

CARE FOR OUR COMMON HOME

REFLECTING ON *LAUDATO SI'*



MICHIGAN
CATHOLIC
CONFERENCE

“Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home” (no. 13). Pope Francis shared this hopeful line in his second encyclical, *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*.¹ Last month marked the five-year anniversary of the document’s release, which reinvigorated the Catholic Church’s longstanding efforts to protect and care for creation. The anniversary presents an opportunity for Catholics, as the Church in Michigan encourages all to reflect upon what it means to live out this teaching.

In the beginning pages of *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis states his hope that the document “can help [humanity] to acknowledge the appeal, immensity and urgency of the challenge we face.” The encyclical covers significant ground while addressing the Church’s teaching on the caring for creation. It brings together topics that may seem unrelated but are in fact intricately linked to the health of the environment and society, such as the dignity of work, the importance of the family, and need for technology and the economy to be focused on people. Woven throughout is a consistent concern for the poor, who experience the worst impacts of environmental deterioration and exclusion. While *Laudato Si’* shares many important insights, the lesson that shines



most brightly is that each living creature has value and purpose.

From the beginning, God created the world and humanity, and saw “that it was good” (*Genesis, Chapter 1*). The people of the state can simply look around them to understand this concept, as Michigan is home to scores of natural treasures that rival those of any other state. These features contribute to the splendor of the state, such as Mackinac Island, Pictured Rocks, the Porcupine Mountains, Sleeping Bear Dunes, Tahquamenon Falls, numerous federally protected national forests, and thousands of inland lakes—the list goes on and on. The greatest examples are the Great Lakes themselves. In looking out at the many shades of blue and green lining the sandy beaches in the summer or the frozen shores in the winter, residents and visitors alike can feel a sense of beauty and peace. Without even knowing that the Great Lakes are the largest bodies of fresh water on the planet, anyone who sees them can understand intuitively their value and can understand why policymakers at all levels of government are constantly working to protect them.

While Michiganders may recognize the goodness of the state’s natural beauty, discussions about protecting the environment too often fall into partisan bickering rather than

honest engagement. The Church teaches that the Earth is a gift for all; thus, all have a role in its use and its protection.

In light of this understanding, Michigan Catholics are encouraged to discern the lessons the document provides, especially in response to the following questions: *What should our responsibility be to one another and to the environment? What kind of world do we want to leave to future generations?* This **focus** reflects on insights from Pope Francis and offers opportunities for Catholics to consider their role in the Church's commitment to care for all creation. •

HUMANITY'S PLACE IN CREATION



Backyards and public spaces frequently provide a setting for children playing with their friends. Michigan parks and trails offer a respite from the indoors, as well as an opportunity for adventure and exercise. For so many, the fresh air and natural landscapes help Michiganders feel a sense of peace and restoration, marveling in the beautiful world God created for all to enjoy. In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis recognizes the ability to discover God within nature and in other creatures, whether it be “in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person's face” (no. 233). Unfortunately, the Holy Father writes, people have misunderstood their role in the world, which has led to painful consequences (no. 66–70, 115). God gave humans unique worth that separated them from the animals (no. 90). At the same time, alongside that special worth also came greater responsibility. Called to cultivate and care for the world, Pope Francis describes human beings as the “instruments used by God to bring out the potential he inscribed in things” (no. 124). Michigan farmers have a unique calling in this regard, as they prepare,

CATHOLIC “CARE OF CREATION” TEACHING

The Catholic Church's environmental teaching did not begin with *Laudato Si'*. Pope Francis builds upon the examples and writings of venerable saints and pontiffs, including

grow, and harvest crops and livestock that are essential for society. Unfortunately, humanity too often acts as if the environment has and will dole out a never-ending supply of resources: as if trees will always grow and provide the materials for large homes, as if water will always keep flowing to nurture lawns and carry away waste, and as if the wind will always clear the pollution from the air people breathe. It has become too easy for humans to exploit natural resources, “giving priority to [their own] immediate convenience” rather than exercising responsible stewardship (no. 122). •

“In the family we first learn how to show love and respect for life; we are taught...respect for the local ecosystem and care for all creatures.”

