News
EarthBeat



In September 2024, students at St. Leo Catholic School in Versailles, Kentucky, held a Laudato Si' family art show inspired by Pope Francis' encyclical on the environment "Laudato Si', on Care for Our Common Home." The art project was spurred by the Lexington Diocese's directive for parishes to develop Laudato Si' action plans, which include ecological education as a component. (Courtesy of Lexington Diocese)



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May 23, 2025
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Near the base of Peters Peak in the Appalachian Mountains, there are plenty of clear skies and sunshine at Mother of Good Counsel Catholic Church. That's good news for the small mission parish in Hazard, Kentucky, as it pursues placing a solar array atop the 86-year-old stone church.

"We're on the side of the mountain, there's no obstruction, like trees hanging over it," said Lori Helfrich, the parish life director at Mother of Good Counsel.

To outsiders, a pivot to solar power may seem peculiar in a part of the country long tied to coal mining. Those ties still exist, Helfrich said, but people recognize that coal is unlikely to return to its heyday. Solar panels are already present at some Hazard businesses.

Mother of Good Counsel's renewable energy aspirations are among the many ways parishes across Eastern Kentucky are responding to the late Pope Francis' calls for ecological conversion in his encyclical "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home."

That landmark papal document turns 10 on May 24. And while Francis did not live to mark the anniversary, actions continue from Catholics in response to his appeal for humanity to repair and rejuvenate its relationship with the rest of the created world in the face of climate change and other socio-ecological crises.

The full impact of Francis' environmental legacy will play out for years to come, though now solely through the hands of others. While some Catholics lament that their pastors have not prioritized the teachings of *Laudato Si*', others have found leaders in the past pope's mold.

Read this next: Here's how 10 US dioceses have embraced Laudato Si'



At Mother of Good Counsel, a mountain parish in Hazard, Kentucky, the directive for all Catholic churches in the Lexington Diocese has led it to explore placing solar panels on the new roof of the 86-year-old building. (Lori Helfrich)

In Appalachia, the decade-old papal plea has received a sizable assist from Bishop John Stowe, who last year directed all 59 parishes in the Lexington Diocese to develop and implement plans to bring the encyclical to life among the Kentucky bluegrass and mountains.

While not the region many first envision when they think of environmental efforts, Lexington, a small mission diocese where poverty is prevalent, has earned a reputation as a leader in the U.S. Catholic Church on caring for creation.

"There is great pride in the beauty of the Appalachian region," Stowe said. "And when we focus on the goodness of creation and our responsibility to live in harmony with creation, there is a more positive response."

An episcopal mandate for creation

Lexington's *Laudato Si*' efforts were set in motion on May 19, 2024, Pentecost.

That day, Stowe, a Conventual Franciscan, issued a letter to the diocese reflecting on how the first Christians were empowered to step out from the safety of their small community to take on a global mission.

Present-day exploitation of the Earth and its resources — from the extraction and burning of fossil fuels that drive climate change and maladies like black lung disease, to polluted waters and endangered species — call Christians to a new mission today, the bishop said.

"We need to begin to live and act as responsible stewards of this planet and in right-relationship with all our sisters and brothers in creation. And we need the help of the Holy Spirit to do so," Stowe wrote.

> Requiring active participation from all parishes, Bishop Stowe said, was meant to help Catholics 'understand the seriousness of this call and to realize that, as in many aspects of our faith, we cannot just be about words.'
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The diocese began answering that call itself a month earlier when it became the first in the U.S. to announce plans to reach net-zero carbon emissions, with a goal to do so by 2030. It has since calculated its carbon footprint and aims to finalize its path to net-zero by October.

In his Pentecost letter, Stowe asked each parish also to devise individualized plans to apply the teachings of *Laudato Si*' at the local level. Part of the process included forming a *Laudato Si*' team, with the pastor or parish life director as a member, and enrolling in the Laudato Si' Action Platform, the Vatican's ambitious churchwide initiative for Catholic institutions of all sizes and geography to act upon the encyclical through multiyear plans.

Other U.S. dioceses have made *Laudato Si*' a priority, encouraged creation care teams and solar power, and provided plans with suggested actions. But none have taken as direct an approach as Lexington, said Paz Artaza-Regan, program manager for Catholic Climate Covenant who oversees U.S. efforts under the Laudato Si' Action Platform.

"If they are successful, they would become an incredible model for other dioceses," she said.

