"An authentic faith … always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this Earth somehow better than we found it ...."

- POPE FRANCIS, EVANGELII GAUDIUM
INVITATION

For the past 20 years, members of the EcoJustice Committee of the Dominican Alliance have presented interactive programs on important ecological issues: Water, Food, Land, Climate Change, and most recently, a multi-sensory retreat experience, *Falling in Love with Earth*.

Though some progress has been made, none of these global ecological issues have been resolved to the mutual benefit of the Earth community. One of them, Climate Change, or Global Heating as it is now referenced, continues to grow in significance and consequence.

This Conversation Café, *Climate Change is the Overarching Life Issue: Continuing Conversations in this Election Year 2020*, is designed to stretch your understanding of the climate crisis, to stimulate your thinking, and mobilize your response.

May you find the discussions fruitful, the resources stimulating, and the process one that encourages further study, reflection, and action.

To help with this conversation, please choose someone among you to convene and lead the group through the process of the Invitation: Participants will need to have their own copies of pages 1-8 of this Conversation Café to join in the discussion. Additional resources are located in the appendices, pages 9-13.

CONVERSATION CAFÉ ETIQUETTE

- **Create** a space of trust and acceptance.
- **Expect** to be surprised and gain new insights.
- **Focus** on what really matters.
- **Link** your experience to the global reality.
- **Listen** to understand and make connections.
- **Make room** for others to join the conversation.
- **Respect** each person’s unique perspective.
- **Share** your own experience and truth.
- **Take action** for justice individually and collectively.
OPENING REFLECTION

When we speak about “Life Issues” our minds often go to the one issue that speaks most loudly and clearly for us. It is probably safe to say that many of us would not think – climate change!

For many Catholics, protecting the unborn is the single most important life issue. Others say it is anti-racism or immigration. Others believe we must promote a consistent ethic of life, which recognizes the sanctity of all life.

How do you suppose God would answer if asked which life issue is most important? What part of the created world would God hold above all else and say, “This is the most important life to me.”? Would it be the young, the old, men, women, the unborn, the dying, the poor, the disenfranchised, the wealthy, the movers and shakers? Yes. Would God not also include the other two-leggeds, the multi-leggeds, the winged, the finned? Yes.

Don’t you suppose that in the eyes of the Creator, the whole of created life has value? When God loves, God loves with all that God is. Love itself cannot apportion more or less love for any particular life. Love is all that it is and loves all that is. How do we, then, presume to make a choice and say that one life is more important than another.

All life has value. No life should have its breath choked off because any one of us feels it has no right to that breath, whether it is the air of political asylum, of freedom from systemic racism, of access to healthcare, or air free of toxic fumes. These, and all the other issues of justice, are all life issues. All of them are essential for us to address.

Yet, we now face, for the first time in the history of our species, a fundamental issue that threatens the whole of life itself. Climate change is a reality whose consequences are already wreaking havoc on Earth’s ability to sustain life as we have known it.

Daniel P. Horan, OFM, assistant professor of systematic theology and spirituality at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, states it well. What good is it to focus solely on one specific life issue, he asks: “If there is no air to breathe, water to drink, land to farm, plants or animals to eat, or habitats free from flooding, hurricanes, wildfires, tornados, earthquakes or some of the other devastating weather phenomena?”

Responding to the climate challenge is no longer a choice we can ignore. The rest of creation can only react, possibly adapt, or fail to survive. While the issue itself may seem too massive to deal with, there is still much we can do to make a difference. Our personal choices about the food we eat, the cars we drive, the amount of stuff we purchase are all very important in addressing the effects of climate change. They also impact directly on issues of immigration, systemic racism, pandemics, human trafficking, economic disparity. The issues are all interconnected.

The most significant choice we make, however, is the people we elect into office and how we hold them accountable.
The USCCB has asked us to make abortion the most prominent life issue as we begin this election year. Yes, it is important to protect the life of the unborn. But as Robert McElroy, Bishop of San Diego, poignantly states, “Climate should be the central priority for the U.S. church. If we don’t get this issue right, in the end none of the other issues are going to matter.”

