

## Statement on Upcoming World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation

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### *Towards an ecological conscience*

In his message for the 1990 World Day of Peace, Pope St. John Paul II warned of a “profound moral crisis *of which the destruction of the environment is only one troubling aspect.*”<sup>1</sup> Twenty-five years later, Pope Francis further developed the important moral dimensions of ecology and its interrelatedness to other human and spiritual concerns in his encyclical, *Laudato si’*. The moral dimension of the ecological crisis demands that each of us cultivate an *ecological conscience*, one that enables us to see clearly, judge rightly, and act ethically when it comes to the care of “our common home.”<sup>2</sup>

Environmental problems can be difficult to understand because they involve highly complex scientific and technical interactions between natural phenomena, animal and ecosystem behaviors, and human actions. This difficulty is exacerbated by the complexity of communication and globalization in the modern world. Despite ever-increasing forms of communication and social media, we must admit that “the flood of information at our fingertips does not make for greater wisdom,”<sup>3</sup> and at times is even deliberately used to confuse and manipulate consciences. Our times require robust consciences, capable of wise discernment in the face of complex moral problems.

In a recent speech celebrating St. Alphonsus Liguori, Doctor of the Church and patron of confessors and moralists, Pope Francis called for a mature Church, able to respond to our contemporary moral predicaments with the formation of “responsible and merciful consciences.” A mature, merciful and responsible conscience includes, centrally rather than peripherally, the ability to value and address environmental problems:

In these times, society is facing countless challenges: the pandemic and work in the post-Covid world, the care that is to be guaranteed to all, the defense of life, input from artificial intelligence, the protection of creation, the anti-democratic threat, and the urgency of

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<sup>1</sup> Pope John Paul II, “Message for World Day of Peace” (Jan. 1, 1990). [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_19891208\\_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19891208_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html).

<sup>2</sup> See, *Laudato si’*, no. 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Fratelli Tutti*, no. 50.

brotherhood. Woe to us if, in this evangelizing effort, we were to separate “the cry of the poor” from “the cry of the earth.”<sup>4</sup>

These ‘countless challenges’ must be met with a deep and well-formed faith. Indeed, one of the underlying drivers of our current crisis, both moral and ecological, is a radical world view that has placed excessive trust in the power of mankind and disregarded God.<sup>5</sup> Faith helps us to face so many looming challenges without becoming discouraged or despondent, and guides us to the ultimate standards of goodness and truth, without which conscience can lose its way.<sup>6</sup>

But these challenges also require from us a well-formed reason that can integrate knowledge and information from different secular disciplines. We recall that “in fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of men in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals from social relationships.”<sup>7</sup> It is a mistake to think that faith alone is sufficient for the Christian life, especially when it comes to complex moral problems that require both *faith and reason*.<sup>8</sup> We must especially hold reason and conscience to the highest standards.

When it comes to the environment, climate change is one of the most serious moral challenges we face. The recent Sixth Assessment Report of the United Nation’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (“AR6 IPCC”) prompts us to exercise our ecological conscience and integrate the best available science with the truths of our Catholic faith. Not only is the IPCC report valuable in the *content* it provides<sup>9</sup> for our conscience, but it also allows us to sharpen the *process* for enriching our ecological conscience. We invite every Christian concerned with the environment to seriously consider the findings of AR6 IPCC report.

To come to a well-formed opinion of the report, beyond the many sensationalistic headlines, one must read at least some sections of the direct text. The insight and interpretation of scientists, scholars and journalists is also helpful, though the motivations, priorities and biases of experts must be evaluated and discerned along with the substance of their affirmations. Finally, one must come to one’s own conclusions assisted by common sense and the light of faith, acknowledging that “there are things that science cannot see.”<sup>10</sup> For Catholics, faith and reason work together in the pursuit of the truth.

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<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis, “Message for the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Proclamation of St. Alphonsus Maria de Liguori Doctor Ecclesiae,” (March 23, 2021). [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2021/documents/papa-francesco\\_20210323\\_messaggio-santalfonso.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2021/documents/papa-francesco_20210323_messaggio-santalfonso.html).

