

Encyclical Exploration: Laudato Si (2015)

A Guide For How We Live and Love in the 21st Century

OPENING SLIDE: WORLD

Thank you for having me speak today – Laudato Si’ is such a pivotal encyclical and I do love how it complements and expands on Evangelium Vitae

Today I want to begin my presentation with what I call the why question? Why did Pope Francis write this encyclical?

I’ll give you a brief overview of the theological and scientific context in which he was writing, so you can better see what he offered Catholics in this encyclical and how he shaped his message around social and ecological justice.

SLIDE TWO: Theological Context - Pope Francis with Quote

In 2014, Pope Francis reminded Catholics that our lives are deeply connected with our sacred home, and that caring for creation is central to faith — not just for the “faith-hearted” (LS, 11). We don’t have time here to fully explore why our imagination and practices have grown so disconnected from Earth as our material and spiritual life-source. If you want to dive deeper, I’ve written a short article, “*We Are Stardust*,” on my website, and the first half of my book, *Creation, God, and Humanity* (2017), covers this in more detail.

SLIDE THREE: Baptism

Pope Francis wrote *Laudato Si’* to remind us that from Baptism to Eucharist to Ash Wednesday and Anointing of the Sick, **God is deeply present in the material world** — and so are we. Water, oil, dust, bread, and wine are not just symbols; they’re sacred elements of our journey to God.

SLIDE FOUR: Eucharist

At every Eucharist we hear Jesus’ words: *Take this bread, bless it, break it, and share it* — remembering his birth, his ministry of care, and his resurrection that redeems the world. But does this sense of **interconnectedness** truly live in us when we sing *One Bread, One Body* during communion? Do we believe we are bound together — with God, with one another, and with the Earth itself? If we do, then surely we are called to protect all our kin in creation and our human family suffering because of the climate crisis.

SLIDE FIVE: Hymns

Hymns like *Flow River Flow*, *Rain Down*, *Sing Out*, *Earth and Skies*, and *Morning Has Broken* reveal the deep theological heart of our faith. They remind us that God is living water — love that wells up and spills into the world — and that creation itself is sacred, from singing birds and fresh rain to sunlight on new grass. When we sing these hymns, do we truly join in that divine rhythm? Do we celebrate creation's beauty and God's life-giving presence in the world through faithful action?

Yes, *Laudato Si'* was written to remind Catholics of these core spiritual elements — interconnectedness and interdependence — but it was also in response to the alarm sounded by the world's scientists

(3:24)

SLIDE SIX: Scientific Context

In 2014, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was a global body established by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to assess scientific knowledge on climate change.

At that time, the IPCC included 195 member countries and drew on the expertise of more than 800 scientists from around the world who served as lead authors, coordinating authors, and review editors. Thousands more contributed as expert reviewers and research contributors.

Their collective work culminated in the Fifth Assessment Report (AR5) in 2014, which made it clear — the planet is warming because of human activity, and the changes we're seeing have no parallel in Earth's history.

SLIDE SEVEN: Religion and Science

This report helped spark new action among faith communities. In 2014, the American Academy of Religion devoted its annual conference to "*Climate Change and the Coming Storm*," calling scholars to engage the moral, spiritual, and practical dimensions of the climate crisis. It marked a turning point — recognizing climate change as not just a scientific or political issue, but a deeply moral and religious one.

To explore how faith communities were responding, the AAR partnered with the Public Religion Research Institute on a national survey, “*Religion, Values & Climate Change*.” The results were striking: in 2014, white Catholics were among the least concerned about climate change, while Hispanic Catholics were among the most.

SLIDE EIGHT: What was Happening (AR5) 2014 Circle

The 2014 IPCC report made clear what was happening to our planet — and Pope Francis didn’t need statistics alone to understand it. He was hearing firsthand from bishops and advocates across the Philippines, India, Africa, and Latin America who were already living the reality of climate disruption.

That’s why it was so powerful to see *Evangelium Vitae* (“The Gospel of Life”) and *Laudato Si’* (“On Care for Our Common Home”) celebrated together. Too often we separate human suffering from the suffering of the Earth — but they are deeply intertwined.

