News
EarthBeat

by Cardinal Blase Cupich

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Archbishop Blase Cupich of Chicago addresses media about Pope Francis' encyclical "Laudato

Archbishop Blase Cupich of Chicago addresses media about Pope Francis' encyclical "Laudato Si', on Care for Our Common Home," at the Archbishop Quigley Center in Chicago June 18, 2015. Six years later, the cardinal delivered a speech on how the U.S. church can more boldy respond to the papal document on the environment. (CNS photo/Karen Callaway, Catholic New World)

Editor's Note: *On June 13, Cardinal Blase J. Cupich of the Archdiocese of Chicago delivered the opening keynote address at the second "Laudato Si' and the U.S. Catholic Church" conference, held virtually and sponsored by the Catholic Climate Covenant and Creighton University, in Omaha, Nebraska. The conference series seeks to find ways to integrate Pope Francis' encyclical more deeply into the experience of the U.S. Catholic Church. Cupich's full prepared remarks, titled "From 'Not Enough' to Bold Embrace: U.S. Catholic Responses to Laudato Si'," are published below with permission.*

Recovering the spiritual and theological aspect of *Laudato Si'*

"In God we trust", we proclaim on our U.S. currency; yet do we? To put it differently, in which god do we trust? Is it the god money, Mammon (cf., Mt. 6:24), the idol who moves us *to have more*, and have more than others? Or do we trust in Jesus Christ, in whom and for whom everything was made (cf., Col. 1:16), who invites us to be more, and be with others?

Mammon is a divisive idol, one that triggers the worst in us: individualism, indifference, and irrational competition, while distorting freedom and "bolstering a complacency and a cheerful recklessness" (*Laudato Si*', *On Care for Our Common Home,* [hereafter LS] 59) that give us permission to excuse ourselves from supporting social cohesion and environmental care.

Today, you have asked me to talk about how U.S. Catholics could more boldly embrace "*Laudato Si*'*:* On Care for Our Common Home*,*" in which Pope Francis offers a response through the best science available and the Christian faith (cf., LS 199ff) to the most challenging sign of our time: the ecological crisis caused by human activity in the past two centuries (cf., LS 46).

What does the pope's challenging message mean for a Christian community that professes a commitment to promoting a culture of life, yet acts with indifference to the call to make the sacrifices needed to protect this common home God has entrusted to us?

In the Christian tradition, the Holy Father reminds us, Christ is the destiny and the measure of maturity of all things (LS 83), and the perfect model of a human being (cf., Heb. 2:10). By revealing the life of the Triune God, Jesus constantly invites and enables us to generate actual communion. Christ calls us to be open to ongoing conversion of our personal lifestyles and social systems, to be merciful and to freely love one another, especially the vulnerable.

As such, *Laudato Si*' needs to be understood as a renewed call to conversion, to respond to Jesus' invitation to think differently about human beings, life, society and our relationship with nature (LS 215): The first conversion involves a shift that affects our politics by moving from an economic model of development to one that emphasizes integral human development (cf., LS 13); a second conversion leads us to become more aware of the interconnectedness of creation and the need for global solidarity through ecological education that is both informational and formational and a third conversion, which is fundamentally spiritual (LS 220ff.), provides us both passion and motivation in taking up the challenges we face. So, let's briefly look at each of these conversions.

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From economic development to integral human development

In *Laudato Si'* Pope Francis recovers from our theological tradition the intrinsic interconnection that exists among ourselves, Creation and the Creator (cf., LS 66). In doing so, he urges us to remember our place in God's Creation as an integral component of the Earth's ecosystem. In the beginning, when God created the universe, He saw the goodness of Creation. All of this goodness was entrusted to humans, the only creatures created "in God's image and likeness … man and woman" (Gn 1:27), who were put "in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it" (Gn 2:15), meaning to live from it but also with it, and to take its fruits while caring for it (cf., LS 67).

Somewhere along the way, we have forgotten the sacred relationship that binds us with nature. We falsely have come to believe that we have absolute dominion over the Earth and can exploit it at will. This "is not a correct interpretation of the Bible as understood by the Church" (LS 67), the pope observes. We are called to love and care for the planet, not to treat it despotically. "We are not God" (LS 67), hence we are not at the center of Creation. We are an important part of it, and in fact, are dust of the Earth (cf. Genesis 2:7) for our very bodies are made of her elements." (LS2) The cry of the Earth now stirs our consciences to "acknowledge our sins against Creation." (LS 8)

This "Promethean vision of mastery over the world" (LS 116), as Pope Francis calls it, not only has had an impact on how we treat creation but is at the heart of the world's economic crisis, for we have come to adopt the false idol of economic growth as the sole purpose and overarching desire of society. The desire for money has fomented division between winners and losers, where "the winners take it all". Having experienced the benefits of economic progress, so many of us turn a blind eye to the consequences this way of living has on people, our planet and our own spirituality.

