



Praise be to you, Lord

The First World War lingers in the memory as humanity's first encounter with industrialized killing on a mass scale. New weapons of the machine age obliterated forests, villages and fields — an entire way of life. This new type of war also deeply shaped the thinking of men who experienced it firsthand. Among them were J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, two of the greatest Christian writers of the last century.

Generations have delighted in Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, and Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *Space Trilogy*. But what people often miss in the work of both men is their profound — and deeply *Christian* — love of nature and its creatures, and their equally deep distrust of man's temptation to dominate and abuse; to treat creation as dead matter available for exploitation.

That word “creation” is a key to understanding both writers. For both Tolkien and Lewis, all life and all creation are gifts of a loving God. Neither man disputed the good in modern technology, but they saw clearly that the world is a kind of sacrament, alive with a beauty that points to its Creator.

We don't “own” the earth or its creatures. We have dominion over the world only as its stewards, not as its sovereigns. And as stewards, we have the duty to respect the created order and husband it for the common good.

On June 18, Pope Francis released his latest encyclical, *Laudato Si* (in English, “Praise be to you, Lord”). By its nature, *Laudato Si* is a serious teaching document, not a form of story-telling. But its purpose is rooted in the same concerns shared by the two great authors. Both writers would know that the title is taken from Francis of Assisi's great prayer, “Canticle of the Sun.”

From the start of his papacy, this Holy Father has tried to model St. Francis' simplicity and joy. And just as St. Francis treasured the beauty of the world as a mirror of God's love, so Pope Francis seeks to protect its beauty as a good steward. That desire to protect, along with a keen sense of justice, is the spirit behind this encyclical.

Laudato Si is a wide-ranging and detailed text. It includes an unusual level of scientific analysis and policy recommendations. Climate change and economic development play key roles in the document's content. This will invite discussion.



What's essential is this: Vital truths about human nature, the nature of creation, the human “will to power” and its impact on the environment, are laced throughout *Laudato Si*. Pope Francis develops the teaching of his predecessors, from John XXIII to John Paul II, with persuasive skill. One of the Pope's best lines is borrowed from Benedict XVI: “*The external deserts of the world are growing because the internal deserts [of our hearts] have become so vast.*”

But my favorite passage comes directly from Pope Francis himself:

“If we approach nature and the environment without [a spirit of] openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs ... The poverty and austerity of St. Francis were no mere veneer of asceticism, but something much more radical: a refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled” (11).

Laudato Si speaks eloquently of inter-generational solidarity; the beauty of the family; the dishonesty of population control as an answer to poverty; the broad duties of rich nations to those that are poor; and the dignity of the human body in its God-given masculine and feminine forms. “It is not a healthy attitude,” Pope Francis writes, “which would seek to cancel out sexual difference because it no longer knows how to confront it.”

For the Holy Father, a humane ecology includes much more than our treatment of the material world. It involves our bodies, our sexuality and our personhood as well.

There's a line in *The Lord of the Rings* that's worth remembering here:

“[It] is not our part to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the succor of those years wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the fields that we know, so that those that live after may have clean earth to till. What weather they shall have is not ours to rule.”

Times have changed since Tolkien wrote those words, but the wounds of humanity and the world it stewards have only grown more urgent. In reading and judging *Laudato Si*, we might keep that fact in mind.

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Local Catholics praise papal tome on environment

The encyclical letter of Pope Francis, "Laudato Si, mi signore, (Praise be to you, my Lord)," released June 18 will be one of the most discussed papal encyclicals issued in modern times.

It was not just a letter to the bishops or even a letter to the Catholic faithful, but a letter to the entire world because the topic is, "On the Care of our Common Home."

Archbishop Charles Chaput called the encyclical "a deep and complex appeal to conscience, a challenge to all of us to re-examine our stewardship of the environment and our love for the global poor."

"It argues forcefully for the priority of the common good, the dignity of the marginalized and the beauty of God's creation as a gift we all need to husband and share.

"As Philadelphians prepare for the World Meeting of Families this fall, Pope Francis reminds us that the family is a school of love and responsibility, the seed of a 'culture of life' that includes the dignity of the earth and the needs of all people."

Sister Mary Scullion, R.S.M., cofounder of Project HOME and a leader in programs that alleviate the suffering of the poor, said, "One of the remarkable aspects of the encyclical is its powerful analysis that links climate change to the suffering of poor communities and an unjust international economic system. By mak-

ing the connection between the suffering of God's creation and the suffering of God's children, there is a mandate for us to work in an integrated way of economic justice and ecological justice."

Father Dennis J. Billy, C.Ss.R., a moral theologian at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary, believes the document must be given careful analysis, not snap judgment.

Father Billy points out there is "nothing substantially new in magisterial teaching," and Pope Francis relies on "the writings of his predecessors, especially John XXIII, John Paul II and Benedict XVI." The pope also quotes significantly from documents published by various Catholic bishops' conferences in countries around the world.

The Redemptorist priest described the pope's critiques of "rampant consumerism that is a result of unbridled capitalism" as a root cause of the problem of climate change. He said the pope "does not call for a 'quick fix,' but would like to see us taking solid incremental steps at solving the problem."

Catholic food pantry offers choices, just like a store

Hungry families in Montgomery County hoping to stretch their food budget now have the opportunity to choose the foods they want, just as though they were shopping in a store.

The food pantry at archdiocesan Catholic Social Services' Norristown location recently completed a major renovation to transform its heavily trafficked site into a "Choice Market" model for individuals and families exper-

riencing food insecurity.

"The Choice model is just good common sense," said Liz Peteraf, administrator of the CSS Family Services Center in Norristown, "giving people the opportunity to choose foods that fit their preferences and support their health, and in a way that promotes their dignity and is also more efficient than the old system."

The new initiative at one of the largest food pantries in the region was made possible by the generosity of two major donors. The Federal Association of the Order of Malta, a Catholic lay organization dedicated to service and charitable work, provided a \$25,000 grant to purchase glass-door display case refrigerators and freezers.

The pantry closed from May 29 through June 7 to accomplish the renovations performed mostly by more than 50 volunteers, and re-opened on Monday, June 8 as a "Choice Market."

Most come from area Catholic parishes: St. Paul in Norristown, which provides space on its campus to the CSS Family Service Center and food pantry; St. Genevieve in Flourtown; St. Titus in East Norriton; Visitation B.V.M. in Trooper, near Norristown; St. Helena in Blue Bell; Epiphany of Our Lord in Plymouth Meeting and Mother of Divine Providence in King of Prussia.

In just the first three months of this year, the food pantry distributed 150,353 pounds of food to 2,327 households, which represent 8,202 individuals served.

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