

Polish Bishops' Conference

Pastoral Letter "Out of Concern for our Common Home" in the liturgical commemoration of St. Francis of Assisi, October 4, 2018 (Gal 6: 14-18; Mt 11: 25-30 - volume VI)

Brothers and Sisters!

The fragment of Matthew's Gospel read today (Mt 11:25-30) reveals the mysteries of Jesus' heart. Jesus invites us to undertake our tasks and fulfil them with Him. The expression "yoke and burden" which we read in the Gospel refers to the obligations imposed on us by God's law. His yoke, however, is first and foremost that of love; love towards man and towards the whole work of creation. Love is the only way by which every human heart can recognize the needs and rights of others as our own. The logic of love protects us against selfish conquests of the created world and constitutes a pillar by which the permanence of human relationships and the harmony of our co-existence with the created world are rested.

1. We are responsible for shaping the beauty of the created world

The dignity of a human being, called to live in union with God and other creatures, underlies his responsibility for all creation. When reflecting on human greatness, the psalmist says: "Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honour. You have given him dominion over the works of

your hands; you have put all things under his feet" (Ps 8:5-7).¹

Throughout history, man has heard God's call from the Book of Genesis: "... and fill the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28) "With the help of science and technology, he has extended his mastery over nearly the whole of nature and continues to do so" (*Gaudium et spes*: No. 33). Often, however, this activity is tainted with human egoism. Therefore, as Pope Francis writes in the encyclical *Laudato si'*, the earth, i.e. our sister "now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come – the Pope continues – to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life." (*Laudato si'*: No. 2).

From our Polish perspective, we have experienced this disease over the recent years in the form of polluted air. In this

¹ All English version Biblical quotations come from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. ESV® Text Edition: 2016. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

respect, the statistics are inexorable. Among the 50 European cities noting the highest levels of air pollution, as many as 33 are in Poland. The annual number of deaths caused by this situation is estimated at almost 40,000. Smog kills. Low-quality fuels burned in outdated furnaces, toxic exhaust fumes resulting from increased car traffic on congested roads, combined with windless weather leads to the air quality norm being exceeded by several hundred percent. Smog is sometimes so bothersome that even with the windows closed, the indoor sensors still indicate high pollution of the air that we breathe.

It makes all initiatives to improve air quality all the more welcome. We trust that air protection programs, developed and implemented at national, regional and local levels, will help to change the current situation and improve the ecological conditions of life in our country. However, we know that even the best law will not have the desired effect without the involvement of all responsible for clean air. It is necessary to provide financial means, subsidies for those who want to modernize the heating system, and who simply cannot afford it. Above all, a firm attitude is required, not only on the part of all levels of the state and local administration, but also on the part of all people of good will. No one should say that this is not the matter of his or her concern, because we all need clean air to live. Ultimately, the care for the natural environment, and especially, the failure to care for air purity, is a matter of conscience which should be sensitive to ecology.

2. Integral ecology and the call to conversion

In the encyclical *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis reminds us that “everything is connected. Concern for the environment thus needs to be joined to a sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society” (*Laudato si'*: No. 91). The environment of which the air is an integral

part “is a collective good, the patrimony of all humanity and the responsibility of everyone. If we make something our own, it is only to administer it for the good of all. If we do not, we burden our consciences with the weight of having denied the existence of others” (*Laudato si'*: No. 95).

This strong message from the Pope regarding the common good must be extended to other ecological issues. Although many years have passed since the collapse of the socialist economy in our country, the effects of a lack of respect for human dignity and devastation of the natural environment from that period still make themselves felt. Degraded agricultural and forest areas, buildings dilapidated as a result of mining damage, tectonic depressions, heaps, dumps, poisoned soil, water, polluted air – all this bear testimony to the fact that the common home has not always been properly cared for. To this day, many “ecological dumps” scattered throughout the country, especially in highly industrialized regions, pose a threat to the health and life of the people living in their vicinity. New threats add to these infamous remnants of the bygone era. An irrepressible desire for profit accompanied by lack of imagination prompts some to turn our country into a garbage dump of Europe, and to make later on primitive attempts to eliminate waste when it is set on fire by “unknown perpetrators”.

