



# ON CARE *for* OUR COMMON HOME

GROUP READING GUIDE

to POPE FRANCIS'

*Laudato Si'*

BILL HUEBSCH

I also want to address every living person on the planet about global environmental deterioration here on our shared home, the earth.

**4** I stand in a long line of popes and other church leaders throughout the world who have spoken about this. Blessed Pope Paul VI in 1971 called attention to the ecological catastrophe that threatened to turn against the human family, depriving people of food and homes. **5**] Pope St. John Paul II called for a global ecological conversion. We humans exploit our natural environment, he said, wildly consuming as much as we can. A true conversion, he taught, would lead to an “authentic human ecology.” God has entrusted the world to us, and we must steer all development toward the human person, not merely toward financial gain.

**6** Likewise, Pope Benedict XVI asked us to realize fully that we have damaged the earth almost beyond repair, both physically and socially. These two march along together, he taught. “The book of nature,” he said, “is one and indivisible,” including the environment, life, sexuality, the family, and social relations. When we begin to think that we own the world, that the world is simply our property, that God and the family of God (all men and women) have no place in it, then misuse is the result.

### *United by the same concern*

**7** The various statements from my predecessors reflect the consensus of scientists, philosophers, theologians, and civic leaders. They’ve all helped shape the church’s thinking on these matters. Outside the Catholic Church, others have also raised these issues, especially the beloved Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. **8**] Patriarch Bartholomew has called on each of us to take small, personal actions to care for the planet, reversing our own small ways of harming her. We have sinned against creation, he teaches firmly. “To commit a crime against the natural world,” he teaches, “is a sin against ourselves and a sin against God.” **9**] Bartholomew has gone even farther. He calls us to a deep change with-

## INTRODUCTION

*For group process, before the first session please read this introduction and respond to the reflection questions at its conclusion.*

**1** “Praise be to you, my Lord.” These were the words of St. Francis of Assisi in his wonderful song to creation. He reminds us that the earth is our common home: “Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us...”

**2** Indeed, the earth, which is our common home, cries out to us in pain because we have hurt her by how we’ve used and abused her. We have grown to believe that we’re the lords and masters of everything and can plunder the earth however we wish! The violence we render is now evident in the sickness of the water, the soil, and the air. The earth is being laid waste. In our sinfulness, we have forgotten that we are made from the dust of this very earth ourselves.

### *Nothing in this world is indifferent to us*

**3** In 1963 Pope St. John XXIII called “all men and women of good will” to reject war and embrace peace in his landmark *Pacem in Terris*.

in our hearts, to “replace consumption with sacrifice, greed with generosity, wastefulness with a spirit of sharing.” We should see the world as a “sacrament,” he tells us, a way of sharing life with God and our neighbors. We meet on the earth, and we humans are drawn from her dust.

### *Saint Francis of Assisi*

**10** St. Francis of Assisi is our patron saint as we consider these issues. He lived the “integral ecology” of which we will speak, and he did so with authenticity and pure joy. I took his name as my guide when I became pope because I wish to follow in his footsteps. He lived simply, sustainably, and in solidarity with the world and her people.

**11** St. Francis approached all of creation and all people with awe and wonder. He saw all creatures as sisters and brothers rather than viewing them as a mere economic commodity. Because of this, he felt compelled to care for all of creation as though it were part of his family. To him, all creation was beautiful and he couldn’t help but break into song with praise for it. The minute we wander away from his attitude, we start to see ourselves as lords and masters of creation, entitled to exploit it even to the breaking point, leaving little or nothing behind for the next generation. **12** As a man of faith, St. Francis saw creation as a window through which he also saw God.

### *My appeal*

**13** We humans can shift to a more sustainable approach. God has not abandoned us; he will show us the way. My thanks go to all who are already working for this, especially those who assist the world’s poorest people.

**14** My urgent appeal is for dialogue. Let’s tackle this together! There is a worldwide ecological movement, but powerful forces oppose it, while most people simply go their merry way and ignore the problem,

as though it will go away on its own. Others have come to believe that nothing can be done to repair the ecological damage we see. And still others think that all we need is more technology and development, as though adding to the problem will fix it. What I believe we need is a new and worldwide solidarity of will and talent to care for God’s creation.

**15** I hope this encyclical can help us all understand the urgency of the situation and face it squarely. This encyclical is now part of the church’s social teaching. First, I will sketch the present crisis, drawing on the best science available today. Second, I will articulate principles drawn from the Judeo-Christian tradition that will direct our response to the crisis. Third, I will discuss the deep roots of this crisis in order to understand the causes. Toward this end, I will propose broad dialogue and action, both personal and international. Finally, because I am convinced change will only happen if we are motivated and educated for it, I will offer guidelines drawn from our Christian beliefs.

**16** Certain themes will be evident throughout this letter. These will include the close relationship between the poor and the fragile planet; the belief that we are all connected; the way in which we understand economics, technology, and progress; the belief that every person has dignity; the truly serious need for international policy; and the need for an honest dialogue about how to proceed, imagining a new and more sustainable lifestyle for us all.

