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UGA scientists pen climate action plan for Catholic Archdiocese of Atlanta

By **LEE SHEARER** updated Wednesday, April 6, 2016 - 7:29am **1 comments**

A group of University of Georgia scientists has created what may be the first climate action plan based on Pope Francis' "Laudato Si" encyclical of last year.

The encyclical was subtitled "On Care for our Common Home," and in it Francis called on not only Catholics but the people of the world to leave behind the irresponsible development and consumer culture that have fueled environmental degradation and global warming, which Francis called "one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day."

On Tuesday, Archbishop Wilton Gregory of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Atlanta came to the Catholic Center at the University of Georgia to thank the scientists who developed the plan, to emphasize why it's important, and to say, "We'll try to do a better job" of taking care of God's creation, the earth.

More than 200 people gathered at the Lumpkin Street center Tuesday morning to hear speakers and then see Gregory ceremonially plant a weeping cherry tree.

• **[View more photos from the event in our slideshow.](#)**

The plan, printed in both English and Spanish, describes dozens of ways people can help take care of the earth.

"We are charged with scripture to be good stewards," UGA climate scientist Marshall Shepherd told the crowd Tuesday.

The effects of climate change will fall heaviest on the most vulnerable, such as the poor and the elderly, he said.

"It's the type of people Jesus would be hanging out with," he said.



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Shepherd and fellow UGA climate scientists Pam Knox and David Stooksbury helped write the action plan, along with UGA water resources expert Mark Risse and geologist Rob McDowell, said Susan Varlamoff, the recently retired director of the UGA College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences' Office of Environmental Sciences.

Varlamoff went to Gregory after Francis' encyclical to suggest the idea, then led the effort to put it together.

The straightforward document describes dozens of ways people can help take care of the earth, divided into three categories — “easy,” “moderate” and “advanced.”

Avoiding bottled water or carpooling to Mass, school or parish meetings would be easy, for example, while planting trees and supporting candidates who support the environment would be a moderate action, and reducing lawn size and creating a community garden are in the advanced category.

“We can all do something in this plan,” said Varlamoff.

“We also know as scientists we must make change quickly,” Varlamoff told the crowd gathered Tuesday, which included students from Athens' St. Joseph Catholic Parish School and Monsignor Donovan Catholic High School.

“As far as we know, this is the only action plan for the pope's encyclical in the nation,” Varlamoff said.

An encyclical is a kind of letter, and Francis' encyclical “came from Pope Francis to all of humanity,” Gregory said. “It is addressed to all of us because we share one earth.”

Gregory's message reinforced the impassioned words of another speaker at Tuesday's ceremony, Rev. Dr. Gerald Durley, the retired pastor of Atlanta's Providence Missionary Baptist Church.

Durley is a longtime civil rights activist who now works with Interfaith Power & Light, a national religious group that promotes energy conservation, energy efficiency and renewable energy.

Climate change and environmental destruction are “the civil and human rights issue of our time,” Durley said, calling on people to “reverse the devastation we are deliberately and consciously inflicting on the earth.”

The Archdiocese of Atlanta's action plan is online at www.archatl.com/catholic-life/refreshatl.

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