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Catholic social teaching calls Catholics to family as a "fundamental structure" but also asks believers to stand in solidarity with others and to care for the Earth. This can lead to anxiety about climate change and the role American families play in consuming resources. (Heather Schieder, @heatherschiederillustrates_)



by Brittany Wilmes

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Mandy Easley is trying to reduce the size of her consumer footprint on the planet. She has switched to reusable straws. She and her fiancé recycle plastics and other household items. The couple has a habit of nurturing others who don't have access to unlimited resources — rescue dogs find a foster home in the Easley household, and as an alumna of Bellarmine University, Easley travels to Guatemala to accompany students on a service-oriented spring break.

Easley, 32, and her fiancé, Adam Hutti, don't plan to give birth to children, partly because they can't help but see the world through the lens of rapidly-changing climates.* Easley realized while chaperoning a mission trip to Guatemala that her climate activism is fueled by the issues of homelessness and poverty. Watching families pulling electronic waste out of a landfill to burn the plastic and sell aluminum and glass so they could afford to send their children to school, she understood that the immense waste of a modern throwaway culture becomes the burden of other countries, other cities and other people trying to thrive.

Active in their Louisville community and aware of a lack of resources that so many experience, Easley and Hutti are interested in researching local adoption agencies after they're married.



Mandy Easley and fiancé Adam Hutti (Provided photo)

"There's a lot of stuff that's coming on the horizon, and it just doesn't feel responsible to bring a new life into that chaos," Easley said. "It doesn't make sense to bring more babies into the world when there are, especially in Kentucky, so many children lingering in foster care."

Easley knows that systemic change made by governments and corporations could be more effective than the small steps she's taking in her own life, but she feels empowered by her vision and how it reflects her Catholic values.

She recalls Jesus' words in a Scripture passage from Matthew: "Whatever you did for the least of those, you did for me."

"What about those kids who are waiting to be adopted?" she said. "I have to believe that if we choose adoption or fostering over birthing children that that has some

value in God's eyes. It has to."

"*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home" inspires Easley's service to her community and the broader world. "Francis' encyclical on climate change impacting the poor was one of the most groundbreaking pastoral responses to what's going on in the world," she said.

As Francis writes, so Easley acts: "We have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*" (*LS*, 49).

When a couple marries in the Catholic Church, they vow during the sacrament to be open to life. The Catechism of the Catholic Church underlines this responsibility, stating that "married love is ordered to the procreation and education of the offspring and it is in them that it finds its crowning glory."

Perhaps because the church's stance on procreation, cemented by Pope Paul VI's document Humanae Vitae in 1968, is unchanging, Catholics who grapple with the question of whether to have children tend to turn anywhere but the church for answers.



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Julie Hanlon Rubio teaches social ethics at the Jesuit School of Theology at Santa Clara University, and she acknowledges the gap between the church's promotion of official teaching, like natural family planning, and the desire that Catholics have to participate in groups that offer authenticity and actual discernment help.

"It's hard to do all this alone," she said. "When there are structured places for these kinds of conversations, I think that's really positive."

Catholic social teaching calls Catholics to family as a "fundamental structure" but also asks believers to stand in solidarity with others and to care for the Earth, values that many middle-class millennials embrace, having grown up in a global, digitally connected world made smaller by the vast industries of consumerism and technology.

This embrace can lead to anxiety about climate change and the role American families play in consuming resources. The feeling even has its own name: "eco-anxiety." Hanlon Rubio says that she often hears about eco-anxiety in her own students, and while it can feel overwhelming to consider the planet in lifestyle choices, it's important to remember that perfection isn't an end goal.

"I think it's good to have this consciousness while also realizing that the Catholic tradition actually realizes that no one can avoid all material cooperation with evil," said Hanlon Rubio. "Environmental scientists are also saying, 'Don't let personal perfection suffocate you so that you have no energy for political advocacy.' "

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Frances Rafferty (Provided photo)

Reconciling parenthood and the climate crisis — or not

Frances Rafferty, 21, seems to be an embodiment of Francis' words in *Laudato Si*': "Young people demand change. They wonder how anyone can claim to be building a better future without thinking of the environmental crisis and the sufferings of the excluded" (*LS*, 13).

An undergraduate student in environmental policy at Loyola University Chicago, Rafferty blazes a bright streak of activism on campus as an urban agriculture intern and a member of an environmentally-themed Christian Life Community small group that discusses spirituality and God from an environmental perspective.

In everything that she does, Rafferty says she asks herself, "How are my actions affecting the most marginalized?"

She participated in an immersion experience at Bethlehem Farm in West Virginia while still in high school, which first ignited her passion for creation care. Three years on, Rafferty's worldview has expanded exponentially in college, where she

composts food scraps in her dorm room and eats a vegan diet. Most of her classes focus on the environment. Her beliefs have led her, too, to make the decision to not give birth.

"We live in a society where the logic of domination is prevalent. I don't feel comfortable having children given the state of our world right now. They would be taking up more resources that don't necessarily need to be had," she said.

