

WE ARE NOT GOD, Section 67 of “Laudato Si”

Hello, my name is Kathy Heskin, and part of my heritage is with the Anishinabe and Lumbee tribes. I teach Native American Spirituality at Edgewood College.

As I read the encyclical, and reflected on my Native American background, I keep thinking that things would be very different in our culture, if we had only paid attention to Native traditions... if only we had respected the ways of the people who lived on this continent and knew how to survive here long before we arrived.

At first contact there were 550 sovereign nations, each with their own culture, language, rituals, and beliefs. It is almost impossible to make universal statements about all these peoples, but there are some things that were held by most of the nations, and these were the things we should have learned.

In 67 section of the encyclical, “We are Not God,” Pope Francis reminds us that the earth was here before us, and it has been given to us. Our Judeo-Christian creation story shared in Genesis, might lead us to see humankind as a pinnacle of creation, rather than a part of a complex system of interdependent creatures. And one interpretation suggests that because human beings are created in God’s image, we have dominion over all other creations. Pope Francis seems to agree more with the creation stories of the First peoples. Each band, each tribe had its own creation story – some very different from others. But in all of them, one theme stands out - humans were the last and the least of creation – beings who needed to watch, listen and learn from the life that came before them. The earth is our mother, and she is to be honored and respected. We are to show the same respect and honor to

all our relations – the two-leggeds, the four-leggeds, the winged ones, and the swimmers, who were our first teachers, and to the rocks, the plants, the trees, and the land. All of these existed before us, and we need them in order to survive – not the other way around!

One principle of the encyclical reminds us that the world is fragile, and we are challenged to direct, develop, and limit our power. In the Native way, we are invited to only take from the earth what is needed, and nothing more. Nobody owns the land, it is given to us to share and to care for. We journey through this world but try to leave no tracks. We are to care for each other, and all of life, and to make decisions about the use of resources, about the relations between others, about the earth we inhabit, being mindful of how our actions will affect not just us, but all the way forward to the 7th generation. When we live in this way, the amassing of great wealth by a few, the abuse of our sisters and brothers, including the plants and animals, and the destruction of the natural resources, cannot happen.

Pope Francis reminds us that care for the earth is entrusted to us, and that is why we are gathered here today – to remind ourselves of the need to unite in solidarity to protect our home, the earth. We are at a critical point in history – but we can change what is happening.

Each of us needs to find a way, out of our experience, out of our giftedness, to engage in that great work. The encyclical states that we are not God. And in the Native way we acknowledge that, and in all things praise and thank the Creator for the gifts we have received.