



Social Justice Resource

Ecological Conversion: An Augustinian Guide

Kathleen Bonnette, Th.D.
Assistant Director, JPIC

EXPERIENCE

Every April, many of us – more than a billion people, globally – set aside a day to focus our attention and energies on our planet and its needs. We might be more conscious of turning off our lights or powering-down our electronics, or we might join a local group to pick up litter or plant trees. The politically-engaged might use the day to mobilize advocacy efforts demanding eco-friendly policies. Often, however, our efforts dwindle as Earth Day fades and “the usual” responsibilities of our lives take precedence. We might continue to care for our earth in some ways – recycling paper or refusing plastic bags, for example – but the focused and sustained care that energizes us on Earth Day often dissipates.

And yet, we cannot fail to notice that our world is becoming increasingly defaced and volatile. As we pump millions of tons of carbon into the air,¹ spill oil into waterways and oceans,² and allow plastics to permeate the food chain,³ our earth is responding with signs of extreme stress: species are becoming extinct at a rapid rate; droughts, floods, and heatwaves are becoming more prolonged and severe; sea levels are rising; storms are becoming more intense.⁴ Importantly, “the destruction and disruption all those events bring to people in all parts of the globe are increasing.”⁵ It bears emphasizing that environmental degradation has the strongest impact on the people who are

already vulnerable to poverty and food and water insecurity.⁶



Credit: Getty

<https://gizmodo.com/hurricane-matthew-death-toll-climbs-to-842-in-haiti-1787548101>

ANALYSIS

Unless our commitment to caring for the earth and all of creation becomes more than a passing fad – unless we, as individuals, communities, and nations, take immediate and sustained action to limit our negative impact on the earth – the health of our planet will continue to deteriorate.

The U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has found that the past four years have been the four hottest years on record for the globe.⁷ Further, the twenty warmest years on record have all occurred in the past twenty-two years.⁸ While Earth’s climate has fluctuated throughout its history, the exponential emissions increase that has occurred since the industrial revolution make it extremely likely (>95%

probability) that the current warming trend is the result of human activity.⁹ According to the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) Deputy Secretary-General Elena Manaenkova, “These are more than just numbers. ... Every fraction of a degree of warming makes a difference to human health and access to food and fresh water, to the extinction of animals and plants, to the survival of coral reefs and marine life. It makes a difference to economic productivity, food security, and to the resilience of our infrastructure and cities. It makes a difference to the speed of glacier melt and water supplies, and the future of low-lying islands and coastal communities. Every extra bit matters.”¹⁰



Vostok ice core data/J.R. Petit et al.; NOAA Mauna Loa CO2 record

While these facts are accepted by over 97% of climate scientists,¹¹ many people still reject climate change as a crisis, often claiming that it is a politically-motivated issue. The scientific consensus is clear, but even those who fear political manipulation and doubt the human impact on climate change still have reason to protect and care for the earth. Air pollution causes 7 million premature human deaths each year;¹² at least 1000 species every year become extinct (compared to the 1-5 species annually that would become extinct naturally);¹³ and human-made structures such as border walls, highways, and oil and natural gas extraction systems destroy ecosystems and animal migration flows.¹⁴ The omnipresent use of plastic is also problematic, since 79% of the 6.3 billion tons of plastic waste generated by human beings is not recycled and ends up cluttering the earth and our oceans, harming wildlife and ecosystems.¹⁵ This short list of the myriad ways human activities cause harm demonstrates that the way we use our earth is

clearly unacceptable and inconsistent with any pro-life or Earth-steward ethic.

“Scientists emphasize that time, albeit limited, remains to curtail [the global impact of climate change]. But to do so would take a historic display of rapid action, economic transformation and international cooperation.”¹⁶ I am reminded, here, that perhaps the most amazing human achievement in history – putting a person on the moon – was accomplished in response to one president declaring, in essence, “I want this done within the decade.” Revamping our social and economic structures so that they are sustainable for the earth and future generations would be, I think, an equally marvelous endeavor, but with concerted action, it seems equally attainable. As Petteri Taalas, WMO Secretary-General, has said, “It is worth repeating once again that we are the first generation to fully understand climate change and the last generation to be able to do something about it.”¹⁷ And, in the words of youth climate activist Greta Thunberg, “We cannot solve a crisis without treating it as a crisis. ... If solutions within the system are so impossible to find, then maybe we should change the system itself.”¹⁸

“Scientists emphasize that time, albeit limited, remains to curtail [the global impact of climate change]. But to do so would take a historic display of rapid action, economic transformation and international cooperation.” - WMO

So far, sadly, “science alone has not been able to provide the spark to overcome political inertia that has resisted such massive change.”¹⁹ Often, our opposition to the type of action that is required is based on habits – such as an inability to see beyond current economic and social structures; indifference – a mindset that does not recognize our personal responsibility to, or connection with, the earth and all creatures; or ignorance – a willful or accidental failure to recognize the signs of nature’s distress.

