



***Laudato Si'*: A Document for All Seasons**

By Mary Ellen Dougherty, SSND

Given the multitude of public responses by experts on the economy, ecology, theology, sociology, and many other fields relevant to *Laudato Si'* (Praise be to You), the recent encyclical of Pope Francis on the environment, I have been reluctant to attempt a response. Yet I cannot help wondering if we are missing the point. Whether we are among those who do not believe that global warming is a crisis for us or those who, with Pope Francis, agree that "it represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day," (25); whether we share his concerns for the loss of biodiversity or appreciate his recurring mantra for the poor, it is difficult to deny his basic message to us: "The ecological crisis is ... a summons to profound interior conversion." (217) Addressed to all humanity, *Laudato Si'* is a document for all seasons.

"I want to dialogue with all people about our common home," says Pope Francis.(4) And he does, in a way that is logical, intelligent, and occasionally quite passionate, stressing in every chapter his two recurring themes, the plight of the poor and everything is interconnected. While I am not qualified to respond to the more technical implications of the encyclical, I do recognize as a believing and active Christian of nearly eighty years, the voice of God in this summons to conversion, or a change of heart, especially in the context of the environment.

I grew up in Cumberland, in the heart of the mountains and valleys of western Maryland. Lincoln Street where we lived was situated between two mountains, or hills as we thought of them then. I had a fascination with the hills. Among other things, I associated them with mystery. With their wide vistas of the town below and their seasonal changes, from blazing red yellow leaves in the fall to soft flowering trees in spring, they engendered in me a sense of awe. I would go there often as a child, alone. Sometimes I would bury small things I valued under the mountain laurel. These were intended, I think now, as gifts of gratitude for the hills, for their strength and their steadfastness. They were always there and I felt safe with them.

Now, seventy-some years later, I realize that I intuitively loved the earth. I thought of it as friend and protector. What happened, I ask myself? Why did I not grow in that view? Why was I not aware as they built a pipeline on one of those hills, cutting down many trees to do it, that that was a violent thing to do? Instead, I and many other children in the neighborhood rejoiced in the clearing, which now provided a steep and unencumbered sledding place for us.

Or why, a few years later, when they built a night club at the top of another more arduous mountain in Cumberland, did I not ask myself why? I, instead, was grateful for that long road up to it which had also displaced many trees and a great deal of rich vegetation. It made a difficult mountain to climb much more accessible to us. Even then my instinct for the earth as a living part of my identity was eroding. I was being conditioned by a culture of "progress" to a utilitarian view of the environment.

And now Pope Francis is calling all of us to radical conversion. We need to ask ourselves the hard questions about this place we call home. As the Pope reminds us, "Many things have to change course, but it is we human beings above all who need to change."(202)