

# BRINGING LAUDATO SI' TO LIFE

## The Journey to Tackle the Climate Crisis

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### THE URGENCY OF THE CLIMATE CRISIS

"It is my hope that this Encyclical Letter can help us to acknowledge the appeal, immensity and urgency of the challenge we face" (LS 15), stated Pope Francis in Laudato Si'. In fact, the encyclical was extremely effective as it was widely credited with boosting the moral imperative to increase the level of ambition of the Paris Agreement, which was negotiated at the COP21 Paris climate summit in December 2015 a few months after the release of Laudato Si'.

But now the challenge remains for the Catholic Church – both hierarchy and grassroots – to bring to life the important message of Laudato Si' and continue to remind the human family about the urgency and severity of the climate crisis. Given that the political momentum will be lesser in upcoming rounds of the UNFCCC process, world religions have an important role to play to demand more courageous action from governments and corporations. At the same time, Laudato Si' provides the guidance needed for the Catholic community to lead by example, undergoing its own transformation.

To start with, the Laudato Si' message needs to be promoted at scale to continue stressing the immensity and urgency of the climate crisis. The human family needs to "take a frank look at the facts to see that our common home is falling into serious disrepair, [to] see signs that things are now reaching a breaking point, due to the rapid pace of change and degradation" (LS 61). The scientific community has been very vocal about the need to change course, reaching an extremely strong consensus about the human causes of the climate crisis<sup>2</sup>, but unfortunately has not been very successful in triggering a meaningful response from governments worldwide because of the powerful vested interests at play and the complex nature of this "global commons problem". Considering that speaking to people's minds has not been very effective

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<sup>2</sup> J. Cook, et al, "Consensus on consensus: a synthesis of consensus estimates on human-caused global warming," Environmental Research Letters Vol. 11 No. 4, (13 April 2016).

during the past three decades, there is a strong need for faith communities to speak to people's hearts.

The magnitude of the urgency sadly continues to grow, with global surface temperatures and Arctic sea ice extent continuing to break records year after year<sup>3</sup>, but business-as-usual continues to be the response of the majority in the political and economic elites. Instead of "redefining our notion of progress" (LS 194) and "containing [economic] growth by setting some reasonable limits", elites continue to pursue "insatiable and irresponsible growth" (LS 193). And despite the fact that "technology based on the use of highly polluting fossil fuels needs to be progressively replaced without delay" (LS 165), the global economy continues to build new fossil fuel infrastructure that scientists assure will exacerbate the climate crisis with dramatic consequences.

In fact, a recent report using "mainstream" data from the energy consultants Rystad shows how the coal mines and oil and gas wells currently in operation are extremely harmful as they have a carbon content that is 2.67 times bigger than what is "safe" to burn to keep global temperature increase below the dangerous threshold of 1.5 degrees Celsius with a 50–50 chance<sup>4</sup>. In other words, if we are serious about "hear[ing] both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor" (LS 49) to tackle the climate crisis, the world needs to shut down almost two thirds of the current extraction operations of the fossil fuel industry. And the magnitudes are even more drastic if the wider unexploited reserves are considered: 85% of the reserves need to remain in the ground if we are to stay below the 1.5 degrees threshold. The pursuit of climate justice will certainly be very challenging.

## **THE JOURNEY AHEAD TO BRING LAUDATO SI' TO LIFE**

With that worrisome context in mind, this essay intends to lay out some initiatives that the Church could undertake to bring Laudato Si' to life at the speed and scale that the climate crisis requires. Galvanized by the momentum of the Laudato Si' release, the Catholic mobilization for climate justice ahead of COP21 was unprecedented and had a significant impact in the Paris outcome, combining an impressive effort of both the Church hierarchy – with the release of the Bishops' 'Appeal to COP21 Negotiating Parties', the diplomatic interactions of the Holy See and the advocacy efforts of institutions such as CIDSE – and the Catholic grassroots through the Global Catholic Climate Movement (GCCM) – delivering over 900,000 Catholic Climate Petition signatures to COP21 authorities and mobilizing over 40,000 Catholics for the Global Climate March. But much more needs to be done ahead of COP22 and future rounds of the UNFCCC process.

