

2020 New Year's Letter from Bishop of Kyoto

Protect All Life
~A Response to Pope Francis' Call~

Paul Yoshinao Otsuka
Catholic Bishop of Kyoto

Introduction

The theme of Pope Francis' November 23-26, 2019, visit to Japan was "Protect All Life." These words come from the final paragraph of "A Christian prayer in union with creation" in the pope's encyclical "*Laudato Si*".

O Lord, seize us with your power and light, help us to protect all life, to prepare for a better future, for the coming of your Kingdom of justice, peace, love and beauty. Praise be to you! Amen.

This is a prayer that Christians might take responsibility for the created world as the gospel of Jesus shows us.

"I have something to tell you." The Pope spoke to everyone in Japan about the love of God and the gospel of life in various situations. We want to fulfill our mission to "protect all life" with the Pope's message in mind, prayerfully reflecting on it. So, in this year's annual letter I want to reflect on "A prayer for our earth" from *Laudato Si*'. This is a prayer offered to all who believe in God, the Almighty Creator.

A prayer for our earth

*All-powerful God, you are present in the whole universe and in the smallest of your creatures. You embrace with your tenderness all that exists.
Pour out upon us the power of your love, that we may protect life and beauty.
Fill us with peace, that we may live as brothers and sisters, harming no one.
O God of the poor,
help us to rescue the abandoned and forgotten of this earth, so precious in your eyes.
Bring healing to our lives, that we may protect the world and not prey on it,
that we may sow beauty, not pollution and destruction.
Touch the hearts of those who look only for gain at the expense of the poor and the earth.
Teach us to discover the worth of each thing, to be filled with awe and contemplation,
to recognize that we are profoundly united with every creature as we journey towards your infinite light.
We thank you for being with us each day.
Encourage us, we pray, in our struggle for justice, love and peace.*

--- Encyclical Letter "*Laudato Si*" of the Holy Father Francis on Care for Our Common Home, 246.

1. God, the Creator

All-powerful God, you are present in the whole universe and in the smallest of your creatures.

There is a hymn called *Always with God*. It sings, "Morning comes and night opens, gifts of the sun," and acknowledges God in the life of nature, gratefully praying, "Thank you, God." It is the same spirit as *Laudato Si'* (Praise be to you, my Lord) in the "Canticum of the Creatures" of St. Francis of Assisi. Psalm 19 (verse 1) says "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork." St. Paul taught, "[God's] eternal power and divine nature ... have been understood and seen through the things God has made" (Romans 1:20). God rules the magnificent universe, yet also works in the lives of the least living things found on our earth.

Christians proclaim their faith that God is the Creator. All life is due to the creation of God, is the work of God, and is the fruit of God's love. And God who created humankind as the final act in the creation of heaven and earth created us in the divine image (Genesis 1:27). This is the absolute basis for explaining the dignity of human life. But sadly, we hear news every day that people's lives are destroyed. We may lose unknowingly our sense of the preciousness of life. We may no longer feel pain and indignation at life's being taken away. We may lose minds that value life, minds that we should have originally. If we do not recognize God the Creator, it is natural that we do not understand the value of human life. We Christians must believe in the importance of life based on our faith in God the Creator, and work to "protect all life" in order to proclaim the mystery of life.

2. God's Tenderness

You embrace with your tenderness all that exists.

The word "tenderness" used of God in the Bible literally means "feel sorry for people" and goes beyond the Japanese sense of the word as generosity and warmth and refers to the will and concern of God that never desires that a weak person perish. The world is embraced in the tenderness of this divine consideration. How much do we feel God's tenderness in our lives? we can't take time to fundamentally reexamine our existence because we are busy with our daily life. However, when we are in a crisis, have a serious illness, or come up against serious anxiety, if we have not found anything that fundamentally supports us, we will lose even the desire to live. It is not always easy to identify the meaning and purpose of life and to direct one's life accordingly. But when we find God by faith, we find the true meaning and value of our lives, because we then realize that God cares for and loves each and every one of us.

When we realize that we are surrounded by God's tenderness and feel the power and joy to live, we can be tender to people and to nature. This attitude is called love. Love is openness to others, not using or attempting to own them, but rejoicing in their very existence. Love further acknowledges the uniqueness of others and the differences among them while cherishing them and wishing for coexistence with them.

3. The Power of Love

Pour out upon us the power of your love, that we may protect life and beauty.

