

**Fourth Annual Veninga Lecture  
May 9 and 10, 2016**

**Bishop Richard Pates**

I am very honored to be a participant in the company of Sister Simone Campbell in the fourth annual Veninga lecture.

The series pays deserved tribute to Jim Veninga, founder of the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service. Jim's legacy, encouraging citizen involvement and literacy in the political and civic institutions of our society, lives on in this lecture series. Moreover, insights from the religious perspective add a richness that goes beyond immediate issues and offers a reflection and time-tested dimension to our considerations.

I am especially grateful to Eric Giordano for extending the invitation to be with you and to Gail Kell who has attended to all of the organizational details with great skill. Originally from Minnesota, I m a little apprehensive. Truth be told, I bleed purple and therefore hope my words won't be blocked in the heart of Packer land. At any rate, our prayer is that the Vikings will be somewhat competitive in their new billion dollar U.S. Bank Stadium.

Given my role as a Roman Catholic Bishop, much of what I will say this evening comes from this perspective. I hope that listeners from other backgrounds can adapt it to their own rich legacy. I appreciate your understanding.

In January, I had the opportunity to participate in an international gathering of Catholic bishops in Lisbon, Portugal. The Conference was sponsored by the Acton Institute of Grand Rapids, Michigan, on the topic of the intersection between the free market and Catholic social justice teaching. I was the only American bishop. The majority of the group were from Africa and Central and South America. Upon learning that I was from Iowa, they immediately engaged conversation on the American elections.

First of all, they were astounded at the tenor of the political conversation and how negative it was in terms of candidates' positions. It seemed distant from the expected appreciation of a people who are the wealthiest in history. Moreover, the proposed resolution of significant problems by aspiring leaders was bellicose and dependent on military force.

My friends asked : Had we Americans not heard of Pope Francis? Had we of Christian persuasion not been challenged by the path of dialogue? What does the Holy Father mean when he constantly affirms: "We are one human family. We are all brothers and sisters?"

The bishops, almost in chorus, emphasized how important the American elections are. They establish a direction for the rest of the world with implications for pursuing a sustainable peace and grappling with widespread hunger and poverty and the huge migrations of peoples especially those running from the inferno of Iraq and Syria.

The lights, therefore, are shining on us. We Americans are being called to incorporate our Christian values and beliefs into the political process in a manner that reflects what best serves the human scene.

But, we protest, given the current positions of the two major parties, that when interspersed with our religious convictions, don't a preponderant majority of us have difficulty in finding a comfortable home in either major party – democrat or republican? But the privilege of civic participation and voting and the responsibility we hold for the common good leave no alternative. We must engage. But how?

We need to articulate core principles that serve as a foundation for our position that also coincide with the natural law – that law which is embedded in our souls, in our very bones, which the U.S. Declaration of Independence describes as "truths that are self-evident."

My international friends made reference to Pope Francis. Everywhere I go the Pope is admired for his authenticity and genuine humility. The remarkable media coverage that he received in his September U.S. visit clearly demonstrates the influence he wields. Even our polarized

politicians took on a listening mode. I don't believe it is an exaggeration to identify him as "Everyone's Pope."

Tonight, I would propose to address three mega issues that Pope Francis has latched onto: first, to an extended degree, the environment and then to a lesser extent peace and the economy. I contend these three questions should also be high on the radar screen of presidential campaigns.

The signature writing that has catapulted the Pope center stage on global issues is *Laudato Si*, his encyclical on the Environment published on June 18, 2015. Its sub-title is "Care for our Common Home."

His message is clearly a call to action. In effect, he states that Mother Earth, our home is on fire. The scientific facts, he concludes, are beyond dispute. We need to take action before the house is beyond salvaging which in fact is not that distant. Moreover, we are responsible for the fate of future generations.

