

In Australia, this 22nd Sunday of the Year is designated by the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference (ACBC) as "Social Justice Sunday".

The usual readings from Sacred Scripture for Year B of the three year cycle of Sunday readings are retained. However, proper prayers of the Mass are now published by the ACBC for Social Justice Sunday.

The homily for this Sunday is basically a summary and reiteration of the Australian Bishops' Social Justice Statement for 2021/22 which is entitled "**Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor**".

The Social Justice Statement has been published annually by the ACBC since 1988. These statements apply the fundamental moral social teaching of the Catholic Church to our particular Australian situation. The Australian situation is inextricably related to the global situation, as is clearly the case in this year's statement.

This year's Bishops' statement is a teaching document which takes as its cue the social encyclical of Pope Francis *Laudato si*, "On the Care of Our Common Home", this encyclical being the latest in a most distinguished genre of Catholic magisterial teaching which began in 1891 with Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum novarum* "On the Condition of the Working Classes". In *Rerum novarum*, Leo addressed the appalling conditions of working people in Europe in the wake of the industrial revolution and demanded certain basic standards for them be legislated. Leo's doctrine upset communists and laissez-faire capitalists alike, as he denounced both Marxism and unregulated capitalism.

One hundred years later, Saint Pope John Paul II found himself addressing many of the same issues as he critiqued both the collapsed old communist order of Eastern Europe and the capitalist west whose flag-bearer, the USA, for all its wealth, still had a miserly national minimum wage and no universal healthcare system. JPII established himself as the all time champion of Catholic Social Teaching (CST) insisting, to the chagrin of many ideologically right wing American Catholics, that CST is core Catholic moral teaching and not some sort of optional extra. His peak contribution to CST was his encyclical *Centesimus annus* of 1991 which reviewed the whole corpus of papal social encyclicals since Leo's prototypical social encyclical of 1891, and set an even stronger platform for those still to be written by Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis.

This year's ACBC statement, "Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor" focuses on the encyclical *Laudato si*/"Care of Our Common Home", as applied to our Australian (and Pacific Islands) environment including the degradation of soils, river systems and biological species, climate change, the increasing frequency of extreme weather events and the role of human causation in all of these. It might also have included the huge sleeper event which has only more recently come to public notice - that of the vast volumes of all kinds of stuff that is thrown out to the extent that "advanced" nations can no longer cope with these materials and have increasingly tried to dump them in less prosperous nations with the secondary result that they, in turn, have become overwhelmed, underscoring the unsustainability of what Pope Francis refers to as

“throw-away societies”. The most extreme manifestation of this “throw-away attitude” is of course seen in the significantly increased contemporary demand for ugly practices like abortion and assisted dying.

The Bishops’ statement is ultimately based on prayerful reflection on the true relationship between God and his creation which is to be found in Sacred Scripture (particularly in the gospels) and in the lives of saints like Saint Francis of Assisi, Saint Claire of Assisi, Saint Anthony of Padua and many others. Of course it is using the very words of Saint Francis’s “Canticle of Creation”, that Pope Francis begins in Italian his encyclical concerning the “Care of our Common Home”: *Laudato si’, mi Signore* (= praised be you, my Lord). The Canticle praises God for the wonder and beauty of his creation. In it, Saint Francis complements the strong scriptural tradition that the various elements of creation somehow in themselves praise their Creator:

“Most High, all powerful, good Lord,
Yours are the praises, the glory, the honour, and all blessing.

To You alone, Most High, do they belong,
and no man is worthy to mention Your name.

Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures,
especially through my lord Brother Sun,
who brings the day; and you give light through him.
And he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendour!
Of you, Most High, he bears the likeness.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,
in heaven you formed them clear and precious and beautiful.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind,
and through the air, cloudy and serene,
and every kind of weather through which
You give sustenance to Your creatures.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,
which is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
through whom you light the night and he is beautiful
and playful and robust and strong.

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Mother Earth,
who sustains us and governs us and who produces
varied fruits with coloured flowers and herbs.

Praised be You, my Lord,
through those who give pardon for Your love,
and bear infirmity and tribulation.

Blessed are those who endure in peace
for by You, Most High, they shall be crowned.

Praised be You, my Lord,
through our Sister Bodily Death,
from whom no living man can escape.

Woe to those who die in mortal sin.
Blessed are those who will
find Your most holy will,
for the second death shall do them no harm.

Praise and bless my Lord,
and give Him thanks
and serve Him with great humility.”

The Book of Genesis states God gave humankind “dominion” or lordship over his creation (Gen. 1). This is not in the sense of the right to “dominate” creation, but lordship in the Christian sense of the Lordship of Jesus Christ which orders all things to the praise and thanks and service of God and his Kingdom. Time and time and time again, Sacred Scripture refers to the natural world of God’s creating. In the Old Testament, the Psalms are replete with references to creation. The canticle of divine praise which is found in Chapter Three of the Book of Daniel (Daniel 3:57-88,56), and which is a staple of Holy Church’s Morning Prayer on most Sundays and feast days, calls directly on so many elements of the natural world to praise their Creator:

“O all you works of the Lord, O bless the Lord.
To him be highest glory and praise for ever.

And you, angels of the Lord, O bless the Lord.
To him be highest glory and praise for ever.

And you, the heavens of the Lord, O bless the Lord.
And you, clouds of the sky, O bless the Lord.
And you, all armies of the Lord, O bless the Lord.
To him be highest glory and praise for ever.

And you, sun and moon, O bless the Lord.
And you, the stars of the heavens, O bless the Lord.
And you, showers and rain, O bless the Lord.
To him be highest glory and praise for ever.

And you, all you breezes and winds, O bless the Lord.

