
Laudato Si'

By Archbishop John C. Wester, June/July 2016 *People of God*

It has been one year since Pope Francis released his landmark encyclical letter on ecology, *Laudato Si'*, and I fear this election season shows us that our country as a whole has not yet reckoned with its powerful message. While covering a host of ecological issues, Pope Francis points to the deepest cause of our societal problems—our disconnection from one another. We see this disconnection most clearly in the issue of climate change: while seas rise and diseases spread in a warming climate, we have yet to seriously discuss solutions to the problems hitting our common home. Pope Francis gives us the moral and spiritual framework to realize our interconnectedness and to do right by our sisters and brothers around the world and future generations.

Addressing “every person living on this planet” in *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis echoes recent Christian concerns – expressed by St. John Paul II, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, among others – that environmental degradation harms the life, health, dignity of people, especially people who are poor and countries most at risk from climate impacts. By raising these challenges, Pope Francis affirms the insight made by St. Pope John Paul II in his 1990 *World Day of Peace Message* that the ecological crisis is a moral issue and we must act.

In order to adequately protect our common home, Pope Francis applauds and encourages individual and local actions. Here in the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, one wonderful example of Catholics caring for God’s creation is St. John XXIII Catholic Community in Albuquerque. They installed a 100kW solar carport, which reduces its electrical usage by roughly 2/3. The parish also benefits from shade provided to 60 parking spaces and the planet benefits from less pollution and carbon emissions from New Mexico’s mainly coal-fired power plants. They are working on reducing their own carbon footprint through energy efficiency and implementing a recycling program. They just completed a six-week study of *Laudato Si'* to raise awareness in the parish community and are committed to implement the directives in the document.

We Catholics still have more work to do, but the momentum continues to build following *Laudato Si'*. And a tangible action like that of St. John XXIII Catholic Community has a compounding effect: the solar panels are a great conversation-starter and invite greater reflection for each of us to discern how we can better care for the gifts and resources we have received from God.

Our individual and local actions are not enough, however, given the immense urgency of climate change that Pope Francis makes clear. We need to come together as a country to do the big things that we cannot do as individuals. Francis insists that “there is an urgent need to

develop policies so that, in the next few years, the emission of carbon dioxide and other highly polluting gases can be drastically reduced, for example, substituting for fossil fuels and developing sources of renewable energy.” For many years, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has repeatedly urged our national leaders to address climate change. Riding the wave of *Laudato Si’*, we bishops became even more vocal this past year. Leading bishops called for the setting of national standards on carbon pollution from power plants, such as through the Clean Power Plan. We urged Congress to allocate money through the Green Climate Fund to assist poor countries struggling to adapt to climate disruptions like water scarcity and crop failure.

With immense disruptions facing our country and the world—including greater water scarcity and wildfire damage in New Mexico—and following *Laudato Si’* and the Paris climate agreement, climate change should be talked about more than it has been this election season. It is not always an easy conversation, but public officials have a moral obligation to act with courage and leave behind a legacy of smart policy efforts that care for our common home.

This election season, I pray that our political leaders will embrace the difficult truth and the necessary changes that need to be made in order to be good stewards of the gifts that God has given all of us. Elected officials are uniquely able to seek the common good and care for our common home. In the face of catastrophic climate change, I join in Pope Francis’ prayer that God would “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.”