

Commentary on Pope Francis' encyclical on ecology, *Laudato Si'* (continued from last week):

Last week I began reflecting on Pope Francis' recent letter, *Laudato Si'*. I explained the Holy Father's overarching goal of "integral development" by and for the whole human race. That means not only economic, political or ecological efforts, but especially moral and spiritual renewal that leads to a genuine cultural flourishing in each region of the world.

Francis' method towards achieving his goal is like that of a spiritual physician. First he lists all the "symptoms" of the sickness that the world is presently experiencing. Then he proceeds with a "diagnosis" of the root causes. Finally, he offers a prognosis and prescription.

In Chapter One, he listens attentively to the most prominent scientists of our day. On this point, some conservatives are upset that Francis favors the majority opinion that human activity has exerted a destructive force upon the environment, causing changes in the global climate. I have actually read scientists (vs. journalists and political blogs) on the issue of climate change, and have formed my own opinions – but I will refrain from that discussion. One need not agree on this issue in order to agree with Francis' main points. Even Francis acknowledges that other factors are at work (n. 23). Much more relevant for us is Francis' *diagnosis* of the spiritual problem, not to mention many of the *other* "symptoms" that are more difficult to dispute.

Here are some examples of other "symptoms." Millions of poor people have died as a result of human pollution (n. 20). Human beings produce hundreds of millions of tons of waste per year, much of it non-biodegradable (n. 21). Many poor people do not have access to clean drinking water (nn. 27-30), and become sick or dead as a result. An increasing number of human beings worldwide have embraced the "throwaway culture" (n. 22), resulting in a lifestyle that is unsustainable. If we keep "getting and spending" at the present rate – and especially if all 7.3 billion people on earth adopt the same lifestyle, there is little question of the serious damage and irreparable harm that would come to the earth and the people of the earth, whether or not it affects earth's climate.

It takes centuries for trash (especially plastic) to decompose. It takes hundreds of millions of years for new fossil fuels to form. There is absolutely no question that the present model of economic development demands the "intensive use of fossil fuels" (n. 23). Even if we listen to some conservatives and "drill, baby, drill," we will still reach a point, eventually, of depleting the earth of these fossil fuels – if we continue on the present course. Whether that point is in 30 years or 300 years really doesn't matter. Living an unsustainable lifestyle is destructive, irresponsible, immoderate, and against the will of God. Isn't that motive enough?

But the part of the encyclical that truly captivated my attention was the "diagnosis" offered by Pope Francis in Chapter Two (and throughout the letter). His diagnosis is a point that I believe over 90% of the audience has *missed* so far, too caught up as they are in political agendas.

Francis begins with God's original plan in Genesis. All created things are "good," but human beings are "very good," because we are made in the very image and likeness of God. That means that we have an inestimable dignity and worth that cannot be taken away. Nonetheless, while affirming man's superiority over the other creatures, described by Genesis as "dominion" (Gen 1:28), Pope Francis also stresses our solidarity with all creatures. None of us exist in isolation.

God established a threefold communion in His original plan: (1) communion with God; (2) communion with each other; and (3) communion with the land / the earth (n. 66). Later in the chapter Francis expands on this reflection, describing the fulfillment of God's plan in Christ,

when all of creation will be brought under his headship in His Body, the Church. Not only will the entire human race (those who accept the offer) be united in Christ, but the entire cosmos.

But as we know, Adam and Eve fell, and each of us, wounded by original sin, have ourselves added to the problem. The result is a threefold wound: (1) separation from God; (2) isolation and division among the human race; and (3) a disordered relation to the creatures of this world. Adam and Eve, in other words, lost the gift of *integrity*; both their interior and exterior peace was destroyed.

Our loss of integrity as individuals and as a human race has also resulted in a distorted understanding of the call to “dominion,” which is probably best expressed as a call to stewardship. We are stewards, not owners, of God’s creation. All is gift, and we will give an account of our stewardship. Pope Francis describes the distorted understanding of human dominion as “the unbridled exploitation of nature” (n. 67).

In more recent centuries, an already wounded human nature has become further warped by some of the erroneous ideas of modern philosophy and modern science. Modern philosophy often sees man as creating truth for himself; and modern science often sees man as controlling nature to get whatever he wants. We’ve all heard Francis Bacon’s words, “Knowledge is power.” The idea sounds inspirational at first, but when analyzed more in-depth, it’s quite disturbing, and quite a contrast with Greek, Roman, and medieval European culture (which was far better than most people realize today!). The ancients and medievals offered a very different paradigm for man’s relationship with nature, one of “receiving what nature itself allowed, as if from its own hand” (n. 106). But many modern scientists, adopting the “knowledge is power” paradigm, view nature as something that can be manipulated, controlled, or even changed in order to accomplish our own ends. Pope Francis calls this new paradigm the “technocratic paradigm” and laments the way it has now taken deep roots in culture, in politics, in economics, and in personal morality – so much so that one has to be radically counter-cultural in order to break free from its cruel dominion.

I couldn’t agree more. For two decades I have been describing and critiquing exactly what Francis describes and critiques. God has written his law into nature, and we are not free to change or manipulate nature in whatever way we wish. Rather, our humble role in using our God-given human genius is to uncover the truths hidden in nature and cooperate with nature in the manner God intends. We receive truth; we do not create truth! In the simple words of Pope Francis, “We are not God” (n. 67).

Thanks to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we are now able to become one in his risen flesh and reclaim the integrity that was lost. In the person of St. Francis of Assisi, Pope Francis sees a shining example of integrity and of the “integral development” he is trying to foster among the whole human race. St. Francis exhibited a remarkable communion with God, a remarkable love for all human beings, and a remarkable harmony with nature all around him. In stark contrast to the insatiable consumerism that so dominates today’s world, St. Francis lived in perfect poverty of spirit. He took intense joy in the beauty of all creatures, but never with a possessive or manipulative or controlling love. He had a big heart open to God. Unlike the rest of us, who say, “That’s beautiful! *I must have it!*” St. Francis simply marveled at the beauty without needing to possess it. As long as God was glorified, he was content. We have much to learn from St. Francis.

That is the diagnosis. We will consider the prognosis and remedies next time I write.

TO BE CONTINUED...