



Worshippers recite the Lord's Prayer during a Mass celebrated in honor of the 100th anniversary of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, Dec. 9, 2017, in San Diego. The church was first founded to serve the recently arrived Mexican population in San Diego, and has become a cornerstone of the local Latino Catholic community. (OSV News/David Maung)

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This Friday, Oct. 4, marks the feast of St. Francis of Assisi, the final day of the Season of Creation, a monthlong period when Christians are called to [renew their relationships with God and creation](#).

This season offers an opportunity to engage all Catholics in the work of caring for our common home. Yet U.S.-based programming designed to celebrate St. Francis' feast day or advance the principles of [Pope Francis' encyclical "*Laudato Si'*, on Care for Our Common Home](#)" seldom reflects the diversity of Catholic communities.

[As a scholar of religion and the environment](#), I have spent the last decade researching environmental values among Catholic churchgoers in the United States, [with special attention to Spanish-speaking communities](#).

The Latino Catholics I have met, through focus groups and ethnographic interviews across Los Angeles, have taught me that home-based conservation measures — such as cultivating backyard gardens, avoiding consumerism and limiting waste — are routinely shared among families in their communities. Through these practices, they enact their own distinct environmental traditions that combine Catholic sensibilities with Indigenous wisdom and cultural values grounded in Latin America.

Yet the creation care advocates and priests I met throughout my research seldom saw these communities as allies for creation care programming, in part because they equated "creation care" with "environmentalism" and assumed Latino Catholics did not prioritize environmental issues.



Archbishop Gustavo García-Siller of San Antonio signed commitment documents regarding the Laudato Si' Action Platform on July 28 at two Masses, in Spanish and English, at the Cathedral of San Fernando. (OSV News/Courtesy of Today's Catholic)

One priest suggested that members of his working-class, primarily Latino parish were not interested in creation care because they were in "survival mode" and did not have "the luxury of speculating on what's causing global warming." Another community leader, while recognizing Latino Catholics' concern about the climate crisis, concluded it was more effective to work with wealthier communities with the financial means to purchase solar panels and install other energy-saving devices.

As these examples illustrate, even though church leaders understand creation care as an important matter of faith, the discourses they embrace and actions they promote often follow the dictates of modern environmentalism.

The environmental movement [historically has been dominated by white people](#) and draws from planetary frameworks that position the environment as something that is "out there" and separate from the spaces of everyday life.

Environmental justice advocates have helped transform the wider movement for the better by insisting that environmental concerns must always include concern for

vulnerable human communities. But today, dominant discourses of environmentalism continue to embrace grand crisis narratives focused on saving an endangered planet Earth from human harm.

That sentiment is reflected in the Catholic Climate Covenant's [2024 Feast of St. Francis program](#), which introduces creation care through an urgent message of crisis and alarm: "The ice caps are melting, the seas are rising, forests are burning, crops are decimated, and people are suffering," the introduction states. "How could we possibly feel hopeful?"



A butterfly rests on a flower outside of Sagrado Corazon at the Catholic Pastoral Center July 26, 2017 in Nashville, Tennessee. Sagrado Corazon, or Church of the Sacred Heart, is the home of the Hispanic Ministry for the Diocese of Nashville. (CNS/Tennessee Register/Rick Musacchio)

When viewing the environment as a victim of human greed and environmentalism as separate from the struggles of everyday life, we reify the distinctions between

humans and the rest of creation, and position "environmentalism" as an item on our to-do list we can check off and then move on. All too often this is accomplished through [seemingly virtuous acts](#) that are connected to consumerism, such as installing solar panels or [driving an electric vehicle](#).

In contrast to narratives of crisis and alarm, Spanish-speaking churchgoers I met across L.A. talked about the environment through narratives of relationality with God, family members and the land. In their stories, maintaining a loving, reciprocal relationship with the earth was a matter of common sense and an enduring, mundane aspect of everyday life.

One churchgoer whom I call Esmerelda, a retired schoolteacher in her early 60s, traced her environmental values to the lessons she had learned from her grandmother.

As a child, Esmerelda told me, she had spent hours watching her grandmother prepare food in the family kitchen, carefully making sure that nothing went to waste. Her grandmother also "used to plant everything" and provided much of the family's sustenance through the thriving garden she cultivated in their yard.

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Her grandmother's hard labor ensured her family, while poor, had everything they needed, Esmerelda said. "We ate pretty good! Rice and beans, fresh tortillas, who could go wrong?"

When I asked Esmerelda if her environmental values related to her religion, she spoke of her grandmother who was "very, very into her Catholicism" and also provided the foundation for Esmerelda's lifelong environmental ethics.

