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# The most meaningful Earth Day ever

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**"Our planet still exists."**

Pope Francis, in his *Laudato Si* encyclical issued five years ago, helps us to see what Earth Day requires - an integral ecology that take us to the heart of what it is to be human. He reflected on the legacy of Saint Francis of Assisi: Just as happens when we fall in love with someone, whenever he would gaze at the sun, the moon or the smallest of animals, he burst into song, drawing all other creatures into his praise. He communed with all creation, even preaching to the flowers, inviting them to praise the Lord, just as if they were endowed with reason.

Saint Francis' response to the world around him was so much more than intellectual appreciation or economic calculus, for to him each and every creature was a sister united to him by bonds of affection. That is why he felt called to care for all that exists. His disciple Saint Bonaventure tells us that, "from a reflection on the primary source of all things, filled with even more abundant piety, he would call creatures, no matter how small, by the name of 'brother' or 'sister'".

Such a conviction cannot be written off as naive romanticism, for it affects the choices which determine our behavior. If we approach nature and the environment without this

openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs. By contrast, if we feel intimately united with all that exists, then sobriety and care will well up spontaneously. We know we are stewards, gardeners, and caregivers.

In *Laudato Sii*, Pope Francis always makes sure that the poor is ubiquitous; raising always the question of the impact of an issue on poor people, emphasizing all the time fairness and justice as a guide to how the world must respond.

More positively, Pope Francis also gives examples of a commendable human ecology practiced by the poor despite the challenges they face. He gives us an example indigenous peoples who see “land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God and from their ancestors who rest there, a sacred space with which they need to interact if they are to maintain their identity and values.” According to *Laudato Sii*: “When they remain on their land, they themselves care for it best. Nevertheless, in various parts of the world, pressure is being put on them to abandon their homelands to make room for agricultural or mining projects which are undertaken without regard for the degradation of nature and culture.”

Pope Francis explains why we must not separate the state of our planet from what is happening to many of its people: “The human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation.” This means we must work to institutionalize environmental and climate justice, which requires the integration of human rights, at all levels of governance – global, national, and local.

The cry of the earth and the cry of the poor are resounding in this time of the pandemic. This is why Earth Day this year is the most meaningful ever. Everything we have said could go wrong because of environmental irresponsibility has gone wrong at great economic and human cost. Moving forward, we must abandon outdated notions of cost-benefit analysis and trade-off between economic and environmental interests when what is at stake is human well-being and public health. When an activity or industry can cause a pandemic or global climate change, there is no economic or other justification that can be invoked that allows for that activity. I hope government and business will internalize this now. In my case, never again will I accept any action, law, or agreement that compromises the health of our planet and sacrifices the poor.

In making this commitment, I am aware that I am part of a community of practice bonded together by love of people and planet. In writing this column, I honor three pillars of that community – Pat Dugan, Jun Factoran, and Sonny Alvarez. All three were

great human beings; I owe a lot to them as veterans who walked earlier than me in this fight for Mother Earth. I will write in the near future a longer obituary honoring these pioneers.

In this column, I once quoted Rainier Maria Rilke, the great German poet, who has said it very well: "Everything is far and long gone by. I think that the star glittering above me has been dead for a million years. I would like to step out of my heart and go walking beneath the enormous sky. I would like to pray. And surely of all the stars that perished long ago, one still exists. I think that I know which one it is."

I quoted these words of Rilke in a column ten years ago. It is my hope, that because we cared and took action, and especially after this devastating pandemic, that centuries from now, our descendants too would come out and walk beneath the sky and say: Our planet still exists.

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