

# How far have we come in five years? The legacy of *Laudato Si'* in England and Wales

**Edward de Quay, Project Manager for the Bishops' Conference Environmental Advisory Group, looks at how Catholics in England and Wales have responded to *Laudato Si'* and how each of us can be part of that response.**

To those keenly waiting for the publication of *Laudato Si'* (LS) the text was a relief. Led by Scripture and grounded in science, it identified care for creation as key to our faith, recognising that 'science and religion, with their distinctive approaches to understanding reality, can enter into an intense dialogue fruitful for both' (LS 62). By accepting the signs of the times and understanding them through the lens of our faith, Pope Francis presented a powerful case to care for our common home.

Equally important was his insight that the ecological crisis we face is a human one; that climate change is a symptom of a problem that cannot be solved without addressing the root cause, which is our way of living and thinking and interacting with the world: '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' (LS 2). Drawing on the teaching of Pope St John Paul II, we are asked to embark on the journey of a 'profound interior conversion', leading to an 'ecological conversion' (LS 217).

So far so good. *Laudato Si'* was also a call to action, to wake up to climate change and understand that the cry of the poor, which we have always prided ourselves on being responsive to, is intertwined with the cry of the earth, which has been perhaps more difficult to identify. This article will focus on the practical imprint the document has made on the Catholic Church in England and Wales over the past five years.

*Laudato Si'* is incredibly challenging at a personal level, and this has been evident in the difficulty many have found in engaging friends, family and parishes in its themes. In 2017 the Bishops' Conference convened an Environmental Advisory Group, and while progress has been made in the following three years under the guidance of Bishop John Arnold, there is still a mountain to climb.

In principle, we are well poised to be agents for change. Globally there are 1.3 billion baptised Catholics, or 17.7 per cent of the world population. This is also a perhaps rare topic where we are in agreement with a prevailing societal view, that climate change is a fundamental problem to be addressed urgently. More than this, we have been ahead of the times in terms of our teaching. In 1971, Pope Paul VI noted in his apostolic letter *Octogesima Adveniens*: 'Man is suddenly becoming aware that by an ill-considered exploitation of nature he risks destroying it and becoming in his turn the victim of this degradation.' Pope St John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI too were outspoken on the topic.<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis was able to bring together the threads of his predecessors into the tapestry of *Laudato Si'*, developing their understanding of care for creation and human development being two sides of the same coin, and criticising the consumerist mentality which fails to acknowledge this reality. There is no need to leave this topic to David Attenborough and Greta Thunberg. Catholics have a rich understanding of how care for our common home contributes to a life lived



well. The science is important, but only half of the conversation.

On top of this, Pope Francis is a well-liked diplomat, and the political significance of *Laudato Si'* should not be understated. The document was released, it is safe to assume, deliberately in the run-up to the UN Conference on Climate Change (COP21) in Paris in 2015, where it was well acknowledged as influential and inspirational to the delegates. Archbishop Bernardito Auza, the then Apostolic Nuncio and Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations, described how 'not only had practically every delegate heard of *Laudato Si'*; Pope Francis was cited by more than thirty Heads of State or Government in their Interventions at the Plenary Session'. The resulting 'Paris Agreement' was a milestone in climate diplomacy, and is due to come into force this year when the UK hosts the twenty-sixth conference in Glasgow in November 2020.

Nationally too, *Laudato Si'* has been influential. In 2018, the then secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Michael Gove, gave the Theos annual lecture on the environment, heavily referencing *Laudato Si'*, which he considers 'remarkable for the depth of thought which goes into addressing the twin challenges of climate and social justice, for considering in depth both the science and

theology of climate change, and for exploring the spiritual, ethical and religious dimensions of one of the greatest challenges facing the world'. He went on to state that 'the Pope's solutions in *Laudato Si'* are clear and sensible, and ones on which I think we can all agree'.<sup>2</sup>

Particularly in England and Wales, we have another incentive to act. Quoting the bishops of Bolivia, Pope Francis states that 'the countries which have benefited 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' (*LS* 170). The Prime Minister has in fact committed us to this, acknowledging in his speech to launch COP26 that as we were first to industrialise, it is proper that we are the first major economy to meet net-zero by 2050.

Our own Bishops renewed their commitment to care for creation in 2019, with the written statement *Guardians of God's Creation*, in which they call for the development of a 'Christian spirituality of ecology' which begins in 'personal and family life'.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps this appears to be passing the buck, but the 'interior conversion' needed to tackle the ecological crisis is a personal responsibility for everyone. Furthermore, it is in the schools that we see perhaps the most engaged

action, where, at primary level at least, students can explore the issue outside of grown up concepts like ‘realistic expectations’, ‘economic progress’ or ‘funding constraints’. ‘Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven’ (Mt 19.14). Like children, we should ask ‘why?’ more, questioning the prevailing logic of the world and looking for truth and beauty. In a recent homily, Pope Francis reflected on the ‘apostasy of Solomon’ passage in the first book of Kings, saying that ‘for us this slippery slide in life is directed toward worldliness. This is the grave sin: “Everyone is doing it. Don’t worry about it; obviously it’s not ideal, but...” We justify ourselves with these words, at the price of losing our faithfulness to the one and only God.’<sup>4</sup> This ‘Christian spirituality of ecology’, both the key and biggest obstacle to engaging in the ecological crisis, must start in personal and family life, inspired by bold leadership.

