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Archdiocese of Baltimore

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God Once Saw How Good It Was!

“God saw how good it was” that special phrase appears five times in those opening passages of the Book of Genesis as the sacred text describes how the Lord God was obviously admiring His works of creation. It is now our spiritual and moral obligation to “see how good it is” the created world that God has now entrusted to our care. It’s not merely good because it is profitable or usable or exploitable. First and foremost, it is good because it reflects God’s goodness itself. In the very act of creation, God was bestowing upon

all of nature an undeniable reflection of His own Divine Goodness. The apex of that reflection is to be found in the women and men entrusted with God's handiwork. Human beings are God's creation that most perfectly reflects His Own Divinity. If we are to begin to safeguard God's creation, we must launch an increased reverence for every human life. We must be so grateful for those whose concerns for the planet draw our attention to its fragility. Yet we must first safeguard human life as the very starting point of environmental security. The life of human beings enjoys a priority of importance in the environmental concerns because those who have been entrusted with the care of creation must themselves be safeguarded in order

to accomplish our Divine assignment of caring for His creation.

Our respect for human life however can never be limited exclusively to a life within the womb, but it must also extend to those who may now be prisoners who are guilty of horrendous crimes, those who may be frightened immigrants – including those with or without documentation, the mental or emotionally fragile, and the too often neglected poor who may be seen as inconvenient but who nonetheless are our brothers and sisters in the Lord.

For the past several years, our nation has faced a tragic eruption of widespread violence that has directly impacted the African-American community as well as the law enforcement communities in too many different locations – including this City of Baltimore. The violence has been such that neighbors have been put on edge and the serenity of residential areas has been threatened and interrupted. This explosion of violence has shaken our national sense of wellbeing. We Americans have begun to discuss our common future as though the Civil Rights achievements of the past generation had not taken place. Our public language has grown so more severe and offensive. Some people have begun to question if not even to doubt our

future as a home community unified by a sense of national identity.

This unfortunate reality resulted in the USA Bishops asking for a conversation regarding this regrettable state of affairs. I was honored to have chaired a dialogue to facilitate a plan of action for this state of affairs and then to make recommendations to the full body of bishops with the results of that conversation. I am happy to report that Archbishop William Lori and I have worked closely to advance that conversation. He has been a bright light in promoting the pursuit of peace and reconciliation that has addressed the quality of life and its future here in the Archdiocese of Baltimore and I consider our collaboration

a true sign of the respect of human life and dignity that is so deeply needed. His leadership in inviting our ecumenical and inter-faith partners in responding to the violence that erupted in this local Church are signs of hope that all such behavior is contrary to God's ultimate design for our relationships with one another. You are fortunate to have him as your servant minister at this moment in our common history.

The environment and the increasing concerns of ecology have received intensified attention over the past few decades because of too many examples of the destructive exploitation and the wanton damage that humans have done to what God first saw as very good – He created the universe and the people that He fashioned to tend it.

In 1972, Franco Zeffirelli brought Hollywood star power to the life of Saint Francis of Assisi with his epic film: *Brother Sun Sister Moon*. The very title itself comes from the much celebrated canticle that Francis himself composed in 1224. The canticle also provided the title for Pope Francis' Encyclical *Laudato Si* which is focused on the environment whose beauty, fragility and potential we are invited to reflect upon today.

Saint Francis of Assisi has long been identified with possessing an inspiring, mystical and loving relationship with all of created nature. He tamed vicious wolves, preached to birds, and even spoke to the sun and moon.

Francis of Assisi has become a Thirteenth Century ecologist without his even knowing it. He praised God for everything that God had created and Francis placed himself in relationship to all of creation by seeing Divine splendor in all of nature. Francis saw God's fingerprints throughout every element of creation.

I suppose that Saint Francis would be shocked to see how God's splendid generosity in fashioning the world in which we live has now come too often to be desecrated and exploited. How could our beloved Sister Mother Earth come to be so threatened by science and technology and greed so that her treasures are exploited and hoarded by the rich and powerful when they were divinely intended to

sustain us all? How could our Sister Water become so polluted and defiled that she increasingly cannot be found fresh and pure and available to quench the thirsts of all the creatures who depend upon her for life itself?

We need to recall Francis of Assisi today and ask him to rekindle within each one of us a share of his profound spirit of wonder, awe and gratitude for God's creation. Without the benefit of our modern scientific acumen and expertise, Saint Francis was able to view all of nature as a precious treasure that God has entrusted to us to be shared and preserved for those who will follow us. Francis of Assisi believed in the truth of the Book of Genesis when it repeatedly reminds us that at the very moment of creation

God saw everything that He had fashioned as something very good! At a moment when much of the world was preparing or engaged in the Crusades, Francis was reaching out to engage Moslems – he was truly a man way ahead of his times.

