

HISTORY OF CATHOLIC EARTHCARE BALLARAT DIOCESE

Ballarat Catholic Earthcare grew from the energy of a group of people who regularly met to discuss ecology, theology and spirituality, discussions which were sometimes preceded by bushwalks. The Diocesan Pastoral Council was approached in 2010 with the request to form a Diocesan environmental group. Frank Sheehan, a member of the Diocesan pastoral Council at the time, volunteered to chair the new group and regular meetings began in 2011. Initially called the Ballarat Diocesan Sustainability Group, the name was changed to Catholic Earthcare Ballarat Diocese as we were closely liaising with Catholic Earthcare Australia.

Catholic Earthcare Australia was established by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference in May 2002, and received its mandate in May 2003, as an agency of the Catholic Bishops Conference. It was through the activities of education, research and advocacy, to give leadership in responding to Pope John Paul II's call to encourage and support the 'ecological conversion'. Earthcare networked with schools and parishes.

Programs offered by Catholic Earthcare Australia included the ASSISI Program – a Strategic-Systems based Sustainability Program to which three members participated in a course in Tasmania, the NEEN project in 2013, a National Energy Efficiency Network which aided Not-for Profit organisations to become more energy efficient, also promoted within the Ballarat Diocese at the time. The Earthcare Parish Audit was also available for parishes to implement and this opportunity was taken by St Joseph's Parish Warnambool Pastoral Council. Over this time we have been privileged to access to the extensive knowledge and experience and ongoing support of Sr Veronica Lawson and Fr Barry Ryan.

Jacqui Remond, the initial director of Earthcare Australia assisted in the formation of the Global Catholic Climate Movement, now known as the globally interconnecting *Laudato Si Movement*, of which Australia is included particularly in the *Laudato Si Movement Asia Pacific Network*.

In May 2017, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference decided to incorporate Catholic Earthcare Australia into its sister agency, Caritas Australia. This was to strengthen the capacity of Earthcare Australia in its advocacy and educational about the principles of Pope Francis' 2015 Encyclical, *Laudato Si* through Caritas' extensive education and advocacy work in parishes, schools and the wider community regarding our responsibilities on environmental issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss and the need to live sustainably.

The Australian Catholic Bishops encourage each Catholic parish, diocese, eparchy, educational institution and organisation to join the Laudato Si' Action Platform **by 2024** and develop a Laudato Si' Action Plan.

The Laudato Si Action Platform is a shared space where the Church worldwide is to develop a bold and active response to the ecological crisis, so urgently illustrated in Pope Francis' encyclical Laudato Si, the platform is to equip us to take action now to address the seven Laudato Si Goals:

- Response to the Cry of the earth
- Response to the Cry of the Poor
- Ecological Economics
- Adoption of Sustainable Lifestyles
- Ecological education
- Ecological Spirituality
- Community Resilience and Empowerment.

We currently have two parishes who have signed to be part of the Earthcare Parishes. By committing to becoming an Earthcare Parish, one becomes part of a network of Australian parishes and organisations who discuss and take action, for in supporting the Laudato Si Goals we are supporting all of creation who are suffering in our world.

Jacqui Remond , the initial Director of Catholic Earthcare Australia

A couple of stories featuring Catholic Earthcare Ballarat can be read below:

Recently, Bernard Holland, the new Director of Catholic Earthcare Australia, travelled to Ballarat to meet with Catholic Earthcare Ballarat to introduce himself and discuss how his services might be utilised within this diocese. He was interested in knowing more about the group themselves and to know what the group do and plan to do. Below is some information that has been written following this meeting which may help to know about Catholic Earthcare Ballarat



L-R: Sandra Dillon, Jo Rix, Sr Veronica Lawson, Kathleen Leonard, Frank Sheehan, Kate Lawry, Bernard Holland, Susan Crowe, Anna Schlooz.

Catholic Earthcare Ballarat is made up of members who are passionate about ecology and sustainability. The group discuss, plan and advocate about how we, Australian Catholics, and all people, can actively promote **Care of Our Common Home** (*Laudato Si – Pope Francis*). The group meets bi-monthly at the Mercy Centre in Victoria St, Ballarat East. One member represents Catholic Earthcare Ballarat on the Ballarat Diocese Social Justice Commission.

The Ballarat Diocese Social Justice Commission (BDSJC), an important advisory body for Bishop Paul Bird CSsR, works to develop a Christian contribution to public debates on social issues especially in areas of local or regional impact. The commission promotes spirituality through liturgy, structures and agencies, giving prominence to right relationships, respect for life and creation, and the promotion of liberation from every form of oppression. (*BDSJC webpage*)

Within the BDSJC, Catholic Earthcare Ballarat, through its representative, aims to bring to prominence the importance of caring for and saving our common home.