*Laudato Si*, conceived within the framework of human and environmental ecology, is a clarion call for universal action to reverse ailing Mother Earth's health condition. Evidence abounds: pollution and waste, widespread experience of radical climate variation, reduction of safe water which is the "stuff of life" and loss of biodiversity. More distressing is the impact on human life – where the poor suffer intolerably and societies and cultures are unraveling.

At the heart of this environmental disruption is what has been termed "climate change." In this, the Pope concurs with the preponderant analysis of 97% of the actively publishing climate scientists. This change, in large measure, occurs when greenhouse gases (carbon dioxide, methane, nitrogen oxides and others) concentrate as a result of human activity. Cited especially are the use of coal, oil and gas coupled with deforestation and clearing of the resources which help maintain equilibrium in the atmosphere by absorbing excessive carbon that is being produced.

This “greenhouse” effect traps heat in a so-called ceiling that increases temperature which, in turn, has a significant impact on the pattern of the climate, the form of water and the sustainability of microorganisms and other impressions of life which contribute to the balance of nature and its sustainability. The balance that is essential for continuation of all forms of life is shut down.

It is true that the crisis has come about because of human action. The Pope contends, the undergirding of this debilitating movement is supported by an anthropocentric philosophy. All is simply at the disposition of human desire.

Contrary to the Christian vision, as so beautifully and poetically espoused by St. Francis of Assisi, which regards all creation as God’s gift to be revered and enjoyed within the framework of preserving and sustaining it, this outlook basically holds that the earth, and all of nature, exist for human use thus justifying and encouraging its exploitation. It is a system that promotes endless consumption of material goods with the assumption that such a way of life will bring happiness. What is occurring is the world is being used up. There will be little if anything left for the benefit of generations to follow us.

Nonetheless, it is our working together that can turn the tide and avoid catastrophe and preserve the remarkable beauty we have inherited. The Pope leads us to a hopeful perspective that should galvanize us into action based on a love of creation, of nature and its beauty in and unto itself.

Cited as among the leading culprits in the climate crisis is carbon dioxide.

In the Pope’s view, reached with the input of knowledgeable experts, two significant factors must be addressed: the use of fossil fuels and wide swaths of deforestation wiping out indispensable carbon dioxide hungry trees.

The miracle is that both of these processes can be reversed through human ingenuity. I admit to being somewhat biased. But do you know that MidAmerican Energy, which supplies our power

in Iowa, has definitive plans to expand the production of renewable energy in Iowa to 85% of need in the near term with the additional investment of 3.8 billion dollars in wind power?

An industry employing thousands of workers has blossomed in the production of the windmills. Further economic development occurs in the manufacturing, transporting, installing and then maintaining these machines which take advantage of a plentiful Iowa resource: wind. In addition, technology companies such as Google and Facebook, which consume endless supplies of energy have opted green and are establishing operations in Iowa because of the plentiful availability of renewable energy. Both the environment and the economy are beneficiaries of this development. The future is to be found in universal resources: the wind and the sun.

The second cause of growing carbon dioxide is deforestation. Much of this phenomenon is attributed to the expanding population due to reach 9 billion by 2050. In this scenario, it is contended trees need to give way to food production.

But wait a minute, do you know how much food is wasted? The crops spoiled before getting from field to market and the food that is scraped off our plates amount to 40% of total food production.

Shimon Peres, the remarkable Israeli statesman and humanitarian, has begun a study center located near Tel Aviv, Israel. It has three goals: 1) to develop a process of recycling food; 2) to obtain medicines from natural sources rather than chemical and 3) to desalinate water. Peres conclusion: Trees can be spared. People can eat and not only survive but thrive. The quality of life for the poor is enhanced. A Jewish scientist by the name of Daniel Hillel has invented “drip” irrigation that produces food with the bare minimum of precious water, “drip by drip.”

Another bright light elucidating the future is the World Food Prize. Established by Norman Borlaug who is credited with saving a billion lives, it espouses the green revolution developing crops and agriculture methods that will be able to produce enough food in comfortable quantities to feed all 9 billion earth’s residents and again forego dismantling of our forests.