—*Laudato Si'*, No. 213

ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS



In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis critically assesses the real difficulties the world is facing before encouraging conversation about potential next steps. He specifically names the following issues:

- Pollution and waste
- Climate change
- Water contamination and access
- The depletion of natural resources

St. Francis of Assisi, St. John of the Cross, St. Bonaventure, St. Paul VI, St. John Paul II, and Pope Benedict XVI. In *Laudato Si'*, the Holy Father offers a moral perspective to the wider environmental discussion and raises awareness among Catholics about their personal responsibility to care for God's creation. The themes Pope Francis develops are consistent with his predecessors and with the Church's environmental teaching over time. •

- The loss of animal and plant life
- The breakdown of society
- An information overload produced by constant digital updates
- Global inequality

In recent years, the State of Michigan has experienced numerous environmentally based concerns that have drawn parallels to the thoughts articulated by Pope Francis. The Flint water crisis, ongoing difficulties regarding access to clean and affordable drinking water in Detroit, the presence of PFAS contamination², and lingering environmental questions around the distribution of oil and gas through the Straits of Mackinac are but a few of the many issues present today. Their impact on low-income and vulnerable populations—including many of whom are members of minority communities—are consistent with the concerns advanced by the Holy Father. In addition to these concerns, Michiganders have witnessed the connections between the environment and health care, agriculture, and other industries highlighted in *Laudato Si'*. •

“The acceptance of our bodies as God’s gift is vital for welcoming and accepting the entire world as a gift from the Father and our common home.”

—*Laudato Si*, No. 155

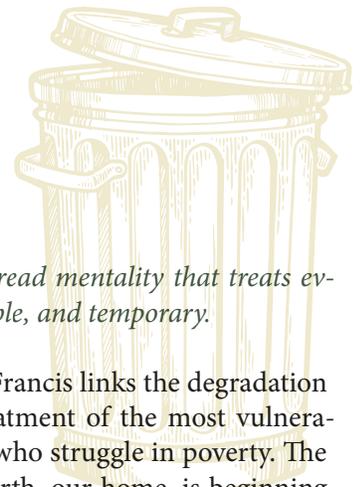


ST. JOHN PAUL II

“Modern society will find no solutions to the ecological problem unless it takes a serious look at its lifestyle.”

—1990 World Day of Peace Message

THE THROWAWAY CULTURE



Throwaway Culture: A widespread mentality that treats everything as disposable, replaceable, and temporary.

Throughout *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis links the degradation of the environment to the treatment of the most vulnerable in society, especially those who struggle in poverty. The Holy Father writes that “the earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth” (no. 21). This decay has occurred, he writes, because of a developing “throwaway culture” in society (no. 22). Items that have outlived their usefulness are discarded, rather than being reused or recycled. Pope Francis initially cites this concept in relation to pollution, overconsumption, and waste that have harmed the environment and the health of individuals. However, he also points out that the throwaway culture “affects **the excluded [person]** just as it quickly reduces things to rubbish” (no. 21, emphasis added). Relationships are easily abandoned, and for many in society, an individual’s worth is viewed as inextricably linked to their achievements or perceived usefulness. This type of attitude is troubling, as it ignores the inherent dignity that each person is afforded because he or she is a child of God. For the faithful, respecting the value of each person—from conception until natural death—is an integral part of the daily lives of Catholics. The ability to practice this respect in every encounter with others will inevitably impact the way human beings treat the environment, as the natural world is a gift from God. •



POPE BENEDICT XVI

“The world is not something indifferent, raw material to be utilized simply as we see fit.”

—*Sacramentum Caritatis*, 2007

“When we fail to acknowledge... the worth of a poor person, a human embryo, a person with disabilities...it becomes difficult to hear the cry of nature itself.”

—*Laudato Si*, No. 117

CONSUMERISM, CONSUMPTION, AND THE POOR



Many of the Earth’s natural resources are used faster than they can be replaced, whether that is because of consumer desires, emerging technologies, or the design of the manufacturer. When resources are consumed in this way, the poor often suffer the most. Specifically, Pope Francis:

- Warns against excessive consumerism.
- Challenges Catholics to consider those in difficult economic circumstances.
- Dismisses the idea that a reduction in the birth rate is the solution, which only legitimizes the continuance of excessive consumption and waste (*no. 50*).



