



A HUMAN ECOLOGY

caring for our common home

In the first chapter of Genesis, we read a detailed account of the creation story:

Then God said: Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the tame animals, all the wild animals, and all the creatures that crawl on the earth. God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

God blessed them and God said to them: Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that crawl on the earth.

God also said: See, I give you every seed-bearing plant on all the earth and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit on it to be your food; and to all the wild animals, all the birds of the air, and all the living creatures that crawl on the earth, I

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give all the green plants for food. And so it happened. God looked at everything he had made, and found it very good. Evening came, and morning followed—the sixth day. Gen 26-31

This passage sets the tone for the world we live in. We are part of God's creation, and we are called to "fill the earth and subdue it," to "have dominion" over everything around us. At first, these words may seem out of context with the loving God we know. What does it mean to subdue? How do we relate having dominion to our calling?

Some people have interpreted "dominion" to mean that we have absolute authority over everything else. We can hunt, plant, drill, and build to our hearts' content and manipulate human biology however we please. Others see these terms as the mantle of responsibility—we have a duty to care for the earth, as part of our participation in God's work.



corporate and government, but its true focus is the root of our environmental problems—an inadequate understanding of our place in creation, and our responsibility to the poor and most vulnerable.

The Pope states clearly that humankind is at fault in our current crisis, but he asserts that it's not people per se who are the problem, but rather the attitude of today's society. To change the environmental crisis, we must change the way we treat each other and our planet. We need to shift our understanding of human fulfillment—from a "want, take, have" mentality to a state of communion with God, others, and the world.

"The best way to restore men and women to their rightful place, putting an end to their claim to absolute dominion over the earth, is to speak once more of the figure of a Father who creates and who alone owns the world. Otherwise, human beings will always try to impose their own laws and

interests on reality" *Laudato si*, 75.

Pope Francis revisits God's decree in Genesis, enriching the word "dominion" with an understanding that our rights to the goods of creation come only when we have the right relationship with creation, including humanity.

Many people blame overpopulation for the environmental depletion we're facing. However, the Pope vehemently opposes this view, looking instead at excessive consumption. Blaming population growth instead of extreme, selective consumerism bypasses the real issues, and excuses the current consumption model, in which a minority enjoys consumerism at a level the planet's resources cannot hope to match.



The most recent statistics on population density support Pope Francis' statements. Take California—if you travel from LA from San Francisco, you'll find plenty of uninhabited land. But sitting in traffic on the 405, you see people for miles. Other states across the country are similar—lots of open space without many people.

This is true of the rest of the world too. China has only 356 people per square mile. Southeast Asia has 430, and Latin America has 61. These places have some of the most highly populated cities in the world, but they also have large, open expanses of land. The World Bank recently predicted that earth's population will top out at about 9 billion in 2040, and decline steadily from there.

We can't blame overpopulation, but we can blame improper distribution of earth's resources among the population. The motivation of excessive consumption—greed—has a practical, unsettling application.

Currently, 14% of people consume 82% of earth's energy. Virtually all of this energy is carbon-based, meaning whenever you drive, turn on the A/C, or buy anything that takes energy to make, transport, or sell, you used carbon-based fuels, which creates greenhouse gases, and contributes to climate changes.

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1 billion of earth's people are responsible for the consumption that created the ecological crisis. But that same 1 billion can isolate themselves from the negative effects—we can turn on the A/C, drive through smog in our cars, or buy houses inland. The other 6 billion face the negative impact of our consumption because they can't escape the pollution, rising sea-levels, or excessive heat and extreme weather and fire conditions.



and that being good and decent are worth it,' he insists.

As an antidote to consumer lifestyles and the culture of waste, Pope Francis proposes Christian spirituality. Our faith, he says, leads to a lifestyle—‘an attitude of the heart’—that is marked by moderation, humility, and gratitude; that finds happiness in the little things in life and ‘accepts each moment as a gift from God to be lived to the full’” Archbishop Gomez, *The Tidings*, June 18, 2015.

In the U.S. alone, we spend tons of money on things that we don't need—\$18 billion per year on pet food, and \$7 billion per year on cosmetics. Talk about first world problems! Eliminating childhood hunger worldwide would cost only \$21 billion. \$14 billion could provide prenatal care to women who don't have any. \$12 billion would give everyone safe drinking water.

