

# COMPOSTING



**“I would like to ask all those who have positions of responsibility in economic, political and social life, and all men and women of goodwill: let us be 'protectors' of creation, protectors of God's plan inscribed in nature, protectors of one another and of the environment.” Pope Francis, Inauguration, 3/19/13**

**“One of the most difficult things is not to change society – but to change yourself.” Nelson Mandela**

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## **COMPOSTING**

### **The Problem**

“The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth.”  
(*Laudato Si*, No. 21)

### **The Solution**

God has created a system (nature) whereby creation continually recreates and restores itself. On a relatively simple scale, we see the trees in a forest live, die, decompose and produce a product (compost) which provides a nourishing medium for new life. On a larger scale, we see similar cycles in the natural existences of all living things.

Composting, while not expressly referred to in *Laudato Si*, is described in paragraph 22 wherein the way natural ecosystems operate to convert organic waste into new generations of plants is explained. That process is cited as an example of a practice that is overlooked by people in our “throwaway culture”.

Composting is a natural process that decomposes organic waste to produce a nutrient-rich substance (compost) that provides numerous benefits to the soil. Keeping compostable matter out of the trash stream is a simple effort that produces significant results for the environment. Composting is simple and inexpensive. While there are methods to compost more efficiently and quickly, decomposition happens with no human involvement. The refrigeration of food is to slow the rate of decomposition. Very recent scientific findings reveal that composting provides a solution to the dangerous levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere that cause climate change. Composting removes carbon from the atmosphere and puts it into the soil, where it belongs and where it is beneficial to the environment.

The carbon cycle is the exchange of carbon (in various forms, e.g., carbon dioxide) between the atmosphere, ocean, terrestrial biosphere and geological deposits. Most of the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere comes from biological reactions that take place in the soil. Carbon sequestration occurs when carbon from the atmosphere is absorbed and stored in the soil.

In what is being called “simple science”, recent studies demonstrate that applying compost results in the soil absorbing greenhouse gas emissions. A recent seven-year study in California revealed that “if compost made from the state’s green waste were applied to a quarter of the state’s rangeland, the soil could absorb three-quarters of California’s greenhouse gas emissions for one year.” John Wick, who is involved in the referenced study, calls the findings, “the most exciting thing I can think of on the planet right now”.

More information about the science involved in this process of improving soil and air quality is available through the Marin Carbon Project<sup>1</sup> and the Rodale Institute<sup>2</sup>. One of

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.marincarbonproject.org/>

the most positive aspects of this science is the fact that there is no downside in the implementation of composting on a larger scale. “It’s inexpensive, it’s low technology, it’s good land use, it solves multiple problems.”

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency recognizes that composting provides many other benefits, including enriching the soil and eliminating or reducing the need for chemical fertilizers, remediating polluted soil, diverting material from landfills, suppressing plant diseases and preventing erosion. On the flip side, there are no negatives. So, even if the findings showing a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions are not accurate, or are overstated, there is no negative aspect to increasing composting.

Stated simply, healthy soils play an important role in climate change mitigation by storing carbon (carbon sequestration) and decreasing global greenhouse gas emissions in the atmosphere.

### **East Steps to Get Started**

As stated earlier in this article, composting is simple. The following are thoughts of the author and many more ideas and techniques can be found online or in books.

If you live on a property with the space for a compost pile, you can simply begin to pile your organic materials in a spot that you select. You don’t really need a container to make compost, but, if you don’t have the space, or if you prefer a more tidy appearance, you can use a container. A wide range of containers are available to purchase or you might choose to construct your own bin or container. A container can be as simple as a modified trash can. (Remove the bottom, drill a few small holes, and place it on the soil).

After choosing a place and method, start collecting organic materials to put on your pile or into your container. From outside of your home, you can use leaves, grass clippings, weeds and garden debris. From inside of your home, you can include kitchen waste from vegetables or fruits, egg shells, bread, coffee or tea grounds, and paper towels that have not been exposed to chemicals or toxic substances. You should avoid meat, bones and dairy products as these materials will attract unwanted rodents. You should also avoid anything that is toxic and pet feces in order to maintain the healthy quality of the finished compost.

The next step is to simply wait. You can keep adding materials to your pile or container and the finished compost will first appear on the bottom. If you want to accelerate the process, you can periodically turn or mix the contents.

The final step is to use it. Use it at your convenience - Compost won’t spoil. You can spread it lightly on your lawn to make it greener. You can apply it to your garden to make the plants stronger, healthier and more disease-resistant. You can sprinkle it around your houseplants or container plants. You can package it and give it to friends

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<sup>2</sup> <http://rodaleinstitute.org/regenerative-organic-agriculture-and-climate-change/>

and neighbors. And even if you never use it, you've already done great work by keeping organic waste out of the waste stream.

