

**Talk
Loras College
October 21**

**Climate Change
On Care for Our Common Home**

Introduction

I am delighted to be able to be with you my good friends at Loras College. Thanks to you, Father Joensen, for the invitation. The faculty and students of Loras continue a solid tradition of utilizing intellect and will to bring a presence in the world that promotes justice, truth and a spirit of charity truly representative of our living God. No topic in this worthy enterprise could be more relevant than “Laudato Si!” the encyclical “On Care for our Common Home” the challenge of Pope Francis for our times.

Continuing In the Encyclical Tradition

Pope Francis in his first encyclical continues the tradition of the Social Encyclicals begun by Pope Leo XIII in *Rerum Novarum*.

Addressing economic and social issues has been the characteristic of the encyclicals usually directed to those within the household of the faith. Emphasis has also been placed on human rights and the dignity of the human person. Pope John XXIII broadened this scope with *Pacem In Terris* which he intended for all people of good will, emphasizing the universal nature of his message.

Pope Francis reflects on economic concerns on a couple of fronts in *Laudato Si!* In keeping with the spirit of John XXIII, he asserts: “I wish to address every person living on the planet.”

- Treating the environment/world as a resource for a market economy based on consumption. Materials of the world are viewed from an anthropocentric perspective to be used for human exploration rather than being seen with inherent dignity/identity in their own right having been created as such by a loving creator.

- The existence of an economy that excludes beneficial participation of 3 billion of the 7 billion world’s human population. This system needs to be reorganized to accord essential elements of human dignity and opportunity to the poor. The development of this new approach should embrace heart and compassion for fellow members of the human family.

The Pope also opens new avenues to the Encyclical’s format.

In addition to the customary references to his predecessors St. John Paul II and Benedict XVI whom he cites 23 times, he quotes Bishops’ Conferences from around the world 17 times thus

introducing an inductive method whereby teaching percolates upward and is not only handed down.

The Encyclical very clearly calls for action for change which needs to be made in order to avoid potential irreversible disaster. Contemporary modes of introduction of the encyclical are employed utilizing news conferences and ongoing discussion of themes to heighten impact. Strategic considerations are also employed to influence the 2030 agenda for sustainable development at the World Summit as well as the Paris Conference on Climate Change scheduled for December of this year.

The Pope very specifically wants to be influential in the broader secular development of policies oriented toward the common good. He takes advantage of the platform he speaks from as well as the communication tools available to him.

Francis of Assisi the Icon of Human and Environmental Ecology

As it became clear that Jorge Bergoglio, the Archbishop of Buenos Aires was to be elected Pope, his close friend, Cardinal Hummes leaned into him and said, “Jorge, do not forget the poor.”

It was at this moment, the future Pope recalls, that St. Francis of Assisi entered his thinking and how he was the model for all that the future Pope revered - love for the poor, indeed all human beings and love for creation, the handiwork of a beneficent creator who freely surrounds us with the beauty and wonder of our world. When asked what name he was to take after his election as Successor of Peter, the spontaneous response was Francis.

The central focus of both Francis’ is Jesus, the Son of the living God. The lifestyle, the driving force behind his leadership, the motivation guiding the vision of the Holy Father, is the intimate and profound relationship with the Son of God. This union is positive and generates warmth, compassion, tenderness and peace of mind. It is expressed in the Joy of the Gospel – the Good News of God’s love for all.

The Pope’s model in the way of life, Francis of Assisi, surrendered everything to authenticate his relationship with Jesus and in the process became totally free. He was thus able to open himself to exude love for others, without exception, which elicited the response of deep appreciation and love for him. The thousands who lined his funeral procession witnessed the total identification that Francis had grown into with His Lord. Covered with a simple, sparse cloth exposed for all to see were the stigmata. Francis bore the wounds of Jesus in his hands, his feet and his side. He had become one with his Savior.

The Pope in the early paragraphs of his encyclical cites Francis, his inspiration, as a model, as a witness to guide us in our relationship with one another and also in our relationship with the gift of the created world and universe. It is the rupture of relationships with each other and in turn with the created world that is at the heart of the ecological crisis.

The Pope notes that his namesake grew into an understanding of the inherent value of each created being as a result of a specific intentional act by God. Each is to be revered in its own right for its identity as an expression of God's expansive creation. Thus, Francis would be able to see and express with great awe and wonder his relatives "brother sun and sister moon." Francis along with them were part of the family of God meant to be organized into what we have come to call nature. Of Francis, the Pope says:

"He was a mystic and a pilgrim who lived in simplicity and in wonderful harmony with God, with nature and with himself. He shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society and interior peace." (10)

Recognizing our contemporary alienation from the created world the Pope writes for our consideration:

"If we approach nature and environment without this openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs. . . . The poverty and austerity of St. Francis were no mere veneer of asceticism, but something much more radical: a refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled." (11)

Today's Reality

The balance and integration into the rhythm of nature as incorporated in the world vision of Francis of Assisi has deteriorated into our time. From the industrial revolution through our own moment with the prowess of technology, nature and the environment have come to be seen as resources for human need almost exclusively. A consumer mentality has taken hold whereby we see the gifts of creation placed at our disposition for material benefit and a selfish and essentially excessive lifestyle in terms of boundless consumption.

