

Care for Creation: A Catholic Tradition

(Materials are adapted with permission from Catholic Relief Services.)



Care for our environment is a year-round mandate, not simply a once-a-year Earth Day activity. As we prepare to welcome Pope Francis' upcoming encyclical on care for creation, "human ecology," we offer these reflections adapted from the Catholic Relief Services website to guide our understanding of why the Church is involved and how we can respond in faith.

Each of us has a personal responsibility to care for creation, this precious gift which God has entrusted to us.

-Pope Francis

The Church teaches that creation is a gift from God, and that we show respect for our Creator by taking care of the environment. We also care for creation because of the relationship between the environment and our well-being, a relationship known as human ecology. Building on a long tradition of Church teaching, Pope Francis is writing and will soon release his encyclical on human ecology.

Catholic Relief Services President & CEO Dr. Carolyn Woo described Pope Francis' stance on climate change in a recent article in *The Huffington Post*. She reflects that Pope Francis urges the international community to remain mindful of the effects of climate change, especially on those who are poor. She writes:

"One theme throughout Catholic social teaching is a respect for free markets as necessary for individual dignity, along with a recognition of the injustice and despair that can result from the excesses of capitalism. It is in this tradition that Pope Francis takes on climate change, not to constrict the entrepreneurial spirit that God has placed in humanity, but to ensure that the changes wrought by the over-reliance on fossil fuels do not damage our world and its communities and countries in a way that does not allow their citizens to retain their dignity, their autonomy, their God-given rights." (Read the full article, "Pope Francis and Climate Change: A Catholic Tradition" in the Huffington Post: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/catholic-relief-services/pope-francis-and-climate_b_6595036.html?utm_hp_ref=religion&ir=Religion)

Pope Francis is not alone in advocating for care for creation. For generations Popes and church leaders have been reminding us that the goods of creation are meant to benefit all of mankind. Today Francis is building on the established teaching of the Church and relying on the Catholic belief that science illuminates and reveals the creation of our Lord and shapes the actions of mankind.

WHERE IN SCRIPTURE DO WE HEAR A CALL TO CARE FOR CREATION?

In the very beginning of time, God created all that is, and proclaimed it good (Genesis 1:1–31). He instructs us to “cultivate and care” for creation (Genesis 2:15). God also tells Moses to make sure the Israelites let their land lie fallow every 6 years, giving the land itself a Sabbath, or time to rest (Leviticus 25:4–5). The Scriptures brim with reminders that creation belongs to God and reveals his goodness (Romans 1:19–20, 1 Corinthians 10:26), which invites us to respect our Creator by caring for nature.

WHY DOES THE CHURCH CARE ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT?

The Church has a long tradition of caring for creation. St. Francis of Assisi, considered a patron saint of ecology, praised God for revealing his greatness through “Brother Sun” and “Sister Water.” By being good stewards of creation, we recognize and honor our Creator. We also care for creation because we believe that people deserve to live in conditions that uphold their God-given dignity. When the environment suffers, human beings suffer too.

HAVE ANY POPES SPOKEN ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT?

Pope Francis is not the first pope to speak specifically about the environment. Dubbed the “green Pope,” Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI emphasized a human ecology that stresses the link between the well-being of the environment and human beings.

“The way humanity treats the environment influences the way it treats itself, and vice versa ... Every violation of solidarity and civic friendship harms the environment, just as environmental deterioration in turn upsets relations in society” (*Caritas in Veritate*, no. 51).

The Holy Father Pope Francis echoes Pope Benedict, saying that “We are called not only to respect the natural environment, but also to show respect for, and solidarity with, all the members of our human family. These two dimensions are closely related ...” (Papal Audience, June 5, 2013).

WHAT EFFECT IS CLIMATE CHANGE HAVING ON THE WORLD’S MOST VULNERABLE PEOPLE?

Catholic Relief Services, the official international humanitarian agency of the Catholic community in the United States, is witnessing first-hand the effects of environmental degradation and climate change on poor and vulnerable people in more than 100 countries around the world. Today, developing nations are prone to experiencing major devastation as a result of climate-related disasters. Homes, livelihoods, crops, livestock and human lives are being destroyed in the wake of these storms and floods. Severe hunger and disease often follow these disasters at a slower but just as deadly pace.

When natural disaster strikes, people living in fragile homes and those whose livelihoods depend on nature are the most devastated. Luis Cortés is a farmer in Honduras whose corn

crop is at risk because of climate change. His family is one of more than 1 million in Central America that rely on growing corn or beans to earn their living. In a CRS study, *"Tortillas on the Roaster,"* researchers predicted that because of climate change, water will become scarcer in Central America, meaning smaller corn and bean crops—and less income for families like Luis'. CRS works to help the poor become more resilient to natural disasters and the effects of climate change. (Visit: <http://www.crsprogramquality.org/publications/2012/10/9/tortillas-on-the-roaster-summary-report-central-american-mai.html>)

WHAT CAN I DO TO CARE FOR GOD'S CREATION?

Taking small, conscious steps in your everyday life can help you reflect on our call to care for creation—and make an impact on the environment. Simple things like composting kitchen scraps, recycling and eating less meat can reduce waste and shrink your carbon footprint. Turning down your thermostat, shutting off the lights when you leave a room and making sure your car tires are properly inflated mean you'll use less energy from nonrenewable resources—and save some money! Even the things we buy can make a difference. "Fair trade" means that workers in other countries were paid a fair wage and ensures that products were created through environmentally responsible practices. By buying fair trade products like coffee, chocolate, clothing and home decor, you support workers and the environment.

Catholic Relief Services offers a number of resources about our how our faith invites us to care for creation and how the environment impacts the poor. These are available online at: <http://resources.crs.org/blog/preparing-for-pope-francis-encyclical-on-the-environment/>
<http://www.crsprogramquality.org/climate-change>

May It Please You - A Prayer for Creation from CRS:

<http://resources.crs.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/May-it-Please-You.pdf>