

The Holy Father Francis named his encyclical on ecology "Laudato Si", meaning "Praised Be".

"'Laudato Si', mi' Signore - Praise be to you, my Lord'. In the words of this beautiful canticle, St. 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. 'Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs.'"

. . . Pope Francis, the opening words of the Encyclical.

Though beautifully written, almost lyrical, the document deals with the most serious crisis in human history. Climate change, agreed by scientists world-wide, is caused and accelerated by human activity and affects all levels of society and the health of all the planet's ecosystems. We can't avoid hearing about - and experiencing - the symptoms of this rapidly changing environment.

God has gifted us with a beautiful home - bountiful, delightful. But, we've thoughtlessly misused, wasted and polluted it. As our Holy Father describes the results of our behavior, "Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us . . . is burdened and laid waste . . . she 'groans in travail'"(Romans 8:22) - consequently, adversely affecting weather, food supplies, water supplies, ecosystems, economies. The outlook is grim unless we take the problems seriously and change our ways. These are issues that we, as Catholic Christians, have the responsibility to understand and act upon.

The following topical summary of "Laudato Si" is based on an outline provided by The Catholic Climate Covenant - CCC - (CatholicClimateCovenant.org). Each paragraph of the Encyclical is numbered. Paragraph references here are noted in parenthesis.

COMMON HOME, COMMON CONCERN



As Pope Francis says, we live in a "throwaway culture" which has resulted in air and water pollution, depletion of resources and loss of biodiversity. While technology and production advances have benefited us in many ways, unsustainably rapid growth and wasteful practices have not only resulted the problems noted above, but also caused deteriorating quality of life, societal breakdowns and global inequality. The problems are complex and interrelated.

In the introduction to the Encyclical, Pope Francis defines his purpose and audience - to address "every person living on this planet" regarding the crisis we all

face together, "global environmental deterioration I would like to enter into dialogue with all people about our common home." He refers to the many previous popes' encyclicals related to ecological concerns, consumerism, production models, waste, power structures, etc. all pointing to the basic human tendency toward greed and/or indifference - the root of the current environmental problems. The climate crisis addressed in the encyclical is an issue shared by scientists, philosophers, theologians, religious and civic groups world-wide. Pope Francis believes that Francis of Assisi, his "guide and inspiration when elected the Bishop of Rome", is the our best example of care for the Earth and "the most vulnerable" among us - the poor and outcast - and the best model of the essential relationship between the health of the environment, society, institutions and individuals.

Since the root is human greed and indifference, the resolution of the problems lies first and foremost in the transformation of each human heart and will. Though the solutions will come from multiple sources/efforts/technologies, for us it must begin with this personal transformation - a renewed sense of awe and wonder, an awareness of our connectedness with all creation and creatures, a recognition of our personal contributions to the problem and desire for reconciliation with all peoples and creatures. To be a part of the complex solutions to this crisis, we must be open to dialog and collaboration with those of various backgrounds, opinions and knowledge. This crisis affecting the entire planet and its peoples, calls for global cooperation.

COMMON PROBLEMS CALL FOR SHARED SOLUTIONS

In paragraph 14 of the encyclical, Pope Francis says, "I urgently appeal, then, 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, concerns and affects us all." Pope Francis notes the urgent need for the world community to set policies, such as those below, to avert climate disaster:

- Develop new models of production and consumption
- Advance new technologies and energy sources to reduce/eliminate carbon dioxide and other toxic emissions
- Protect water sources, natural resources, biodiversity
- Promote energy efficiency in building structures and materials

He goes on to acknowledge the progress made by many governments and organizations in raising public awareness and taking steps to change policies and practices, but is disappointed that much of this has not resulted in effective change for many reasons including some powerful internal opposition, obstructionism, over-confidence in technical solutions, or simple indifference.



A long anticipated meeting of approximately 200 nations met in Rio in 2012. This Conference of the United Nations on Sustainable Development, "Rio+20", issued a document endorsing many very important policies to address the agreed-upon climate concerns. The success of these policies requires the cooperation and follow-through of all the countries involved. Though some progress has been made, many countries have put national and powerful business interests above concern for global well-being. The largest, wealthiest nations must take the lead in these efforts and be held most responsible.

