

Catholic Review Column: Pope's Encyclical Sparks Important Discussion

"I urgently appeal ... for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all."

- Pope Francis

Pope Francis has initiated this new dialogue throughout the world with his recent encyclical on the environment, "Laudato Si': On the Care of Our Common Home." The encyclical is centered on the idea of "integral ecology," which tells us that the way we relate with one another and how we relate to the environment are intimately connected. In other words, how we respect life, treat one another, regard the poor, and make economic decisions and policy have a decided impact on the environment, our natural resources and the precious gift of creation - and vice-versa.

"It is no longer enough to speak only of the integrity of ecosystems," the pope writes. "We have to dare to speak of the integrity of human life, of the need to promote and unify all the great values. Once we lose our humility, and become enthralled with the possibility of limitless mastery over everything, we inevitably end up harming society and the environment."

It is important to note, however, that those acts which demonstrate responsible stewardship for God's creation - whether caring for wetlands or reducing stormwater runoff - are reflections of our belief that earth is the place where people live and the God-given scene for human flourishing.

The Holy Father also reminds us that how we care for the environment has a disproportionate impact on the poorest among us.

"Many of the poor live in areas particularly affected by phenomena related to warming, and their means of subsistence are largely dependent on natural resources

and ecosystem services such as agriculture, fishing and forestry,” he writes. “They have no financial activities or resources which can enable them to adapt to climate change or to face natural disasters, and their access to social services and protection is very limited. ... There has been a tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation. ... Our lack of response to these tragedies involving our brothers and sisters points to the loss of that sense of responsibility for our fellow men and women upon which all civil society is founded.”

Early in the pope’s pontificate he gave the world a glimpse that environmental stewardship was of special concern to him. Just a few days after his election, he told reporters that he decided to name himself after St. Francis of Assisi, whom he called a man “who loves and safeguards creation. At this time we don’t have a very good relationship with creation, do we?”

His encyclical, I pray, will prompt each of us to examine our own relationship with God’s creation and to answer the vital question his encyclical seems to be asking, “What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us?”

Each of us should examine our own lifestyle, our consumption and transportation habits and our personal commitment to preserving and improving the natural resources on which we rely.

Here in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, we’ve made an effort to make decisions with these in mind. Most recently, I signed a power purchase agreement for a four-megawatt solar array, generating enough electricity to power 11 area Catholic churches, schools and other facilities. We are incorporating the latest energy-reduction technologies when we renovate existing structures, and we entered into an agreement with the Baltimore Tree Trust, whereby the trust will plant, water and maintain trees at our churches and schools in Baltimore City, where the need for environmental stewardship is especially important. This is a wonderful opportunity to play our part in mitigating climate change, reducing stormwater runoff and reforesting Baltimore’s urban tree canopy for the health and well-being of all.

The church is also engaged in such activities at the local level. St. Elizabeth Ann Seton in Crofton constructed a wetland outflow project to capture water runoff from

its parking lot to allow the water to filter back into the earth's natural aquifers. A number of our schools have been certified by the State of Maryland as "Green Schools."

Finally, let us take heart of Pope Francis' words: "Creation is a gift, it is a wonderful gift that God has given us, so that we care for it and we use it for the benefit of all, always with great respect and gratitude."