

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)/Fst. of St. Francis of Assisi
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Climate Change & Consumerism
Feast of St. Francis of Assisi

This summer I had the opportunity to read the book Blessed are the Consumers: Climate Change and the Practice of Restraint, by the Catholic theologian, Sally McFague.

In the book she points out that experts tell us that it is *not sufficient* to consume in a “green” fashion (like: changing from an SUV to a Prius...) but – if we truly are going to save our planet – we’re going to have to consume less! McFague notes: “even reducing and eliminating the use of certain goods such as cars or airplanes, that have become important parts of our life today for many, is insufficient.”

This casual statement from the State of the World Essay (2010 edition of the Annual Environmental Publication) causes a global gasp. As McFague states:

“Reducing and eliminating the use of cars and airplanes surely not! The shock, however, causes us to realize how far we have to go in both our attitudes and in our practices. As the essay points out, we human beings are so embedded in the culture of consumerism, that asking us to curb it (let alone eliminate precious forms of it) is like asking us to stop breathing.”

My sisters and brothers, as outlandish as this may sound, the ‘culture of consumerism’ is not just a form of life that we can accept or reject. It has now become the air we breathe.

‘*Consumerism*’ is a cultural pattern that leads people to find meaning and fulfillment in life, through the consumption of goods and services. For example: ‘If you’re depressed... go to the mall and “shop ‘til you drop!” The increasingly often made observation that ‘consumerism is the newest and most successful religion on the globe’ is not an overstatement.

McFague points out that if one accepts that our global society is in serious condition, then one must accept that preventing the collapse of civilization requires nothing less than a wholesale transformation of dominant cultural patterns. To change culture from one of consumerism to one of sustainability is an awesome task.

Sisters and brothers, you might be saying to yourselves: ‘Yes: our world is facing some serious problems of climate change for sure, but what does all this have to do with coming to Mass this weekend? I like to come to church to hear some *Good News!*’

I invite us as Christians, as disciples of Jesus, to reflect on climate change and consumerism this weekend because:

First: our Catholic Church globally commemorates Respect Life Sunday: reminding us that human life is sacred and must be protected; that every person is created in God's image and likeness. Climate change and consumerism threaten not only human life, but all of life – we become more and more vulnerable as resources become scarce and violence escalates in an attempt to hold on to them.

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Secondly: our Christian religion..., our Catholic faith at its core – as well as most of the ancient religions of the world – offer us an alternative to consumerism... and that's *Good News!* Jesus, in the Gospel, makes it so clear that although there is nothing wrong in money and material things; *in and of themselves* they won't give us the true satisfaction – peace – fulfillment – freedom ...love for which we hunger. In fact, if we want to be truly happy, than we are to give, rather than receive; let go, rather than hold on. Our Gospel today reminds us:

'Whoever wishes to come after me must deny oneself, ...take up the Cross; whoever wishes to save one's own life will lose it. But whoever loses – gives away – shares one's life for my sake, will find it.'

'What profit would there be for one to gain the whole world and forfeit one's soul, one's heart in the process?'

Let's just take a peek at other religions' perspectives on consumption:

The Baha'i Faith: "In all matters, moderation is desirable. If a thing is carried to excess it will prove a source of evil."

Buddhism: "Wholeness in this world overcomes selfish cravings: one's sorrow floats away from her like drops of water from a lotus flower."

Confucianism: "Excess and deficiency are equally at fault."

Taoism: "One who knows he has enough is rich."

Hinduism: "That person who lives completely free from desires – without longing – attains peace."

Judaism: "Give me neither poverty nor riches." (Proverbs)

Islam: "Eat and drink – but waste not by excess. God loves not the excessive."

The ancient religions are *not* calling for ‘hair-shirts and ashes,’ but rather for moderation: the path to *life* is *subtraction not accumulation*. Things like ‘moderation,’ ‘restraint,’ “I have enough,” ‘sharing resources’ sound like a foreign-language in our consumer culture... where: “more is better”!