Francis quotes the Bishops of South Africa who proclaimed, "Everyone's talents and involvement are needed to redress the damage caused by the human abuse of God's creation". The growing "deserts of Earth are reflective" of the barrenness in the hearts of many humans and the inability to see the connection between our behavior and the health of the planet. A profound individual transformation is necessary to re-reflect a renewed Earth image. For Christians, this means truly living our vocations as followers of Christ in deepest respect for each other and God's handiwork. This, Pope Francis says, "is not an optional or secondary aspect of our Christian experience" - it's essential in living life as a Christian. We, as transformed individuals, have the power to influence what occurs at institutional and governmental levels. And, he calls all people, regardless of religion or culture, to become aware of the parts they are required to play in dealing with the global crisis, planning for the future health of the planet and putting the good of all before personal, corporate and national interests.

THERE IS MUCH TO BE DONE!

In Pope Francis' words, Encyclical paragraph 202, he states, "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 sees an awareness evolving, but the mindset prevalent since the industrial revolution will be challenging to overcome. The patterns of over-consumption and waste are systemic - from individual life styles, to the way we do business and run our governments. Though many are now waking up to the seriousness of the problems and are actively working to prevent disaster, many others are unaware, skeptical or obstructionist. The Holy Father praises the efforts of those actively working for change, especially as those efforts relate to "the world's poorest." But he notes that, even as he was writing the Encyclical, international negotiations were failing to agree to implement the Rio+20 specifications. He calls on the wealthiest nations - the most powerful and most to blame - to take the most responsibility and lead. And he calls on all believers to pray for rapid movement in positive directions in areas such as:

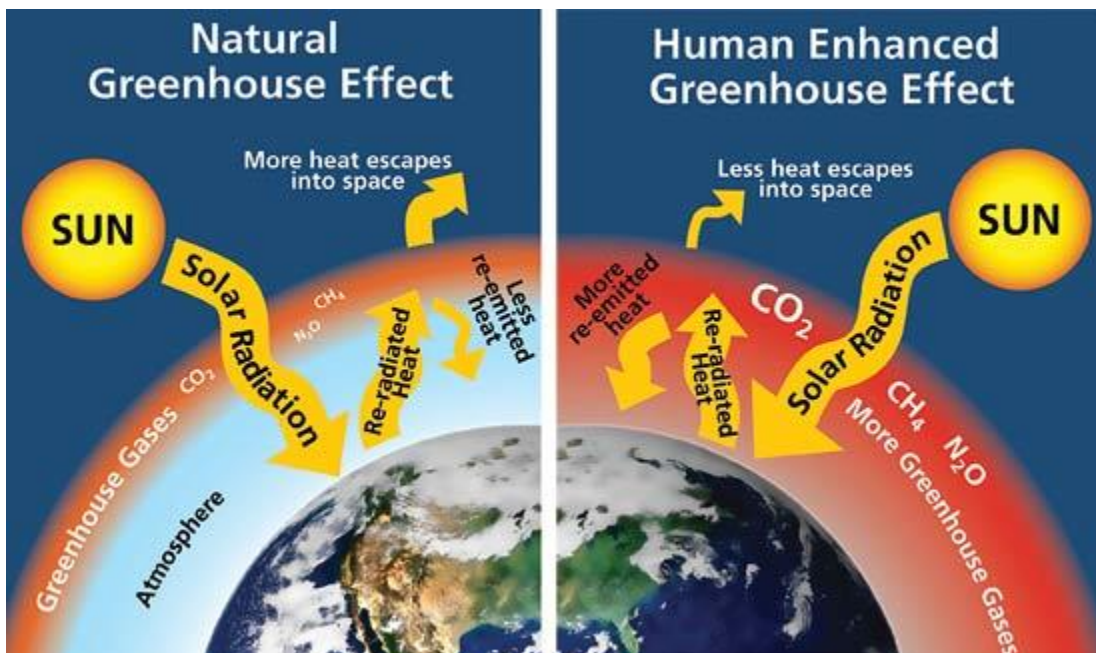
- Energy and raw materials conservation
- Transport systems improvement
- Waste and disposal systems development
- Sustainable agricultural practices promotion
- Biodiversity and ecosystem protection



So, in Pope Francis' words, "There's much to be done!" He calls on us as Christians to be transformed, become more aware and involved, and work with people of all backgrounds to bring about the needed changes. He also reassures us that we have a God who loves and cares for His creation and will "never abandon us." We stand in the doorway to a new era. Let us not abandon our children by leaving them an unlivable home.