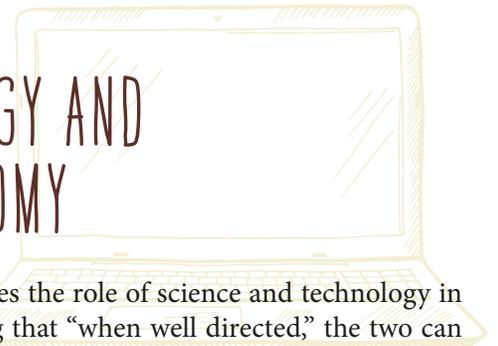
POPE FRANCIS

“A sense of deep communion with the rest of nature cannot be real if our hearts lack...concern for our fellow human beings.”

—*Laudato Si*, No. 91

The teaching on consumption in *Laudato Si*’ is challenging and countercultural. Americans are encouraged to acquire newer and better goods, without considering if those things give “meaning and joy to the human heart” (*no. 209*). Society espouses the idea that community needs are important, but only if they do not clash with personal desires, an attitude which leaves vulnerable neighbors behind. The Church, on the other hand, reminds Catholics that by reducing dependency on material goods, greater happiness may be achieved. Pope Francis emphasizes this point, saying “happiness means knowing how to limit some needs which only diminish us” (*no. 223*). •

TECHNOLOGY AND THE ECONOMY



Laudato Si’ addresses the role of science and technology in society, recognizing that “when well directed,” the two can work together to improve people’s lives (*no. 103*). Yet the Holy Father warns against society separating technology from ethics; against the economy using advances in technology to prioritize profits above all else, especially people; and against people believing so strongly in the power of technology to address every problem that its impact on environmental deterioration is dismissed. The pontiff acknowledges that society cannot and should not return to the Stone Age. However, as a society, it is beneficial to ask: “is this the right way forward?” (*no. 114*). Treating technology as the savior to everything—without considering its direction, goals, and social implications—is dangerous, often ignoring the root causes of the problem or the larger impact on those who are marginalized. •

“[Each community] also has the duty to protect the earth and to ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations.”

—*Laudato Si*’, No. 67

A PROPOSED INTEGRAL ECOLOGY

Public discussions often frame the needs of the environment and individuals to be incompatible. Pope Francis points out how interconnected the two truly are. In *Laudato Si'*, he makes the case for developing an **integral ecology**. Since ecology is the study of the relationship between living organisms and the environment in which they develop, an **integral ecology connects care for the environment with care for people**. For example, the protection of nature also must address issues of poverty and restore dignity to the marginalized, including the unborn. As each issue is part of “one complex crisis,” any solution that does not address all would not be desirable (*no. 139*). At the same time, it can be tempting for leaders to address environmental concerns with a one-size-fits-all approach. The pontiff takes care to acknowledge that addressing environmental concerns requires engagement of local people, knowledge of local concerns, and a respect for the local culture. Environmental solutions cannot ignore the needs of those impacted directly, especially the poor and indigenous whose lives have been uprooted due to pollution, waste, and the depletion of natural resources (*no. 143–146*). •

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

Laudato Si' encourages discussion of the means to care for God's creation. The following questions have been adapted to assist in these discussions:³

- What lifestyle changes can we make to combat the throwaway culture?
- How can we protect all God's creation, especially the poor, the unborn, and the elderly?
- Do we consume more than we need, and if so, how can we change this habit?
- Do we consider the needs of the poor in the way we live our lives and make decisions?
- How can we include the perspectives of the vulnerable in actions to care for creation? •

“Work is a necessity, part of the meaning of life on this earth, a path to growth, human development and personal fulfilment.”

