



Be a Good Steward of the Environment – Stop Plastic Pollution

In his ground-breaking encyclical *Laudato Si* ("Praise be to You"), Pope Francis urged humankind to exercise better stewardship of the earth. Subtitled "On Care of Our Common Home," the pontiff's letter called for a radical "ecological conversion" on the part of people the world over, and especially disciples of Jesus Christ, to honor and save our earth from degradation. One way we can be better stewards of the earth is to fight plastic pollution.

Cheap, capable of being made into any conceivable shape, strong and durable, plastic is the wonder product of the modern world. However, the victim of this technological success appears to be much of life on earth. Almost 80% of the plastic produced since the 1950s has been thrown away, either into landfill sites or into the general environment.

Ending plastic pollution is the focus of Earth Day 2018, the annual event celebrated on April 22 world-wide to raise awareness of ecological dangers and demonstrate support for protection of the global environment.

Items like plastic packaging, bags and bottles are thrown away every day, and end up in trash sites as well as in forests, creeks, rivers, seas, and oceans around the world. While some of these items are recycled, the growth of plastic consumption and its improper disposal currently outpace efforts to recycle and produce post-consumer plastic materials.

But plastic is more than just litter. A petroleum product, plastic is non-biodegradable. And in reality, most plastic does not ever disappear, but becomes long-lasting "plastic dust". When items like plastic bags break down, they readily soak up (and release) toxins that then contaminate soil and water, as well as harming animals that ingest plastic fragments. The increasing presence of plastic in our oceans poisons and ensnares marine life. Check your refrigerator. How much stuff in there is stored in plastic? Hazardous chemicals, some of which can disrupt human hormones, leach from some plastics that are used for food and beverage storage.

Plastic is the basic material of a consumer world. Without it we wouldn't enjoy the same standard of living or convenience. But if we take the Holy Father's urgent pleas seriously, we should take seriously the issue of plastic contaminating and damaging our environment. For Christian stewards, it is a moral responsibility to confront this pollution. And become better stewards of the earth.



Suggestions for Stopping Plastic Pollution

A springtime walk on a lovely April day brings you into contact with the ubiquitous presence of plastic in our lives. From the crushed soda bottle lying at the side of the road to the plastic bags floating through the air like kites, plastic pollution is everywhere. It is not possible to be plastic free. But there are steps we can take to reduce consumption of plastic. Earth Day 2018 asks us to consider the Five Rs: Reduce, Refuse, Reuse, Recycle and Remove plastic in our everyday lives.

Here are a few suggestions you can incorporate into your life immediately:

- Keep reusable canvas bags in your car for shopping trips and commit to refusing plastic shopping and grocery bags.
- Many stores have containers to recycle plastic bags, even newspaper wraps. Utilize them.
- Carry a small set of simple utensils and a reusable straw so that you never have to use throwaway plastic utensils.
- Encourage your school or college to look into utensils made with biodegradable components. Many Catholic schools have gone this route.
- Store left-overs in reusable containers.
- When shopping for gifts or toys, watch for excessive, wasteful plastic packaging.
- Many cities are considering levying a fee for using plastic bags at stores. Urge your local government to consider this proposal to encourage reusable bags. Ireland reduced its plastic bag use by 95% almost overnight by placing a tax on plastic bags!
- Visit www.earthday.org for more ideas and inspiration!