Columns



Plastic pollution and juvenile fish (Unsplash/Naja Bertolt Jensen)



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The 1980s seemed to be the peak of talk about "preferential option for the poor," influenced by liberation theology which focused on the injustices lived by the poor. Peruvian Dominican Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez was one of its founders, and religious everywhere embraced it — some even moving from their comfort zones to the barrios, slums and rural villages to live the Gospel in solidarity with the poor.

In the 1990s, I heard the late Jesuit Fr. K.M. Matthew — then a botany professor at St. Joseph's College in Trichy, India — say: "Option for life is bigger than option for the poor." He had done a considerable amount of work in the field of nature conservation.

Over the years the ecological crisis has become a serious threat to life on Earth. An article I read in the New Leader, by Jesuit Fr. S.M. John Kennedy, an environmentalist and former secretary-general of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, quoted Maurice Strong as saying, "The threat to earth's eco-system and our environmental security are like cancer, spreading quietly and pervasively through the body of our society, which by the time the effects become acute, will be too late to cure." The U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has reminded companies and governments that we have a truly short window of time to avert the unavoidable climate crisis facing the world.

It is a paradox that extreme weather conditions disproportionately affect those in the poor countries, who contribute the least. Due to the high population of China and India, the West blames them as the polluters of the world — while the individual pollution rate is far behind those in the rich countries. The poor and marginalized around the world are first hit by climate change. Pope Francis talked about the historical "ecological debt" rich countries owe to the poor.

In 2014, in New York City I participated in a massive climate rally of over 400,000 participants. There were placards representing various organizations, religious congregations, and others but Catholics were scattered. Feeling the need to unite after that, the Global Catholic Climate Movement was born, and later rebranded itself as the Laudato Si' Movement. The Global Catholic Climate Movement organized many activities, including the online training for Laudato Si' animators to spread the awareness and action. The Laudato Sí Movement has more than 8,000 animators

and over 900 member organizations.



Sr. Celine Paramundayil is pictured, fourth from the left, at a 2014 climate march in New York City. (Courtesy of Celine Paramundayil)

In 2015 the world welcomed some favorable changes: for instance, the outcome document of the Paris Agreement of the U.N. climate change conference, where the countries agreed that each would reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to climate change. Pope Francis visited the U.N., where they loved his encyclical "*Laudato Si', on Care for Our Common Home*" — addressed to all people of goodwill, in response to the current environmental and social crisis.

It played a role in the development of the U.N. 2030 Agenda with its 17 sustainable development goals. During the negotiations we attended, Macharia Kamau, the ambassador from Kenya and one of the facilitators, raised the book *Laudato Si'* and

told the General Assembly members and the entire U.N. family: "This is a must-read book; I am not a Catholic, but all should read it." He told the Vatican ambassador to thank the pope, saying that we had felt the pope's support all through the process. That was a proud moment for us Catholic religious nongovernmental organizations at the U.N.!

Pope Francis officially launched the Laudato Si' Action Platform, on the World Day of the Poor, Nov. 14, 2021. Vatican News described it as "an online hub that collects, directs, and coordinates global and local initiatives inspired by the encyclical on care for creation." The Laudato Si' Action Platform is coordinated from the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, formed in 2017. (Dicastery is a lay term that replaces "Vatican office" or council, which is a welcome gesture from Pope Francis).

In addition to the call to people of goodwill, the pope particularly invites dioceses, parishes, religious communities, schools, and other "sectors" to actively get involved. The seven sectors are to achieve the seven goals of the Laudato Si' Action Platform in seven years.

Many others are joining the Laudato Si' Action Platform and there are international working groups under each of the seven sectors to promote the platform. The process begins with understanding the principles developed in the document and expanding our vision by having conversations and listening to each other about the issues.

Pope Francis says that the cry of the poor and cry of the earth are not two separate crises but one. Humanity has made incredible progress in science and technology, but this has not been matched by moral, ethical and spiritual growth. We need a paradigm shift. Paradigm changes (from long-established sets of concepts or thought patterns) require conversion of mind and heart that involve changes of attitudes, values, reordering priorities, and finding new ways of doing things.

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In our faith, the awareness of ecological sin needs to be included. Kennedy also gave the following as essential elements for shift in a climate paradigm:

- *Consciousness*: growing in awareness about the implications of the environmental crisis and unethical practices;
- *Conversion*: Sincere awareness about the crisis will lead to a genuine conversion and change of lifestyle, using nature's finite resources in a sustainable way that respects planetary boundaries;
- *Conviction*: With conversion follows the conviction that immediate and committed actions are needed to restore the health of the planet;
- *Concrete Actions*: Conviction needs to be reflected in concrete actions at the individual, communal, social and institutional levels.

We can illustrate those four steps with an example: at the University of Bergen (Norway), scientists were horrified by what they discovered inside the stomach of a sick and dying whale. According to the Associated Press, they were shocked to see masses of plastic waste and about 30 plastic bags. They concluded that the whale probably beached due to the plastic in its stomach.

This awareness gives us the *consciousness* that our actions have consequences, with the message: "It should never happen again." That should lead us to a *conversion*, and the *conviction* for *concrete actions*: Reduce waste and use of plastic; reuse, recycle, and replace plastic with biodegradable materials like paper and cloth whenever possible; and refuse to accumulate unneeded stuff.

Option for life calls for a mass movement beyond the option for the poor, and that invitation is to you and me for micro solutions in our daily lives, while leaders of the national and global forum must find macro solutions. God, who created humans and other earthlings, invites us to sit around the table of creation each taking our rightful place, with humans no more at the center!

The good news is that there is a growing number of people around the globe, aware and committed to the care of Earth — not only by planting trees but promoting concrete actions rooted on ethical, ecofriendly and sustainable lifestyles.

Together with our visionary leader Pope Francis, let us join the Laudato Si' Action Platform and pray with the patron saint for nature, Francis of Assisi, "*Laudato Si*' *mi Signore*! — Praise be to you, my Lord!"