St. Paul tells us, "Nothing in creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39). The driving force behind the protection of all life and the beauty of the created world is God's love. Love is the power to nurture and grow life and the passion to move people. When our lives burn with love, we begin to live in a way that cares

for the lives of others. One example is St. Teresa of Kolkata (Mother Teresa). After leaving the Loreto Order at the age of 38 in 1948, Teresa all alone began a service for the poor and orphans living in the slums of Kolkata. It was God's love that moved her, and she named the order she later founded the Missionaries of Charity. The purpose of the order is to care for the hungry, the naked, the homeless, the disabled, the sick, the unneeded, and the unloved who are not cared for by anyone. At Mother Teresa's canonization ceremony, Pope Francis said, "There is no alternative to charity: those who put themselves at the service of others, even when they don't know it, are those who love God (see 1 John 3:16-18; James 2:14-18). The Christian life, however, is not merely extending a hand in times of need. ... The task which the Lord gives us, on the contrary, is the *vocation to charity*. ... Our only criterion for action is gratuitous love, free from every ideology and all obligations, offered freely to everyone without distinction of language, culture, race or religion."

4. Life and Peace

Fill us with peace, that we may live as brothers and sisters, harming no one.

Created in the image of God, our life is given to us by God; it is not our own. Therefore, we have no right to harm our own lives or those of others. Even less do we have a right to take the life of another. We were born in order to meet and be loved by God. Therefore, as children loved equally by God, we care for one another, treat each other with sincerity, and deal with one another with open hearts. The peace God wants for us is to live this "connection between life and life." The basis of Pope Francis' thought is the perspective that "everything is connected." In that sense, people today must give greater value to the sense that all life is connected. My life does not exist only as my own. It is connected to the life of all the various living things on the earth. It is also connected to the lives of the poor. It is connected to people of other religions, other countries, and other ethnic groups. It is also connected with the sick, the elderly, and children. Living these connections is the "ecological mission" of which Pope Francis speaks. Environmental problems are not just so-called environment issues. The problems of the poor, of war and peace, and of the life of the fetus are all connected. In his encyclical "*Pacem in Terris*" (Peace on Earth) St. John XXIII said, "Peace on Earth can never be established, never guaranteed, except by the diligent observance of the divinely established order." The order established by God is this connectedness of life, and the fulfillment of this connection is peace. Peace is the perfection of God's creation, and to work for peace is to cooperate in God's work of creation. War and violence that destroy peace are human works, the destruction of human life. As St. John Paul II declared in his Hiroshima Peace Message in 1981, "War is death."

5. Accompanying the Poor.

*O God of the poor, help us to rescue the abandoned and forgotten of this earth,
so precious in your eyes.*

Since the start of the 21st century in Japan and around the world many people have been deprived of their lives by major natural disasters such as torrential rains and typhoons linked to climate change. Many people who have lost their homes and property and are forced to live in poverty will never regain what they have lost. But for God, the poor are not limited to the needy. People who lose faith and live as if God does not exist, young people who have lost their values and ideals, people in danger at home, the sick, prisoners, refugees, immigrants, and the lonely

elderly --- these are the people to whom God accompanies.

Pope Francis calls on us as members of the same family to listen to the grief of all the world's abandoned people because the earth is "our common home." St. Paul says: "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it" (1 Corinthians 12:26). The pope has said, "I want a Church which is poor and for the poor." This is because those who are poor can recognize the presence of God and testify that God is close to our lives. The Church is invited to a new missionary activity that recognizes God's power to bring salvation in the lives of the poor and puts them at the heart of the journey of the Church. (See "*Evangelii Gaudium*" (The Joy of the Gospel), 198.)

6. The Environmental Crisis and Our Responsibility to the Next Generations

*Bring healing to our lives, that we may protect the world and not prey on it,
that we may sow beauty, not pollution and destruction.*

The Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami on March 11, 2011, and the subsequent Fukushima nuclear power plant accident have caused us to reevaluate the meaning of science and human life. In recent years, the pollution of the oceans by plastic waste has become an urgent issue. Human production and consumption are rapidly taking over the planet. In order to avoid this crisis, we must practice earth-friendliness in our daily lives. In this age of excessive consumerism, if we look at reality with the eyes of God, clearly it is far from the perfection God seeks. The value of protecting the God-given earth and life has been excluded from the center of society. So, Pope Francis asks. "What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up?" (*Laudato Si'*, 160). This is a question not only about the environment, but also fundamentally about the very significance of the creation and the underlying value of social life. As the Pope says, the world is facing one complex crisis, not two separate environmental and social crises. Modern production activities and consumerism sacrifice the earth and produce waste left to the human race of the future. We must think seriously about taking responsibility for sowing seeds of beauty for the next generation.

7. Ecological Conversion

Touch the hearts of those who look only for gain at the expense of the poor and the earth.