And you, fire and heat, O bless the Lord.

And you, cold and heat, O bless the Lord.

To him be highest glory and praise for ever.

And you, showers and dew, O bless the Lord.

And you, frosts and cold, O bless the Lord.

And you, frost and snow, O bless the Lord.

To him be highest glory and praise for ever.

And you, night-time and day, O bless the Lord.

And you, darkness and light, O bless the Lord.

And you, lightning and clouds, O bless the Lord.

To him be highest glory and praise for ever.

O let the earth bless the Lord.

To him be highest glory and praise for ever.

And you, mountains and hills, O bless the Lord.

And you, all plants of the earth, O bless the Lord.

And you, fountains and springs, O bless the Lord.

To him be highest glory and praise for ever. ...

... And you, rivers and seas, O bless the Lord.

And you, creatures of the sea, O bless the Lord.

And you, every bird in the sky, O bless the Lord.

And you, wild beasts and tame, O bless the Lord.

To him be highest glory and praise for ever.

Let us praise the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit:

To you be highest glory and praise for ever.

May you be blessed, O Lord, in the heavens:

To you be highest glory and praise for ever.”

The point here is: how can God's creation render him the praise which is his due when that praise is weighed down, corrupted, polluted and compromised by so many man-made handicaps - handicaps caused by the injuries and scars of its misuse by its divinely appointed overseers and stewards, namely humankind. The Mass itself, the “summit and source” of our whole Catholic Christian life and our great prayer of praise and thanksgiving to God, is likewise disrespected when we have collectively tainted one of the very elements for which we are thanking and praising him at every Mass, namely all that he has created through his only Son and in which dwells his Holy Spirit.

In the gospels, Jesus himself, the Son of God and the Word through whom all things were made (*cf* the Prologue of Saint John's gospel and the Nicene Creed), has regular recourse to metaphors and images from the natural world in his preaching and teaching of the Good News.

Some may well ask: "What has *Laudato si'* and its Australian application by the ACBC got to do with social justice? Without elaborating here, it has already become obvious that generally speaking, those who are worst affected by the rapid deterioration of our global environment are poorer countries and especially the poor within those countries - the urban poor and subsistence farmers, herdsman, fishermen - people who live day to day and season to season. It is the poor who are the first to suffer the consequences of toxic air pollution, climate change, rising sea levels and "the throw-away society". Other people, particularly the wealthy, will often have the means to at least mitigate the affects of environmental change upon their quality of life.

There is another sense in which the corruption and pollution of our natural environment is unjust. Colloquial Italian has an expression, "Non e giusto!", i.e. "It's not right", "It's not just" or "It's just not right!" It is just not right that we do not care about our duty to care for our common home, given to us so that our societies can flourish in a sustainable way, a way that sees us live in harmony with the earth God has given us to steward, i.e. to oversee in a responsible and not a reckless way.

In their Social Justice Statement for 2021–22, "Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor", the Australian Catholic Bishops say, "The signs of the times are clear - we know that we human beings need a change of heart, mind, and behaviour". The Statement provides theological foundations to ground and inspire our efforts to care for creation while responding to the needs of the disadvantaged and excluded. The Bishops invite us to join them in responding to Pope Francis' invitation to take a seven-year journey towards total ecological sustainability guided by seven *Laudato si'* Goals. The Goals are: response to the cry of the earth; response to the cry of the poor; ecological economics; sustainable lifestyles; ecological spirituality; ecological education; and community engagement and participatory action.

Scripture, the theological tradition, Catholic social justice teaching, and the wisdom of the world - including insights of the First Nations - are all placed in dialogue with human experience. Four theological foundations for a genuinely Christian response to the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor emerge from this dialogue. They are: creation in and through the Trinity; the sacramentality of all created things; the wonder and beauty available to the contemplative eye; and the need for conversion and change of life.

The bishops also call for the transition to a globally sustainable way of living for the entire human family to be achieved in a just way, and not in a way that significantly disadvantages some, while others benefit from financial windfalls.

Our parish of Saint Peter at Surry Hills is invited to reflect on the theological foundations offered by the Bishops and to plan our own next steps towards reaching the *Laudato si'* Goals. One reflects that our grandparents may have been more environmentally enlightened than us in

some regards: e.g., I remember that my grandmother had one set of natural fabric shopping bags which she used throughout her lifetime, while I shudder to think of the number of single use plastic bags and containers I have used during mine.

I would welcome expressions of interest from those who might be interested in applying the seven *Laudato si'* goals to Saint Peter's and monitoring our progress towards achieving them. We do not need the Greens with the baggage of some of their more obnoxious extra-environmental ideologies. The Church has had its own environmental champions and doctrines for many centuries, long before the Greens were established as a political entity. Unfortunately (as is the case in other domains of Catholic moral teaching), many of us have tended to ignore that teaching until we have several environmental crises on our hands. *Laudato si'* is really the logical culmination of the increasing concern of the recent popes from the time of the Second Vatican Council and its Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* on "The Church in the Modern World". (It was in fact Saint Pope John Paul II who first used the term "human ecology" and at the "book ends" of his pontificate, JP II declared Saint Francis of Assisi (in 1979) and then Saint Benedict (in 1997) patrons for the care of God's creation. Pope Francis has used a similar term "integral ecology", by which he also means that our behaviour affecting the natural environment needs to be considered as being part of the whole of our human moral behaviour. The World Health Organization, e.g., estimates that 6.5 million deaths per year globally are caused by air pollution alone: proper care of our common home earth morally obliges us to address this and other related life issues.)

"To God the Father of the world,
His Son through whom he made all things,
And Holy Spirit, bond of love,
All glad creation glory sings."
(Stanbrook Abbey Hymnal)