CLIMATE CHANGE EFFECTS

Unlike the other planets in our solar system, which are either scorching hot or icy cold, Earth has a protective atmosphere keeping the temperature livable and providing the right mixture of oxygen and other gases to support healthy ecosystems and human life. Up until the last 200 years, these gases have remained balanced. Though varying slightly over many thousands of years due to volcanic action and other natural occurrences, there has been a recent, rapid increase of the amount of some gases - carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide. These are the gases we call "Greenhouse Gases" because they capture heat and hold it in the atmosphere. The resultant rise in temperatures creates an imbalance in the carbon cycle which is the basis of all Earth's ecosystems, supporting all life forms.



How do we know this is happening? Scientists world-wide have observed, documented and compared atmospheric gas amounts present over thousands of years. Sophisticated collecting and testing of cores that contain samples of ice dating thousands of years back, indicate an

alarming increase of the greenhouse gases over the past 200 years. Though scientists note that these levels have varied throughout history due to volcanic action, polar shifting, etc. at no time have they risen so rapidly and never to current levels. Additionally, we know this is happening because we can feel and see it: polar caps are melting; sea levels and temperatures are rising; storms and wild fires are becoming more frequent and violent; animal and plant species are going extinct at alarming rates; and so much more.

Ninety-seven percent of the world's climate scientists agree that these changes have been caused by human activity. The recorded rise in greenhouse gases corresponds with the beginning of the Industrial Age due to our use of fossil fuel and land use. Gigatonnes of carbon are released into the atmosphere yearly due to our usage and it increases every year. The clearing of forests for agriculture/building/etc., eliminates the greenery that converts carbon dioxide into oxygen. The oceans, natural absorbers of carbon dioxide are warming, thus making them less efficient at absorption. Additionally, the rise in carbon in the oceans acidifies them, making them less supportive of sea life. Coal mining, agriculture, thawing permafrost, landfills emit tons of another greenhouse gas - methane.

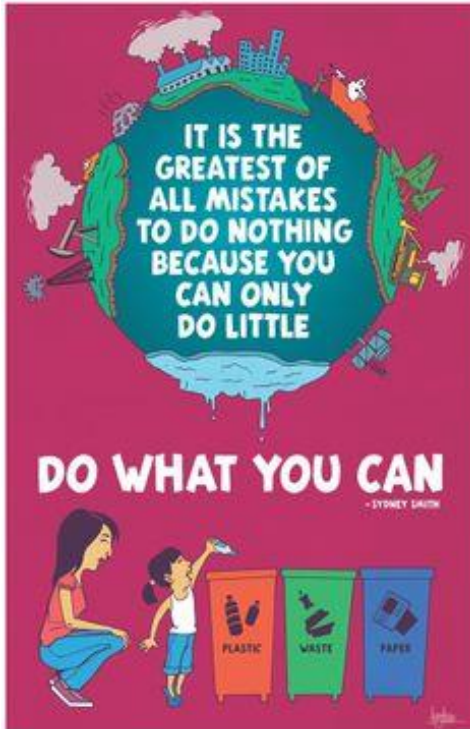
So all the systems of the Earth are affected! In the human sphere, the poor suffer the most and have the least ability to deal with and adjust to these effects. Migrating populations will grow. The poor will become poorer. The poverty rate will rise and inequity among nations will increase.

Pope Francis portrays all these issues and many more related outcomes of the climate crisis. He says, "The climate is a common good, belonging to all and meant for all." And he warns that our lack of attention to the problems and the resolve to stem them, "points to the loss of that sense of responsibility for our fellow men and women upon which all civil society is founded."

