

Laudato Si' Study Guide
Diocese of Rochester Public Policy Committee
March, 2016

Guidelines

This study guide is formatted for 7 sessions, 1 to 1 1/2 hours long each. Adapt as desired to fit the needs of your group. Groups of 10 or less are ideal; if you have more than 15 you may want to consider splitting in 2. Each session includes a short video so you will need to have access to the internet and, for a larger group, a projector and sound system. Small groups of 5-7 could probably comfortably watch on a laptop computer.

Participants should sign up ahead of the first session so they can pick up a book and read the assigned chapter ahead of the discussion. Books are available for purchase from a number of sources, including the USCCB which also has links for downloading a pdf of the encyclical and other resources. See <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/environment/index.cfm>. Most printed editions of the encyclical include summaries and discussion questions at the back of the book which may be used in addition to, or instead of the ones included here. Another study guide is available at <http://ncronline.org/blogs/faith-and-justice/readers-guide-laudato-si>.

Arrange chairs in a circle around a table that holds a candle and some objects from nature (plant, rocks, flowers...).

Begin each session by welcoming everyone, lighting the candle and inviting the group to an inner quiet and awareness of God's presence. Ask everyone to quietly reflect for a moment on some way that they have recently been aware of God's presence in nature and to offer gratitude to God for this gift.

Close each session by praying together one of the prayers found at the end of the encyclical, either "A Prayer for Our Earth" or "A Christian Prayer in Union with Creation."

Session One - Introduction

Take some time during this first session for introductions and establishment of discussion guidelines (i.e. listening fully, respecting confidentiality, not judging others opinions, waiting until all have had a chance to speak before speaking again). For introductions, go around the circle 2 or 3 times so participants may respond to prompts such as

- In 1 or 2 or minutes, please tell us a little about yourself.
- Following Pope Francis lead, this discussion accepts that climate change is real and is happening right now. However, we are all in different places in our understandings of the science and the impacts. Many things influence how we feel about climate change. You may even be wondering why Pope Francis has gotten involved in this topic. The fact that you are all here means that you are interested and you care; none of us can judge another's journey. Would you mind briefly sharing where you are in your understanding of this issue and what you hope to gain from our discussion group?

Leader: Encyclicals are named for their opening words, in this case, Pope Francis uses the beginning of St. Francis' beautiful Canticle of the Sun, "Laudato Si' mi' Signore" - "Praise be to you, my Lord." I invite you to spend a minute watching and listening to this video rendition.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kpPSZkmr Js> (The Canticle of Creation only - 2:31minutes - Salt & Light Media)

Pope Francis' encyclical on the environment has a number of recurring themes:

- Everything is interconnected.
- Humans have increasingly been living under the illusion that some of us can recklessly consume the earth's resources without concern for that consumption's impact on the world's poor, the earth's essential biodiversity or on the "commons" of the earth, those systems which are shared by all, including water, air and soil.
- The poor are most harmed by the effects of climate change.
- We have failed to appreciate "the joyful mystery" of God's great gift of the earth. The harm we have done and continue to do is a sin against God, the earth itself, our brothers and sisters and ourselves.

Awareness of impending ecological disaster is not new. Popes Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict all gave strong warnings as well as scientists, philosophers and religious leaders from other traditions.

- Why haven't we been listening?
- Has the solution required more than we were ready to give?
- If we commit to solving this problem, what might be lost that is of value to us?

Patriarch Bartholemew calls us to liberation from fear, greed and compulsion. #9 How could a simpler lifestyle be liberating?

Pope Francis cites a number of reasons why the world has not been able to move forward in solving the ecological crisis. #14 What will it take for us to move forward?

Is there anything else that particularly struck you in this introductory session?

Chapter I - What is Happening to Our Common Home?

<http://video.nationalgeographic.com/video/way-forward-climate> (7min)

or

<https://www.climaterealityproject.org/video/climate-101-bill-nye> (4 min)

"The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth." #21

Without going into a lot of scientific detail Pope Francis outlines the current problem: the earth is warming, primarily because of human activity. The results of that warming include more frequent weather disasters, drought, a loss of biodiversity and greater hardships for the poor. All this is complicated by a breakdown in social structures and a general decline in the quality of life.

The people who live in the industrialized nations, which have historically produced the emissions, have enjoyed the benefits of the carbon economy. The poor nations of the world have neither enjoyed the fruits of carbon nor contributed significantly to warming, but they are likely to suffer the most from the effects. What would be a just response?

How would you respond to this quote: "...when media and the digital world become omnipresent, their influence can stop people from learning how to live wisely, to think deeply and to love generously"? #47

Why should the climate be considered a common good? What does that mean? What other resources should be considered common goods? Water? How would that impact our current profit system?

What symptoms of warming are we already seeing? What have you noticed?

