



PONTIFICIUM CONSILIUM
DE IUSTITIA ET PACE

Public Lecture / Lenten Reflection

Care of Creation as a Work of Mercy

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Thank you for your warm welcome. How happy I am to be invited to combine a “Public Lecture” with a “Lenten Reflection”. I am also delighted with the title you have chosen, “Care of Creation as a Work of Mercy”. It really helps us to explore a most relevant theme: how to live our faith in the world.

The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace has always been charged with developing and promoting the Social Teaching of the Church, in order to bring the timeless truths of the Gospel, our faith and tradition, into the public space, into society. The first formal example is the social encyclical *Rerum Novarum* of 1891. At a time when the industrial economy was only a century old and posed many dilemmas, especially for workers and their families, Pope Leo XIII was responding to these many *res novae* or “new things”. The most recent instance of such teaching, nearly 125 years later, is *Laudato si'*.¹ Again Pope Francis is responding to the *res novae* of our time, namely, environmental and social degradation. So to give this lecture is an example of what our department of the Roman Curia does to assist Pope Francis in his mission.

At the same time, I am invited to St. Thomas of Villanova Church to offer a “Lenten reflection”. This is a moment of spiritual deepening on our pilgrimage, during the Jubilee Year of Mercy, and in Lent, towards the passion, death and resurrection of Christ. Ordained as a Bishop to sanctify the Church, I am very happy to exercise this Ministry of the Word amongst you “bearing witness to the gospel of God’s grace”.²

So here are the five sections of the public lecture, and the five points of the Lenten reflection:

¹ “This Encyclical Letter ... is now added to the body of the Church’s social teaching” (LS §15).

² Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, §21.

- I. What is Creation?
- II. What is Care of Creation?
- III. What is Mercy?
- IV. What are the Works of Mercy, and how does Care of Creation belong to them?
- V. How do the Works of Mercy help us to live the Jubilee of Mercy here in Philadelphia?

But first, Pope Francis himself offers us the core message of *Laudato si'* in a short video. Let us watch it now.³

Having seen the video, we are now ready for our Lenten Reflection on “Care of Creation as a Work of Mercy”:

I. The Creator and Creation

Let us meditate on God’s basic relationship with all that He has made.

In Judeo-Christian tradition, the human story begins in an orderly fashion within the story of the beginning of everything. As orderly as the days of the week: God creates nature, inanimate and then animate, in the first five days, and humanity on the sixth. So the human story is not apart from that of all of nature – humanity and nature are integrated. As the video showed, our nature is created by God and surrounded by the gifts of creation.

The biblical narrative teaches us that “human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbor and with the earth itself” (§66). When one of these relationships is broken, the others are broken too, and our insertion in the universe is no longer integral – it is fractured and partial. In the second chapter of *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis articulates the “tremendous responsibility” (§90) of humankind for creation. “The natural environment is a collective good, the patrimony of all humanity and the responsibility of everyone” (§95). This collective good and this responsibility of all underpin the insistent message about the moral dimension of how we treat nature *and the rest of creation*. For “Creation is the order of love,” he says. It is a loving gift– not some show of “arbitrary omnipotence” and God’s love enfolds us and all things with his affection (§77).

But the relationship with nature does not stand alone; it is intertwined with other dimensions. In the Bible, “the God who liberates and saves is the same God who created the universe, and these two divine ways of acting are intimately and inseparably connected” (§73). The story of creation is central for reflecting on the relationship between human beings and other creatures. And that story is not static – the story of creation continues today, and our human engagement in it has failed to cooperate with God’s design: *“The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected*

³ <http://catholicclimatemovement.global/pope-video/>

in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life". This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; 'she groans in travail' (Rom 8:22)" (§2). As the video showed: we over-consume and we do not share the gifts of creation. We have tilled too much and kept too little – with dire consequences for the poor and the planet

II. What is Care of Creation?

We are often told to be good stewards of creation. A major surprise, then, is how little the Encyclical says about *stewardship*. Good stewards take responsibility and fulfil their obligations to manage and to render an account. Yet the term appears only twice. For one can be a good steward without feeling connected. Beyond jobs and accountability, *care* is a more intimate relationship. It comes up dozens of times. For if one *cares*, one is connected. To *care* is to allow oneself to be affected by another, so much so that one's path and priorities change.

