

St. Mark Study Guide

Stewardship and Nature

Care for the Environment *Laudato Si* involves both the natural and human environment

In recent papal encyclicals, Pope Paul, John Paul, Benedict and Francis have voiced increasing concern for the environment. That concern was given more definitive shape in a recent encyclical, *Laudato Si*, by Pope Francis. Much of the following are excerpts from *Laudato Si* reflecting its call to Christian stewardship of our common home, the earth.

St. Francis of Assisi

Saint Francis of Assisi reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us. “Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs”. Pope Francis helps us to see that an integrated sense of nature is open to a meaning beyond what math or biology can capture. Our capacity to love and the beauty of nature require an understanding beyond a merely chemical analysis. St. Francis of Assisi was particularly drawn to the natural world. Stories about him relate that he preached to the flowers, inviting them “to praise the Lord, just as if they were endowed with reason”. For to him each and every creature was a sister united to him by bonds of affection. That is why he felt called to care for all that exists. ... If we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on our own selfish and immediate needs. By contrast, if we feel intimately united with all that exists, then sobriety and care will well up spontaneously. St. Francis refused to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled.

1. What do you need to be happy?
2. What does it mean that the world is a fallen place?
3. How does technology and consumption fit into your sense of happiness?
4. What is your understanding of a technocratic view of life? Do you have one?
5. What is your understanding of a sacramental view of life? Do you have one?
6. Do you think your value as a human being is measured by what you produce and what you own?
7. Relativism is the belief that there are no firm moral standards. What is right might vary depending on what benefits you. How do you think consumption feeds a sense of the relativism in the moral life?
8. Do you believe that everything is connected?
9. When you look at nature, do you see something that fills you with awe or something to be turned to your advantage?
10. How can nature take us closer to God?

11. What do you think about the future of technology and sacrament?
12. In what ways is technology used in a selfish manner?

Our Common Home and the Gospel: The Gospel begins with creation of the world and all living creatures by God. *Genesis*. The Judeo Christian vision of creation that is non-violent and an act of love. God does not need us. He creates all things purely out of divine love. "Through the greatness and the beauty of creatures one comes to know by analogy their maker" (*Wis* 13:5); indeed, "his eternal power and divinity have been made known through his works since the creation of the world" (*Rom* 1:20). For this reason, St. Francis asked that part of the friary garden always be left untouched, so that wild flowers and herbs could grow there, and those who saw them could raise their minds to God, the Creator of such beauty.

When God is removed from creation and we see nature as a machine, all reality is reduced to a technical understanding. It becomes something we manipulate. When we don't value nature, we tend to rob persons of value. The unborn, migrants, the elderly, the disabled are in danger in our world. Abortion, backlash against illegal immigration and euthanasia are reactions against a notion of solidarity among God's people. Pope Paul VI was especially concerned about artificial birth control which separated the sexual act from procreation. It disconnected humans from the natural cycle of human fertility by suppressing or blocking a natural act. Pope Paul VI predicted in his encyclical on birth control, *Humane Vitae* that the effect of artificial contraception would undermine marriage and the relationship of the sexes.

If we don't see the value in the simplest and most defenseless of God's creatures, we end up seeing no value in ourselves. There can be no true love and value given to nature without a renewal of what it means to be authentically human. We are more than just users of nature. We are part of nature. When we see ourselves as just one being among many, our sense of responsibility wanes. Our unique capacities for knowledge, understanding, freedom and responsibility place a moral burden on us to care for the littlest things. If we mistakenly place ourselves at the center of creation, then the value of all things is relative to our sense of their usefulness to satisfying my desires.