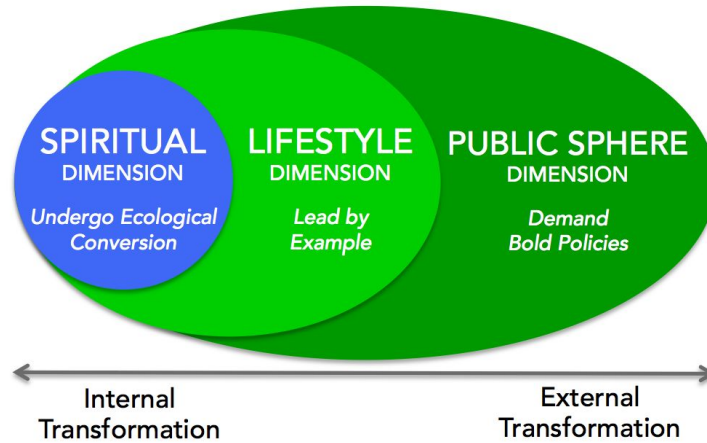
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<sup>3</sup> National Aeronautics and Space Administration, "2016 Climate Trends Continue to Break Records" (19 July 2016); available at [www.nasa.gov/feature/goddard/2016/climate-trends-continue-to-break-records](http://www.nasa.gov/feature/goddard/2016/climate-trends-continue-to-break-records)

<sup>4</sup> Oil Change International, "The Sky's Limit: Why the Paris Climate Goals Require a Managed Decline of Fossil Fuel Production" (22 September 2016); available at [priceofoil.org/2016/09/22/the-skys-limit-report/](http://priceofoil.org/2016/09/22/the-skys-limit-report/)

The strategic framework of GCCM will be used to explain the multi-faceted nature of the journey ahead and to explore some promising cases and proposals. As illustrated in Figure 1, the framework lays out that there are three key dimensions in which the Catholic community should take action simultaneously to live *Laudato Si'*: the spiritual, lifestyles and public sphere dimensions.

**Figure 1. Living *Laudato Si'* in the Three Dimensions of the GCCM Strategic Framework**



It should be stressed that all dimensions are important to tackle this complex climate crisis and are applicable to every single level of the Catholic Church, ranging from a small parish to a national bishops conference, from a local religious order to an international lay movement, from a diocesan Caritas to the Holy See. Achieving significant progress in one or two of these dimensions is not enough if one of the dimensions was overlooked.

At the same time, given that these dimensions are part of a spectrum, a transformation in any of the internal dimensions will enhance a transformation in the more external dimensions. In the words of Pope Francis, “by developing our individual, God-given capacities, an ecological conversion can inspire us to greater creativity and enthusiasm in resolving the world’s problems” (LS 220). At the same time, “community actions, when they express self-giving love, can also become intense spiritual experiences” (LS 232) that nurture the transformation in an outside-in direction. The urgency is such that bold action needs to happen in all fronts, simultaneously, not sequentially.

## **LIVING LAUDATO SI' IN OUR SPIRITUALITY**

In the first place, *Laudato Si'* is a call for Christians to undergo “an ecological conversion, whereby the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them” (LS 217). Building on the teachings of St John Paul II about the

need for an ecological conversion<sup>5</sup> and inspired by St. Francis of Assisi, Pope Francis emphasises that “this conversion calls for a number of attitudes which together foster a spirit of generous care” (LS 220), which range from gratitude and gratuitousness to an awareness about our communion with the rest of creatures.

That is why it was so special that, soon after the release of *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis instituted the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation to be celebrated on September 1 each year, to “rediscover in our own rich spiritual patrimony the deepest motivations for our concern for the care of creation”<sup>6</sup>. Having such an official date in the Catholic liturgical calendar has proven to be a wonderful opportunity for Catholic communities to celebrate creation and take concrete steps to care for our common home, while doing it in an ecumenical fashion together with other Christian churches.

But the experience of GCCM promoting this day of prayer has proven that the vast majority of the Catholic community is still unaware of the Pontiff’s invitation to join this celebration. Ecclesial institutions need to scale up communicational efforts in coming years to raise awareness about the importance and significance of this official day of prayer for creation and support the Church to undergo its ecological conversion.