This election year holds particular significance in the life of this planet. We ask that each of us carefully, prayerfully, and responsibly consider electing those candidates that pledge the greater good, and then hold them accountable once they are elected.


EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE

(10 minutes)

Take a moment to be aware of your body. Where are your thoughts? What is your body telling you regarding its level of comfort?

Now imagine that you are in your favorite place in the natural world. Notice what is close by to touch. What do you see, smell, hear and taste?

Are you aware of any changes happening in your body? Are you more relaxed?

Pause

Using your senses, take a more prolonged look at what is happening in your extended body, Earth.

Note what has changed to your favorite place over the years. How have humans impacted this change?

What would your favorite place look like if negative effects caused by humans were removed?

Using your senses, what do you notice in your human and your Earthly body now?

After taking 5 to 10 minutes to do this exercise, share your experience with one other person.

CONVERSATION: CLIMATE CHANGE IS THE OVERARCHING LIFE ISSUE

(20 minutes)

“… the intellectual and moral integrity of the consistent ethic of life principle … upholds that every human life – born and unborn – is inherently valuable, dignified, and must be protected. We live in a time in which there is now a more fundamental issue that threatens
all life: climate change. For this reason, it seems to me dangerously shortsighted to propose directing our attention, argumentative energies, and financial resources to any singular anthropocentric ethical issue. The stakes are too high for us now to be so myopic. Global climate change threatens every life now and poses an existential danger to the very condition of the possibility for future life on this planet. If we are called to be moral agents guided by a seamless garment approach, as I believe we are, then climate change is the body on which such a garment hangs. The preservation of particular human lives is predicated on the future of the planet and delicate ecosystems on it that make life possible at all.”

– Climate Change is the Most Important Life Issue Today, NCR, Sep 4, 2019, by Daniel P. Horan, OSF; www.ncronline.org/news/earthbeat/faith-seeking-understanding/climate-change-most-important-life-issue-today

Discussion Questions

1. What would our world be like, what would it look like, if we acknowledged the integrity of life as a whole?

2. What attitudes and behaviors would we exhibit?

Resources

• Climate Change is the Most Important Life Issue Today, NCR, Sep 4, 2019 by Daniel P. Horan, OSF; www.ncronline.org/news/earthbeat/faith-seeking-understanding/climate-change-most-important-life-issue-today

• Introduction to this Conversation Café: “Climate Change is The Overarching Life Issue”

• Katharine Hayhoe TED Talk: “The most important thing you can do to fight climate change: talk about it”; www.ted.com/talks/katharine_hayhoe_the_most_important_thing_you_can_do_to_fight_climate_change_talk_about_it/transcript?language=en

CONVERSATION: THE ELECTION

(20 Minutes)

“In the end, it is the candidate who is on the ballot, not a specific issue. The faith-filled voter is asked to make the complex judgment: which candidate will be likely to best advance the common good through [her/his] office in the particular political context [she/he] will face? Such a decision embraces the planes of principle and character, competence and capacity. And for the faithful voter, the very complexity of this moral judgment demands a recourse to the voice of God which lies deep within each of us – our conscience.”

Discussion Questions

1. In the context of climate change, what is the common good?

2. What are the considerations that a faith-filled voter would bring to bear in deciding for a particular candidate?

Resources


• Climate Change, Pro-Life as Same Fight, video by San Diego Bishop Robert McElroy; youtu.be/47L0uHEkrOU

CONVERSATION: INTEGRATING CLIMATE ISSUES WITH THE ELECTION

(20 Minutes)

“Let us keep in mind the principle of subsidiarity, which grants freedom to develop the capabilities present at every level of society, while also demanding a greater sense of responsibility for the common good from those who wield greater power… The mindset which leaves no room for sincere concern for the environment is the same mindset which lacks concern for the inclusion of the most vulnerable member of society.”

