

Pope Francis' Vision for Ecology: Dialogue and the Common Good

Keynote address for the 2025 Catholic Social Ministry Gathering, Washington DC

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Peace be with you! Friends it is a great honor for me to be asked to address you here at the annual Catholic Social Ministry Gathering. Often my own Catholic Charities team attends this annual event. But this is my first time.

I come from the Diocese of Yakima. In fact, I was baptized in the Cathedral where I am bishop. As the saying goes in the Pacific Northwest: "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree." We are in fruit country. Apples. Apricots. Pears. Cherries. These are fruits that require hand labor. As a result, since the Second World War the Yakima Valley has depended on labor from Mexico. I cannot recall a time in my life when we didn't hear the music of the Spanish language on farms and orchards. I often joke that the diocese of Yakima is the largest border diocese without a border. About three-fourths of our parishioners have roots in Mexico and the vast majority of people in the Diocese of Yakima attend Mass in Spanish.

Yakima is a poor diocese, and we have limited staff. Most of my time is devoted to the pastoral needs of the people. I'm very hands-on. So, my reflections today come not from an in-house theologian but from my own reading, reflection and pastoral experience.

This is the context in which I address the vision of Pope Francis for Ecology, Dialogue and the Common Good. I will share some thoughts with you through stories and ideas that help link *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti*: Pope Francis' landmark encyclicals that

outline Franciscan visions of care for creation and care for one another. This might help us think through how we ought to live and act in a way that honors both.

Romans 8:18-27: Redemption of ALL creation!

I want to begin this talk by uplifting the Pauline scripture highlighted by our Holy Father in this year's message for the "World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation." I begin with the eighth chapter of Romans verses eighteen to twenty-seven.

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us. For creation awaits with eager expectation the revelation of the children of God; for creation was made subject to futility, not of its own accord but because of the one who subjected it, in hope that creation itself would be set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that all creation is groaning in labor pains even until now; and not only that, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, we also groan within ourselves as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope, we were saved. Now hope that sees for itself is not hope. For who hopes for what one sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait with endurance. In the same way, the Spirit too comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit itself intercedes with inexpressible groanings. And the one who searches hearts knows what the intention of the Spirit is, because it intercedes for the holy ones according to God's will. (Romans 8:18-27)

It is important to note here that the very concepts of redemption and salvation come from the ancient trade of human trafficking. Paul applies this common

understanding at that time to all of creation, not just to human life. But what does this mean?

I think that the word redemption passes through our lips too easily. We often hear from our evangelical brothers and sisters: “Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior?” If we take seriously Paul’s (and our Church’s) soteriology—the theology of redemption and salvation—then we must consider that Jesus Christ is not just *my* Lord and Savior, but the Lord and Savior of all people and all of creation.

One of the key concepts from *Laudato Si’* is “Integral Human Ecology.” We humans are not the totality of creation. But we stand in creation. We are part of creation. When creation is respected with dignity, human dignity is enhanced. And when creation is denigrated, so too are humans degraded. I see this most clearly in my own diocese: those who working in orchards and fields depend on good treatment of the environment for their health and safety. Redemption is not simply about the redemption of humans, but all creation. God wants humans and all of creation set free.

In *Laudato Si’* this notion of interconnectedness is so important, and it relates to our soteriology. Put another way, redemption by God is not an escape hatch but a rescue plan. We cannot just live our lives in a singular, merely personal relationship with God. Our redemption is dependent on how we live our lives integrally.

In paragraph 66 of *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis expounds on the creation stories in Genesis and notes that these accounts

[C]ontain, in their own symbolic and narrative language, profound teachings about human existence and its historical reality. They suggest that human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined

relationships: with God, with our neighbor and with the earth itself. According to the Bible, these three vital relationships have been broken, both outwardly and within us. This rupture is sin. The harmony between the Creator, humanity, and creation as a whole was disrupted by our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations.

Also in *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis quotes Benedict XVI who, in his first homily as our new pontiff in 2005, made this point in his own poetic eloquence when he wrote:

The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast. Therefore, the earth's treasures no longer serve to build God's Garden for all to live in, but they have been made to serve the powers of exploitation and destruction. The Church as a whole and all her Pastors, like Christ, must set out to lead people out of the desert, towards the place of life, towards friendship with the Son of God, towards the one who gives us life, and life in abundance." (Sunday, April 24, 2005)

Notice that Pope Benedict says that it is the responsibility of the Church as a whole—that's all of us—and all her pastors to lead people out of the desert and towards life and friendship with God who wants nothing less for us than an abundant life in Christ. If our time on earth keeps us simply waiting for an escape hatch rather than participating in a rescue—a redemption—plan, then we're living the wrong soteriology.

