

The Conversion to Care for Our Common Home

- *Washington Women's Foundation*
- *November 4, 2015*
- *Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.*

I am very pleased to be asked to speak on this “Discovery Day” to members of the Washington Women’s Foundation about the subject of environmental justice. Perhaps I bring some perspective to this subject as the president of Seattle University and as a priest in contact with college students and how they see this subject and where their commitments are. Perhaps I also bring a special understanding of environmental justice because of the recent encyclical of Pope Francis, another Jesuit, entitled “On Care for Our Common Home” and because of his recent nation-inspiring visit to us as a people. The unusual fact that a year ago yesterday I had the privilege, together with a leading and committed family of Seattle, to have a private 45-minute conversation with Pope Francis in the Vatican lends something of an up-close-and-personal perspective on what he, as the world’s leading moral leader, is calling us to in regard to the environment or what he prefers to call “integral ecology”. I hope my work with United Way of King County with its reach into all of the social issues of our community and to its neediest members, as well as service for years on the Governing Council of the Committee to End Homelessness, lends an understanding of some of the more human dimensions of this issue. At the end of this week, at our Gala on Saturday night, Seattle University will bestow its highest honor, the St. Ignatius Medal on Anne Farrell. She is a friend of our university but a longer friend and leader and pioneer among the Washington Women’s Foundation. I dedicate my remarks to Anne.

Recently, Pope Francis issued his long-anticipated, much-discussed, highly-unusual, and very broadly-comprehensive encyclical on the environment. The character of this 173-page letter is shown in its title “On Care for Our Common Home”. That focus on care for our common home is so true to Pope Francis because it personalizes the subject of the environment, takes it out of the realm of statistics, puts faces on it, makes the dialogue about the environment a family meeting, expresses the reality of how we are all of one family, and have not only an obligation but an impulse and instinct to care for one another, to show mercy and love toward one another. He brings home the issue of the environment to who we are in our deepest convictions, truest humanity, most felt sisterhood and brotherhood. My reading and rereading and praying over this encyclical convinces me that essentially what is called for by Pope Francis is a conversion in regard to the who, the what, the why and the how of environmental justice. So the focus of my reflections with you could be titled “The Conversion to Care for Our Common Home”.

I need that conversion and I am wondering if we all do. This came home to me when I was invited to teach a class on leadership at Seattle U. I was making the point that the “Greatest Generation”—along the lines of Tom Brokaw—were the men and women of the Second World War because they had the greatest cause of saving the world from totalitarianism. My point was that the greatest cause elicits the greatest leaders of a generation. At that point a woman student raised her hand and asked, “Why are they the greatest generation?” I responded, “Because they had the greatest cause.” She replied, “We are the greatest generation.” I was taken aback and asked, “Why is that?” She said, “Because we have the greatest cause any generation could

possibly have.” “What’s that?” I asked. She said, “Our generation’s cause is nothing less than saving the planet from destruction and nothing could be greater than that.” What was remarkable to me was that when she said this, the whole class—something I have not experienced before—assented to her in a collective breath, exclamation, bodily assertion. The coin that dropped for me at that moment and has stayed with me is that I am committed to the environmental cause in my head: I understand it, I agree with the data, I know the consequences, I comprehend what we must do. I get it. But I get it intellectually. These students not only get it, understand it, but they feel it, they are grasped by it viscerally, they are moved to action in a whole-body way. For them it is a vital issue, the issue of their very lives, their actual futures. They are converted. I need to be converted from the environment being one of many problems I know and am convinced we must deal with, to it being a life and death issue of humanity. Maybe students can convert a Jesuit president.

I doubt many of them read papal encyclicals, but they are one with him. He says what they feel; they are his representatives at the table in the family meeting he calls for among all people in “Our Care for Our Common Home”. In some sense they live in that home and I do not yet. I am outside. I need to be turned around, converted, brought in by them and others within the home, invited to the table. I’m not saying, I’m just asking, if you do too. Do we all need to be converted and brought into our common home? Who is it, in fact, who can invite us: our children, the poor, the hungry, the homeless, displaced Native Americans, ecological refugees, those who have lost their livelihoods from environmental change, our grandchildren looking back at us from their future world?

My problem is that essentially I stand outside of this vital issue: I experience some climate change and global warming; I regret the lack of birds and wildlife on the trails I hike; I resent pollution, unclean air, some changed streams, and am suspicious of the impact of our changed environment on the illness and cancer of friends. So I try to remediate, to lessen these effects. I try to do with less, drive a more fuel-efficient car, conserve energy, endorse a carbon-neutral plan at my university, pay for carbon offsets. All good, all needed, all important, but all mostly remediation, more about effects than causes, and frankly, insufficient. What is lacking is not a head for promoting environmental justice or an integrated ecology but the heart for full, human involvement from the deepest level of myself.

