

America

COMMONS SENSE

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As many as 300,000 people marched in New York on Sept. 21 to call for the United Nations to take action on climate change—four times the number that organizers predicted. In the interfaith bloc, behind a wooden ark on wheels and a giant inflatable mosque, I marched and sang with nuns and seminarians, friends and strangers, sharing our love for the planet we all have in common.

The Book of Acts talks twice about the early church holding “all things in common,” in the second chapter and in the fourth. Both times, the phrase “signs and wonders” comes right before. Sharing things followed a shared experience. There is some kind of connection, it seems, between holy spectacle and how we treat the world around us. Like how falling in love makes us see miracles all around us, or how a wedding binds families together, signs and wonders help us share what we once kept to ourselves. September’s climate march was certainly a wonder. I hope world leaders will also take it as a sign.

But what does the phrase “in common” mean? Cold War shudders might arise in us: Are we talking communism or capitalism? Was the climate march some kind of plea for an Earth-worshipping politburo?

I hope not. Heeding the scientific consensus and the cries of people enduring climate-induced floods and famines, popes from John Paul II to Francis have spoken of inaction on climate change as a pressing moral crisis for Christians. An environmental encyclical is in the making. In New York, Cardinal Timothy Dolan wrote on his blog, “It would be wonderful if there were a strong Catholic presence at the march, to indicate our prayerful support of God’s creation.”

What the apostles were doing, and what we should be doing to protect the planet, falls on neither side of the Cold War binary. Acts is not talking about a state bureaucracy any more than about a stock market; it is talking about the ancient practice sometimes called “commoning”—that is, treating the means of livelihood as the common birthright of everyone. The whole world, after all, is ultimately God’s. Thus Gratian understood that by natural law *omnia sunt communia*—all things are common—and thus St. Thomas Aquinas held that poor people’s right to necessities trumps the property rights of the rich. Thus, alongside England’s Magna Carta came the Charter of the Forest, which ensured that the landless masses would have the right to sustain themselves with the fruits of common land. Thus Leviticus required that farmers leave the edges of their fields unharvested so that the poor could live off the remains—and so, to protect the health of the land, every seven years it was to be left fallow.

Commoning was the original bulwark against poverty, an economic system built around meeting the needs of the poor and sustaining the environment. It was a natural fit for early Christians, many of whom were on the fringes of society. The medieval church went on to maintain churches and land for common use; it was no accident that with the Reformation came a surge in the enclosure of land into private estates.

Throughout history, commoners have had to fend off the urges of the wealthy to enclose common resources. “The pre-eminent challenge is to assure the greatest integrity of the commons, so that the fruits of commoning are not siphoned away by clever, covetous businesses and governments,” writes David Bollier in his essential new introduction to the commons, *Think Like a Commoner*. While commoning might coexist with a market or state, it is neither. Commons are governed by the customs of the poor, not the bureaucracies of the rich.



Today, movements framed around the commons are resisting attempts to privatize such essentials as water, seeds and medicines. Climate change itself results from a kind of enclosure—an economic system that allows polluters to treat the atmosphere as theirs to disrupt and profit from. That is why, the day after the big march, I helped to organize another event: Flood Wall Street. Following a call to action from poor and indigenous communities, several thousand people wearing blue filled the Financial District. One hundred were arrested in a peaceful sit-in near the stock exchange.

First, we must see a God-given commons like the climate for what it is. Next, we must organize to protect it. Third, may we find the grace to become good stewards of it again.

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