– Laudato Si’, 196

“We cannot be so simplistic and reductive as to make what is meant to be a well-informed and thought-out decision about our governmental representation and leadership a simple binary, yes-or-no referendum on our favorite ethical case or ideological point. We must take the whole panoply of issues relating to peace and justice into consideration when we cast our votes and weigh our life choices. Nevertheless, there will be a natural inclination to order our priorities and take stock of what is most important in the moment. The magnitude of climate change’s threat to life – human and nonhuman alike – eclipses everything else. People are already dying from its consequences, and more will follow.”

– Climate Change is the Most Important Life Issue Today, NCR, Sep 4, 2019, by Daniel P. Horan, OSF; www.ncronline.org/news/earthbeat/faith-seeking-understanding/climate-change-most-important-life-issue-today

Discussion Question

“You are the voter and you are the believer, in your heart and soul, in your conscience, you are called to make the Gospel manifest in the world in which we live.” (Bishop McElroy) How will you do this?
With the COVID-19 pandemic and protests against police profiling and systemic racism directly in front of us, it may be difficult to remember that all the many other justice issues we face are still very much part of our reality. Not least of these is climate change.

For years to come, social scientists will have much to tell us about the human, political, religious, economic consequences of these days, and we must trust that some of the lessons we learn will make changes for the better. We can already identify some significant insights that are making the connections.

What are they?

We are indeed a global community, vitally interconnected in ways we are now seeing played out in a very real physical, emotional, and spiritual reality. None of us remains untouched by the pandemic, racism, or a heating planet.

Regarding COVID, each of us has an essential role in the work to contain it, even though that role may seem passive and perhaps futile. Stay home. Wash your hands. Wear your mask. Keep your social distance. We have an equally essential role in supporting anti-racism and in addressing climate change. Challenge and hold accountable your state and federal legislators on these issues.

Use your vote to support candidates who understand the overarching consequences of global heating. Keep informed of the facts. Listen to the scientists and to the professionals. Question fake news. Do not be swayed by leaders whose priority is profit over people.

If anything, COVID-19 has shown that governments can respond quickly and efficiently when the need is great enough. When they give the public the facts so the risks involved are understood, the public can and will do what is needed, even changing long-held habits and attitudes to do what is necessary to curtail the crisis.

**Sharing**

“You are the voter and you are the believer, in your heart and soul, in your conscience, you are called to make the Gospel manifest in the world in which we live.” (Bishop McElroy)

What will you do?
CLOSING PRAYER
(Pray Together)

Prayer for Creation

All humankind is one vast family.
This world, our home.
We sleep beneath one roof, the starry sky.
We warm ourselves before one hearth, the blazing sun. Upon one soil we stand, and breathe one air, and drink one water, and walk the night beneath one luminescent moon.
The children of the Universe are we, family of one blood,
Members in one worldwide family, this Earth, our home.

– Adapted for the Multi-Faith Earth Day Service April 10, 2020, Co-sponsored by Washington National Cathedral and Interfaith Power and Light, from the poem, Family of God, by Vern Bennom Grimsley

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

Appendix 1: Quotes from Laudato Si’
Appendix 2: Experiential Exercises
Appendix 3: Quotes from Faith Traditions
Appendix 4: List of Resources

Suggested Voting Guides:
Faith & Public Life and IPL (Interfaith Power and Life)
http://fpl.actionkit.com/sign/2020_voterguide_dl
League of Women Voters - www.lww.org
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns Faithful Voting & Global Concerns -
https://maryknollogc.org/resources/2020-us-election-briefs-faithful-voting-and-global-concerns
Network Lobby for Catholic Social Justice - networklobby.org
Party Platforms
Democrat: democrats.org/where-we-stand/party-platform
Green Party: www.gp.org/platform
Libertarian: www.lp.org/platform-2020
Republican: gop.com/platform

EcoJustice Committee of the Dominican Alliance

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APPENDIX 1: QUOTES FROM *LAUDATO SI’*

Doomsday predictions can no longer be met with irony or disdain. We may well be leaving to coming generations debris, desolation and filth…. We need to reflect on our accountability before those who will have to endure the dire consequences. (161)

