

**“Praise Be to You, My Lord”
In the Heartland
With Bishop Pates**

“Praise Be to You, My Lord” words taken from the canticle of St. Francis is the way Pope Francis opens his Encyclical on the environment.

This beginning immediately frames the Pope’s reflections within the context of creation. You and I have been blessed with the gift of God’s handiwork. We are integrally related to God’s initiative and as the crown of creation by virtue of our consciousness and self-reference we are called to be stewards of this creation. It is our responsibility to maintain its integrity and its life-giving hospitality to all creatures intended to live within its framework but especially, of course, to the human family.

But the great bestowal of consciousness includes the gift of one’s will that makes decisions that are often at odds with the best interests of the natural world. Pope Francis cites Pope Benedict in establishing that the degradation of Mother Earth, being experienced today, is due to freedom run amok. “We have forgotten that man is not only a freedom which he creates for himself. Man does not create himself. He is spirit and will but also nature. With paternal concern, Benedict urges us to realize that creation is harmed ‘where we ourselves have the final word, where everything is simply our property and we use it for ourselves alone.’” (Paragraph 6)

Pope Francis moves from identification of human responsibility for natural degradation to citing Patriarch Bartholomew, Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople of the Eastern Orthodox Church. The Patriarch asserted the following: “For human beings to destroy the biological diversity of God’s creation; for human beings to degrade the integrity of the earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the earth of its natural forests or destroying its wetlands; for human beings to contaminate the earth’s waters, its land, its air and its life, these are sins.” For “to commit a crime against the natural world is a sin against ourselves and a sin against God.” (Paragraph 8)

Patriarch Bartholomew sees human conversion as the ultimate remedy for the crisis of environment. He asks us to “replace consumption with sacrifice, greed with generosity, wastefulness with a spirit of sharing, an asceticism which entails learning to give, and not simply to give up. It is a way of loving, of moving gradually away from what I want to what God’s world needs.” (Paragraph 9)

Thus, Pope Francis presents the argument for change, determines what is required for authentic change and then calls on all the earth’s inhabitants to undertake this transformation. But change requires motivation. Who am I among 7 billion people to have an impact by changing? Even if I were to join thousands others, what difference will it make? In order to go beyond the immediate we need to move from the more pragmatic outcomes to be in touch with my relational identity. Relationship or a derivative of this word appears most often in Pope Francis’ Encyclical – exceeding 160 times.

By changing in rhythm with Mother Earth and nature – I will set right my relationship with God and the creation which he has designated as my home.

By changing – I will address my relationship with the poor and the vulnerable who suffer the most when nature’s equilibrium runs afoul. Pope Francis raises the question about the most defenseless person in existence: “How can we genuinely teach the importance of concern for other vulnerable beings, however troublesome or inconvenient they may be, if we fail to protect a human embryo even when its presence is uncomfortable and creates difficulties? If personal and social sensitivity towards the acceptance of new life is lost, then other forms of acceptance that are valuable for society also wither away.” (Paragraph 120)

By changing we will provide for the intergenerational health and well-being of our children, grandchildren, our progeny for centuries to come. Can we choke off or doom their future by our reckless ways?

What Pope Francis does in this encyclical is lay before us the condition of Mother Earth today. By all accounts, the Earth is ailing. The reason is chiefly accountable to human behavior. Given the gift of freedom we can change that behavior and in turn earth’s health. But what will it take for us to change?

I encourage all to read carefully “Praise to you, My Lord.” It is not a scientific document nor is it political in nature. Referring to it as either serves to sidetrack the Pope’s intentions. It is religious in character, a moral document if you will, pleading with us to take action.

The bottom line is that God created each human person out of love as well as our home, the earth. We are fully capable of responding to that divine outreach with an altruistic love modeled for us by Jesus.