So, let's see if we can flesh out some of these ideas a bit further.

What do we see as modern-day slavery?

Again, recalling that the very term "redemption" comes from the ancient trade of slavery and human trafficking, let me tell you the story of one of my own seminarians.

Nico grew up in Guatemala speaking Q'anjob'al. This was the language of instruction in his school although the textbooks were in Spanish. Nico was kidnapped for money and held for ransom. He was beaten and tortured. His parents borrowed \$50,000 from family and friends to free him. But the threat of kidnapping continued. One of the kidnapers was also a "coyote." So, in order to protect their son Nico, his parents paid a "coyote" to get him to the United States. He ended up in the Diocese of Yakima in the town of Mattawa. Nearly everyone in Mattawa has roots in Mexico and most daily interaction is in Spanish. So, Nico perfected his Spanish. Then Nico got a job as a busboy and then a waiter in order to begin to pay back the money his parents borrowed to free him. Tips depend on English, so he was highly motivated to learn English. A couple of the waitresses took a shine to him and helped with his English (they might have taught him some other things as well!). When I met him, he was still in Mattawa. He had a profound retreat experience and began thinking about the priesthood. He was still undocumented, but I encouraged him to go to night school and get his high school diploma. In the meantime, our diocesan attorney learned of his kidnapping and said that Nico had a strong case for asylum. Over time—and through lots of prayer—he forgave his kidnapers. At our Diocese of Yakima pastoral center Christmas retreat, Nico shared his story with us. In his bones, he grasps that we can't save ourselves. We can't pay our own ransom. Someone else must do it for us. He told us this is how "Christ" saves us. He now understands "salvation" more than most and thus will make a very fine priest.

In the Diocese of Yakima, however, the "redemption" of human trafficking does not always work out.

Several years back, a mom who worked on the apple sorting line in one of our many fruit packing plants took a leave to go home to a village in Michoacán, Mexico, to deal with her own very sick mother. While caring for her mother, she herself was kidnapped. The kidnapers sent the family a ransom note which made it back to the Yakima Valley. They wanted \$15,000. A collection basket was sent around the fruit packing plant. Between the family and her co-workers, they raised about \$7,000 and sent the money to the kidnapers

A few days later a note arrived to the family in the village stapled to a trash bag. The kidnapers acknowledged receipt of half the money. When the other half of the money came, they would send a second trash bag with the other half of this dead mom's body. The family in the Yakima Valley had memorial masses celebrated.

The people I serve as bishop can have very hard lives. They depend on us in uplifting a salvation for all creation. They depend on us countering the simplistic and facile notion that salvation is only about accepting Jesus Christ as a person Lord and Savior.

Modern day slavery takes many forms. But at the root is a profound disconnection or a willful disregard for paying attention to and cultivating the three key relationships Pope Francis noted in *Laudato Si'*: with creation, with one another and with God.

And don't get me wrong here. I do hope every single one of you know the need for salvation in and through Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen One! But far too often salvation is presented as an escape hatch that only applies to humans. Salvation is not an escape plan. It is God's rescue plan. And it not only applies to us in our sin, our

addiction, and our twisted pride, God intends to save all of creation, a creation often damaged and marred by human actions that individually and collectively can only be labeled and sinful.

When we consider this human sinfulness, especially our sin against both humans and the environment, Pope Francis uses a specific image. Most official translations render this word “descartados” as “throwaway culture”. When the Holy Father spoke to us during our 2019 ad limina visit, he referred to “descartados” as not simply “discarded” as the direct word for word Spanish to English translation might indicate. No. He talked about how migrants, refugees, the poor, and common working-class folks have been “discarded” like packaging on a product. We focus on what we want. We focus on the end result and the product. But we “throwaway” everything around the product – the people and the environment. They are discarded as nothing more than packaging.

Is this what we do? Is this what we do with God? Is this what we do to our own human conscience? Is this what we do to migrants? Refugees? Asylum seekers? The poor? Is this what we do to our environment? Do we discard the environment and those who work in the fields as nothing more than useless packaging? Is my neighbor—whether she is next door or overseas—in the way? Discarded as packaging? Do I care about our rampant consumer culture gobbling up earth’s precious resources, resources that are meant for everyone to share?