<sup>5</sup> See *Laudato si’*, no. 122.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “Conscience and Truth”, Presented at the 10th Workshop for Bishops, February 1991. <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/conscience-and-truth-2468>.

<sup>7</sup> *Gaudium et spes*, no. 16.

<sup>8</sup> *Fides et Ratio* no. 1.

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., *Letter from Bishop Cantu and Bishop Dewane in support of U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change* (Nov. 10, 2017) (also expressing support for the Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change (IPCC)). <https://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/environment/upload/UNFCCC-letter-2017-11-10.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Remarks of Archbishop Coakley: “Convening of Catholic Leaders with Senate Climate Solutions Caucus Co-Chairs,” (October 1, 2020). [https://www.usccb.org/resources/2020-10-01-Environment-Archbishop%20Coakley-Remarks%20for%20%20Hill%20Briefing%20on%20Environment\\_0.pdf](https://www.usccb.org/resources/2020-10-01-Environment-Archbishop%20Coakley-Remarks%20for%20%20Hill%20Briefing%20on%20Environment_0.pdf).

The AR6 IPCC report tells us many important things about our climatological past, present and future. The news about the past is not good. The report reaffirms, conclusively, that the climate is affected by human activities and that we have not done enough to change course. There is no room for denying the human impact on the climate nor for delaying further action! About the past, we should repent.

The news about the present is mixed. We are currently off track to meet the goals set by the Paris Agreement which are expected to keep global warming well below 2 degrees Celsius. However, there is still time to reach those goals. In the United States we are witnessing ambitious climate policies proposed and enacted by Congress, many of them with support from both political parties.<sup>11</sup> The upcoming UN Climate Summit in Glasgow (COP 26) in November presents an opportunity for nations to be bolder in their emission reduction commitments. In the present, we must act boldly and with urgency!

The news about the future is hopeful. The IPCC AR6 report has now recognized that the most extreme and terrifying climate scenarios, the basis for many newsworthy apocalyptic predictions, are unlikely. Globally we have swiftly transitioned away from coal, and more likely climate scenarios point to a stable, albeit warmer, climate future. Climate change is serious and urgent, but it is not the end of the world. For the future and in hope, we must pray!

Today, after all, is the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation. As Catholics, we believe that the end of the world, the true Apocalypse, belongs to God alone, and is not of our own making. “Heaven and earth will pass away... of that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.” (Matthew 24:35-36). Faith in God and his mercy gives us hope in the face of adversity, and our hope leads us not into complacency, but to action and prayer.

Placing our trust in God and recognizing that *He* has entrusted us as stewards of creation, we pray today for all climate scientists, experts in technology and policy, and those on the frontlines of climate mitigation and adaptation. Echoing Pope Francis, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has renewed its appeal to Congress to work collaboratively and courageously to address environmental problems<sup>12</sup> with an emphasis on infrastructure investment, and will plead again for ambitious climate policies in forthcoming reconciliation negotiations directed toward stimulating ingenuity and domestic and international economic development. We pray for the UN Climate Summit in Glasgow (COP 26) and especially for all creatures and people affected by climate change, especially the most poor and needy among us. As we begin the Season of Creation today, we encourage all Catholics to build upon the ecological actions for the 5th anniversary of *Laudato si'*<sup>13</sup> and to join our Christian brothers and sisters in putting our ecological conscience into practice.

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<sup>11</sup> See, “U.S. Bishops’ Chairman Grateful to Senate for Passing Infrastructure Bill, Signals Need for Additional Action” (Aug. 10, 2021). <https://www.usccb.org/news/2021/us-bishops-chairman-grateful-senate-passing-infrastructure-bill-signals-need-additional>.

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., USCCB Environmental Justice Advocacy, 2021. <https://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/environment/index.cfm#tab--latest-information>

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., “Summary of Activities of the U.S. Church in Response to *Laudato si'*,” (Aug. 18, 2020). <https://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/environment/upload/summary-activities-laudato-si.pdf>