

Laudato Si (4)
Pope Francis's Encyclical on the Environment

Thus far I have discussed the first three chapters of the Pope's encyclical on the environment. We have seen how Pope Francis describes the environmental crisis, what the Gospel has to say, and the origin of the crisis. In the fourth chapter of the encyclical, "Integral Ecology," the Pope takes up the question of what he calls an "integral ecology," by which he means an environmental approach that "clearly respects its human and social dimensions." This chapter has five sections.

In the first section, *Environmental, Economic and Social Ecology*, the Pope emphasizes "how everything is interconnected." When we speak of "the environment" we are talking about a relationship that exists between nature and society. This means that we are *not* faced with two separate crises, one environmental and the others social. We are faced with a complex and interrelated crisis that is both social and environmental. For what we do to the environment affects society, and how we live in society affects the environment."

In the second section, *Cultural Ecology*, the Pope warns that there "is also an historic, artistic and cultural patrimony which is likewise under threat." A consumerist vision of human beings "has a leveling effect on cultures, diminishing the immense variety which is the heritage of humanity." Go to any shopping mall and you will know what the Pope means. No matter where you go, everything is the same.

In the third section, *Ecology of Daily Life*, the encyclical discusses the need to "bring about an integral improvement in the quality of human life." Here Pope Francis discusses the need for open spaces, the relationship between living space and human behavior, urban planning, the need for housing and transportation. How we live and where we live is an integral part of ecology and our human behavior.

In the fourth section, *The Principle of the Common Good*, the Pope recalls one of the most important principles of Catholic Social Teaching: the Common Good. Here he calls for solidarity and "a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters."

Finally, in the fifth section, *Justice between the Generations*, he notes that the principle of the common good extends to future generations. We must provide the next generation with "an inhabitable planet." Using very strong language, the Pope writes, "We may well be leaving to coming generations debris, desolation and filth." Such a legacy would be the result of rampant individualism, and a self-centered culture of instant gratification. The intergenerational solidarity of which Francis speaks is not optional." It is a question of justice.

As I read through this chapter I was reminded yet again how everything, without exception, is interconnected. What we do in society affects the environment, and the environment affects how we live in society. Every generation is dependent upon the generation that preceded it. We are careful to provide for the financial welfare and care of our children. But are we equally concerned to hand on to them an environment that will be cleaner and less polluted than the one in which we now live? If we are not, we will be doing them and their children a great injustice. Everything is interrelated because we all live within to God's good creation.

Father Matera