

MARY SHARON MOORE, M.T.S.
Catholic author, speaker, evangelizer

marysharonmoore.com
1080 Patterson Street, Eugene OR 97401
541.687.2046 | marysharonmoore@gmail.com

Bulletin series: *Laudato Si'* and Catholic Social Teaching in a Nutshell
A five-part series for bulletin publication in the summer months
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Part 1: Life and Dignity of the Human Person: Cultivating the Land of the Rightside Up
Part 2: Call to Family, Community, and Participation—and therefore Rights and Responsibilities
Part 3: Option for the Poor and Vulnerable: Gospel Logic at the Heart of Francis' Plea
Part 4: Dignity of Work and Rights of Workers: Solidarity for the Greater Good
Part 5: The Lord's is the Earth and Its Fullness: Care for Creation

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The five installments begin on the next page.

Laudato Si' and Catholic Social Teaching in a Nutshell

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Part 1: Life and Dignity of the Human Person: Cultivating the Land of the Rightside Up

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Imagine with me, church, a world which cherishes the whole of life, which *flows from God, lives for God, returns to God*, and therefore is *holy*. I call this worldview **living in the Land of the Rightside Up**. Or, simply, **living the whole of the Gospel** at every turn. Church already has blazed the path for us.

Since the mid 1800s the church's social tradition, or social teaching, firmly rooted in sacrament and Gospel, has been our **clear and insistent moral response** to the social and economic disruptions and grave injustices accelerated by the Industrial Revolution.

The church's social tradition today is most powerfully expressed in Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si': Care for Our Common Home*. Our work—particularly as laity—is to shape ourselves in heart, understanding, and action through this social tradition to **build the Land of the Rightside Up** in every dimension of the world entrusted to us.

Ideally, the Land of the Rightside Up would include all of creation, as well as our **human institutions and systems** such as economy and industry, healthcare, education, and all forms of governance. And, ideally, the Land of the Rightside Up would include our **personal and community relationships**, family life—everything within the human and creational experience.

What we actually experience, tragically, is the **Land of the Upside Down**. We have an innate preference for ease and convenience. Living the Gospel is not convenient. Following Jesus is not convenient. We bought a lie from whoever told us it would be.

Church is vigilant and vocal about grave injustices against persons, human populations, and creation because it **sees the world through this sacramental lens**—all of life *flowing from God, living for God's purposes, returning to God*, and therefore *holy*.

The **first element of Catholic social teaching, life and dignity of the human person**, makes sense of all the other elements. It is the sturdy thread that weaves through all of *Laudato Si'* and binds it together. Pope Francis names the **massive assaults on human life and society**: from abortion and euthanasia, to pollution of the ecological commons for private corporate gain, to global and systemic inequality, to weak responses to all of the above. Section 1 of *Laudato Si'*, “What is happening to our common home,” lays out the mess and the global challenge to address it.

And in line with Catholic social teaching, *Laudato Si'* calls out the **human and societal tragedies of war**, including wars waged for profit from massive extraction of natural resources—all sins against the dignity of the human person and human communities. Referring to Saint Francis' harmonious relationship with creation, Pope Francis writes: “This is a far cry from our situation today, where sin is manifest in all its destructive power in wars, the various forms of violence and abuse, the abandonment of the most vulnerable, and attacks on nature” (66).

Both Catholic social teaching and *Laudato Si'* suggest that **we personally and as a society have work to do** to defend life and the dignity of the human person and human communities that are crushed through any form of social injustice and economic or systemic oppression.

Reflection

1. In what ways does my **experience of sacrament** shape my way of being in the world? Does Eucharist impel me toward living mercifully and generously? What stories can I share?
2. In words, and also in actions, how do I **defend life and the dignity of the human person**? What are the stories?

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Part 2: Call to Family, Community, and Participation—and therefore Rights and Responsibilities

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“The person is not only sacred but also social,” the U.S. Bishops write in their recap of the key elements of Catholic social teaching. “How we organize our society [institutionally] directly affects human dignity and the capacity to grow in community.” The bishops point to **marriage and family life as an important foundation for a healthy and just society.**

Pope Francis expands this notion of family, writing that “all of us are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of **universal family**, a sublime communion [or sacramental way of being in the world] which fills us with a sacred, affectionate and humble respect” (89).