As carbon emissions rise, the planet warms. Wet places get wetter, dry places get drier, storms grow stronger and less predictable. Those with wealth can adapt; the poor cannot. Warming oceans and dying reefs push fish and families alike to migrate — but unlike the fish, people can’t always move — especially those without wealth. Many displaced by drought or flooding fall prey to traffickers or forced labor. The UN warns this creates a “vicious cycle,” where climate disasters deepen poverty and exploitation.

Pope Francis also reminds us, “Because of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God.” When biodiversity and ecosystems vanish — so too will the human communities that have flourished alongside them for centuries. Traditional knowledge, cultural practices, and ways of living in harmony with the land are disappearing. These are not random tragedies or “God’s will.” They are human-made wounds — calling us to repentance, renewal, and action for both people and planet.

(7:45)

SLIDE NINE: Garbage

Laudato Si’ arrived at a time when the Earth itself seemed to be crying out, echoing the cries of the poor. Pope Francis recognized that many Catholics had

grown disconnected from the Earth as a sacred source of life — and, as a result, had become less attuned to the suffering of the most vulnerable.

This letter, like other papal teachings throughout history, calls us to live the Gospel in new contexts — in this case, caring for creation. It is not the first Catholic leader to speak on this and since I cannot delve deeply into this, I've included a timeline on your handout, based on Celia Deane-Drummond's 2012 article "*Joining in the Dance*." This shows the rich Catholic legacy of ecological concern.

SLIDE TEN: What kind of world do we want

Thus, in 2015, *Laudato Si'* sought to restore humanity's connection to God, self and others by calling for a deep ecological conversion — a transformation of hearts, habits, and imaginations. Our common home, Pope Francis insists, is being destroyed not merely by policies or technologies but by the sinful patterns of human economics, behaviors, and ways of perceiving reality that separate us from creation and from one another.

In paragraph 217 Pope Francis writes: "The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast." (217) Thus, Pope Francis asks all people of faith the following question: "What kind of world do we want to leave those who come after us, to children who are now growing up?" (160)

SLIDE ELEVEN: Youth

If we say – "I want a world where my children, my children's children, and all Earth's many children, can have abundant life physically and spiritually," then we need to experience an **ecological conversion**. It is our youth that have the most at stake and they are quite vocal in demanding change.

Are we listening?

If we are, then our hearts must be formed anew

And Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* was showing us the way.

(10:20)

SLIDE TWELVE: Overview

Laudato Si' is an incredible Catholic document for many reasons - but here are four

- a) It is interdisciplinary stressing a fruitful dialogue with science. As a former chemist and quite comfortable with science, Pope Francis engaged in a fruitful dialogue and models how Catholics can do this
- b) It was the next great Catholic Social Teaching document in a long legacy – as my handout shows
- c) It affirms “grassroot” voices as authorities, placing the voice of the marginalized alongside saints and theologians and philosophers and poets
- d) And it testifies that we need a more adequate Christian understanding of the relations among God, Creation, and Humanity – and then shows us how.

(11min)

SLIDE THIRTEEN: AWAKENING

Now let's delve deeper into the encyclical.

All of *Laudato Si*'s six chapters are stepping stones towards ecological conversion. And **Ecological Conversion** requires a few things:

First we need to awaken to what is happening and why it is happening. This is chapter one and three.

Chapter One tells readers that we are changing the climate of our home and **Chapter Three** takes a magnifying glass to our economic, political and social practices in order to reveal “excessive” anthropocentrism (116) as the rot that is the cause of our ecocrisis. This excessive focus on the human has eroded our vision of the intrinsic worth of the rest of the created world as well as distorted the true purpose of being human. Pope Francis voices his disapproval: “If we scan the regions of our planet, we immediately see that humanity has disappointed God's expectations.” (61) These are strong words that need to be said. But the intent is not to paralyze people of faith out of guilt. Rather they are said in great hope; Pope Francis knows that the tools to rebuild our crumbling outer and inner worlds lies in our faith tradition – if we look.

