

How a Jesuit Parish Responds to the Four Universal Apostolic Preferences through Its Care for Creation Work

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The following narrative describes how the work of our Care for Creation Committee embodies the Ignatian mission of serving God and promoting the common good as articulated in the Four Universal Apostolic Preferences of the Society of Jesus, published in 2019 so that Jesuit institutions, including our parish, may continue to be *"guided by the Spirit"*.¹

In condensed form, the four apostolic preferences are as follows:

1. Showing the way to God through discernment and the Spiritual Exercises.
2. Walking with the poor, the outcasts of the world, and those whose dignity has been violated, in the mission of reconciliation and justice.
3. Walking together with young people to build a hope-filled future.
4. Working together to care for the earth, our common home.²

Our work began with the first preference of discernment followed by a focus on the subsequent preferences of walking with the poor, praying with the children, and caring for the earth with a joyous hope for its healing.

Preference 1: Showing The Way to God Through Discernment and The Spiritual Exercises.

Last year our church conducted a parish-wide discernment exercise, in which I participated. This deeply moving, months-long process coincided with my reflection on Pope Francis' teaching in *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*: "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." (LS 217). As Chair for the parish Care for Creation Committee, my discernment prayer was how to bring this life of virtue tangibly into the Committee's work so that it would indeed be integral to the faith-life of the parish.

I also reflected on how our faith might motivate us to have the courage to conduct this work. I meditated on the prayer so dear to St. Francis Xavier, "O God, I love you, and not because I hope for heaven thereby."³ The prayer teaches that our love for God on the deepest most intimate level flows from a boundless gratitude for God's abiding love for us ("Then I, why should not I love thee, Jesu so much in love with me?")

Gratitude is the glue that bonds us in proper relationship with God and His Creation. The reciprocity between the Lover God and us the Beloved gives us the courage to love because we are so loved. It establishes an authenticity that frees us from our ego with its feelings of entitlement and attachments to status, power, and greed. We are then free to go beyond ourselves and partake in an expansive outpouring of affection and generosity for all of God's creation, and to seek to heal it from the harm that has been done.

Preference 2: Walking With the Poor, The Outcasts Of The World, And Those Whose Dignity Has Been Violated, In The Mission Of Reconciliation And Justice.

For over 30 years, our parish has sponsored Faith Food & Friends (FF&F), an all-volunteer outreach program in response to the Gospel's call to feed the hungry and minister to the poor. A nutritious, multi-course midday meal is served, restaurant-style, three days a week for around 60 guests. In addition, FF&F provides support services that include spiritual guidance, assisting guests seeking

placement in housing and emergency shelters, advice on health and medical issues, and dispensing of toiletries and clothing.

In the fall of 2023, our committee began a collaboration with FF&F, in which we invited the guests to participate in a Neighborhood Cleanup Campaign. Several times a week, groups of guests and committee members walk through the neighborhood and nearby parks picking up cigarette butts, discarded candy wrappers, food wastes, plastic debris, and other types of garbage. On a typical half-hour walk-through, two large black plastic bags of trash are collected and brought back to the church for disposal.

Like every good sustainable solution, this initiative provides multiple environmental and social benefits. The guests love the experience and are pleased that it helps the community and the church. They like being able to see the neighborhood neat and clean. They especially like that their efforts are improving their relationships with neighbors and park rangers.

Neighbors witnessing the cleanup have approached the guests expressing gratitude for their efforts. The park rangers are delighted with their work in beautifying the parks. At a luncheon in November honoring the guests, a park ranger offered a testimonial affirming the positive influence of their work on the mission of the Park Service. And perhaps most important, the outpouring of praise from the neighbors and the rangers recognizes our guests as valued contributors to community life, despite their marginalization by the larger society.

Preference 3: Walking Together with Young People to Build A Hope-Filled Future.

The work of our Care for Creation Committee is vitally linked to this preference because healing the planet with all due haste is critical for protecting the future of our youth and succeeding generations. Pope Francis has boldly stated this imperative in his encyclical: “We can no longer speak of sustainable development apart from intergenerational solidarity. Once we start to think about the kind of world we are leaving to future generations, we look at things differently; Intergenerational solidarity is not optional, but rather a basic question of justice, since the world we have received also belongs to those who will follow us” (LS 159).

To stay faithful to the Pope’s calling, our committee forged a collaboration with Children’s Liturgy of the Word (CLOW), our parish’s Sunday educational program for children from pre-school to age 10. With the leaders of CLOW, we hosted events in both Spring and Autumn last year.

In celebration of Earth Day in April 2023 we gathered with the children in a green space in front of our downtown church to plant a flower garden. Their enthusiastic work soon blossomed into a resplendent rainbow array of colors that graced the church grounds all summer long.

In October 2023, we co-hosted a *Prayer for the Earth* event with CLOW in which the children were invited to write prayers expressing their fondest aspirations for protecting the earth. Twenty prayers were gathered and pinned onto a large poster adorned with a colorful image of the planet with children holding hands in a circle around it. They prayed for the safety of their favorite animals (turtles, polar bears, foxes, butterflies), for all endangered species, for planting more trees and stopping forest fires, for clean water, for stopping pollution and global warming, and for peace in the world. The poster is displayed prominently in the parish hall as a testament to the kind of world our children would like to inherit from us.

Preference 4: Working Together to Care for The Earth, Our Common Home.

Often left out of the conversation about what individuals can or should do to save the planet is the question of how we ourselves may change so that we are strong enough to overcome despair or apathy and contribute to the healing in a positive way. As I ponder this question, I find solace in the prayer of St. Francis, who taught us, “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace where there is

despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy.” Pope Francis in *Laudato Si’* repeated this message from a modern ecological perspective: “Let us sing as we go. May our struggles and our concern for this planet never take away the joy of our hope” (LS 244). Is there some way we can transform ourselves from people lost in despair, darkness, and sadness into a people filled with hope, lightness, and joy?