... recent World Summits on the environment have not lived up to expectations because, due to lack of political will, they were unable to reach truly meaningful and effective global agreements on the environment. (166)

Is it realistic to hope that those who are obsessed with maximizing profits will stop to reflect on the environmental damage which they will leave behind for future generations? Where profits alone count, there can be no thinking about the rhythms of nature, its phases of decay and regeneration, or the complexity of ecosystems which may be gravely upset by human intervention. (190)

St. Francis of Assisi reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us. ... This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. (1-2)

We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature. (139)

Along with the importance of little everyday gestures, social love moves us to devise larger strategies to halt environmental degradation and to encourage a “culture of care” which permeates all of society. When we feel that God is calling us to intervene with others in these social dynamics, we should realize that this too is part of our spirituality, which is an exercise of charity and, as such, matures and sanctifies us. (231)

... the ecological crisis is also a summons to profound interior conversion…. 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. (217)

The deterioration of the environment and of society disproportionately affects the most vulnerable people on the planet: “Both everyday experience and scientific research show that the gravest effects of all attacks on the environment are suffered by the poorest.”* May our struggles and our concern for this planet never take away the joy of our hope. Our faith calls us to hope. (244)

Our goal is not to amass information or to satisfy curiosity, but rather to become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it. (19)

* from Bolivian Bishops’ Conference, 2012
APPENDIX 2: EXPERIENTIAL ACTIVITIES

Use your senses to engage with the realities of Climate Change in your local area.

Reuse an old notebook to create a Climate Change Awareness Log. Some suggested items for annotation include:

• Note the weather-related changes you observe: Sept. 2, 2019, Severe storms, one right after another. It was unusual that the storm did not pass but stayed put. Received 4.6 inches of rain in 5 hours. Second time this year that heavy benches wound up in the creek.

• Observe or get to know an animal, plant or tree outside your door or in your neighborhood. Visit it at least every two weeks. Note the changes you see, especially after extreme changes in weather. How does it adapt? What does this teach you?

• Note what is happening around you. What species (insect, plant) is new this year? What species is missing? How has a species or its behavior changed? (We had a week where we had tiny little bees that wanted our attention if we sat and conversed at a picnic table. This was new and different.)

• Take sunset photos and record the level of air quality. What do you observe?

• List your personal commitments that you have taken to lower your carbon and water footprints. Add one new change each month. (Carbon and water footprint calculators are programmed and free on the Internet.)

• Form a group and share your findings/commitments/photos with others once a month.

Use your imagination to engage in dreaming with Earth new possibilities for the future, for example:

• Stand in place and image where you purchase the groceries that don’t come out of your personal garden. Are you at a co-op, farmers’ market or grocery store? Notice what is close by to touch. What do you see, smell, hear, taste?

• Now take a closer look around you and note the assortment of colors in the filled bike rack and recognize that all the cars are models which use alternative fuels. See the re-usable bags and containers in the hands of every customer who passes by you. Do you smell the herbs and flowers from the community garden and see further out that every building has native flowers and trees around them?

• Now glance further and further out. What other new possibilities do you imagine? What other sounds from the natural world do you hear? How has the air quality improved? Note that every person has sufficient clean water for the day.

• Continue your gaze outward and note other changes in your state, your county, our world.
APPENDIX 3: QUOTES FROM FAITH TRADITIONS

The resources required to respond to climate change will only be released when the peoples and governments of the world adopt a shared and connected sense of responsibility for the fate of the planet and for the well-being of the entire human family.

– The Bahai

Buddhism teaches that the idea of separateness is an illusion. The health of the whole is inseparably linked to the health of the parts, and the health of the parts is inseparably linked to the health of the whole.

– The Buddhists

As pastors ... we urge Catholics as an essential part of their faith commitment to respond to the reality of climate change with sound judgments and resolute action.

– The Australian Catholic Bishops

What is happening to Earth belongs to an order of magnitude beyond any other into which we have poured out our apostolic energies in the past. It is of greater magnitude than any of the present-day social justice issues. In fact, it is foundational for them in that none of them will succeed apart from the larger context of what is happening to earth itself.