### **Personal Process**

**Reflect:** What is your personal view of the state of the natural environment? Are matters as serious as Pope Francis says they are?

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**Reflect:** What is your response to articles 8 and 9 from Patriarch Bartholomew?

## 1. POLLUTION AND CLIMATE CHANGE

### *Pollution, waste, and the throwaway culture*

**20** Pollution is part of daily life for many people. Breathing in pollutants causes a host of health issues, especially among the poor who cannot escape it. Technology cannot solve this problem. **21**] Toxic waste is a culprit in the pollution puzzle. We pile it everywhere, but it's making the earth, which is our home, into an "immense pile of filth." Once beautiful landscapes are now littered with rubbish.

**22** We live in a "throwaway culture" in which we think nothing of using a carton or other item once and then disposing of it. Paper, which is easily recycled, is often used once, for example. The dialogue to which I'm calling us as a human family could deal with this by creating a circular model of production in which everything is used and reused, we engage in moderate consumption, and we guard the non-renewable resources.

### *Climate as a common good*

**23** The climate belongs to everyone and is a complex system linked to what is needed to sustain human life. A "solid scientific consensus" has emerged that human activity has contributed significantly to the general warming of the planet. Other factors also play into this, such as volcanic activity and the solar cycle, but it is now undeniable that our dependence on fossil fuels triggers a large increase in greenhouse gases. Fossil fuels are at the center of the worldwide energy system. **24**] Climate change affects the carbon cycle, essential to all life. Potable water supplies decrease; agricultural output is reduced; water levels rise on our coasts; polar ice caps melt, producing increased methane gas.

**25** The poor will be affected by these climate changes more than the rich are. Nearly two-thirds of all people on earth live along the coastlines. These changes adversely affect farming, fishing, and forestry; the means

## SESSION ONE

# What Is Happening to Our Common Home?

**17** Instead of beginning with theology or philosophy, I want to sketch a picture of what is happening on our common home, the earth. **18**] Our lives seem to be speeding up. We might call the phenomenon of everything moving along so fast by the term "rapidification." Human change is happening faster than the slower speed of biological evolution. And much of the change is not aimed at human dignity or ecological sustainability. **19**] The human family has just come through a period when we believed that we could do anything on earth, without regard to sustainability. But a growing number of people now see the need to protect nature. Let us take a brief look at the main questions about the environment that are before us. We can't sweep these under the carpet any longer.

of livelihood of most poor people on earth. The poor are forced to follow the migrations of animals and move away as deserts expand. They must leave behind their homes and live with even greater insecurity. How can we be indifferent to them?

**26** The ones on earth with power and money, however, try to deny there is a problem at all. They argue with the scientific consensus on this while ignoring the plight of the suffering masses. We need an urgent plan to drastically reduce polluting gases and increase access to renewable energy.

### Group or Personal Process

*Reflect:* As we get started here, what is your view of the argument going on in Western society today about climate change? If fossils fuels are largely to blame for climate change, what can you personally do to help?

*Reflect:* What is your response to articles 25–26? Are you poor or are you in the group with power and money?

## II. THE ISSUE OF WATER

**27** In wealthy nations, the habit of wasting and discarding resources is astounding! We simply must address this, in part for the sake of the poor. **28** Fresh and available water is primary. It is essential for human life. Our supplies of water, once abundant, are running low, and in some places “water poverty” has already appeared.

**29** Unsafe water is the only water widely available in poor nations.

It is the cause of numerous diseases and much death. It results in poor production among farmers. Meanwhile, we continue to pollute the water supplies. **30** In some places, the sale of water has become a thriving business, but the poor cannot afford to pay. We must agree that access to safe drinking water is a basic human right. We have a “social debt” to the poor and must provide water, but few understand the seriousness of this crisis. **31** Water and its management is so important that the scarcity that is emerging, and the controls on it being imposed by multinational business, could lead to war.

## III. LOSS OF BIODIVERSITY

**32** The plundering of earth’s resources happens because developers are short-sighted. The loss of woodlands and waterways reduces biodiversity. Species are being lost at an alarming rate. **33** We can’t think of the loss of these species with indifference. We do not have the right to destroy them.

**34** Not only are we losing large animals and birds, but also the smaller microspecies that live in the ground, wetlands, and trees. As we attempt to solve the problems we have created through industry and commerce, we often create an even larger problem in the process. The level of intervention to solve this, often in the service of business interests, is making the earth less rich and beautiful.

**35** We crowd out many species and ruin their habitat by building highways, damming water sources, and tearing down forests. As a human family, we must pay close attention to these losses because they are an essential part of the balance of life on earth. **36** Those looking to turn a fast profit often don’t care about ecosystems. We are often complicit in this without knowing as we buy homes or products that result from this.

37] We applaud efforts to provide sanctuaries and protect biodiversity, and we know that certain areas and species need more protection than others. 38] Two examples include the great aquifers and glaciers on the planet and the Amazon and Congo River basins, which are the world's "lungs" and are essential for all life on earth; we must protect them. 39] Managing forests and wetlands demands careful study and good planning.