By adopting this one-dimensional approach to the economy, we have fallen into the misconception that material growth is synonymous with human development. By neglecting the relational, spiritual, and emotional dimensions of development, we have inflated our desires and our greed for *more*: more income, more growth, more possessions; and more than others, expanding competition over cooperation. This

paradigm has infiltrated all aspects of our lives and convinced us of the "*myth of progress*" (LS 78), the illusion that we are free to exploit the Earth for personal and national economic growth, without considering the lasting consequences of our exploitation.

The need of a new vision of the economy, the environment and global solidarity comes into view as we look at the crises confronting the human family over recent decades. In 2008-2009, we suffered a severe financial crisis that spread throughout the globe. This crisis was an opportunity to overhaul the global financial system and align it more closely with the real economy and the common good (cf., LS 109). Unfortunately, since the 2008 Recession, a widening of the wealth gap has worsened inequalities, which continue to tear at the fabric of humanity.

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In 2015, world leaders, "painfully aware" (LS 19) of the effects of our economic choices on our common home, moved to act. On behalf of more than 190 countries, they signed the historic Paris Agreement, which set a sustainable global agenda and goals. Fortunately, our country has re-joined this effort, although, despite this hopeful opportunity to change our development model, some polluting countries, including the United States, have been reticent to live up to their commitments for the Sustainable Development Goals.

That, of course brings us to *Laudato Si*' when Pope Francis, in that same year, 2015, warned us about the lack of leadership and the weak political responses to the social, economic and ecological crises (cf., LS 54). He provided a thorough analysis, with the help of many conferences of bishops worldwide, including the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) (cf., LS 52), urging, as did St. John Paul II years ago, the need for a "global ecological conversion", both personal and structural. Sadly, however, we in this country have not, for the most part, taken this

invitation to heart.

Pope Francis invites us to explore new ways of understanding progress, different from the "myth of progress" (cf., LS 16). Particularly, this means an economy "which favors productive diversity and business creativity" (LS 129) while developing practices that preserve nature's gifts for generations to come (cf., LS 180-1). Ultimately, in the words of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, the conversion of the economy requires "eliminating the structural causes of the dysfunctions of the world economy and correcting models of growth which have proved incapable of ensuring respect for the environment" (LS 6) (cf., LS 2). For that to occur, the economy should serve society and political life, not the other way around (cf., LS 189).

What becomes clear in this analysis is that this misconception of development goes hand in hand with a distortion of freedom (cf., LS 6; 105), which has impacted our approach to politics. While the sense of absolute freedom without responsibility has led us to take from the Earth more than we need, it has also alienated us from our fundamental identities as brothers and sisters of the same human family. Let us be clear. Sharing, solidarity, and communion are neither anti-freedom values nor the basis of an anti-American "socialist" plan. They are first and foremost Christian values, deep human values that are vital for actual human development.

What is needed are new political systems "capable of reforming and coordinating institutions" (LS 181) and producing policies that are "far-sighted […] and interdisciplinary" (LS 197) systems that intrinsically include the notion of justice. We also need bold politics capable of challenging long-standing idols and free-market fundamentalisms, while also maintaining integrity and transparency (cf., LS 182; 189). Above all, we need open, participatory and inclusive political systems that involve all forms of wisdom (cf., LS 63). Each of us must take responsibility for effecting change by becoming involved in the political process and by advocating for full participation of all citizens by protecting voting rights.

We have arrived at a turning point in history and must make some hard decisions, especially given how the COVID-19 pandemic has complicated these longstanding crises. The pre-existing socio-economic, ecological and political crises are even more exacerbated as we see in underfunded public services, over-financialized economies that encourage perpetual risk-taking, continued environmental degradation and, worst of all, the absence of global solidarity.

That is why we must pause and reflect on our choices both communally and personally, for our current lifestyles and policies are inextricably linked with the current model of development. Our every action is relevant, since small gestures of love help change the world, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux reminded us (cf., LS 230). As St. Francis of Assisi said, let us bring light where is darkness, and hope where there is despair.

But to give space for God's light, each of us must at the least reject all attempts to divide us as a people. That would be a great place to start. We have to understand, as the Holy Father reminds us that "we are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental" (LS 139).

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Conversion through ecological education

To sustain a process of global ecological conversion, we must prioritize education about ecology and the human place in Creation. For *Laudato Si',* this education involves becoming familiar with scientific information and raising our consciousness about the complex issues involved: environmental justice, pollution, climate change, potable water access, biodiversity, and the breakdown of society amid global inequality. Could we not begin this education in our parishes, schools and universities by arranging for small group gatherings to take up this dialogue?

But information about ecology is meaningless without the values needed to make important choices. Education is incomplete without formation, that is cultivating social virtues that help people make selfless ecological commitments (LS 211). To be complete, ecology education must provide a critical understanding of the "myth" of a modernity grounded in a utilitarian mind-set, e.g. individualism, unlimited progress, competition, consumerism, the unregulated market, etc. (LS 210).

