See: Recognizing the trauma around us and within us

We have witnessed the dramatic convergence of multiple global crises—climate change and environmental degradation leading to increases in natural disasters, violence and conflict, discrimination and disparity, exploitation and human trafficking, global unrest, disease, corruption, and the mass displacement of peoples as a result of these issues. We have arrived at a unique moment in human history and living memory when the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the pain of food and housing insecurity, economic inequality, and health disparities. Earth and indeed all of God’s creation cry out for mercy, for justice, for healing.

This is a time of trauma. Trauma refers to events or circumstances that cause profound physical and psychological stress and which are experienced as intensely threatening or harmful to one’s physical, emotional, spiritual, social, or psychological well-being. We feel it in our anxiety and pain and in the terrible fear that we live with daily, fear not only for ourselves and our loved ones but for future generations as well.

Our Sister, Mother Earth is experiencing trauma.

“The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth. In many parts of the planet, the elderly lament that once beautiful landscapes are now covered with rubbish.”—*Laudato Si’*, paragraph 21

“[A] sober look at our world shows that the degree of human intervention, often in the service of business interests and consumerism, is actually making our earth less rich and beautiful, ever more limited and grey, even as technological advances and consumer goods continue to abound limitless. We seem to think that we can substitute an irreplaceable and irretrievable beauty with something which we have created ourselves.”—*Laudato Si’*, paragraph 34
“We are not God. The earth was here before us and it has been given to us. …[W]e 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. …[Rather, the Bible] implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature. Each community can take from the bounty of the earth whatever it needs for subsistence, but it also has the duty to protect the earth and to ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations.”—Laudato Si’, paragraph 67

“This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she ‘groans in travail’ (Rom 8:22). We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. Gen 2:7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters.”—Laudato Si’, paragraph 2

All creation is experiencing trauma.

“Together with our obligation to use the earth’s goods responsibly, we are called to recognize that other living beings have a value of their own in God’s eyes.”—Laudato Si’, paragraph 69

“Each creature possesses its own particular goodness and perfection… Each of the various creatures, willed in its own being, reflects in its own way a ray of God’s infinite wisdom and goodness. Man must therefore respect the particular goodness of every creature, to avoid any disordered use of things.”—Catechism of the Catholic Church, 339

“The ecosystems of tropical forests possess an enormously complex biodiversity which is almost impossible to appreciate fully, yet when these forests are burned down or levelled for purposes of cultivation, within the space of a few years countless species are lost and the areas frequently become arid wastelands. A delicate balance has to be maintained when speaking about these places, for we cannot overlook the huge global economic interests which, under the guise of protecting them, can undermine the sovereignty of individual nations.”—Laudato Si’, paragraph 38

Violence visited on Earth and other beings is likewise being revisited on the human family. Consider bats—known carriers of coronaviruses, including COVID-19. Recently, scientists have linked bat stressors (e.g. losing their habitats and being kept in wet markets) to the cross-species spread of such diseases. It has become devastatingly clear that when we contribute to creation’s suffering, we also suffer. Our destinies are intimately and inextricably connected. Let us also see in
this a message of great hope: When we truly care for creation, it will in turn nurture and enrich us and generations yet to come.

The human family is experiencing trauma.

Humanity continues to reel with the devastating losses and effects of COVID-19. Yet, the human family has been living with the traumas brought about by violence, greed, and apathy for much longer. Such traumas can seem to erode the very essence of our humanity, leaving generations fearful, despondent, and angry.

Our current global system runs on the principle of scarcity, the idea that there is simply not enough to go around. When we operate from a position of fear—believing all resources are scarce and must be closely guarded—we are far more likely to engage in discrimination and evils against our brothers and sisters. In this way, we create the “Others” of society. The Others are somehow less human or good than we are, allowing us to justify excluding them. Perhaps they have a different religion or culture, the color of their skin differs from ours, they speak another language, or they come from a different place. There might be any number of differentiating factors, but in any case, we create a clear sense of us versus them. In so doing, we erase their humanity. This is a source of great evil and great suffering in our world.