Requiring active participation from all parishes, Stowe said, was meant to help Catholics "understand the seriousness of this call and to realize that, as in many

aspects of our faith, we cannot just be about words."



Bishop John Stowe of Lexington, Kentucky, stands beside a newly planted tree in Hisle Park. In September 2023, the diocese partnered with Green Forest Work on a tree planting day to celebrate the Season of Creation, with 300 new saplings placed in the ground. (Kevin Steele)

To provide support, the diocese hosted seven webinars on topics ranging from practical to educational, like how to enroll in the platform, incorporating the encyclical's themes into liturgies and homilies, and "green" parish facilities. One of the webinars offered a primer on the scientific evidence of climate change.

Along with *Laudato Si*' and other papal teachings, the diocese turned to its own history of environmental concern to underpin the bishop's new initiative. The bishops of Appalachia issued sibling pastoral letters 20 years apart, "This Land Is Home to Me" (1975) and "At Home in the Web of Life" (1995), that reflected on the natural beauty of the mountain region and the hardships its people face, including

from mining and environmental destruction.

"We have a long history of our faith calling us to have a prophetic voice to respond to the cry of the poor and the cry of the land," Van Cleef said.

All 59 parishes submitted their plans to the bishop by Oct. 4, the feast of St. Francis of Assisi. The next month, the diocese held an inaugural assembly for *Laudato Si*' teams to pray together, collaborate and share ideas.

On Jan. 1, the diocese published a 225-page document compiling every parish's *Laudato Si*' action plan.

"Before the process started, we had probably only one *Laudato Si*' ministry at a parish," said Josh Van Cleef, the diocese's peace and justice director. "And then by the end, every parish had a team, and parishioners stepped forward that had skills in this area [and] were passionate."

Parishes began by examining what they were already doing. Many found that ongoing ministries and programs fit into one of the seven overarching goals outlined in the Laudato Si' Action Platform: cry of the Earth, cry of the poor, ecological economics, ecological education, spirituality, sustainable lifestyles and movements/grassroots.



A new grotto at Mother of Good Counsel Catholic Church in Hazard, Kentucky, incorporates native plants alongside statues of St. Nino and St. Charbel, a reflection of its parishioners from the Philippines and Lebanon, respectively. (Lori Helfrich)

Mother of Good Counsel had already installed a gravity-fed water filtration system to forgo plastic bottles and had begun composting. Helfrich had even considered enrolling in the Ladauto Si' Action Platform before, but hadn't pursued it, "just because other things were going on."

The method to implement *Laudato Si*' in Lexington was intentionally both top-down and bottom-up, Van Cleef said. Stowe directed parishes to develop creation care plans, and the diocese provided resources, training and support. Each church was left to decide for itself what its plan should include.

Such an approach recognized differences in parish makeup, with some having as few as two dozen members and many facing strained budgets or receiving subsidizing

from the diocese.

The diocese continues to provide support and guidance. It helped arrange a $100,000 grant from the fundraising organization Catholic Extension to assist parishes in their efforts. The funds will help defray solar costs at some Appalachian parishes, including Mother of Good Counsel.

In May, Van Cleef began meeting one-on-one with parish *Laudato Si*' coordinators to discuss their plans' progress and challenges they're facing.

"The next step for us as a diocese is to continue to encourage and strengthen and empower those teams to be a flourishing ministry long term," he said.

Artaza-Regan said the energy and actions already flowing place Lexington at the vanguard in adopting Francis' encyclical.



University of Kentucky students helped plant more than 300 trees in Hisle Park in Lexington, as part of a diocesan tree planting event Sept. 23, 2023, to mark the Season of Creation. (Kevin Steele)

"It's not just in the diocesan office, which is important, but really make it go alive in parishes, which is where it can really take off, because the parish is really the center of education and action and evangelization," she said.

Alonso de Llanes, program manager for the Laudato Si' Action Platform, agreed, calling the approach in Lexington "one of the most comprehensive and inspiring examples of ecclesial commitment to integral ecology that we've seen globally."

What is happening in Lexington, de Llanes said, "shows how an entire diocesan community can discern, act and journey together toward ecological conversion."

Plentiful growth despite pushback

In mid-April, students at St. Agatha Academy, in Winchester, headed outside on a cloud-covered day to prepare the ground and plant seeds for a new butterfly garden.