Who are those who look only for gain? Are they only other people, some businesspeople having nothing to do with us? So long as we live in this world, none of us can deny that we tend to pursue material riches and pleasure and seek only our own happiness. Therefore, even with "protect all life" as our slogan it is necessary for each of us to humbly continue to change our heart, to convert. Let us recall the four aspects of "ecological conversion" that Pope Francis calls for: conversion of our relationship with God, conversion of our relationship with others, conversion of our relationship with nature, and conversion of our relationship with our own selves. The cry of the poor invites us who are self-centered and indifferent to others to conversion. The pope reminds us that those who entrust themselves to God will never be forsaken for God hears the cry of the poor. (Message of His Holiness Pope Francis, Second World Day of the Poor, 2018)

St. Paul says: "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are" (Romans 12:15–16). When we discard our self-centered thoughts, abandon our pride, break down the barriers of indifference, and go to those who are suffering we widen the circle

of empathy in society. The pope sent a message to the funeral of Jean Vanier, founder of the L'Arche community for the Intellectually disabled who died on May 7, 2019, at the age of 90, saying, "God in Christ took on all our weakness, and Jean Vanier sought to live in harmony with that Christ. He tried to ensure that the weakest people who are prone to rejection are recognized and accepted as brothers and sisters beyond religion and social standing.

8. Christ, the Way, the Truth, and the Life

Teach us to discover the worth of each thing, to be filled with awe and contemplation, to recognize that we are profoundly united with every creature as we journey towards your infinite light.

The life that God desires in creating humankind is in our connection with God, a life that will bring us back to God. "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Matthew 16:25). In using the same word for life, Jesus speaks about physical life and our efforts to protect it, but says that if we only look at it, we will lose sight of the richer "life" of our connection with God. The purpose of Jesus' cross was to bring to humanity an eternal life beyond the destruction of bodily life. "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). It is our Savior Jesus Christ who has lived life to the fullest. Following Christ who loved God, loved others, died on the cross, and rose from the dead will save our lives from danger and lead us to eternal life. Indeed, Christ is "the way, the truth, and the life."

9. Thanks to God Who is with Us

*We thank you for being with us each day.
Encourage us, we pray, in our struggle for justice, love and peace.*

Gratitude to God goes beyond ritual. It means confession of sin as well as confession of faith before God. Gratitude begins when we open our hearts to God's mercy and generosity by confessing our sins and praying for forgiveness. Each day, we who live by God's love and grace are required to reflect on the damage inflicted on the earth and to take responsibility for healing, not being indifferent to the pain of the wounded world.

Pope Francis has called on us to discern the signs of the times and protect life and its dignity. In Japan and the rest of the world, the situation of society changes greatly every day, and there are many problems and challenges related to life. Among the problems facing families are marital problems, sex and reproduction, parent and child relations, and the strain of an aging society. Issues connected with life and death include prenatal diagnosis, disability, self-death, euthanasia, the death penalty, life science, brain death and organ transplantation, human embryos, human clones, gene therapy, and environmental problems.

The mission of the Church in Japan is to shine the light of the gospel on the lives of people in Japan and on efforts to tackle the complex problems facing life. It is a challenging call to walk toward the light of God. Therefore, let us pray that through the intercession of Mary, queen of all creation, God, the Almighty Father, will support us.

A Christian prayer in union with creation

*Father, we praise you with all your creatures.
They came forth from your all-powerful hand;
they are yours, filled with your presence and your tender love.
Praise be to you!*

*Son of God, Jesus,
through you all things were made.
You were formed in the womb of Mary our Mother,
you became part of this earth,
and you gazed upon this world with human eyes.
Today you are alive in every creature
in your risen glory.
Praise be to you!*

*Holy Spirit, by your light
you guide this world towards the Father's love
and accompany creation as it groans in travail.
You also dwell in our hearts
and you inspire us to do what is good.
Praise be to you!*

*Triune Lord, wondrous community of infinite love,
teach us to contemplate you
in the beauty of the universe,
for all things speak of you.
Awaken our praise and thankfulness
for every being that you have made.
Give us the grace to feel profoundly joined
to everything that is.*

*God of love, show us our place in this world
as channels of your love
for all the creatures of this earth,
for not one of them is forgotten in your sight.
Enlighten those who possess power and money
that they may avoid the sin of indifference,
that they may love the common good, advance the weak,
and care for this world in which we live.
The poor and the earth are crying out.
O Lord, seize us with your power and light,
help us to protect all life,
to prepare for a better future,
for the coming of your Kingdom
of justice, peace, love and beauty.
Praise be to you!
Amen.*

--- Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* of the Holy Father Francis on Care for Our Common Home, 246.