A related initiative that has enormous potential, and has already generated a lot of excitement in the GCCM network, is the celebration of the month-long Season of Creation, also called Creation Time, which starts on September 1 with the day of prayer for creation and was extended to last till the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi on October 4. Aware that a single day of prayer on September 1 was too little to engage meaningfully with the creation care theme, different Christian churches started celebrating this special time in the 1990s and early 2000s, with the Catholic Bishops’ Conferences of the Philippines and Europe joining in 2003 and 2007, respectively<sup>7</sup>.

The Catholic Season of Creation celebration went global in 2015 when GCCM started promoting it in its global network by invitation of its Filipino members, and scaled even more in 2016 when GCCM collaborated with the World Council of Churches, the Pope’s Worldwide Prayer Network and other networks to launch a joint ecumenical campaign. This included the screening of a promotional video by Pope Francis that was showcased to 3 million World Youth Day pilgrims in Krakow, plus other innovative initiatives taking place in the Season of Creation website<sup>8</sup> such as online ecumenical prayer services, online weekly meditation sessions and resources, and the convening of about 300 local prayer services in all continents.

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<sup>5</sup> St. John Paul II, *Catechesis* (17 January 2001), 4: *Insegnamenti* 41/1 (2001), 179.

<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis, Letter for the Establishment of the “World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation” (6 August 2015).

<sup>7</sup> CBCP: [http://www.cbcponline.net/v3/documents/2000s/2003-CELEBRATING\\_CREATION\\_DAY.htm](http://www.cbcponline.net/v3/documents/2000s/2003-CELEBRATING_CREATION_DAY.htm);  
CCEE: <http://www.eea3.org/documenti/final/FinalmessageEN.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> [SeasonOfCreation.org](http://SeasonOfCreation.org)

It would be very positive if other bishops conferences, either national or continental, joined their counterparts from the Philippines and Europe to also promote this special time for creation. But statements are not enough, as illustrated by the experience of the Church in the Philippines and Europe where there still is much potential to engage the Catholic community at a larger scale and more meaningfully. The 2016 Season of Creation was a beautiful ecumenical celebration, but there is a lot of work to be done to leverage this special moment to encourage Catholics to undergo the ecological conversion that we urgently need.

At the same time, it would be interesting if the Holy Father considered inviting the whole Catholic community to observe this month-long celebration, building on top of the acknowledgement of this initiative in the recent message “Show Mercy to Our Common Home”<sup>9</sup>. Given that the World Council of Churches instituted this special time for creation in 2008, such a gesture by the Catholic Church would bring us even closer to other Christian churches and “serve as a sign of a common journey in which all believers in Christ take part”<sup>10</sup>, while encouraging a stronger commitment to care for our common home in these critical times.

In the same line, it is worth mentioning the proposal for a liturgical Season of Creation, by Columban Father Charles Rue, “to better acknowledge the first article of the creed, God as Creator”<sup>11</sup>. Even if the current liturgy already has a lot of references to creation and God as Creator, there is very little awareness among the faithful about these creation themes in our liturgical rites. The novelty of the *Laudato Si'* release illustrated how the “wrong understanding of the relationship between human beings and the world” (LS 116) is so common in the Catholic community. If we are to encourage a deep ecological conversion at the needed scale and speed, a new liturgical season would certainly help us move quicker and deeper.

But this is something for theologians and liturgists to explore and discern, so in the meantime it will be important to spend significant effort to educate the faithful about the beautiful creation themes already present in our liturgy. At the same time, valuable efforts – such as the one led by Father Michael Agliardo, SJ – are already being pursued to support homilists and liturgy planners to integrate creation care into Sunday mass liturgy, and those special resources – that integrate *Laudato Si'* themes into homiletic materials, prayers of the faithful and bulletin assets – need increased promotion so that as many parishes as possible can develop a “spirituality [that] can motivate us to a more passionate concern for the protection of our world” (LS 216).

