation in both scientific and religious language, especially because I had to do it in French.

So it was a real delight for me to read and study Francis’ words this past month. This is one of the most lucid documents of this century merging science and spirit, and contrasting the message of Christ with the message of our consumer society; which exploits both the world and the poor around the world to satisfy our perceived personal needs.

The document is long and sweeping - it addresses the religious, political, economic, social and spiritual issues of our time. It is written to all of humanity. Some of it is deeply relevant to our place here in this community in Rutland.

It is directly rooted in the teachings of Christ Jesus, and that makes it heresy to our political and economic system.

The Catholic Church will spend 2 years studying it – I have been studying it for 3 weeks, and today I have 15 mins!

So smile and take 2 deep breaths – I am going to guide you through a tiny part of it by reading some paragraphs to give you a sense. It will give you a glimpse into the mind and soul of one of our great spiritual teachers. I have printed some copies, so you can study it also.

The Rutland Herald published the Introduction. It begins:

1. “LAUDATO SI’, mi’ Signore” – “Praise be to you, my Lord”. In the words of this beautiful canticle, Saint Francis of Assisi reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us.

Pope Francis goes on to explain why he took the name of St. Francis:

“St Francis shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace.”

The first chapter maps out the global ecological and environmental crises that humanity faces from a scientific perspective – you are largely familiar with them – it is refreshing to hear a clear statement of these real issues from the church.

The second chapter is a biblical perspective that he calls the Gospel of Creation, taken mostly from the Old Testament.

Each of these is a sermon in itself, but I am going to move on because the next four chapters deal with issues that Christian teaching rarely addresses so clearly. In fact there is usually a conspiracy of silence. I am going to read selected paragraphs – just listen and let in the words of Francis. Chapter 3 is

3. THE HUMAN ROOTS OF THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

101. It would hardly be helpful to describe symptoms without acknowledging the human origins of the ecological crisis. A certain way of understanding human life and activity has gone awry, to the serious detriment of the world around us. Should we not pause and consider this? At this stage, I propose that we focus on the dominant technocratic paradigm and the place of human beings and of human action in the world.

104. ..it must .. be recognized that nuclear energy, biotechnology, information technology, knowledge of our DNA, and many other abilities which we have acquired, have given us tremendous power. More precisely, they have given those with the knowledge, and especially the economic resources to use them, an impressive dominance over the whole of humanity and the entire world. Never has humanity had such power over itself, yet nothing ensures that it will be used wisely, particularly when we consider how it is currently being used.

105. There is a tendency to believe that every increase in power means “an increase of ‘progress’ itself”as if reality, goodness and truth automatically flow from technological and economic power as such. The fact is that “contemporary man has not been trained to

use power well”, because our immense technological development has not been accompanied by a development in human responsibility, values and conscience.

[107.] We have to accept that technological products are not neutral, for they create a framework which ends up conditioning lifestyles and shaping social possibilities along the lines dictated by the interests of certain powerful groups. Decisions which may seem purely instrumental are in reality decisions about the kind of society we want to build.

Exactly: “Do we have a vision of the kind of society we want to build?” You can hear the echo of Pastor Hannah’s enquiry into: What is our vision for this Church in Rutland?”

109. The technocratic paradigm also tends to dominate economic and political life. The economy accepts every advance in technology with a view to profit, without concern for its potentially negative impact on human beings. Finance overwhelms the real economy. The lessons of the global financial crisis have not been assimilated, and we are learning all too slowly the lessons of environmental deterioration. Some circles maintain that current economics and technology will solve all environmental problems, and argue that the problems of global hunger and poverty will be resolved simply by market growth.

Yet by itself the market cannot guarantee integral human development and social inclusion.... we are all too slow in developing economic institutions and social initiatives which can give the poor regular access to basic resources. We fail to see the deepest roots of our present failures, which have to do with the direction, goals, meaning and social implications of technological and economic growth.

111. Ecological culture cannot be reduced to a series of urgent and partial responses to the immediate problems of pollution, environmental decay and the depletion of natural resources. There needs to be a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies, an educational program, a lifestyle and a spirituality which together generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm.

