



Responsibility for Creation as a Mission for the Church

**Recommendations for Action on Ecology and
Sustainable Development for the German
(Arch-)Dioceses**

“...our Sister, Mother Earth, [...] cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her.”

Pope Francis in his Encyclical *Laudato si'*

Foreword

Man-made climate change is a reality. We are also increasingly feeling its ecological and social impact in Germany. “...our Sister, Mother Earth, [...] cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her”. These were the words of Pope Francis in his Encyclical *Laudato si’*. This means that we are all called upon to assume greater responsibility for ecology and sustainable development.



Bishop
Dr. Franz-Josef Overbeck

We as a Church aspire to lead by example when it comes to sustainability, the environment and climate protection. These are areas of practical faith in Creation belong to the core of the Church's activities. We believe that actions speak louder than words. The Plenary Assembly of the German Bishops' Conference therefore dealt in the autumn of 2017 with the joint responsibility of the Church for the preservation of Creation, and held a half-day of study on the topic of "Responsibility for Creation according to *Laudato si’* – The Environment and Integral Development as a Task of the Church". A working group set up jointly by the Commission for Society and Social Affairs, the Commission for International Church Affairs and the German Commission for Justice and Peace then went on to jointly formulate concrete Recommendations for Action for the further implementation of the responsibility for Creation according to *Laudato si’* in the sphere of the Catholic Church in Germany. My

sincere thanks go to the members of the working group, which was chaired by Auxiliary Bishop Rolf Lohmann. I would especially like to thank Auxiliary Bishop em. Dr. Bernd Uhl for the pioneering preparatory work that he has carried out in recent years.

The ten Recommendations for Action relate to matters of pastoral care, diocesan administrative activities and socio-political commitment. The text contains concrete, ambitious demands, and at the same time possesses the necessary breadth to take into account the different realities prevailing in the 27 German (Arch-)Dioceses. I am grateful for the diverse ecological and international commitment with which many Christians are already working to preserve God's Creation today – and in some cases have been doing so for decades. But we can do better still. The ten Recommendations for Action are intended to help in this respect. We are united by the desire and by the well-founded hope that we may live up to our responsibility for setting an example, and to our responsibility for Creation, through decisive action on the part of the Church.

Bishop Dr. Franz-Josef Overbeck

President of the Commission for Society and Social Affairs of the German Bishops' Conference

The Recommendations for Action were adopted by the Full Assembly of the German Bishops' Conference on 27 September 2018.

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I. Preamble

With his Encyclical *Laudato si'* (LS)¹, Pope Francis calls on us to preserve Creation as a “common home” for all of humanity. Faith in Creation is at the core of the Christian tradition. Our responsibility for Creation and the integral development of human beings derives from faith in the Triune God, who created the world and entrusted it to us.

We Bishops would like to invite all believers, together with all people of good will, to take practical responsibility for God's Creation in all its abundance. Climate change, the increasing consumption of finite resources, environmental pollution, and the decline in biodiversity, all make it very clear to us that action needs to be taken. The Church particularly takes sides with the poor, the weak and the disadvantaged. She actively supports the objectives of Agenda 2030.

The life conditions of humans, animals and plants are being damaged by our current lifestyle. Our society must renounce ways of thinking and acting based on the exploitation of human beings, our fellow creatures and natural resources. There is a need for joint political, economic and social efforts, as well as a fundamental change in the way we live and work. The window of opportunity is closing for us to be able to preserve the basis of existence for life for today's and tomorrow's generations. To this end, we must also critically question and change consumer behaviour in the Church (see LS 203–208).

The Catholic Church in Germany wishes to set a credible, good example through Her own actions. As Christians, we assume responsibility for dealing with our natural resources and our fellow creatures, and endeavour to ensure a just distribution of resources between people living today and future generations. We need the courage to

change course and the willingness to share and to exercise moderation. Only in this way can we ensure the preservation of Creation and the peaceful coexistence of people all over the world.

As bishops, we are submitting the following recommendations for practice in our (Arch-)Dioceses:

II. Recommendations for Action

1. Finding a place for Creation Spirituality in proclamation and the liturgy

Responsibility for Creation is a “genuine part of the Church’s pastoral mission”². Responsibility for Creation should therefore be made even more deliberately an object of the Church’s proclamation³ and catechesis, and it should regularly be given a place in the celebration of divine services. This can for instance be expressed in sermons, intercessory prayers, the celebration of the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation on 1 September of each year (or in Germany in the churches belonging to the Council of Christian Churches [ACK] on the first Friday in September), as well as the harvest festival and the Ecumenical Time for Creation, or in the celebration of sacraments and divine services in natural surroundings. Pope Francis encourages us to live a spiritual life in an “ecological spirituality”⁴; this has the power to shape both personal spiritual and community ecclesial life.