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<sup>9</sup> Papal message “Show Mercy to Our Common Home”, 1 September 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Pope Francis, Letter for the Establishment of the “World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation” (6 August 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Charles Rue, SSC, “A proposal for a Season of Creation in the Liturgical Year”, June 2016; available at [catholicclimatemovement.global/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Article-Season-Creation-Charles-Rue-SSC-June-2016.pdf](http://catholicclimatemovement.global/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Article-Season-Creation-Charles-Rue-SSC-June-2016.pdf)

## LIVING LAUDATO SI' IN OUR LIFESTYLES

Second, in *Laudato Si'* we are “called to recognize the need for changes of lifestyle, production and consumption, in order to combat this warming” (LS 23). The carbon footprint of the Catholic community is gigantic, and so far there are too few cases of Catholic institutions that have implemented bold measures to mitigate this harmful impact. On one hand, the institutional Church has a gigantic amount of facilities – 221,700 parishes, 95,200 elementary schools, 43,800 secondary schools, 10,100 orphanages, 3,600 Abbeys and Monasteries, 5,200 hospitals – and vehicles that rely on the burning of fossil fuels to maintain its operations. On the other hand, the collective footprint of 1.2 billion Catholics consuming energy in their homes and vehicles is obviously extremely big. So a concerted effort to “green” the institutional Church has a huge multiplier potential as it could educate and inspire the faithful to follow suit. The Catholic community is called to lead by example and show how drastic cuts in carbon emissions are possible in a relatively short timeframe.

To respond to “the moral imperative of assessing the impact of our every action [...] on the world around us” (LS 208), GCCM is advancing the proposal of a “Roman Catholic Church Global Sustainability Program” that was originally raised by Focolare leader John Mundell<sup>12</sup>. The proposal intends to measure the current impact of the Catholic Church on the environment and to take specific, measurable steps to improve our collective awareness and care for God’s creation. This commits the Church to become more transparent and explicit in all of its operations in order to assess its environmental impacts and change them in order to create the maximum positive social, environmental and economic benefit. This could include establishing an Office of Creation Care and Sustainability within the new Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development and at a diocesan level, to develop a unified and effective Church Environmental Sustainability Program at all levels to assess and put in place specific steps for improving the Church’s environmental impacts on the earth, issuing an annual Roman Catholic Church Global Sustainability Report that summarizes the efforts to reduce the Church’s environmental footprint.

At the same time, it would be an important signal if the Holy See surrenders its observer status at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change to become a full member, in order to sign the Paris Agreement and start reporting on its own carbon emissions. It would be a helpful message outside the Church for the international community to notice that the Holy See is taking serious climate action, and inside the Church to inspire Catholic institutions and communities to follow the Vatican lead.

There are some promising examples of what can be done in this regard, such as the effort of the Catholic aid agency CAFOD to support 16 dioceses in England and Wales, with a total of 1,922 parishes, to switch to renewable energy sources while saving £180,000 yearly on their collective energy bills. In parallel, GCCM recently launched an Eco-Parish Guide with the goal

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<sup>12</sup> <http://bit.ly/catholic-sustainability>

of supporting parishes to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions by addressing actions in relation to parish operations, the congregation, and the broader community. CIDSE has also produced useful resources about sustainable lifestyles under the Change for the Planet, Care for the People initiative.

## LIVING LAUDATO SI' IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

And in the third place, Laudato Si' reminds us that Pope Benedict XVI's emphasized how "the Church has a responsibility towards creation and she must assert this responsibility in the public sphere... She must above all protect mankind from self-destruction" (CV 51). Pope Francis added that "public pressure has to be exerted in order to bring about decisive political action. Society [...] must put pressure on governments to develop more rigorous regulations, procedures and controls" (LS 179). Actually, soon after the encyclical release, Pope Francis delivered a memorable speech at the Second World Meeting of Popular Movements in Bolivia in which he used even stronger language to invite us to mobilize: "Our common home is being pillaged, laid waste and harmed with impunity. Cowardice in defending it is a grave sin [...] I ask you, in the name of God, to defend Mother Earth"<sup>13</sup>.

There are a number of ways in which the Church can raise its voice in the public sphere to call for the implementation of the urgently-needed public policies to protect our common home. First, it must join the mobilizations of the wider climate movement, keeping in mind that Pope Francis praised its critical role: "thanks to their efforts [of the ecological movement], environmental questions have increasingly found a place on public agendas and encouraged more far-sighted approaches" (LS 166). That is what happened in the Global Climate March of 2015, when the GCCM network facilitated the mobilization of 40,000 Catholics to join the wider crowd of 800,000 people in all major cities around the world. But it is also about joining local mobilizations targeting local fossil fuel infrastructure, such as the case of Archbishop Ramon Arguelles of the Lipa archdiocese in the Philippines, who led 10,000 people in a march against local coal plants<sup>14</sup>. GCCM is working closely with the climate movement to encourage Catholics to join such mobilizations, with the most recent one being the Break Free from Fossil Fuels campaign of May 2016. Regarding this last mobilization, several GCCM members engaged in civil disobedience – for example in Australia and in the United States – to stress the dramatic urgency of the climate crisis. It is about living Pope Francis' invitation "to cry out, to mobilize and to demand – peacefully, but firmly – that appropriate and urgently-needed measures be taken."

