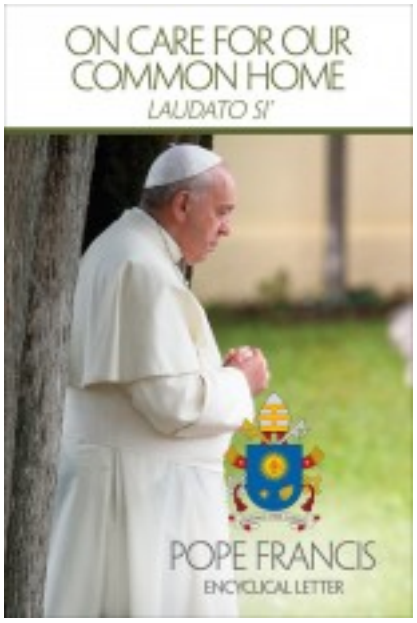


By Archbishop Charles J. Chaput
Philadelphia, June 18, 2015 (ZENIT.org)

The First World War lingers in the memory as humanity's first encounter with industrialized killing on a mass scale. New weapons of the machine age obliterated forests, villages and fields - an entire way of life. This new type of war also deeply shaped the thinking of men who experienced it firsthand. Among them were J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, two of the greatest Christian writers of the last century.

Generations have delighted in Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings,*and Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*
and
Space Trilogy.
But what people often miss in the work of both men is their profound - and deeply
Christian
- love of nature and its creatures, and their equally deep distrust of man's temptation to dominate and abuse; to treat creation as dead matter available for exploitation.

That word "creation" is a key to understanding both writers. For both Tolkien and Lewis, all life and all creation are gifts of a loving God. Neither man disputed the good in modern technology, but they saw clearly that the world is a kind of sacrament, alive with a beauty that points to its Creator. We don't "own" the earth or its creatures. We have dominion over the world only as its

stewards, not as its sovereigns. And as stewards, we have the duty to respect the created order and husband it for the common good.

Earlier today, June 18, 2015, Pope Francis released his latest encyclical, *Laudato Si* (in English, "Praise be to you, Lord")
. By its nature,
Laudato Si
is a serious teaching document, not a form of story-telling. But its purpose is rooted in the same concerns shared by the two great authors. Both writers would know that the title is taken from Francis of Assisi's great prayer, "Canticle of the Sun."

From the start of his papacy, this Holy Father has tried to model St. Francis' simplicity and joy. And just as St. Francis treasured the beauty of the world as a mirror of God's love, so Pope Francis seeks to protect its beauty as a good steward. That desire to protect, along with a keen sense of justice, is the spirit behind this encyclical.

Laudato Si is a wide-ranging and detailed text. It includes an unusual level of scientific analysis and policy recommendations. Climate change and economic development play key roles in the document's content. This will invite discussion.

What's essential is this: Vital truths about human nature, the nature of creation, the human "will to power" and its impact on the environment, are laced throughout *Laudato Si.* Pope Francis develops the teaching of his predecessors, from John XXIII to John Paul II, with persuasive skill. One of the Pope's best lines is borrowed from Benedict XVI:
"The external deserts of the world are growing because the internal deserts [of our hearts] have become so vast."

But my favorite passage comes directly from Pope Francis himself:

"If we approach nature and the environment without [a spirit of] openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs . . . The poverty and austerity of St. Francis were no mere veneer of asceticism, but something much more radical: a refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be

used and controlled" (11).

Laudato Si speaks eloquently of inter-generational solidarity; the beauty of the family; the dishonesty of population control as an answer to poverty; the broad duties of rich nations to those that are poor; and the dignity of the human body in its God-given masculine and feminine forms. "It is not a healthy attitude," Pope Francis writes, "which would seek to cancel out sexual difference because it no longer knows how to confront it." For the Holy Father, a humane ecology includes much more than our treatment of the material world. It involves our bodies, our sexuality and personhood as well.

There's a line in *The Lord of the Rings* that's worth remembering here:

"[It] is not our part to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the succor of those years wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the fields that we know, so that those that live after may have clean earth to till. What weather they shall have is not ours to rule."

Times have changed since Tolkien wrote those words, but the wounds of humanity and the world it stewards have only grown more urgent. In reading and judging *Laudato Si,* we might keep that fact in mind.

Read the encyclical here ...