

POPE FRANCIS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

CARING FOR OUR COMMON HOME

BY MICHAEL WRIGHT



As a father, I try to impart my wisdom to my kids. My advice often falls on deaf ears. Sound familiar?

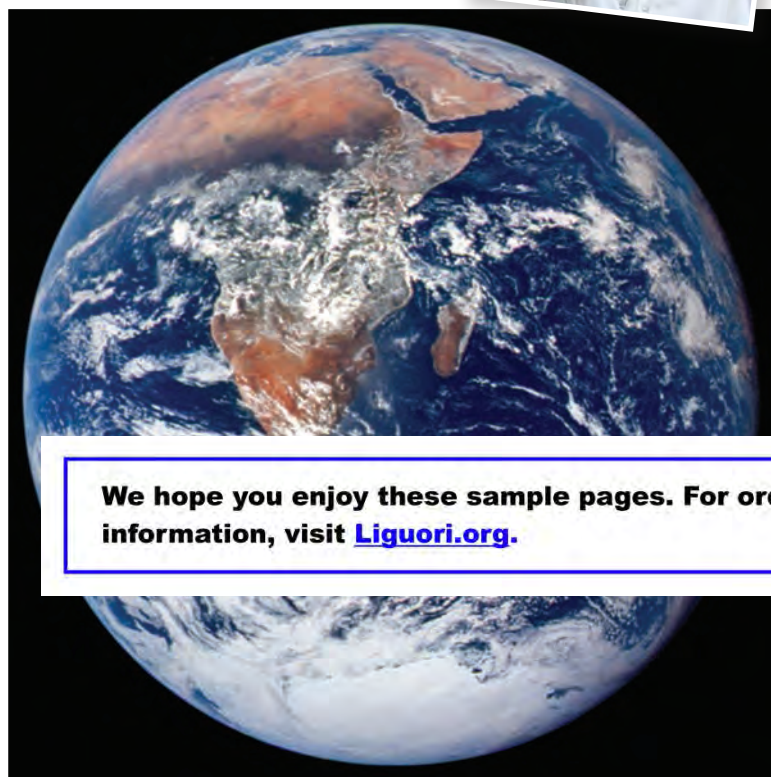
In “On Care for Our Common Home” (*Laudato Si’*), Pope Francis offers us, his spiritual children, wisdom about caring for the environment—the first encyclical to do so in the Church’s history. The pope covers society, technology, economics, and culture, which he explains are all interrelated with the natural environment. He also connects the environment with basic values of life, love of God and neighbor, family, and the common good.

Pope Francis calls the earth our “common home.” We see this reality in images from the 1972 Apollo 17 mission, which show our entire planet in a single frame. These images also show the fragile veil of our atmosphere.

EARTH = GOD’S CREATION

Despite Pope Francis’ background as a scientist, some feel that he and the Church shouldn’t be concerned with science and the environment. The environment, however, is relevant to our faith:

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING. Its care is tied to respect for God’s creation. Along with issues of life, family, and the poor, care for creation is a principle of Catholic social teaching.



“THE BLUE MARBLE” FROM APOLLO 17, NASA, DECEMBER 7, 1972

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SOCIAL JUSTICE. The environment’s degradation affects the vulnerable, particularly the poor in developing countries who contribute least to the problem but have the most to lose.

LIFE. Environmental problems, and climate change in particular, affect all life—from sea creatures at the bottom of the food chain to populations that depend on snowmelt for clean water. Weather change already causes famine, disease, and death for millions of people.

Scientists report that all the earth's life-supporting systems are in decline. We already see the effects of climate change: extreme weather, drought, and flooding. These effects are well-correlated to warming from human-induced carbon emissions, a reality on which all climate scientists and the pope agree. Exacerbating factors occur worldwide—deforestation, land-use changes, unsustainable consumption, and pollution. The pope laments: "These situations have caused sister earth, along with all the abandoned of our world, to cry out, pleading that we take another course. Never have we so hurt and mistreated our common home as we have in the last two hundred years" (53).

Pope Francis is candid about environmental problems: "Our goal is...to become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it" (19).

LYING TO OURSELVES

After the 1986 Challenger shuttle disaster, sociologist Diane Vaughan coined *normalization of deviance* to refer to acceptance of recurring anomalies that eventually led to the accident. Likewise, we generally accept resource consumption and environmental exploitation as normal. Even in economic statistics, such as housing starts and consumer confidence, we consider *more* to be *better*.

Pope Francis equates environmental abuse with sin, quoting Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople: "For human beings to degrade the integrity of the earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the earth of its natural forests or destroying its wetlands; for human beings to contaminate the earth's waters, its land, its air, and its life—these are sins" (8).

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