

THE EARTH CRIES OUT

*How Faith Communities Meet
the Challenges of Sustainability*

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Introduction

Generations alive today take our seats on a deeply troubled planet at a unique point in human history. The unsustainable “take, make, and waste” economic model in place since the Industrial Revolution is severely stressed, threatening the biological stability of our planet and the lives and livelihoods of millions of people. Demands for sustainable economies grow ever louder, yet agreement on a path forward is elusive. Governments and societies seem paralyzed, even as dangerous environmental and social thresholds continue to be crossed.

Fortunately, people of faith, alongside our secular brothers and sisters, are increasingly active in building sustainable societies, from myriad grassroots initiatives like those found at GreenFaith and Interfaith Power and Light to institutional efforts such as Pope Francis’s 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si’*, which challenges all people to hear “the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor.” Faith involvement brings unique and arguably indispensable contributions to the issue of sustainability. This volume imagines how emerging faith experiments, each with a bearing on sustainability, might respond robustly to Francis’s call. It is written for people of faith who may be confused by the record storms, droughts, and other environmental dislocations assailing societies everywhere; who question how those changes relate to their faith; and who wonder what this historic moment is asking of them.

THE URGENCY OF NOW

Until the last two centuries, no generation in ten thousand years of settled human existence had created morally problematic global-scale disruptions to life and planetary systems. We and our immediate forebears have done so. The first chapter and Parts II through IV detail the extent of these global problems. But for now, consider:

- When human activities change our planet's climate; cause extinctions that erase epochs of creative evolution; acidify the oceans and fish them to exhaustion; drain groundwater critical to food supplies; cause deserts to advance and forests to recede; erode and salinize the soils that nourish us; and generate, as a matter of course, an Asian brown cloud, a Great Pacific Garbage Patch, aquatic dead zones along six continents, and a giant hole in our atmosphere's ozone—*when these things are ordinary and accepted as “the price of progress”*—something is profoundly amiss in our relationship with the Earth.¹

1. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), “Summary for Policymakers,” in *Global Warming of 1.5°C.*, 2018, <https://www.ipcc.ch>; IUCN 2020, *The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Version 2020-1*, <https://www.iucnredlist.org>; NOAA, “What Is Ocean Acidification?” PMEL Carbon Program, <https://www.pmel.noaa.gov>; Jon Lanman, “A Comprehensive Guide to Overfishing: The Facts, Causes, and Solutions,” *Exo*, August 20, 2019; USGS, “Groundwater Decline and Depletion,” <https://www.usgs.gov>; M. Cherlet et al., eds., *World Atlas of Desertification* (Luxembourg: Publication Office of the European Union, 2018); Frances Seymour, “Deforestation Is Accelerating, Despite Mounting Efforts to Protect Tropical Forests. What Are We Doing Wrong?” World Resources Institute blog, <https://www.wri.org>; FAO and ITPS, *Status of the World's Soil Resources (SWSR)—Main Report* (Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and Intergovernmental Technical Panel on Soils, 2015); “Asian Brown Cloud,” *ScienceNetLinks*, <http://sciencenetlinks.com>; NOAA, “Garbage Patches,” <https://marinedebris.noaa.gov>; Denis Breitburg et al., “Declining Oxygen in the Global Ocean and Coastal Waters,” *Science*,

- And when, in an ever-wealthier world, 820 million people struggle with hunger alongside 2,100 billionaires; when an African child is twelve times more likely than an American child to die before the age of five; when climate catastrophes caused by the comfortable are projected to create tens of millions of climate refugees, *and when these outrages trigger no corrective system response*, something is profoundly amiss in our relationship with one another.²

These wounds to the planet and its people are widespread and interconnected, suggesting failures that are systemic, rather than isolated, in nature. Indeed, entire ecological, economic, and social systems—the foundation of industrial civilizations—are under serious stress, are at risk of collapse, and urgently need overhaul.

Certainly, the industrial model of development that began in the eighteenth century and eventually swept across most of the world has produced tremendous advances in life expectancy, health outcomes, and education, and has spurred innovations that make life comfortable and convenient for a sizable share of the human family. Many of these gains should be preserved, if possible. But these fruits are available unequally across the globe, and even fortunate populations are vulnerable as the pillars supporting our comfortable lives weaken and crack. Indeed, while many cities and civilizations shimmer with achievement, their successes will erode in the decades ahead unless we learn to overcome the twin Achilles' heels of ecological and social neglect.

The commonly cited cure for today's global economic and environmental dysfunction is sustainable development—

January 5, 2018; NASA, "NASA Data Aids Ozone Hole's Journey to Recovery," <https://www.nasa.gov>, April 30, 2020.