So how do we participate in God’s redemptive plan for ourselves and all of creation? How do we do this?

I want to note the guideposts so very evident in all three of Pope Francis’ encyclical letters (now four if you consider his latest on the human heart). *Lumen Fidei*

helps us understand our relationship with God and our faith, *Laudato Si'* focuses on our relationship with creation, and *Fratelli Tutti* focuses on our how we must renew our relationships with each other.

We must, harking back to Pope Benedict, arrest the desertification of the human heart which has become so vast so we can stop the literal spread of deserts around the world.

If *Laudato Si'* was a reflection by Pope Francis on St. Francis' *Canticle of the Creatures*, *Fratelli Tutti* is his reflection on the rules that governs Franciscan life.

What are the characters of this fraternity, our relationships with one another—relationships that go a long way in the redemption of humankind and all creation?

As you know, this is a Jubilee year and Pope Francis encourages us to become "Pilgrims of Hope." Pilgrimages are meant to be undertaken together, with fellow travelers. As we consider how to celebrate the Jubilee, I recommend that you work with other Catholics and organizations in your diocese to take a Pilgrimage of Hope for Creation, something that was featured in one of yesterday's community workshops. Dozens of national Catholic organizations, including Catholic Climate Covenant for whom I am the episcopal moderator, have joined together to help you shape your pilgrimage between September 1 and October 4, the Season of Creation.

Walking with others to a place of natural beauty or a place of environmental degradation provides an opportunity to build community and to contemplate the wonder of our planet and our neglect of God's creation. Visit the Catholic Climate Covenant exhibit to learn more.

As bishop, I have become famous for requiring my seminarians to pick fruit. It broadens their social circle. If my men are to elevate the bread and wine, gifts of the earth and the work of human hands, then I want them to know the sweat and hard human labor behind those ecological gifts.

Most of the people we encounter in our field work have never met anyone from the church – let alone a bishop. The reactions vary. One man asked one of the seminarians, “What did you do to your bishop that he is making you come out here to pick fruit?”

Some years ago, another seminarian came up to me and said, “Bishop, I don’t know what to do. The guy sitting next to me in the van this morning was smoking crystal meth as we were heading out to the fields.” My advice to him was simple: “Don’t inhale.” This was before Pope Francis’s famous line about smelling like the sheep!

I learn a lot about the character of my men by how they pick fruit. One woman commented to a couple of us about one of the seminarians: “No se ve la zanca del pollito.” It was very subtle. She didn’t see the feet of the little chicken move – meaning that the young seminarian was not working! He was dropped as a Yakima seminarian a few months later. The following November this same woman came to me to bury her father who had died. A family on the move, they chose Yakima as a permanent site for burial.

And yes, our seminarians need to work in a parish setting – Spanish and English. I also require that they teach middle school religion in one of our six grade schools because if you can survive middle school teaching you can survive anything the church may throw at you!

Yet, in this polarized time, we too often try to convince people of our ideas and beliefs before we seek understanding and belonging. Cardinal Christophe Pierre, our papal nuncio, once said: polarization always occurs when we focus on ideas rather than people.

As we go about this work of redemption, let's focus on people and on belonging. When we encounter those with different ideas, what are the skills we need to create community, a sense of belonging and genuine understanding?

In his book, "The Role of the Church in a Polarize Word," Aaron Wessman asks whether we can become curious about how others different from ourselves think, act and feel. A posture of curiosity will always be more effective than one of judgement. Rather than respond to those around us with our own self-righteous opinion can we pause? Can we ask questions about how others came to their emotionally anchored and deeply seated beliefs and opinions?

For example, with the English-speakers in the Yakima Valley where I am from, "climate change" can be a conversational non-starter. Many of these people are related to me. One of my cousins farmed cherries for nearly fifty years. Another family just sold their off their grapes as they prepared for retirement.

So, when I ask curiously about their farms, I don't start with my scientific data on the climate crisis. I start with *their* data. I ask about change in the growing seasons, adaptations they've made over the years.

In Grant County where I was born, one farmer said that whereas they once burrowed in three inches when planting potatoes, they now go down five inches. The extra two inches provide earth insulation against the summer heat.

A major fruit packer recalls how 50 years ago cherries came in their peak around the Fourth of July. Now they peak in mid-June.