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The third reason I invite us to reflect on climate change and consumerism this weekend is we celebrate the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi – who Saint John Paul II called the Patron of ecology – because: 800 years ago, Francis embraced values and a lifestyle that could save our civilization today – and that’s also *Good News!*

The 13th C. St. Francis came from a wealthy family, and was, by the standards of his day, a heavy consumer: living a life of ‘eat drink and be merry,’ but as a young man he went through a crisis and felt a great emptiness inside him, which brought about a conversion. That conversion transformed him through humility and simplicity into a lover of Mother Earth and the defender of all kinds of life, especially the lives of those that are most threatened: the poor and marginalized.

In St. Francis are all the charisms that call the Church to proclaim a fundamental option for the poor and to become an ecological lighthouse for the whole world. St. Francis of the 13th Century shows us – in the 21st – how to relate to nature and Mother Earth.

All the biographers of his time testified to the most tender affection Francis had for all creatures: he gave them the kind name of ‘*brothers*’ and ‘*sisters*’; he freed birds from their cages; took care of wounded animals; even begged gardeners to leave a corner of their gardens uncultivated – so that weeds could grow to give honor and praise to God. With St. Francis, we see another way of being in the world: living *beside and together with* – rather than *above to possess and dominate* – all Creation.

St. Francis sensed then what we know today from scientific data: we *all* carry the same basic genetic code! So we *are* blood relations: parents, cousins, sisters and brothers to one another! Hence, the importance of respecting and loving one another and *never* using violence against other human beings or other creatures, who are all our brothers and sisters. With St. Francis we have a model of reverence, respect and peaceful coexistence with all of nature and the whole earth; an attitude that is fundamental for the future of our civilization, the future of the natural world and the future all life on earth.

Sisters and brothers, it’s rather overwhelming tackle such a huge issue as climate change and consumerism in a Sunday homily, so I’d like to conclude this reflection with a couple of practical suggestions:

1. As we begin the season of Autumn: the season of completion, perhaps we could reflect a bit on connecting our prayer to nature; to take some time for reflection outdoors and listen to the voice of God speaking to us through the voice of Mother Earth....

2. To ask ourselves how Jesus and his mission – proclaiming the values of giving rather than receiving; letting go rather than hanging on; of subtraction rather than accumulation – might touch us and guide us through the crisis of climate change and consumerism? Today we are commissioning our sisters and brothers who are catechists: teachers of Faith! Let us give thanks for these folks who are committed to teaching and carrying on our Faith: a Faith which proclaims values which have the potential to save civilization as we know it! Jesus saw a way out – imagine *if* Christians *lived* this new way!

There is a growing interest in our Parish to form a ‘Sustainability Task Force’ – to focus on how we can become more environmentally friendly: in our families and in our parish; and how we might be able to join with others to bring about the change needed to save the earth: ‘living simply – so that others may simply live...’

In closing I liked to share some of the words taken from the letter attributed to Chief Seattle, Chief of the Suquamish People, to the American Government in the 1800s, in response to a potential deal involving the sale of native lands:

“Every part of the Earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every meadow, every humming insect. All are holy in the memory and experience of my people.

“We know the sap which courses through the trees as we know the blood that courses through our own veins. We are part of the earth and it is part of us. The perfumed flowers are our sisters. The bear, the deer, the great eagle, these are our brothers. The rocky crests, the dew in the meadow, the body heat of the pony, and man all belong to the same family. ...

“Will you teach your children what we have taught our children? That the earth is our mother? What befalls the earth befalls all the children of the earth.

“One thing we know: our God is also your God. The earth is precious to God and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its creator.

“We love this earth as a newborn loves its mother’s heartbeat. So, if we sell you our land: love it as we have loved it. Care for it, as we have cared for it. Hold in your mind the memory of the land as it is when you receive it. Preserve the land for all children, and love it, as God loves us.”

Amen!