



SESSION SIX

Ecological Education and Spirituality

202 We humans are the ones who need to change in order to grasp our shared origins and a future belonging to all. This is a great journey of spiritual renewal.

I. TOWARDS A NEW LIFESTYLE

203 It is easy to get caught up in needless spending and buying. We come to believe we must conform to what the advertisers tell us; human freedom becomes “freedom to consume.” **204** The global situation makes us feel insecure, which leads to selfish behavior, which is only natural. If our hearts are empty, we must fill them with possessions and pleasures. We are concerned about climate change, of course, but we’re also concerned about our own hearts and the unrest we find there. **205** Let’s take an honest look at ourselves and acknowledge our unrest; then let’s set

out on a pathway to true freedom. **206**] We consumers wield power if we refuse to buy from companies leaving a harmful environmental footprint. **207**] May our age be remembered as the one in which we woke up to a new reverence for the earth and her people, especially the poor.

208 Our own personal and communal happiness, as well as the survival of the earth and the welfare of the poor, depends upon one thing: our ability to practice the art of self-giving; our ability to care for others and things, our ability to shift away from individualism to a communal way of thinking.

Group or Personal Process

Reflect: What is your response to articles 203–205? What is your own personal experience with consumption? What process do you (and the members of your household) go through when deciding to spend money?

Reflect: What is your response to article 208? Do we have to take the poor into account every time we buy groceries, cars, theater tickets, or meals in restaurants? What does Pope Francis mean here by “a communal way of thinking”?

II. EDUCATING FOR THE COVENANT BETWEEN HUMANITY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

209 We know that simply buying more and having more possessions does not lead to deep happiness and meaning, yet it’s hard to break the habit of shopping. We see hope, though, because young people have a new ecological awareness; yet even they struggle to change consumer habits. **210**] Environmental education is the answer. We need an ethics

of ecology one that pierces through the myth of consumerism and moves toward a more transcendent view. **211**] Environmental education forms the human heart for selfless ecological decisions. Small daily actions by many produce a great effect, such as turning down the heat, avoiding one-use plastics or paper, reducing water use, recycling garbage, no longer wasting food, using public transportation, planting trees and flowers, or reducing electrical use. **212**] We must believe that these efforts will change the world! They also change our hearts. **213**] Ecological formation takes place in a variety of settings, the most important of which is the family. In the family we learn how to show respect for life, the proper use of things, order, and ecological values. Here we learn to say “thank you” and to turn greed into generosity.

214 The church also plays a role in this by helping people develop personal qualities of self-control and self-giving love based on ecological values. **215**] When we learn to see beauty, we learn to reject what exploits and destroys it, especially in nature. Ecological education must produce a new way of thinking about other people, society, and nature.

III. ECOLOGICAL CONVERSION

216 Here are a few suggestions for an ecological spirituality grounded in faith. Such spirituality can move us to be more passionate, drawing on our interior impulse as persons of the Spirit. **217**] Some ridicule concern for the environment while others are passive or hopeless. What we all need is this ecological conversion where our encounter with Jesus Christ leads us to protect creation. **218**] A healthy relationship with nature is one key to holiness. **219**] However, let’s be realistic. Individual conversion and change of habits alone will not solve the ecological crisis. We also need a communal conversion. **220**] Such conversion calls us to blind generosity, deep gratitude, and awareness that the world is a gift from God.

221 As we said earlier in this encyclical, each person and each being in nature reflects the face of God; we are all interconnected. Christ is present to each of us, and God has written into our hearts through Christ and the Spirit an inner order that we must respect. I ask all Christians to fully live this conversion.

IV. JOY AND PEACE

222 Christian spirituality leads us to a contemplative lifestyle free of being bound to consumerism. This spirituality understands that “less is more” and that we do not need a flood of new possessions to satisfy us because we cherish each gift we have, live in moderation, and are happy with less. We live more simply and sustainably. **223** Such sobriety is freeing for us. We do not feel sad for what we lack but happy for what we have. We learn to appreciate each person and each thing, and we are not weary with demands for more. Our satisfaction and happiness come from encountering each other, experiencing music and art, and being in nature.

