

# Praised be the Seizing of This Moment

By Rev. Msgr. Joseph Kerrigan

Each Sunday, preachers do well to deliver homilies that engage worshipers' attention in messages that connect the day's Scripture with the signs of the times. In seminary training, many clergy heard the adage, "Preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other." Often, this is easier said than done.

But not for Pope Francis.

Even though *Laudato Si'* belongs altogether to the ecclesial genre of encyclical, and at nearly 200 pages at that, Pope Francis' worldwide message is perhaps best received in the rarified spirit of a great, audacious and inspired sermon. He masterfully weaves the Gospel of Creation and the Mystery of the Universe with the all-too-observable condition of "care for our common home."

Pope Francis' vision of integral ecology -- a garden state -- bears little resemblance to New Jersey. For those who take *Laudato Si'* seriously, a gigantic moral reckoning can be envisioned -- everywhere from High Point to Cape May Point -- to arrive at that dominion where the dignity of the human person and care for the common good have decisively overcome forces that pollute, degrade, oppress and exclude.

*Laudato Si'* concludes with prayer, but really -- and again in the spirit of a fantastic sermon -- it ends with an implied "altar call" (which, ironically, is a more evangelical than Catholic preaching device). This "come to Jesus" summons is found explicitly, and more than once in the document, in statements such as, "I urgently appeal, then, for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet."

In a way, *Laudato Si'* echoes the first page of the pope's landmark 2013 document, *The Joy of The Gospel*, where he invited all Christians, "everywhere, at this moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ."

Those who have said yes to that encounter know what it can mean: continuing conversion, profound change, a new lifestyle, gigantic awakenings, and, in this context, realized Isaiah-like harmonies of religious, political and economic forces in sincere dialogue toward integral human fulfillment.

Catholics in the Diocese of Metuchen have a special responsibility to take up this invitation and lead the way in responding. Our diocesan boundaries are framed by prominent bodies of water, and our territory within those borders also contains ready examples of the pope's sad litany of pollutants, economic exclusions, inequities, apathy.

With our cathedral named after St. Francis of Assisi, we have a centralized "example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically," as Pope Francis described him in the encyclical.

So it's urgently time for some new, Spirit-inspired and unscripted work for God's glory and the good of the kinship we share with nature and each other. In the lyrics of that well-known Christian hymn, "shall we gather at the river...the beautiful, beautiful river, gather with the saints at the river, that flows by the throne of God?" Nineteenth-century composer Robert Lowry was said to be reflecting on the river of death when he was inspired by a vision of a river of life. Pope Francis has given us an even more profound opportunity to sing "as we take charge of this world that has been entrusted to us." Praised be this moment that has been handed to us.



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