



carmelngo

THE CARMELITE NGO BULLETIN

2024 | Volume 17 | Number 3

English Edition

Responding to the Cry of the Earth

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Climate change can be regarded as one of the most critical problems that humanity is facing. Nearly two centuries of man-made pollution has created a vast threat that has the capacity to have devastating and unthinkable consequences for the planet. Throughout the world today you can see the effects of climate change whether it be rising sea levels, warmer global temperatures, more frequent and intense weather events, or extinction of species. This phenomenon will ultimately affect everyone.

It is no surprise that climate change has been accelerated by the ever-increasing industrialization and transportation around the world, as these practices produce excess amounts of carbon emissions and general pollution. Nevertheless, there have been countries, businesses, and nonprofits that have implemented sustainable development and “green” policies in order to combat this polluting industrialization. This includes the efforts of the United Nations and their 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Net Zero Coalition. This is also not limited to the secular realm as religious organizations have utilized sentiments and teachings from religious figures, such as Pope Francis, who emphasizes an integral ecology approach to battle climate change and other threats to our environment. In this article, I will examine some of these efforts to promote sustainable development and address climate change.

Pope Francis's *Laudato Si* (2015) has been an incredibly influential message for the fight against climate change and the adoption of an integral ecology. Ecology and climate change are clearly not strictly secular subjects to be addressed by science and politicians. In fact, religious organizations from various traditions have adopted many ways to promote

sustainable development and integral ecology and they do so based on their religious beliefs, as well as on science. The connectedness and appreciation for the Earth can be found in all people. Pope Francis speaks to this belief as he sends a message to the world about recognizing this threat and how to combat it. He intertwined his environmental concerns with issues of social justice and spiritual values to offer guidance for how to approach the future. Addressing climate change as a grave and present danger is individually important, but for someone in such a prominent place of authority, it has the capability to reach and influence an incredibly large number of people. And it has.

Through *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis emphasizes the relationship and interconnectedness between the divine, human beings, and the Earth. Climate change affects every living thing on Earth, and even the Earth itself. This document serves as a call to action. Especially from a spiritual perspective, he posits that we should not only respect the planet but also to honor God by protecting His creation.

These sentiments are visible in other Catholic social teachings, such as in *Centesimus Annus*. In this document, Pope John Paul II describes how the Earth is God's gift and humans have to learn to promote environmental sustainability. He addresses the overconsumption of Earth resources by humans, stating, “At the root of the senseless destruction of the natural environment lies an anthropological error...” (CA, 37). These perspectives can be found in other Catholic teachings, but with the accelerated effects of climate change, Pope Francis has tried to bring this particular issue to the forefront.

He cites scientific evidence of the existence of climate change and the fact that human activity has been the major cause. As humans are the cause of climate change, they are also the only ones that can fix it. In *Laudato Si*, there is an emphasis on community involvement. This document does not put all the responsibility on the individual, it is to also show it is the governments and large corporations that make these decisions. Community engagement promotes systemic change; these sustainable goals can grow from this base.

Among the many important points in *Laudato Si* are the concepts of integral ecology and sustainable development. Integral ecology highlights the importance of the natural world and the social systems, also taking into account ethical and spiritual dynamics. Sustainable development, promoted largely by the United Nations' seventeen SDGs, focuses on the development and progress of society in ways that do not deplete the world's natural resources. These two concepts—integral ecology and sustainable development—are paramount in the fight against climate change. If actions these concepts promote are not implemented there will be detrimental effects. In fact, there already are negative impacts being felt worldwide.