Good parents know this. You care about your children; you care for your children, so much so that parents will sacrifice enormously—even your lives—to ensure the safety and flourishing of their children. As our parents did for us. With caring, the hard line between self and other softens, blurs, even disappears. St Francis of Assisi is our model. He integrated the human and the natural, creation and the spirit.

Pope Francis proposes that we think of our relationship with the world and with all people in terms of *caring*. As Jesus does when he calls himself the Good Shepherd who does not flee when the wolf threatens the flock (Jn 10:11-15). Caring for our common home requires, as Pope Francis says, not just an economic and technological revolution, but also a cultural and spiritual revolution—a profoundly different way of living the relationship between people and the environment, a new way of ordering the global economy. And so, as the little video emphasized, it is urgent that we change our sense of progress, our management of the economy, and our style of life.

So let us hold onto the beautiful demanding idea of *care*, which we already find in the title of *Laudato si'*, and pass to another beautiful generous word, *mercy*.

III. What is Mercy?

In asking this question, I am following a fine article Archbishop Chaput published about the Jubilee, late last year.

Mercy derives from the Latin word *merces*, “reward” or “gratuity”. We see this meaning in the French expression *merci*. It is a courtesy that graces our social interactions with a touch of

kindness. In English, moreover, *mercy* can take on a theological sense, even in secular contexts. God's grace comes to us as an *unmerited* gift. To be merciful, then, is freely to offer clemency to someone worthy of punishment, or to release someone from a debt he or she owes.⁴ Shakespeare wrote the most eloquent words about mercy in his *Merchant of Venice*:

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath.⁵

Such mercy restrains the hand that would punish, and gratuitously sets us free. Such mercy comes from above, like a summer shower. It comes from outside us. Such mercy forgives, it restores, it sets right.

But even more than gift, merit, grace, and the forgiveness of debts, mercy has a whole other meaning. "Mercy" is often used to translate *misericordia*, the Latin word for compassion, or, literally, "having a heart for those who are miserable, poor, in need". Here we speak of an emotional state of entering into someone else's plight and sharing in his burdens.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, while the young good-for-nothing was still afar off, "his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him" (Lk 15:20). This kind of mercy or *misericordia* wells up from within. It is like a spring forming in the depths and then welling up and flowing out and over. Geoffrey Chaucer calls upon the authority of Aristotle to say that "Mercy is a virtue by which a person's heart is stirred by the misery of those in distress."⁶ Such mercy forgives, too, it heals and makes new.

So let us keep in mind both kinds of mercy – the forgiving kind like rain from above, and the compassionate kind like a spring from within – as we now consider the traditional works of mercy.

IV-a. What are the Works of Mercy?

You may remember the Works of Mercy from catechism, or they may have slipped your mind, and I hope you have found them printed in this evening's program. "They are still valid, still current... they remain the basis for self-examination," says Pope Francis. "Perhaps some aspects could be better 'translated'"⁷ for our situation, our society. It is just such a "better translation",

⁴ Charles J. Chaput, *A Jubilee Year of Mercy*, December 2015
<https://www.firstthings.com/article/2015/12/a-jubilee-year-of-mercy>

⁵ Act 4, Scene 1

⁶ Under "Relief for the Sin of Avarice", *The Parson's Tale*, 577.

⁷ Pope Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy*, pp. 97-99.

inspired by *Laudato si'*, that I would like to share with you this evening.⁸ Let me read the Works to you slowly.

First, here are the 7 corporal ones:

1. to feed the hungry; especially those who suffer from poverty and drought.
2. to give drink to the thirsty; especially those who lack clean, abundant water.
3. to clothe the naked; especially those exposed to the cold of winter and the sting of indifference.
4. to give shelter to the homeless; especially victims of war, storms, and rising seas.
5. to care for the sick; especially those who have been poisoned by the wastes of our industries.
6. to ransom the captive; especially those oppressed by cruel economic and political systems, or from addictions to the pleasures of the world.
7. to protect the dignity of the human person, especially in reverently burying the dead.

And here is an additional 8th:

8. to care for our common home.

Now, here are the 7 spiritual ones, again with the same additional 8th:

1. to teach those who do not see how their lifestyles harm others.
2. to offer hope to those who despair for the future of loved ones or the future of the world.
3. to admonish those who sin against neighbor, the natural order, or the laws of nature.
4. to patiently bear the sufferings inflicted by gluttony and greed.
5. to willingly forgive offences committed against humanity and the goodness of creation.
6. to comfort those afflicted by corruption, by changes to our climate, and by unwholesome desires.
7. to desire always to pray for the living and the dead and future generations.

