Columns
Social Justice



Pope Francis waves goodbye at the conclusion of a meeting of Scholas Occurentes in Rome May 19, 2022. The event was for the launch of the "Laudato Si' School," a yearlong project of Scholas young people to develop projects to promote protection of the environment. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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## Join the Conversation

March 26, 2025

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"Waste, fraud and abuse" is now a slogan and a smokescreen to justify any and all cuts to federal programs. Those words resonate with most of us because we want our tax dollars to go to efficient, transparent and useful programs. However, what we are witnessing are major cuts to international aid programs and increasing rhetoric about significant cuts to Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid. In addition, thousands of civil servants are being summarily dismissed, and federal agencies and departments are being dismantled.

The speed with which this is happening testifies to decisions being made without sufficient reflection on the long-term consequences. A major motivation for such significant cuts is the desire to extend and add to tax cuts that disproportionately benefit the richest in our country.

At the same time, an increasing number of states are proposing laws mandating that the Ten Commandments be displayed in every public school in the hope of bringing morality back into our lives.

I find myself curious about how to make sense of an increasing desire to return morality to our culture while we act in a purely transactional way, without considering the consequences for the most vulnerable, both here and throughout the world.

Although I do believe that what I would call the "spiritual impulse" in us as human beings needs to be reawakened, I don't think a copy of the Ten Commandments alone can address that need. A code of morality articulated in Hebrew Scripture can be helpful. But just as the issues we face today are different from those of that time, so too is our need to internalize a more complex understanding of who we are as human beings and how we are to interact with one another as part of the planetary community.

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Lent invites us to take time to ponder the life of Jesus and how the "good news" continues to be understood as the political, social, economic and cultural conditions change throughout history. One of the ways the Catholic Church has tried to do this is through a body of teaching called Catholic social justice teaching. I taught Catholic social justice teaching throughout the years, and we often referred to it as the church's best-kept secret.

A good reflection for our Lenten journey would be to take a few critical teachings from recent papal encyclicals and pause to see how they speak to us today in light of the political choices we must make regarding the U.S. budget, which, like all budgets, embodies the values we hold and are willing to make real.

Catholic social justice teaching began in 1891 with *Rerum Novarum*, an encyclical by Pope Leo XIII. In response to the social and economic impacts of the Industrial Revolution, he felt compelled to address the moral issues arising from modern society and economy.

The encyclical condemns the abuses and inequities of new economic systems and calls for just relationships between the rich and poor, capital and labor, and the powerful and powerless, grounded in Scripture and tradition.

Since then, the church's moral teaching, with the primary emphasis on the individual and one's sexuality, has been complemented by a social morality that extends our responsibility beyond ourselves, families and geographical neighbors to address the common good of all people and our planet.

The encyclicals that followed over the past 130 years have continued to address issues of faith and morals relevant to the times we live in. There are excellent resources on Catholic social justice teaching if you want to learn more about this rich tradition. For this reflection, I'm drawing on the work of Anthony Annett, in his book *Cathonomics*.

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*I invite you to find a quiet space and sit for a few minutes in contemplation. After creating the spaciousness needed to "take a long, loving look at the real," read each quote or section and pause.*

*Let the words speak to you and see what stirs within you. What do they mean for you today? What are the challenges for you in living these values? How can such*

*values and beliefs be expressed in our economic, political and cultural life? What are the challenges for our elected leaders shaping public policy and economic decisions?*

## ***Laudato Si'***

Like Leo XIII, Pope Francis reflects on the significant shift happening today in our world — the interconnected social and environmental crises that threaten life on planet Earth. In "*Laudato Si'*, on Care for Our Common Home," Francis provides a moral diagnosis of the challenge. Rooted in the latest scientific evidence, he boldly asserts that environmental devastation, brought about by our large-scale economic activity, is threatening the health of the planet and its people.

Francis traces the problem to what he calls the technocratic paradigm: " 'myths' of a modernity grounded in a utilitarian mindset (individualism, unlimited progress, competition, consumerism, the unregulated market)."

This mentality has led to "immense technological development" without any accompanying development in "human responsibility, values and conscience."

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Francis offers another vision — an "integral ecology" in which human beings, in harmony with nature, structure the systems of production and distribution in ways that protect the rights of both.

"A true 'right of the environment' does exist, for two reasons," Francis told the United Nations General Assembly in 2015. "First, because we human beings are part of the environment. We live in communion with it. … Any harm done to the environment, therefore, is harm done to humanity. Second, because every creature ... has an intrinsic value."

Responding to the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor means respecting the rights of both.

"Everything is connected," Francis wrote in *Laudato Si'*. "We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it."

He urged "an awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone. This basic awareness would enable the development of new convictions, attitudes and forms of life. A great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge stands before us, and it will demand that we set out on the long path of renewal."

*Pause and reflect.*

## ***Fratelli Tutti***

In *Fratelli Tutti* — brothers and sisters all — Francis addresses the reemergence of ideologies such as nationalism, extremism, xenophobia and polarization. He calls for fraternity between all peoples, transcending all barriers and boundaries. He sets before us a vision of an open world marked by solidarity, fraternity and social friendship.

His moral vision includes a political culture marked by dialogue and charity. He denounces a globalization that benefits only powerful economic and financial interests. What is needed is a new form of openness where all people and cultures are respected and affirmed and where the whole is greater than the parts.

Solidarity "means thinking and acting in terms of community. It means that the lives of all are prior to the appropriation of goods by a few. It also means combatting the structural causes of poverty, inequality, the lack of work, land and housing, the denial of social and labor rights."

*Pause and reflect.*

Now more than ever the secret of Catholic social justice teaching needs to be shared. Make that your Lenten resolution.

This story appears in the **Lent** feature series. View the full series.