"It'll be a visible symbol to them about creation care," said Fr. James Kinney, pastor of St. Joseph Catholic Church. Once in bloom, the garden will also provide students a living classroom to learn more about butterflies and other pollinators.

"We're all very excited about it," Kinney said.

The budding butterfly garden is just one of the pieces in progress from the St. Joseph *Laudato Si*' plan. The parish has conducted an energy audit, and Kinney has preached on creation themes, which have also been added to petitions and the weekly bulletin.

"Things are starting to move, I would say, with greater pace now than they have in the past," the pastor said.



Students at St. Agatha Academy in Winchester, Kentucky, get their hands dirty in helping prepare the ground and plant seeds for a butterfly garden at their school. The project is part of the Laudato Si' plan for St. Joseph Catholic Church. (James Kinney)

Movement was also evident diocese-wide in April during the monthly meeting of parish *Laudato Si*' coordinators. Queen of All Saints is replacing lawn equipment with battery-powered alternatives. St. Mildred is installing water bottle refillers in the parish hall to eliminate single-use plastics. St. Peter is looking to replace its windows. St. Paul has moved to sustainable products for all its outreach meals. Many parishes are switching to LED light bulbs, and several are joining St. Joseph in planting new gardens.

At Mother of Good Counsel, the solar project would provide 80% of its electricity needs, and with it provide a substantial reduction in its utility bills. The parish has plans for a new dishwasher, connecting people to local produce, and moving away

from using chemicals in lawn care. Its recently renovated grotto now uses native plants in the landscaping.

"The mood in the room is people are excited to do this work, and they want to find ways to continue to engage the other parishioners ... to keep this top of mind for people, the importance to protect God's creation," Van Cleef said.

Before the bishop's Pentecost letter last year, creation care efforts at St. Joseph were minimal. "To be honest, it's been an uphill battle until Bishop Stowe came out with the manifesto for all the parishes to be involved," Kinney said.

Screenings of "The Letter," the 2022 documentary film on *Laudato Si'*, led some parishioners to argue the pope was wrong. Former parish council members told the priest that climate change was a myth.

"We've had a lot of pushback, but less so recently. So there are signs that things are changing," Kinney said.

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Reasons for skepticism about the message of *Laudato Si'* in Eastern Kentucky are similar to in other parts of the country: political ideology, distrust of climate science, financial trade-offs. But atop the list here remains the region's economic and cultural ties to coal.

Laudato Si' coordinators describe a natural defensiveness among some in Appalachia against anything seen as a threat or criticism of coal. After becoming bishop in 2015, Stowe embarked on a listening tour of the diocese's coal mining communities. A constant refrain he heard was the importance of work in how people, and especially men, defined themselves.

"It helped me realize that to criticize mining was often received as a critique of the miners and that their defense of the industry was very often a defense of their livelihood and of a culture," he said.

Fr. Marc Bentley, pastor of Prince of Peace Church in West Liberty, and Sts. John and Elizabeth Church in Grayson, understands how ingrained coal has been in the region. When he was a kid in Pike County, his school hosted a coal fair, akin to science fairs

more common across the country.

"I thought that was something everybody did. And so it kind of boggled my mind when I found out that, no, that was something that was quite unique for us. So that kind of messaging begins at a very young age," he said.



An art project by the Buelos family at St. Leo Catholic School in Versailles, Kentucky, depicts St. Francis of Assisi and Pope Francis praying over the world. (Courtesy of

Lexington Diocese)

Beyond coal, partisanship also plays a role. The *Laudato Si'* initiative rolled out in the heat of a highly polarized presidential election in a historically red state where 64% of voters voted for Donald Trump in 2024. In his second term, Trump has worked aggressively to eliminate climate projects and research and to dramatically expand fossil fuel production, including coal.

Stowe himself has been outspoken in criticizing Trump's policies related to climate change and the environment, casting them as "anti-life" ahead of the 2020 election.

"We just have really encouraged all of our pastors, all of our ministers, all of our teams to just be straightforward that this is a matter of our faith that we're doing this," Van Cleef said. "In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis says that this is part of our vocation, to be protectors of God's creation."

In preaching on creation care, Bentley often goes back to Scripture.

"We're not doing this because some politician told us it's important. We're not doing this because it's a cool thing to do. We're doing this because it's part of the teaching of Jesus Christ. It's part of what we stand for as Christians," he said.