40] The oceans are of immense importance to human life but, like other natural environments, are terribly threatened. 41] The coral reefs are particularly threatened by agricultural runoff, the warming of sea waters, and industrial waste being dumped at sea. 42] In sum, we need a careful inventory of the species of the earth and a plan to safeguard and care for each. We are all interconnected.

**IV. DECLINE IN THE QUALITY OF HUMAN LIFE AND THE BREAKDOWN OF SOCIETY**

43] We humans also belong to the natural order of the world, and we have rights to life, dignity and happiness. 44] But many urban areas have become overcrowded and dangerous. They waste a lot of energy and water. 45] Some people have created private green spaces for themselves, walling everyone else out. 46] We know that economic or technology growth has not always led to better lives for most people. A social breakdown has occurred, laced with drugs, money, and human trafficking.

47] Moreover, the digital world can stop people from living wisely; people do not have to think deeply. Ever-present media create a din of noise such that great poets, philosophers, mystics, and prophets go unheard. We can't distinguish their voices from the constant flow of data. Real relationships are sometimes replaced with virtual ones. While we seem to be communicating, we are shielded from people's real fears,

joys, and hopes. Such media have exciting possibilities for us—if we manage them well.

**Group or Personal Process**

*Reflect:* How much water do you use each day? Try to think about everything from your morning routines to your final flush before bedtime. What do you hear about or know about the question Pope Francis raises here on biodiversity? Is there anything anyone can do to improve this situation?

*Reflect:* What is your response to article 47? How has the digital world changed your relationships and attitudes?

**V. GLOBAL INEQUALITY**

48] We can see from this that deterioration in the human community and in the natural environment go hand in hand. When water runs short, the poor who depend on bottled water cannot afford it. When the seas are ruined, coastal fishing villages suffer. 49] These poor and excluded ones are the majority of the population of the earth, and yet few in the wealthy nations seem to understand their plight. This is because media are controlled from centers of wealth and power, beyond the reach of the poor. They don't know each other. What we want to say with force here is that a true plan to sustain nature is always also and at the same time a plan to sustain people. We must hear both the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth at the same time.

50] Some say that what we need is to forcibly reduce the birth rate and that this alone would solve our problems. But population growth is not

itself the problem; extreme consumerism is. In the present way we distribute goods, a tiny minority has come to believe it has the “right” to consume in a way that could never be universalized. The problem isn’t too many mouths to feed but a lack of will to feed them. We know that one-third of all food produced is wasted today, and if we put our minds to it, we can change this.

**51** There is an “ecological debt” that the wealthy, generally northern nations owe to the many places around the world from which they have exported the raw materials to sustain their wealthy lifestyle, and they have done this for two centuries or more. These poor nations become the dumping ground for waste of all kinds. And when local natural resources are depleted, the multinational companies that set up shop to get them leave town in a hurry. But they leave behind a disaster for the local people: unemployment, deforestation, poverty, depleted agricultural capabilities, pollution, and most of all, despair among the people.

**52** Such ecological debt continues to fuel the economies of the rich at the expense of the poor. In paying for climate change, therefore, we should expect that there will be “differentiated responsibilities,” more paid by those who are wealthy and less by those who have little. We must come to believe that we are one human family, all of us.

## VII. WEAK RESPONSES

**53** All of these factors—pollution, scarce water, declining biodiversity, a decline in the quality of life for both humans and the natural world, and global inequality—lead us to argue for change. In the whole history of the human race we have not depleted our common home as much as we have in the past two hundred years. We are out of balance, and we need

the leadership to restore sanity. We need a clear legal framework within which boundaries can be set and monitored.

**54** So many special interests at global summits easily overturn the emerging will of the people of the world. The rich fear they will lose their foothold in wealth—that somehow they have a right to more than others. In this environment, where economic interests supersede everything else and dominate the conversation, no genuine reform can occur. Those who want change are seen as romantic dreamers, a nuisance to be dealt with and set aside.

**55** Some nations are making progress now, but even in these, consumption remains rampant. **56** We make our markets into our gods, and we sacrifice everything, including our home on this planet, to continue economic expansion. **57** As resources run out, new wars will occur, and war is always a disaster for ecology, because in war, nothing can be stopped. Powerful financial interests control this, and they also control many politicians. **58** The improvements made in some nations to clean up waterways, restore woodlands, and live in peace with nature are amazing, and they prove it can be done without causing a financial disaster. **59** Meanwhile, there is also a false ecology that takes token actions while arguing that things aren’t really that bad. This way of thinking supports maintaining our current lifestyles and puts off until tomorrow the important decisions we must make today.

## VII. A VARIETY OF OPINIONS

**60** There are many opinions about the causes of and cures for our current ecological crisis. Some will not give up on the belief that technological progress will solve our problems, while others want no intervention of any kind. What we need is dialogue between differing points of view.

61] The church does not wish to impose an opinion, but she does call for open dialogue and honest debate.

#### **Group or Personal Process**

*Reflect:* How does global inequality affect care for the environment? How are the poor adversely affected by climate change, either in First World or Third World countries? Why is the response to known data about the environmental crisis being met with such a weak response?