We pause today as a recommitment to the work of caring for our common home and carefully preserving those gifts that God has given to us and through us to generations to come. While the task of respecting God's creation is entrusted to each one of us, we also know that we must work in collaboration with men and women of good will everywhere to achieve our goals of insuring that this planet is both cherished and sustained. In that regard, the dioceses

from this region are deeply grateful for the opportunity to gather in reflection and to pledge themselves to work collaboratively and generously with others to develop our response plan to Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si*. Such collaboration is the only way that we can work together successful to care for our common home. The Archdiocese of Atlanta was singularly blessed to partner with the University of Georgia's Environmental Department in Athens to prepare and promulgate a local response plan to Pope Francis' encyclical. The initiative for this collaborative effort came from a university professor even in anticipation of the issuance of the encyclical. Dr. Susan Varlamoff immediately saw the potential of bringing the academic world into direct dialogue with the Pope's

planned message in such a way that what the world of science knew about the environment would highlight and strengthen the spiritual and moral message that Pope Francis would proclaim.

There are many of you here at this conference today whose love and concern for our planet home takes many different expressions both from a professional and a personal perspective. On this day, we all gather together in prayer and in the hope that the work of ecology and scientific research will result in greater protection for this planet. Francis of Assisi regularly praised God for creating the entire world of nature. We make his prayer our own today so that working together and praying together we might

preserve what God has given us and tend it much more carefully as God would have us do.

Pope Francis' Encyclical *Laudato Si* proposes an integral ecology that seeks to draw the diverse expressions of creation's dignity ever closer to the dignity of all men and women. He writes to remind us that we are the custodians of creation and not its exploiters. For creation still belongs ultimately to God Himself entrusted to us for our well-being and the well-being of future generations. God's creation invites us to enter into a three-fold relationship – with God, with one another and with nature itself. Each of these relationships is interconnected and ultimately they are intended to enhance and to strengthen one another.

It was Francis of Assisi's extraordinary ability to see and treasure the relationships between God, creation, and other human beings that adds to his stature as a truly holy man. He not only revered nature, he saw God's creation in a holistic way as he spoke of "brother sun and sister moon" – inanimate celestial objects that enjoyed a special place in the saint's life. We too are called to value creation in this reverential fashion and not to view nature as simply objects to be exploited for their fiscal value or for our pleasure.

Pope Francis is not the first pontiff to call our attention to the issues facing the environment or to challenge us to safeguard the things of this world in a more conscientious

way. Pope Benedict XVI actually had solar panels installed on structures in the Vatican as a measure not simply to conserve energy or as a money saving gesture but to stand as an example of being more attentive to the limited resources that we all must preserve.

Pope Francis in reconstituting several Roman dicasteries on January 1st into a single agency chose to name the new structure – a dicastery for the Promotion of Human Integral Development. The name highlights the importance of seeing the links between social, political, charitable, and environmental issues. The new dicastery combined four former offices as a way of drawing together the works that were heretofore the activity of four separate Vatican

agencies. This reconfiguration is another example of focusing on the interrelatedness of human activity and our connection with all of nature as well.

The one portion of humanity that is especially and directly impacted by the destruction of our environment are those who are poor – those who have the least ability to halt or to modify the exploitation of the natural resources that sustain us all. Much of the Encyclical *Laudato Si* describes the perilous situation of the people whose lives are directly tied to the earth and its care. We all depend upon the health of the climate and the resources of the earth, but the poor in particular seem to suffer most when God's creation is abused. Without the means to change the ruination of the

climate or the fragile condition of the earth, the poor frequently have their lives completely subjected to the whims of industry that destroy forests, pollute streams and rivers, and ravage the landscapes upon which the poor depend.

God's creation can replenish itself but not as quickly as the international corporations and interests can manage to deplete it. Some natural resources have already been so squandered that they may already now be lost for future generations. There are those who question or even deny the dire descriptions of earth's current conditions. Some maintain that human intervention and exploitation are not in fact the causes of changes in climate, destruction of the

balance of nature, or even the loss of entire eco-systems. The evidence seems to be incontrovertible that we human beings are no longer carefully tending the world that God saw as very good, but wasting and destroying the very means of life for future generations. Almost daily we see media coverage of the life-threatening pollution of air quality in many places across the globe. The radical destruction of the forests that not only help regenerate breathable air but also secure and anchor the very earth that can then produce crops that feed the entire globe is an acknowledged fact.

Francis of Assisi lived 800 years ago and many of the places in the world that may now be at risk were still

unknown to the peoples of his world – who were then living a world away. Francis would not have envisioned the power of modern day machinery and technology that now make it possible to visit Sister Moon and to harness the energy from Brother Sun and Sister Wind. Our contemporary scientific acumen would no doubt astonish Francis of Assisi as would our often reckless treatment of God’s creation.

Pope Francis encourages us to “encounter” others in many different settings including in the work of preserving our environment. We encounter those who are most directly affected by the misuse of nature as well as those who have

the capacity to change the course of human behavior's use of this planet.

Francis of Assisi and his name-sake in the Vatican stand as shining examples of people who take the opening words of the Book of Genesis literally and who challenge us to do the same. They invite us to see and to respect the grandeur of God's creation – beginning with the lofty dignity of the human person and our divinely inspired responsibility to care for the world in which God has entrusted to us. This earth is the new garden in which we are to discover not only the means for our survival, but a reflection of the very face of God Himself so as to be able to declare that truly all that God has fashioned is good, holy, and precious indeed.