I once heard, almost literally heard, coming from within myself when I was objectively doing anything one could be expected to do to exercise leadership, five words” “You lack a loving why!” What this impressed on me unmistakably was: “Where is the loving, warm, human, felt, relational, caring, moving and moved heart within all you are doing?” That’s the question I ask; that’s the question the Pope asks; that’s the question our children of the next generation ask of us in regard to all we do, choose to do, decide to do—as you are deciding to do—in regard to the environmental challenge. There again is the conversion point or pivot.

What we see depends on where we stand, where we look from, with whom we stand. You can look at the environmental challenge as a scientist, as a professor, as an economist, as an American citizen, as a member of a highly educated and highly technological city like Seattle. Some have looked on the Pope’s call for conversion from those places where they stand and they have been critical. I was in a discussion about this with some colleagues. One said, “I hear what is said by the Pope from a small church in Latin America with mostly women who are poor but

of great faith and hope. You see the environmental call in a special way when you stand there.” Another said, “I hear the words of the Pope from a circle of Native Americans in our city, strangers on their own land. Stand with them, and you hear something profoundly caring and merciful and respectful.” Essentially, the voice of the Pope is the voice of the poor and the powerless—the voice of those not often heard in the family meeting about the environment in our common home.

I believe that what is called for from all of us in our “Conversion to Care for Our Common Home” is to see environmental change not from where we ordinarily stand—for we must have the humility to recognize we are privileged in almost every way you can imagine—but by going to and having contact with and standing with and learning to see from the place of the poor. If we do this we will see the ecological reality in a fuller, more human way in what is called an integral ecology. See it from the poor; see it whole; let it convert your heart.

Let me quote just two passages from Pope Francis, which help us to see better where we need to stand in the choices we make about investing in environmental justice.

“It needs to be said that, generally speaking, there is little in the way of clear awareness of problems which especially affect the excluded. Yet they are the majority of the planet’s population, billions of people. These days, they are mentioned in international political and economic discussions, but one often has the impression that their problems are brought up as an afterthought, a question which gets added almost out of duty or in a tangential way, if not treated merely as collateral damage. Indeed, when all is said and done, they frequently remain at the bottom of the pile. This is due partly to the fact that many professionals, opinion makers, communications media and centers of power, being located in affluent urban areas, are far removed from the poor, with little direct contact with their problems. They live and reason from the comfortable position of a high level of development and a quality of life well beyond the reach of the majority of the world’s population. This lack of physical contact and encounter, encouraged at times by the disintegration of our cities, can lead to a numbing of conscience and to tendentious analyses which neglect parts of reality. At times this attitude exists side by side with a “green” rhetoric. Today, however, we have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.”

In this we hear how environmental action must become “environmental justice” because it starts with, rather than takes in as an addition, the reality of the poor of the world. It has to become more than planetary, or physical, or atmospheric, when it starts from the reality of who the “Our” is in reality in “Our Common Home”; it has to become social, economic, humanistic, a matter of justice. Environmental action requires an “integral ecology”, i.e., taking in the whole and the whole as connected, and requires “environmental justice” because of the “poor” of our planet and how the planet impacts their lives.

One other quote from the letter of the Pope exemplifies this.

“Climate change is a global problem with grave implications: environmental, social, economic, political and for the distribution of goods. It represents one of the principal

challenges facing humanity in our day. Its worst impact will probably be felt by developing countries in coming decades. Many of the poor live in areas particularly affected by phenomena related to warming, and their means of subsistence are largely dependent on natural reserves and ecosystemic services such as agriculture, fishing and forestry. They have no other financial activities or resources which can enable them to adapt to climate change or to face natural disasters, and their access to social services and protection is very limited. For example, changes in climate, to which animals and plants cannot adapt, lead them to migrate; this in turn affects the livelihood of the poor, who are then forced to leave their homes, with great uncertainty for their future and that of their children. There has been a tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation. They are not recognized by international conventions as refugees; they bear the loss of the lives they have left behind, without enjoying any legal protection whatsoever. Sadly, there is widespread indifference to such suffering, which is even now taking place throughout our world. Our lack of response to these tragedies involving our brothers and sisters points to the loss of that sense of responsibility for our fellow men and women upon which all civil society is founded.”

Can we imagine a family meeting in our common home which includes the voices of and dialogue with these members of our family already being displaced as if there is not room for them in our homes or in our hearts?