While not all of us live in the community of marriage and family, we all are part of **a web of communities larger than ourselves.** Therefore, the U.S. Bishops insist, we have **“a right and a duty to participate in society,** seeking together the common good and well-being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable.”

Pope Francis brings forward the narrative of **the poor and vulnerable** who are “insufficiently represented on global agendas” (48). He writes that “a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach . . . so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” (49).

But “hearing the cry of the poor” is not enough for societies and communities of means. If I have a right to possess or consume those things that make for **a life lived in sufficiency and dignity,** then I have a responsibility to ensure that others can possess or consume these same things for a life lived in sufficiency and dignity, too.

“If we make something our own,” Francis writes, echoing the Apostle Paul, “it is only to administer it for the good of all. If we do not, we burden our consciences with the weight of having denied the existence of others” (95).

Our commitment to building the Land of the Rightside Up must be reflected not just theoretically but in our purchasing choices and consumption habits. Participation in family and community means connection, too, to the poor, the vulnerable, and future generations within the human family.

Reflection

1. When I participate in Eucharist, am I filling my basket for me? Or am I filling it with fresh loaves of generosity, justice, and compassion to distribute throughout the week also to others who have no means to the meal or place at the table?

2. What stories can I share of delivering these fresh loaves of generosity, justice, and compassion to people who lack sufficiency in my community—or around the world?

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Part 3: Option for the Poor and Vulnerable: Gospel Logic at the Heart of Francis' Plea

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In March 2013, when Cardinal Bergoglio was elected pope, his friend Brazilian Cardinal Hummes whispered to him, **"Don't forget the poor."** The name the new pope chose—Francis—was **not merely a name but the announcement** of a fresh focus for the church. "I want a Church which is poor and for the poor," Francis stated early on. "They have much to teach us" (*Joy of the Gospel*, 198).

This focus is not new for people of faith. **Special regard for the poor appears consistently in the Hebrew scriptures, and forms the core of Jesus' ministry.** When Jesus says "the poor you will always have with you" he gives church today a marker: *If we have no poor in our midst, we are doing something wrong.*

The U.S. Bishops affirm the church's preferential option for the poor and vulnerable: **"A basic moral test is how the most vulnerable members of society are faring."** The unconscionable chasm between the superfluously rich and those in abject poverty—especially the working poor whose labor provides the upward flow of wealth, and the laws and loopholes which permit such a chasm—**should shock and enrage us who profess Jesus as Lord.**

The logic of the Gospel confronts the Land of the Upside Down, just as Jesus, in righteous anger, confronted the profiteers in the temple. Francis is right: The poor have much to teach us. *But we have to show up for the lesson and be willing to learn.*

I can easily gloss over Jesus' words to the rich man who wanted to "inherit" (a wealth word) eternal life. Jesus tells him: "Sell what you have, distribute to the poor, then—*then*—come follow me" (see Matthew 19:21; Mark 10:21; Luke 18:22). If I think I can skip those first two steps and still call myself a follower of Jesus, I am seriously deluded. I have learned: *It doesn't work.*

In *Laudato Si'* Francis writes of "the intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet" (16); that exposure to atmospheric pollutants causes health hazards and premature death, "especially for the poor" (20); the collapse of ecosystems impels the poor to migrate, "with great uncertainty for their future" (25). And he writes of the world's "grave social debt towards the poor ... because they are denied the right to a life consistent with their inalienable dignity" (30).

I cannot save the poor of the world. But within my geographic radius I can **rethink** my own forms of wealth, **step out** of my bubble, **befriend** a few people who are "not just like me," and

show up for the larger conversations on justice, compassion, and solidarity (our next topic)—all fresh pathways into the Land of the Rightside Up.

Reflection

1. What are my forms of wealth (e.g., health, mobility, education, time, connections, experience, talents, money, property, unused but useful stuff, etc.)?
2. What steps can I take now to mobilize my forms of wealth locally in service to the poor and vulnerable? (Note: These mobilization channels may be outside my church.)

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Part 4: Dignity of Work and Rights of Workers: Solidarity for the Greater Good

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Our sacramental tradition is the great formator for mature life in the world: We are *washed* (in Baptism), *anointed* (in Confirmation), *fed* (in Eucharist), and *ready for work*. Therefore work, in the Catholic social tradition, is an area of special concern, and essential to formation of a just economy.