Esmerelda had learned how to take care of God's creation by watching her grandmother, praying with her and helping her with household responsibilities like tending the garden, sewing her own clothing and hanging clean laundry on the line to dry.

"We were taught not to use a bunch of electricity, to conserve," Esmerelda reminisced. "Even then we would conserve ... of course for budget, but it has always taught me to conserve and not to use a bunch of light."

For Esmerelda, home-based conservationist measures were routine aspects of her everyday life, a set of habits she had learned from her grandmother and had passed onto her own children. While maybe rooted in financial considerations, these practices also connected to cherished childhood memories and ideals of living in respectful relationship with God, extended family members and the earth.



A hummingbird is seen getting nectar from a flower Sept. 28, 2019, in a garden on the grounds of St. Anthony of Padua friary in Butler, New Jersey. The feast of St. Francis of Assisi, patron of animals, is celebrated Oct. 4 each year. (CNS/Octavio Duran)

Some church leaders are already familiar with the types of environmental narratives I heard throughout my research, where caring for creation is connected to cherished memories of family members who knew how to live off the land. But these stories often are not reflected in the materials the church circulates to share the message of caring for creation.

To commemorate the five-year anniversary of *Laudato Si'* in the spring of 2020, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops hosted two roundtable discussions — [one in English](#) and [one in Spanish](#) — where panels of bishops shared their reflections on the pope's encyclical.

Responding to a nearly identical set of questions, the bishops in both conversations talked extensively about creation as a gift from God and the ways the encyclical had spoken to many people outside the church.

There were also clear differences in the discussions.

In the English-language roundtable, the bishops focused on global environmental problems and used terms such as crisis, politics, climate change and assault.

Then-Bishop Robert McElroy, who has since been elevated to a cardinal and is recognized for his [impactful work in spreading the principles of *Laudato Si'*](#), suggested the encyclical's most important theme was "the fragility of the gift of creation."

McElroy expressed concern the church was not reaching out "with that level of intensity" necessary to address the urgency of the problems, especially given that extractive industries had enacted "a whole series of assaults upon the science and upon the realities of climate change." Bishop Robert Barron read the encyclical as "a postmodern reflection on the dangers of modernity."

By contrast, the Spanish-language conversation focused on the positive relationships that many Latin Americans maintained with God's creation. These bishops were concerned about climate change and mentioned it periodically, but their attention more often centered on the embodied knowledge and morality that were passed down among families who maintained a productive relationship with the land.

While Latino Catholics had not widely read the encyclical, Bishop Daniel Flores remarked, there was a certain "cultural receptivity" to its core ideas because feelings of love and respect for nature were widespread in Latin American society.



Bishop Daniel Flores of Brownsville, Texas, poses for a photo in the offices of the General Secretariat of the Synod at the Vatican, on April 12, 2023. (CNS/Robert Duncan)

Like Esmerelda, Flores reflected he had learned to respect nature from his grandparents — avid gardeners who had cared for animals and relied on the land for their survival. They taught Flores to "respect the gift of creation, of food, of the garden, of the beauty of flowers in the morning." These lessons had helped Flores recognize humanity's dependence on the land while instilling a sense of appreciation for the Earth's aesthetic beauty.

Flores suggested that younger generations of Hispanics had lost the sense of dependence and relationality that his grandparents' generation instilled in him and his peers. Yet he sensed many young Hispanic Catholics were open to "rediscovering this other way of finding the world" that Pope Francis promoted in *Laudato Si'*.

Indeed, there is a real opportunity to engage Latino Catholics in the vital work of caring for our common home. But developing meaningful partnerships within these communities starts with aligning creation care initiatives with the values Latino Catholic communities express. This requires more work than simply translating English-language materials into Spanish.

Church leaders might begin by recognizing the environmental knowledge, agency and leadership already abundant among Spanish-speaking Catholics, and invite respected elders to share their experiences with younger generations.

The "[Migration and Me](#)" program, from interfaith environmental justice organization [Faith in Place](#), is one successful model. It uses story circles to help communities develop their own culturally relevant understandings of caring for creation, building meaningful connections between their core values and the imperative of caring for our common home.

Catholic leaders can learn from this approach that builds on local knowledge and adapts to the interests of any given community.

By recognizing and uplifting the wisdom of beloved elders, rather than offering a predetermined list of measures that may not be equally relevant to all Catholic communities, church leaders can advance the aim Pope Francis championed [in his Season of Creation message this year](#): to hope and act with creation by joining forces with "all men and women of good will."