As we seek resolution to the situation, Pope Francis recognizes the current ecological crisis as global in nature. The Vatican joined with other world representatives in the Paris summit at the end of 2016 to solicit commitments of all nations to address the global reality. *Laudato Si* reads: “Enforceable international agreements are urgently needed, since local authorities are not always capable of effective intervention.” (#173)

The Holy See has exerted its influence on the international level, by its intervention and advocacy at the Paris Conference. In doing so, it emphasizes that all of the world needs to be on the same page and committed to those policies and action intended for the beneficial global outcome of all. In affirmation of the agreement on climate change at the Paris Conference, Pope Francis on January 11<sup>th</sup> stated:

“This significant accord represents for the entire international community an important achievement; it reflects a powerful collective realization of the grave responsibility incumbent on individuals and nations to protect creation, to promote a “culture of care that permeates all of society.”

In analyzing the climate crisis, the Pope notes that the suffering caused is not shared proportionately. Thus, the Pope clearly states that we are called to be attentive to the three billion persons who are suffering and are left behind in a proportionate sharing of God’s providence. They represent what Pope Francis terms the “throw-away” culture. One of the ways their lives can be enhanced, their God-given dignity recognized and respected is by reversing the suffering emanating from environmental degradation. The goods of the world necessary for survival, indeed the flourishing of human nature, are intended for universal application. They are not to be hoarded by a select minority. St. John Chrysostom brings this principle into close focus. He asserts that if I wear one pair of shoes and have another in the closet – that which is in the closet belongs to the poor man who has no shoes.

“It is essential,” Pope Francis asserts, “to seek comprehensive solutions which consider the interactions within natural systems themselves and with social systems. We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis

which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature (139).”

At a certain point, some claim that as early as 2075 the damage to the environment may be irreversible. We must pay forward to future generations providing them a home that will be habitable, preserving the wonder of God’s goodness. We should do so because we can do it. In response to the welcome at the White House, on September 23<sup>rd</sup> during his visit to the United States, Pope Francis stated: “Mr. President, I find it encouraging that you are proposing an initiative for reducing air pollution. Accepting the urgency, it seems clear to me also that climate change is a problem that can no longer be left to a future generation. When it comes to the care of our “common home” we are living at a critical moment of history. We still have time to make the changes needed to bring about a “sustainable and integral development, for we know things can change.” (Laudato Si, 13)

We are all born into life on this planet. This common home is an unmerited gift. Through creation, God has provided for us an abundant Mother: Earth. Earth's health is imperiled by a relational breakdown with God, with fellow humans and with the planet itself. Our faith and the common relationship with one another impel us to address this situation. Our destiny is intertwined - earth and each human person on a common journey. For the Christian, this is in unity with Christ who leads us to the goal of creation - life-giving unity with the Father.

To arrive at this goal, Pope Francis accentuates the reality that all of creation is in communion. Echoing St. Francis of Assisi, the Holy Father proclaims: "Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of his creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth."

The Pope insists that the natural environment is "a collective good, the patrimony of all humanity and the responsibility of everyone." Our work to ensure justice and a livable situation for everyone represents "fidelity to the Creator, since God created the world for everyone."

In considering the primacy of the human person in creation, those activities which diminish the dignity of each human person are to be challenged. Especially is this so with the emerging supremacy of technology. This development gives rise to a "practical relativism," which translates: if it can be done, do it. Importantly, as we pursue material "progress" we must adhere to the requirement to provide work for people to enable them to achieve the meaning and purpose God has in mind for them - core to the hierarchy of human values.

Moving forward with "environmental conversion," Pope Francis employs a word characterizing his papacy: dialogue. This dialogue occurs on an international scale, on the national and local scene. It emphasizes transparency in decision making, in politics, in economy and religious dialogue with science. In all of these formats, the key is transparency, openness and a commitment to reach resolutions that are in the best interests of each of us individually and as one human family.

