News
EarthBeat



A participant discusses his views at a small group session during the "Laudato Si' and the U.S. Catholic Church" gathering at Creighton University in Omaha, Neb., June 27-29, 2019. About 230 diocesan and parish staff members left the event with ideas on how to integrate Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical on the environment into parish life. (CNS/Catholic Climate Covenant)



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Living in rural central Minnesota, JoAnn Braegelman and her neighbors in the Diocese of St. Cloud know that disrespecting the natural resources "right outside our window" would quickly make life very difficult.

It's imperative, they realize, that the soil be kept healthy so it can continue to produce corn, soy beans and other important crops that have supported farm families for generations.

"Caring for God's creation has been a part of who I am for really all of my life," Braegelman, rural life coordinator under the diocesan Catholic Charities system, told Catholic News Service.

While the church has long supported the work of farmers and agricultural workers across the diocese, Braegelman is adopting a new tool in her ministry: Pope Francis' encyclical "Laudato Si', on Care for Our Common Home."

The four-year-old document stresses the integral nature of individual practices, protecting creation and the importance of building relationships with other people, particularly the poor and vulnerable, in order to protect the planet.

Braegelman said she believes the encyclical can be indispensable in her work by giving people the opportunity for study, prayer and discussion so that parishioners can accept the pope's call to be better stewards of Earth.

"Praying for God's creation is the greatest pro-life movement there is," said the member of St. Francis de Sales Parish in Belgrade, Minnesota.

Braegelman was among 230 people from U.S. parishes and dioceses who attended the first of three biennial gatherings meant to insert the encyclical more deeply into parish life. The June 27-29 conference at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska, was co-sponsored by the school and Catholic Climate Covenant, which is affiliated with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

She attended sessions on the encyclical and faith formation and returned to St. Cloud with a sense of urgency to create greater awareness of climate change and its global impact. Forming and training parish social ministry teams is a major part of Braegelman's responsibilities and she said she believes that parishioners can benefit by understanding their role in protecting creation.

Separately from the Omaha gathering, the Minnesota Catholic Conference is rolling out an educational resource, "Minnesota, Our Common Home." It focuses on the encyclical's core messages and bringing them into parish and community life.

"The publication of 'Laudato Si'' and the deepening of the church's engagement of ecological principles and integral ecology prompted our work," explained Jason Adkins, Minnesota Catholic Conference's executive director. "It's also an opportunity for evangelization. We're trying to present Catholic social teaching in an ecological framework and people really find it compelling."

Accompanying the guide is a separate guide, what Adkins called an examen. "We wanted to give people more principles to help them discern and undergo that ecological conversion," he said.

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Nicole Henrichs, parish social ministry coordinator of Catholic Charities of Southern Minnesota in the Diocese of Winona, plans to use the Catholic conference's document as she develops parish-based discussion groups examining the encyclical.

In reviewing the resource, Henrichs found it poses worthy questions to guide discussions on practical steps people can take.

Dan Misleh, executive director of Catholic Climate Covenant, told CNS that such efforts are necessary to ensure that the pope's document becomes an integral part of parish life.

The Omaha gathering focused on eight tracks, including energy management, advocacy, liturgy, young adult ministry, education in schools and higher education. Misleh said increased emphasis will be made to reach minority communities, particularly Latinos.

The next gathering is set for 2021 at Creighton and Misleh said he hopes that during the next two years, diocesan and parish attendees will share resources, discuss efforts that work and do not work, and identify resources to allow "Laudato Si'" to be implemented throughout a diocese.

Other representatives of the Catholic Church in Minnesota returned from the conference with renewed energy to bring the encyclical to people in the pews in various dimensions of parish life.

Mary Dahl, director of the Office of Worship in the Diocese of Crookston, learned that liturgy can energize parishioners to understand their call to protect the environment. She said she is hoping that she can help priests utilize homilies to connect the encyclical with church teaching on creation care.

"It's teasing out from the Scriptures the fact that God created the world in which we live and God called us to not just be stewards but to bring that into more of a perspective that is a little more in living what our faith actually calls us to be," Dahl said. "We're not meant to take, take, take, take all the time without realizing there's a consequence and realizing the consequences have not been good. We've all contributed and we are still contributing to the demise of our planet."

At St. Thomas More Parish in St. Paul, Steve Thomas, a member of the church's Care for Creation Committee who participated in the Omaha gathering, is exploring ways to "localize" the encyclical so that parishioners can "put their arms around" it.

"I think we see the interconnection between Mother Earth as a gift from God and as an object to be loved and respected," he said.

Along the way, the parish already has taken steps to reduce energy consumption by replacing the 80-plus-year-old windows in the parish school and installing LED

lightbulbs in place of traditional versions.

Still, Thomas would like to see wider efforts undertaken and believes the encyclical can be the starting point.

"There's awareness and energy (here) to do something," he said. "We want to do more. I think the conference provided the energy for us."