

Care for Creation in the Technological Age

On a 100 degree summer day in Saint Louis, it is a welcome relief to step into an air-conditioned room and leave the heat and humidity outside. Perhaps, we say a prayer of gratitude for the technology of air-conditioning. Or, we are so used to air conditioning that we do not even think about it anymore. However, whether we think about it or not, air-conditioning is one example among the many ways humans have exploited and dominated the natural environment. In this paper, I will discuss the current human relationship with the environment and how we need to rethink this relationship in order to inspire us to care for creation.

Pope Francis, in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*¹, uses air-conditioning as an example of consumerism and overconsumption (#55). He decries the destruction of the environment resulting from the continued exploitation of natural resources by humans to satisfy their material needs and desires. He invites us to recognize the “intrinsic dignity” of God's creation and to care for our common home.

The first question we can ask is how is our consumption of resources through technology destroying the environment. The simple act of turning down the thermostat in the summer may seem innocent and harmless to us. Pope Francis correctly points out that everything is connected. A large portion of electricity comes from coal which has inherent destructive side effects of air pollution from burning, destruction of landscapes from mining, and water pollution from processing. Once we know that our use of air-conditioning has these negative consequences on the environment, we realize that turning down the thermostat is not an harmless act afterall.

Next we can ask why we should care. Perhaps, we can think that the coal in the ground is there for our use and the resulting harm to us from its use is an acceptable consequence of using it. We think that we are justified in using natural resources around us to improve our lives. However, now that we live in a globalized world, we know that our burning of coal has harmful effects on people far away from us through air pollution and climate change. We also realize that we are leaving a degraded and depleted environment for our descendents. Thus, even if burning coal causes little harm to us, we know that it is detrimental to people far from us. This knowledge may spur us to clean up our act and burn as little coal as possible. We note that in both cases we are inspired to care for the environment because destruction to the environment affects other people in the present time or in the future.

The idea of safeguarding the environment because we care about other people has an anthropocentric tilt. Our care for the environment has a utilitarian bent in the sense that we care for the environment because of its utility to humans. We want to keep our air clean because we humans breathe that air. We want to keep the oceans clean because dirty oceans lead to diminished fish stocks and lower fishing catches. We are worried about the plummeting insect population because we think this will lead to lower agricultural yields due to reduced pollination. We care for the Redwood trees because we enjoy their beauty. We care about the Amazon because its destruction will lead to global warming. In every case, our motivation to care for creation is guided by the utility of said portion of creation for humans. Thus, the primary goal is to use creation for human consumption, and the secondary goal is caring for creation as long as it aids the primary goal of using creation for human consumption.

What will inspire us to care for creation when it is not connected to human consumption? Suppose we know that we will never need the plants or the animals or the land of a small island in the South Pacific, are we justified in dumping toxic chemical waste there? Tying care for creation to human benefits is a risky proposition as human needs and desires are constantly changing. Further, it makes our motivations to care for creation shallow. We need to look at care for creation from a different angle.

To begin with, we examine the place of humans in the universe. A secular worldview puts humans above the rest of the world because of our consciousness and intelligence. A Christian worldview has a hierarchy of God, man, and the rest of the world. Some worldviews distinguish the rest of the world category (in descending order of importance or value) into animals, plants, and nonliving entities. In both the secular and the Christian worldviews, humans are above other living and nonliving things. These worldviews result in the notion that humans can do as they wish with everything below them in the hierarchy, as long as their actions do not harm fellow humans.

Humans are thus free to use technologies that exploit the resources in the environment to make life better. We must only be concerned when these technologies harm other humans. So we are concerned about the use of coal only because the resulting air pollution harms other humans. We may switch to solar power because, as far as we know, covering a landscape with solar panels does not negatively affect humans. Again, our care for creation rises only to the extent that other humans are affected. We are unconcerned with the fact that we have dominated and destroyed a landscape with solar panels.

Thus, in examining our motivations for caring for creation, we need to reimagine our relationship with creation. As mentioned previously, the common worldview today is that of

humans above the rest of the world. As an alternative, I propose an alterity relationship with the environment. We need to see plants and animals, mountains and rivers as the 'other'. As Thomas Weidel writes, "The environment is not merely a backdrop or context for human activity, nor is it a passive recipient of our benevolent care and 'tilling'. Rather it is something that has independent ontological status and shares characteristics of existence with humans."²

In this view, we care for everything in the environment because we have a sense of duty to the other. In Christian traditions and modern societies, we do not harm humans or exploit humans out of respect for their humanness. We do not care for other humans merely because it benefits us in some way. We care for humans because we see their intrinsic value. In the same way, when we see the 'otherness' in plants and animals, we will care for them because of their intrinsic value.