SLIDE FOURTEEN: CHAPTER TWO GOSPEL OF CREATION

If the first step is awakening to “what is,” the second is imagining “what could be.” To see that path forward, we need to retrieve Christian sources that have been forgotten or misunderstood. This is **Chapter Two of *Laudato Si***: the Gospel of Creation. Shortly I will look at how *Laudato Si* portrays God, creation, and humanity, guiding us to reform our imaginations and reconnect with the Earth.

But Pope Francis knew that looking to the past would never be enough to reform our imaginations and tackle climate destabilization. He knew that our ecological conversion also requires faithful **innovation** — new ways of living, loving, thinking, and acting in harmony with creation.

SLIDE FIFTEEN: INNOVATION

People of faith need to develop **new** ways of articulating our faith now that we know that we live in an ancient, interconnected, dynamic, creative BUT ultimately finite world. This is the purpose of Chapter Four through Six.

Chapter four offers a vision of integral ecology thus re-immersing humanity into the ocean of created life. Our world is interconnected and interdependent – we are stardust – and this must inform everything we do. Human ecology is part of – and dependent on – Earth’s ecologies. When our common home is deteriorating, so will human life.

Integral ecology **doesn’t** mean protecting nature at the expense of human flourishing. For example, displacing indigenous communities to save tigers is not integral ecology — nor is destroying habitats to satisfy our endless desire for bigger homes and private yards. The vision of integral ecology in this chapter helps to articulate new ways to understand human development that is cooperative with and dependent on Earth’s ecologies. Pope Francis, however, is not satisfied with a beautiful but theoretical vision of integral ecology.

In **Chapter Five**, Pope Francis rolls up his sleeves — and asks us to do the same. Every one of us, from international leaders to each person sitting here today, is called to take part in bringing integral ecology to life.

And **the final chapter of *Laudato Si’*** weaves together ancient wisdom with modern scientific, social, and theological insight into a comprehensive spirituality. I challenge anyone feeling overwhelmed or paralyzed by the immensity of our current crises to read it and not be inspired. This chapter is a luminous guide — a hope-filled “how-to” — uncovering spiritual treasures, traditions, and resources that empower people of faith to respond to the ecological crisis with courage, creativity, and fidelity.

Now, let’s take a closer look at the theology of *Laudato Si’* — the deep spiritual insights it offers and the practical ways it invites us to act. Much of what I’ll share

is on the handout, and I hope it can serve not only as a companion for your prayer life, but also as a guide for your broader spiritual journey.

(16 min)

SLIDE SIXTEEN: Triune God: Theology of Laudato Si

Let us begin with how Laudato Si describes God: Our Creator, Sustainer, and Liberator.

In this letter both God's transcendence and immanence are vital. This document never emphasizes one to the detriment of the other. LS reminds readers that "the biblical tradition clearly shows that the renewal of Earth and humanity entails recovering and respecting the rhythms inscribed in nature by the hand of the Creator." (71)

God as Creator is the ultimate source of all that is: Earth beauty, Mystery and our planet's limits. Earth was formed with great care and intention in the womb of God, as Hildegard depicts in her art and theology. This way of envisioning God and our connection to God informs Laudato Si which states "Everything in the material universe is open to God" (79) and all created life "speaks of God's love" (84). Our Creator God is deeply immersed in life here on Earth and desires "to work with us" to bring this finite and broken world - and ourselves - to fulfillment in God (80 & 83). We did nothing to earn this gift; God just loves our cosmos and us that much. Laudato Si offers so many descriptions of God to help us understand the relationship of God to creation: the Supreme artist (80), Infinite creativity (80), "goodness without measure" (77), eternal Seeker of Justice (73), Shipbuilder, "the love which moves the sun and the stars" articulated by the poet Dante (77), God the merciful, and All Powerful God who made, sustains and ultimately redeems every facet of creation.