And again here is the additional 8th:

8. to care for our common home.

I trust that everyone here would agree that, in the light of *Laudato si'*, the Works of Mercy take on a new currency, urgency, reach and scope.

IV-b. How does Care of Creation belong to the Works of Mercy?

To appreciate care of creation as an eighth *spiritual* work of mercy, consider the Holy Father's central question in *Laudato si'*: "What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up?" (§160). For example, I know that Pennsylvania is a major coal-mining state. But if coal continues to be used on a large scale, the world of our

⁸ Written by Bill Patenaude for the Global Catholic Climate Movement. Cf. also Pope Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy*, pp. 97-99.

children may be uninhabitable. At the same time, having recently visited the coal-mining heartland of Poland, I appreciate what a great challenge it is to develop a viable post-coal economy. Let us regularly bring our coal-mining communities into our prayer and ask God to help us to solve the great problems.

Care of creation could also be our eighth *corporal* work of mercy, through concrete actions large and small – from the everyday actions of good ecological citizens (§211) to pressuring national governments to implement what they have promised. We must keep alert about *What is happening to our common home*, “not to amass information or to satisfy curiosity, but rather to become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it” (§19). An important example is the pledge by the United States in its Intended Nationally Determined Contribution (or INDC) to the international effort to reduce greenhouse gas pollution. The United States has committed to “an economy-wide target of reducing its greenhouse gas emissions by 26-28 per cent below its 2005 level in 2025, and [it intends] to make best efforts to reduce its emissions by 28%.”⁹ However, I understand that the implementation has been challenged at the Supreme Court. This concrete corporal work of mercy is in jeopardy.

Allow me to suggest that here in Villanova University and the surrounding community, you familiarize yourselves with your country’s INDC – it is only 4 pages. Then you can add your voices and efforts to make sure it is fully and promptly implemented. You could even push for more ambitious targets to avoid or reverse environmental degradation and harm to all God’s people. What a work of mercy this will be!

A few weeks ago I spoke at Seton Hall University. Now, I have heard of the thrilling basketball victory of Villanova over Seton Hall on 20 January. Are there any lessons for our Works of Mercy? Let me draw out one: saving the planet Earth is not like basketball: it is not a competition, there must only be winners! We must indeed work together to care for our common home!

V. How do the Works of Mercy help us to live the Jubilee of Mercy in Philadelphia?

As a visitor I greatly admire Philadelphia. As a pastor, though, I share many concerns you have about the environment. I know you would mention serious issues like poverty, poor health, air pollution, hunger and obesity, unemployment, children in poverty, crime.¹⁰ Enough for me to remind you how much awaits your corporal and spiritual works of mercy in caring for our common home in and around Philadelphia.

⁹ <http://www4.unfccc.int/submissions/indc/Submission%20Pages/submissions.aspx>

¹⁰ http://www.philly.com/philly/blogs/public_health/Philadelphia-ranks-dead-last-on-health-And-with-budget-cuts----.html#6fJBb6pCcXzOB8C7.99

On the other hand, there are good practices to celebrate. Let me mention just one of them. With the support of the Church's Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD), the Urban Tree Connection was formed. The UTC revitalizes abandoned lots and repurposes them as gardens for the production of food. This is an ethically responsible and economically viable way to help the community access fresh, healthy and affordable food. As part of the process, they create meaningful local jobs and opportunities for training youth. Around such community actions, Pope Francis comments, "relationships develop or are recovered and a new social fabric emerges... In this way, the world, and the quality of life of the poorest, are cared for, with a sense of solidarity which is at the same time aware that we live in a common home which God has entrusted to us" (§232). So the Urban Tree Connection surely represents the Works of Mercy in operation, and indeed an effective implementation of *Laudato si'*. Congratulations!

And now allow me to give Pope Francis the concluding words of encouragement, taken from the bull or edict with which he established the Holy Year of Mercy:

It is my burning desire that, during this Jubilee, the Christian people may reflect on the *corporal and spiritual works of mercy*. It will be a way to reawaken our conscience, too often grown dull in the face of poverty. And let us enter more deeply into the heart of the Gospel where the poor have a special experience of God's mercy. Jesus introduces us to these works of mercy in his preaching so that we can know whether or not we are living as his disciples.¹¹

¹¹ Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, § 15.