Social scientists are beginning to appreciate the chronic stress experienced by members of society who have been historically marginalized. Persons of color, for example, may be subjected to routine daily experiences of discrimination and prejudice. When others devalue our humanity through repeated acts of discrimination, we can internalize these thoughts, and this has devastating consequences for our personal well-being and for society as well. Studies have also shown that, in countries like the United States, persons of color are more likely to live in poverty and suffer the ill-health effects and stress of environmental pollution and climate change. [6, 7 & 8]

“Disregard for the duty to cultivate and maintain a proper relationship with my neighbour, for whose care and custody I am responsible, ruins my relationship with my own self, with others, with God and with the earth. When all these relationships are neglected, when justice no longer dwells in the land, the Bible tells us that life itself is endangered. . . . [G]enuine care for our own lives and our relationships with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice and faithfulness to others.”
—Laudato Si’, paragraph 70

While trauma takes many forms, the impacts of traumatic experiences carry similar impacts for those affected. These include the increased likelihood of chronic health conditions, depression and anxiety, and even suicide. [1, 3 & 9] How, then, do we begin to heal a traumatized world?
Judge: Invoking Jubilee—Wisdom from Pope Francis

During this year’s Season of Creation, we have been invited to declare a “Jubilee for the Earth.” Fittingly, in his Message for the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation which began the 2020 Season and from which the following quotations come, Pope Francis reflected on Jubilee’s meaning in the face of the multiple, interrelated crises shaking our planet, reminding us that “a Jubilee is a sacred time to remember, return, rest, restore, and rejoice.”

A Jubilee is a time to turn away from all that ostensibly divides us and remember that we exist only in relationships, that we are “brothers and sisters in one common family, and with all of God’s creatures. It is a time for cherishing our inter-relational existence.

A Jubilee is also a “time to turn back in repentance,” to heal ruptured relationships with our Creator, with one another, with Earth itself. It is a time to turn toward our fellow human beings, especially those poor and most vulnerable, a time of setting free those who are oppressed in any way. It is a time to “return our to our rightful place in the created natural order,” to acknowledge that many of the interlocking crises we face are a “wake up call in the face of our rampant greed and consumption.”

“Our way of life is pushing the planet beyond its limits.” Traditionally, a Jubilee was also a time for rest for the land, a time to let earth heal and repair itself. “Today we need to find just and sustainable ways of living to give the Earth the rest it requires.”

A Jubilee is a time to restore the original harmony of creation and heal strained interpersonal and inequitable societal relationships, a time for restorative justice, for restoration of the land. “We must restore with justice in mind, ensuring that those who have lived on the land for generations can regain control over its usage,” in the face of corporate thievery.

Finally, a Jubilee is a time to rejoice. Although we are painfully aware that the cries of the earth and those who are vulnerable or disenfranchised have grown only louder in recent times, there is a growing mobilization of people, especially from below and from the peripheries who are generously working for the protection of our common home and all who share it.

Act: Embracing Jubilee (Suggested Actions)

Now that you have given thought to the trauma around and within you, consider taking a trauma-informed approach when you encounter others. This can be as simple as asking yourself, “What might have happened to this person? How might they have experienced trauma?”
Looking at your own reality and society, where do you see evidence of trauma? How might you apply the techniques recommended by Pope Francis to promote healing? What opportunities do you see for personal encounter, advocacy, and prayer? Consider partnering with others in your community to develop an action plan.

A Prayer of Healing for All Creation

Loving God, open our hearts that we might recognize the beauty and intrinsic value of all creation. Instill in us a great and powerful hope that, though there is much work to be done, there is still time enough to do it. Give us the courage and the wisdom to approach our fellow beings with care and concern for all, to change corrupt systems, to heal old wounds, and to realize our potential as persons of God that we might truly embrace Jubilee. Amen.

References

7. Ibid., “Pollution, Poverty and People of Color: Falling into the Climate Gap,” [English]
8. Ibid., “Pollution, Poverty and People of Color: Asthma and the Inner City,” [English]

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