

Living ‘Laudato Si’: Practical tips to care for God’s creation

written by OSV News |



For Catholics seeking a way to both honor the memory of Pope Francis and embrace the principles of his landmark encyclical “Laudato Si’, on Care for Our Common Home” — released a decade ago in May 2015 — OSV News has gathered some practical tips and thoughts.

These come from the Vatican, a Jesuit expert in environmental sustainability and a lay Marianist whose grandmother taught him an ecological lesson or two.

And if you think just one person — instead of corporations, politicians and governments — can’t do anything significant to help the environment, Pope Francis had a “Laudato Si’” piece of advice: “There is a nobility in the duty to care for creation through little daily actions,” he observed, “and it is wonderful how education can bring about real changes in lifestyle.”

Reduce waste

“A very practical way to start addressing ecological concerns is to see if we could reduce waste,” said Msgr. Robert Vitillo, senior adviser in the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development.

The dicastery sponsors the Laudato Si’ Action Platform, providing concrete ecological action resources for everyone: families; parishes and dioceses; educational institutions; health care services; organizations and groups; the economic sector; and religious orders and

communities.

“The dicastery was very much involved in setting up the Laudato Si’ Action Platform,” Msgr. Vitillo explained. “This is the way we’re trying to make sure that we have more people involved in this, and committed to the ‘Laudato Si’ encyclical ... but also learning and sharing with each other. It’s another way to motivate more people to do this.”

The internet-based Laudato Si’ Action Platform invites members — of which there are more than 10,000 — to commit to various actions and activities based upon seven key goals stated in “Laudato Si’”: response to the cry of the earth; ecological economics; adoption of sustainable lifestyles; ecological education; ecological spirituality; community resilience and empowerment; and response to the cry of the poor.

Recycling

“Are we still using throwaway plastic? If we are using plastic, then are we making sure we’re bringing those to be recycled?” asked Msgr. Vitillo. “Those kinds of things seem simple — but they often are avoided, because it might be a little bit of trouble having an extra garbage receptacle to collect these things and then bring them somewhere else. But that’s a way that we can start reducing waste.”

Food waste

Food waste can also be examined — leftovers may simply go into the trash, but the systems required to produce and dispose of food in the first place have an environmental impact.

“Do we need to take huge portions we’re not going to finish? Do we need to go to restaurants — especially in the United States — where they have tremendously large portions? It’s not good for us to eat that much,” said Msgr. Vitillo. “But it’s also important for us not to waste food as well.”

Likewise, if your food doesn’t have to travel far, fuel and energy is saved. “Many people commit themselves to eat only locally produced things,” he noted.

Eat less meat

Brother Mark Mackey, a Jesuit lecturer in environmental sustainability at Loyola University Chicago, said, “It’s good, first of all, to just say, ‘What is it that I even eat?’ In a given day, some of us might not give it a lot of thought,” he noted.

“The first step is to take an assessment — and maybe a look at our groceries. Eating lower on the food chain is one of the ways we can reduce how much impact our diet has,” he said.

In September 2011, the Catholic bishops of England and Wales reinstated the obligation for Catholics to abstain from eating meat on Fridays year-round, not just during Lent. A 2022 Cambridge University study — “Food for the Soul and the Planet: Measuring the Impact of the Return of Meatless Fridays for (Some) UK Catholics” — found only a quarter of the U.K.’s four million Catholics complied. Nonetheless, the study projected that those who did so reduced 55,000 tons of carbon annually, or the equivalent of 82,000 fewer people flying round-trip from London to New York during the course of a year.

Prayer

"The fostering of an ecological spirituality is just critical. We can't really have long-lasting change without that," said Brother Mark

"How do we incorporate the planet and creation into our daily prayer and our understanding of our own story?" he asked. "We have this collective story and our salvation history that's part of being Christian, being Catholic."

Mindfulness and intentionality are another place to start.

"We need to bring it to the forefront of our daily life — whether it's in the way we pray; whether it's just in what we pay attention to," suggested Brother Mark. "I really think it needs to be lived out in that way, as well as reducing our footprint perspective."

Transportation

Considering transportation alternatives can also assist the environment. "Do we need to go in the car all the time? Could we use the bicycle? Could we walk more?" Msgr. Vitillo said.

Gardening

Planting trees and gardens, Msgr. Vitillo added, are both doable contributions to sustainability.

Advocacy

Msgr. Vitillo also suggested joining individual action with community action.

"It's one thing doing this for ourselves and our family," he said. "If we join others doing it, we may have even more enthusiasm and more energy and more motivation to do it — and we're also able to impact a larger area."

Education and advocacy, Msgr. Vitillo stressed, are essential.

"We need to have an ecological education — learn about what's going on and how we contribute to it, and how we can resolve those situations," he said. "We can advocate and give sound information, and hopefully help people to change their behavior."

That change, said Brother Mark, does have to be, as suggested by Msgr. Vitillo, both personal and global.

"The solutions need to have individual action," Brother Mark said. "But we have to recognize that any true, lasting change that we need to counteract climate change — as well as biodiversity loss — is going to have to be collective as well."

He recognizes that it can be discouraging.

"It's frustrating to just go to the policy and the global changes — the societal changes — that need to happen, because as an individual, we can be left feeling frustrated and saying, 'These changes aren't happening and what can I do?'"

For Matt Naveau — community coordinator of an effort that created Spiritus, a social justice

mission-oriented lay community in Beavercreek, Ohio, molded in the tradition of the Marianist order — ecological inspiration was found within his own family, from his grandmother.

“The way that grandma lived her life — sustainably, simply, in solidarity with others and anchored in prayer — showed me how to live ‘Laudato Si’ long before the encyclical was published,” Naveau told OSV News.

“It was only after grandma’s passing, as I re-read the encyclical and reflected on it with others, that I connected her life’s example with ‘Laudato Si’,” he recalled. “I’ve been in many creation care conversations where the discussion is abstract, focused on buying less and wasting less and doing more to help those around us. These are all great, but I have often found it difficult to translate these ideas into my own life. When I finally connected grandma’s example to the discussion, suddenly the abstract concepts became tangible and realizable in my own life.”