In speaking of the loss of biodiversity, Pope Francis says, "Because of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God by their very existence, nor convey their message to us. We have no such right." (#33) and "Because all creatures are interconnected, each must be cherished with love and respect, for all of us as living creatures are dependent on one another." #42 How has a human sense of entitlement over other creatures gotten us into trouble?

"...a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor." (#49) Focusing solely on the issue of population ignores the problem of overconsumption and can be an attempt to justify "present models of distribution." #50 What does Pope Francis mean by an "ecological debt" owed primarily from the global north towards the global south. How might that debt be repaid?

Are there signs of hope?

Chapter II The Gospel of Creation

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wSnXuCxiHXE> - CRS' Care of Creation 101

In this chapter Pope Francis reviews what biblical and faith traditions can bring to the development of the "integral ecology" that he sees as essential for our transformation into a more sustainable world. Even though *Laudato Si'* is one of only two encyclicals written for all the world (#3), it is a faith-based document and this chapter develops the spiritual roots of creation-care. Has an "essential understanding" of your faith included your "responsibility within creation, and [your] duty towards nature and the Creator..."? (#64)

"Human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbor and with the earth itself." #65 What do "biblical narratives" have to "say about the relationship of human beings with the world"? How attentive have we been to them?

"The harmony between the creator, humanity and creation as a whole was disrupted by our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations." The idea of sin as "broken relationships" may be different from our traditional understandings of guilt and blame. How do we continue to "take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations."? #66

"Disregard for the duty to cultivate and maintain a proper relationship with my neighbor, for those whose custody and care I am responsible, ruins my relationship with my own self, with others, with God and with the earth. When all these relationships are neglected, when justice no longer dwells in the land, the Bible tells us that life itself is endangered." #70 Where do you see this today?

How would we and all the earth benefit from a renewed sense of Sabbath, of rest and restoration?

Where do you see evidence that "In practice we continue to tolerate that some consider themselves more human than others, as if they had been born with greater rights."? #90

A sense of deep communion with the rest of nature cannot be real if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human beings.... Concern for the environment thus needs to be joined to a sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society." (#91) What can we in the developed world learn from the New Zealand bishops question, "What does the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" mean when "twenty percent of the world's population consumes resources at a rate that robs the poor nations and future generations of what they need to survive?" #95

What can we learn about our relationship to the earth from the lived examples of Jesus and St. Francis?

Chapter III The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis

The Story of Stuff <http://storyofstuff.org/movies/story-of-stuff/>

How does The Story of Stuff encourage us to look differently at how and why we make purchases?

Pope Francis acknowledges the benefits of technology, but points out that advancements have given those with the knowledge and "economic resources to use them, an impressive dominance over the whole of humanity and the entire world." #104 This unprecedented power comes with no guarantee of wisdom in its use. We intervene in nature without a vision of broader (and moral) impacts. We act as if resources are infinite. How has our dependence on technology had the unintended consequence of limiting our freedom?

"The economy accepts every advance in technology with a view to profit, without concern for its potentially negative impact on human beings." #109 How are we influenced to consume more than we need?

"When we fail to acknowledge as part of reality the worth of a poor person, a human embryo, a person with disabilities - to offer just a few examples - it becomes difficult to hear the cry of nature itself; everything is connected." #117 How has our constant engagement with technology deprived us of deep connections with nature and with other human beings?

"This situation has led to a constant schizophrenia, wherein a technocracy which sees no intrinsic value in lesser beings coexists with the other extreme, which sees no special value in human beings." Pope Francis cites as examples abortion, forced labor, sexual exploitation, humans as collateral damage, blood diamonds and the drug trade. How are our purchases moral acts? Who is impacted if the precious stones in our jewelry funded bloody wars in Africa? if the chocolate we eat was harvested by enslaved children? if the clothing we buy came from sweatshops?

Pope Francis takes a measured approach to biological technologies, but cautions that we need to carefully consider ethics and the wider impacts of a fast-moving biological evolution. How does a sense of "integral ecology" help in considering what is moral and wise?

Chapter IV Integral Ecology

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wo-bHt1bOsw>

Ocean Acidification by the Alliance for Climate Education

Pope Francis presents a different vision - one of integral ecology - everything is interconnected. How does the problem of ocean acidification reflect this integral ecology? How does it affect biodiversity? How does it impact humans, especially the poorest humans?

"We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combatting poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature." #139

"Each organism, as a creature of God, is good and admirable in itself..." #140

Pope Francis reminds us that human ecology includes culture, order and beauty, decent housing and all that makes life both possible and pleasurable. These are essential for everyone, not just the rich and powerful.

"Human ecology is inseparable from the notion of the common good..." #156

We are called "to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sister." and "an appreciation of the immense dignity of the poor in the light of our deepest convictions as believers." #158 What is our responsibility to people who are poor?

