



SESSION TWO

The Gospel of Creation

62 I want to turn now to the ways in which faith can inform the dialogue for which I am calling. Even though not all to whom this is addressed are believers, religion can still make a rich contribution.

I. THE LIGHT OFFERED BY FAITH

63 The ecological crisis in which we find ourselves is complex, and solutions must, therefore, come from every culture and tradition, from art and poetry as well as from spirituality. **64** I hope for a worldwide dialogue through this encyclical, and I hope that Christians will realize their responsibility within creation.

II. THE WISDOM OF THE BIBLICAL ACCOUNTS

65 Human dignity rises out of the belief that we are created by God and

found by him to be good. We are made in God's image. Because we are created in love, we are capable of giving ourselves in love. Each human life is, therefore, valuable and unique. Each is held in God's own hand. 66] Scripture helps us see that human life is grounded in three close relationships: we relate to God, to our neighbor, and to the earth itself. By refusing to acknowledge that we humans have certain limits and that we are not the masters of the universe, we ruptured these relationships. We call this rupture by the name sin.

67] "We are not God. The earth was here before us and it has been given to us." Our way of reading Genesis 1:28 has in the past suggested that humans have "dominion" over the earth, and this has been the root justification for "the unbridled exploitation of nature." This is not a correct interpretation of Scripture, and we reject the idea that being created in God's images gives us the right to destroy the earth. The role we have been given leads us to restore the broken relationships, end the selfishness, and turn greed into shared resources. Our role, in the end, is to till, keep, and protect the earth (Genesis 2:15).

68] We are also called to respect the natural laws of the world, offering the land and animals alike a chance to rest, helping and assisting both neighbor and livestock when the need arises, and caring even for the birds when they have fallen to the ground (Deuteronomy 22:4, 6). The Bible does not support the idea that humans are allowed to plunder and destroy other creatures.

69] We humans, according to the Bible, must take our place within creation, not stand outside it in a superior position. It is a distorted view of human life that claims we are better or more important than the rest of creation. The *Catechism* teaches that each created animal or plant reflects the face of God.

70] The ancient biblical stories illustrate what happens when our relationships are out of balance. After Cain had killed his brother, Abel, he was cursed from the ground. When our relationships are out of whack in one area, all other areas also suffer. In the story of Noah, we see the restoration of the world to order, showing once again how interconnected our relationships are. 71] One of the ways balance and fairness were restored was by way of the Jubilee year, a time when the gifts of the earth were shared openly and freely by all, including widows, orphans, and foreigners.

72] The psalms often sing of the glory of creation and invite all creatures to join in the praise. 73] The prophets time and again remind us that God the creator is also the God whose tender mercy constantly saved us from our own selfishness and sin. 74] Indeed, even in times of spiritual crisis, deeper faith emerged because of God's mercy. If we trust in God now to save us and if we follow the pathway set before us, we will overcome evil and injustice. 75] If we fail to make God central like this, then we risk thinking that we are God, which leads to thinking that we can trample creation underfoot. But God alone owns the world, and we are the ones chosen to tend and keep this earthly garden.

Group or Personal Process

Reflect: Return to article 67. The pope is saying that humans do not have unilateral power to simply exploit and use up the resources of the world. What's your view of this, in light of the Scriptures?

Reflect: What is your response to articles 74 and 75? How can we make God central in this discussion, even when non-believers are involved?

III. THE MYSTERY OF THE UNIVERSE

76 We distinguish between “creation,” which includes all that God has made as an act of love, and “nature,” which is the system of natural life that can be studied and understood scientifically. **77**] “Creation is of the order of Love.” It flows from God’s own heart and not from chaos. Thus, every single element of creation is loved by God. We meet God in creation. **78**] The myth of unlimited material progress is replaced now by an understanding that we humans must serve as guardians and caretakers of nature in all its fragility. **79**] The drama and excitement of human history results from our human freedom to choose a pathway on which nature is protected or to choose one on which it is abused and exploited. The work of the church is to encourage the former.

80 And yet, God can also bring good out of our bad choices. Creation thus continues to unfold in front of us as God continues to fill the universe with possibilities. **81**] We humans are unique in creation. Each of us has an identity and is an individual center of initiative. We can speak with God and with each other. We are creative, artistic, and intelligent. Clearly, we share in God’s divine life. **82**] But this does not mean that other living beings are mere objects, subject to our domination. Nature cannot be viewed merely as a profit source; this has led to exploitation. Instead, we are to be seen as servants of nature, here to guard and protect it.

83 The bottom line is that the ultimate purpose of non-human creation is not found in us humans. It is found only in God, in harmony and balance, in community and peace.

IV. THE MESSAGE OF EACH CREATURE IN THE HARMONY OF CREATION

84 Saying that each human being is an image of God does not take away

from the purpose of all non-human creation. Every creature has a unique and important purpose as well. The whole of creation sings of God’s love. We can meet God on a lovely hill, hear a rivet, or in a local square; these places hold dear meaning for us. **85**] It’s as if God has written a wonderful book: creation. In it, we read the story of God. Nature reveals God, and we humans live in relation to all other creatures. **86**] All things in creation are interrelated, and we grasp their meaning only through those relationships. No creature is self-sufficient, including us.

87 Saint Francis sang of this in his lovely *Canticle of the Creatures*. “Praise be to you, my Lord ...,” he sang. Praise be, indeed! **88**] The Spirit of life dwells in every creature.

Group or Personal Process

Reflect: Share ways in which you meet God in nature. How is God revealed to you there?

Action: Read Saint Francis’ *Canticle of the Creatures*. What does this song say to you?

V. A UNIVERSAL COMMUNION

89 Nonetheless, the things of this world have indeed been given to us by God, joining us closely together so that when the earth suffers and is parched, we feel it in our own bones. **90**] We do not mean to suggest that all living beings are on the same level, nor that humans are deprived of their unique status in creation. At times, more energy is spent defending other species than caring for the suffering of the world. Some people live in degrading poverty while the rich practice conspicuous consump-

tion, leaving so much waste behind that if everyone did that, the planet would be destroyed. 91] If we fail to show concern for fellow humans, we will also fail to protect the rest of creation; all are interrelated. 92] We must embrace a universal communion; how we treat creation is how we treat each other. I say it again: everything is interconnected and we are on a wonderful pilgrimage bonded with other creatures and moving toward God.

VI. THE COMMON DESTINATION OF GOODS

93] Whether you are a person of faith or not, we all agree today that the earth is a shared inheritance, meant for the benefit of everyone. This is especially true, however, for people of faith. We defend the right to private property but also teach that all such property has a social dimension to it. 94] "The rich and the poor have equal dignity." 95] The natural world belongs to all; if we own it for a short time, we must bear in mind the needs of all.

VII. THE GAZE OF JESUS

96] Jesus taught that everyone is important in God's eyes. 97] Jesus often used parables and examples drawn from creation. 98] He lived in harmony with creation; he loved to eat and drink and to enjoy life; he did not reject the physical world. He worked with his hands and knew the toil of daily labor. 99] In Christ, all things in nature hang together, as Colossians 1:16 reminds us. 100] We now gaze forward to the end of time when all being will find its home in the One Being who is God.

Group or Personal Process

Reflect: What last thoughts or questions does this section provoke for you? What does Jesus have to do with caring for our common home, the earth?

Reflect: What is your response to articles 90–91? How does this observation of the pope reach into your own daily life?