

The Catholic University of America Laudato Si' Action Platform: Reflection

As stewards charged with advancing the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, The Catholic University of America is committed to improving the environmental well-being of the campus and the greater community. All Catholic University community members are encouraged, engaged, inspired, and motivated to take steps to reduce their impact on the environment.

Catholic University's efforts towards environmental sustainability are guided by the University's 5-Year Sustainability Plan: FY 2021-2025, which was released in 2020. The Sustainability Plan was inspired by the teaching of Pope Francis in Laudato Si' and is organized around four pillars: Catholic Identity – Living Laudato Si'; Sustainability Leadership and Recognition; Campus Facilities and People, Planet, and Prosperity; and Engagement. In addition, the Sustainability Plan touches upon all seven goals of the Laudato Si' Action Platform: Response to the Cry of the Earth, Response to the Cry of the Poor, Ecological Economics, Adoption of Sustainable Lifestyles, Ecological Education, Ecological Spirituality, and Community Resilience and Empowerment. As such, Catholic University is submitting our Sustainability Plan as our Laudato Si' Action Plan. An overview of the Sustainability Plan's alignment with the Laudato Si' goals is below.

Response to the Cry of the Earth. The Sustainability Plan includes goals and milestones, grounded in the University's mission, which amplify the objectives of the call to Respond to the Cry of the Earth. The Plan includes benchmarking and transparency actions focused on monitoring and tracking sustainability progress, metrics, and environmental key performance indicators annually. It also includes actions focused on the implementation of best practices for energy, water, waste, grounds, and building management.

Response to the Cry of the Poor. The Sustainability Plan includes one primary action related to the call to Respond to the Cry of the Poor: maintaining a year-round food pantry. The University also has established a small, but growing community garden, tended by volunteers. The fresh produce grown in the community garden is donated to the food pantry. In addition, through Campus Ministry, students are encouraged to volunteer with the large community garden at the nearby Franciscan Monastery of the Holy Land in America. This Laudato Si' goal represents an opportunity for Catholic University to expand on our sustainability actions and programs as they relate to highlighting social injustices commonly rooted in environmental degradation.

Ecological Economics. The Sustainability Plan focuses on Fostering Ecological Economics through procedural planning and financing integral ecology. This includes creating analysis protocols for proposed capital projects and funding sustainability initiatives through a green financing mechanism.

Adoption of Sustainable Lifestyles. Fostering the Adoption of Sustainable Lifestyles is included throughout the Sustainability Plan. The Plan focuses on communicating integral ecology through focus groups, stakeholder communications protocols, certifications, and educational opportunities. Topics include healthy foods, reducing food waste, zero waste best practices, alternative transportation, and commitments to a sustainable campus through achieving building certifications and protocols.

Ecological Education. The Sustainability Plan focuses on Ecological Education through the lens of educational planning and dissemination as well as promoting the campus as a living classroom. The Plan includes actions such as hosting annual convenings of university faculty to assess the need for additional courses related to the environment, maintaining a sustainability peer group with student, faculty, and staff representatives, and promoting interdisciplinary collaboration among faculty and students on issues of sustainability. To promote the campus as a living classroom, the Plan also includes actions such as including sustainability attributes on campus tours; encouraging faculty-led student research projects related to sustainability, with coordination from the Office of Campus Sustainability; collaborating with student clubs focused on the environment; and developing courses specifically focused on improving sustainability on campus.

Ecological Spirituality. The Sustainability Plan connects our responsibility to care for creation with our spiritual life through environmental stewardship retreats, events coinciding with the October Feast Day of St. Francis of Assisi, and creating an annual forum for exploration and discussion of the Church's teachings on environmental stewardship.

Community Resilience and Empowerment. The Sustainability Plan incorporates a significant commitment to sustainability through collaborations, partnerships, and actions. Collaborations with other higher education institutions and partnerships with local and national organizations with a strong focus on sustainability and environmental stewardship help us on our synodal journey of community engagement. Engaging locally through adopting a neighborhood block for clean-up and hosting an annual environmental justice week addresses direct needs in our own community and builds a sense of community.

In FY 2022, Catholic University established a new Office of Campus Sustainability, which is forging connections across the departments and divisions of the University. The staff is working with faculty, staff, and students to fill new roles designed to better educate, collaborate, and create dialogue on today's key sustainability issues.

Other significant sustainability developments, in addition to committing to the Laudato Si' Action Platform, include the construction of the largest urban solar array in the Washington, DC metropolitan region, opening in 2023, creating the Sustainable Living Office, convening a cross-department Climate Change and the Future of Work Conference, and breaking ground on a new building for the nursing school designed to achieve LEED and WELL (sustainability and wellness) certification. If approved, the building will be the first university building on the East Coast of the United States to have WELL certification. The University also has undertaken a campus-wide tree survey and maintenance plan, expanded the community garden, and participated in the DC-area's Climate Justice Teach-In. Upcoming activities in FY 2023 will build on these initiatives as well as generate positive environmental change, promote education and research, preserve resources, raise awareness, and generate exciting dialogue.