A Carmelite Parish Acts

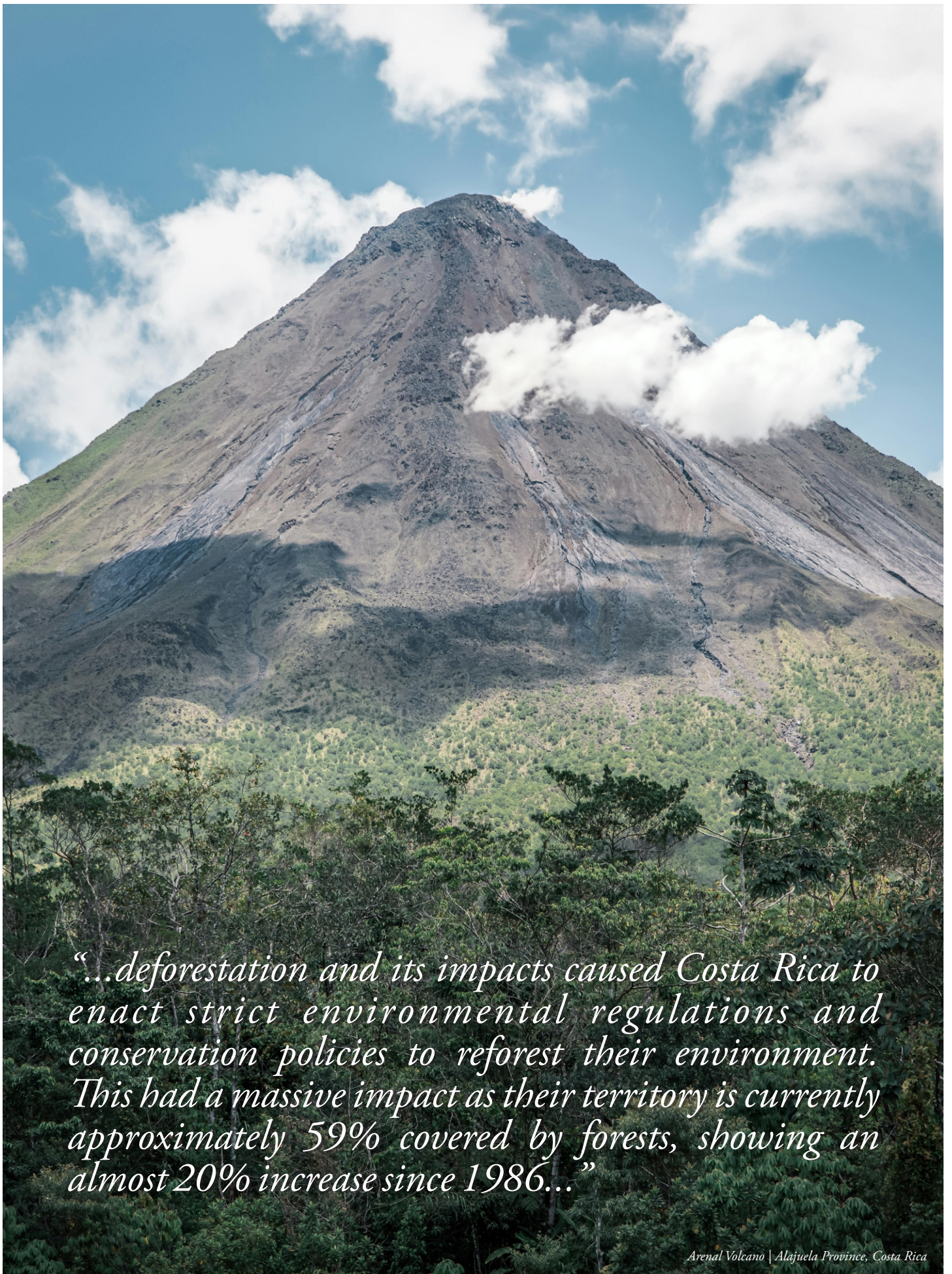
By putting an integral ecology and a commitment to sustainable development into action we can have tremendous positive outcomes as I will demonstrate by highlighting the efforts of one Catholic (Carmelite) parish—Saint Teresa of Avila—and the many green initiatives implemented in the country of Costa Rica.

St. Teresa of Avila in San Francisco, California has been influenced by Pope Francis's *Laudato Si*. They recognized climate change as one of the most important issues facing humanity. And so, they have taken many steps to reduce their pollutants and overall carbon footprint. Since 2015, they have reduced their total carbon emissions to the level that places them as a top 10% Certified Cool Congregation (Sarah 2020). Certified Cool Congregations have collectively contributed to preventing over 1,000 metric tons of greenhouse gas emissions from being put into the atmosphere (Green Team 2024).

St. Teresa of Avila Parish focuses on renewable energy—installing solar panels—and optimizing all of their energy usage. Most notably, they have converted into 100% renewable energy as a result of their commitment to the tenets of *Laudato Si* (St. Teresa Energy Report 2023). They publish their annual energy reports to show their statistics and the results of their efforts. In the year 2020, this parish was the only Catholic place of worship to be certified as an Energy Star building through the EPA's Energy Star program (Energy Report 2023). The basis of their 100% renewable energy campus lies in solar power, having the entirety of their electricity production come from their solar panels. In addition, since 2018 this parish has remained at zero total emissions (Energy Report 2023). These implementations follow many of the guidelines of both Pope Francis's *Laudato Si* and the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations. This demonstrates a clear trend of positive results from environmentally conscious development.