A small group of people deeply concerned for the environment, meeting regularly led by Tom and Jenny Kingston, formed the basis of what is now Catholic Earthcare Ballarat Diocese. Discussions included the writings of Passionist Fr Thomas Berry, also influential was Earthsong, the centre for Spirituality and Ecology at Parkville. In 2011, Frank Sheehan from the Diocesan Pastoral Council led the formation of a formal Diocesan group. In the following years the writings of Dennis Edwards, Leonardo Boff, Elizabeth Johnson, Sean McDonagh and many others have influenced the groups discussion and actions. Since its formation, the group has promoted NEEN (Catholic Earthcare's National Energy Efficiency Network) 2014-5 and the Catholic Earthcare Energy audit, attended Catholic Earthcare Assissi programmes, joined the Global Catholic Climate movement, newsletters (2013-2016), submissions to local, State and Federal governments and informative community presentations. The third anniversary of Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si – "Care for Our Common Home"* was recently honoured in Ballarat with a presentation on the sobering July Vatican Conference "Saving Our common Home and the Future of Life on Earth" and the urgent action required to combat the effects of Climate Change.

On the World Day of Prayer for Creation in 2016 (01/09/16), Pope Francis offered people of faith a practical and very accessible way of living the message of his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'*:

May the works of mercy also include care for our common home. As a spiritual work of mercy, care for our common home calls for a 'grateful contemplation of God's world' (Laudato Si', 214) which 'allows us to discover in each thing a teaching which God wishes to hand on to us' (ibid., 85). As a corporal work of mercy, care for our common home requires 'simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness' and 'makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world' (ibid., 230-31).

A consideration for Catholic Earthcare Ballarat Diocese might be taking the two key elements of the eighth work of mercy (grateful contemplation of God's world and simple daily gestures) as a framework for our conversations and for our work of caring for/saving our common home.

Jo Rix, Sandra Dillon and Sr Veronica Lawson rsm (December 2018)

Recently the Diocesan Ecological Sustainability Group (ECOS) held an evening centred on St Francis of Assisi and *Laudato Si*. The evening was chaired by Frank Sheehan who introduced the program and welcomed those attending. Special mention was made of guest speakers Associate Professor Singarayer Florentine (Florry) from the Centre for Environmental Management, Federation University Australia and Sr Veronica Lawson rsm.

Florry referred to the encyclical of Pope Francis suggesting that the whole world is now more aware of the importance of looking after all of creation. He said it is no exaggeration



to say that a great many more people were becoming aware of the effects of climate and climate change since the release of *Laudato Si*. He mentioned a recent article in The Age's Good Weekend magazine which featured the plight of coastal dwellers in Fiji who had to move their village some hundreds of metres inland from its original shoreline location due to the rising sea waters. <http://www.theage.com.au/good-weekend/escaping-the-waves-a-fijian-villages-forced-relocation-20150831-gic0k1.html>



Vin Dillon and Singaray Florentine (Florry)



Listening intently

As part of his presentation, Florry gave a quick overview of some of the typical arid zone vegetation communities and emphasised the issues in the arid zone. Lack of regeneration of trees and shrubs in the arid and semi-arid rangelands of south east Australia has caused widespread concern. The grazing pressure that has been exerted over most of the land for up to 150 years, coupled with the episodic nature of regeneration, means that many communities are seriously at risk. Both pastoralism and conservation depend on the long-term survival of the natural perennial vegetation. Florry emphasised that the Belah/Rosewood community in particular has been severely depleted through harvesting of timber and clearing of overstorey trees in an attempt to increase growth of grasses and forbs. In addition Florry highlighted some of the major issues in arid zone Australia. Issues such as (i) impacts of pastoralism, (ii) changes to water regimes, (iii) exotic plants and animals.

Continuing on, Florry then gave a good overview about Federation University Australia's 40,000 ha teaching research and conservation property of Nanya Station. In 2004 the property was purchased by Federation University Australia with assistance from the Commonwealth Department of Environment and Heritage. Florry finished his talk with a range of research projects currently taking place up in Nanya Station, reducing grazing pressure on the land by closing ground tanks, goat control and ripping rabbit warrens. The tank closure is complemented by research into impacts on biodiversity; regenerating endangered flora and fauna communities by using exclusion fencing around critical communities; and protecting the Mallee fowl population by exotic predator control and monitoring their nest sites.

Sr Veronica concentrated on ecology from a biblical perspective, particularly on water. Highlighting that at the very crux of existence, water is life-giving. All life needs water, it is the essence of life. "Water, I take it but I don't take it for granted". Sr Veronica mentioned some alarming facts such as every minute a child dies of a water-related disease; one in nine people lack access to safe water; more people have a mobile phone than a toilet. <http://water.org/water-crisis/water-facts/water/>

The evening was attended by approximately thirty people and the Diocesan Ecological Sustainability Group hope to hold more informative presentations similar to this in the future.



Sandra Dillon and Florry



Sr Veronica Lawson rsm presenting