



# Just ACT

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## *“My Work is Loving the World”: Responding to Our Climate Crisis on the Anniversaries of Earth Day and Laudato Si’*

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### EXPERIENCE

*My work is loving the world.  
Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird—  
equal seekers of sweetness.  
Here the quickening yeast; there the blue plums.  
Here the clam deep in the speckled sand.*

*Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?  
Am I no longer young, and still half-perfect? Let me  
keep my mind on what matters,  
which is my work,*

*which is mostly standing still  
and learning to be astonished.  
The phoebe, the delphinium.  
The sheep in the pasture, and the pasture.  
Which is mostly rejoicing,  
since all the ingredients are here,*

*which is gratitude, to be given a mind and a heart  
and these body-clothes,  
a mouth with which to give shouts of joy  
to the moth and the wren,  
to the sleepy dug-up clam,  
telling them all, over and over, how it is  
that we live forever.*

- Mary Oliver, “The Messenger”

Through the poetry of Mary Oliver we are invited not only to see the beauty of the natural world, but to listen to the wisdom of creation, and to befriend Earth and her community of life, of which we are members.

As her poetry enables us to celebrate the beauty of God’s creation, it also disarms our denial of earth’s suffering and opens our awareness and hearts to the harm that has been done. At this time when the world celebrates the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Laudato Si’* and the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Earth Day, let us pause and reflect on the significance of these anniversaries and their call to restore health and sustainability to our planet.



## ANALYSIS

When the first Earth Day celebration occurred in 1970, 20 million Americans mobilized to “provide a voice to ... emerging environmental consciousness.”<sup>1</sup> The movement “led to the creation of the United States Environmental Protection Agency and the passage of the Clean Air, Clean Water and Endangered Species Acts,”<sup>2</sup> and it has spawned global participation. At that time, studying the effects of human activity on climate change was a relatively new pursuit, and the theories and predictions were erratic. In 1988, however, a panel of international scientists – now called the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)—convened to examine the century’s climate data, and they concluded that global action to cut emissions would be necessary to avoid dangerous levels of climate change.<sup>3</sup> Since then, calls for lowering carbon emissions have increased exponentially by scientists and civil society alike, even as they have been challenged by corporations and politicians who balk at the changes they would be required to make. This year, climate change is a major focus of Earth Day activities, and the theme for 2020 is “Climate Action.”



The IPCC has issued a number of reports on climate change to advise policy makers on the status of the climate and to suggest options for adapting to or mitigating changes. Currently in its sixth assessment cycle, the IPCC has issued three special reports since 2018: [Global Warming of 1.5°C](#) (SR15); [Special Report on Climate Change and Land](#) (SRCCL); [Special Report on Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate](#) (SROCC). The Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) is expected to be finalized in 2022.

These reports conclude that we must limit global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels to avoid dire consequences. Projecting that we will hit that mark between 2030 and 2052 if we continue with current emissions rates, the IPCC recommends cutting emissions by 50% in the next decade, and reducing emissions to net zero by 2050. The IPCC suggests that “pathways limiting global warming to 1.5°C ... would require rapid and far-reaching transitions in energy, land, urban, and infrastructure (including transport and buildings), and industrial systems. These systems transitions are unprecedented in terms of scale, but not necessarily in terms of speed, and imply deep emissions reductions in all sectors, a wide portfolio of mitigation options and a significant upscaling of investments in those options.”<sup>4</sup> It is an extraordinary task, but we have no choice except to achieve it.

The IPCC finds that “Impacts on natural and human systems from global warming have already been observed. Many land and ocean ecosystems and some of the services they provide have already changed due to global warming.”<sup>5</sup> Low-lying coastal regions already are experiencing increased saltwater intrusion, flooding, and damage to infrastructure; and across the globe, regional climate characteristics are changing to include increases in “mean temperature in most land and ocean regions, hot extremes in most inhabited regions, heavy precipitation in several regions, and the probability of drought and precipitation deficits in some regions.”<sup>6</sup> These extreme weather events affect the ability of people to grow crops, to find fresh water or irrigate their land, and to feed livestock. In other words, not only have ecosystems been destroyed by the warming temperatures, but our own food and water supply is threatened by global warming.<sup>7</sup> Further, since 10% of the world’s people inhabit coastal areas, sea level rise is disrupting—and will continue to disrupt—the lives of millions and the global economy.

The IPCC reports suggest that taking the steps to limit emissions now—however disruptive—will be preferable to responding reactively to the consequences. Not only will we be responsible for

destroying the rich biodiversity of our planet, but we also will have to mitigate the destruction of infrastructure, the displacement of millions of people, and a global food and water shortage. Rather, they suggest, we should commit to proactive solutions.

Unfortunately, the IPCC reports that “although multiple communities around the world are demonstrating the possibility of implementation consistent with 1.5°C pathways, very few countries, regions, cities, communities or businesses can currently make such a claim. To strengthen the global response, almost all countries would need to significantly raise their level of ambition.”<sup>8</sup> This is true even of the commitments made by signatories of the so-called Paris Accord—they are nowhere close to drastic enough. The IPCC recommends reducing the demand for energy—which would include things like limiting travel by car or airplane and turning off electricity, as well as adopting a more local, vegetable-based diet, since meat production accounts for at least 15% of global emissions.<sup>9</sup> Further recommendations include adopting widespread clean energy methods and developing Carbon Dioxide Removal (CDR) technology to store or sequester carbon emissions (although the IPCC stresses that this last suggestion is not recommended as a replacement to the others). In sum, the IPCC concludes that “low energy demand and low demand for land- and GHG-intensive consumption goods facilitate limiting warming to as close as possible to 1.5°C.”<sup>10</sup>

We are challenged, however, to make sure that any plan to limit emissions involves a commitment to enhancing the capacity of developing nations to adapt to and mitigate the climate challenges that affect them, without preventing them from pursuing development.<sup>11</sup> Developed nations built their success on industries that emitted massive amounts of carbon, but developing nations are the most affected by—and the least capable of adapting to—climate change. Further, if developing nations are unable to pursue the same options for development due to their egregious emissions, developed nations should be ready to assist.