Such conversion or change requires us to think of the preservation of that which gives life: air, water, fertile soil. We can do so by being responsible in our own situation but also by joining together in advocacy of those policies that will characterize us as grateful "stewards" so that all God so lovingly created might thrive.

Let me at this point again brag about my home state, Iowa. Iowans have been especially blessed and inspired by leaders who are able to parse the grammar of responsible stewardship. Farmer after farmer who visit with me, tell me that they are committed to leaving the soil and the water for which they are responsible, in much better shape than they inherited it. As noted earlier, wind power has taken off in Iowa. It is now the number two state in the United States producing more such energy per capita than any other state. Right behind is the installation of solar panels – especially in rural areas. The development of renewable energy creates jobs and produces clear, breathable air while enabling us to experience accustomed lifestyle benefits.

An example I like to cite in this regard is that of Justin Doyle, a Catholic engineer in Des Moines who is practical and committed toward healthy economic development. He transforms old

buildings through renovation and very importantly the installation of solar energy – which is sustainable and very economical operationally. Outright energy returns in one of his mid-size renovated industrial office buildings are \$120.00 monthly rebates.

The Pope challenges us to dedicate efforts for change on the personal level over which we have control and then on to the ever expanding citizen level which calls for coalitions of influence.

Independent undertakings which he advocates include “avoiding the use of plastic and paper, reducing water consumption, separating refuse, cooking only what can be reasonably consumed, showing care for other human beings, using public transport or car-pooling, planting trees, turning off unnecessary lights, or any number of practices.”

It is reasonable to ask has there been noticeable, effective change by these individual actions? The Holy Father notes: “People may well have a growing ecological sensitivity but it has not succeeded in changing their harmful habits of consumption which, rather than decreasing, appear to be growing all the more. A simple example is the increasing use and power of air conditioning.”

In response to the need for policies that better care for God’s creation, the Holy Father acknowledges that “politicians will inevitably clash with the mindset of short-term gain and results which dominates present-day economics and politics” (§181). He goes on to say, however, that politicians “if they are courageous, will attest to their God-given dignity and leave behind a testimony of selfless responsibility” (Ibid.). Moreover, the pope asks God to “enlighten those who possess power and money that they may avoid the sin of indifference, that they may love the common good, advance the weak, and care for this world in which we live” (§246). Simply put, Pope Francis recognizes that the defense of our common home concurrently requires both strong public policies and intrepid leaders committed to justice and the common good of all – especially the poor, vulnerable and marginalized.

The individual action in climate change needs to evolve to embrace political consensus. That is where progress will be achieved for the common good. It is on such issues that politicians

should be coaxed to rise above political advantage based on convoluted differentiation – namely, wedge issues, and be committed to achieving the common good. It is here where Christian citizens join together on issues, which need to be addressed by both parties in the best interests of all God’s children.

It is in finding common ground on questions of universal application that we will be able to move forward in authentic human advancement.

Thus, in this political season, it is up to us citizens, Pope Francis insists, to look beyond narrow interests to bring about the common good. “Unless citizens control power – national, regional and municipal – it will not be possible to control damage to the environment.”

“Climate Change and the Common Good” a 2015 April statement of the Pontifical Academy of Science pushes us dedicated to the moral good: “Over and above institutional reforms policy changes and technological innovations for affordable access to renewable energy sources, there is a fundamental need to reorient our attitude toward nature and, thereby, toward ourselves. Finding ways to develop a sustainable relationship with nature requires not only the engagement of scientists, political leaders, educators, and civil societies, but will succeed only if it is based on a moral revolution that religious institutions are in a special position to promote.”