2. Luisa Kroll, "Billionaires: The Richest People in the World," *Forbes*, March 5, 2019; UNICEF, "Child Mortality Estimates," September 9, 2020.

economic activity that provides for the needs of all and unfolds within ecological boundaries. Innovative sustainability solutions exist today, ranging from renewable energy and regenerative agriculture to walkable cities and circular economies. These deserve urgent attention and commitment. But they are not enough. As chapter 2 suggests, people of faith offer a range of additional dimensions—moral and spiritual in nature—that can deepen and broaden the technological and economic solutions now on the drawing boards.

PEOPLE OF FAITH AS CHANGEMAKERS

If congregations and faith institutions offer spiritual and moral underpinnings for sustainable development, they are also well positioned to offer *lived expressions* of sustainability that can help to jump-start the transition to sustainable societies. People of faith bring a set of infrastructural, social, financial, political, and of course, moral and spiritual, tools to the sustainability challenges of our time. Consider, for example, that people of faith are organized into communities that:

- meet regularly
- are motivated and guided by a vigorous moral and spiritual energy
- possess scriptural and other teachings that speak to sustainability issues
- are heirs to a long tradition of engagement on social justice issues
- understand and sometimes tap the power of prophetic voices
- can act as an influential political force when they desire to
- control meaningful amounts of investment capital
- manage land and buildings that are potential sustainability showcases

- possess the moral standing to address issues, like consumerism, that other groups avoid
- are small enough to undertake low-risk social and economic experiments, and
- are large enough, via linkages with other congregations, to move the needle on sustainability issues.

Few institutions at the global level have such a broad and powerful tool set. Of course, these assets are seldom utilized to their fullest potential; people of faith are arguably punching well below their weight on the critical issues of our day. Yet skillfully employed, these assets could help convert civilizational decline into a rejuvenation in which solidarity and ecological consciousness become ethical norms. Pope Francis calls regularly and concretely for faith activism to transform societies, challenging us to step up and make a difference. Take, for example, his 2015 pitch to members of an Italian federation of cooperatives:

How beautiful it would be if, starting in Rome, an effective network of assistance and solidarity could be created among the cooperatives, for parishes and hospitals. . . . And the people, starting from the most needy, would be placed at the centre of . . . this solidarity movement: the people at the centre, the neediest at the centre. This is the mission we are proposing to ourselves! *It is your task to invent practical solutions.* . . .³ (emphasis added)

In 2020, Francis announced a bold Catholic effort to jump-start the societal transition to sustainability, the multiyear

3. “Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Representatives of the Confederation of Italian Cooperatives,” February 28, 2015, <http://www.vatican.va>.

Laudato Si' Action Platform. The program will roll out sustainability commitments and actions among a series of Catholic institutions, including families, dioceses, schools, universities, hospitals, businesses, and religious orders. Institutions will be challenged to demonstrate commitments on a range of sustainability actions, from adoption of renewable energy to simplified lifestyles and development of ecological catechesis, retreats, and prayer. The initiative is ambitious: "We hope to inspire a people's movement from below for creation care," declared a dicastery official,⁴ to achieve "total sustainability" over seven years.⁵ This is an astonishingly bold and speedy agenda for an institution often said to "think in centuries"!

ABOUT THIS VOLUME

Pope Francis's vision of societal conversion will require a massive change of hearts, practices, and policies. This historic moment of social and political flux poses an opportunity to rethink economies and societies at the most fundamental levels—to create clean, "no-waste" economies, for example, and economies of solidarity. This volume contains inspirations that, taken together, offer a sense of how widespread change might be jump-started. Some are long-standing but newly relevant resources, like parish credit unions. Others showcase new and exciting ideas, such as mapping church lands for their ecological and conserva-

4. Brian Roewe, "Vatican Office Invites Church on Journey to 'Total Sustainability' in Next Decade," *National Catholic Reporter*, May 17, 2020, nronline.org.

5. Roewe, "Vatican Office Invites Church"; see also Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, "Laudato Si' Special Anniversary Year, 24 May 2020–24 May 2021," May 16, 2020, <http://www.humandevlopment.va>.

tion value. Each inspiration is an innovation, or an innovative enlargement of established faith activities.

Part I (This Moment) lays the groundwork for the book by describing the sustainability challenges facing humanity today and the ecological conversion needed to meet those challenges. Parts II (Hearing the Cry of the Earth), III (The Consumption Connection), and IV (Hearing the Cry of the Poor) encompass nine chapters focused on sustainability issues, grouped thematically around environmental issues, consumerism, and social issues, respectively. Each part is introduced with a brief review of *Laudato Si'* to provide a backdrop of church teaching related to the chapter discussions. The nine chapters open with stories of inspired faith actions regarding the issue, followed by a sustainability challenge of that issue, and closes with a Leavenings reflection to raise and expand the chapter's innovation in achieving its fullest potential. The book concludes with two chapters that deal with speaking up and acting in favor of a sustainable civilization.

