

A few years ago, I received *this box* as a gift from my grandfather. His father, Božo Karanovich, made it from an old crate to hold small tools, screws, and nails. He likely made some plans before piecing it together, some adjustments as the process went on, until he reached the end at which time he could affirm it was “good.” And it is indeed good. Like my great grandfather, my grandfather used the box to hold tools and drill bits. And I, like them, did the same until I moved to Boston. Even though it no longer stores tools, hardware, or fasteners, the box came with me because of the *other* thing it contains: the presence of my family.

I’m certain each of you here can think of something you cherish like this—a family heirloom, a gift from a friend, a note or drawing from a child—that functions to make present those who are not with us: maybe they live across the country, maybe they’re away at school, or maybe they died decades ago. But they are present to us in these things. In fact, beyond our memory of them, it’s the *only* way they’re present to us—the only way the spirit of those we love is kept close. And it is for that reason that these mere *things* become heirlooms and are passed from one generation to the next—because they are more than they appear.

Turning to our readings for today, let me begin by saying that I am always amazed at the ways God is portrayed in the early chapters of Genesis—as if God is just one of us (*aside from that whole creating-the-world thing*). For example, recall that when Adam and Eve hide themselves from God, post-fruit-eating and newly aware of their nakedness (a couple chapters after our first reading from today), they hide because they hear God walking through the garden. And God even asks, “Where are you?” I can envision God peaking around trees, pushing aside brush, pressing the animals about the humans’ whereabouts. Just . . . one of us.

Today, we meet a similarly familiar God. After creating each piece of the cosmos, God “sees how *good* they are” (GN 1, *throughout*). Note that it *doesn't* read, “And God knew it was going to be good and so *yawned, unsurprised* by creation’s goodness.” Instead, God saw that it was good. It’s as if the process was begun without knowing where things would go, a surprisingly successful attempt at a wholly new project. God liked what was made.

The Season of Creation, which concluded on Friday’s Feast of St. Francis, has given us a unique opportunity to see the goodness in God’s creation. The community here at St. Ignatius has honored this season by taking opportunities to learn together, to act together, and—as is the case today and throughout the season of creation—to enrich our liturgy with a particular focus on the call of our church to us, encouraging us to remember well the responsibility with which we were tasked at our own creation: to subdue the earth and its creatures and to have dominion over it.

For generations, however, we have ignored this call as it was *originally* intended, opting instead to manipulate the words of Scripture—no less those words attributed to *God*—to justify the earth’s (and along with it, our neighbors’) destruction, often for political and economic gains. This is *not* the subduing and dominion intended by God that respects the “relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature” and which results in our taking “whatever [we] need[] for [our] subsistence,” while also honoring our “duty to protect the earth and to ensure its

fruitfulness for coming generations.”<sup>1</sup> The consumeristic approach to dominion is rejected outright by Pope Francis. He writes in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, that the interpretation of dominion as God’s having “encouraged the unbridled exploitation of nature . . . is *not* a correct interpretation of the Bible as understood by the Church.”<sup>2</sup>

You see, as Pope Francis reminds us, “We are not God. The earth was here before us and it has been given to us. . . . [*But*] we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God’s image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures.”<sup>3</sup> And the Holy Father is not the first to admonish Christians to consider their ecological impact. The call to reorient ourselves in a way that honors creation, one another as creatures, and our responsibility to both, particularly with regard to the care of our common home, has been a point of concern since the papacy of Paul VI (for those following along at home, that was when the Beach Boys still topped the Billboard charts).<sup>4</sup> This *isn't* a new concern.

As more people, more organizations, more religious institutions add their voices to those of the popes of the last half-century calling for the care of our common home, our planet is *far* from safe from the risk humanity poses to it. I don’t think it’s necessary to rehearse for you the many devastating results that climate change ushers in, you know all of these things (and if you don’t, a quick Google search can do the trick). But even knowing all of this information, for most of us (and I am included in this), it doesn’t yet affect—on the deepest levels—how we live on this

<sup>1</sup> *Laudato Si'* 67.

<sup>2</sup> *Laudato Si'* 67.

<sup>3</sup> *Laudato Si'* 67.

<sup>4</sup> *Laudato Si'* 4-6.

planet and the attention we give to the way our actions damage it and its inhabitants. As Pope Francis notes, this requires something more profound than data collection or education. It requires a transformation of the most radical kind. It is first an issue of *spirituality*. Spirituality mandates that we grapple with the reality around us and informs—or at least ought to inform—every aspect of our life as it reveals how we’ve opted to answer the most fundamental questions about ourselves: “Who are we?” and “What are we?”<sup>5</sup> In our case: Christians.