224 You can plainly see that it is not enough to speak merely about ecosystems that are out of balance. The lack of balance in nature results from a lack of balance in the human heart. We must accept the challenge of living together more simply, which is not easy to promote. **225** [The bottom line is that we must be at peace with ourselves. Such inner peace results from knowing that we live a balanced life, one that sustains the environment, connects warmly with others, is lived without frenzy, and is oriented to the common good. **226**] This spirituality is based on an “attitude of the heart” that approaches life with serenity, attentiveness, and trust. It leads us away from being superficial, aggressive, and greedy. **227** [One simple example of this is the pause before meals to express gratitude for the gifts we have and to be in solidarity with those in need.

Group or Personal Process

Reflect: Pope Francis makes the argument that the human community must bring itself into balance in order to preserve and restore the environment. What does he mean by that? What has to balance?

Reflect: What is your response to article 222? What does he mean when he says that “less is more”?

V. CIVIC AND POLITICAL LOVE

228 We are all sisters and brothers to each other, bound together by an inner principle as children of one God. Such love leads us to forgive our enemies and live in peace. **229** [We must become convinced that we need each other. Being good and decent are what lead to happiness, and we must consider ourselves finished with the thin ethics that mocks honesty, faith, and communal concerns. **230**] In the spirit of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, we should let our daily habits be kind, peaceful, and self-giving.

231 Such love overflows with goodness. We want to create a civilization of love—political, economic, and cultural—not one of hate and greed. We want a society that is more humane, worthy of us as persons, and true. From this will emerge the communal will to protect the environment. **232** [Beyond political life, many are involved in community organizations that rally around a local need, whether to promote beauty, the arts, historic preservation, or human welfare.

VI. SACRAMENTAL SIGNS AND THE CELEBRATION OF REST

233 The world around us is filled with wonder and mystery. Every leaf, raindrop, or mountain trail holds within it the meaning we seek. **234** We do not separate beauty, awe, and wonder from God. God is present in all things noble and beautiful. This is all part of the encounter with God. **235** Such encounters with God do not require that we abandon the world but rather that we embrace it. The sacraments are filled with similar signs that move our hearts toward God.

236 For us, the Eucharist is a profound expression of the closeness of God and God's unity with us humans and all of nature. God is intimately present here in a universal or cosmic way. Heaven and earth are joined in this act, providing a powerful motivation for our work to save the environment of the earth. **237** On Sundays we rest; rest restores us and prepares our hearts for gratitude and communal life.

VII. THE TRINITY AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CREATURES

238 The Trinity is the community of love from which creation flows. When we contemplate the beauty of nature, we also praise the Trinity. **239** We humans live within the Trinity when we practice self-giving love in our daily lives; we bear within ourselves the same love shared there. **240** The world is, therefore, a web of relationships, and we humans and all creation are in movement toward God. The more we humans enter into relationships, the more we live in communion with God. Everything is interconnected.

VIII. QUEEN OF ALL CREATION

241 We ask Mary, the Mother who cared for Jesus, to help us see the world with eyes of wisdom. She is filled with wonder and love, understanding all things and living with God forever. **242** Next to her is St. Joseph, hardworking yet tender, strong yet humble. We ask Joseph to show us how to care for each other and the earth.

IX. BEYOND THE SUN

243 We are all journeying toward the final rest, the final sabbath of eternity, where all things will be new and all people will find freedom and comfort. **244** But in the meantime, we must come together to take care of our home here on earth. May our work to save this planet, difficult as it is, never take away our joy. **245** God gives us direction and light on the journey. God does not leave us alone, and his love pushes us to find new pathways forward. Praise be to him!

246 I propose we offer two prayers. One can be shared among all who believe in God. In the second, we Christians embrace our commitment to creation. (These prayers can be found at www.23rdPublications.com and are provided as a courtesy, along with St. Francis' *Canticle of the Creatures*. Simply follow the link on the home page.)

Group or Personal Process

Reflect: What is your response to articles 233-235? Is the world imbued with the presence of God? Is God in nature?

Reflect: Looking back over this entire encyclical, what were its most striking points to you? What two or three key thoughts or insights do you take away from this study?

Action: What actions has this study led you to consider taking?