

## Integral Ecology: Loving the Earth and Other People

*Because all creatures are connected, each must be cherished with love and respect, for all of us as living creatures are dependent on one another. . . Human beings, too are creatures of this world, enjoying a right to life and happiness, and endowed with unique dignity. So we cannot fail to consider the effects on people's lives of environmental deterioration, current models of development, and the throwaway culture.*

**-Pope Francis-**

It could be seen coming for a long time—the distinct shape, like a great comma moving across the satellite photographs of the Gulf—but the hope had been that it would miss, as others had missed, the most populated regions. It seems we live on such hope, combined with large doses of denial and short-sightedness. We don't accept the science of global warming because we know that to accept it would mean grave inconvenience and, perhaps, even some constraint on our consumption-centered lifestyle; we deny that what we do *"on our own property"* can really affect the order of the world; we tell ourselves that *"someday"* isn't this day. And so we cut down the mangroves and do away with the miles and miles of marsh land to make it easier for the oil and gas industries; we ignore the natural course of rivers and build our houses (and even our cities) on flood planes, believing we can just dam and levee our way to safety; we push the poor into the lowlands and assure them that bad things rarely happen—surely not in their lifetime. After all, look at all the storms that have missed, think how many days of the year disaster has avoided us. Until the time it doesn't.

When Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf coast, generations of hubris and denial, of cost-cutting and avoidance helped to make it one of the five deadliest hurricanes in the history of the United States. Such human failure went back more than a century, when it was decided to redesign the natural path of the Mississippi River around New Orleans—resulting in much of the city, eventually, being actually lower than the level of the river that surrounded it. It continued in the Flood Control Act of 1965, which allowed the use of shorter steel pilings as a money-saving measure in the construction of levees. And it became cataclysmic through all the decisions that allowed the natural buffers of coastal grass and marsh, which had protected New Orleans and other regions from storm surges for centuries, to be destroyed and developed. Combining these factors with the intensifying effects of global climate change allowed Katrina to become not just a great storm, but one of the most destructive hurricanes ever seen in the Gulf.

Yet, Hurricane Katrina was more than an ecological disaster: it was also a human tragedy, a failure of wisdom and compassion that contributed to the death of many of the 1,200 hundred people who lost their lives, and to the displacement of tens of thousands of others. It was a failure that led to hundreds of poor people being trapped in their homes, that led to others being evacuated to Houston—where today, many of the same poor are the victims of Hurricane Harvey. The aftermath of Katrina saw large numbers of poor people housed in a domed stadium, with poor sanitary conditions and insufficient food and water. It saw a community of children and the aged living for years in FEMA trailers, some of which were later recalled because of formaldehyde leakage. And, in the wake of Katrina, despite the immediate outpouring of sympathy, the poor remained largely

displaced, slipping again into the shadows as agencies and public opinion moved on to the next headline-grabbing event. We have, it seems, great hearts for those struck by disaster, both natural and human-caused—for victims of hurricanes and tsunamis, of violence and war—but our attention spans are dangerously brief, especially when it comes to the poor and to the inconvenient truths that may call us to change our way of behaving and doing business.

In his social encyclical, *Laudato Sí*, Pope Francis seeks to call the world out of its addiction to short-sightedness and patchwork solutions; he seeks to challenge all women and men—not just Catholics or Christians—to look at the long-term effects of our habits of domination of the earth and reckless consumption. He seeks to establish that events such as Katrina are not accidental nor unavoidable, but that they are directly related both to our self-centered attitude towards the goods of the world and to our diminished sense of the value of the poor and marginalized. Indeed, for Francis these issues are inextricably linked: our thoughtless misuse of the earth and our thoughtless misuse of the poor are two sides of the same sin. And, conversely, our care for the earth and our care for the poor are also intrinsically interwoven: to truly love the earth, we must love the poor who make up such a huge part of its population; and to love the poor, we must love the earth from which their life emerges and is sustained. This is the principal at the heart of *Laudato Sí*, a principal that Francis calls “*integral ecology*”—a type of ecology which seeks not to make the earth a garden for the rich, but rather a home for all women and men; where use is distinguished from exploitation and renewal involves both changes in the environment and changes in the human heart.

Integral ecology calls us to recognize that property is never fully owned, but is always held in trust from the Creator for the good of the human community existing over history. Thus, to destroy something absolutely—e.g., to eliminate a species or to devastate a forest, to fill in marshland or burn fossil fuels—requires a discernment that takes into account more than one’s immediate circumstances or personal property rights. Likewise, to restrict something—e.g., the burning of wood for charcoal or the clearing of forests for farmland—requires a similar discernment, that takes into account the needs of the persons who actually live on the land. True ecology calls us not simply to be stewards or masters, owners or occupiers, but to be in communion with each other and with our common home; i.e., to live as women and men who love and serve each other within a world of living things, which give us life and enable us to give life to others. Integral ecology calls us to go beyond merely reacting to events—to our desires of the moment or to the crisis of the month—and invites us to form a community of discernment and reflection, in which all voices are heard and various considerations—scientific, economic, environmental, etc.—are fit into the human framework of the common good.

All this month at St. Joseph Parish, we are invited to reflect upon the Season of Creation: to renew and deepen our understanding of Pope Francis’ encyclical and to commit ourselves more fully to the integral ecology that raises up people by renewing the earth, and that renews the earth by raising up people. Seeing the devastation of Hurricane Harvey makes such reflection and commitment even more timely (*and, please note, we will, like other parishes, look to our community to help fund relief for the victims of Harvey in the coming week*); but it should also remind us that we, as a Parish, have been doing the kind of

reflection and action called for by the Pope since the days of Katrina—through our support and sponsorship of the work of Shirts Across America.

Shirts Across America began in the frustration of the young women and men of St. Joseph's youth group, the Voice, who saw in the devastation of Katrina a call to service that was at once both essential and overwhelming. Yet, they began, and in the course of the last decade they have remained faithful to the poor areas of New Orleans—especially to the Ninth Ward—and to the people who have been displaced. Though tempted to run off to the next flood or the next disaster, they have focused on where they began, and have shown the grace of constancy and commitment, as well as sweat and zeal. They have grown a community of leaders, young women and men from high schools and colleges, who are asking questions about social structures, even while they are mudding dry-wall to help a displaced family come home to a structure of their own. Shirts, which eventually grew too large to be housed as a part of the St. Joseph youth group, has opened up young, privileged women and men to the life of the poor and marginalized, and has helped them to become part of one another's community. Before Francis became Pope, let alone wrote about integral ecology, Shirts Across America was helping our young sisters and brothers (and some of us old folks, as well) see the connection between poverty and ecological degradation, between sustainable ecosystems and sustainable communities.

For this reason, I have asked Randy Novak, founding director of Shirts Across America, to offer the reflection at our Masses this weekend—and have directed that the collection this week will go to the work of Shirts. In this Season of Creation, let us build a just and loving world: one house, one relationship, one community at a time.