

# Creation Justice Committee

*A healthy, thriving planet—  
through dialogue and action*



First Creation Justice Committee event, October 2023.  
Dialogue on the Biblical Foundations of *Laudato Si'* with Dr. Kathryn Schifferdecker,  
professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary.

Our restoration as human beings is inseparable from the restoration of the natural world around us.

St. Francis of Assisi taught us that all living things—birds, trees, even moon dust—are our brothers and sisters. Centuries of scientific inquiry reinforce this truth, as we now know we are all made of the same fundamental elements of creation: atoms and energy. And as people of faith, we know God is responsible for the creation of all living things and the environment that sustains them, which requires us to treat all life with dignity and respect. Given all of this, we must recognize that past and present environmental harms inflicted on our kin—all of nature—can no longer be ignored.

In the spirit of this reality, in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis calls Catholics to join together to build a new Common Home—a healthy, thriving planet—through dialogue and action. The Basilica community, under the leadership of Janice Andersen, Director of Christian Life, has responded to this call by forming the Creation Justice Committee (CJC), which focuses on the pursuit of justice for God's creation, and the restoration of nature and communities.

BY RACHEL HOLMES FARGIONE

The members of CJC are eager to build on the foundation laid by The Basilica's previous sustainability efforts by organizing an environmental initiative that, grounded in our Catholic faith, further centers justice for all of creation. We seek to provide new and novel opportunities for members of our community to learn and serve, with the hope of inspiring what the Pope calls an "ecological conversion." We are excited to explore ways we can support The Basilica community in more fully aligning with the Pope's vision as laid out in the encyclical, discover ways this ministry can help the Basilica achieve its mission, including sharing our faith in word and deed, and witness how the spirituality of creation justice work serves as a pathway for deeper encounters of Christ.

The CJC founders—which includes our beloved, and recently departed, Dennis Dillon—chose the words 'creation' and 'justice' intentionally. CJC will draw on the principles of 'environmental justice,' a movement historically led by people of color that engages all people in efforts to eliminate environmental harms and influence the environmental health of their communities. We chose to use the word 'creation' instead of 'environmental,' however, to reflect that our work draws on the wisdom of Scripture, wherein our Earth and all upon it are referred to as 'creation.' 'Justice' was a natural choice given the Basilica's strong portfolio of social justice work including ministries like St. Vincent de Paul and most recently, Fr. Daniel Griffith's restorative justice initiatives. Additionally, we understand that in order to be impactful in promoting the restoration of nature, we must first critically reflect on and attend to the structures and systems that exploit and oppress it. This is an important approach in justice work.

Our first official CJC event, held this past October just after the Feast of St Francis, was a Dialogue on the Biblical Foundations of *Laudato Si'* with Dr. Kathryn Schifferdecker, professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary. Dr. Schifferdecker presented a thought-provoking lecture on the parallels between Pope Francis's teachings on the environment and on scripture, particularly the Book of Genesis and Psalms.

She highlighted four scriptural concepts that are embedded within the encyclical: *Imago Dei* (humans are created in God's image and also made from earth), the Sabbath (allowing the land to lie fallow and be restored), the modern interpretation of "Dominion" in Genesis (stewardship of nature, not domination over it), and service (to others and to creation). She stressed that scripture teaches us to prioritize the innate goodness of creation ("being") over its utility for us ("being useful"). Perhaps one of the most moving moments of the event, however, was when a young couple shared that they were surprised this particular conversation was being hosted

animal—as they rage, due to increasing impacts of climate change. Admittedly, I sometimes fall into despair if I let fear take over my faith in God or the power of our collective ability to address threats to our planet. But this time of year, especially, I actively strive to re-center God—and the hope that springs from faith—in my work. One of the ways I do this is by replacing the age-old environmental slogan: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle with my own spiritual, creation-focused version: Reflect, Restore, and Rejoice. I Reflect (on my personal impact on the planet and my ability to change it), Restore (connection to God and creation), and Rejoice (in the beauty



Creation Justice Committee table at The Blessing of the Animals, Feast of St Francis Festival, October 2023.

by a Catholic church. They were excited to learn that their interest in environmental issues has a ministerial/vocational home at The Basilica.

On a personal note as a conservationist, the Lenten Season—one of contemplation and redemption—is for me also a time for a sort of vocational recalibration. On Ash Wednesday, being among fellow parishioners wearing ashes reminds me of serving alongside my fellow wildland firefighters, covered in ash after long days on the frontlines of wildfires. Over the past decade, I have seen these fires burn increasingly hotter and longer, and take more lives—human, plant, and

of creation and the hope of redemption). And I call to mind the words of Gustavo Gutierrez in *A Theology of Liberation*: "We find the Lord in our encounters with others, especially the poor, marginated [sic], and exploited ones. An act of love towards them is an act of love towards God."

Please consider joining me and the members of the CJC in deepening our faith through loving action for the healing of creation. ✚

*Rachel Holmes Fargione, an urban forester, is a parish member and on the Creation Justice Committee.*