

Laudato Si *Pope Francis's Encyclical on the Environment*

Pope Francis's encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si* ("Praise be You"), has six chapters, the first of which I will discuss this week: (1) What is Happening to our Common Home? (2) The Gospel of Creation (3) The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis (4) Integral Ecology (5) Lines of Approach and Action (6) Ecological Education and Spirituality.

The first chapter, "What is Happening to Our Common Home?" is divided into seven sections. In the first of these, *Pollution and Climate Change*, the Pope notes that many of the problems we face today "are closely linked to a throwaway culture that affects the excluded just as it quickly as it reduces things to rubbish." The climate, the Pope says, is "a common good" that belongs to all people." Given what is happening to our environment today, there is need "for changes of lifestyle, production and consumption." And since it is the poor who are the first to suffer the results of environmental damage, we need to overcome the mentality of our throwaway culture.

In the second section, *The Issue of Water*, the Pope highlights the crisis affecting our drinking water. Water supplies "used to be relatively constant, but now in many places demand exceeds the sustainable supply... Water poverty especially affects Africa." Access to water that is safe and drinkable "is a basic and universal right, since it is essential to human survival."

In the third section, *Loss of Biodiversity*, the encyclical notes that the "loss of forests and woodlands entails the loss of species." Consequently, "each year sees the disappearance of thousands of plant and animal species," many of which have become extinct for reasons related to human activity. Here the Pope gives special attention to the environmental damage that is happening in the Amazon and Congo basins with their enormously complex biodiversity.

In the fourth section, *Decline in the Quality of Human Life and the Breakdown of Society*, Pope Francis points to the "disproportionate and unruly growth of many cities, which have become unhealthy to live in, not only because of the pollution caused by toxic emissions but also as a result of urban chaos, poor transportation, and visual pollution and noise." The encyclical notes that human beings were not meant "to be inundated by cement, asphalt, glass and metal, and deprived of physical contact with nature."

In the fifth section, *Global Inequality*, Pope Francis notes a theme that occurs throughout this encyclical: "the gravest effects of all attacks on the environment are suffered by the poorest." Thus, in a phrase that may disturb us who live in the north, the encyclical notes that "a true 'ecological debt' exists, particularly between the global north and south, connected to commercial imbalance and effects on the environment." To pay this debt, we will have to rethink and change our habits of consumption.

In the sixth section, *Weak Responses*, the encyclical laments how weak the international response has been. Global summits on the environment have failed because there are too many special interests and economic interests. If there is to be an adequate response, there must be strong and determined political leadership.

Finally in the seventh section, *A Variety of Opinions*, the Pope notes that there are a variety of opinions about the environmental crisis we are facing. At one extreme is the myth of progress that says the ecological crisis will solve itself with the application of new technologies.

At the other extreme are those who say that all human intervention simply makes things worse. What is needed is a frank and open discussion.

As I read through this encyclical, I was acutely aware that we in Simsbury live in one of the most beautiful parts of our county, where the ecological crisis is not so evident. But there are other parts of the world where the situation is severe and the time for repairing the damage to the environment can no longer wait. If we live in a common home in a shared environment, the problems the encyclical describes will eventually come upon us. All of us need to rethink how we live. All of us need to find a style of life that goes beyond a culture of senseless waste and conspicuous consumption. *Father Matera*