



CANARIES IN THE COAL MINE

The deep connection between environment destruction and poverty By FRED KAMMER, S.J.

One of the most significant insights of Pope Francis in his May 24 encyclical on the environment—*Laudato Si'*—is the direct connection between environmental degradation and the plight of people who are poor. A critical look at this connection can help to unlock the message of the entire document.¹

The concern of Francis for the poor and the environment is not new to papal teaching nor Catholic social concern. In his 2009 encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI developed the theme of a “covenant between human beings and the environment” [7]² in which he delineated a threefold responsibility that is part of the human relationship to the environment: “a responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations, and towards humanity as a whole” [48].

Before Benedict, St. Pope John Paul II had made the connection in his 1990 World Day of Peace message *Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation*. National and regional conferences of

bishops also made the same connection in the years that followed. Of course, teaching at the hierarchical level was deeply influenced by the work of local Catholics and other people of good will on issues of environment preservation and “environmental justice” (often referring to the connection of environmental degradation and its profound impact especially on poor and minority communities).

Canaries in the Coal Mine

While Pope Francis does not use this image in *Laudato Si'*, one of the first ways to understand the connections between environmental destruction and the poor can be likened to the practice of coal miners keeping a canary in the mine as a “first warning” of poisonous air. Francis emphasizes the “intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet...” [16]. As Francis develops this connection, he notes:

Many of the poor live in areas

particularly affected by the phenomena related to warming, and their means of subsistence are largely dependent on natural reserves and ecosystemic services such as agriculture, fishing, and forestry. They have no other financial activities or resources which can enable them to adapt to climate change or to face natural disasters, and their access to social services and protection is very limited.

Among the results, the pope continued, is “a tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation” [25].

Another example he gives is how the world’s growing shortage of potable water is now reflected in “water poverty,” especially affecting Africa “where large sectors of the population have no access to safe drinking water or experience droughts which impede agricultural production” [28]. Humans who are poor then could be

likened to those biological species that become extinct from environmental change and destruction.

Linked Environments

Pope Francis further underscores the systemic linkage between environmental destruction and the human destruction born of the breakdown in our sense of the common good:

The human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation. [48]

The common sign of the breakdown of both environments is the plight of those who are poor, the billions of people who are affected by environmental damage and who suffer from the failures of our social and economic systems as well. This prompts Francis to urge that “a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” [49]. Why is this?

The Causes

Pope Francis lays the responsibility on multiple but interrelated causes. One is excess consumption “where a minority believes that it has the right to consume in a way which can never be universalized, since the planet could not even contain the waste products of such consumption” and where “a third of all food produced is discarded” [50]. Such consumption, he continues, has created an “ecological debt” between the global north and south resulting from commercial imbalances and “the disproportionate use of natural resources by certain countries over long periods of time” [51].

Another cause is the absence of a sense of the universal duty to the common good arising out of our common humanity and what our Catholic tradition calls the “universal destination of goods,” which subordinates extreme private property claims to the well-being of society at large, especially the poor [93]. This mindset is strongly reflected in an economic sector

driven by the maximization of profits frequently isolated from other considerations—such as care for the environment and care for the least among us. For Pope Francis, “The mindset which leaves no room for sincere concern for the environment is the same mindset which lacks concern for the inclusion of the most vulnerable members of society” [196].

A related cause is an excessively anthropocentric view of the human person that “continues to stand in the way of shared understanding and of any effort to strengthen social bonds” [116]. This view of humankind fosters an attitude of domination of the environment and of other people that undermines responsibility for the earth and for the human community. Both the environment and other people become “objects” to be used by individuals for their own advantage and not “subjects” calling upon us for respect and care. As Francis notes, “If the present ecological crisis is one small sign of the ethical, cultural and spiritual crisis of modernity, we cannot presume to heal our

relationship with nature and the environment without healing all fundamental human relationships” [119].

So what is humanity to do? Pope Francis calls for international, national, and local dialogue on environmental policy, including transparent decision-making that serves human fulfillment and not just economic interests. Religions and science must work together for the common good. Essential too are changes in lifestyle and new attitudes born of individual conversion; community networks to solve the complex problems; and a spirituality that is marked by moderation, mutual care, and a passionate concern to protect our natural world and to build a better world for all, especially those who are poor and vulnerable.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, May 24, 2015.
- 2 Numbers in brackets refer to the paragraph numbers in the respective documents.

