

## Protecting and Restoring the Earth

The Working Document has a section subtitled '*Care for "Our Common Home"*' (paras 186-8), borrowing the title of 'Laudato Si', but it is under a heading: '*Renewing our solidarity with all life and with the Earth*'. Para 186 of the Working Document notes that the National Consultation has called for stronger efforts by Catholics and all Australians to care for the natural environment of the earth and all its forms of life. It also references Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si': On Care for our Common Home*, as a source of inspiration for many Catholics.

Para 186 concludes with a statement from the Australian Bishops as an expression of 'the growing awareness of our ecological responsibility is one of the clearest signs of the times and has become a constitutive dimension of the Church's preferential option for the poor and vulnerable':

*The Church hears the cries of the poor and the groans of the earth. It seeks to stand in solidarity with the poor and the marginalised, and to exercise good stewardship of the fragile ecosystems that support life on earth. Every day more Christians are becoming aware of their responsibilities as people of faith towards God's Creation (para 186).*

However, the Australian Bishops' statement is nearly two decades old (2002). The lack of a statement of the bishops on the environmental challenge since 2002 highlights the problem of a lack of consensus within the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference on agreed actions to address the issue. This is clearly a matter that the participants can resolve by agreeing on a programme of actions that Catholics can undertake to show 'their responsibilities as people of faith towards God's Creation'. At the very least the Council could endorse the 2002 statement and put in place some programs to give effect to it.

Unfortunately, the Working Document side-steps the issue by broadening the focus so much that care for our common home is lost as a key issue. This is done by using the concept of 'An Integral Ecology of Life' from *Laudato Si'* to emphasise 'the interconnectedness of all living things in environmental, social and economic systems, diverse cultural expressions and traditions, the "ecology" of the private and public domains, the requirements of the common good, and the inter-generational requirements of justice' (Para 189).

The Working Document eschews specific recommendations to address environmental change by making a general call for Catholics to renew their service to society 'by both promoting and modelling this commitment to an integral ecology based on the Gospel of life' (para 191). This includes 'relationships of solidarity and care for life in all its dimensions, both human and non-human'. The vagueness of this highly generalised call to service requires no action other than a spiritual one: 'conversion to an integral ecology of life calls for a spirituality of gratitude and wonder, giving praise to the Creator and Giver of all that exists'.

The Plenary Council needs to do much better than this on an issue which is of vital concern to many Catholics, especially the young, and to the broader human community.