LIVING MORE SUSTAINABLY

Earth's resources are finite, but we modern humans have acted as though they are unlimited. We also have a long history of not seeing the long-term effects of our behavior or the interconnectedness of our actions - thus the current environmental crisis. Pope Francis notes that the focus of environmental education has evolved from the simple presentation of scientific facts to an effort to "critique the 'myths' of a modernity grounded in a utilitarian mindset (individualism, unlimited progress, competition, consumerism, unregulated markets)." (210) Additionally, he says, environmental educators are teaching the interdependency of biological systems and the effects of human behavior on all levels of Earth's ecologies - and calls them to connect this information to a deepened understanding of the personal and corporate ethics involved. Though sufficient public awareness can affect the creation of laws governing human action, the majority of individuals must be personally committed to enable the necessary systemic change. In regard to Christians, Pope Francis says, "So what they all need is an 'ecological conversion,' whereby the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ becomes evident in their relationship with the world around them " (217).

If we understand and live this relationship, our respect for everything we connect with will change, including the "little" things we do in our daily life. We'll realize that we can and must make changes in our behavior. Pope Francis lists some examples. "All of these, and many other practices, reflect a generous and worthy creativity which brings out the best in human beings" (211).



- Avoid use of plastic/paper containers and goods
- Reduce water consumption
- Turn the heat down in winter and the air conditioner up in summer
- Use less gasoline - car pool, use public transportation, buy fuel efficient vehicles
- Recycle
- Don't waste food
- Turn off unnecessary lights
- Plant trees

"Along with the importance of little everyday gestures, social love moves us to devise larger strategies to halt environmental degradation and to encourage a 'culture of care' which permeates all of society"(231).

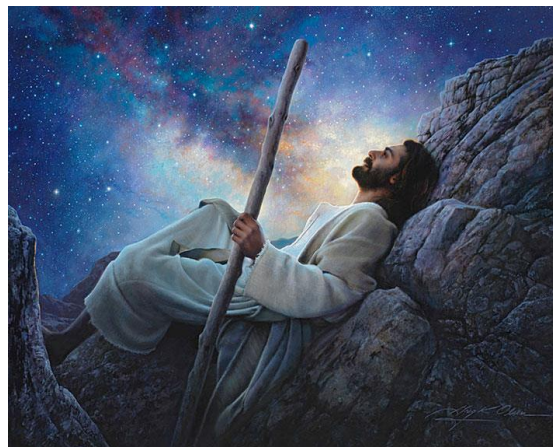
THE FAITH PERSPECTIVE

"In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the word 'creation' has a broader meaning than 'nature,' for it has to do with God's loving plan in which every creature has its own value and significance" (76). Pope Francis says our world and all it contains was brought into existence by God's intent, not by random chance. "God's love is the fundamental moving force in all created things" (77). In Genesis, after each phase of creation, "God saw that it was good." In our human parents, he instilled life's purpose and the basis for right relationship - love of God, neighbor and care for the earth (66). We all know how human ego and greed soon crept in and tipped the balance. God had entrusted humans, the most intelligent of his creatures, with the care of creation. Laws unfolding throughout the Old Testament attempt to regulate human attitudes and behavior to live as God intended. Pope Francis included some beautiful Biblical passages as examples of these laws - touching each of the areas of human relatedness to other humans and all of creation and upholding the sacredness of the entire cosmos, from the great expanse of the skies to the smallest creature. (Quoted in sections 67 and 68 of the encyclical) "The earth is the Lord's (Ps 24:1) and "to him belongs all that is within it" (Dt 10:14).

- "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine' for you are strangers and sojourners with me" (Lv 25:23).

- "He commanded and they were created; and he established them forever and ever; he fixed their bounds and he set a law which cannot pass away" (Ps 148:5b-6).
- "You shall not see your brother's donkey or his ox fallen down by the way and withhold your help . . .
- If you chance upon a bird's nest in any tree or on the ground, with young ones or eggs and the mother sitting upon the young or upon the eggs, you shall not take the mother with the young" (Dt 22:4).

