

The world we leave for our children

By Carolyn Woo

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I was privileged to be asked to speak at the press conference in Rome that launched Pope Francis' encyclical on the environment. In it, he asks us a very simple question: "What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up?"

This question surely resonates with almost everyone. It resonates with me as a mother. It resonates with me as the head of an international development agency. And it resonates with me as someone who spent much of my career in business education, who now draws on business as a partner to eliminate poverty.

Pope Francis poses other 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?" From my years working with businesses, I realize these answers are like the mission and vision statements that businesses formulate to define themselves, to gain legitimacy from society, commitment from employees and support from customers.

Just as businesses ask themselves these questions, we all should ask ourselves such questions, particularly those of us in a country such as the United States, which has a responsibility to take leadership on these crucial moral issues.

An important point Pope Francis emphasizes is that now those who have done the least to create these problems are suffering the most from them. This is something we see every day in our work at Catholic Relief Services.

One of the principal themes in this great encyclical is that all life on this planet is connected, bound together via three fundamental and intertwined relationships: with God, our neighbour and the earth. When one of these relationships is damaged, then the others are damaged too. So there is a connection between how we treat the planet and how we treat the poor, our neighbors.

As Pope Francis puts it, we do not have two separate crises, social and economic, but "one complex crisis which is both social and environmental."

We have not treated our common home well - this is a key message of the encyclical. When it comes to the earth, we should think of ourselves as stewards rather than owners - tenants of God, as it were. The encyclical refers to the concept of the "global commons," the tangible and intangible assets that belong to all of humankind across all generations - water, air, biodiversity, culture, genetic materials.

What we must undergo, the pope tells us, is a true "ecological conversion" as all of us, businesses included, adopt the virtues of solidarity and sustainability, oriented toward the common good and the true development of all peoples. This has a number of practical dimensions.

We can face up to these huge challenges by all working together - governments, international institutions, businesses, NGOs and religions - with forthright and honest debate and dialogue that begins in the call to ecological conversation outlined so clearly in this great encyclical.

"What kind of world do we want to leave to our children?" If we stay focused on that question, we will stay on the right path.

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