The smaller scale nature of this one parish serves additionally as a foundation in their community, demonstrating the embodiment of the nature of integral ecology as described in *Laudato Si*. The importance of understanding the interconnectedness of the Earth and humanity in fostering environmental education is fundamental for climate change action. This helps create a sustainable community that promotes these beliefs and practices. Community engagement is an integral part of Pope Francis's message and a place of worship can often be a cornerstone in a community. Faith can instill a sense of connection to the people and world around you. It is through this spirituality that these types of ideas can be fostered and grow throughout society.

Collective action in humanity is paramount for progress to be made. This is such a large-scale problem that it needs to be made from the ground up. Community in this case is the bedrock of civilization, being an integral part of human coexistence and development, especially in the realm of education, which Pope Francis is adamant about. Ecological education helps instill a sense of awareness of the reality that we live in today. To create fundamental *societal* change, you need the citizens to become aware and passionate. *Laudato Si* emphasizes the need for ecological education, because you do not want people to just follow along with what the authorities say. You, in fact, want the population to understand the world and be able to identify the correct course of action. This



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course being an environmentally conscious existence and the development of more sustainable ways of life.

The Saint Teresa of Avila Parish shows a strong commitment to the ideals of *Laudato Si* and has shown every year since 2015 that it is indeed possible to build up a renewable and sustainable community space that promotes ecological spirituality.

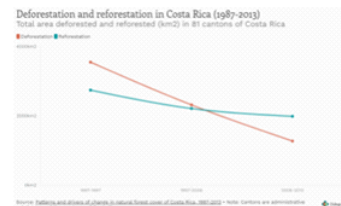
A Nation Demonstrates a Commitment to Sustainable Development

Costa Rica has been revolutionary in their goals to improve their sustainability and eco-friendly initiatives. They are among the leading examples of the positive outcomes that are possible through the implementation of many of the United Nations SDGs. This is especially apparent in their protection of their natural environment. Costa Rica is home to approximately 5% of the world's biodiversity, despite only being 0.034% of the world's surface (World Bank 2021). Their forests are a main component of this, being the driving force behind their incredibly diverse ecosystem.

Costa Rica is a very important example, because it shows that it is possible to reverse the effects of climate change. For example, before their new green initiatives, there was massive deforestation occurring in the name of economic development in the agriculture sphere. This led to Costa Rica losing half of its forests between 1940 and 1980, a tragic decrease in environmental sustainability. This is the case with the majority of nations: the stripping of natural resources for profit. With that being said, their turnaround is a perfect example of how positive change can be made. This deforestation and its impacts caused Costa Rica to enact strict environmental regulations and conservation policies to reforest their environment. This had a massive impact as their territory is currently approximately 59% covered by forests, showing an almost 20% increase since 1986 (Rodríguez 2023).

The challenges involved in trying to reverse significant environmental destruction are vast. On the surface, massive deforestation does not seem fixable, but with the right motivations and sincere commitments there

can be amazing opportunities for progress. Echoing the sentiments of Pope Francis's *Laudato Si*, an appreciation and respect for the land we inhabit is paramount for understanding the gravity of climate change. This is our shared human existence, on this planet, and it is important that people recognize the connection between humanity and the natural world.



It is understood that deforestation and other forms of environmental destruction have impacts that go beyond borders. They have global effects. So, through the funding from organizations such as the World Bank, the LEAF Coalition, and the Green Climate Fund, Costa Rica has been able to plant over 60,000 trees, replenishing and reforesting their natural environment. This consequently has resulted in millions of tons of CO₂ being captured out of the atmosphere, with 14.7 million tons captured between 2014-2015 alone, as well as an expected 12 million to be achieved by 2025 thanks to the additional funding from COP 26 (Rodríguez, 2023).

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This is incredibly useful information in the fight against climate change, showing the benefits that can come out of investing in the environment. This is directly in line with the United Nations SDGs, such

as Climate Action (#13) and Life on Land (#15). These reforestation policies—and other positive environmental actions—are possible to enact correctly and there are tangible results that one can look for to judge if there is a real benefit for the climate. The dedication that Costa Rica has shown towards fixing their ecosystems and focusing on sustainable living is a clear example of the possibility for more change, fundamentally rooted in the respect for our shared planet.