According to Pope Francis this has caused a radical cleavage in both human ecology and environmental ecology.

In terms of our relationship with our human family, three billion of our brothers and sisters are isolated in poverty and suffering because of a system that neglects honoring their dignity and fails to include them in an economic system that should first be dedicated to providing for all created by God. They are left behind in a rampage to achieve so-called progress. Moreover, as the Pope points out they contribute least to the environmental crisis by virtue of how they live but suffer most because of the consequences of pollution and the radical shifting of weather patterns and the covering of land mass by expanding water.

Tied into the extensive degradation of so many fellow humans is the crisis in the ecology of the environment in nature or in the loving provision of God, creation. Pope Francis asserts this reality writing: “Our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, . . . is falling into serious disrepair,” It “is beginning to more and more look like an immense pile of filth.”

At the heart of this environmental disruption is what has been termed “Climate change.” The Pope concurs with scientific analysis that this change, in large measure, occurs when carbon dioxide is emitted from the use of carbon fuels – coal, oil and gas coupled with deforestation and clearing of those resources which help to maintain equilibrium in the atmosphere by their absorbing excessive carbon that is being produced.

What basically happens is that a “greenhouse” effect is developed in the atmosphere trapping heat in a ceiling that increases temperature which in turn has a significant impact on the pattern of the climate, the form of water and the sustainability of microorganisms and other expressions of life which contribute to the balance of nature and its sustainability.

The consensus of 96% of scientists is clear: climate change is a reality. The Pope then asserts that this change with its destructive results is caused by human action. The undergirding of this debilitating approach is supported by a philosophy that is centered on anthropocentric

considerations. Contrary to the vision of Francis of Assisi, which regards all of creation as God's gift to be revered and enjoyed within the framework of preserving and sustaining it, this outlook basically holds that the earth, nature, exist for utilization of human use thus justifying and encouraging its exploitation. It is a system that promotes endless consumption of material goods with the assumption that such a way of life will bring happiness. What is occurring under this pattern is that the world is being used up. There will be little if anything left for the benefit and sustainability of generations to follow us.

Given the fact that the problem of climate change is the outcome of human activity, it can also be reversed by human intervention. The Pope, therefore, leads us to a hopeful perspective that should galvanize us into action derived from a love of creation, of nature and its beauty in and unto itself. Secondly, we want to be attentive to those 3 billion in our time who are suffering because of being left behind in a proportionate sharing of God's providence. They are the outcome of what Pope Francis calls the "throw-away" culture. Surely, their lives can be enhanced, their God-given dignity recognized and respected. Finally, at a certain point, some claim that as early as 2075 the damage to the environment may be irreversible. Thus, we must pay forward to future generations leaving them a home that will be habitable, preserving the wonder of God's creation for them. We should do so because we can do it.

Moving Forward

The classical approach to action in the Catholic tradition is observe, judge and act. The first step is to observe, to gather the scientific and social data which will ground our future action. The reality and condition concerning the poor are more than evident. The political, economic and social systems that are operative need to change to establish an order that treats them for whom they truly are, God's beloved.

Evidence is clear that climate change is occurring. Is this merely the ongoing cyclical pattern of nature? Or is it induced by human activity? The Holy Father relying on scientific data, the prevailing philosophy of a man-centered culture and the ongoing disappearance of thousands of

organisms, of themselves explicit manifestation God's loving act of creation, pose evidence that is seemingly incontrovertible.

The next step for us is to judge. The Pope has placed his teaching authority on the line, the overwhelming preponderance of scientists concur with the identification of the reality of climate change and its root causes as well as significant leaders everywhere who agree with these assessments. From the Christian perspective, which is committed to the common good and the hope enacted by the resurrection – this reality does exist and calls for our individual and corporate action. If anything is obvious in the Pope's writing – it is a clarion call to action. We must change.