Ecological education also involves promoting a new way of thinking about human beings, life, society and our relationship with nature (LS 215), which aims to promote a simpler and more "grateful" way of living, concerned with the needs of the poor and the environment (LS 214). While this kind of education aims at forging a "culture of love" and care (LS 213) in each of us, a true ecological conversion will require the conversion of our national and international cultures that promotes a "new universal

solidarity" (LS 14) and counters the laws of the market (LS 30) and "self-interested pragmatism" (LS 215). Pursuing the moral dimensions of culture has the promise of urgently moving society forward "in a bold cultural revolution" (LS 114).

Archbishop Blase J. Cupich of Chicago, right, and Gina McCarthy, administrator of the U.S. Env

Archbishop Blase J. Cupich of Chicago, right, and Gina McCarthy, administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, look over a board with Ted Hudon that displays the solar panel activity at Old St. Mary's School in Chicago July 24, 2015. (CNS photo/Karen Callaway, Catholic New World)

A spiritual conversion that provides passion and motivation

Radical systemic change will not come — let alone be sustained — by mere political, economic or scientific arguments (cf., LS 202). What is needed is a conversion of the heart. In this regard, we as Catholics have much to contribute, since "authentic faith … always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better that we found it" (EG, 183).

Christian spirituality provides passion to care for and protect the world and all humans and impels us to reconcile our personal values with our everyday practices. Christian spirituality "proposes an alternative understanding of the quality of life and encourages a prophetic and contemplative lifestyle … marked by moderation and the capacity to be happy with little." (LS 222). As such, Christian spirituality ignites personal and social love (cf., LS 231), because it favors "sobriety and humility" at a personal level (LS 224), while increasing "the capacity for living together in communion" (LS 228), moving from indifference to loving awareness, and from individualism to solidarity (cf., LS 220). And finally in our worship, Christian spirituality recovers our capacity to contemplate and celebrate the goodness of Creation; it is the antidote to "a more intensified pace of life and work which might be called ‘rapidification'" (LS 18).

Ours is a radical spirituality, equal to the radical change necessary to save human society and our common home. Consequently, one vital element of Christian spirituality that must occupy a central role in the transition to a sustainable planet with a just economy is sacrifice. This is a topic that is usually avoided in discussions of how to meet the ecological crises that confront us for two reasons. The first is that speaking clearly about the level of personal sacrifice that will be required to move

toward an equitable economy makes it more difficult to form a consensus supporting climate justice. The second is that any discussion of sacrifice will be distorted by climate deniers to make the pathway to sustainability seem impossible.

But the world's great religious and ethical traditions urge us to confront the reality that major individual and societal sacrifice are essential to saving our planet. And these same spiritual and moral traditions are equally united in demanding that the marginalized must not bear heavy burdens in moving to planetary sustainability.

It might seem that a society such as ours has lost its capacity for sustained sacrifice, or at least lost sight of the ennobling role that sacrifice can play in our individual and communal lives. But if we look more deeply, we find in the enormous sacrifices that families make for their children a proclamation that sustained sacrifice is in fact all around us.

This is the linchpin for building a public ethic of sacrifice in pursuit of a just and sustainable world. Pope Francis devotes tremendous attention in *Laudato Si*' to the ethic of intergenerational responsibility, which is ultimately rooted in the spirituality of sacrifice for those who will inherit the planet. We must be willing to publicly advance such an ethic, not as a position we grudgingly acknowledge the need for, but as the great moral call of our age.

The transformative power of spirituality is contagious. Starting from promoting a personal rediscovery of the beauty of Creation through the grace of Christ, it can fuel a conversion towards new structures, instilled with universal love that can build up the common good (cf., LS 219; 235). In sum, Christian spirituality can provide a rich and balanced understanding of the meaning of our life on Earth (cf., LS 125), as well as the basis for a new understanding of growth, underpinned by an economic system that has people at its center, with long-term policies that care for future generations (cf., LS 231).

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Concluding remarks

The threefold conversion I have discussed today will require ongoing dialogue, a commitment to education and repeatedly tapping into the deep spiritual resources of our tradition if our nation and our world is to move from "not enough" to a bold embrace of the vision of *Laudato Si'*. Likewise, I am convinced that it is useless to talk about advancing a culture of life absent a vigorous commitment — both by individuals and communities — to making the sacrifices required for improving the socio-economic, ecological and political crises of our time.

Pope Francis has been clear about the interconnected nature and complexity of the challenges we face, and the need to address them in unity, ever mindful that it is in God we trust. It is up to us to put aside any false idols and continually respond to the call to conversion that will lead to a more just, equitable and loving future.

Let us be reminded of our mission to care for each other and for the Earth. Let us seek an interconnected response based on faith and science. And let us not be discouraged by the work ahead. Instead, let us trust and rejoice in God's promise to make all things new (Rev. 21:5), and take to heart the encouragement the Holy Father offers when he tells us that in spite of the practical relativism and consumer culture we live in, "all is not lost. Human beings," he notes, "while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves and their mental and social conditioning, choosing again what is good, and making a new start. No system can completely suppress our openness to what is good, true and beautiful, or our God-given ability to respond to his grace at work deep in our hearts. I appeal to my sisters and brothers throughout the world not to forget this dignity which is ours" (205).

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