The idea of the otherness of things in nature can raise questions about the place of humans in God's creation. In this view of 'otherness' of nature, humans can be considered as the first among equals in God's creation. In the hierarchy of God, humans, and the rest of creation; humans are much closer in terms of being and value to the rest of creation than they are to God. Thus, it is not much of a stretch to think of humans as the first among equals from God's point of view.

Christians also believe that humans were created in God's image, and that fact raises humans above the rest of creation. The 'first among equals' image takes into account the special place of humans in creation while also keeping in view that our finiteness places us closer to the rest of creation as compared to God in His infiniteness.

The shift of humans from an exalted position above all of creation to that of first among equals is similar to the shift from a geocentric worldview to a heliocentric worldview in the seventeenth century. In a geocentric worldview, humans were the center of all creation. The

cosmos revolved around the earth because we humans lived on earth. The move to a heliocentric worldview did not diminish the place of humans in God's creation. We still rightly believed that God created humans out of love, and sent his Son to save us from their sins. In the same way, when we rethink our role as first among equals in God's creation, we are not rejecting the facts that God created us out of love, or that God sent his Son to save us from our sins. Just as the realization that the universe does not revolve around us did not mean that humans are insignificant and unloved in the eyes of God, in the same way raising the status of the natural environment to that of the 'other' does not diminish our standing in the eyes of God.

Now if we accept this alterity relationship with the environment, it raises the question of how are we to use the natural resources around us. Are humans required to go back to the Stone Age and give up all the comforts of modern technology? Pope Francis addresses this objection by stating that (#114) "Nobody is suggesting a return to the Stone Age, but we do need to slow down and look at reality in a different way, to appropriate the positive and sustainable progress which has been made, but also to recover the values and the great goals swept away by our unrestrained delusions of grandeur."

Our 'values and great goals' can be about caring for creation because we recognize the otherness in the world around us. We are to think of the use of resources for human flourishing and comfort through a caring 'otherness' relationship with creation. As Pope Francis advises us, "Our dominion over the universe should be understood more properly in the sense of responsible stewardship." We are to take only what is needed in a considerate manner. When we consume resources, we can make ourselves aware that we are taking from the other (that is by recognizing the otherness in nature). This new mindset will make us reconsider our consumerist tendencies.

Humans have always intervened in the environment from the dawn of the human species tens of thousands of years back. Thus we may ask why is the Church only now asking us to care for creation? I propose that we look at our relationship with the environment as that of a parent and a child. For a long time, humans were small and weak infants, unable to truly affect the environment in any significant way. Humans could only gladly accept what was provided by the environment. The environment as a parent had the ultimate say in the wellbeing of humans, and in a way, humans lived in fear of the environment. However, through the technological progress beginning with the industrial revolution, humans have been able to alter the power balance between humans and the environment. Humans are now in their adolescence, rebelling against ‘mother’ nature. As Pope Francis writes (#106) “Human beings and material objects no longer extend a friendly hand to one another; the relationship has become confrontational.” Like typical teenagers, we are running amok, hurting ourselves and the environment in the process. We selfishly put ourselves first, before everyone else.

Through *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis is calling humans to mature into adulthood such that we have a cordial and caring relationship with ‘mother’ nature. As adult children of loving parents, we will appreciate all that we have received from our mother, and we will care for her for no other reason except that she is our mother. For the good of humans and the environment, it is best that we move into this mature adulthood quickly.

The motivation for caring for creation needs to be more than mere utility of creation for human consumption. We need to rethink the way that we currently view the environment as something inanimate and subordinate to humans. When we recognize the ‘otherness’ of the environment, we will be motivated to care for creation through a brotherly/sisterly love.

References

- 1) Encyclical Letter Laudato Si' Of The Holy Father Francis On Care For Our Common Home
- 2) Weidel, Timothy A. (2019). Laudato Si, Marx, and a Human Motivation for Addressing Climate Change. *_Environmental Ethics_* 41 (1):17-36.