

## **23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Cycle A, 9.10.23

Ezekiel 33:7-9/Romans 13:8-10/

Matthew 18:15-20

### ***SEASON OF CREATION:***

#### ***Let Justice Roll Like a River***

A year ago, in July, 2022, I moved to Toledo after ministering 35 years in parishes in northern California. Although I grew up in Toledo, I left in 1968 when I joined the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales. Since then, I've lived from the east to the west coast – Niagara Falls and Buffalo, Toronto, Denver and California. When I moved back to Toledo --- the last Oblate holdout in the West -- my California friends had only one thing to say: "WHY?" I quickly discovered a lot of reasons why. We have clouds in Toledo – big, white, puffy, fluffy, fascinating clouds. In California, all we had were blue skies – almost every day (which is very nice), but here I rediscovered the wonder of clouds which I had to look up at and admire as they floated by so effortlessly.



In the Fall, a drive through Toledo Memorial Park Cemetery reintroduced me to the glories of Midwest autumn and the dazzling colors of changing leaves.

Winter almost disappointed me since we only had three snowfalls (I was so looking forward to snow) and one hardly lasted overnight (I'm sure most people were happy about that). Ah, but the dark barren branches of winter trees each appeared to me as a work of art – delicate filigree branches like silhouettes against the gray

sky. Then, Spring happened -- the explosion of pink and yellow blossoms on trees up and down West Bancroft Street and the ridiculous multiplication of white mophead hydrangea bushes everywhere I turned just blew me away. No artist can top our Creator-God's palette; no architect possesses God's exquisite design taste; no interior designer or landscape engineer can outdo the creativity and beauty of the One who gave us this wide and wonderful world in which we live and work and play.



No wonder the clarion call to protect this beautiful world of ours is so pressing. Or is it? How many Catholics would you guess are aware that on September 1<sup>st</sup> we began the "Season of Creation" – a month-long period ending on October 4<sup>th</sup>, the Feast of St. Francis Assisi, the patron saint of ecology? The "Season of Creation" first began in 1989 as a time of prayerful observance that calls the planet's 2.2 billion Christians to pray and care for God's creation. It's a time to reflect on our relationship with the environment – not just "distant" nature, but, crucially, the place where we live – and the ways in which our lifestyles and decisions as a society can endanger both the natural world and those inhabiting it, both humans and other creatures. During this time, we join our sisters and brothers in the ecumenical family in prayer and action for our common home.

In 2015, Pope Francis issued his second encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, subtitled, "On Care for our Common Home." In that historical document, which has been heralded as ground-breaking by Catholics and non-Catholics alike, Pope Francis critiques consumerism and irresponsible development, laments environmental degradation and global warming. He calls all people of the world to take swift and unified global action. When history is written many years from now, one of the enduring legacies of Pope Francis' disruptive and dynamic pontificate will be the concrete initiatives he is now implementing to put the Catholic Church at the forefront in addressing climate change and environmental destruction, and making it a leader in caring for all God's creatures and all God's creation.



The Monroe IHMs have been a part of that movement for a long time. Two decades ago, during a major renovation of the Motherhouse facilities, you made successful efforts to implement "green" remodeling using sustainable design practices including passive energy systems, renewable energy sources, reduction of water use, habitat restoration, constructed wetlands, and the use of recyclable materials. Your innovative and forward-thinking project was awarded regional and national recognition.

At your IHM Assembly in 2018 you affirmed a Chapter Direction *to create and coordinate new opportunities for*

*experiential learning in theology, spirituality and integral ecology for yourselves and the broader public.* You committed yourselves as a Congregation to *assess your policies, procedures and use of resources in light of your commitment to social, economic and ecological justice.* In these decisions, I hear echoes of the challenge that the prophet Ezekiel faced in your desire to be "watchwomen." God said to Ezekiel: *If you do not speak out to dissuade the wicked from their way, the wicked shall die for their guilt, but I will hold you responsible.*

In his papal audience a few weeks ago, before he left for his visit to Mongolia, Pope Francis said: *It is necessary to stand with the victims of environmental and climate injustice, striving to put an end to the senseless war on our common home, which is a terrible world war. I urge all of you to work and pray for our world to abound with life once again.* Even our American bishops, many of whom are reluctant and even resistant to the guidance of the Holy Father, issued a statement in preparation for this year's "Season of Creation." *The ecological conversion of hearts and changes in lifestyles are important for us as individuals and for our sanctity, but it is the public policy decisions about collective impacts that will significantly change the course of our environmental future ... and we must be engaged in civic life as people of faith.* In other words, our vote makes a difference; our voices need to be heard.

In his Letter to the Romans Paul urges us: *Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another.* I believe this is certainly an expression of love to which you and I are being called today – a mental adjustment in our lifestyles and a conversion of heart that serve to protect and not abuse our environment and to preserve it for generations to come. In this country, with

our vast economy, we face the constant temptation of living beyond our needs. We have so much, while so many lack the basic necessities of life. It's not wrong to enjoy the pleasures of life. God gave us this earth for our use. A change in lifestyle isn't about austerity. It is, however, an invitation to a simpler way of life, a lifestyle that Jesus exemplified and commanded. As I heard said long ago: *Live simply so that others may simply live.*

Weather events this summer have taught a dramatic lesson which we, in northwest Ohio and southeast Michigan, were saved from. The scorching temperatures, soaring above 100 degrees for weeks at a time, in so many parts of the country and throughout the world, give credence to the frightening fact that by 2030, the average global temperature will be one-and-a-half degrees warmer than it was in the pre-industrial age, leading to more extreme weather events, from droughts in some areas to flooding rains in others; rising seawater and the destruction of coastal areas; the endangerment and extinction of animals and plants; big threats to the health, livelihood, food security, water supply, and economic status of people around the world.

The early church was no stranger to "Christians behaving badly." Matthew's description of an intervention if "*your brother or sister sins against you,*" would have been quite familiar to early Jewish Christians; it's rooted squarely in the Torah. The oldest, most reliable gospel manuscripts don't include the words "against you" – but simply, "*if your brother or sister sins.*" Whether the harm is directed at us personally or elsewhere, like sins against the environment and against Mother Earth, we're called to seek remedy and repair. That conversation or gentle confrontation can take place one-on-one with a friend, a family

member or a neighbor. It can happen in small group settings -- in RCIA programs, in children's faith formation classes, in Bible study groups, at a book club night. And it has to happen on a broader scale in homilies, bulletin articles and pastoral communication that alert people to the dramatic urgency of the climate crisis and the universal call to right the wrong that we have done and are doing to Mother Earth.

We rely on Jesus' promise: *If two of you agree on earth about anything for which they are to pray, it shall be granted them by my heavenly Father.* May our prayers be joined to bold action as we come to terms with ways that we have failed to care for our common home, this beautiful earth, with its blossoming bushes and cloud-filled skies and all its inhabitants – all that is given to us by God as a gift to be nurtured as well as enjoyed. The Book of Genesis describes the divine attitude toward the world: *God looked at everything God had made and saw that it was, indeed, very good.* May we take up the challenge and work together for that day when God can again look at us and our world and be able to declare: *It is still very good.*



**"And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good..."**

*John Kasper, OFS*