On the third level, that of action, there are different possibilities of opportunity. If conviction moves us individually the St. Anthony Messenger identifies where strong motivation will lead us: "Pope Francis is a big-picture thinker, but he also understands that large scale systemic change depends on each one of us. We can all do "little daily actions," that turn away from an individualist – consumer driven mindset. We can support a healthier society and a healthier earth. We can avoid the use of plastic and paper, reduce water consumption, separate refuse, cook only what can be reasonably consumed, show care for other living beings, use public transport or carpooling, plant trees, turn off unnecessary lights, or any number of other practices. All of these reflect a generous, conscientious and worthy creativity that brings out the best in human beings." (St. Anthony Messenger, October 2015)

The second level of action is to support, within our relatively local situation and associates, the development and utilization of energy that is green, clean and renewable.

An example that I like to cite is that of Justin Doyle, an engineer in Des Moines who is Catholic and very practical and very much oriented toward healthy economic development. He transforms older buildings by installing solar energy that is sustainable and very economical. He has reduced outright energy costs in a mid-size industrial office building to a total of about \$16.00 a month.

As I drive along the southwest portion of Interstate 80 in the Diocese of Des Moines, certainly a garden spot, I admire the extensive development of wind energy. Mid-American energy anticipates that 57% of its source of power will come from “clean, renewable” sources. This places Iowa, whose citizens we like to consider “enlightened,” at the very top of the states employing such resources. They are both efficient, economically positive and have the long-term benefit of serving the common good and future generations.

When Pope John Paul II visited Living History Farms and the State of Iowa on October 4, 1979, he upheld the dignity of farmers, “Farmers be proud” he boomed. What is so impressive are the countless farmers I encounter who are determined to leave the fertile soil which is among the world’s best in better condition than they inherited it. It is important to encourage them to keep moving in ways of positive conservation particularly in the preservation of water quality absolutely essential for a healthy lifestyle now and into the future.

We, in Iowa, host the beginning of the four year cycle to elect the U.S. President. It is a particularly valuable opportunity to highlight and talk up with these candidates, in small settings, the importance that we attach to a revolution in the form of energy production. This holds a grave responsibility for us in the United States. Our country’s industrial and domestic utilization production are responsible for a significant disproportionate percentage of the greenhouse gases that are creating the climate problems. In the can-do American spirit we can change for the benefit of all.

In sequence, we move to the national and to the international scene, where extensive proposals are being made that hopefully joined by our united voices can maintain momentum that will be life-changing throughout the world.

As Pope Francis points out, the human and environmental ecology problems impact everyone, everywhere. In his speech to the United Nations on September 25th, the Pope addressed this reality.

“The misuse and destruction of the environment are also accompanied by a relentless process of exclusion. In effect a boundless thirst for power and material prosperity leads both to the misuse of available natural resources and to the exclusion of the weak and disadvantaged, either because they are differently abled (handicapped) or because they lack adequate information and technical expertise or are incapable of decisive political action.”

“Economic and social exclusion is a complete denial of human fraternity and a grave offense against human rights and environment. The poorest are those who suffer most from such offenses, for three serious reasons: they are cast off by society, forced to live off what is discarded and suffer unjustly from the abuse of the environment. They are part of today’s widespread and quietly growing “culture of waste.””

In his address, the Pope strongly advocated two initiatives of the United Nations:

- 1) The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the world summit. This plan seeks to eliminate poverty and hunger by the target date of 2030. Earlier millennial goals have been successful in reducing world-wide poverty by 50%. Where there is motivation, there are results. Moreover, there is hope.
- 2) The Paris Conference on Climatic Change to be held in that city in December of this year is of critical consequence. May the cascade of our individual change be transformed into a world-wide movement that spurs necessary evolution and authentic progress benefitting all the daughters and sons of God.

We return to the figure of St. Francis of Assisi. He stands as an icon of how the work of God can flow from us which is more necessary than ever in seeing the truth about all of creation as applicable especially among us humans. Pope Francis has inherited the mantle of the 13th Century Francis, which is sorely needed. The Holy Father is leading not only us Catholics, but all people of good will throughout the world in the path that enables us to fulfill our purpose and to do so with love.

The young generation, those of you gathered here, have a remarkable opportunity to change the environment both the human and that of creation for the good and in the process introduce our fellow earthly travelers to expanded happiness.

“Climate Change and the Common Good” a 2015 April statement of the Pontifical Academy of Science and the Pontifical Academy of Social Science pushes us on:

“Over and above institutional reforms, policy changes and technological innovations for affordable access to renewable energy sources, there is a fundamental need to reorient our attitude toward nature and, thereby, toward ourselves. Finding ways to develop a sustainable relationship with nature requires not only the engagement of scientists, political leaders, educators, and civil societies, but will succeed only if it is based on a moral revolution that religious institutions are in a special position to promote.”

My friends, our religious institution, is not an anonymous, faceless, nameless organization. It is you and I. Pope Francis implores us to join him to lead the way to an ecology that is of great benefit everywhere.