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<sup>13</sup> Address to the Second World Meeting of Popular Movements, Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia (9 July 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Marie Venner, "Philippines archdiocese, concerned by coal, joins campaign to 'break free' from fossil fuels", National Catholic Reporter (10 May 2016).

<sup>15</sup> Address to the Second World Meeting of Popular Movements, Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia (9 July 2015).

Going out to the streets is of course not the only way for Catholics to call for climate justice in the public sphere. A petition campaign, such as GCCM's Catholic Climate Petition delivered to COP21 political authorities and to national authorities of countries as Australia, United Kingdom and United States, is a good way to engage Catholic communities and urge policymakers to take bolder action. Actually, the engagement of policymakers can be even more fruitful if it happens in interfaith coalitions – such as it happened in GCCM's events in Paris – that demonstrate the breadth of support for climate action. Other public witness campaigns can be in the form of letters to policymakers in support of specific legislation, or through creative initiatives such as the Pilgrimages for Climate Justice that several Catholic aid agencies spearheaded in Europe ahead of COP21. Lastly, some GCCM member organizations – and GCCM itself – have been working closely with many bishops to publish *Laudato Si'* op-eds in different media outlets to reach new audiences, and a concerted effort should continue to place many more bishops' op-eds in years to come.

Lastly, it is encouraging to see that many Catholic institutions are using their financial assets for good by divesting from fossil fuel corporations and reinvesting in renewable energy as a response to the *Laudato Si'* call to replace fossil fuels “without delay” (LS 165). The strongest foundation for the Divest-Reinvest cause comes from the Bishops' ‘Appeal to COP21’, which demanded that governments “put an end to the fossil fuel era [...] and provide affordable, reliable and safe renewable energy access for all”<sup>16</sup>. When praising the joint divestment announcement of several Catholic organizations in June 2016, Professor Jeffrey Sachs explained that “divestment sends a strong signal to the marketplace: companies need to reorient their strategies towards a low-carbon future that is safe for humanity and all life on the planet. By redirecting capital investments towards climate-safe energy, investors help to push the world towards achievement of the Paris Climate Agreement”<sup>17</sup>. In parallel, other Catholic groups that are part of ICCR are committed to shareholder engagement aiming to change corporate practices of the fossil fuel industry. It was newsworthy that Cardinal Turkson mentioned that the fossil fuel divestment movement is based on the same logic encouraged in *Laudato Si'* of applying social pressure to businesses for the common good<sup>18</sup>. GCCM and several of its member organizations are working to encourage many more institutions to divest in the near future, to join the divestment announcements of other major Christian institutions such as the World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation.

## CONCLUSION

*Laudato Si'* has unleashed an amazing amount of energy and action in the Catholic community worldwide to care for creation, but the frightening business-as-usual of the political and

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<sup>16</sup> Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, ‘Appeal to COP21 Negotiating Parties’, October 2015.

<sup>17</sup> <http://catholicclimatemovement.global/jeffrey-sachs-divestment/>

<sup>18</sup> Presentation of the Message of Pope Francis, “Show Mercy to our Common Home” for the celebration of the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, 1 September 2016.



economic elites means that the Church needs to dramatically scale up its engagement in the pursuit of climate justice. This will require an ambitious effort of all ecclesial institutional to bring Laudato Si' to life in all dimensions of the climate crisis: spirituality, lifestyles and the public sphere. The Church has much to learn from the faithful in the frontlines of the climate crisis, in countries like the Philippines, where the Catholic community is demonstrating incredible leadership in living the Laudato Si' message.

May the recent papal message "Show Mercy to Our Common Home", with the highlight of its enshrinement of "care for our common home" in the works of mercy, be a source of inspiration for the challenging journey ahead.