REFLECTION

According to Catholic social thought (CST), a commitment to caring for the earth is an integral part of Christian faith. This is grounded in the belief that God creates everything that exists with a specific purpose – an integral goodness – that reveals God’s beauty, unity-in-diversity, and creativity. Human beings, created from the dust of the earth, are biologically and spiritually connected to the rest of creation. Thus, we can say with Saint Francis of Assisi, “brother sun, sister moon.” As the U.S. Bishops emphasize, “Care for the earth is not just an Earth Day slogan, it is a requirement of our faith. We are called to protect people and the planet, living our faith in relationship with all of God’s creation.”²⁰

Living our vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience. – Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*

In the encyclical *Laudato Si’*, “On Care for Our Common Home,” Pope Francis analyzes the reluctance to live out this aspect of Christian faith. He writes:

‘The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast.’ For this reason, the ecological crisis is also a summons to profound interior conversion. It must be said that some committed and prayerful Christians, with the excuse of realism and pragmatism, tend to ridicule expressions of concern for the environment. Others are passive; they choose not to change their habits and thus become inconsistent. So what they all need is an ‘ecological conversion’, whereby the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them. Living our vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience.²¹

Given that a conversion of any kind entails a transformation of habits and commitments, it seems clear that an “ecological conversion” could provide the impetus needed to enact serious and sustained change.



Lessons from Saint Augustine’s Conversion

One of the most well-known and self-reflective conversion narratives comes from Saint Augustine. Today, we see echoes of Augustine’s struggles in our own hesitancy toward ecological conversion, and a brief look at his experience will be helpful, I think, in identifying ways to engage in this type of ecological conversion. Augustine recounts a few distinct moments in his journey toward conversion that offer us some guidelines:

Augustine’s first conscious experience of God resulted from intellectual awareness. Augustine says that he “attain[ed] sight of the God who IS” through practicing philosophical exercises.²² As his rational engagement deepened, he came to recognize Scripture as illuminating what his intellect had found to be true, and this motivated him to pursue the fullness of truth in the Christian faith. However, Augustine grappled with this newfound truth because he resisted making the lifestyle changes that it would require. He writes:

To make the journey, and to arrive safely, no more was required than an act of will. But it must be a resolute and whole-hearted act of the will, not some lame wish. ... In my heart I kept saying ‘let it be now, let it be now!’, and merely by saying this I was on the point of making the resolution. I was on the point

of making it, but I did not succeed. ... I was held back by trifles, the most paltry inanities, all my old attachments. In my state of indecision, they kept me from tearing myself away, from shaking myself free of them and leaping across the barrier to the other side, where you were calling me. Habit was too strong for me when it asked “Do you think you can live without these things?” ... I kept crying “How long shall I go on saying ‘Tomorrow, tomorrow’? Why not now?”²³

Finally, Augustine did open himself to the grace that led to his conversion, and afterward, he adopted a lifestyle consistent with his faith.

When we truly grasp that our own flourishing is bound up with the flourishing of all of creation, we will reject practices that exploit any creature and will strive to live a life in right relationships, affirming the dignity of all.

In the spirit of Augustine, a good first step toward opening ourselves to an ecological conversion would be to engage our intellect in the problem at hand. This would require a commitment to educating ourselves about the current state of the planet and the environmental impact of human beings on the earth. It also would involve a commitment to contemplation – to reflecting on nature and our place in it, seeing with gratitude the beauty and diversity of the earth, and being attuned to the message of all of God’s creatures. As Augustine’s experience demonstrates, the engagement of the intellect and the senses leads to knowledge and love of truth. In our case, developing our awareness of and appreciation for the beauty of all creatures and the interconnection of all of creation will lead to a love that will carry us to action.²⁴

With our minds and hearts directed toward ecological conversion, then, we can begin the process of giving up our attachment to things that do not facilitate right relationships with our world. It

is tempting to cling to our personal lifestyles and habits, and our social structures and practices, resisting the change that a true conversion would demand because it seems easier or more economically or politically expedient. However, when we truly grasp that our own flourishing is bound up with the flourishing of all of creation, we will reject practices that exploit any creature and will strive to live a life in right relationships, affirming the dignity of all.