2. Anchoring Creation consciousness within the Church

We recommend the establishment of diocesan guidelines for Creation-conscious action for those working in the Church’s

pastoral care, training and administration, and the integration of these guidelines into basic and further staff training; this applies in particular to the training of future priests⁵. Interdiocesan exchanges and Universal Church partnerships help to broaden the perspective and adopt responsibility for Creation as a global faith community.

3. Raising awareness and encouraging through learning

We propose to include the topic of responsibility for Creation in religious instruction and theological curricula, and to contribute towards ecological and social awareness building and “global learning” by offering education for sustainable development in church child day care centres, in youth, adult and seniors’ education, in church educational institutions and houses. This encourages and empowers everyone to adopt a sustainable lifestyle.

4. Rediscovering our own traditions

Old ecclesial traditions of spiritual life must be rediscovered as possibilities for becoming aware of our own connectedness with the whole of Creation. From the perspective of the perception of responsibility for Creation, traditions such as fasting, especially at the relevant times of year, or Friday as a day of abstinence, i.e. as a day on which no meat is eaten, can be made fruitful once more in today’s contexts. They are strong signs of sufficiency, of a different understanding of quality of life, and of the conviction that less can be more: “Such sobriety, when lived freely and consciously, is liberating.”⁶ Days of prayer or outdoor processions, too, can be rediscovered with regard to responsibility for Creation.

5. Establishing responsibility for Creation as a diocesan focus

Understood as a cross-cutting task of church action, sustainability concerns all of the areas that are mentioned in these Recommendations for Action, and should accordingly be reflected as a focal point in the dioceses' administrative activities. A proven and therefore recommended way of doing this is to appoint diocesan officers, such as environmental officers, equipped with a mandate from the diocesan leadership to coordinate and steer the ecological commitment of the (Arch-)Diocese on their behalf, and to consolidate and represent it both internally and externally. To do this, they need the competences, participation rights and resources appropriate to their mission. Good cooperation with the various diocesan officers is indispensable, especially with those responsible for the work of the Universal Church. Diocesan action benefits from inter-diocesan networking, advice and representation in the field.

6. Designing building management in an environmentally-friendly manner

The number of existing buildings in the (Arch-)Dioceses should be adapted with pastoral farsightedness, and the buildings that are fit for the future in this sense should be ambitiously upgraded in terms of energy efficiency as part of upcoming renovations. The use of renewable energy sources must become standard. In addition, buildings can become locations for in-house energy production, for example for power generation via combined heat and power generation or photovoltaics. Further energy saving potentials can be tapped through simple, local energy management and by working together with ecumenical and municipal partners in the use of the buildings.

Religious buildings need their own concepts adapted to the uses to which the buildings and equipment are put, as well as their special features. For strategic planning, the review of savings targets and the preparation of climate impact assessments, we recommend that an energy data collection system be set up in each (Arch-)Diocese, and that results be reported to the public.

7. Sustainable management in Church facilities

Sustainable management includes the purchasing and use of goods, merchandise, operating materials and services. Starting with energy, food and office materials, it is important to align procurement in diocesan institutions and parishes with ecological and social criteria, as well as with longevity and quality. Framework agreements can be negotiated for this, and correspondingly orientated purchasing associations and information and purchasing platforms can be used or set up for this purpose. The accumulation of waste is to be avoided as far as possible. We recommend also investing the Church's financial assets according to ethical and sustainable criteria.⁷ In light of climate change, efforts are to be made here towards helping in the decarbonisation of the economy.

8. Sustainable management of Church land

Church land should be treated in a sustainable manner in order to protect soil and water and to preserve biodiversity.⁸ This concerns the construction and maintenance of areas around church buildings and cemeteries within the responsibility of the Church, as well as the way in which the (Arch-)Diocese and other church legal entities manage their own land. Where agricultural and forestry land is leased by church-related owners, the selection criteria for potential leaseholders and the terms and conditions of the lease agreements, as well as the rents, should promote sustainable agriculture, including organic farming. We recommend that a transparent award procedure be followed. In order to create sales opportunities, church facilities should preferably buy food from local and where possible sustainable producers.

9. Making mobility environmentally friendly

With regard to the ecological effects of mobility, this too must be made more climate friendly. It makes sense to give preference to bicycles, carpools, buses and trains and to promote their use, both for journeys to and from work and for official journeys, so that using individual cars becomes less attractive. Official cars and fleets should be designed to be as environmentally friendly as possible, and flying should be avoided wherever feasible. To offset CO₂ emissions, for example, environmental projects with partners from the Universal Church can be promoted, or compensation schemes can be used.⁹ It is important to draw up appropriate mobility concepts for major events and pilgrimages, as well as in Universal Church partnerships.