“Praise be to you” as an encyclical is not a political document, nor a scientific document, but rather a religious document which our Holy Father, Pope Francis has developed to guide us in the moral order that we might be faithful to the scriptures and teachings of the Church in our times. From a Christian/humanist perspective we pray: May it inspire us to unite in generating hope and in building the Kingdom of God, indeed be about building a safe and healthy haven for all in the human family.

### Peace

A second area which Pope Francis has dedicated a great deal of effort to is that of seeking concord throughout the world.

It is the understanding of being one human family that has driven the vision of Pope Francis to overcome debilitating separation and bring people to the table of peace. It is the same vision that has led the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to advocate for renewing diplomatic relations and completely ending the embargo in Cuba and also reaching agreement with Iran on the non-development of that country's nuclear bomb capability.

Representatives of the U.S. Bishops went to Iran in March of 2014 to the city of Qom at the invitation of Shia leaders to discuss the common understanding that our faiths share. We were very warmly and cordially received. Our goal was to come to an agreement from a moral perspective on the utilization of nuclear weapons with the hope that we, in turn, might influence political leaders of our respective countries.

The outcome of our talks was that both faiths hold that the utilization of nuclear weapons is immoral. This is based on the indiscriminate nature of these weapons and their potential for widespread and intolerable destruction.

The Iranians and we representatives of the USCCB are scheduled to meet again in Rome, June 2<sup>nd</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup>. This time the focal point of the talks will be terrorism. Coming together has brought about a further appreciation for each other's faith and the impact we can have in our home countries for mutual benefit. Diplomacy, negotiation and most importantly, as Pope Francis insists, dialogue are far better than hostility and separation.

Divisions of people create fear and negativity and shroud the goodness residing in every human heart. The Berlin Wall, for instance, perpetuated the artificial separation of two peoples extending tension and political conflict – in fact, a cold war. Aware of that history, as Pope Francis recently said, we don't need more walls. A wall between Mexico and the United States would proclaim loudly of our inability to resolve such issues as immigration, our country's insatiable appetite for drugs, the ensuing corruption and widespread violence and the unraveling of education in Latin America. The Holy Father has said a Christian is one who builds bridges not walls.

In his visit last year to the Central African Republic, the Pope raised the consequential role of weapons' merchants who do lucrative business in supplying death machines to opposing military factions – often purely mercenary, who do not have the common good at heart. Conversation of weapons raises the dark specter of American mass violence. It also brings to mind our continuing development, production and maintenance of nuclear weapons to the tune of hundreds of billions of dollars. Their only value: never to be used. These threats to our humanity demand religious as well as common sense responses.

When I reflect on Christians enabling peace, I recall a United Nations official from Benin who was in charge of rehabilitation in Cote d'Ivoire after its recent civil war. He demonstrated convictions and values at the heart of our Christian ethic: forgiveness, justice, compassion, dialogue, new beginnings, dissolving sentiments of hatred. When I expressed admiration for his putting into practice his convictions, he simply replied, "I am a Christian, and my faith compels me to such action expressing the love of Christ."

### The Economy

"What are we going to do about the poor?" Pope Francis asked in response to an invitation to the Davos Conference on economic activity in January. The question epitomizes the Pope's deeply seated concern. His question is well grounded in the Gospels, in his cultural heritage of South America and in the Catholic Church's "Preferential Option for the Poor."

In his September talk to the U.S. Congress, the Pope urged the lawmakers to "keep in mind all those people around us trapped in a cycle of poverty. They too need to be given hope. The fight against poverty must be fought consistently and on many fronts, especially in its causes." He added, "It goes without saying that part of this great effort is the creation and distribution of wealth. The right use of natural resources, the proper application of technology and the harnessing of the spirit of enterprise are essential elements of an economy that seeks to be modern, inclusive and sustainable."

As we engage economic issues we identify with David as he battled Goliath: There are 62 billionaires in the world who have the aggregate wealth of 3.6 billion people or approximately half the world's inhabitants combined. Furthermore, the conditions which the poor live under – lack of education, joblessness, hunger, malnutrition, poor health and inadequate housing, lack of proper sanitation, corruption, poor government, etc. seem insurmountable. But our Christian convictions tell us we should engage in resolution without hesitation or fear.