But Because *Laudato Si* emphasizes the triune nature of God, we can't fully understand God without also reflecting on how LS presents the Incarnation and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

(18 min)

SLIDE SEVENTEEN: Incarnation

Laudato Si reminds us that Jesus consistently taught his disciples that God, the Creator, is the Father of all creation (Matt 6:26; Lk 12:6), who cares even for the smallest sparrow. We must not overlook the intimacy and love this entails. Jesus

invited his disciples to see God's presence in all things — the mustard seed, the harvest in the field (97) — and this closeness is powerfully expressed when he cries out from the cross, calling God *Abba* — a term of deep, intimate love. God is never absent from creation and loves it profoundly.

Another key aspect of *Laudato Si*'s depiction of Jesus — the Incarnation — is that the Second Person of the Trinity fully entered the cosmos, even to the cross (99). As the encyclical notes, “Jesus lived in full humanity with creation, and others were amazed” (98). He calmed winds and seas, enjoyed the pleasures of life, and never despised the body or the material world (98). Out of great love, Christ chose intimate participation in creation through his incarnation. Our rejection of our own earthiness — and of our fellow creatures — runs contrary to the profound lesson of the incarnation.

Jesus also sanctified human labor when it works in harmony with the Earth and cooperates with creation to bring about justice and peace. *Laudato Si* invites us to reflect on what the full humanity of Christ means today, in a world the first disciples could not have imagined — a world ancient, dynamic, and fragile, now facing unprecedented ecological and human crises that demand our faithful action.

This reflection on the incarnation is not new; it follows in the footsteps of those who came before us, starting with the Council of Chalcedon, which affirmed that Christ is fully divine and fully human. Today, facing a planet in crisis, we must reimagine what it means to live as an Earthly Christ, seeing his creative work as the divine Word. Christ rejected “unhealthy dualisms” — false separations between spirit and body, humanity and Earth — and we too are called to choose life of harmony and justice.

Laudato Si is a guide for this reflection, reminding us that we must keep in creative tension the **earthly and Risen Christ** (100). Hope for peace, justice and wholeness is the common destiny for all created life. At end times creation will not be annihilated or forgotten, rather “the risen One [will be] mysteriously holding them to himself and directing them towards fullness as their end. The very flowers of the field and the birds which his human eyes contemplated and admired are now imbued with his radiant presence.” (100) This is vital – why would we care for creation and work to protect something that is merely a stage for the God-human drama or a dead machine for human use and discard?

If creation is very good in the beginning (alpha) and important enough to be imbued with Jesus' radiant presence at end times (omega), then hopefully we will

be motivated to ‘move heaven and earth’ to protect this precious gift and help all our Earthly brothers and sisters towards what Laudato Si calls ‘divinization’ (236).

(24)

SLIDE EIGHTEEN: Holy Spirit

Now Laudato Si did not ignore the Holy Spirit. Pope Francis articulates that the Spirit of God has filled the universe with possibility so that newness can emerge. With the immanence of the third person of the Trinity, new life can emerge out of death. The Holy Spirit is described in paragraph (80) as infinite creativity and our human creativity can be a dim but real reflection of this divine creativity. Thus to be in the image of God, human creativity must be mutually empowering bonds of love and not purely self-serving and destructive. Human creativity must cooperate with God’s inscribed natural order to help draw ourselves and of all of creation towards final rest and fulfilment in God. Destabilization and diminishment of Earth does neither of these. The infinite empowering creativity of the Spirit must become the foundation of understanding of human community, work, and progress. Anything else is a failure of our moral and theological imaginations.

(32min)

SLIDE NINETEEN: Creation

Early in Chapter Two, Laudato Si states that “creation can only be understood as a gift from the outstretched hand of the Father of all and as a reality illuminated by the love which calls us together into universal communion.” (76) Our Blue Marble - seen for the first time in 1972 – is an incredible part of a bigger universal communion. Scripture witnesses to the interconnectedness and interdependency of our diverse and good universe (70) and the Blue Marble shows us how this is. Looking at this illustrates how arbitrary human borders and political boundaries truly are.

