

## Pope Francis' Encyclical: Hearing the Cry of the Earth by Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee

The Earth “now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her.” So begins Pope Francis in his powerful and long-awaited encyclical on ecology. “The earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor.”

Pope Francis chose to be called after a saint for whom love for all of God’s creation was central to his life, and all creatures were his brothers and sisters. Speaking in the voice of this saint “who loved and protects creation,” he calls for a moral response to prevent the “unprecedented destruction of the ecosystem,”—that we urgently need to recognize the consequences of, and changes required in our way of life. He reflects on our abuse, the violence creating “the symptoms of illness that we see in the Earth, the water, the air and in living things.” And describing how climate change most adversely affects the poor, he combines ecological and social justice, that we “hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.”

The state of the Earth is our most pressing concern. Our present ecological crisis is the greatest man-made disaster this planet has ever faced: the signs of global imbalance, climate change, and species depletion are all around us. The monster of materialism is ravaging the Earth, its rapacious greed destroying the ecosystem, the fragile web of life that supports and nourishes all of life’s myriad creatures. We are part of a world of wonder and beauty which we are systematically sacrificing to feed our ever-increasing desires. We need to remember the simple wonder of the natural world around us, which St. Francis celebrated in his beautiful Cantic of Brother Sun:

Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Mother Earth,

who sustains us and governs us and who produces

varied fruits with colored flowers and herbs.

Yesterday, when I went to my small vegetable patch to pick a few zucchinis for supper, I was once again amazed at the Earth’s generosity, how one plant could give so many vegetables. I had to look carefully under the spreading leaves to discover a zucchini unexpectedly growing almost too large. This is the sacred life that sustains us, part of the creation we desperately need to “love and protect,” just as it loves and protects us.

A central but rarely addressed aspect of this crisis is our forgetfulness of the sacred nature of creation, and how this affects our relationship to the environment. Pope Francis speaks of the pressing need to articulate a spiritual response to this ecological crisis and to “feel intimately united with all that exists.” Today’s world is dominated by a divisiveness that encourages exploitation and greed, and we need to return to a sense of wholeness, reflecting the living unity of all of creation and its myriad inhabitants.

The Earth needs both physical and spiritual attention and awareness, our acts and prayers, our hands and hearts. Life is a self-sustaining organic whole of which we are a part, and once we reconnect with this whole we can find a different way to live—one that is not based upon a need for continual distraction and the illusions of material fulfillment, but rather a way to live that is sustaining for the whole.

Each in our own way we can turn away from the patterns of consumerism that drain our money and our life energy. We can aspire to live a simpler life, learning how to live in a more sustainable way, and not be drawn into unnecessary materialism—filling our life with love and care rather than “stuff.” A simple meal of vegetables and grains cooked with love and attention can nourish our body and soul.

But, to speak more with the voice of St. Francis, the Earth also needs our prayers, our spiritual attention. Many of us know the effectiveness of prayers for others, how healing and help is given, even in the most unexpected ways. It can be helpful first to acknowledge that the Earth is not “unfeeling matter,” but a living being that has given us life. And then we can “hear its cry,” sense its suffering: the physical suffering we see in the dying species and polluted waters—the deeper suffering of our collective disregard for its sacred nature.

Pope Francis ends his encyclical with two prayers for our Earth. There is also the simple prayer of placing the world as a living being within our hearts when we inwardly offer our self to the Divine. In this prayer we remember the sorrow and suffering of the Earth in our hearts, and ask that that the world be remembered, that divine love and mercy flow where it is needed; that even though we continue to treat the world so badly, divine grace will help us and help the world—help to bring the Earth back into balance. We need to remember that the power of the Divine is more than that of all the global corporations that continue to make the world a wasteland, even more than the global forces of consumerism that demand the life-blood of the planet. We pray that the Divine of which we are all a part can redeem and heal this beautiful and suffering world.

Sometimes it is easier to pray when we feel the earth in our hands, when we work in the garden tending our flowers or vegetables. Or when we cook, preparing the vegetables that the Earth has given us, mixing in the herbs and spices that give us pleasure. There are many ways to pray, and we will each find our own way of tending the Earth within our own hearts. Just as the song of St. Francis calls us to praise the Earth, and to praise God “through all your creatures.”

As Pope Francis’s message reminds us, we each need to be the person who “loves and protects creation,” who remembers its sacred nature. We need to bring this song of love into our hearts and hands. Through our love for the Earth we can honor the call to climate action that comes from all faiths and from the single voice that is within all of humanity. We are all part of one living being we call the Earth and it desperately needs our love and attention.