In *Guardians of God’s Creation*, the Bishops committed themselves and invited their people to engage in this urgent challenge, ‘so that together we show leadership by our actions’, looking to ‘avoid the worst consequences of this ecological crisis by engaging now and over the next decade on this “long path to renewal”’. Some dioceses already have environmental policies in place, such as Middlesbrough and Hexham and Newcastle, and others have committed their dioceses to action through pastoral letters and Diocese-wide events.

As far back as 2007, Clifton Diocese organised a yearlong series of events exploring our relationship to the natural world through the eyes of faith, under the title ‘The Sound of Many Waters’. CAFOD, too, have been running their *livesimply* award to celebrate parishes living simply, sustainably and in solidarity with the poorest since 2006. In Lent 2019, Bishop John Arnold issued a pastoral letter in which he challenged every parish to help ‘make the Diocese of Salford a flagship for ways to heal and care for our common home’, as well as announcing the development of a ‘Laudato Si’ Centre’ in the grounds of Wardley Hall. In Advent 2019, Bishop Richard Moth issued a similar challenge to his Diocese of Arundel and Brighton, urging it to ‘wake up’ to our ecological crisis, as well as launching the ‘Journey to 2030’ project. Run by

Catholic youth in the Diocese, it commits it to a decade of action, and provides a simple ‘getting started guide’ for parishes at [www.journeyto2030.org](http://www.journeyto2030.org).

One way the Bishops’ Conference has indicated the importance of engaging with this topic is through the commissioning of two films produced by Catholic Faith Exploration (CaFE). *Global Healing* (2018) and *Global Caring* (2019) are TV-quality films engaging in the spirituality and practicalities of *Laudato Si’*, in a format designed to promote discussion and community building in a parish setting. They are freely available online at [www.ourcommonhome.org.uk](http://www.ourcommonhome.org.uk), and parishes are encouraged to make use of them. The Jesuits in Britain have also taken on the educational challenge, launching the *Laudato Si’* Research Institute at Campion Hall, Oxford and an MA in Theology, Ecology and Ethics at Roehampton University last year.

Another national response has been the work done by the Catholic Church’s energy procurement group, Inter-diocesan Fuel Management (IFM), which supplies 2,800 churches with green electricity and gas, including landmarks such as Westminster, Nottingham and Plymouth Cathedrals. This contract is also available to Catholic schools, institutions and religious orders. The cost is kept down by buying energy together, so the more buildings we have on the scheme the better it becomes. Two dioceses, Lancaster and Middlesbrough, and several religious orders have also gone one stage further by announcing that their investment portfolios will no longer include fossil fuel companies.

There are many inspiring stories from schools and parishes across England and Wales, which deserve to be told. It is important to celebrate what we do achieve, be this improving recycling rates, insulating our churches and schools better or generating greener energy, opening allotments, banning plastics from parish activities, holding film and information nights and promoting eco-friendly behaviours, all while building a sense of community in the parish. All of this happens and happens well.

To return to the idea of asking ‘why?’ more often, this can be as grand as challenging economic systems and as simple as looking at the contents

of your own shopping basket. Often, there are no definitive answers, and the best approach is to allow those that have the skills and the time to engage in the issue and to come up with a locally workable solution. Even simple question like ‘why do we buy cut flowers?’ could lead to interesting conversations. Perhaps this will come about by looking at what the parish buys, where it comes from, how it was traded, and whether better, more ethical, sustainable alternatives are available. Perhaps not every parish will come up with the same solution, but by engaging in the problem we learn more about the issues and our responsibilities as Christians to care for our neighbour.

This problem of unethical sourcing driven by the ‘culture of consumerism’ is criticised by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si’* and returned to in his recent apostolic exhortation *Querida Amazonia* (QA), or ‘Beloved Amazonia’, a region of the world directly affected by our consumerist behaviour. ‘The globalized economy shamelessly damages human, social and cultural richness’ (QA 39). ‘The land has blood, and it is bleeding; the multinationals have cut the veins of our mother earth’ (QA 42). Speaking at a press conference to launch the document, Bishop John Arnold added that ‘the environmental questions are enormous because what they’ve been doing in the Amazon is not sustainable. The use of fossil fuels and the mining cannot be sustained and is doing dreadful damage. We’ve got to be aware of our role in that, that so many of the products of the Amazon are consumed by us, and are not even for the benefit of the people of that region.’ Changing our consumer habits helps bring pressure on those who wield political, economic and social power. Pope Francis argues that ‘this is what consumer movements accomplish by boycotting certain products. They prove successful in changing the way businesses operate, forcing them to consider their environmental footprint and their patterns of production. When social pressure affects their earnings, businesses clearly have to find ways to produce differently. This shows us the great need for a sense of social responsibility on the part of consumers. Purchasing is always a moral – and not simply economic – act’ (LS 206).