Laudato Si describes creation as a “precious book” whose letters are the multitude of created things present in the universe. (85) Every creature, every letter in the Book of Nature, is loved by God and given their special worth and “place in the world” (77). In Psalms, the intrinsic worth of all of creation is celebrated (104:31) and every created thing gives praise to God. When we learn to hear this hymn of praise we can live more “joyfully in God’s love and hope” as the Bishops of Japan note. (85) St. Thomas Aquinas (ST 1.47.1) also tells us of the worth of Earth’s diversity. Creation’s diversity and interdependency was necessary “because [Gods]

goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone.” [God] produced many and diverse creatures so that what was missing to one in the representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another.” The Canadian bishops also affirm this beautifully: “From the panoramic to the tiniest living form, nature is a constant source of wonder and awe. It is also a continuing revelation of the divine.” (85) Nature is a locus of God’s presence (88) and the Spirit dwells in every creature. Thus we are being called to protect our home not just because we use the water or the soil; our spiritual well-being depend on the flourishing of our sacred home.

And LS teaches us that not only are we interconnected, we are interdependent: LS reminds us of what is written in our Catechism: “God wills the interdependence of creatures. The Sun and the moon, the cedar and the little flower, the eagle and the sparrow: the spectacle of their countless diversities and inequalities tells us that no creature is self-sufficient. Creatures exist only in dependence on each other, to complete each other, in service of each other.” (86) Thus we need to protect our sacred, ecological home because our physical and spiritual well-being depends on it.

SLIDE TWENTY: Finite Creation (STORM)

Interconnectedness and Interdependence, however, are not the only lessons Laudato Si is teaching. Yes, creation is portrayed as beautiful and intrinsically good but it is also unfinished and broken. Just look upon the storm captured from space. All of creation is in need of rest, renewal and fulfillment; it is a necessary part of the natural rhythm of life that is both beautiful and harsh, fertile and cruciform (71). When we deny our connectivity and interdependency with creation, we forget this lesson.

SLIDE TWENTY ONE: Ask the Beasts

We can relearn this if we ask the beasts, as Job reminds us (12:7), or the Noah narrative which speaks to renewal with great hope (71). The prophets also invite us to find renewed strength in times of trial by contemplating the all-powerful Creator via the created universe. (73) The biblical account of Cain and Abel also illustrates how a ruptured relationship between two human brothers echoes the rupture between **Cain & God** and **Cain and the land**. Relationships among God, Creation, and Humanity are all in need of restoration. “These ancient stories ... bear witness to a conviction which we share today” – brought alive by the Blue Marble picture, that everything is interconnected, and “that genuine care for our

own lives and our relationships with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice, and faithfulness to others.” (70) Justice, peace and protecting our home requires right relations among God, humanity and creation. Our actions are denying creation the wholeness and peace God desires for all.

SLIDE TWENTY TWO: HUMANITY

This leads me to the third thread of Laudato Si’s Christian anthropology: humanity. Laudato Si’s 68th paragraph is clear that the Bible has no place for a tyrannical anthropocentrism; we are being called to appreciate our one planetary family and our many other-than-human brothers and sisters. It also states that the cause of our problems is that we lack an awareness of **our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone.** (202).

Yes, humanity is made in the image and likeness of God with unique gifts and with a unique purpose (84) and this is also true for our many planetary brothers & sisters. Our worth cannot be seen in isolation; we have emerged from God’s creative impetus, and Earth’s creative processes -- as has all of creation. **This is our common origin.** We share this with all of creation.

Thus the entire material universe is a universal communion of neighbors or to use the language of St Francis: Brother Sun, Sister Moon and stars, Brothers Wind and Air, Sister Water, Brother Fire, Mother Earth, and Sister Death. Laudato Si calls this “Deep fraternity” and this fellowship means that all of creation speaks of God’s love... Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God.” (84) We learn to love ourselves and our human brothers and sisters better when we learn how to truly love creation. **This is our mutual belonging.** We all belong to a universal communion.

