A Day to Pray, Give Thanks For All God Has Created

Stephen Palanca

In the encyclical, Laudato Si’, or Praise Be to You, Pope Francis calls us to protect our planet. He outlines the importance of good stewardship of creation and how we have sometimes failed in living up to our collective responsibility to care for the Earth. Three months after the promulgation of Laudato Si’, on the Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord 2015, the pontiff designated September 1 as World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation. In the letter establishing the day, the Holy Father echoed the message of the encyclical, noting the importance of our stewardship and the need for continued gratitude to God and petitioning for his help in caring for our world. He said:

The annual World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation will offer individual believers and communities a fitting opportunity to reaffirm their personal vocation to be stewards of creation, to thank God for the wonderful handiwork which he has entrusted to our care, and to implore his help for the protection of creation as well as his pardon for the sins committed against the world in which we live.

By selecting September 1 as the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, Pope Francis joins with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, who initiated a similar day of prayer for the Orthodox Church in 1989. With this day, too, the pope is reaching out to other Churches and ecclesial communities to join in taking part in prayer for the planet “so that this World Day can serve as a sign of a common journey in which all believers in Christ take part,” he said.

PREPARING THE LITURGY
To prepare to celebrate the day, parishes may want to consider making use of two valuable resources on the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ (USCCB) website: “Caring for God’s Creation: Resources for Liturgy, Preaching, and Taking Action” (http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/environment/upload/ecology-resource-all.pdf) and “Prayers to Care for Creation” (http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/prayers-and-devotions/prayers/prayers-to-care-for-creation.cfm). Both offer suggestions of prayers, psalms, and Scripture readings from the Old and New Testaments that are appropriate for services focused on creation. “Caring for God’s Creation,” which was written in 2015, also provides suggestions of appropriate Masses from the Masses and Prayers for Various Needs and Occasions in the Missal, sample petitions for the Universal Prayer, and recommendations for the homily. Within this document too are questions that can be used for small group discussion and pages of quotes on the environment from Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and the USCCB. The worship commission and the peace and social justice commission may want to study this document together and decide how it can be used to inspire the parish to make protecting the environment a priority. The World Day of Prayer for Care of Creation could be a starting point for integrating concern for the environment into parish life. In Laudato Si’, Pope Francis calls not only for dialogue and education on the environment but for an understanding of our connection to all that lives. “As believers, we do not look at the world from without but from within, conscious of the bonds with which the Father has linked us to all beings” (220).

Depending on the schedules of members, parishes might want to schedule an early morning, noon, or evening service. A consideration for parishes with schools would be to invite parishioners to join in a school liturgy. If weather permits, it would be fitting for the liturgy to be outside.

The service could follow a model of an Opening Song, Greeting and Opening Prayer, readings with a homily or shared reflection, a litany or Universal Prayer, the Lord’s Prayer, Closing Prayer, Blessing, and Closing Song.

For hymnody, refer to the thematic section in a parish hymnal or worship resource for hymns on creation and justice. “All Creatures of Our God and King” would be a most appropriate choice as the text is based on St. Francis’ “Canticle of the Sun.” Other options might include “All Things Bright and Beautiful,” “Let All Things Now Living,” “Praise and Thanksgiving,” and “Sing Out Earth and Sky.”
Options abound regarding choices of Scripture texts and psalmody. Besides the Scriptures noted in "Caring for God’s Creation," reference the *Lectionary for Mass*, volume IV. Masses for Various Needs and Occasions: 14. For Peace and Justice (887–891); 19. For Productive Land (912–916; 20. After the Harvest (917–921); 26. In Thanksgiving to God (943–947; 28. For the Promotion of Charity or To Foster Harmony (953–956). Many of these options have an equivalent in the *Lectionary for Masses with Children*; an index search can assist in finding the matching texts.

Consider choosing from Psalms 66, 67, 104, 136, or Daniel 3. For texts for an opening or closing prayer, refer to *The Roman Missal* under Masses for Various Needs and Occasions: 25. At the Beginning of the Civil Year; 26. For the Sanctification of Human Labor; 27. At Seedtime; 28. After the Harvest; 30. For the Preservation of Peace and Justice; 33. In Time of Famine or For Those Suffering Hunger; 36. For Fine Weather; or 49. For Giving Thanks to God.

