

The Feast Day of St Francis has special meaning for Pope Francis who has made care for the environment a key theme of his papacy. Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si'*, explored a range of environmental challenges and the ways in which issues of greed, human suffering and inequality are interconnected with environmental degradation. He calls the Church faithful to pursue an "integral ecology", a concept deeply rooted in Catholic tradition.

Usaia Moli's story

Perhaps the best way to talk about how the various issues intersect is through story. Usaia Moli, from Moala Island in Fiji, recently came to Australia at the invitation of Oxfam and I was privileged to hear him speak. Usaia is a father of seven, a farmer and a volunteer first responder after disasters. Pacific cyclones are getting stronger. In 2009 Moala was hit by two category 5 cyclones in one year! There's also the more slow-moving disaster of sea levels rising. After years of ever-stronger cyclones, food shortages from salt water inundation of crops and lack of fresh water, his village had to be relocated.



This is not like moving house in Australia. As with other indigenous people, Fijian tribes are intimately bound to their land, so the losses include loss of identity, connection to land and being able to pass on one's heritage to the young. Re-location involves complex negotiations with the hosting community, eg, Usaia's tribe can't simply start using the host tribe's fishing grounds.

Usaia sadly recalled a recent storm surge which washed away their ancestors' graves, and the heartbreak of collecting the ancestors' bones.

Usaia said, "These changes were brought to our doorstep. We did not create them."

Regarding the more powerful cyclones he said, "We are tired of recovering picking up the pieces after disasters – one disaster after the

other – how can we develop if we are constantly recovering from disasters or preparing for future disasters?"



Sea level rise, South Pacific

Urgency of the climate challenge

Since the publication of *Laudato Si'*, climate change has been the environmental issue which has featured most strongly in Pope Francis' public teachings.

This has paralleled the greater urgency in warnings from climate scientists, the calls to action from UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, civil society and religious leaders of various traditions. We are all hearing about climate disasters escalating – in the melting ice caps and many extraordinary floods, wildfires, heatwaves, storms, and ever-longer droughts across various parts of the world.

The impacts of just 1.1°C global temperature rise has cost the lives or livelihoods of many millions. This means that 1.5°C is clearly not safe either, even if that level of warming is now regarded as humanity's guardrail against tipping into runaway climate catastrophe.

The reality is that humanity needs to rapidly slow down the mining and burning of coal, oil and gas and, secondarily, to stop the logging of carbon-absorbing forests.

On 25 May this year, in Pope Francis' message for the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, he called for an end to "the fossil fuel era," saying it is "madness to permit continued exploration and expansion of fossil fuel infrastructure."

.... "Let us heed our call to stand with the victims of environmental and climate injustice, and to put an end to the senseless war against creation."

***Laudato Si'* Action Plans**

The Vatican encourages everyone in the Church and each part of the Church to formulate a pathway to "integral ecology". At each level, a "*Laudato Si'* Action Plan" can be put together.

Challenges for families

In materials prepared for families, they are challenged to consider questions such as:

- How much our money in banks or super funds is being invested sustainably, not in fossil fuels?
- Could we use our car less and avoid plane travel?
- Could we vote for candidates who make positive climate action a priority?
- Could we switch to GreenPower or install solar panels?
- Could we eat a more plant-based diet and avoid meat, with its heavy carbon footprint?
- Are we able to give more to Charities helping people who are struggling?

Challenges for parishes

Parishes and smaller communities could consider questions such as:

- Could we use more clean energy via GreenPower or installing solar?
- Could the parish use more energy efficient appliances and vehicles?
- Could we join faith-based advocacy for more ambitious climate policies?
- Could ecological concerns be integrated into our worship?



Resources

See the resources recommended on the Bishops' statement 'Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor' website: <https://socialjustice.catholic.org.au/2021/09/24/social-justice-statement-2021-22/>

Resources on Sydney Justice and Peace Office: <https://justiceandpeace.org.au/laudato-si-kit/>

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