

The environmental challenge affects not only our technology, but also our spirituality and lifestyles, and it requires a re-think at the deepest level, both individually and collectively. The challenge has been well put to the world by Pope Francis in his 2015 Encyclical Letter *'Laudato Si'*, which takes its inspiration and title from St Francis' hymn, best known in English as *"All creatures of our God and King"*. Key ideas in the Letter are:

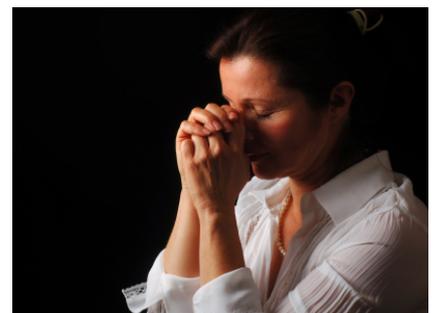
- The hymn describes the planet as *"our Sister, Mother Earth"*, and all its creatures as our sisters and brothers. Yet we treat them as objects, and the earth *"is the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor...defenceless before the interests of the almighty market, which becomes the only rule"*.
- We are always trying to catch up with the new products of an accelerating consumerism promoted by advertising. *"The emptier a person's heart, the more he or she needs things to buy, own and consume."*
- To counter this *"we need a sound ethics, a culture and a spirituality genuinely capable of setting limits and teaching clear-minded self-restraint"*.
- This requires not only developing better techniques, but a conversion of the heart, to set us free from our compulsive craving for more and more things, and to restore our broken relationship with the natural world.
- Ecological conversion *"is not an optional or secondary aspect of our Christian experience"*.
- Through the incarnation God calls us home, forgives our sins, frees us from our addictions and offers us a vision of hope.
- Contemplative prayer enables us to slow down, to wonder and cherish each moment. *"Those who enjoy more and live better are those who have given up dipping here and there, always on the look-out for what they do not have."*
- The story of Noah tells us that *"all it takes is one good person to restore hope."*
- *"All is not lost! Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new start, despite their mental and social conditioning. No system can completely suppress our openness to what is good, true and beautiful, and our God-given ability to respond to his grace at work deep in our hearts. I appeal to everyone throughout the world not to forget this dignity which is ours. No-one has the right to take it from us."*

Questions:

- Which aspects of Pope Francis' message speak most powerfully to you in meeting the ecological challenge?
- What do you find most difficult?
- What do you find most helpful?

Contemplative Prayer

St Augustine of Hippo (AD 354-430) taught that we are born with a desire for eternal beauty, and nothing less than God himself can satisfy this longing of the human heart: *"You, O God, have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you"*.



Deliverance from our cravings comes from turning away from ourselves to God in an attitude of inner silence and stillness. Jean-Pierre de Caussade (1675-1751) wrote of *“the sacrament of the present moment”* - God is present in every moment of our lives, waiting to give himself to us as we offer our undivided attention.

These spiritual writers build on the teaching of Jesus: *“Consider the birds in the sky...the lilies in the fields”* (Matthew 6.25-34). Contemplation helps us to appreciate the beauty and freedom of things, and to become more centred and contented in our lives. To learn to stop in this way is difficult, but deeply rewarding, and essential for the future of the Earth.

Many different spiritual traditions share this emphasis on contemplative silence. *“A Field Guide to the Soul”* by James Thornton, the co-founder of Client Earth, includes many practical exercises to help us acquire this gift. In one of them he invites us to mark out one square foot of Earth, to sit or lie down beside it and give it our unwavering attention:

“See what is there. Much of it will be at a smaller scale than you usually notice. Do not touch anything, just attune your senses. Watch, listen, smell. Follow your curiosity. Watch everything. There is a universe at every level of scale...It will take about 20 minutes before you really start to see. Something you thought dead or inorganic will startle you with a movement so subtle you would never have noticed it before. Let yourself experience the life world of the beings within your one square foot. Your awareness is love, and loving anything can bring you to the whole. If a question arises in your heart, let it rise. Ask it...Stillness opens perception...When the heart asks its questions from deep silence they are received and subtly answered.”

Try it for yourself, and see what happens!

The full text of “Laudato Si” can be obtained from: The Catholic Truth Society, 42-46 Harleyford Road, London SE11 5AY. Phone: 020 7640 0042. Email: orders@CTSbooks.org

A Field Guide to the Soul by James Thornton - this is not available in bookshops, but copies can be obtained from: Michael Bourke, The Maltings, Little Stretton, Shropshire SY6 6AP (email: steamtrainhouse@yahoo.co.uk). Price £6 including postage; cheques made out to Michael G Bourke.

If you decide to explore this Avenue further, record this on the 'Future Calling - My Commitments' sheet.

With thanks to Michael Bourke for preparing these notes