The book is not a road map for building sustainable faith institutions or sustainable economies. Nor are the nine sustainability issues covered necessarily the ones most urgently needing attention. Indeed, faith involvement in sustainability issues needs to range well beyond the nine considered here. Instead of a how-to manual on sustainability, the nine issues demonstrate the potential range and power of faith communities for jump-starting the creation of sustainable economies and societies. The objective is to help people think creatively and confidently about their potential contributions to building new, sustainable civilizations.

MORE VOICES, RICHER HARMONY

This volume, authored by a Catholic for a Catholic publisher, is also supported by GreenFaith, an interfaith environmental organization; thus the volume delights in including non-Catholic and non-Christian perspectives. One of the great blessings of this historical moment is the increased appreciation of diverse ways of viewing the world and the divine. Many readers have grown up in Christian households in predominantly Christian nations, where cultural touchstones often affirm our spiritual worldview and deepest beliefs. Blessed are we who also value, appreciate, and learn from the perspective of other, often ancient, traditions and from indigenous peoples.

Pope Francis is a helpful guide in this regard, given his pursuit of warm relations beyond Catholicism. He is close to the ecumenical patriarch Bartholomew, spiritual head of Orthodox Christians, whom he refers to as his brother. He has promoted closer ties with the Jewish people, writing in 2019 of the need “to ask for forgiveness and to repair the damage” caused by “nineteen centuries of Christian anti-Judaism.”⁶ The same year, he issued an unprecedented joint text with Muslims, “On Human Fraternity,” entering the pavilion for the signing ceremony hand in hand with Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, vice-president of the United Arab Emirates. Furthermore, his commitment to indigenous peoples is clear from his 2020 apostolic exhortation, *Querida Amazonia*, in which he declares that “we do not need an environmentalism that is concerned for the biome but ignores the Amazonian peoples.”⁷ Francis’s interest in respect, encounter, and dialogue is a helpful example as global

6. Marco Cassuto Morselli and Giulio Michelini, eds., *The Friendship Bible: Passages of the Torah-Pentateuch Commented Upon by Jews and Christians* (Milan: Edizioni San Paolo, 2019).

7. Pope Francis, “*Querida Amazonia*: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation

crises ramp up and multiply. “We lose nothing by engaging in dialogue,” he observes. “We always gain something. In a monologue, we all lose, all of us.”⁸

OUR PROSPECTS

In mid-2020, the mood was gloomy, with the COVID-19 pandemic and economic downturn stealing headlines, even as climate and other environmental catastrophes continue to unfold and as political instability rocks many national governments. A record number of people say the United States is on “the wrong track.” Terms like “existential threat,” “post-truth,” and “unprecedented” pepper the news. People seem unmoored and frightened.

Yet we cannot afford to be pessimists or doomsayers. It is still possible that the world’s governments, businesses, and societies will awaken and mobilize rapidly for an economic and societal transformation that saves us from the worst consequences of our current path. Of course, we cannot count on this, and any such transformation will require hard work on our part. But unexpected breakthroughs are possible; witness the seeming night-to-day awakening of white consciousness after the killing of George Floyd in 2020. Whatever the staying power of this budding transformation, it is surely fresh evidence that mass stirring is possible. Could a similar, wholesale conversion on climate and sustainability issues be just around the corner? Who are we to dismiss such possibility?

God promises always to accompany us. We access God’s help

of the Holy Father Francis to the People of God and to All Persons of Good Will,” February 2, 2020, 8.

8. “Address of His Holiness Pope Francis,” meeting on the theme “Theology after *Veritatis Gaudium* in the Context of the Mediterranean,” June 21, 2019, <http://www.vatican.va>.

most effectively when we listen deeply, discerning carefully the path forward. Divine guidance may point us in directions we would rather avoid, sacrificial paths of justice and environmental responsibility that require us to heed voices long ignored, especially of those groups, both human and nonhuman, that are marginalized and vulnerable. We resist, of course; we want any new civilization to be built on *our* terms. But surely we grasp by now that our insistence on control over nature, our overconfidence in human cleverness, and our excessive reliance on free-market solutions is what created our environmental and social crises in the first place. Humility and surrender are in order; through a posture of spiritual openness, we are attuned to God's beckoning and ready to receive God's help.

Many faith communities are making efforts to build new societies. They are reading the signs of the times, listening for the voice of God, and responding. No parish or congregation, no religion or denomination, no community or nation has cracked the code of sustainable living in the modern era. But faith traditions and indigenous wisdom hold guiding insights and innovations necessary to make our way forward. May their inspirations, like those highlighted in this volume, help to energize our own efforts.