

Homily for the Mass for Marchers 2017

Given by Fr. Hyacinth Marie Cordell, O.P. at St. Dominic Church on April 29, 2017

The “environment” is a vast system and network of relationships that contains and sustains all living things here on earth. In short, it’s our home. It’s a home for life. It’s our “common home,” as Pope Francis calls it. It’s earth, the “blue planet.” All living things (as far as we know) live in this common home. All living things depend on the wellbeing of this home.

I want you to imagine that your parents gave you a great gift one Christmas: a new home for you to live in, a new home that you didn’t build it. It would be a pure gift, and a great gift indeed.

Now, if you were to take good care of this home, you could have many guests over (including your parents), and you could build up an atmosphere of love and goodness, giving rise to many memories. And if you kept it in good shape, you could hand it on in great condition for many generations to come. And think about how happy and proud your parents would be. You would be honoring them by making such good use of the gift they gave you.

On the other hand, if you were irresponsible . . . if you turned up the heat too much, if you let mold build up and dominate all the living spaces, if you let toxic trash pile up and be scattered around in all the rooms, and if you ran out of water in your home because of overuse, your home would increasingly become unlivable and intolerable, and it would increasingly make you, your family members, your visitors, and all your pets and plants sick. At a certain point, it would even start to threaten lives. Besides that, neglecting and ruining your home would be very disrespectful toward your parents who gave you the home.

That is the condition in which we find ourselves in today. From the Industrial Revolution to today, we, as a human race, have made great advances in science and technology. But we have not always been attentive to the consequences of our decisions. We have not been sufficiently attentive to the effect of our actions on the climate, on the poor, on future generations, on ecosystems and their many species, on air and water, and on the whole system of the planet. We have chosen many short-term goods for ourselves at the expense of many other precious goods, both present and in the future.

In many ways we have created for ourselves a culture of overconsumption and waste, a culture in which we value persons and things only to the degree that they are useful for us in the present moment, afterwards discarding them as if they have no value, a culture which Pope Francis fittingly calls the “throwaway culture.” Unfortunately, there is still a lot of ignorance about the situation and the extent of the damaging effects of our overconsumption and waste. And there is still a lot of resistance to change, even among many Christians, unfortunately. This is why Pope St. John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI, and Pope Francis more recently and in a magnified way, have called the Church, and the world, to an “ecological conversion.”

This ecological conversion involves recovering a spirituality of creation, in which we rediscover our unique value as human persons from beginning to end, as well as the value of all created things, and all things as created by, as reflecting, and as loved by, God. Ecological conversion involves seeing things differently. It involves acting differently. It calls us to change on personal and societal levels.

On the personal level there is much we can do. We can learn, increasingly, to act not only with our own good and convenience in mind, but above all to think and choose according to what is best for all, especially for the poor and for future generations. This ecological conversion calls us to self-examination: to make an inventory of our lives and habits, so that we can learn to be better stewards of our common home and its resources, which are meant for the good of all. To choose “green transportation,” for example: driving less, walking and biking more, using public transportation more, and carpooling. And “green eating”: eating less meat and dairy (which consume a tremendous amount of resources), and eating a more plant-based diet. This is perhaps the biggest personal impact we can have. And “green disposal”: trying to reuse and repurpose things, and when disposable items are used to favor compostable and biodegradable items, so as to recycle and throw away as least as possible. And “green energy”: to use less electricity, heat, gas, air-conditioning, and water; to use them more efficiently and gratefully, and to move as much as possible toward renewable, sustainable, and cleaner energy and away from nonrenewable, dirty, and unsustainable energy. And “green cleaning,” and “green gardening and landscaping,” and “green shopping,” etc.

We could go on and on. At the heart of it all is revolution of the heart, a change toward responsibility and virtue, a transition to thinking about the common good, future generations, the poor, other living beings, God’s glory, and the environment in all our decisions, instead of thinking only in terms of a short-term, fleeting, and superficial good or convenience for ourselves.

Today we celebrate a saint of the Dominican order, a doctor of the Church, a medieval mystic, and a spiritual reformer named St. Catherine of Siena, who lived only 33 years, from 1347 to 1380, but who had quite an impact on the people of her time.

Although she lived long before the rise of modern environmental problems, she is a good model for us. There were many problems in Catherine’s time: Europe was devastated by the plague, city-states were at war, there was laxity among many clergy and laity in the Church, and sin in its many forms was pervasive. Catherine responded to these issues first through personal conversion. Catherine sought God intensely in prayer, grew in deep personal conversion, dedicated herself to the poor and sick, advocated for peace, and promoted spiritual reform within the Church, all while being totally faithful to the Church. Her advocacy and action were effective, since they were rooted in a deep loving relationship with Christ, and in deep personal conversion. Her personal example attracted many people to follow her, and moved many to reform their lives. The human heart gone astray was at the heart of the many problems of her time, as well as the problems of our time. And so, she began a revolution of the heart, or rather Jesus invited people to this revolution through her.

May St. Catherine inspire us today to take the same approach to the problems of our time. Today we gather together here in Washington, DC as a sign of our desire to embrace and promote the ecological conversion in ourselves and throughout society. In doing so, we are standing up for God’s glory, for the poor, for future generations, for all living beings, and for creation itself. May the Holy Spirit bless our efforts, soften resistance, break through hardened hearts, and make fruitful our advocacy. May He bless our march for our common home. Amen. St. Catherine of Siena, pray for us!