The Pope said, “All it takes is one good person to restore hope!” (LS 71) If this is true, then the world should be abounding with hope because of the countless people of goodwill who are doing the hard work of healing our planet. Nearly all of this good news goes unreported in the mass media that chooses instead to focus on the bad news. Should we not as Christians be purveyors of the good news? Indeed, the word “gospel” derives from the Old English words “göd” + “spel”, which literally mean “good news.” So perhaps it is entirely proper to proclaim that joining this “good news” movement of healing our planet is a tangible way for living out the gospels!

To add further momentum to this movement, our committee has partaken in authoring a document titled, *Caring for Creation: 100 Reasons for Hope*. It is a collection of stories about individuals, private and public institutions, faith-based communities, and environmental groups working to repair the world in all sectors of society and on scales from local to global. These are the good people, as the Pope tells us, who can restore our hope if their stories are known.

How motivational is inspirational storytelling? Biochemical research has provided a fascinating perspective.⁴ A good story causes the intrigued listener to synthesize the hormone oxytocin, the so-called “bonding” hormone. This is the same reaction responsible for the special bonding that occurs when a mother holds her newborn. Analogously, storytelling has the power to bond the listener to the story, elevating levels of well-being, raising levels of awareness, changing attitudes, and encouraging engagement in cooperative behavior concerning the topic described by the storyteller.

Perhaps this is the underlying biochemical basis for findings from social science research that confirm the role of hope in inspiring climate action, which in turn inspires stronger feelings of hope.⁵ One example from our document is the story of Marie Nowak, our parish chef, who began collecting rectory food wastes for composting in 2021. In the first 18 months, this effort saved 820 pounds of food waste from going to the landfill, avoided more than 1,000 pounds of greenhouse gas emissions from entering the atmosphere, and generated 500 pounds of humus-rich topsoil, some of which was distributed to fellow parishioners.

I shared Marie’s story at EcoPhilly’s annual gathering at Villanova University in November 2022, where Care for Creation ministries across the Archdiocese of Philadelphia come together, share resources, and brainstorm new ideas. Marie’s story was an inspiration to many in the audience and subsequently led to composting initiatives at other parishes.⁶

Marie’s action may seem like a drop in the ocean considering the magnitude of the task of repairing the planet but Pope Francis reminds us that such acts snowball into something much more: “Let us realize, then, that even though [small acts do not] produce a notable effect from the quantitative standpoint, we are helping to bring about large processes of transformation rising from deep within society.”⁷

Another example from our document is the story of 16 young people (ages 5-22) who, in the summer of 2023, sued Montana state officials for violating their constitutional rights by promoting fossil fuel development. This was a trial about the stories of children telling the judge their direct experiences with climate change, and how it was harming their mental and physical wellbeing.

The children won their case: the court affirmed their claim that a stable climate is included in their right to a “clean and healthful environment,” as guaranteed in the state’s constitution. It was the

first youth climate case to go to trial in US history. It matters because it could influence hundreds of other pending climate change lawsuits in the country.⁸

A third example is the Church of England, a leader among the world's faith-based institutions in divesting from fossil fuels and bearing witness to the ethical dimensions of climate change. In a clear, unequivocal statement, the Archbishop of Canterbury stated the reason for this action: "The climate crisis threatens the planet we live on, and people around the world who Jesus Christ calls us to love as our neighbours."⁹

In Conclusion

Caring for Creation advances the spirit of the Four Universal Apostolic Preferences by its very nature. Our committee did not set out adopting the preferences as a model in formulating its agenda for the year. But as our work unfolded it did in fact fulfill the call to action articulated in them. Perhaps this not surprising, because caring for creation is not a peripheral ecological issue. Rather, it is integral to our faith-life as Catholics.

References

¹ See Universal Apostolic Preferences, <https://www.jesuits.global/uap/>.

² Ibid.

³ *O Deus, Ego Amo Te*, prayer of St. Francis Xavier, translated by Gerard Manley Hopkins.

⁴ Zak, P.J. (2014). Why your brain loves good storytelling. Harvard Business Review, October 28, 2014. <https://hbr.org/2014/10/why-your-brain-loves-good-storytelling?>

⁵ Nairn, K. (2019). Learning from young people engaged in climate activism: The potential of collectivizing despair and hope. *Young*, 27(5), 435-450. Kleres, J., & Wettergren, Å. (2017). Fear, hope, anger, and guilt in climate activism. *Social movement studies*, 16(5), 507-519. Aronson, R. (2017). *We: Reviving social hope*. University of Chicago Press.

⁶ For a summary of the impact of Marie's work, see: A. Lemma, Composting: A Simple Act That Transforms Us Into A Culture More In Love With God, *CatholicPhilly*, Dec 14, 2023. <https://catholicphilly.com/2023/12/commentaries/composting-a-simple-act-that-transforms-us-into-a-culture-more-in-love-with-god/>

⁷ Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation: To All People of Good Will on the Climate Crisis*, April 2023 (71).

⁸ D. Gelles and M. Baker (*New York Times*, Aug 16, 2023). Judge rules in favor of Montana youths in a landmark climate case. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/14/us/montana-youth-climate-ruling.html>

⁹ S, Laville (*The Guardian*, Jun 22, 2023). C of E divests of fossil fuels as oil and gas firms ditch climate pledges. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/22/c-of-e-divests-of-fossil-fuels-as-oil-and-gas-firms-ditch-climate-pledges>