In facing these seemingly impossible tasks, we find encouragement from Mother Theresa, on docket to be proclaimed a Saint in this Jubilee of Mercy. When asked how she was going to take care of the millions upon millions of the poor, she replied simply, “One person at a time.”

### Conclusion

This talk is billed as the utilization of our conscience – that of a Christian conscience or even a deeply held humanitarian conscience, in exercising responsible activity on behalf of the polis, of the city, of the common good.

The foregoing considerations spoke of three issues – care for our common home, peace, and the economy which Pope Francis has raised as central to the common good and the pursuit of justice in our time thereby insuring the inherent dignity of every person.

Legitimately, we ask, but what is conscience? How does it come to be? I will spell out a Catholic understanding of conscience but trust it has applicability beyond our Catholic ken.

The Second Vatican Council elaborated on the nature of conscience. It defined it as “the most secret core and sanctuary “of a person where one “is alone with God, whose voice echoes in one’s depths.” There, a person “detects a law which one does not impose upon oneself, but which holds one in obedience. Always summoning the person to live good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to the heart: do this, shun that.” That is to say, conscience is where a person discovers “in the heart a law written by God . . . which is fulfilled

by love of God and neighbor.” (Quotations from Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 16)

Guided by conscience, persons employ reason to “judge the moral quality of a concrete act that one is going to perform, or has already completed. In all one says and does, a person is obliged to follow faithfully what one knows to be just and right.” (From the Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 1778.)

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has outlined how the person exercises the responsibility to judge rightly by forming one’s conscience for political choice. It is summarized in four steps. (Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship)

- 1) Each person must “begin being open to the truth and what is right.” In essence that requires each of us to set aside our partisan perspectives whether it be from CNN, Fox News, or Rush Limbaugh. We are to forego ideological biases and approach issues and situations with authentic openness of mind and heart.
- 2) Each of us must carefully and regularly study scripture and classic fonts of human wisdom. We should reflect every day on authentic inspiration to serve the common good.
- 3) The third element of conscience formation entails examination of the objective facts, data and options that pertain to a particular decision. We are expected to avoid narratives from biased commentators and seek objective, thoughtful reflections from trusted analysts who are not swayed by any sort of special interest or agenda. Frequently occurring in our day Pope Francis asserts in *Laudato Si’s*, “There are too many special interests, and economic interests who easily end up trumping the common good and manipulating information so that their plans will not be affected. (#54)
- 4) Finally, for the believer, we are called to prayerfully reflect in order to discern the divine will in a particular situation. We are invited to bring our openness, reflections and

examination to quiet reflection and be open to God's spirits to enlighten our hearts and minds of how to act.

Employing our consciences together in common cause could have a powerful effect on our corporate future.

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As we reflect upon our political responsibility and employ our consciences in determining the route we choose, perhaps beyond our voting is the call to be of ongoing influence in our culture. As my international bishop friends so directly reminded me in Lisbon, all of us today live in a global society. We have responsibility for the evolving relationships that bind us together. And for us Americans, we are reminded: To those to whom much is given, much will be expected. Can we serve to reanimate the generous and altruistic American traits that have characterized us Americans at our best? - exemplified in the Marshall Plan, the Peace Corps, the extraordinary compassionate responses to natural disasters.

Though frustration inevitably emerges from the current political turmoil, we should continue to reform political parties from the inside which could, if well directed, achieve most of what is at stake for the common good.

At the same time, often it will be necessary to rise above party limitations and join in united front. In doing so, we are to pursue the path of wisdom and Gospel teachings which recognize the inestimable value of each human person and render to that person the life and dignity to which he or she is entitled as a child of God.

As Pope Francis insists: "We are one human family, all brothers and sisters."