# Pope Francis’s legacy inspires environmental action at Hampton Roads parish



In the week following the passing of Pope Francis at the age of 88, reflections on his legacy have highlighted his notable advocacy for environmental responsibility, alongside his many other contributions. While environmental activism may not be the foremost cause associated with his tenure, the late pontiff was a vocal proponent of climate change awareness. His influential 2015 encyclical, Laudato Si, acknowledged the realities of climate change and addressed critical issues such as pollution, waste, water quality, and biodiversity loss. He further underscored the urgency of environmental action in 2023 with Laudate Deum, where he lamented the insufficient progress made.

Pope Francis's environmental message extends into the realm of social justice, particularly in addressing the effects of environmental degradation on vulnerable populations. In Laudato Si, he wrote, "The deterioration of the environment and of society affects the most vulnerable people on the planet… For example, the depletion of fishing reserves especially hurts small fishing communities without the means to replace those resources; water pollution particularly affects the poor who cannot buy bottled water; and rises in the sea level mainly affect impoverished coastal populations who have nowhere else to go."

Drawing from the Pope’s call to action, a local Catholic parish in Hampton Roads, Virginia, is actively embodying these principles. Immaculate Conception Catholic Church has committed itself to "caring for Creation," undertaking significant environmental initiatives over recent years. Supported by the Catholic Climate Covenant, the church has achieved a full transition to solar energy. The parish has also engaged in global efforts such as donating 25,000 trees to Kenyan farmers to offset carbon emissions and supplying clean drinking water filters to the Navajo Nation.

This summer, the parish's attention focuses locally on the Hampton River, where around 100 volunteers from Immaculate Conception are collaborating on a major living shoreline restoration project with the Chesapeake Bay Foundation (CBF). The project, known as the Pine Cone Harbour living shoreline, is situated just three miles from the church. Father John Grace, pastor of Immaculate Conception, highlighted the moral imperative of the environmental work, stating, "Climate change is not just an economic issue or a political issue, it is a moral issue." He also noted the particular vulnerability of the Hampton Roads area to sea level rise due to subsiding land.

The Pine Cone Harbour restoration is poised to be one of CBF’s largest living shoreline undertakings and will be the first "roots to reef" project in the Bay Foundation's history. This approach integrates restorative practices that benefit both the water and the shoreline ecosystems. The project involves the creation of 1,076 linear feet of oyster sill using nearly 4,700 oyster castles – durable, 30-pound concrete blocks that form a protective and habitat-enhancing structure alongside the marsh. Additionally, 850 bushels of recycled oyster shells will be placed channelward to support oyster population growth and provide further ecological benefits.

CBF Restoration Specialist Kati Grigsby emphasised the environmental challenges faced in the Hampton River area, citing urban runoff from streets, parking lots, and buildings as among the most significant threats to water quality in this densely populated 51-square-mile region, home to approximately 138,000 residents.

The involvement of Immaculate Conception parishioners goes beyond mere numbers. Despite the parish’s relatively small size, with around 600 households, the community’s dedication to the project is notable. Father Grace recounted the extraordinary commitment of volunteers, including one elderly parishioner who, despite needing a walker and oxygen tank, chose to support the effort through a monetary donation. She entrusted the priest to "Make sure someone plants my oyster castle for me."

Beyond the environmental impact, Father Grace reflected on the communal benefits of the project, likening the collaborative effort to an "old-fashioned barn raising," fostering stronger bonds within the parish. He said, "Our faith doesn’t stay in the doors [of the church], it goes outside, with a sense of shared responsibility."

The parish’s environmental stewardship is a direct response to Pope Francis's challenge to Catholics worldwide. As the Pope wrote in Laudato Si, "Our insistence that each human being is an image of God should not make us overlook the fact that each creature has its own purpose. None is superfluous. The entire material universe speaks of God’s love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God."

When asked about his personal participation in the shoreline project, Father Grace, a priest of 40 years, confirmed his active involvement with enthusiasm: "Oh, I’m definitely going to be in the water!"

The ongoing efforts of Immaculate Conception Catholic Church exemplify how faith communities in Hampton Roads are merging spiritual commitment with tangible environmental action to address the challenges facing the Chesapeake Bay region. The Chesapeake Bay Magazine is reporting these efforts as a significant example of local environmental engagement inspired by global leadership.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html> - Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical, Laudato Si', acknowledges the realities of climate change and addresses critical issues such as pollution, waste, water quality, and biodiversity loss.
2. <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html> - In Laudate Deum, Pope Francis underscores the urgency of environmental action, lamenting the insufficient progress made in addressing climate change.
3. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2023-10/laudate-deum-pope-francis-climate-crisis-laudato-si.html> - Pope Francis's 2023 apostolic exhortation, Laudate Deum, criticizes the insufficient progress made in addressing climate change and calls for urgent action.
4. <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html> - In Laudato Si', Pope Francis highlights the impact of environmental degradation on vulnerable populations, emphasizing the moral imperative to address these issues.
5. <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html> - Pope Francis's encyclical, Laudato Si', addresses critical issues such as pollution, waste, water quality, and biodiversity loss.
6. <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html> - In Laudato Si', Pope Francis acknowledges the realities of climate change and addresses critical issues such as pollution, waste, water quality, and biodiversity loss.
7. <https://news.google.com/rss/articles/CBMizAFBVV95cUxNbU9nM09aZTdSMS14bmJVSGROT2ZtR3pXNjdpZVhrbHl4MXJ2Rkl2SVFieHhhNklCblgxZTl5WDU0bVBhNEcybmYtbl9ET2FjZ2hpWjgtUlJmY1AxdmpSMlRIcWc0bHBJLU0zd1R6dFdOTEZXMmdpcThCWjFZSF9fN21nUXhnWGU0dUoyY3B6ZVVkT0szbUpsWWpRSzBWUTY5OWtnbDhpdXJRVFN4SUZSQmxWaXVnM1JUWUpsTGlZdkNTdEhSQzliVWJMVnE?oc=5&hl=en-US&gl=US&ceid=US:en> - Please view link - unable to able to access data