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Seeing Creation as a Gift

In his 16 September general audience, Pope Francis continued his catechesis on the Church's social teaching, stressing the need to "care for our common home."

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Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

To emerge from a pandemic, we need to look after and care for each other. To look after and care for each

other. And we must support those who care for the weakest, the sick and the elderly. Ah, there is the tendency to cast the elderly aside, to abandon them. And this is bad. These people -- well defined by the Spanish term "*cuidadores*" (caretakers), those who take care of the sick -- play an essential role in today's society, even if they often do not receive the recognition and recompense they deserve. Caring is a golden rule of our nature as human beings, and brings with it health and hope (cf. Encyclical *Laudato Si'* [LS], 70).

Taking care of those who are sick, of those who are in need, of those who are cast aside: this is a human, and also Christian, wealth.

We must also extend this care to our common home: to the earth and to every creature. All forms of life are interconnected (see *ibid.*, 137-138), and our health depends on that of the ecosystems that God created and

entrusted to us to care for (see *Gen* 2:15). Abusing them, on the other hand, is a grave sin that damages us, and harms us, and makes us sick (cf. *LS*, 8; 66). The best antidote against this misuse of our common home is contemplation (see *ibid.*, 85, 214). But how come? Isn't there a vaccine for this, for the care of the common home, so as not to set it aside? What is the antidote against the sickness of not taking care of our common home? It is contemplation. "If someone has not learned to stop and admire something beautiful, we should not be surprised if he or she treats everything as an object to be used and abused without scruple" (*ibid.*, 215). Also in terms of using things and discarding them. However, our common home, creation, is not a mere "resource". Creatures have a value in and of themselves and each one "reflects in its own way a ray of God's infinite wisdom and goodness" (*Catechism of*

the Catholic Church, 339). This value and this ray of divine light must be discovered and, in order to discover it, we need to be silent, we need to listen, and we need to contemplate. Contemplation also heals the soul.

Without contemplation, it is easy to fall prey to an unbalanced and arrogant anthropocentrism, the “I” at the centre of everything, which gives excessive importance to our role as human beings, positioning us as absolute rulers of all other creatures. A distorted interpretation of biblical texts on creation has contributed to this misinterpretation, which leads to the exploitation of the earth to the point of suffocating it. Exploiting creation: this is the sin. We believe that we are at the centre, claiming to occupy God's place and so we ruin the harmony of creation, the harmony of God's plan. We become predators, forgetting our vocation as custodians of life. Of course, we can

and must work the earth so as to live and to develop. But work is not synonymous with exploitation, and it is always accompanied by care: ploughing and protecting, working and caring... This is our mission (cf. *Gen 2:15*). We cannot expect to continue to grow on a material level, without taking care of the common home that welcomes us. Our poorest brothers and sisters and our mother earth lament for the damage and injustice we have caused, and demand we take another course. It demands of us a conversion, a change of path; taking care of the earth too, of creation.

Therefore, it is important to recover the contemplative dimension, that is, looking at the earth, creation as a gift, not as something to exploit for profit: no. When we contemplate, we discover in others and in nature something much greater than their usefulness. Here is the heart of the

issue: contemplating is going beyond the usefulness of something.

Contemplating the beautiful does not mean exploiting it, no:

contemplating. It is free. We discover the intrinsic value of things given to them by God. As many spiritual masters have taught us, heaven, earth, sea, and every creature have this iconic capacity, or this mystical capacity to bring us back to the Creator and to communion with creation. For example, St. Ignatius of Loyola, at the end of his Spiritual Exercises, invites us to carry out "Contemplation to come to love", that is, to consider how God looks at His creatures and to rejoice with them; to discover God's presence in His creatures and, with freedom and grace, to love and care for them.

Contemplation, which leads us to an attitude of care, is not a question of looking at nature from the outside, as if we were not immersed in it. But

we are inside nature, we are part of nature. Rather, it is done from within, recognising us as part of creation, making us protagonists and not mere spectators of an amorphous reality that is only to be exploited. Those who contemplate in this way experience wonder not only at what they see, but also because they feel they are an integral part of this beauty; and they also feel called to guard it and to protect it. And there is one thing we must not forget: those who cannot contemplate nature and creation, cannot contemplate people in their true wealth. And those who live to exploit nature end up exploiting people and treating them like slaves. This is a universal law. If you cannot contemplate nature, it will be very difficult for you to contemplate people, the beauty of people, your brother, your sister. All of us.

Those who know how to contemplate will more easily set to work to change what produces degradation and damage to health. They will strive to educate and promote new production and consumption habits, to contribute to a new model of economic growth that guarantees respect for our common home and respect for people. The contemplative in action: this is good! Each one of us should be a guardian of the environment, of the purity of the environment, seeking to combine ancestral knowledge of millennia-long cultures with new technical knowledge, so that our lifestyle may always be sustainable.

Finally, contemplating and caring: these are two attitudes that show the way to correct and rebalance our relationship as human beings with creation.

Oftentimes, our relationship with creation seems to be a relationship between enemies: destroying creation for our benefit. Exploiting creation for our profit. Let us not forget that this will be paid for dearly; let us not forget that Spanish saying: "God always forgives; we forgive sometimes; nature never forgives". Today I was reading in the newspaper about those two great glaciers in Antarctica, near the Amundsen Sea: they are about to fall. It will be terrible, because the sea level will rise and this will bring many, many difficulties and cause so much harm. And why? Because of global warming, not caring for the environment, not caring for the common home. On the other hand, when we have this relationship - let me say the word - "fraternal": it is a figure of speech; a "fraternal" relationship with creation, we will become guardians of the common home, guardians of life and

guardians of hope. We will guard the heritage that God has entrusted to us so that future generations may enjoy it. And some may say: "But, I can get by like this". But the problem is not how you are going to manage today - this was said by a German theologian, a Protestant, a good man: Bonhoeffer - the problem is not how you are managing today; the problem is: what will be the legacy, life for future generations? Let us think of our children, our grandchildren: what will we leave if we exploit creation? Let us protect this path of the "guardians" of our common home, guardians of life and also guardians of hope. They safeguard the heritage that God has entrusted to us (people, all people) so that future generations may enjoy it. I think especially of the indigenous peoples, to whom we all owe a debt of gratitude - also of penance, to repair the evil we have done to them. But I am also thinking of those

movements, associations, popular groups, which are committed to protecting their territory with its natural and cultural values. These social realities are not always appreciated, and at times they are even obstructed; because they do not earn money; but in reality they contribute to a peaceful revolution, that we might call the “revolution of care”. Contemplating so as to care, contemplating to protect, to protect ourselves, creation, our children, and our grandchildren, and to protect the future. Contemplating to care for and to protect, and to leave a legacy to the future generation.

And this must not be delegated to others: this is the task of every human being. Each one of us can and must be a “guardian of the common home”, capable of praising God for His creatures, and of contemplating creatures, and protecting them. Thank you.

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