

The wheels are in motio

LAUDATO SI'

ON CARE FOR
OUR COMMON HOME



Last month Ellen Teague focused on resources to help people understand the message of Laudato si'. This week our writer presents ideas for putting the green encyclical's central message into practice

Pope FRANCIS' encyclical Laudato si' (LS) on God's Creation has provoked more discussion and column inches than any Vatican document in living memory. But now the "talk has been talked" how do parish communities set about "walking the walk"? How do we become beacons of hope in our environmentally degraded world?

Some time ago, as a campaigner with the ecumenical Operation Noah group, I would be constantly asked: "Climate change is a huge problem. How can we as a small parish make any difference?" I would retort: "Do you recall the south Asian tsunami of 2004? Hands up anyone here who did even the smallest thing to raise funds and support those who had lost their homes and families." A sea of hands would shoot up. Then I would pose the question: "Did you ever once think, 'What is the point of sending £30 if it cannot solve all the problems caused by the tsunami?'" and there would be a shake of heads. Why, then, do we use this faulty reasoning to avoid action on the environment?

As Catholics, we have the benefit of a solid tradition of virtue ethics. Put simply, if something is worth doing, it is valuable not only for its consequences, but because it is worth doing in itself. Small actions can be genuinely sacramental: outward signs of a rich interior disposition. What Pope Francis has challenged us to do is not to think of practices such as adopting renewable energy, eating less meat and walking to Mass as "lifestyle fads" or consumer choices, but as an integrated show of our bond with God and the material world he has created.

How sad that, thus far, only 19 of more than 3,000 parishes have sought to become "Live Simply" communities (an initiative of the Livesimply network and administered by eco-congregation, www.livesimplyaward.org.uk). One such parish, St John Bosco in Woodley, Berkshire, has already installed solar panels and runs a Creation Liturgy every September to coincide with harvest time; but

coordinator Rita Belletty is aware of the danger of complacency and further challenges that arise out of the publication of LS. “Sometimes, when we have our walk-to-church Sundays, I have to confess that the car park can still be pretty full. People are not against the idea, but they forget that they need to set aside the time to get to church on foot.” The parish has often despatched teams of 20-plus volunteers on a “Tidy up Woodley” litter pick, but more needs to be done. “There’s a patch of land near the church where youngsters occasionally play football. How wonderful if we could convert that into a parish allotment. We’d give people experience of cultivating crops and also be able to share that food with people in the community who need it.”

The encyclical encourages us to “replace consumption with sacrifice, greed with generosity, wastefulness with a spirit of sharing”(LS9) and in responding to the “cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” Pope Francis asks us to “move forward in a bold cultural revolution” (LS114). These are not words that ask us to make minor adjustments in our lightbulb-purchasing practices. So what can be done?

Thankfully there is some of the so-called low-hanging fruit. Parish buildings can source electricity from companies such as Good Energy and Ecotricity that supply energy from 100 per cent renewable sources. Better still would be a parish pledge that gets as many homes as possible on board. Pope Francis has asked us to take seriously the importance of grace before meals, to make us aware of that relationship of bounty and dependency between humans and the natural world. Think of the words at every Mass: “Blessed are you Lord God of all Creation, through your goodness we have this bread to offer, which earth has given and human hands have made, it will become for us the bread of life.”

Every re-enactment of the sacrifice of the Mass has, as its core, an umbilical relationship between humankind and the earth. How many of us think of that? And why cannot this be our attitude in the practice of sharing food together? As Pope Francis says: “One expression of this attitude is when we stop and give thanks to God before and after meals. I ask all believers to return to this beautiful and meaningful custom.” In addition, if suitable educational materials were provided, could not parishes feature care of Creation in preparation for Holy Communion and Confirmation in their catechetics programme?

At the more radical end of the spectrum, a parish that collectively lived at energy consuming levels of the poor of the developing world could, as witnesses to the future: reduce meat consumption to a day or two a week; make a collective pledge to fly only for emergencies; and run a car sharing scheme that reduces to a trickle all those wasteful and inefficient journeys taken with one driver behind the wheel and no one else in the car.

There'd be free cycle-maintenance donated by admiring locals and a parish pressure group that held regular meetings with the managers of big local supermarkets to really make the best use of all that food waste. This is scary and demanding stuff but I know that if even one parish could make it take off, it would attract huge attention and curiosity. At present, it's as though we are all standing nervously looking down the line and smiling at one another, saying: "After you." "No, after you." In a world of YouTube, social media and tweets, this kind of non-showy virtue and grasping the ecological emergency by the scruff of the neck could reap transformative dividends for those brave folk who seize the initiative and let the power of *Laudato si'* be translated into exemplary practice.

This is not hair shirt and Luddite territory. It cannot be sold by believers with long faces who come across as green pharisaical prigs. Goodness knows we Catholics do guilt better than anyone, but neither can we guilt-trip people into submission. There is a genuine joy and celebration about *Laudato si'*. (As Belletty from St John Bosco says: "A genuinely readable and comprehensible encyclical for once!") Parishes should study it and then draw up a plan of action based on its demands. There is a vital UN climate summit in Paris starting on 30 November which many climate scientists are calling a "last chance saloon".

This is one that really cannot be kicked into the long grass.

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Mark Dowd-The Tablet