In *Laudato Si’*, Francis encourages an “ecological spirituality” spurred on by an “ecological conversion.”<sup>6</sup> And while I appreciate the use of the term “ecological” as adjectives for spirituality and conversion in an ecological encyclical, he’s pointing to something much broader, it seems. For Pope Francis, this conversion provides a spirituality in which “the effects of [one’s] encounter with Jesus Christ become[s] evident in their relationship with the world around them.”<sup>7</sup> In this, he’s drawing our attention to two things: first, that the beneficiaries of our active Christian lives are all created things—human or otherwise; and second, that the source of our conversion, and the conversion that we hope to help facilitate by our own lives, is an *encounter with Jesus Christ*.

But what makes for an *encounter with Jesus Christ*? I’m going to ask you a question—it’s rhetorical, so please don’t shout out your answers: Have you ever seen Jesus Christ? [*Pause.*] Now, I’m going to speculate and say that right now, there are one of two things going through you head. (Well, three, if we consider

<sup>5</sup> Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 103; See also Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988).

<sup>6</sup> *Laudato Si’* 216-17.

<sup>7</sup> *Laudato Si’* 217.

those of you who are thinking, “When is this homily going to be over?!”) But with regard to the question, some of you—those who took the question more literally—you’re saying to yourself, “No. I’ve never actually *seen* him.” And that’s, as far as I can understand, a correct answer. For the other group of you, certain ideas started floating around in your head: “Well, I’ve ‘seen’ Jesus in the sacraments, in the poor, in my children or parents, in prayer, on the crucifix that hangs in church.” And this, I believe, is also a correct answer.

You see, in the same way that my great-grandfather’s presence is mediated to me through this box that he made, and the same way that *all* of our keepsakes or heirlooms do the same for our family, friends, and loved ones, so too is God’s presence mediated to us through the things God made. As Patriarch Bartholomew is quoted in *Laudato Si’*, “It is our humble conviction that the divine and the human meet in the slightest detail in the seamless garment of God’s creation, in the last speck of dust of our planet.”<sup>8</sup> And it is this conviction, that the *only* way that we experience God is through the mediation of the created world around us, that ought to ground this new spirituality. But how do we ground ourselves in that? What is required of us to achieve this conversion?

Recall from our first reading—the first narrative of creation—that after God creates—first light, and night and day, then the sky, the earth, the sea, vegetation, the sun, moon, and stars, then creatures, including “great sea monsters” (which incidentally is why you’re not allowed to swim in the Chestnut Hill Reservoir), and then humanity—God rests. God rests. God determined at each step that the parts of

<sup>8</sup> *Laudato Si’* 9, quoting “Global Responsibility and Ecological Sustainability,” Closing Remarks, Halki Summit I, Istanbul (20 June 2012).

this glorious, intricate, beautiful, awe-inspiring (or, in older terms, fear-of-the-Lord inspiring) creation is good, and then God rests.

Now we've done remarkably well at mirroring God by trying to take up the task of God. Unfortunately, however, our taking up the *task* of God has looked more like attempts to *be* God. Instead of becoming *co*-creators, we have often sought to be *the* creators. We have extracted fossil fuels without concern for the end of those reserves, the costs of their pollution, or their effects on the planet. We use the earth's minerals to create instruments of destruction. And we ship the garbage and waste of our consumerism far from our sights because it's unpleasant, and we put it near those powerless billions of people, forcing *them* to suffer the effects of our recklessness and irresponsibility, which serves to further reinforce our biases—explicit or implicit—that they too are unpleasant. Indeed, the way that you and I currently experience global climate change is drastically different from those whose lives were already on the edge.

It is my conviction, then, that the task set before us, to open ourselves to this ecological conversion, begins where God's creation ended: rest. Rest, stop, wait, hold. Then look and see. See what God has created: the plants, the trees, the oceans, you, and me. Recognize that in them, we see God—we encounter Jesus Christ—it is the *only* way we do so. And see it in such a way that the boxes God has made for us, like this one, are not disposable, even if it serves no use for you. Those elements of God's creation that seem most disposable, most useless—be they plant, plains, or people—indeed make God present—maybe not *immediately* to us,

but to someone. And if we are to take the title Christian seriously, we *may not* inhibit that potential encounter. That is an heirloom we must not fail to pass on.

I would like to conclude with a poem by one of our country's great novelists, essayists, and poets, Wendell Berry. I hope you hear in it the same call I do to rest, to recognize God's presence, and only *then* to recommit to our work. But this time not as *the* Creator, but as God's *co*-creators.

*Learn by little the desire for all things  
which perhaps is not desire at all  
but undying love which perhaps  
is not love at all but gratitude  
for the being of all things which  
perhaps is not gratitude at all  
but the maker's joy in what is made,  
the joy in which we come to rest.<sup>9</sup>*

Amen.

<sup>9</sup> Wendell Berry, "Sabbaths XII" (2007) in *This Day: Sabbath Poems Collected and New 1979-2013* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2013), 312.