

Six ways to put a Catholic spin on Earth Day

Saints who love and care for animals, ancient hymns of praise for God's creation, an environmental doctrine that connects care for creation to care for people—all examples of ways that the Church has been preaching respect and care for the natural world long before it was cool. This Earth Day, share some of that tradition with your kids. Here's how.

1. Bless and praise God for his creation

"The trees of the LORD drink their fill, / the cedars of Lebanon, which you planted. / There the birds build their nests; / the stork in the junipers, its home." Those are just a few of the beautiful lines from [Psalm 104](#) praising God for his creation, written thousands of years ago—and it's just one of many passages in the Bible meditating on creation. Such verses no doubt inspired St. Francis when he wrote his famous [Canticle of the Sun](#).

You can share some of these ancient hymns and prayers with your kids during your family prayer time. Here are a few examples:

- [Genesis 1:1-2:3](#)
- [Genesis 9:8-13](#)
- [Psalm 104](#)
- [Psalm 148](#)
- [Job 38-39](#)
- [Daniel 3:52-90](#)

[Catholic Household Blessings and Prayers](#) (USCCB Publishing) also contains several blessings and prayers related to nature; see the Blessing of Animals, the Blessing of the Products of Nature, and the [Canticle of the Sun](#).

You can also check out this [Prayer to Care for Our Common Home](#), based on Pope Francis's recent encyclical.

Got pets or wild animals? This [Blessing of the Animals](#) resource from Franciscan Media offers a general explanation of the occasion.

2. Check out the poetry of Jesuit Father Gerard Manley Hopkins

Jesuit priest Gerard Manley Hopkins became famous after his death for his bold, innovative style of poetry. In poems such as [The Windhover](#)," [Pied Beauty](#)," and "[God's Grandeur](#)," he vividly demonstrated how nature can be a window onto the transcendent. Plus, even younger kids will enjoy his playful sprung verse.

3. Read the stories of saints who befriended God's creatures

The next time you are sitting around the campfire, read the story of a saint whose love of God was expressed in his or her love of God's creation. [St. Francis of Assisi](#) is an obvious example, but Ethel Pochocki proposes other animal- and nature-loving saints in her kid-friendly [Once Upon a Time Saints](#) series: [Comgal](#) (friend of swans and mice); [Felix](#) (friend of spiders); [Hubert](#) (protector of deer); [Kentigern](#) (brought a bird back to life); [Martin de Porres](#) (veterinarian and friend of animals, especially mice); [Melangell](#) (protector of wildlife, especially rabbits); [Pharaildis](#) (friend of animals, restored a dead goose); and [Rigobert](#) (befriended a goose), to name a few.

You can add to the list St. Blase, who befriended bears, wolves, and lions, and St. Kevin, who is supposed to have befriended an otter, a blackbird, and even the trees; St. Hildegard, a skilled botanist; and even St. John Paul II, who as a priest took young adults on camping trips as a spiritual retreat.

Indeed, St. [Bernard of Clairvaux](#) said, “What I know of the divine science and holy scripture, I learnt in the woods and fields”—a sentiment echoed by many other spiritual masters.

At the end of the story, incorporate the saint into a prayer of gratitude for the beauty of God’s creation.

4. Explore Church teaching in the great outdoors

If you have younger children, take a look at the overview of the Church’s teaching on the environment in the **Talking Points** section below to get the basic framework. Then take your kids outside to explore a nearby natural area; as you do, you might be able to introduce a few basic points about the Church’s teaching. Check out Project Learning Tree’s [Connecting Kids to Nature](#) page for dozens of ideas about how to engage your kids with the natural world.

5. Help your kids dig deeper into the Church’s ecological teaching

Many Catholics have a limited or mistaken understanding of the Church’s teaching on the environment, identifying it with the positions of the secular environmental movement. But while the Church embraces principles of concern, respect, and care for the environment, it does so within a broader social justice and faith context, leading to an approach that attempts to balance competing goods.

Here are some good resources for helping your older kids and teens dig deeper into the Church’s teaching:

- [Friending Planet Earth: Helping Youth Understand Solidarity & Sustainability in Light of Climate Change](#). This is a six-session program from the Center for Ministry Development and the Catholic Coalition for Climate Change geared toward parish religious education programs; however, it may be adapted for home use. The program is endorsed by the USCCB.

- [Laudato Si': Caring for Our Common Home bulletin insert](#). This resource from the USCCB offers a quick overview of the pope's recent landmark encyclical on the environment.
- You can also explore [Quotes from Church Teaching on Climate Change](#). The quotes cover the papacies of Paul VI through Benedict XVI, as well as major statements from the U.S. Catholic bishops.

6. Take the St. Francis Pledge to Care for Creation and the Poor

Make a family commitment to caring for the environment in the context of your Catholic faith by taking the [St. Francis Pledge to Care for Creation and the Poor](#) available over at the [Catholic Coalition for Climate Change](#). Then, sit down and make an action plan as a family.

Talking points: Meeting God in the natural world

Use your time outdoors to share the Church's teaching about the environment with your children. Here are some talking points:

► **We can encounter God in nature.** Since ancient times, the natural world has been one of the ways that people come to know about God and experience his wisdom and glory (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [#32](#) and [#299](#); *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* [#487](#)). Many of the saints lived in harmony with the natural world and had special friendships with animals as a consequence of their closeness to God (see the partial list above).

► **We still need the Church.** Your older kids might ask: “If we can encounter God in nature, why do we need the Church? Why can’t nature be our church?” It is important for them to understand that the Church isn’t just another human organization; rather, it is both a sign of our communion with God and the unity of the human race, and the means by which our union with God and other people is accomplished ([Catechism #775](#)). Catholics say that the Church is the sacrament of Christ—the means by which Christ is physically manifested in the world, and by which he continues his saving work. So even though the beauty of the night sky or the mystery of life unfolding in a stream might lift our minds to God, it is only in the Church that we are saved from the power of sin and death (see [Catechism #846-847](#)).

► **God intends creation for our good.** Our faith teaches us to treat our natural environment within the context of God’s overall plan of salvation ([Compendium #451](#)). God intends the created world to serve the good of human beings, who are the “summit” of his creation ([Catechism #343](#)). The Church rejects any view that values the environment as much as or more than human beings, or makes creation into a sort of god. We are called to care for creation in part to preserve it for the benefit of all human beings, including future generations ([Catechism #2415](#)).

► **God calls on us to respect creation for its own sake.** The Church also rejects views that reduce the natural world to something to be manipulated and exploited ([Compendium #463](#)). Creation has its own intrinsic value, for the simple reason that God made it and called it “good” (Genesis 1); God loves and cares for each of his creatures ([Catechism #342](#); [2416](#)), so we should, too.

Learn more

► *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #[282-301](#), [337-349](#), 2415-2418

- ▶ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, “[Chapter Ten: Safeguarding the Environment](#)” #451-487
- ▶ [Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home](#)