Session 1: "The Agony in the Garden: What's Happening to our Common Home?"

Personal, at-home reflection on the signs-of-the-times:

In preparation for the 1st session, please choose at least two pieces of material from the following selection:

1. 5-minute video "Drought, Water, War, and Climate Change" from Yale Climate Connection: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BbkNcvGHZwc
8. Video from PBS program: Extreme Realities. It investigates the link between extreme weather, climate change and threats to the national security. Advance to 12:30 to watch a section about the impact of climate change on the people of Bangladesh: http://www.pbs.org/video/2365380402

Also, read the following excerpts from Pope Francis’ encyclical Laudato Si: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

Passages from Laudato Si’ (chapter 1)

# 2 This sister [the earth] now cries out to us because of the harm we have in acted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor.

# 10 I believe that Saint Francis is the example ... of an integral ecology... He shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace.
Every effort to protect and improve our world entails profound changes in “lifestyles, models of production and consumption, and the established structures of power which today govern societies”. Authentic human development has a moral character.

Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home. Here I want to recognize, encourage and thank all those striving in countless ways to guarantee the protection of the home which we share. Particular appreciation is owed to those who tirelessly seek to resolve the tragic effects of environmental degradation on the lives of the world’s poorest. Young people demand change. They wonder how anyone can claim to be building a better future without thinking of the environmental crisis and the sufferings of the excluded.

Our goal is not to amass information or to satisfy curiosity, but rather to become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it.

The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth.

...A throwaway culture (which) affects the excluded just as it quickly reduces things to rubbish.

The climate is a common good, belonging to all and meant for all... Humanity is called to recognize the need for changes of lifestyle, production and consumption... The problem is aggravated by a model of development based on the intensive use of fossil fuels, which is at the heart of the worldwide energy system. Another determining factor has been an increase in changed uses of the soil, principally deforestation for agricultural purposes.

Climate change is a global problem with grave implications: environmental, social, economic, political and for the distribution of goods. It represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day.

There is an urgent need to develop policies so that, in the next few years, the emission of carbon dioxide and other highly polluting gases can be drastically reduced, for example, substituting for fossil fuels and developing sources of renewable energy.

Fresh drinking water is an issue of primary importance, since it is indispensable for human life and for supporting terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems... Our world has a grave social debt towards the poor who lack access to drinking water, because they are denied the right to a life consistent with their inalienable dignity. This debt can be paid partly by an increase in funding to provide clean water and sanitary services among the poor.

Today, however, we have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.

It is remarkable how weak international political responses have been. The failure of global summits on the environment makes it plain that our politics are subject to technology and finance. There are too many special interests, and economic interests easily end up trumping the common good and manipulating information so that their own plans will not be affected. .... the interests of economic groups which irrationally demolish sources of life should not prevail in dealing with natural resources.

In some countries, there are positive examples of environmental improvement: rivers, polluted for decades, have been cleaned up; native woodlands have been restored; landscapes have been beautified
thanks to environmental renewal projects; beautiful buildings have been erected; advances have been made in the production of non-polluting energy and in the improvement of public transportation. These achievements do not solve global problems, but they do show that men and women are still capable of intervening positively. For all our limitations, gestures of generosity, solidarity and care cannot but well up within us, since we were made for love.

#59 As often occurs in periods of deep crisis which require bold decisions, we are tempted to think that what is happening is not entirely clear. Superficially, apart from a few obvious signs of pollution and deterioration, things do not look that serious, and the planet could continue as it is for some time. Such evasiveness serves as a license to carrying on with our present lifestyles and models of production and consumption. This is the way human beings contrive to feed their self-destructive vices: trying not to see them, trying not to acknowledge them, delaying the important decisions and pretending that nothing will happen.

For those who are interested, here is the summary of Chapter 1 of Laudato Si from the study guide from the Inter-Franciscan Commission for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation

Opening prayer and introductory reflection (3 minutes)

Welcome and the introduction. Then, invite everyone to place herself or himself in the presence of God.

Reader: Let us reflect in silence on what God wants to tell us through our sacred scriptures:

Lector 1: “Ah Lord God! It is you who made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you... You brought your people Israel out of the land of Egypt with signs and wonders” (Jer 32:17, 21)

Lector 2: “Do not pollute the land where you live and where I dwell.” Numbers 35:33-34

Lector 3: (Because of the sins of the people...) “The land mourns and everything that dwells in it languishes; The beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and even the fish of the sea perish.” Hosea 4:3

Lector 4: “If you defile (yourselves) and the land, the land will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were there before you.” Leviticus 18:28

Leader: O God of the poor, help us to rescue the abandoned and forgotten of this earth, so precious in your eyes. Bring healing to our lives, that we may protect the earth and not prey on it, that we may sow beauty, not pollution and destruction. May your Holy Spirit of truth and integrity help us to see how we can continue on your saving mission; showing mercy to all and healing our broken relationships with you, with our brothers and sisters and with all Earth’s community of life. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Based on ‘A prayer for our earth’, Laudato Si’)

Background Information (to be used by the host/facilitator) – 5 minutes

Welcome everyone and remind them that the purpose of the gathering is to reflect in faith on Pope Francis’ encyclical, Laudato Si’. The title is taken from the first line of the encyclical, “Laudato Si’, mi Signore,” or “Praise be to you, my Lord.” This beautiful canticle written by Saint Francis of Assisi reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us.
An “encyclical” is a letter that is a teaching document by the Holy Father. A “social encyclical” applies the consistent, traditional moral teachings of the Church to the social and economic challenges of the current day.

