

**International Seminar “Beyond sustainable development: integral ecology”
Seminario Internazionale “Oltre lo sviluppo sostenibile: l’ecologia integrale”**

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Implementing Laudato Si':

**Do we send Cadres of Bureaucrats - as the millenium goals would suggest - or
Companies of Saints - the exercise of spiritual freedom in a post-Christian world?**

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The situation that this encyclical seeks to address began for my forebears (*antenati*) with the dissolution of the monasteries on that beautiful fertile island England, which was completely self-sufficient. There was no poverty. Everyone had what was required to feed his family, and a multi-faceted web of tithing and charity ensured those in need were cared for ... until King Henry VIII and his friends decided to build an empire, to tear down the monasteries to build ships and cannons, to divide the land among friends, selling the remainder to the highest bidder. The integral relationship between the person and nature in this community - a community which produced so many saints - was destroyed.

Eventually, my family made its way to America, most likely as indentured servants, paying their seven years of labor for the passage, and then moved west to stake their claims as subsistence farmers, not unlike their ancestors, except without the support of a Catholic culture.

And so, here I am today, a Roman Catholic living in America, representing a culture where some of the best and worst ideals are on display. As to the good, the United States originally was meant to mirror what Leo XIII said on the dignity of the human person: persons precede the state. As the United States' Declaration of Independence says, there are human rights that are inalienable - they are not granted by the state and the state cannot take them away. Our other founding document, the Constitution, has a Bill of Rights that does not grant any rights but only limits the government when it attempts to rule on those rights. That means laws and regulations are servants to the person and not for the technical rationalization of persons in order that they may be coerced or managed into serving the state. This freedom provides a unique opportunity to implement *Laudato Si'*.

My work involves getting conflicting parties - Fortune 100 companies, the federal government (specifically USEPA) and communities across America - to work together. My position leads me to some of the most polluted, most distressed communities in the U.S. Ultimately, my job is to help rebuild broken communities and re-knit them together.

I would like give some brief examples of how that freedom has allowed me to help implement principles found in *Laudato Si'* and later will discuss why the need for saints to carry out this work is increasingly urgent.

CONSENSUS

The first one is the story of South Camden, New Jersey, an area of mixed industrial facilities, scrap dealers and neighborhoods. We were called in because the state and city government had decided that it was too polluted for people to live there and the little neighborhood that had formed around Sacred Heart Church would need to be eliminated. As the Pope says in LS 183, environmental impact assessment should not be top-down, based on a plan influenced by political pressure; instead

consensus should always be reached between the different stakeholders, who can offer a variety of approaches, solutions and alternatives. The local population should have a special place at the table; they are concerned about their own future and that of their children, and can consider goals transcending immediate economic interest. We need to stop thinking in terms of “interventions” to save the environment in favour of policies developed and debated by all interested parties.

We worked with the pastor, a feisty Irishman named Father Doyle, and his friends to conduct a ground-up analysis. We did a comprehensive analysis of soil, air and water contamination and pollution sources. We determined that while there were definitely impacts, particularly the effects of scrap-handling which had to change, the underlying problem was that nature had been destroyed. The area was what we called an “urban desert.” In the winter, there was nothing alive. This both had a bearing on the people and their exposure to toxins and was also an underlying cause of the degradation of the neighborhood itself. As the Pope says in *Laudato Si* '48, quoting the Bolivian bishops, “The human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we tend to causes related to human and social degradation. In fact, the deterioration of the environment and of society affect the most vulnerable people on the planet: ‘Both everyday experience and scientific research of all attacks on the environment are suffered by the poorest.’” We worked with Father Doyle to bring back nature, planting gardens, buffers, and street trees, as well as working to mitigate sources of toxins. While the poverty remains, the neighborhood has continued to rebuild and strengthen.

COMMUNITY

The second experience is Toledo, Ohio, home to Chrysler Fiat's “Jeep.” In the neighborhood where the original Jeep plant had been the lifeblood for the community, our charge was to determine how to rebuild a neighborhood in which 43% of the lots were vacant and 30% of its population had been lost in the 10 years after the plant was moved. One of the key underlying principles was reconnecting with youth and helping them to engage in rebuilding their community. Over 60% of the children lived in poverty and so, as they become teenagers, they begin to steal. Once caught, the typical approach is for the children to enter the criminal justice system. With a criminal record, it is difficult, if not impossible, for them to get a job, continuing the cycle of poverty. To attempt to break the cycle, a number of efforts are underway. Led by St. Vincent's Hospital, an institution run by the Daughters of Charity (“Grey Nuns”), the efforts include a restorative justice program in which the children are encouraged to apologize to those they stole from and to participate in work-training projects designed to improve the neighborhood and rebuild the natural systems, including planting gardens, improving stormwater flow, and creating pocket parks.

CREATION

I see that the poor are cut off from nature in urban environments throughout America, and because of that rupture, they are unable to grow their own food or create something from a natural resource. They thereby become dependent, too often on a government check. So our poor are not only deprived of that relationship with creation, but of their own liberty and human dignity. However, through my small non-profit, Pax in Terra, we are helping urban communities find new ways to grow enough food to meaningfully supply them with fresh vegetables most of the year. In Bridgeport, CT, we have established an urban farm on the parking lot of Blessed Sacrament Church, where throughout the year, we grow as many as a dozen different varieties of vegetables. Between the farm in Bridgeport, and my farm in Newtown, approximately 30 minutes away, we help provide fresh vegetables to the food pantry that serves as many as 300 families a week. Our only regret is that we never have enough so we continue to strive to find new ways to help them grow more food on their own. This has become a model for others in the neighborhood, and throughout the diocese.