In *Laudato Si'* Pope Francis is clear about the need to protect employment and workers: "We were created with a vocation to work. ... Work is a necessity, part of the meaning of life on this earth. ... Helping the poor financially must always be a provisional solution. ... **The broader objective should always be ... a dignified life through work**" (128).

Francis warns of an economy driven by technological progress in **service to market gains rather than the greater good of the human community**: "[T]he orientation of the economy [favors] technological progress in which the costs of production are reduced by laying off workers and replacing them with machines" (128).

The U.S. Bishops put it this way: "**The economy must serve people, not the other way around.**" They state that work is "a form of continuing participation in God's creation. If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers must be respected—the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to the organization and joining of unions, to private property, and to economic initiative."

In the Land of the Upside Down, defending the dignity of work and workers is a drag on maximum profitability. So is the cost of cleaning up the mess from damaged human communities and ecosystems due to corporate extractive practices that **privatize the gains and socialize the costs.**

Solidarity, which Pope Francis describes as an expression of love (see 58) and a civic virtue (see 116), is a "**network of ... belonging**" (148) which is intergenerational (159). He writes that the principle of the common good becomes "a summons to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters" (158).

The U.S. Bishops concur: "Loving our neighbor has global dimensions. ... At the core of the virtue of solidarity is the pursuit of justice and peace."

A sacramental worldview affirms the divine image within humanity and within creation—a human solidarity embedded within the ultimate "network of belonging" which is Holy Trinity.

Reflection

1. How does the phrase “*washed* (in Baptism), *anointed* (in Confirmation), *fed* (in Eucharist), and *ready for work*” make a difference in how I show up in the world? What are the stories?
2. What fallout do I see locally from an economy that works for some but that locks out many others? How do I respond to what I see?

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Part 5: The Lord's is the Earth and Its Fullness: Care for Creation

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In the beginning, God was a Potter, a Farmer, a Riverkeeper, Crafter of the human family. All that God made was very good. *Astonishingly good, and beautiful.* And we were entrusted with the care and prospering of it all.

Care for the earth is "a requirement of our faith," the U.S. Bishops write, "to protect people and the planet, **living our faith in relationship with all of God's creation.**"

Laudato Si' opens with lines from Saint Francis' canticle of praise to God through creation, through "our Sister, Mother Earth" (1). The subtitle of the encyclical is: On Care for Our Common Home, **a phrase which implies relationship, community.**

"This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her," Pope Francis writes. "We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will" (2).

Laudato Si' goes on to describe the Land of the Upside Down. Our challenge is to **restore the Earth**—by will and intention, by resources and commitment, and by cooperation and grace—to **the Land of the Rightside Up.**

We must become, in essence, the answer to our prayer: "*Your kingdom come ... on earth, as in heaven.*" This prayer is **not a wish but an assignment.** We can downsize, simplify, move from "single use" to "zero waste," take only what we need, clean up our messes, and urge corporations to do the same. **The inconvenience will not kill us.**

If we truly want to heal our Mother Earth, **we first must love her.** Get to know her—her beauties, her workings, her magnitude, her mysteries. Touch the bark on the ancient cedar, learn the varieties of birds and birdsong, be stunned by wheat fields gleaming in the sun, pay attention to the colors of the sky and the changing shapes of clouds.

What practical remedies does Pope Francis suggest? **Move our lifestyle** from consumption-driven individualism to community (see 203-208); **build a curriculum** of ecological ethics and ecological citizenship (see 209-215); **undergo "ecological conversion"** rooted in a Gospel-shaped ecological spirituality (see 216-221); **live in joy and peace** with "sufficiency, ... sobriety and humility" (see 222-227); **cultivate civic and political love** to counter "the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness" (see 228-232).

Francis even urges us toward the mystical, to “discover God in all things,” and to cultivate a **sacramental way of being in the world**, especially through the Eucharist (see 233-237). “How much love do you have?” Jesus asks his disciples. Imagine, going forth from the Table of the Lord with all those small fresh loaves of love and healing and justice to distribute to the world you touch.

Reflection

1. How can I—and my household—touch and love Mother Earth on a weekly and even daily basis?
2. What stirs as I consider a “sacramental worldview”? Am I willing to live more intentionally an anointed and eucharistic life for the good of the world I touch?

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