



DIOCESE OF KNOXVILLE

OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In this time of celebration of the Jubilee Year of St. Francis, I invite all the Christian faithful to follow the example of Saint Francis in becoming models of holiness and witnesses of peace. St. Francis showed his love for God with complete humility. He showed an extraordinary love and oneness with God's creation, even naming God's creatures his sisters and brothers. St. Francis understood that "from the greatness and beauty of created things, their original author, by analogy, is seen" (Wisdom 13:5).

Pope Francis followed the example of his namesake in making care for the environment and for all of God's people a key priority. In his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si*, On Care for Our Common Home, he offers insight into our modern global situation, the problems before us, and proposes solutions. In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis states that despite making incredible technological progress over the past two centuries, humanity has not kept up with moral progress, making our world less rich and less sustaining for vast numbers of God's people. Pope Francis asks us to listen carefully, beyond our own wants and needs, to "the cry of the earth" and "the cry of the poor" and to respond by rediscovering our responsibility to be true stewards of God's creation.

"There exists a certain reciprocity: as we care for creation, we realize that God, through creation, cares for us (Pope Benedict XVI's Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace, 1 January 2010)."

Humanity and Creation

Creation is the first word of God—a gift provided for all creatures to live sustainably and thrive. God created the universe and its laws and has care and dominion over all creation. He gave us the sacred responsibility to share dominion on our unique earth by tiling it and keeping its creatures and resources so they can be enjoyed by all peoples and future generations. God has provided us with an unending source of awe and wonder, and a plentiful source of materials to form and build useful societies. Yet, as we read *Laudato Si*,

[Our earth] now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she "groans in travail" (*Romans* 8:22). We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. *Genesis* 2:7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters (*Laudato Si* 2).

God provided earth's resources for us to till and keep, and yet accelerating climate change, caused by industrialization, fossil fuels, and deforestation, causes more frequent and severe weather extremes—droughts, wildfires, extreme rainfall and flooding, and melting of glaciers and icecaps around the

world. Many innocent people have had to relocate as a result. We find plastic in every location of the globe—from the deepest regions of the oceans to the summits of mountains and in rainfall and snowfall—and production continues to accelerate. We are experiencing a loss of biodiversity of creatures, mostly due to habitat loss and pollution, which diminishes the gift of nature God created in His wisdom. This is impacting the global food web needed for all creatures to thrive. “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” (*Laudato Si* 2). Inequity between the rich and poor has never been greater with ten percent of the people owning more than the bottom fifty percent, greatly impacting the poorest of our world.

I offer the following from the United States Bishops’ recent letter.

At the same time, our country is stepping back from global and national efforts to change course. Progress to slow climate change remains elusive, even while instances of extreme weather, wildfires, droughts, and floods are now common. Receiving the brunt of the burden are people seeking refuge from disasters, farmers struggling to adapt to erratic weather patterns, children suffering from dehydration and hunger, migrants who flee their homes due to loss of livelihood, and species declining in forests and coral reefs. Never has it been clearer that everything is interconnected (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ February 2026 Letter “An Invitation to Ecological Conversion for US Catholics”).

God created every person on earth with inherent dignity—this is a cornerstone of Christian understanding found in both Genesis creation stories. When humanity existed in the Garden of Eden, our relationship with God and with the earth was fully realized. As pride entered the human heart, both of those relationships were broken and we became separated and divided. We need to restore both relationships!

This is something that many of our late holy fathers have been attentive to. St. John Paul II wrote, “We must therefore encourage and support the ecological conversion which in recent decades has made humanity more sensitive to the catastrophe to which it has been heading” (General Audience, 17 January 2001). Pope Francis turned to his predecessor Pope Benedict saying, “the misuse of creation begins when we no longer recognize any higher instance than ourselves, when we see nothing else but ourselves” (*Laudato Si* 6).

Jesus intentionally opened the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf in a miracle of conversion. Let our eyes and ears continuously be opened to the “cry of the earth” and the “cry of the poor,” calling for Christ to open our hearts to the Gospel, to release our tongues to praise God and break through sin and apathy. Uniting physical restoration and spiritual opening, Jesus’ command encourages us to open ourselves to God’s will.

Solutions to a Global Problem

Our hope lies in the goodness of God and the grace he offers the Church. We are a people who respond to God’s call with a multitude of talents and gifts—all of which are “needed to redress the damage caused by human abuse of God’s creation” (*Laudato Si* 22). “All of us can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation, each according to his or her own culture, experience, involvements and talents” (*Laudato Si* 14).

Pope Francis asked urgently for a “new dialog” within the Catholic Church, and among all people of good will, to address and remedy these serious issues. I wish to echo Pope Francis and other visionary popes by preaching Jesus’ message of compassion and morality over individualism and profit gained by a few.

We need to restore our three essential relationships: to God, to our neighbors, to the earth, and can only accomplish this with intentional prayer, contemplation, and humility followed by action. Solutions begin in our own backyard, and we are truly blessed with the beauty of the Diocese of Knoxville in its incredible mountains, streams, forests, and unique plants and wildlife.

I am asking the Diocese of Knoxville to commit to a new relationship with God’s creation which will benefit the world around us and provide interior peace.

Invitations

The Holy Spirit is guiding the church in a particular way, and we each have a response in faith to build God’s kingdom and uphold human dignity as we ask, “what kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up?” (*Laudato Si* 160).

Since the release of *Laudato Si*, many dioceses around the globe have adopted Care for Creation principles. Some of our parishes in the Diocese of Knoxville have also begun similar initiatives, which I commend. I am asking the Diocese of Knoxville to commit to a new relationship with God’s creation.

As a Diocese, we commit to environmental sustainability with a newly formed Diocesan Care of Creation Commission. I also invite each parish to develop Creation Care Teams and for each parish and school to develop action plans according to the unique abilities and resources of each community. I invite individuals and families to devise ways to live more simply and sustainably as we mindfully live out our Christian faith, protecting life and beauty. We are a Catholic people of hope!

In this coming year as we commemorate the 800th year since the death of St. Francis, I invite each parish to:

1. Hold a Parish Listening Session or other consultation, with your key advisory bodies to parish leaders.
2. Develop a Creation Care Team.
3. Enroll in the *Laudato Si* Action Platform and submit an action plan.

Our Care of Creation Commission is available to support and help you accomplish this essential effort. Please see the information and resources on the Care of Creation website and on the *Laudato Si* Action Platform.

Thank you for all you do to embody the Gospels of Jesus in our own time and place.



Most Rev. Mark Beckman
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