"God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement" (67). If our hearts are open and attuned, we can feel and see that truly, everything is one. And every single action affects the whole (92). As Catholics, our sacramental symbols incorporating Earth's elements, are meant to draw us closer to this wisdom way of knowing the sacredness of creation and our part in it. These elements were touched and re-sanctified by God himself who came in human form to live among us (235).



ECOLOGY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Pope Francis says in paragraph 49 of the encyclical, in regard to high-level discussions of the environmental challenge, "It needs to be said that, generally speaking, there is little in the way of clear awareness of problems which especially affect the excluded. Yet they are the majority of the planet's population, billions of people." Though the subject of poverty may be brought up in international political and economic discussions, it's often as a possible additional matter - with little relevance to the climate change issues. With such limited awareness of the relatedness of climate change to the problems of poverty, further discussion loses priority for inclusion in future

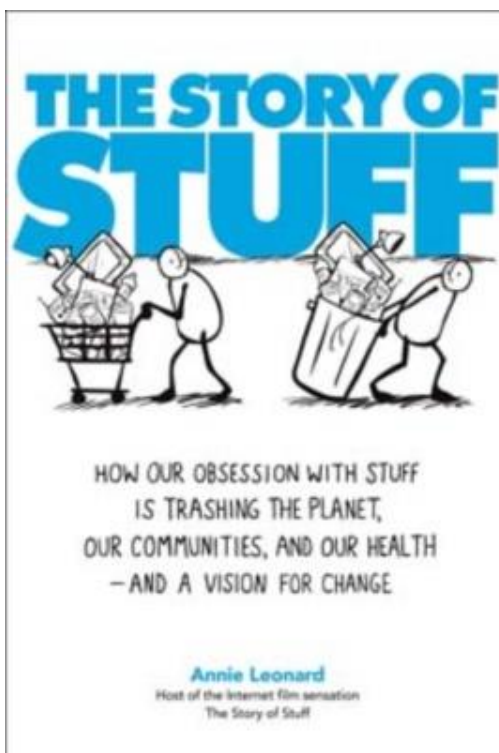


agendas. The major cause of this inability to place poverty in the core mix is due to the fact the individuals involved in these discussions are people of privilege, living in areas and cultures with little or no contact with the lives and problems of world's poor. Many of these same privileged individuals are active in environmental movements - a good thing - but to be effective, the subjects must be connected. "A true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*" (49).

As Pope Francis emphasizes throughout the encyclical, the earth is "our common home" - the home of the entire human race - all levels of society - the rich and the poor, all faiths and non-believers . . . Every ecological approach needs to incorporate a social perspective which takes into account the fundamental rights of the poor and underprivileged. "The principle of the subordination of private property to the universal destination of goods, and thus the right of everyone to their use, is a golden rule of social conduct and 'the first principle of the whole ethical and social order'" (93). In regard to private property, Pope Francis said the "Christian tradition has never recognized the right to private property as absolute or inviolable, and has stressed the social purpose of all forms of private property." He went on to quote from St. John Paul II who reaffirmed this teaching. "God gave the earth to the whole human race for the sustenance of all its members, *without excluding or favoring anyone*." Further referencing John Paul, the Church "defends the legitimate right to private property, but she also teaches no less clearly that there is always a social mortgage on all private property, in order that goods may serve the general purpose that God gave them." (93)

The crisis we face is complex and everything/being is interrelated. There's no one cause and no one solution. Everything and everyone is a part of the whole system. Only when seen in the light of this relatedness can our Earth and its peoples be healed. (139)

CONSUMERISM



In a famous quote from St. Augustine's Confessions, he writes, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee." I remembered this when reading the encyclical sections that focus on our "culture of consumerism." (184) Pope Francis says, "The emptier a person's heart is, the more he or she needs things to buy, own and consume." (204)

But, of course, this doesn't fill the void. So we look for more, continuously encouraged by a steady stream of tantalizing, must-have options. We toss the old to make room for the new.

