News
EarthBeat
Pope Francis looks at photos of the aftermath of a massive landslide in October 1963 that kill

Pope Francis looks at photos of the aftermath of a massive landslide in October 1963 that killed 1,910 people in northern Italy during an audience with pilgrims from the Diocese of Belluno-Feltre and from the association "Vajont: The Future of Memory," and local government officials in the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican Jan. 19, 2024. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Cindy Wooden

View Author Profile

Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

January 19, 2024
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The obligation to care for creation is not only about the environment, "it has to do with human life, as the Creator conceived and arranged it," Pope Francis told a group from northern Italy dedicated to remembering the 1,910 people who died from the Vajont dam disaster.

"One thing is striking," the pope said; "it was not mistakes in the design or construction of the dam that caused the tragedy, but the very fact of wanting to build a reservoir in the wrong place."

In October 1963 a landslide on an unstable mountain on the southern side of the reservoir set off a massive tsunami, wiping out entire towns and villages and killing 1,910 people. The dam, built to generate power, remained intact.

The decision to build and use the dam, despite cautionary studies about its surroundings, put "the logic of profit before the care of people and the environment in which they live," the pope said during a meeting Jan. 19 with pilgrims from the Diocese of Belluno-Feltre and from the association "Vajont: The Future of Memory."

The support survivors showed one another and the way people in the region built new towns and have continued to work together to protect the land have set off a "wave of hope" motivated by fraternity whereas the "wave that brought despair was caused by greed. And greed destroys, while fraternity builds," the pope said.

Advertisement

"This is extremely relevant today," the pope said. "The care of creation is not simply an ecological factor, but an anthropological issue: It has to do with human life, as the Creator conceived and arranged it, and it concerns the future of everyone, of the global society in which we are immersed."

The earth, "the common home, is crumbling," the pope said, "and the reason is once again the same: greed for profit, a frenzy to earn and possess that seems to make people feel omnipotent" when being creatures should mean learning to respect limits.

Pope Francis noted that 2024 marks the 800th anniversary of St. Francis of Assisi writing most of the "Canticle of the Creatures," the hymn of praise to God for the gifts of creation, a hymn in which he addresses as brother or sister the sun, moon, stars, wind, fire and other elements.

Calling them brothers and sisters, the pope said, makes it clear that all creation is "part of a single 'living web of good,' lovingly arranged by the Lord for us."

In the canticle, St. Francis praises the Lord for "Sister Water, which is very useful and humble and precious and chaste."

And it is useful and humble, the pope said, "yet it became tremendous and destructive in the case of the Vajont and is inaccessible for so many in the world today who suffer thirst or have no drinkable water."

"We need the contemplative gaze, the respectful gaze of St. Francis to recognize the beauty of creation and to know how to give things their proper order, to stop devastating the environment with the deadly logic of greed and to collaborate fraternally in development," he said.