



Earth Day 2020

Context

Fifty years ago, on April 22, 1970, the first Earth Day was celebrated.^[1] Like all major historical events, there was a close confluence of events and people that gave birth to this momentous event.

First, there was the publication of a 1962 seminal book entitled *Silent Spring*^[2] that denounced the use of pesticides (i.e., DDT) and initiated a grass-roots movement to demand protection for the environment through state and federal regulation.

Second, there was the state of upheaval in which the United States of America found itself in the 1970s. The civil rights movement was on its third decade, nationwide protests against the Viet Nam war raged, and the possibility of nuclear Armageddon during the Cold War loomed in the horizon.

Third, there was a concerned Senator from Wisconsin, Gaylord Nelson, who expressed deep concern regarding pollution in the skies and waters, as well as the contamination produced by oil spills. His efforts, as well as the efforts of many others, resulted in the establishment of the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)^[3] and President Nixon's decision to sign into law the Clean Air Act (CAA), Clean Water Act (CWA), and the Endangered Species Act (ESA).^[4]

Catholic Response

In the wake of president John F. Kennedy's assassination (1963), many young Catholics focused their attention on issues of social justice. By 1970, the Catholic Church was still

reeling after the momentous changes ushered in by the Second Vatican Council and kept struggling to bring new life and a new spirit into the practices of the faith. The works of Fr. Teilhard de Chardin^[5] and Fr. Thomas Merton^[6] became the catalyst for lectures, sermons, and discussions centered around ecology while new liturgical modes of expression promoted concerned action for the earth.^[7]

Papal encyclicals,^[8] documents from various bishops conferences from around the world, and works of theologians from this time show that the environment was a source of concern for the Church - if not always a major concern. Consequently, from 1970 to the 2010's, a whole Catholic Eco theological synthesis was created.

Based on Scriptures and refined by doctrinal sources, as well as by sound socio-economic, political, and ecclesial analyses, said synthesis broadly highlights the following tenets of our faith.

- There is a strong interconnection and a delicate balance between nature and humanity in all its social facets (i.e., socio-economic, political, cultural, and spiritual).
- The systematic destruction of nature and its plunder upsets said equilibrium, causing immense suffering, especially to the poorest of the world.
- Our fragile link with creation must be maintained or restored through ecological conversion, which happens when we embrace the sacramentality of creation through prayer, penance, and humble acceptance of our true nature as stewards and not as owners.

Laudato Si

Almost five years ago, on June 18, 2015, Pope Francis published his revolutionary Catholic social teaching encyclical *Laudato Si*.^[9] His systematic analysis of the environmental crisis from a religious perspective boldly begins with a proclamation of faith, expressly, that creation is a gift from God and thus, it is holy and to be revered by all.

Building on insights from Scripture, the life of the saints, most especially St. Francis of Assisi^[10] and his predecessors' work regarding care of creation,^[11] Pope Francis invites us to consider the following:

The goods of creation are for the benefit and enjoyment of all. For that reason, their use can never ignore the needs of the poor. Conversely, their abuse benefits few, deprives the poor of what they need to subsist, and pervert their original intent.

For this reason, technological progress and market dynamics must be redefined and re-evaluated in light of their capacity to provide for those who do not have so that the common good of all may be their driving force.

After linking humanity to creation, *Laudato Si* addresses issues of indiscriminate production and consumption through the lenses of greed, abuse of the environment, and failure to provide for the poor. In order to do this, the encyclical draws upon the best scientific research available and combines it with church teaching and contemporary findings from other fields to offer a solid analysis and invite reflection on these critical questions.

At the same time, the encyclical aims to provoke reflection, which ought to be followed by conversion away from greed, indifference, and selfishness and towards true tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human beings, especially the poorest and neediest on our midst.

In classical Catholic social thought terms, Pope Francis' encyclical invites **everyone** (Catholic and non-Catholic alike, at a true global scale) to get involved in acts of solidarity and subsidiarity at both local and global levels, in order to avoid a cookie-cutter mentality. Instead, the Pope calls for individual transformation, cultural revolution, and global ecological conversion.

Continuing the dialogue

As I write these thoughts down, I am more aware than ever of the connection we have with nature. Unfortunately, said awareness comes through the *via negativa*. It is April 21, 2020 and a pandemic of gargantuan proportions has taken hold of our planet. A microscopic virus (CoVid19 or Coronavirus) has made all of us painfully aware of how fragile we are, of how interconnected we are, both with nature and with each other, and of how fragile is that delicate balance.

It has also made us aware that technological advances, wealth, power and status are not as powerful as a N95 mask. Ultimately, this pandemic has brought into question the illusions we have chosen to believe and the prisons we have been created for ourselves and in which we have been living for the longest time.

Presently we know that we can survive without much. We are now painfully aware of the difference between essential items and luxury ones (not people, just to be sure, since there are not "non-essential" people). We are also amazed at the number of wonderful things that have been happening while we have been responsibly staying at home.

The skies are bluer and free from pollutants. Animals are enjoying their original natural habitats and are resting in "our beaches and our backyards." The whole of creation seems to be singing a song to us, their human counterparts, hoping that when our time to go out comes, we may be able, at last, not be a horribly discordant note, but a part in a cosmic symphony. As we celebrate this Earth Day, let us sing in harmony an Ode to Joy to the whole of creation and to the God who made us.

Rev. Leo Almazán
April 22, 2020

^[1] For more information on this day, see <https://www.earthday.org/history/>

^[2] Rachel L. Carson, *Silent Spring*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company: New York, NY, 1962.

^[3] <https://www.epa.gov>

^[4] 42 U.S.C. §7401 et seq. (1970); 33 U.S.C. §1251 et seq. (1972); and 16 U.S.C. §1531 et seq. (1973) respectively.

^[5] Among the many works written by De Chardin, his posthumously published *The Phenomenon of Man* (Harper Perennial: New York, 1955) is considered his opus magnum and the main source of inspiration for care of creation.

^[6] One of the best studies on Merton's ecological stance is Monica Weis, *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton*, The University press of Kentucky: Lexington KY, 2011.

^[7] Some examples are Ray Repp's *Mass for Young Americans* (1966), Joe Wise's *Sea Water* album (1970), The Dameans' *Walk to the Gloryland* album (1971), Paul Quinlan's *The New Day* album (1973), and John Fischer's *Still life* album (1974).

^[8] Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World - 1965); Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* (On the Development of Peoples - 1967) and *Octogesima Adveniens* (A Call to Action - 1971); and Synod of Bishops, *Justitia in Mundo* (Justice in the World - 1971).

^[9] Pope Francis, *Laudato Si* (On care for our common Home - 2015).

^[10] In fact, the title of his encyclical comes from the *Canticle of the Creatures*, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol. 1, New York-London-Manila, 1999, 113-114.

^[11] John Paul II's *Redemptor Hominis* (1979) and particularly *Centesimus Annus* (1991) where he called for a global conversion and for an authentic human ecology. See also Benedict XVI's *Caritas in Veritate* (2009).