"The notion of the common good also extends to future generations.... Intergenerational solidarity is not optional, but rather a basic question of justice, since the world we have received also belongs to those who will follow us." #159 What do we owe those who will follow us?

"Doomsday predictions can no longer be met with irony or disdain. We may well be leaving to coming generations debris, desolation and filth. The pace of consumption, waste and environmental change has so stretched the planet's capacity that our contemporary lifestyle, unsustainable as it is, can only precipitate catastrophes, such as those which even now periodically occur in different areas of the world. The effect of the present imbalance can only be reduced by our decisive action, here and now. We need to reflect on our accountability before those who will have to endure the dire consequences." #161

Why do you think Pope Francis sees "rampant individualism" as a big challenge to the necessary solutions?

Chapter V Lines of Approach and Action

The Soil Story <http://thesoilstory.com/> 4 min and/or [The Carbon Underground Pope Francis](https://vimeo.com/140162538) <https://vimeo.com/140162538> 1:17 min

"Although the postindustrial period may well be remembered as one of the most irresponsible in history, nonetheless there is reason to hope that humanity at the dawn of the twenty-first century will be remembered for having generously shouldered its grave responsibilities." #165

Solutions to the climate crisis will involve not only reducing the amount of carbon and other greenhouse gases that we put into the atmosphere, but we will also need to adapt to the changes that are already happening and use better agricultural practices to reduce the amount of carbon in the air. Even in the face of such huge problems, Pope Francis reminds us that our individual actions matter. Why? What personal choices can you make to shoulder some of the responsibility?

"the countries which have benefitted from a high degree of industrialization, at the cost of enormous emissions of greenhouse gases, have a greater responsibility for providing a solution to the problems they have caused." #170

Laudato Si' was released before the most recent climate talks in Paris in December, 2015. Many people feel that these talks demonstrated a much greater consensus among the world's nations that the world needs to move quickly to begin reducing emissions and the developed world needs to shoulder more of the cost than poor nations. How does this development fit in Pope Francis' description of the world's efforts to date? Do you think the release of the encyclical and Pope Francis' speech to the U.S. Congress may have been timed to have an impact on these talks? Why is a global consensus necessary?

Public pressure must be brought to bear on government "to develop more rigorous regulations, procedures and controls." (#179) "Politics must not be subject to the economy, nor should the economy be subject to the dictates of an efficiency-driven paradigm of technology." #189 How does our current election system complicate efforts to regulate carbon emissions? What can we do?

"We know how unsustainable is the behavior of those who constantly consume and destroy, while others are not yet able to live in a way worthy of their human dignity. That is why the time has come to accept decreased growth in some parts of the world, in order to provide resources for other places to experience healthy growth. Benedict XVI has said that 'technologically advanced societies must be prepared to encourage more sober lifestyles, while reducing their energy consumption and improving its efficiency.'" #193 What does this mean for us?

How would dialogue among the faiths and with the sciences be of benefit? How has religion sometimes been misused? (#199 - 201)

Chapter VI Ecological Education and Spirituality

The Vatican's Eco-encyclical Video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1tYdOIqvpqg>

How does this video tie together the themes of the encyclical?

Pope Francis calls us to a new start, one free from our consumer-driven lifestyles and reminds us that we are capable of change. "Yet all is not lost. Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new start, despite their mental and social conditioning." #205

What are some steps we could take to overcome the individualism that works against a sustainable world and restore "ecological equilibrium, establishing harmony within ourselves, with others, with nature and other living creatures, and with God." (#210

"We must not think that these efforts are not going to change the world. They benefit society, often unbeknown to us, for they call forth a goodness which, albeit unseen, inevitably tends to spread. Furthermore, such actions can restore our sense of self-esteem; they can enable us to live more fully and to feel that life on earth is worthwhile." #212 Why is the development of virtue essential for our transformation? Why does it matter? See #211- 212

"It is my hope that our seminaries and houses of formation will provide an education in responsible simplicity of life, in grateful contemplation of God's world, and in concern for the needs of the poor and the protection of the environment." #214 What is the role of the church? How can you be a part of that?

How can we respond to the ridicule that is sometimes used to diminish the urgency of climate change? How does conversion play a part? Christian spirituality?

Pope Francis calls us to a deeper spirituality and appreciation of the Eucharist, to an attitude of attentiveness, recognition of our dependence on God and gratitude as expressed in grace before meals. What changes in your own practices would deepen this spirituality?

"We must regain the conviction that we need one another, that we have a shared responsibility for others and the world, and that being good and decent are worth it. We have had enough of immorality and the mockery of ethics, goodness, faith and honesty. It is time to acknowledge that light-hearted superficiality has done us no good." #229

"Let us sing as we go. May our struggles and our concern for this planet never take away the joy of our hope." #244 God never abandons us. How do we hold onto this hope?

There are many gifts - we're not all called to the same actions, but we can all bring more love and beauty to the world. What gifts can you bring? Where do we go from here?