It's easy to see that if we reallocate funds and resources, we can provide basic human necessities to billions of people. Foregoing a few luxuries can literally change someone else's life...and that puts a trip to Target in a whole new perspective.

People are at the center of God's plan for creation. Each person is called to be in communion with all others, as the Trinity is in the communion of three persons. That membership in the human community places responsibility on each of us for our brothers and sisters.

The Pope's encyclical reminds us that we are part of the created order. We each have a unique dignity, but we are still created beings with an inherent nature, just like everything else in creation. If we can't respect ourselves or other people, how we can respect the rest of creation? Pope Francis cites situations in which we throw away our most vulnerable members—the unborn, old, sick, and poor. This is contrary to our human nature, which calls us to respect life and help those in need.

“Since everything is interrelated, concern for the protection of nature is incompatible with the justification of abortion. How can we genuinely teach the importance of concern for other vulnerable beings, however troublesome or inconvenient they may be, if we fail to protect a human embryo, even when its presence is uncomfortable and creates difficulties?” *Laudato si*, 120.

This may seem like a lot for any one person to do to keep the world turning, and to keep harm from the rest of the population. Pope Francis touches on international and political solutions, but he ultimately comes back to establishing a personal relationship with God, and with each other.



In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis calls attention to the serious waste of rich countries and the serious needs of poorer countries. He points out the many and varied ecological disasters that our world is facing, and touches on some potential responses.

Much of the time, it seems as though large-scale human and ecological problems are out of our reach, but Pope Francis reminds us that there is great dignity and power in the “little things”. He writes:

“There is a nobility in the duty to care for creation through little daily actions, and it is wonderful how education can bring about real changes in lifestyle. Education in environmental responsibility can encourage ways of acting which directly and significantly affect the world around us, such as avoiding the use of plastic and paper, reducing water consumption, separating refuse, cooking only what can be reasonably consumed, showing care for other living beings, using public transport or car-pooling, planting trees, turning off

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unnecessary lights, or any number of other practices..."
Laudato Si, 211

"We must not think that these efforts are not going to change the world. They benefit society, often unbeknown to us, for they call forth a goodness which, albeit unseen, inevitably tends to spread." *Laudato Si*, 212

We can come to understand appropriate consumerism, and our responsibilities to the less fortunate. The Pope calls us to grow in our relationship with Christ, so that we may respect creation, not as an imposition, but as a privilege.

Unfortunately, we are facing an environmental crisis that is just a symptom of some very deep problems with our society's worldview. We have come to see nature, including the world around us and our own biology, merely as something outside of us that we can manipulate with science and technology for our own comfort and pleasure, instead of an integrally connected natural order that comes from God. Our scientific triumphs and technical progress have led us to think that "if something is technically possible it is therefore morally admissible" (*Fides et Ratio*, 88).

We live in a culture of what St John Paul II termed "scientism", in which science is seen as the only valid way of knowing things, and the insights of religion, philosophy, and ethics are dismissed as imaginary. (Ironically, this worldview cannot be determined by science! No amount of experimenting or mathematical analysis will ever tell you that scientific knowledge is the only type of knowledge worth having.)

Ultimately, science, which has caused many of the ecological problems we currently face, will alone be unable to solve our problems. For that, we will need the guidance of faith in Christ and the morality which flows from that faith. We will need input from the Creator of the world to solve the world's problems.

The Pope doesn't intend this to be the announcement of the end. There is great hope in the innovation and creativity of humankind when we come together for a common purpose. As Christians, we are called to work together in a song of thanksgiving to our loving Father for his gift of creation, and for the leadership role he has given us.

Questions for Discussion:

- What does Pope Francis say is at the basis of our current global climate crisis?
- What suggestions does he give to fix this? Do you agree with his suggestions?
- Is there evidence to support Pope Francis' claim that overpopulation is not an ecological problem?
- If you were asked to devise a plan for redistribution of goods to serve the world's developing nations, what would you recommend?
- How is personal morality a major component of the solution needed to overcome environmental degradation and our current crisis?
- How has science created the current problem? What about economics? Politics?
- Do you agree that a scientific (material) solution will never be sufficient? How does faith play a role in conversations about the environment?
- What is one thing you personally can do to care for God's creation?