Rafferty says that she has a deep conviction that parenthood is not what she's supposed to do morally, and like many of her peers, she wishes that the Catholic Church would be quicker to embrace change in light of the climate crisis.

"The church has stated that it's an organization following the signs of the times … I think church teaching can be restrictive in the midst of a climate crisis," she said.

Some millennials have shaped their lives around their convictions to not have children, like Blythe Pepino, founder of the BirthStrike movement. Founded in the U.K., BirthStrike is an advocacy movement of members who have decided not to have children in the face of "climate breakdown and civilization collapse." Media outlets buzzed about the movement last spring after Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) took to Instagram Stories to voice her own concern about childbearing.

Easley said that she finds hope in Rafferty's peers, like the students she supervises on Bellarmine University mission trips. "Everything I learned about climate change, I learned from [Generation Z students] and their actions. They're passionate."

Weighing church teaching and personal conscience

Speaking to reporters on a papal plane flight in 2015, Pope Francis seemed to suggest that parents should take responsibility to limit the number of children they have, encouraging "responsible parenthood."

"Some think that in order to be good Catholics we have to be like rabbits," he said. "No."

While the Catholic Church has not changed its stance on prohibiting all forms of artificial contraception, the vast majority of American Catholics see this teaching as outdated. A 2016 Pew Research Center poll found that of Catholics who attend Mass

weekly, just 13% say contraception is morally wrong, while 45% say it is morally acceptable and 42% say it is not a moral issue.

Maud, who asked to be identified by first name only, and her husband have a young son and may try for a second child, but she says that the decision feels like theirs and no one else's.

"There are so many things I love about being Catholic, but what I don't like is that feeling of intrusion," Maud, 28, said.

"The pressure that some Catholics feel to have lots of kids feels like an antiquated thing. I think that places an unnecessary stress on people — not just in terms of the environment — an economic stress, a personal stress."

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Sabrina McLaughlin, 37, is single and lives in the Lehigh Valley in Pennsylvania. She doesn't have children and doesn't plan to give birth in the future, but jokes that she would make a great stepmother.

She says that remaining childless is a moral choice for her, even if she were to be in a relationship.

"I have this thought in my head that the more children we all have, the more they'll be competing with each other," she said. "The more people there are competing for diminishing resources, it's going to cause suffering in the end."

McLaughlin acknowledges the discomfort in this decision as a committed, practicing Catholic.

"If I consciously choose not to have children, I'll be in conflict with church teaching. My conscience takes primacy, and I'm not in conflict with my conscience."

In addition to her inner compass, McLaughlin can't ignore news stories about parasite-borne illnesses and the increase of communicable disease among humans without adequate resources. She says that learning about the ways that climate change is already affecting humanity makes it seem "irresponsible" to have a large family and to embrace the attitude that "God will take care of us."

A 2013 Gallup poll reflects both a generational preference for a smaller family and a long-standing trend toward fewer children. In the data analyzed by Pew Research

Center, 48% of Americans said having two children is ideal, with only 13% preferring four or more children.



Maud with her son (Provided photo)

How to welcome children amid climate crisis

Maud, who teaches high school in Oxford, England, admits that when the financial crisis hit in 2008, she felt anxious about the future of humanity.

"[It] was a grim time. I remember having all kinds of anxieties because it seemed the world was morally and ethically reaching the apocalypse. Were the world to end, I kind of thought, I don't want to be bound to a family in a sense," she said in a telephone interview.

"It caused me all kinds of mental anguish. I didn't know if I wanted to have the incredible pressures and stresses of raising kids if we're unable to have clean freshwater. I know it sounds crazy and it probably was."

But who's to judge what's sane in a world when a mere 12 years later, countries are repeatedly setting records for high temperatures, and natural disasters deepen each

year in force and severity?

Maud's 6-month-old son coos in the background as she describes herself as "what a reactionary old person would call an ecowarrior." Her son wears cloth diapers, and her family has never purchased a new item for him.

"If anything," she said, "the difficult thing has been shielding myself from the constant barrage of advertisements ever since the internet found out I was pregnant."

Anna Jones, 28, also has a young son, and while she and her husband Matt Jones once had early dreams to have a larger-than-average family, she doesn't know what God has in store.

"We're staying open [to life], but doing what we can" in terms of living a sustainable lifestyle to lessen their impact on the planet, she said.

The Joneses live in Laurel, Maryland, where Matt works at Little Portion Farm, a ministry of the Franciscan Friars Conventual. Environmental awareness is a "giant passion" of Matt's and now Anna's, too.

"I remember first getting married and it was like, 'OK, no paper towels in the house,' and then it went from there," she said.

Knowing all that she does about climate change and the precarity of human life on the planet, Anna Jones says that she addresses her fears "mostly by suppressing them. My desire for a large family wins out. As scared as I am about the future, I still have this glimmer of hope and optimism that things will work out OK."



Anna and Matt Jones with their son (Provided photo)

*__Editor's note:__ *Language in this story has been updated to make clear that there are many ways of "having" children, including adoption and step-parenting.*

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