"This 'use and throw away' logic generates so much waste, because of the disordered desire to consume more than what is really necessary" (123). The results we see all around us: forests razed; mountaintops leveled; garbage dumps as high as mountains; billions of tons of plastic floating in our lakes and oceans. Our "obsession with a consumerist lifestyle, above all when few people are capable of maintaining it, can only lead to violence and mutual destruction" (208).

This is the culture in which we've have grown up and live. Our habits of consumption are embedded and hard to change, though not impossible (208). Pope Francis has observed a heightened ecological sensitivity and awareness in people and organizations that give him hope. "We are always capable of going out of ourselves towards the other. Unless we do this, other creatures will not be recognized for their true worth; we are unconcerned about caring for things for the sake of others; we fail to set limits on ourselves in order to avoid the suffering of others or the deterioration of our surroundings. Disinterested concern for others, and the rejection of every form of self-centeredness and self-absorption, are essential if we truly wish to care for our brothers and sisters and for the natural environment. These attitudes also attune us to the moral imperative of assessing the impact of our every action and personal decision on the world around us. If we can overcome individualism, we will truly be able to develop a different lifestyle and bring about significant changes in society" (208).

UNSUSTAINABLE BUSINESS

In chapter 3 of the encyclical, Pope Francis talks about "the human roots of ecological crisis" and about what he terms the "technocratic paradigm" which has been developing since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution. This paradigm exalts human technology and puts man in control over all, changing the human relationship with nature from one of connectedness to one of mastery (106). Though the power of this technology has produced much that is good, beautiful and life-sustaining, it has also created much suffering and devastation - socially, politically and economically (109).

Regarding this paradigm as it relates to the economy, Pope Francis says, "[it] 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" (109). Focused on and prioritizing market growth and profit, and trusting the paradigm, a blind eye is turned to negative outcomes and the legacy being left for future generations. This focus demonstrates a fundamental "misunderstanding of the concept of economy. As long as production is increased, little concern is given to whether it is at the cost of future resources or the health of the environment; as long as the clearing of a forest increases production, no

one calculates the losses entailed in the desertification of the land, the harm done to biodiversity or the increased pollution. In a word, businesses profit by calculating and paying only a fraction of the costs involved. Yet only when 'the economic and social costs of using up shared environmental resources are recognized with transparency and fully borne by those who incur them, not by other peoples of future generations,' (138) can those actions be considered ethical" (195).



Though we humans are gifted with superior intelligence and potential for good, we all embody the drive to survive, overcome and succeed. At no other time in our human history has there been such a dire need for balance.

In the words of Pope Francis's "Prayer for Our Earth," let us all pray,

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

FUTURE GENERATIONS

Pope Francis's visit to the U.S. in September, 2015, marked the fourth visit of a Pope to the U.S. As Stephen Schneck, Director of the [Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies at The Catholic University of America](#), said in the August 2015 issue of National Geographic, "Popes come here not just to speak to the United States, but to speak to the world." Pope Paul VI arrived in 1965 during the height of the Viet Nam war and a time of escalating international tensions - pleading the cause of personal, interpersonal and world peace. Pope John Paul II visited the U.S. five times between 1979 and 1999. His focus was on youth and the relationship between youth and the Church. In 2008, Pope Benedict visited with the intention of better communicating the teachings of a 2000 year old Church to the modern mind. The good of all humankind was at the center of all these papal visits.

Now, Pope Francis comes at a time of serious, planet-threatening climate change, the root cause of which he attributes to the change in the relationship of humans to nature - from one of respect and interdependence to one of separation and abuse (11). He writes that the personal and institutional greed and disregard for outcomes resulting from this mentality is having a devastating effect on the environment, economies and social ecology (138) and threatening future generations.

Based on Church teachings, the earth was given to *all* humankind to "till and keep" for all people and all time (67). "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" (159). And Pope Francis quotes the Portuguese bishops: "The environment is part of a logic of receptivity. It is on loan to each generation, which must then hand it on to the next."

Let us pray for the success of this very important papal visit, for transformation of our heads, for the healing of all aspects of society, for our children

- and for Earth, Our Common Home.