Alongside our individual and community efforts, it is right that we are active politically. CAFOD have taken *Laudato Si’* to heart, concentrating

effort through their ‘Our Common Home’ campaign. A current action is a petition to the Prime Minister addressing issues raised in *Querida Amazonia* around support for local, sustainable agriculture and clean energy. This campaign recognises that it is the poorest and most vulnerable who pay the price of climate change, despite having done the least to cause the problems. CAFOD is also active in interfaith and wider society action, such as the ‘Time is Now’ lobby last June, where over 380 members of parliament came out to talk to their constituents about climate change. The National Justice and Peace Network is also focusing on ecology at their annual conference this June, entitled ‘2020 vision – Action for Life on Earth’.

This is another important part of asking ‘why?’ like children and being awake to the ways our society affects our global neighbours. In the run-up to COP26, it is especially important to make our voices heard, and Pope Francis encourages us to do this: ‘For this reason, all of us should insist on the urgent need to establish a legal framework which can set clear boundaries and ensure the protection of ecosystems ... otherwise, the new power structures based on the techno-economic paradigm may overwhelm not only our politics, but also freedom and justice’ (QA 52).

When we stand back and look at the big picture, as illustrated by this entirely insufficient overview, it is of a church in motion. There is something everyone can do to encourage this ‘profound interior conversion’, no matter how small, as there is a ‘nobility in the duty to care for creation through little daily actions, and it is wonderful how education can bring about real changes in lifestyle’ (LS 211).

To conclude and re-emphasise, this article lists a tiny fragment of the Church’s efforts both from organisations and individuals. Every parishioner’s efforts build up the collective action of the Church.

Do let us know how your parish, school, religious order, business or home is pursuing an ecological conversion, so we can better understand where *Laudato Si’* is bringing life to your community, and where there are difficulties in putting it into practice. We would be pleased to hear from you.

<sup>1</sup> See Philip Booth (2020), 'The environment and continuity in Catholic social teaching', <https://catholicsocialthought.org.uk/?s=The+environment+and+continuity+in+Catholic+social+teaching>.

<sup>2</sup> Gove, M., 'When will there be a harvest for the world? Environmental justice, stewardship and the moral purpose of government', Theos annual lecture 2018,

<https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/comment/2018/11/22/theos-annual-lecture-with-michael-gove>.

<sup>3</sup> Catholic Bishops of England and Wales (2019), *Guardians of God's Creation*, <https://www.cbcew.org.uk/home/our-work/environment/season-of-creation/guardians-of-gods-creation/>.

<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis, 'Pope at Mass: Beware of 'slippery slide' toward worldliness', *Vatican News*, 13 February 2020.

## John Paul de Quay introduces *Journey to 2030*, a decade-long programme run by the Ecological Conversion Group:

Our aim is to mobilise the Catholic Church in the UK in the face of the complexity of the current ecological crisis. Motivated by faith and inspired by the teachings of Pope Francis and Pope St John Paul II, we hope to re-engage with parishes and schools, re-centring them as the hub of communities, where we can foster a new era of caring, for both our neighbours and our common home; God's creation. Despite living in a society of rampant individualism and misled aspirations, our faith gives us an opportunity to counter the heart of the problem, through education and community-based parish activities, creating long lasting change in tackling our ecological crisis through the lens of an ecological conversion.

*Journey to 2030* makes use of existing resources, curating them in an easily accessible manner, and drawing attention to particular areas through our yearly themed magazine *The Year of the Cockerel*. This year the theme is about waking up. It was launched in Arundel and Brighton Diocese alongside a pastoral letter by Bishop Richard Moth. There are currently two dioceses and one province signed on to the scheme.

Through forming *Journey to 2030* parish groups, we aim to give hope by looking at the existing good works of parishioners through the lens of peace, justice and preservation of creation, promoting the idea of integral human development, encouraging volunteering and community action in our race against time.

Our resources have already made a difference: 'I think our parishioners never knew how deep the situation actually was,' says Fr Ben, a diocesan priest in Southwark. 'The resources in the Getting Started section of the *Journey to 2030* website helped to generate an interest among our parishioners, and a desire to get involved. As a result, they have embraced the idea of living simply and have made changes so as not to be wasteful with resources. These changes include: growing plants at home and decorating the Church with them; a reduction in the number of cars at Sunday Masses; recycling of candles and of seat cushions; redesigning the parish garden; and looking at options for a new, eco-friendly church boiler.'

Please read and enjoy the *Year of the Cockerel* magazine on our website ([www.journeyto2030.org](http://www.journeyto2030.org)), sign up for news and get involved. If your school or parish has embarked on any projects that you would like to share with others, do let us know.