– John Surette, SJ

The whole of creation works because it follows the laws of the Creator. The only creature that can act contrary to its preordained patterning and upset the balance is the human being. Can faith save the planet? That we save the planet is not a choice for humankind, it is a sacred obligation.

– The Muslim Community

Action to mitigate global climate change must be built upon a foundation of social and economic justice that does not put the poor at greater risk or place disproportionate and unfair burdens on developing nations.

– The United States Catholic Bishops

The Talmud offers us hope that just as we humans may be responsible for disrupting the weather, so too we can be part of repairing it.

– The Jewish Climate Initiative
Bishop Robert McElroy
Bishop McElroy looks at the moral act of voting and lays the groundwork for development of conscience formation in these complicated times. See also: Bishop McElroy on Climate Change, Pro-Life as Same Fight https://youtu.be/47L0uHEkrOU

Austen Ivereigh
“Why Call It Progress?” published in Commonweal September 30, 2019
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/why-call-it-progress
Ivereigh reveals Pope Francis’ call for responsible action on behalf of the environment. The author also reveals the Pope’s influence in the Paris Peace Accord and his challenge to those who give ultimate importance to economic growth at the cost of the ruin of Earth, thus the title of the article.

Greta Thunberg
Speeches at the United Nations and a TED talk
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u9KxE4Kv9A8
https://www.ted.com/talks/greta_thunberg_the_disarming_case_to_act_right_now_on_climate_change?language=en
Still in her teens, this young girl has had a global impact as she calls on all nations and leaders to listen to the science and DO something now about climate change.

Daniel P. Horan, OSF
“Climate Change is the Most Important Life Issue Today” published in National Catholic Reporter September 4, 2019
Father Horan is Franciscan friar and assistant professor of systematic theology and spirituality at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. In this article he posits: “Global climate change threatens every life now and poses an existential danger to the very condition of the possibility for future life on this planet.”

A World of Solutions | The U.N. Climate Sequel | TakePart
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rm5DxoJGAEI
A week after the short film What’s Possible opened the U.N. Climate Summit, Lyn Lear and director Louie Schwartzberg created this compelling sequel. It’s less than five minutes and well worth watching. It expands on the vision for climate change solutions.
APPENDIX 4: SELECTED LIST OF RESOURCES

(Page 2)

Jose Ramirez  
*A Letter from the Virus*  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UEgl_TUYOZo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UEgl_TUYOZo)  
There are many YouTube videos available with the title *A Letter from the Virus*. We recommend this one, which is just under four minutes in length. Subtitles.

North American Dominican Promoters of Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation  
*Gospel Call to Justice*, updated December 2019  
The PDF file can be printed and copied for distribution. It is packed with excellent background information on current urgent issues and includes suggestions for action.

Leonardo DiCaprio  
*Before the Flood*  
[https://www.filmsforaction.org/watch/before-the-flood-2016](https://www.filmsforaction.org/watch/before-the-flood-2016)  
In this full-length film, DiCaprio explores compelling evidence of dramatic changes occurring due to climate change. Through extensive visits with experts and local people around the world, he helps us gain a deeper understanding of this complicated reality and investigates concrete solutions.

Pat Farrell, OP  
*Dispelling the Illusions behind Our Current Crises*  
[https://vimeo.com/374243221](https://vimeo.com/374243221)  
Challenging the notion that humans are a separate species and the anthropomorphism that insists that humans are the pinnacle of evolution and the supreme species on the planet, Sr. Pat calls on Scripture, wise teachers, poetry, visual imagery and her experience at Jubilee Farm, to remind us to be people of both hope and action.

James Balog  
*The Human Element*  
[https://thehumanelementmovie.com](https://thehumanelementmovie.com)  
This is a documentary capturing the lives of everyday Americans on the front lines of climate change. With compassion and heart, *The Human Element* inspires the viewer to reevaluate our relationship with the natural world. The full film may be purchased or rented.

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