

Ecological conversion: walking the talk of *Laudato Si'*

Fifteen years ago a friend and I started a campaign on climate change for churches in the United Kingdom. Britain had just experienced [Make Poverty History](#), a campaign which had unleashed an amazing surge of global solidarity. Now with [Operation Noah](#) Britain's churches would 'make climate change history' – or so we hoped.

On launch day I got my press release ready, clicked 'Send', and waited for the calls to flood in. The first response was not what I hoped. It came from the Campaign for Dark Skies (I had never heard of them!). They complained of our hypocrisy: how dare we claim moral leadership, when church floodlights throughout the land stopped the nation enjoying the stars!

I learnt an important lesson. Unless we 'put our own house in order' as a Church, we have no right to lecture others. Obvious, really.

In this article I'd like to share some of my own experience as an environmental campaigner, a Caritas leader, and drafter of a diocesan environmental policy – and invite you to join with me in exploring how the Church, and Caritas itself, should respond to *Laudato Si'*.

From penance to policy

Laudato Si' is a wonderful, inspiring message with a profound call to change. But to truly receive the healing gift of *Laudato Si'* we have to understand how deep our need for healing is.

As Alcoholics Anonymous put it, the first step to recovery is to admit that we are powerless over our addiction, and that our way of life has become unmanageable. Only then can we take the second step of AA – to believe that a Power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity. Likewise the power to enact *Laudato Si'* requires honesty and even penance from the Church itself.

In my diocese the catalyst for the project was our Justice and Peace Commission. Justice and Peace has always had a valuable role as a 'critical friend' in the Church, able to see and speak for what others cannot see, or are too busy to think about.

The national Justice and Peace Network in England and Wales was urging dioceses to adopt environmental policies 10 years ago. Last year our Bishops' Conference issued its own guidance encouraging dioceses to do so, as part of a wider initiative called [Guardians of God's Creation](#). Now about a quarter of our dioceses have policies in place, from which we can learn some lessons.

Let me share some with you. I hope these short provocations encourage you to consider how your own organisation or diocese could respond to the challenge of *Laudato Si'*.

- **Leadership:** Now is the time to move. If there is a leadership vacuum, take charge and get it filled. Challenge your diocese or institution to make its own plan for enacting *Laudato Si'*. The environmental crisis could undo everything we work for, and care for creation is our Caritas service to the poor, other species and future generations.
- **Urgency:** This is not 'just another policy'. Time is short. In 10 years, the Arctic could be ice free each summer, triggering further heating of the planet. While the Paris Agreement settles for net-zero carbon emissions by 2050, some local authorities in the UK have declared a [climate emergency](#) and aim for 2030. Research called [Zero Carbon Britain](#) shows that 2030 is feasible – but it will require government leadership. Could your branch of

Caritas aspire to be carbon neutral by 2030, and press your government to make it achievable?

- **Authority:** Ensure that the institution's most powerful body agrees the preparation of the strategy at the start. Next month I am putting a report to our diocesan Board of Trustees, which the Bishop chairs. Wish me luck! It will ask them to formally authorise the project, appoint a steering group (more on that below), and nominate one of their number to guide the drafting so that it can be adopted more easily.
- **Partnership:** Don't go it alone. Many people must be involved in helping a diocese deliver *Laudato Si'*: schools (teachers, administrators and building managers), youth services, diocesan property staff, parish administrators, lay activists and Religious, and someone to bring the international perspective – in England and Wales that's [CAFOD](#)'s local staff. Our diocesan steering group will have to be big!
- **Decarbonisation:** In England and Wales almost every Catholic church now runs on renewable electricity under a [national contract](#). It's a great start, but it does not make us carbon neutral. We need an energy plan for the entire estate – schools, churches, presbyteries and offices – covering insulation, renewable generating capacity, and transport. Priests' and parishioners' cars must be changed to electric, and parishes will need the finance and the charging stations to play their part.
- **Procurement:** We must take care in what we buy, and how – and how we dispose of it. Parish administrators and managers of building projects should buy products which are resource-efficient and responsibly sourced, and have a low 'lifecycle impact'. We are asking the national Church [buying group](#) to assess the environmental impact of their products. Our parishes should promote plant-based diets – perhaps they should even discourage eating fish on Fridays!
- **Adaptation:** It is increasingly doubtful that warming can be limited to 1.5C. In the Diocese of Nottingham [scientific projections](#) suggest that by the year 2300 five churches will be lost to the sea. Their parishioners will become Internally Displaced Persons. Inland, schools and churches should be prepared for heatwaves and flooding, and offer shelter for people caught in local disasters. There is a need already for [pastoral care](#) to attend to ecological anxiety among schoolchildren – and adults too.
- **Penance:** In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis criticises at length (LS 101-123) the 'technocratic paradigm' which has got us into this mess – and warns that the same mindset will never get us out of it. It is among the technocrats that ecological conversion is most needed. And let's be frank – some of us are technocrats! That's how we have been trained. So what does ecological conversion mean for me, for you? Is it going too far to suggest that we, and the Church at large, should ask for the gift of penance? Do we dare to?

A strategy for *Laudato Si'*

I have suggested just a few ingredients which might help you enable your part of the Church to 'put its house in order'. What might the strategy look like in practice? In Nottingham it might have several documents:

- An outline of the **context** (theological, scientific, political, technological and economic). For us, this would be framed within our wider diocesan strategy which looks to 2030.
- A succinct **policy statement** to be agreed by the Bishop and Trustees, including a commitment to review progress annually

- A detailed **action plan** setting out how the policy will be implemented across the various branches of the diocese, together with reporting mechanisms
- A library of **resources** including liturgies and promotions, enabling individuals, parishes, schools and others to play their part.

Let your part of the Church 'walk the talk' of *Laudato Si'*. With a robust environmental strategy you will avoid the accusation of hypocrisy which I received! We learnt our lesson. Operation Noah is now focused on helping Britain's churches dispose of their investments in fossil fuels. The entire Catholic Church in Ireland, two dioceses in England (so far), and numerous religious communities have already committed to divest – maybe yours is doing so too.

Divestment from fossil fuels is just one of many ways in which the Church must retrace its steps (LS 193) from the edge of the cliff. The journey will be long and complex to navigate. It will take us into thick forests and rocky terrain.

We do not have to take the journey alone alone: in Caritas we could travel together. The Caritas family is a network ready-made to promote the ecological conversion of our own institutions, and the wider Church. With each other, and with *Laudato Si'* in hand, we could 'sing as we go' (LS 244). Are you ready? *Vamos!*