



Encountering Church Leadership on Laudato Si”

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Ten Suggestions for Engaging Catholic Leaders on Care for God’s Creation

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- 1) **Begin with faith, not politics.** Use religious language that is appropriate and clear: we’re talking about care for God’s creation. **Put this in the biblical and religious context**, modeling Saint Francis and Pope Francis. This is not a secular environmental agenda; it is a faithful Catholic agenda.
- 2) **Approach church officials as pastors and leaders, not targets.** They have many responsibilities, obligations, pressures, and constituents with limited time and resources. Recognize their competing demands and constituencies. They can feel overwhelmed and beleaguered. Try to help them meet their obligations, not just add new ones.
- 3) **Share reasonable, concrete, doable opportunities for action.** Don’t go in with a 12-point plan that will be completely overwhelming and unrealistic. Don’t leave them thinking this is just “one more thing to feel bad about,” but an opportunity to move forward. Provide simple and doable steps and build from there. For example:
 - Why don’t we add a prayer for creation in the petitions every Sunday?
 - Why don’t we celebrate a Creation Care Mass around the Feast of St. Francis?
 - Why don’t we put these few paragraphs from Laudato Si’ in our Sunday bulletin?
 - Why don’t we talk to the social concerns committee about including this in our legislative activity?
- 4) **Offer to help.** Don’t just criticize, complain, and judge. Be a resource to the leader letting them know that you have time, energy, and expertise, and you wish to offer constructive help. The pastor doesn’t have to do everything, but don’t ignore or go around him. Be at their service to advance this issue. Some people are problems and others are problem solvers. We want to be problem solvers, offering help.
- 5) **Relationships matter.** Figure out who the bishop, priest, or other leader trusts, listens to, and relies on for advice and support. Think it through with others:
 - Who are the influential people who are the most persuasive?
 - Who supports the leader’s work?
 - Who are the major donors, significant contributors?
 - Who are his or her allies, friends, models?

- Discern who are the people the leader wants to see *and* who turns them off. Focus on the positive, solutions-oriented people. There are many kinds of people; some are people we are happy to see and are folks we try to avoid.

6) **Integrate, don't isolate caring for God creation.** You need to build bridges with other ministries and communities. One of the worst things we can do is denigrate the work of others at the diocese or parish level. We can divide up the work, but we shouldn't divide the Church. Yes, certain issues often grab the most attention of our leaders. So, let's engage with those Catholics and build relationships with them. Don't isolate yourself or our cause.

7) **Avoid partisanship or ideological frameworks.** There are both democratic and republican, conservative and liberal cases to make for action on the climate crisis. For example, there is a very Catholic conservative case for taking on climate change. It begins with the virtue of prudence. You don't have to know everything with certainty to know that we're doing damage. The virtue of prudence says that first you must stop doing the things that are doing damage. Dealing with climate change will require sacrifice; sacrificing for others is a part of who we are as Catholics. The common good and priority for the poor are central elements of Catholic social teaching.

8) **Welcome modest steps, affirm, and encourage.** The urgency is clear. The fate of the earth is literally in our hands, but modest steps can be very useful. Publicly celebrate those modest steps so more people know of your success. And there are times when you're just going to hit a wall. Find a way around it, a different path. This is going to take creativity but there are ways. Join Catholic Climate Covenant and other groups that offer ideas and resources. Work with schools and in your neighborhood. Most of all, don't let obstacles and setbacks endanger your faith or diminish your capacity to do this work. It's too important.

9) **Don't be a "grim do-gooder."** Climate change is a serious threat now and in the future. We need to act now. But the Gospel is "good news," and we ought to act like it. We ought to see this work as an opportunity to live our faith, rather than as a dour doomsday issue. "Ain't it awful" is not a motivating message. "We can do better" encourages us to act. Let's live our faith authentically and be who we really are in our own time and in our own situation.

10) **This is the Lord's work.** This is our faith in action. This is a Biblical response. This is Catholic social teaching at work. This is proclaiming the Gospel and renewing the earth. I think the success of this movement lies with a bottom-up approach, but it is supported from the very top. We couldn't have a better leader than Pope Francis. And with all of you, this can also be a middle-out movement because you are finding ways to engage and encourage leaders to take steps to reflect our common faith and the call to care for God's creation.

John Carr is the founder of the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University. He served for over 20 years as director of the Department of Justice, Peace, and Human Development at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. John previously served as Secretary for Social Concerns for the Archdiocese of Washington. He was a founding member of the Interfaith Partnership for the Environment, a residential fellow at Harvard's Institute of Politics, and chair of the Board for Bread for the World. At Georgetown, John is also an adjunct professor of theology and a member of the Committee on Investments and Social Responsibility (CISR).