—*Laudato Si*, No. 128

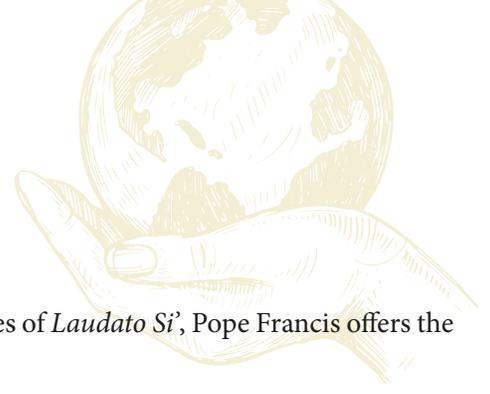
LIVING CARE FOR CREATION

A deep concern for the welfare of others and for the world is central to Catholicism. Jesus lived by these convictions, and they impacted every aspect of His life. *Laudato Si'* calls for people of faith to live by their convictions as well, to become responsible stewards of the creation that God has gifted to past, present, and future generations. Pope Francis reminds readers that there is “no one path to a solution” and instead encourages dialogue, as all have experiences and gifts to share (*no. 60*). Humanity must work together, as the Holy Father writes: “***we must regain the conviction that we need one another, that we have a shared responsibility for others and the world***” (*no. 229, emphasis added*). *Laudato Si'* and centuries of Church teaching do not leave believers without ideas for renewing their care and respect for nature. Some of these include:⁴

- Learning more about environmental responsibility and praying for the care of God's creation.
- Showing care for others, recognizing the inherent dignity of each person, and nurturing relationships.
- Giving thanks for one's possessions.
- Engaging the vulnerable in environmental discussions and encouraging attention to their concerns.
- Buying and cooking only what can be reasonably consumed or donating surplus food to those in need.
- Reducing water consumption, turning off lights, turning down the heat or air, and buying energy efficient appliances.
- Adding solar panels to a home or institution, if feasible.
- Finding creative ways to reuse items, whenever possible and safe.
- Participating in a recycling program.
- Organizing cleanup events for rivers, streams, lakes, and shared spaces.
- Planting trees and native plants.

- Supporting a community garden or farmer’s market.
- Supporting policies that encourage renewable energy, wise management of natural resources, and sustainable agriculture.
- Taking the St. Francis pledge to care for creation and persons in poverty.⁵

PRAY FOR THE EARTH



Within the final pages of *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis offers the following prayer:

All-powerful God, you are present in the whole universe and in the smallest of your creatures. You embrace with your tenderness all that exists. Pour out upon us the power of your love, that we may protect life and beauty. Fill us with peace, that we may live as brothers and sisters, harming no one. O God of the poor, help us to rescue the abandoned and forgotten of this earth, so precious in your eyes. Bring healing to our lives, that we may protect the world and not prey on it, that we may sow beauty, not pollution and destruction. Touch the hearts of those who look only for gain at the expense of the poor and the earth. Teach us to discover the worth of each thing, to be filled with awe and contemplation, to recognize that we are profoundly united with every creature as we journey towards your infinite light. We thank you for being with us each day. Encourage us, we pray, in our struggle for justice, love and peace. Amen. •

LEARN MORE ABOUT CATHOLIC "CARE OF CREATION" ACTIVITIES

- Michigan Catholic Conference
micatholic.org/LaudatoSi
- Catholic Climate Covenant
catholicclimatecovenant.org
- Catholic Rural Life
catholicrurallife.org
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
bit.ly/2Z1bM3h •

“Living our vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience.”

—*Laudato Si'*, No. 217



1. *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis, 2015: bit.ly/2JPfep3. 2. PFAS, a type of contaminant which does not break down easily in the environment, have been commonly found in waterproof, stain-resistant, or non-stick products; food packaging; commercial household products such as cleaning products; and production facilities or industries such as electronics manufacturing. 3. “*Laudato Si'* Discussion Guide,” USCCB, updated March 2020: bit.ly/2XB7FdC. 4. *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis, 2015: bit.ly/2JPfep3, and “*Laudato Si'* Discussion Guide,” USCCB, updated March 2020: bit.ly/2XB7FdC. 5. St. Francis Pledge, Catholic Climate Covenant: bit.ly/2LJ3S6O

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