And most everyone who grows grapes now rely on irrigation drip systems.

I would be remiss if I didn't also talk about farm practices and government regulation which can be a burden for farm families. I know of four dairy farms where nitrates from manure were seeping into the soil and poisoning water wells in the lower Yakima Valley. They spent millions on drainage ponds to remediate seepage. But the EPA and the Department of Agriculture moved the goal posts again and again adding more regulations. Two of the four dairies went out of business. As a consumer, I am concerned about water contamination from nitrates for myself and for the majority immigrant in the Yakima Valley. But I am also concerned about farmers who feel alone and left on their own bearing the costs of these regulations.

So, all these things are connected and the work of redemption and the idea of integral human development demand that we see the connections.

Can we not perceive that so many who migrate here do so in order that they and their children can have a better more secure life? Can we not grasp the connection between environmental concerns and their rural agricultural labor? Can we not see that the flow of drugs from the south are related to the flow of arms from the United States into the hands of the cartels in Mexico? Can we not see that the migration from Mexico has multiple causes that include fleeing violence in rural areas? Can we not see that the flow of drugs is related to people in our neighborhoods who struggle with addictions? Can we focus not only on the question of why we are flooded with opioids, but why are the people we serve turning towards drugs. Why are we here in the north so addicted?

Such questions take us on a pilgrimage of accompaniment and challenge us to see God in all people and all creation. This is the soteriology we seek. This is our participation in the rescue plan.

Closing

Let's return to where we began: Romans 8. Recall that Saint Paul is borrowing from the ancient trade of human trafficking to explain redemption and that Jesus Christ's sacrifice is meant to redeem us and all of creation.

Saint Anselm, in his seminal work "Cur Deus Homo" writes about a question posed by his young student Boso. Boso asks, "Why did Jesus have to die."

This is not just a question about death. What Boso really wants to know is why Jesus had to die in this way. Why did he have to die a tortured death? Crucifixion was an excruciating way to die. But even prior to that, the scourging at the pillar was also meant to create the scent of blood that would attract vultures when the victim was tied to tree.

In contrast, most Roman citizens condemned to death often were beheaded by a sword. Swift. Quick. Relatively painless.

But death for criminals and rabble-rousers was to be on a cross where the victim slowly suffocated. To breathe, the victim would have to prop himself up with his legs. But as the body weakened so too the ability to breathe. The soldiers coming around to break the legs of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke could be seen as a kind of mercy, cutting short the tortuous death. But in Saint Luke's Gospel by the time the soldiers show up, Jesus was already tortured to death.

So, what is St. Anselm's answer to Boso's questions, "Why does Jesus have to die this way?" The answer Anselm gives is very telling:

"Nondum considerasti quanti ponderis sit peccatum."

"You have not yet considered the weight of sin."

In other words, the tortuous death of Jesus on the cross meets or even exceeds any evil or any sin we confront in ourselves and in the world around us. Whatever suffering, whatever sorrow, whatever pain, whatever degradation, whatever tortuous life situation in ourselves or in creation, Christ precedes us.

Jesus Christ even descends into hell. We pray it every Sunday. Now I am not saying that no one is in hell. I have my Academy Award list of nominees just like you. But the point of praying Christ's descent into hell when we pray the Creed is this: There is not one inch of creation that escapes the salvific power of Christ's horrific and tortuous death on a cross – if our hearts are open!

Do we consider the weight of sin? And are we open to this redemptive love that changes us and all of creation? We have to beg God in prayer to have this kind of an open heart. If we are to live the vision of Pope Francis so well articulate in *Laudato Si' Fratelli Tutti* and his other writings, we have to prayerfully beg for an open heart and truly participate in the redemption of all people and all of creation. So, let us reflect on this prayer that embodies the spirit of Saint Francis:

Make me a channel of your peace.

Where there is hatred let me bring your love.

Where there is injury, your pardon, Lord

And where there's doubt, true faith in you.

Make me a channel of your peace

Where there's despair in life, let me bring hope

Where there is darkness, only light

And where there's sadness, ever joy.

Oh, Master grant that I may never seek

So much to be consoled as to console

To be understood as to understand

To be loved as to love with all my soul.

Make me a channel of your peace

It is in pardoning that we are pardoned

In giving to all men that we receive

And in dying that we're born to eternal life.

Oh, Master grant that I may never seek

So much to be consoled as to console

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