Prayer texts for the day also may be found in the *Book of Blessings*: Order for the Blessing of Fields and Flocks (chapter 26), Order for the Blessing on the Occasion of Thanksgiving for the Harvest (chapter 28), Order for a Blessing in Thanksgiving (chapter 70), Order for a Blessing to Be Used in Various Circumstances (chapter 71). From the *Catholic Household Blessings & Prayers*, you may want to draw from Part III. Days and Seasons, Rogation Days: Blessing of Fields and Gardens; Part V. Prayers for Catholic Living: Prayers for School, Work, and Other Endeavors; Blessing of Farms and Farmworkers; Blessing on the Occasion of Thanksgiving for the Harvest; and Part V. Blessing for Objects: For the Products of Nature.

A school service could end with the planting of a tree and marking the occasion with a small plaque engraved with the date. Perhaps the tree could be provided through funds raised by students or a donation from a parish organization or local garden shop through a parish organization, or through a donation from a local garden shop. Prayer cards could be made with the image of St. Francis of Assisi on one side and his “Canticle of the Sun” on the back. Because of his great love of God’s creation, St. Francis was named the patron saint of “those who promote ecology” by Pope John Paul II in 1979. In *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis writes of the saint’s awe and wonder at creation. “His response to the world around him was so much more than intellectual appreciation or economic calculus, for to him each and every creature was a sister united to him by bonds of affection” (11).

**Eucharistic Adoration**

If your parish regularly offers Eucharistic adoration, the Pontifical Council of Justice and Peace offers an outline for a one-hour Eucharistic adoration on its website. (http://www.iustitiaetpax.va/content/dam/giustiziaepace/Eventi/giornatamondialepreghiera/PCJP_WorldDayPrayerCreation2015_PROPOSAL_ENG.pdf). Within the service are a Collect from the Orthodox tradition, selections from *Laudato Si’*, and intercessions that note the holiness of the world. The site also offers a link to a six-minute YouTube video that uses videography with Italian and English subtitles, underscored with music, to convey the urgency of the message in *Laudato Si’*.

**Ecumenical Prayer Service**

To further Pope Francis’ call for other Christians to pray for the care of creation, parishes may want to invite other ecclesial communities to an ecumenical celebration or seek the assistance of a neighboring community in preparing the service. Many communities gather for ecumenical prayer either around the Thanksgiving holiday or during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, mainly held indoors because of colder weather. This could be an opportunity to take the prayer outside. Franciscans for Ecology publishes an ecumenical prayer service at http://francis35.org/english/ecumenical-celebration/. This website is the work of several Franciscan communities, mostly based on the East Coast, which helps promote “among all people a spirit of care for creation in the spirit of Francis.”

It would be appropriate to pass out prayer cards of “A Christian Prayer in Union with Creation” and conclude the service with that prayer. Be sure to attribute the prayer to *Laudato Si’*. Consider providing extra copies of the prayer cards for those in other communities to provide for their members.

**CONTINUING TO PRAY FOR CREATION**

Pope Francis concludes *Laudato Si’* by providing two prayers, “A Prayer for Our Earth” and “A Christian Prayer in Union with Creation.” The Holy Father notes in the encyclical that the first prayer is “for all who believe in a God who is the all-powerful Creator” and in the second “Christians ask for inspiration to take up the commitment to creation set before us by the Gospel of Jesus.” Parishes may access the document at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html and print the prayers in the bulletin or on cards for distribution at Masses, in faith formation sessions, and in the schools. Families may be encouraged to pray these prayers together at home. Parish staff, principals at parish schools, committees, and heads of volunteer groups will want to consider the times they will use these prayers. Perhaps they will be prayed at the beginning or ending of meetings, faith formation sessions, on Earth Day, or at the start of a season. By taking these prayers to heart, parishioners may more deeply consider how justice, love, and peace are entwined in our stewardship for the earth.

As we share these prayers with our parishioners and at interfaith and ecumenical services with our neighboring communities of faith, we will further the message of *Laudato Si’*. The World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, after all, is to point toward a life of harmony with the planet. In establishing the day of prayer, Pope Francis spoke of a spiritual conversion that is needed. Referencing *Laudato Si’*, he said, “Christians are called to an ecological conversion whereby the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them” (217). ◆

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