One of the fastest growing industries around the world is tourism, especially in Costa Rica. Putting aside the controversial nature of the tourism industry, in general, it is clear that the industry is ever present and growing. Tourism is especially popular in developing countries as their unspoiled nature can be threatened by major corporations who seek profits no matter the

ecological repercussions. This problem emphasizes the importance of Costa Rica's attempts to protect their environment.

In Costa Rica, given the significance of tourism in their country, they have developed policies for sustainable tourism: ecotourism. This describes policies that aim to reduce the emissions and pollutants created by the tourism industry. Ecotourism is defined by the International Ecotourism Society as “Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well being of local people” (TIES 2019). Given Costa Rica's commitment to protecting and respecting their natural environment and the living inhabitants of their land, these measures were necessary for them to continue living sustainably.

The negative effects of tourism, in general, are indirectly and directly felt locally, and given the massive scale of tourism in the modern era it is important to recognize the global impact that it can have on the environment. It is Costa Rica especially that has been able to be a leading example for countries attempting to embrace a more sustainable form of tourism.

Specifically in the economic sphere, estimates show that approximately 20% of the Costa Rican population works directly in ecotourism in addition to the 60% of the population that receives indirect economic benefits for the ecotourism sector (Oberhofer Dimitrijevic 2022). This is important to note because sustainable development includes economic growth. Despite the natural inequalities that arise from capitalist enterprises, ecotourism has been seen to benefit the nation's economy. This must also be compared to the environmental benefits of such ecotourism, which can especially be seen in environmental and wildlife *conservation*.

“The improvement of basic services, environmental education and awareness, together with the economic benefits provided by ecotourism, provides a positive human shield changing local perceptions towards wildlife, ecosystems, and landscapes. This shield promotes species recovery, restores habitats, and reduces hunting and other unsuitable practices” (Gutierrez, et.al. 2020).

Wildlife cannot be forgotten in the fight against climate change. It is their natural habitats that humans

have destroyed and they need to be protected in the same way as the environment. Everything is connected in this case, all living things affect the global environment, and consequently they are all affected by climate change. Each organism has its part to play in the world, as it is said, nature is a balance. This balance has been radically shifted because of human action, leading to an increasingly unstable planet.

Conclusion

This research was done in order to illustrate the importance and effectiveness of environmental actions, large and small. The appreciation for the gifts of the Earth should never be understated; it is our home and should be cherished. Throughout time, particularly in the industrial era, humans have caused a countless amount of damage to the global environment, whether it be deforestation, carbon emissions, dumping pollutants, or even factory farming. This has gone largely unnoticed in the past centuries, but in the modern era, scientific advancement has created accurate data for tracking our impacts on the environment. Despite this knowledge being available, capitalist enterprises have accelerated their efforts to extract as many natural resources as they can in the name of financial profits.

The effect that humanity has had on the planet has caused climate change to be a present and serious danger to life itself. The beauty of the Earth will not withstand this treatment if proper action is not taken to reverse our detrimental effects. To echo the statements of Pope Francis, the whole world is interconnected and we must appreciate and respect the gift that is life on this planet.

Laudato Si has been a rallying cry for the world to recognize the issue at hand, a dying planet that we are killing. The ideals imbedded in this encyclical have motivated people and institutions around the world to adopt an integral ecology approach and sustainable development initiatives in order to help the cause of saving our Earth.

Both religious and secular, small scale and large scale, there are institutions and whole nations that have recognized the critical importance of the environment and adopted ecologically conscious practices. This call to action works in tandem with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and their mission to heal

the damage that we've caused. This global effort is rooted in the scientific analysis of the trends of climate change and the disastrous effects that will occur if we continue down this path.

It can be seen through this research that there are indeed practical and effective ways to enact such practices. This problem transcends borders or governments. People all around the world can implement these actions at any scale and it will benefit the world. It seems like an impossible task to overcome the actions of massive corporations and decades of mass pollution, but it is something that humanity cannot give up on. This Earth is the only Earth that we have.

To conclude, this topic is scientific in nature, but this does not mean that there is not an emotional side to this topic. The Earth is what gives us all life, and to those who love this, our common home, it is truly heartbreaking to see it desecrated as it has been over the centuries. Our passion and love for our shared existence must be felt and we must refuse to remain silent.

The treatment of this planet and its inhabitants is enough to move someone to tears, but it is not a bad thing to care this much. It is the most important thing of all. "Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not." The Lorax (1971).

About the author: Patrick Kalob has served as the Carmelite NGO intern this past year. He is graduating in May from Manhattan College in New York City, with a sociology major and a philosophy minor.

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