The universe is a family made up of many subjects that possess both intrinsic and instrumental worth. Our cosmic and planetary family is so close that in Laudato Si, Pope Francis re-iterates a provocative statement he made in 2013: “God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement.” (89) When Earth suffers, we suffer. Our present is interconnected but so is our future; all of “creation is projected toward divinization; every creature, transfigured, “will take its rightful place” (243) with the Creator (236) thus we also **share a destiny with all of creation.**

So as Thomas Berry wrote: we can't have healthy people on a sick planet, nor healthy economies, nor vibrant universities, rich political lives nor faithful churches when Earth's economies, Earth's many classrooms, our planet's polis and our sacred planetary communion are being compromised to such a degree. The destabilization of Earth's life systems is forcing us to see our Catholic moral tradition in new ways: The New Zealand bishops acclaim that even the ten Commandments take on new meaning in light of our planet in crisis: "what [does] the commandment 'Thou shall not kill' mean when "20 % of the world's population consumes resources at a rate that robs the poor nations and future generations of what they need to survive." (95) Thus Laudato Si invites each of us to ecological conversion by reimagining what it means to be human today.

(42 min)

SLIDE TWENTY-THREE: Hope/FEAR

Has much changed since 2014?

Let's look at the scientific or ecological context:

The IPCC published their sixth assessment Report (AR6) in 2023. There are many stories of heartache and devastation but there are also many innovative and promising mitigations discussed and some positive stories of change. Sadly, it also indicates that the rise in temperatures has deepened the consequences.

Take a look at the impact across many sectors: water availability, food production, health and well being, cities and settlements, and biodiversity and ecosystems.

SLIDE TWENTY-FOUR: Compare AR5 and 6

With every increment increase, the Earth's and all our planetary neighbors' suffering increases. This graph compares what was happening in 2024 and then in 2024. Notice the upward trajectories if we do everything in our power and if we continue as we are ... and the dark purple is an ominous warning that we must address human behaviours and mindsets that are placing the dignity and well being of all in jeopardy.

SLIDE TWENTY-FIVE: Hope

Within a religious context - have people of faith changed? Are white Catholics more concerned about climate change?

Well, a 2023 PRRI survey found that many in the white, Catholic communities have recognized climate change as a human caused problem and seem concerned. The questions asked were different so there can't be a direct comparison, but I believe this is good news. This new chart shows progress in concern for creation and admission that it is human caused.

But moving from just acknowledging human caused harm towards changing behaviors that will stop it, is the great work for Catholics today.

SLIDE: TWENTY SIX

One area of concern is that in 2014 it was found that for Catholics, only 5% reported hearing about climate change from their priests and leaders, and over 79% rarely ever heard about this crisis. Without hearing how guiding Catholic principles and Gospel truths are connected to social and ecological crises, change may be impossible.

Has this changed since 2014?

SLIDE: TWENTY SEVEN

PRRI did not ask this exact question again but data was collected in 2019-20 by The National Survey of Religious Leaders. It was a nationwide survey of 1,600 religious leaders in the United States including religious leaders from fundamentalist and evangelical churches, Baptists, Methodists, Black Protestants, Roman Catholic denominations and more. The survey assessed religious leaders' beliefs about climate change and whether they discuss climate change with their congregations.

Data shows yes, an overwhelming majority of Christian religious leaders accept that climate change is caused by human actions but HALF of them have NEVER mentioned climate change or humans' role in it to their congregations. And 78% have never or only spoken about it more than once or twice.

When climate change deepens the suffering tied to immigration, poverty, human trafficking, and threats to life itself — can Churches remain silent? These are not separate issues; they're all connected in the cry of the poor and the cry of the Earth. Of this Laudato Si' is certain.

(Djupe, P. A., & Neiheisel, J. R. (2025). Do Religious Leaders Engage Community Environmental Problems? *Sociological Focus*, 58(3), 344–370. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00380237.2025.2516014>)

LINK for DATA: [NSRL-appendix-summary-table.pdf](#)

SLIDE TWENTY EIGHT: End

Evangelium Vitae and *Laudato Si'* together remind us that protecting life and caring for our common home are inseparable. They call us to uphold dignity, nurture thriving communities, and act boldly so both people and the Earth can flourish.

Thank you