The findings of these reports are grim, but they propose actions that would mitigate many of the direst consequences of our current path—if we choose to take them. The science is clear that not to do so will imperil Earth’s capacity to sustain life. This will dramatically impact the lives of those who are already vulnerable, as well as the lives of future generations. But why should we care? Why should we choose to pursue these pathways that will require significant changes to our own way of life? To answer those questions, we must turn to the principles of our faith.

## REFLECTION

Five years ago, Pope Francis issued his first encyclical, *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*, which promotes the paradigm of integral ecology—the view that all of creation is interconnected. Taking the Trinity as the source of all that is, Pope Francis teaches that the natural world—including human beings—is fundamentally relational. We bear the mark of the Creator in a way that links us together as creatures. Because we are essentially relational, Pope Francis writes, “The human person grows more, matures more and is sanctified more to the extent that he or she enters into relationships, going out from themselves to live in communion with God, with others and with all creatures. In this way, they make their own that trinitarian dynamism which God imprinted in them when they were created. Everything is interconnected, and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity.”<sup>12</sup>



When we embrace this relational identity, our responses to contemporary crises will arise from this place of relational solidarity—of seeking communion with God, others, and all creatures. This is essential because, as Pope Francis recognizes, “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 combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature.”<sup>13</sup> A paradigm of integral ecology will motivate actions that promote our own flourishing as inextricably bound up with that of others and creation—our choices will be made with the recognition that any choice that suppresses the flourishing of others cannot be authentically beneficial. For this reason, Pope Francis writes, “Concern for the environment ... needs to be joined to a sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society.”<sup>14</sup>

To encourage this paradigm shift, Pope Francis takes up Pope Saint John Paul II’s call for human beings to pursue an “‘ecological conversion,’ whereby the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them. Living our vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience.”<sup>15</sup> Focusing on spirituality helps to form our way of being in the world. As Pope Francis writes, “An integral ecology is also made up of simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness. In the end, a world of exacerbated consumption is at the same time a world which mistreats life in all its forms.”<sup>16</sup> When we reorient ourselves according to the relational and creative identity of the Trinity, we will begin to see creation not only as a gift to be loved and cultivated, but as an integral part of who we are. In this spirit, we will further Christ’s hope “that all will be one.”<sup>17</sup>

## DISCUSSION

1. How are *Laudato Si'* and Earth Day connected?
2. What stood out to you from the analysis section of this article? Did anything surprise you or concern you? What did you learn?
3. What is integral ecology? What does it mean for our approach to the climate crisis?
4. What does it mean to undergo an ecological conversion?
5. What actions will you adopt to “live [your] vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork”? (See below for suggestions.)

**“We are called to be instruments of God ... so that our planet might be what [God] desired when [God] created it and correspond with [God’s] plan for peace, beauty and fullness.”**  
– *Laudato Si'*, 53

## ACTION

As members of the SSND community, “The Triune God impels us into the heart of the world to be women of peace, hope, and love.” To embrace this call in the spirit of integral ecology, here are some suggested actions:

1. Visit [Earth Day Network](#) and [Catholic Climate Covenant](#) for ideas to promote integral ecology and environmental justice.
2. Consider adopting a more plant-based diet. Meatless Mondays are a great option! [Click here for recipes and tips.](#)
3. Avoid single use plastic such as straws, k-cups, and plastic water bottles. [Click here to learn more about the effect of plastic on our planet.](#)
4. Try making your garden or backyard a haven for pollinators, which are vital to habitats and ecosystems. [Click here for tips and ideas.](#)
5. Stay abreast of legislative initiatives and advocate for proposals that will protect our planet and those most vulnerable to climate change. [Click here to follow our Voter Voice campaigns.](#)
6. Read and reflect on [Laudato Si'](#), and consider ways you might pursue a personal ecological conversion; the book *The Ten Green Commandments of Laudato Si'*, by Joshtrom Isaac Kureethadam might be useful in this endeavor.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.earthday.org/history/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.earthday.org/history/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/discovery-of-global-warming/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/chapter/spm/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/chapter/spm/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/chapter/spm/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/chapter/spm/>

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/2/2019/02/SR15\\_Chapter2\\_Low\\_Res.pdf](https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/2/2019/02/SR15_Chapter2_Low_Res.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/197623/icode/>

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/2/2019/02/SR15\\_Chapter2\\_Low\\_Res.pdf](https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/2/2019/02/SR15_Chapter2_Low_Res.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/2/2019/02/SR15\\_Chapter2\\_Low\\_Res.pdf](https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/2/2019/02/SR15_Chapter2_Low_Res.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> *Laudato Si'*, 240

<sup>13</sup> *Laudato Si'*, 139

<sup>14</sup> *Laudato Si'*, 91

<sup>15</sup> *Laudato Si'*, 217

<sup>16</sup> *Laudato Si'*, 230

<sup>17</sup> *John* 10:10