So in urban and rural communities, this rupture between the person and nature is happening in America. As it states in *Laudato Si'* 143:

Together with the patrimony of nature, there is also an historic, artistic and cultural patrimony which is likewise under threat. This patrimony is a part of the shared identity of each place and a foundation upon which to build a habitable city. It is not a matter of tearing down and building new cities, supposedly more respectful of the environment yet not always more attractive to live in. Rather, there is a need to incorporate the history, culture and architecture of each place, thus preserving its original identity. Ecology, then, also involves protecting the cultural treasures of humanity in the broadest sense. More specifically, it calls for greater attention to local cultures when studying environmental problems, favouring a dialogue between scientific-technical language and the language of the people. Culture is more than what we have inherited from the past; it is also, and above all, a living, dynamic and participatory present reality, which cannot be excluded as we rethink the relationship between human beings and the environment.

This critique is echoed by the environmental justice movement in the United States, a concern that communities of color are “gentrified” out of their neighborhoods by rising property values that lead to higher property taxes. As a past member of USEPA’s National Environmental Justice Advisory Council, and in my work in the communities I have mentioned as well as others, I have learned that many indigenous, poor, and people of color are seeking to protect their “supportive cultures” in which they could live, work and worship in a manner that allows multiple generations to live and thrive together.

Guardini, a source of inspiration for the encyclical, stated in his prophetic *Letters from Lake Como*: “The new culture will be incomparably more intense and more harsh. It will lack the organic both in its sense of growth and proportions; for the new culture will have been willed into to being by the spirit of man, built up abstractly by his own hands...A single fact, we must emphasize, will stamp the new culture: danger.” That danger is centered on human freedom. Guardini continues, “Our freedom fades when it is handed over to the forces of the unconscious, of self-interest, and of violence. We stand naked and exposed in the face of ever-increasing power, lacking the wherewithal to control it.”

Pope Francis echoes Guardini's warning:

We have to accept that technological products are not neutral, for they create a framework which ends up conditioning lifestyles and shaping social possibilities along the lines dictated by the interests of certain powerful groups.... Technology tends to absorb everything into its ironclad logic, and those who are surrounded with technology "know full well that it moves forward in the final analysis neither for profit nor for the well-being of the human race", that "in the most radical sense of the term power is its motive – a lordship over all." As a result, "man seizes hold of the naked elements of both nature and human nature." Our capacity to make decisions, a more genuine freedom and the space for each one's alternative creativity are diminished.

And so the question from my title "Do we send cadres of bureaucrats (as the millennium goals would suggest) or companies of saints? "

As the culture breaks down, do we become more and more dependent on rules carried out by bureaucrats to attempt to protect what is left of the culture? Can cadres of bureaucrats really overcome these challenges or do we need more? The problems with a bureaucratic system are numerous and can be categorized as follows:

- often the rules are ill-conceived to begin with so the effects are either useless or carry unintended consequences
- the rules cannot possibly cover all that is necessary to bring about good, so the effect is inadequate
- the rules can be misused, due to human sin, to control others far beyond what was intended

And thus, the state slowly, quietly undermines the freedom necessary to support human dignity. A bureaucratic system has no room for the Creator.

And so, while many in America focus on aspects such as the encyclical's statements on climate change or international agreements, my perspective is that a true, deeper, more personal Christianity is needed to preserve human freedom and rebuild a supportive culture. As the encyclical states, quoting Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople (LS 9), we should replace consumption with sacrifice, greed with generosity, wastefulness with a spirit of sharing, and embrace an ascetism which "entails learning to give, and not simply give up. It is a way of loving, of moving gradually away from what I want to what God's world needs. It is a liberation from fear, greed and compulsion." Pope Francis goes on to speak about the urgent need to move forward in a bold cultural revolution (LS 114), noting that in the great monastic tradition "seeing manual labor as spiritually meaningful proved revolutionary. Personal growth and sanctification came to be sought in the interplay of recollection and work" (LS 126).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we must look at history and ask, "Where are we? Has history marched on and left Christianity behind?" I did say in my title "in a post-Christian world." However, I believe the great English convert G.K. Chesterton may have had a better perspective when he said, "That the great ideals of the past failed not by being outlived (which must mean over-lived), but by not being lived enough.

Mankind has not passed through the Middle Ages. Rather mankind has retreated from the Middle Ages in reaction and rout. The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried.”

It might seem unusual for an American to end by quoting a 12th century European saint, Bernard of Clairvaux, but as I have learned in my work, nothing is possible without the connection to the Creator and His creation. Bernard’s zeal for the Lord led to the foundation of dozens of resilient Cistercian communities in his own lifetime. He once said to a fellow abbot: “One learns more from the woods than in books. The trees and the rocks will teach you things you will not hear elsewhere” (St. Bernard of Clairvaux, letter 101 to Henri Murdach, Abbot of Vauclair), and in speaking more precisely about our relation with creation stated that contemplation

regulates the affections, directs the actions, cuts away all excesses, forms the character, orders and ennobles the life, and lastly. . . endows the understanding with a knowledge of things divine and human. It . . . undoes what is tangled, unites what is divided, gathers what is scattered, uncovers what is hidden, searches out what is false and deceptive. It . . . lays down beforehand what we have to do, and passes in review what has been accomplished, so that nothing disordered may remain in the mind, nothing uncorrected. Finally . . . it makes provision for trouble, and thus endures misfortune, so to say, without feeling it, of which the former is the part of prudence, and the latter the function of fortitude (quoted Pius XII’s 1953 encyclical on Bernard, *Doctor Mellifluus*).

As St. Bernard and St. Francis captured the imagination of generations, so we must individually use the resources we have to show the way, to create institutions, neighborhoods, eco-villages, farms, lay monasteries, and other yet un-created communities to capture the imagination of our friends and neighbors and courageously face the challenges and problems that would destroy what we have been given.