The final component of ecological conversion would be an openness to the grace that energizes our faith, without which our efforts toward conversion will be insufficient, but with which we can participate in the creative goodness of God by seeing and loving all of creation in the way God intends. “To be an open pathway for such seeing and loving is, Augustine thinks, to participate in the inner life of the Trinity and to have a foretaste of the beatific vision in paradise.”²⁵

Let us, then, experience the ecological conversion to which we are called, committing ourselves to upholding “the dignity of life and the care of all creation.”²⁶ Let us say, with Augustine,

“My love of you, O Lord, is not some vague feeling: it is positive and certain. Your word struck into my heart and from that moment I loved you. Besides this, all about me, heaven and earth and all that they contain proclaim that I should love you, and their message never ceases to sound in the ears of all [people].”²⁷



The human person grows more, matures more and is sanctified more to the extent that he or she enters into relationships, going out from themselves to live in communion with God, with others and with all creatures. ... Everything is interconnected, and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity.
– *Laudato Si'*, 240

ACTION

SSNDs direct [their] “entire lives toward that oneness for which Jesus Christ was sent.”²⁸ Below are some actions you can take to participate in this mission:

1. **Take time to learn more about our current environmental crisis.** [Catholic Climate Covenant](#), [Earth Day Network](#), [NASA](#), and the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) are good resources to start.
2. **Take time to experience nature**, contemplating the presence of the Spirit in all of creation and reflecting on your relationship to others and your environment. Reading [Laudato Si'](#) could help to ground your experience.
3. **Commit to changing your habits to a more sustainable lifestyle.** The UN’s [Lazy Person’s Guide to Saving the World](#) and Earth Day Network’s [Plastic Pollution Toolkit](#) can give you a good start!
4. **Commit to advocating for sustainable practices in the public realm.** Vote with [your money](#) and your ballot to support measures that will turn our society toward a more sustainable future, and that will care for the earth and [the people whose lives and livelihoods have already been upended by climate-related events](#). [Divest from fossil-fuel companies](#); invest in companies committed to sustainability.
5. **Consider donating** to the [AMSSND Haiti Water Initiative](#), or to another organization that is committed to caring for the earth and its inhabitants.

¹ [Center for Climate and Energy Solutions](#)

² [International Tanker Owners Pollution Federation Limited \(ITOPF\)](#)

³ [Pew Charitable Trusts](#)

⁴ [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Report](#), I.1

⁵ Brian Roewe, “[Where Science Warnings Fail, Can Moral Force Push Us Out of Climate Inertia?](#)”

⁶ Kernal Dervis, “[Climate Change and Vulnerable Societies](#),” Brookings Institute.

⁷ [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration](#)

⁸ [World Meteorological Organization](#)

⁹ [NASA](#)

¹⁰ [World Meteorological Organization](#)

¹¹ [NASA](#)

¹² [World Health Organization](#)

¹³ [Earth Day Network](#)

¹⁴ [Earth Day Network](#); [Center for Biological Diversity](#); Robert Peters, et. al, “[Nature Divided, Scientists United: US-Mexico Border Wall Threatens Biodiversity and Binational Conservation](#),” *BioScience*; [World Wildlife Fund](#)

¹⁵ [Earth Day Network](#)

¹⁶ [World Meteorological Organization](#)

¹⁷ [World Meteorological Organization](#)

¹⁸ RChain Cooperative, [Greta Thunberg’s COP24 Speech](#)

¹⁹ Brian Roewe, “[Where Science Warnings Fail, Can Moral Force Push Us Out of Climate Inertia?](#)”

²⁰ [United States Conference of Catholic Bishops](#)

²¹ [Laudato Si'](#), 217

²² Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin Classics, 1961), VII.17.

²³ *Ibid.*, VIII.7-12

²⁴ *Ibid.*, XIII.9

²⁵ Arthur O. Ledoux (2005), “[A Green Augustine: On Learning to Love Nature Well](#),” *Theology and Science*, 3:3, 335.

²⁶ School Sisters of Notre Dame (SSNDs), *24th Directional Statement*

²⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, X.6.

²⁸ SSNDs, *24th Directional Statement*