Other more practical challenges exist, too. Parishes in the rural communities and in the mountains often lack a recycling program, so discarded materials have to be driven to centers elsewhere.

Small congregations and parish staffs mean fewer people to take up new projects on top of existing ministries and responsibilities.

In Bentley's parishes, they've begun with small steps, like including intentions for creation in the prayer of the faithful at Mass and reducing the use of disposable and nonbiodegradable items at events. With Catholic Extension funds, they are pursuing lighting upgrades and a parish hall dishwasher.

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When there has been pushback, the 36-year-old priest has emphasized that caring for the environment is integral to caring for the whole human person.

"We can't take care of people's souls if their bodies are wracked with asthma because of pollution, or if they've been wrecked because of lack of access to clean drinking water," Bentley said. "It's not about just having something pretty to look at. It's about having an environment that can help the entire human person to flourish."

Renewable energy of the young

Last August, 45 college students sought relief from the waning Kentucky summer in the mountain waterfalls of Cumberland Falls State Park. The annual retreat from the heat was organized by the Newman Center at the University of Kentucky.

"They get this kind of a mountaintop experience, encountering God in the water," said Kevin Steele, the center's minister to students for the past 30 years. "I call it their Kentucky baptism."

The trip, though, was a little different than prior years. As the Newman Center devised its own *Laudato Si*' plan, Steele arranged for the students to help clean up the littered banks of the Cumberland River. Some of the debris was from past floods like the one that devastated the region in 2022.



A University of Kentucky student removes a water heater from the Cumberland River as part of an environmental cleanup in August 2024 organized by the campus Newman Center. (Kevin Steele)

Going forward, that type of environmental education will be a permanent part of all future nature excursions, Steele said.

The action plan "was really helpful — and challenging, just to not be small in our imagination, not have a failure of imagination on how bold we should be in trying to enact *Laudato Si*' practices," he said.

Where some parts of the diocese face *Laudato Si*' roadblocks, the Newman Center has an eager and open audience of young adults who helped devise its plan and for whom environmental concern is already front of mind. Studies have shown young people list climate change as a top issue and report high levels of ecological

anxiety.

"The young people I work with already care a lot about the environment, and now here's all this spiritual nourishment, bringing in Scripture and tradition and that this is not an option, this is how we live out the Gospel," Steele said.

Even with a willing audience, the Newman Center's attention to church teachings on creation care hasn't always been a priority. The bishop's call to action has changed that, and with good timing. The center is beginning a major renovation, whose blueprints now include many steps to build back more sustainably and with a gentler environmental impact.

"It's a shakeup and a wakeup," Steele said.

The Catholic center at the University of Kentucky isn't alone in tapping into the renewable energy of youth. At St. Joseph Parish and St. Agatha Academy, Kinney has found at times that it is easier to begin by working with students, who then bring the lessons home to their parents.



A student art project at St. Leo Catholic School's Laudato Si' family art show depicts "the cry of the earth," a theme in Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home" and one of the seven goals included in the *Laudato Si*' plans created by the parishes and schools in the Diocese of Lexington, Kentucky. (Courtesy of Lexington Diocese)

"The kids seem ready to go. It's amazing," he said. "They bring a lot of enthusiasm and knowledge to what we're trying to do. But the adults is a different story."

Helping more parishioners see environmental actions not as a political act but an expression of faith is one of the challenges facing the priest and the St. Joseph *Laudato Si*' team. While a small, yet enthusiastic, group is leading their efforts now, completing a multiyear plan will likely require more parishioners coming on board.

"I hope we can get what I would call a critical mass ... of parishioners at both parishes who basically are actively involved in doing something about creation care," Kinney said.

No flowers have bloomed yet in the school's burgeoning butterfly garden. They know it will take patience and continued attention. In a way, like the diocese's *Laudato Si*' plans themselves.

"It's definitely going to not get done in one year, or even two years," Kinney said. "It's going to take time."

At the Newman Center, staff are approaching their *Laudato Si*' plan under an ethos of progress, not perfection. With each item checked off, Steele hopes it further ingrains creation care and responding to environmental plights into the identity of the university parish, and even more, what it means to be Catholic in Eastern Kentucky.

"I think that has great promise for young people to see the church as relevant and impactful. And, you know, how can I help? I want to be a part of this."

This story appears in the **Laudato Si' at 10: Impact on the church and world** feature series. View the full series.