114. All of this shows the urgent need for us to move forward in a bold cultural revolution. .. Nobody is suggesting a return to the Stone Age, but we do need to slow down and look at reality in a different way, to appropriate the positive and sustainable progress which has been made, but also to recover the values and the great goals swept away by our unrestrained delusions of grandeur.

This is a staggering challenge for our society.

117. Neglecting to monitor the harm done to nature and the environmental impact of our decisions is only the most striking sign of a disregard for the message contained in the structures of nature itself.

Once the human being declares independence from reality and behaves with absolute dominion, the very foundations of our life begin to crumble, for “instead of carrying out his role as a cooperator with God in the work of creation, man sets himself up in place of God and thus ends up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature”.

121. We need to develop a new synthesis capable of overcoming the false arguments of recent centuries.

He realizes that human relations with nature and the past teaching of the Christian churches need to be rewritten.

Let us briefly shift direction

128. We were created with a vocation to work. The goal should not be that technological progress increasingly replace human work, for this would be detrimental to humanity. Work is a necessity, part of the meaning of life on this earth, a path to growth, human development and personal fulfilment. Helping the poor financially must always be a provisional solution in the face of pressing needs. The broader objective should always be to allow them a dignified life through work.

This is a key issue for our community – Rutland. To gain a full sense of their own value, our youth need productive work.

Believe it or not, that was a brief summary of Chapter 3. Chapter 4 is titled

Chapter 4. INTEGRAL ECOLOGY

137. Since everything is closely interrelated, and today's problems call for a vision capable of taking into account every aspect of the global crisis, I suggest that we now consider some elements of an integral ecology, one which clearly respects its human and social dimensions.

ENVIRONMENTAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL ECOLOGY

138. Ecology studies the relationship between living organisms and the environment in which they develop. This necessarily entails reflection and debate about the conditions required for the life and survival of society, and the honesty needed to question certain models of development, production and consumption. It cannot be emphasized enough how everything is interconnected.

He maps out the deep interconnectedness of all things - how humanity is an integral part of the ecology of the Earth.

We urgently need a humanism capable of bringing together the different fields of knowledge, including economics, in the service of a more integral and integrating vision. Today, the analysis of environmental problems cannot be separated from the analysis of human, family, work-related and urban contexts, nor from how individuals relate to themselves, which leads in turn to how they relate to others and to the environment.

142. If everything is related, then the health of a society's institutions has consequences for the environment and the quality of human life.

Again think of our community here in Rutland.

IV. THE PRINCIPLE OF THE COMMON GOOD

156. An integral ecology is inseparable from the notion of the common good, a central and unifying principle of social ethics. The common good is "the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfilment".

159. The notion of the common good also extends to future generations. The global economic crises have made painfully obvious the detrimental effects of disregarding our common destiny, which cannot exclude those who come after us. We can no longer speak of sustainable development apart from intergenerational solidarity. Once we start to think about the kind of world we are leaving to future generations, we look at things differently; we realize that the world is a gift which we have freely received and must share with others. Since the world has been given to us, we can no longer view reality in a purely utilitarian way, in which efficiency and productivity are entirely geared to our individual benefit. Intergenerational solidarity is not optional, but rather a basic question of justice, since the world we have received also belongs to those who will follow us.

160. What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up? This question not only concerns the environment in isolation; the issue cannot be approached piecemeal. When we ask ourselves what kind of world we want to leave behind, we think in the first place of its general direction, its meaning and its values. Unless we struggle with these deeper issues, I do not believe that our concern for ecology will produce significant results. But if these issues are courageously faced, we are led inexorably to ask other pointed questions: What is the purpose of our life in this world? Why are we here? What is the goal of our work and all our efforts?

What need does the earth have of us? It is no longer enough, then, simply to state that we should be concerned for future generations. We need to see that what is at stake is our own dignity. Leaving an inhabitable planet to future generations is, first and foremost, up to us. The issue is one which dramatically affects us, for it has to do with the ultimate meaning of our earthly sojourn.