We are also aware of the climate change. Human activity plays no insignificant role in this respect, as, along with the growing production and consumption, man contributes to the increase in greenhouse gas concentrations. Therefore, it is necessary to limit human activity having a negative impact on the environment, skilfully manage fossil fuels and develop renewable energy sources, as well as to provide education on the economical use of energy sources. This task rests primarily with political or economic decision-makers, as well as those responsible for education.

We trust that the 24th Session of the Conference of the Parties to the United

Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP 24), which will take place in Katowice this December, will help unite the efforts of all countries in this matter. We encourage everyone to pray for it, so that the Holy Spirit may change people's hearts, leading them to harmony and unity in the care of our common home.

3. Ecological conversion or change of heart and conscience

"Humanity is called to recognize the need for changes of lifestyle, production and consumption, in order to combat this warming or at least the human causes which produce or aggravate it" (*Laudato si'*: No. 23). The reflection aimed at sensitizing the conscience to ecological issues, must be completed by matters much closer to the average recipient of this letter. It is worth looking at yourself and asking whether an egoistic, consumerist lifestyle which poses a threat to all of us and which can be traced back to forgetting God. Creation without the Creator is disappearing, reminds the Second Vatican Council (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*: No. 36).

Man is invariably the first victim of the fact of forgetting God, and he is followed by the created world. Unrestrained accumulation of goods, exploitation and destruction of nature, animal abuse, littering of forests, roadsides, oceans, air, space, abuse of all that we received from God's hand – this is an incomplete catalogue of ecological sins.

Recurrent sin gives rise to a specific type of mentality, namely, a "culture of rejection". According to this way of thinking, "human life, the person, is no longer seen as a primary value to be respected and safeguarded, especially if they are poor or disabled, if they are not yet useful — like the unborn child — or are no longer of any use — like the elderly person. This culture of waste has also made us insensitive to wasting and throwing out excess foodstuffs, which is especially condemnable when, in every part of the world, unfortunately, many people and families suffer hunger and malnutrition

(Pope Francis, General Audience, 5 June 2013).²

There is no doubt that the ecological crisis, whose symptoms are presented in this letter, constitutes a moral problem. Knowing the truth, the examination of conscience from sins, is the first step on the path of change. In the encyclical *Laudato si'*, Father Francis said that as believers we need an "ecological conversion" which, becoming the fruit of the encounter with Jesus, will change our attitude towards the world (cf. *Laudato si'*: No. 217).

4. Rebuild a ruined world!

The best example of such conversion is the Poor Man of Assisi – St. Francis, whom we commemorate today in the liturgy. His life led from carefree youth and the search for his own glory to radical conversion. After experiencing internal humiliation, he underwent a spiritual transformation. He met Christ in the leper and then in the church of St. Damian accepted the message of the Crucified One to "rebuild a church that is in ruins".

His love for God resulted in the love of poverty, simplicity of life, selfless service to others and a special relationship with the created world. Not identifying nature with God, he noticed in the creatures the fruit of love, goodness and beauty of the Creator, and offered them brotherly love. After receiving the stigmata of the Passion of the Lord, he wrote a beautiful hymn in which he praised the Lord through the sun, moon, wind, sister water, earth, which give birth to various fruits, flowers and grasses. He saw the Creator and creation. He believed in God and he respected creation, because he felt an important part of it.

Dear Brothers and Sisters!

May the example and the intercession of St. Francis become an encouragement for

² Pope Francis, *General Audience*, 5 June 2013, available online: <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2013/documents/pa-pa-francesco_20130605_udienza-generale.html>, accessed: 3.12.2019.

us to self-discipline and self-development, to fight our egoism and indifference to the fate of another man and the world.

Words of gratitude are due to those who have been striving for environmental protection for years. May the Poor Man of Assisi help us to be good guards of God's creation, that the common home of the earth would serve us and future generations.

Source: Official website of the Episcopal Conference of Poland – <<https://episkopat.pl/biskupi-w-liscie-o-ekologii-godnosc-czlowieka-podstawa-odpowiedzialnosci-za-swiat-stworzony/>>, (access: 17.06.2019).