News
EarthBeat



A large iceberg breaks from the Grey glacier in 2017 at the Torres del Pine National Park in Magallanes, Chile. (CNS/Joel Estay, EPA)



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As the nation votes today, our entire way of life is killing us and the planet. The profound disconnection between the imperative for infinite growth of current economic logic and the finite resources of the earth threaten all of life as we know it. We need a whole new way of thinking about faithful citizenship that is directed to the common good of planet Earth.

Old ways of social, political and economic thinking, including maximizing consumption and decision-making driven by special-interest groups, explain business management scholars Otto Scharmer and Katrin Kaufer, have "led us into a state of organized irresponsibility, collectively creating results that nobody wants."

And yet, in today's election, the most fundamental of all life issues — the environment — does not rank even in the top five concerns of voters, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation election tracking. While it is encouraging that health care is the leading concern of voters, national discourse tends to obscure how human health is dependent upon clean water, air and land.

Intimate interconnections between human health and clean ecosystems, tragically, are being torn asunder by a White House administration that is gutting the most important clean air, water, and land standards established over the past 50 years.

This is nothing less than an assault on truth and every form of life. It is an assault that is consistent with this president's often violent language against migrants, refugees, women, people of color and people who are disabled, poor and vulnerable. The president's rhetoric eviscerates civility because it is joined to actions by every department — whether the Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Education, or Department of Justice, that blatantly pervert the truth, justice, democratic norms and the common good.

This is what St. John Paul II and Pope Francis name as a culture of death. Being pro-life is far more than supporting unborn human life; being authentically pro-life means a transformation of lifestyle, attitudes and habits that promote the integrity of the whole of creation.

There is another way. In his prophetic 2015 encyclical "*Laudato Si'*, On Care for Our Common Home," Francis invited Catholics and all people of goodwill to a conversion

from an egocentric to an eco-centric moral imagination.

Francis is calling people of faith to a profound reorientation of our entire way of living personally and collectively to an "integral ecology" that truly cares for, and celebrates, the intimacy of the whole of God's creation.

That call to conversion and the moral imagination that inspires it could not be more timely. As Francis emphasizes, climate is a global common good "belonging to all and meant for all" because it is a "complex system linked to many of the essential conditions for human life." Francis underscored how we are "witnessing a disturbing warming of the climatic system."

A landmark study issued in October by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change finds the planet in an even more dire predicament than that described by the pope. The IPCC, an international group of scientists convened by the United Nations to guide policymakers, found that in order to avoid catastrophic damage the global economy must undergo changes in speed and scale that has "no documented historic precedent."

In other words, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is "telling us that we need to reverse emissions trends and turn the world economy on a dime," said Myles Allen, a physicist at Oxford University and one of the authors of the report.

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The urgency to turn the world economy on a dime is underscored by other ongoing scientific studies. For example, consider the World Wildlife Fund's Living Planet Report 2018 that details a 60 percent decline in the size of populations of mammals, birds, fish and amphibians in just over 40 years.

Or contemplate how the Living Planet Report calculates that 20 percent of the Amazon has disappeared in just 50 years. Tropical rainforests like the Amazon are "cradles of biodiversity." While rainforest cover only 6 percent of the earth, they are home to over half of the earth's biodiversity. The Amazon is considered one of the "lungs of the planet," yet deforestation and resource extraction may eliminate this "lung" by the end of this century.

And consider that the world's oceans cover nearly 70 percent of the earth. Hidden underneath the surface are mountain ranges and canyons that rival any on land. If we could venture below with scientists we would find the earth's largest habitat, home to billions of plants and animals — the vast majority of living things on the planet.

As Maurice Tamman and Matthew Green report, oceans are critical for regulating the earth's temperatures because they soak up human-generated heat and carbon dioxide. Yet in the past few decades, as Tamman and Green report, "oceans have undergone unprecedented warming" that have shifted currents and habitats. While these changes are mostly invisible from land, "this hidden climate change has had disturbing impact on marine life — if effect, creating an epic underwater refugee crisis."

While we need to lament these crises, we need not despair. There is hope, John Paul II reminds us in *Centesimus Annus*, because humanity receives from God its essential dignity and capacity to "transcend every social order so as to move towards truth and goodness."

Francis invites hope grounded in the Gospel that all of us can express through mutual expressions of social and political love that nurture authentic human and ecological development. This includes building new cooperative economic arrangements that are ecologically and economically sustainable for the earth.

Laudato Si' invites us to "regain the conviction that we need one another" and "that we have a shared responsibility for others and the world, and that being good and decent are worth it."

There is hope because we can nurture shared responsibility by building connections across seemingly distant and disparate communities. Two indigenous women poets recently celebrated intimate interconnections across the face of the earth as they lamented humanity's disregard for the most sacred sources of life.

As reported at Grist, Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner traveled from the Marshall Islands in Micronesia to Greenland's capital city Nuuk where she met Inuk poet Aka Niviana. I encourage readers to reflect upon, contemplate, and pray with these poets as they recite their poem "Rise" on top of a crevasse-scarred, melting glacier.

May all of us take a moment this Election Day to notice our breathing and air pressure expanding our lungs. May we notice that our breathing, indeed our lives, are intimately connected to the life and well-being of vast rainforests and oceans, as well as the tiniest creatures.

In gratitude for God's gifts of breathing, life and love, may we nurture new forms of social, political, economic and ecological love that renew the face of the earth.

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