In the first session, remind the participants that, in preparation for each of the sessions they should read:

a) A selection of the additional background readings or short videos. These are meant to offer a particular context for the first part of the group discussion on the signs of the times. Point out that the readings and short video news clips were selected to highlight the impact of climate change on the people of Central America, Middle East, Bangladesh and the vast parts of Africa affected by severe droughts linked to climate change. Given that so many St. Camillus parishioners have families in those parts of the world, it’s even more important for us to reflect on what’s happening to our common home in that context.

b) The selection of quotes from Pope Francis’ encyclical Laudato Si. However, please encourage the participants to read the entire encyclical and provide a link to the on-line version:
http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

Next, please provide the guidelines for the group discussion. Ask the participants to avoid a trap of getting into an argument and try to convince the other person/s in the group. Rather, the goals is to help one another to hear God’s voice calling us to care for our common home and live in the world with integrity with justice, peace and harmony with all Earth’s community of life. Some groups find it helpful to use the “mutual invitation” method to move the sharing along. Each participant shares his or her reflections to a particular question, and then invites another person who has not yet shared to do so. Be sure that everyone has an opportunity to respond to each question.

To help create a positive space for faith sharing, ask the participants to observe these simple guidelines:

• Listen carefully to what the other person is saying.
• Use “I” statements. (Take responsibility for what you express. Do not speak for “them.”)
• Help all to participate. Ensure that nobody dominates the discussion.  
  (In case that happens, you can intervene by saying something like: “I can tell you are very passionate about this issue and have a lot to say, let’s give opportunities for others to express themselves…”)
• Stay on the topic and stay focused on Pope Francis’ message.
• Be respectful of different points of views and perspectives. This is a sharing group not a debate.

**Group Discussion**  
**Part A: 10-20 minutes**

In the first 5-10 minutes of the group discussion, ask people to share any insights they may have from the Signs of the Times material that has been assigned to read or watch in preparation for this session. If necessary, you can start a conversation with questions such as:

1. What have you learned about the connection between climate change, the extreme weather events and their impact on the vulnerable people in Central America, Syria, Bangladesh or parts of Africa?

2. In what ways does the presented material confirm or challenge your previous convictions or understanding or the current social, political and environmental realities?

3. Based on your readings of the assigned Sign-of-the-time material, what is the most compelling example of the connection between the care for our common home and some of the social justice issues we're facing?
Group Discussion
Part B: 25 minutes or more

Possible questions for small group discussion:

1. Do you agree with the Pope that the Earth, our common home, is falling into serious disrepair? What evidence can you provide to support your opinion?

2. Pope Francis makes clear his understanding that environmental degradation and social injustice are grave concerns, and that they are interconnected. How have you experienced this connection? How are the teachings of Pope Francis and the signs of the times (the extreme droughts in Central America and Africa, the refugee crisis, the precarious situation of the people of Bangladesh, etc.) challenge our lifestyle?

3. Where have you seen harm inflicted on Sister Earth?

4. What does the pope mean by a “throwaway culture” (22)? Do you agree with him? Why?

5. Do you agree with the way that Pope Francis speaking about the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor links climate change with the right to life and the urgent need for a profound change in our society including our politics?

Taking Action: 5 minutes: Brainstorm ways in which you people could take action as individuals and as part of the community. Practice saying NO to what Pope Francis describes as the “throwaway culture,” and learn more about the recent law passed in Montgomery County prohibiting the use of the Styrofoam. Please see the attachment for more information.

Closing Prayer – 5 minutes

Prayer Leader: Let us close by offering intentions based on today’s reflections and conversation. In a moment, I will start us off with a couple of examples. I invite you to then add your own. After each intention, we will respond, “Lord, hear our prayer.”

We pray for the gift of awe and wonder, that we may recognize God’s creation as gift, let us pray to the Lord...

We pray for God’s help to work together to protect our common home, let us pray to the Lord....

You can add a few more intentions....

After participants are done offering intentions, conclude with the following excerpt from the prayer taken from Laudato Si’.

Leader: God of love, show us our place in this world as channels of your love for all the creatures of this earth, for not one of them is forgotten in your sight. Enlighten those who possess power and money that they may avoid the sin of indifference, that they may love the common good, advance the weak, and care for this world in which we live.

The poor and the earth are crying out. O Lord, seize us with your power and light, help us to protect all life, to prepare for a better future, for the coming of your Kingdom of justice, peace, love and beauty. Praise be to you! Amen.