10. Assuming socio-political and international responsibility

Against the background of the global problems, the Church also works in partnership with other players in the social and political spheres in order to constructively advocate for the poor and for the threatened Creation. Sociopolitical and international commitment can develop in many ways: in the political commitment to eco-social modernisation, in the work of the Universal Church, at educational events, and in prayer. The interest in the often difficult environmental, working and living conditions in many countries, active solidarity with those in need and victims of discrimination, as well as commitment to the threatened Creation, can inspire faith and bear witness to it. The actions of the various church players should both exert an impact on the Church and be perceivable to policy-makers and society, and therefore require competent, pro-active communication.¹⁰

III. Taking the topic seriously and ensuring implementation

These Recommendations for Action are intended to motivate and encourage us as bishops to protect Creation as a common home for humanity.

We have adopted a courageous step-by-step approach when it comes to implementation in our (Arch-)Dioceses. We support one another, and seek to learn from one another. The be-all and end-all of successful implementation is that honorary and full-time staff and persons responsible in pastoral care, education and administration are empowered, supported and challenged.

We bishops will report on a regular basis on the current state of commitment to Creation in the (Arch-)Dioceses in order to reflect on it, inspire us and become even better. We will present our first report in three years.

We are stepping up our commitment to the preservation of Creation in the structures of the German Bishops' Conference and in further supra-diocesan cooperation. This strengthens our ability to have a voice in order to exert a better influence on society and politics, also in dialogue with civil society.

Church practice in accordance with these Recommendations for Action increases our credibility in implementing the mandate formulated in *Laudato si'*. Our ecumenical brothers and sisters have acted as proven and trusted partners for many years.

The Church proclaims Good News with the Gospel, and is thus a bearer of hope. She opens hearts, saves people from discouragement, and gives them confidence and trust in the future, also in their commitment to the preservation of Creation. The Church is sending out an important signal by also taking responsibility for Creation in Her own actions.

- 1 **Pope Francis: Encyclical *Laudato si'* on care for our common home. Secretariat of the German Bishops' Conference (publisher): Verlautbarungen des Apostolischen Stuhls No. 202. 4th, corrected edition (Bonn 2018).** The abbreviation LS and the respective paragraph number refer below to the Encyclical.
- 2 **Secretariat of the German Bishops' Conference (publisher): Climate Change: A Focal Point of Global, Intergenerational and Ecological Justice, 61. The German Bishops – Commission for Society and Social Affairs/Commission for International Church Affairs No. 29en. 2nd, updated edition (Bonn 2007), p. 63.**
- 3 **See LS 200: “Believers themselves must constantly feel challenged to live in a way consonant with their faith and not to contradict it by their actions.”: loc. cit., p. 140.** The ecumenical project entitled “Sustainable Preaching” offers suggestions for the proclamation; retrievable at: www.nachhaltig-predigen.de; most recently retrieved on: 23 October 2018.
- 4 **See LS 216: “Admittedly, Christians have not always appropriated and developed the spiritual treasures bestowed by God upon the Church, where the life of the spirit is not dissociated from the body or from nature or from worldly realities, but lived in and with them, in communion with all that surrounds us”: loc. cit., pp. 150–151.**
- 5 **See LS 214: “It is my hope that our seminaries and houses of formation will provide an education in responsible simplicity of life, in grateful contemplation of God’s world, and in concern for the needs of the poor and the protection of the environment.”: loc. cit., p. 149.**
- 6 **LS 223: loc. cit., p. 154.**
- 7 **See Secretariat of the German Bishops' Conference, Central Committee of German Catholics (publisher): *Ethisch-nachhaltig investieren. Eine Orientierungshilfe für Finanzverantwortliche katholischer Einrichtungen in Deutschland* (Making ethically-sustainable investments. A guide for persons in financially-responsible positions in Catholic institutions in Germany) (Bonn 2015).**
- 8 **See Secretariat of the German Bishops' Conference (publisher): *Der bedrohte Boden. Ein Expertentext aus sozioethischer Perspektive zum Schutz des Bodens*. The German Bishops – Commission for Society and Social Affairs/Commission for International Church Affairs No. 44 (Bonn 2016), p. 49.**
- 9 **E.g. die Klima-Kollekte – Kirchlicher Kompensationsfonds gGmbH; retrievable at: www.klima-kollekte.de; most recently retrieved on: 23 October 2018.**
- 10 **See German Bishops' Conference Research Group on the Universal Tasks of the Church (publisher): *Raus aus der Wachstumsgesellschaft? Eine sozioethische Analyse und Bewertung von Postwachstumsstrategien*. Studies by the Group of Experts on World Economy and Social Ethics Vol. 21 (Bonn 2018), p. 88.**

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