I think I make my point clearly enough about why I believe there is need for a conversion which will animate and help direct the decisions and choices we will make in our commitment to environmental action and justice. One of the reasons I focus so much on this call to conversion is my own experience of meeting the Pope. There we were, eleven of us in a circle sitting on chairs evenly spaced with nothing between us in the 45 minute conversation with the Pope seated with us in his private library. Two things stand out: This was a family meeting—the kind he asks of us in *Our Care for Our Common Home*. He was interested in this family, their story, their concerns, their service, the members of the family not there who especially needed to be prayed for. He simply knew how to become part of the family. The other thing that stands out is not something he said but something he did. I was translating from the family to the Pope in my Italian. I’ve never known anyone to so look at me and to so listen as he did. (I’m quite sure it was not because my Italian was rough or rusty!) I felt fully seen, fully heard, compassionately taken in. After I have forgotten much that was said, I do not forget how I was seen and how I was listened to. This experience empowers my conviction that at the heart of environmental justice is the simplest thing, the poor being truly seen by us and the excluded being fully listened to by us. That sounds simple but it is not. That is conversion; that is “the loving why”; that is the “integral” in “integral ecology”.

Think for a moment of the victims of the “ecological debt”, the poor to whom we owe a debt for our impact on the environment; think also of the children of the future to whom we owe a “generational debt”, think of them as beggars. Pope Francis relates that when people tell him they have given alms to a beggar, he asks them, “Did you look the person in the eye?” Few say yes. Then he asks, “Did you touch the person?” No one says yes. He believes we must look the poor in the eye and we must touch the poor, first of all for their human dignity, but also for our own human dignity. Is there really any possibility of environmental justice which does not see

and touch the poor? It's less about our money and more about where it comes from in us and to whom it is given.

I've been thinking about the choices you want to make personally and collectively as members of Washington Women's Foundation under this banner of the environment. First of all I think you can see that it is not a separate choice from your other ones, for it is a choice also about health, about human services, about education, and even about arts and culture. Can what you decide to do be "integral", be part of an "integral ecology" because of the connectedness of your commitments with one another, united in the people you serve? Could you think through how you make not five different gifts but gifts coming from one commitment in you, each addressing a part of what you are most deeply moved by and converted to? For instance, could education be part of homelessness, as homelessness is part of discrimination, as discrimination is part of environmental injustice? What does art and culture have to say to our care for our common home? Would some time given to what is your "loving why", your converted heart, be time given to what will best inform and guide your decisions? Discover how to make this unified commitment.

I also believe that if we take our location seriously, it helps us see what our environmental commitments might be in terms of what are we most gifted with and what do we have a special responsibility for. When I think of Our Care for Our Common Home here in our region, I find myself coming back again and again to the original people of our land, to our indigenous people. They are our special responsibility as we live in their home in which they are strangers in their own home. Here is a particular "ecological debt" we have, not primarily paid by money, but by respect, dignity, acknowledgement of their right to be who they are, their own rule or sovereignty over their lives and communities, their own ways, customs, rituals, and beliefs, their own land and place. If environmental justice begins at home, it must begin with our Native American people. Discover how to make this commitment to those who have given all to us.

I think of several other local applications of environmental justice. We live in one of the most beautiful parts of the world, effectively a paradise. We are so used to it that we almost take it for granted. Yes, there are things we could do to preserve or improve our own environment, but we need to ask ourselves if we should prioritize that, and if it is just for us to do so given the environmental conditions others live in. Out of local responsibility for the beauty and abundance given to us, I would prioritize a village in Nicaragua where a centuries-old livelihood of clam digging is coming to an end because of warming waters and where there are almost no alternatives of livelihood. In our common home they need in justice some help to live a life of at least minimal beauty and abundance. Similar arguments from justice can be made from being the coffee, the airplane, the technology, the online-retail capitals of the world. Assure the coffee farmers their livelihood; pay more than others for airplane pollution since we make them here and profit from them; beware of imposing our solutions over the lives of others because of the power technology gives us, as the masters of the distribution of goods which we have become, accept a greater responsibility for the distribution of goods within our common home. Our local, unique benefits mean that we must bring to the table those benefits at the family meeting in our common home.

The title of my remarks, "Conversion to Care for Our Common Home" takes me ultimately to the consideration of what is the Soul of Seattle. Conversion and soul are inextricable. Some

worry that we are losing our soul as a city and region. If we harken back to the good old days of Seattle as a regional town with particular, even peculiar ways, then that soul cannot be recaptured. We have matured, grown up, changed, made new friends, put on weight, gotten a job, have kids. It's the soul of this Seattle that is important, the real Seattle and region. Perhaps in Seattle we are more in our heads and have drifted from our hearts. Do we need a conversion, a conversion so that we really care? Can the choices of Washington Women's Foundation in what it cares for help prompt a conversion such that we truly have a soul as a city? Can the conversion to care for our common home in your environmental generosity be a unifying point for our common, caring soul?