There are rarely problems encountered in small-scale composting, but the two most common issues are easily addressed. In the ordinary process of anaerobic decomposition, microbes and other decomposers need both oxygen and moisture. If you find that the contents become slimy, wet or smelly (too much moisture and not enough oxygen), add more dry materials like dried leaves, shredded paper, paper towels or sawdust, and then mix the contents. If the materials are too dry, decomposition will be slow. The remedy for this condition is to add more green materials like fruit and vegetable scraps, grass clippings, or a small amount of water, and then mix the contents.

### **Together We Can Make Progress**

Imagine if the Catholic Church, or a diocese, or a parish, implemented a composting practice in response to Pope Francis' call for action. Imagine if the majority of Catholics responded to the *Laudato Si* by composting food wastes and other organic matter, and using the compost to nourish the soil in place of the use of harmful chemicals. Imagine if other faiths began such practices as models for its members. This idea is not new. There are many individuals and groups that are composting in recognition of the duty to care for creation.

As an example, the Archdiocese of Atlanta, Georgia has published a comprehensive *Laudato Si* "Action Plan" that proposes actions and guidelines for parishes, parishioners and Catholic schools in response to *Laudato Si*. Among other recommended actions, the "Action Plan" recommends composting as a practice in homes, parishes and Catholic schools and describes simple ideas for this practice. This "Action Plan" can be downloaded from the Archdiocese of Atlanta website, <https://archatl.com/>.

Closer to home, Bishop Christopher Coyne of the Diocese of Burlington, Vermont has designated 2017 as "The Year of Creation" to focus on the message of Pope Francis in *Laudato Si* and to implement the actions proposed therein. One of the first steps taken by the Diocese of Vermont was to adopt the practice of composting at the diocesan headquarters in Burlington.

Care for Creation is not a uniquely Catholic principle. Outside of the Catholic Church, many churches and religions recognize the duty to be good stewards of God's gift of creation. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew is known as "the Green Patriarch" for his pursuit of environmentalism as a spiritual responsibility. Patriarch Bartholomew is expressly referenced by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si*. (*Laudato Si*, #s 7 – 9). On a more local level, Presbyterian Minister Ashley Goff implemented a composting program at the Church of the Pilgrims in Washington, DC and received national attention. She describes composting as an act of resurrection. Rev. Goff likened composting "to Christ dying on the cross, and being resurrected to new life so our lives become new." Another church in Burlington, MA has installed a compost bin.

The Office for Catholic Social Justice Ministry of the Archdiocese of Hartford has a Laudato Si Ministry Team which has focused on composting along with the other matters addressed in Laudato Si. There are probably several examples of composting practices within parishes and schools of the Archdiocese of Hartford. With the guidance of Pope Francis in Laudato Si and the useful models of action provided by other dioceses and churches, these seeds of actions can be grown into a more comprehensive composting program to counteract the “throwaway culture” described by Pope Francis. (*Laudato Si* #22).

I urge you to respond to Pope Francis’ call for action by composting. In a small but important way, you can do something about the “immense pile of filth” that Pope Francis describes in Laudato Si. (#21).

### Useful Resources:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5HDTP9PYgko>
- <http://www.marincarbonproject.org/about>
- <https://www.thecarbonunderground.org/>
- <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/environment/renewing-the-earth.cfm>
- <http://rodaleinstitute.org/regenerative-organic-agriculture-and-climate-change/>
- <http://www.patriarchate.org/>
- <http://ncronline.org/blogs/eco-catholic/editorial-climate-change-churchs-no-1-pro-life-issue>
- <http://www.catholic sentinel.org/main.asp?SectionID=2&SubSectionID=34&ArticleID=27134>
- <http://alumni.berkeley.edu/california-magazine/just-in/2014-11-10/new-global-warming-remedy-turning-rangelands-carbon-sucking>
- <http://www.stfrancis.org/green-faith/>
- <http://incarnationparish.org/justice/justice/green-team/>
- <http://www.sthilarychurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Web-version-Ministry-Leaders-Handbook.pdf>
- <https://archatl.com/> download the “Laudato Si Action Plan” in pdf format.
- <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/eco-catholic/vermont-diocese-celebrate-year-creation-2017>
- <http://www.vermontcatholic.org/vcm/index.php/categories/diocesan/562-diocese-to-observe-2017-as-year-of-creation>