162. Our difficulty in taking up this challenge seriously has much to do with an ethical and cultural decline which has accompanied the deterioration of the environment. Men and women of our postmodern world run the risk of rampant individualism, and many problems of society are connected with today's self-centered culture of instant gratification. We see this in the crisis of family and social ties, and the difficulties of recognizing the other.

Chapter 5. LINES OF APPROACH AND ACTION

163. So far I have attempted to take stock of our present situation, pointing to the cracks in the planet that we inhabit as well as to the profoundly human causes of environmental degradation. Although the contemplation of this reality in itself has already shown the need for a change of direction and other courses of action, now we shall try to outline the major paths of dialogue which can help us escape the spiral of self-destruction which currently engulfs us.

He outlines a dialog with all of humanity: what are our values and where are we going?

A question for us as a church also!

I have to skip a dozen pages on dialog so that we can come to a close.

200. Any technical solution which science claims to offer will be powerless to solve the serious problems of our world if humanity loses its compass, if we lose sight of the great motivations which make it possible for us to live in harmony, to make sacrifices and to treat others well. Believers themselves must constantly feel challenged to live in a way consonant with their faith and not to contradict it by their actions. They need to be encouraged to be ever open to God's grace and to draw constantly from their deepest convictions about love, justice and peace. If a mistaken understanding of our own principles has at times led us to justify mistreating nature, to exercise tyranny over creation, to engage in war, injustice and acts of violence, we believers should acknowledge that by so doing we were not faithful to the treasures of wisdom which we have been called to protect and preserve.

That is a beautiful statement and an admission of repentance

Chapter 6. ECOLOGICAL EDUCATION AND SPIRITUALITY

202. Many things have to change course, but it is we human beings above all who need to change. We lack an awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone. This basic awareness would enable the development of new convictions, attitudes and forms of life. A great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge stands before us, and it will demand that we set out on the long path of renewal.

He goes on to discuss again the challenges we face in our consumer societies, and our educational challenges - but I will move to

III. ECOLOGICAL CONVERSION

216. The rich heritage of Christian spirituality, the fruit of twenty centuries of personal and communal experience, has a precious contribution to make to the renewal of humanity. Here, I would like to offer Christians a few suggestions for an ecological spirituality grounded in the convictions of our faith, since the teachings of the Gospel have direct consequences for our way of thinking, feeling and living....

Admittedly, Christians have not always appropriated and developed the spiritual treasures bestowed by God upon the Church, where the life of the spirit is not dissociated from the body or from nature or from worldly realities, but lived in and with them, in communion with all that surrounds us.

It entails a loving awareness that we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures, but joined in a splendid universal communion. As believers, we do not look at the world from without but from within, conscious of the bonds with which the Father has linked us to all beings.

This is an explicit shift to seeing God and Christ in the whole of Creation

The universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely. Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person's face. The ideal is not only to pass from the exterior to the interior to discover the action of God in the soul, but also to discover God in all things.

Francis ends with 2 prayers – I will read one.

A prayer for our earth

All-powerful God, you are present in the whole universe and in the smallest of your creatures.

You embrace with your tenderness all that exists. Pour out upon us the power of your love, that we may protect life and beauty.

Fill us with peace, that we may live as brothers and sisters, harming no one.

O God of the poor,

help us to rescue the abandoned and forgotten of this earth, so precious in your eyes.

Bring healing to our lives,

that we may protect the world and not prey on it,

that we may sow beauty, not pollution and destruction.

Touch the hearts of those who look only for gain at the expense of the poor and the earth.

Teach us to discover the worth of each thing, to be filled with awe and contemplation, to recognize that we are profoundly united with every creature as we journey towards your infinite light.

We thank you for being with us each day.

Encourage us, we pray, in our struggle for justice, love and peace. Amen.

The encyclical can be found at <http://w2.vatican.va/>, click Encicliche and the first one (2015), and on next page you can select the English translation (Inglese).

Direct address is

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