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Laudato Si Lessons

Nurses Recognizing Our Responsibility in Climate Science and Health Systems Resilience



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In this editorial, I am discussing a position from the Catholic Church regarding the global environment health and climate crisis. The challenge is posed for nurses and nurse leaders, “What responsibilities do we feel and what steps can we take to ensure we remain faithful stewards of our profession's covenant with society and each other?”

Laudato Si—Everything Is Interconnected

Pope Francis offered a powerful entry into the worldwide conversation about the global environmental health and climate crisis with *Laudato Si* (LS), a papal encyclical (briefing document to Bishops

throughout the world) outlining the response of the Catholic Church to this critical issue.¹ That response centers around “integral ecology,” which focuses on the bonds between humans and the shared natural world.¹ Integral ecology combines environmental justice and social justice and recognizes a moral imperative to stabilize climate change.² These values are espoused by the nursing profession in our commitment to the dignity of every human person, wellness, healthy behaviors, and optimal outcomes.³ By working to address the profound wealth inequalities driving health disparities experienced by the poor, nurses can help address environmental and climate crisis challenges.³⁻⁸

Climate Change Science and COVID-19

Climate change and the escalating impact of wide-scale natural disasters and weather cycle alterations are placing humans at a grave risk.^{2,9} Deadly heat waves, drastically consumptive deforestation and farming practices exploiting local populations and their lands, increased droughts, wildfires, mass extinctions, rising seas, severe storms, and lethal and widespread oceanic coastal and inland river flood events collectively impact our ecosystems, food supply

chains, healthcare institutions, and, ultimately, nurses. The integrity of delineated boundary habitats becomes altered and facilitates transmission of zoonotic diseases from animals to humans as demonstrated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Most heartbreaking, the poor people, the vulnerable people, and the marginalized adults and children shoulder the greatest burden. Example sequelae include increased morbidity/mortality from toxic exposures and environmental crises, forced community displacements, secondary violence and trauma due to migration, long-term inability to thrive in stable employment and agricultural opportunities for which to support families, and removal from collective decision-making processes.^{1,2,4}

These problems are internationally recognized as scientific priorities. On October 31 to November 12, 2021, the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Glasgow (COP26) assembled more than 120 world leaders and 40000 participants and formalized binding agreements based on science, practical solutions, and political will representing local communities and nations, and set a path for clear actionable responses to actualize climate mitigation.¹⁰ Although these formal agreements are critical steps in the process, a moral-faith framework such as LS helps

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prioritize and guide dialogues on sustainable use and prioritizing fair distribution of limited resources. Can nurses help other denominational groups, community groups, and professional organizations from multiple sectors to also take bold steps on these critical issues?

Health Systems and COVID-19 Resilience

Although healthcare leaders can measure the transmission of SARS-CoV-2 cases and deaths, these statistics ultimately represent the absence of a cooperation framework. Our plans to overcome COVID-19 must move beyond reactionary protocols to include healthy politics in the form of genuine and mutual fraternity in local communities progressing to international governance frameworks. This includes working to ensure adequate global vaccine availability and distribution for all.¹¹

The message of LS consists of 2 prongs that should be considered, hearing and responding to the needs of the Earth and to the needs of the poor.¹ This means that the resources and gifts of our Earth must be preserved and protected, in addition to reducing poverty and lifting up individuals and communities, particularly those who are marginalized on the peripheries.¹²

Healthcare leaders can use this ecologic philosophy and framework to prioritize addressing the climate crisis by linking COVID-19 recovery responses to the design of stronger, more equitable, and climate-resilient healthcare institutions and workplaces.¹³ The strongest science, evidence, and research must be placed at the service of those who are the most profoundly vulnerable. As nurse leaders develop strategic plans to move forward, they should consider

climate-friendly goals and interventions. Examples include: energy efficiency; building designs responsive to local climate conditions and optimized for reduced energy and resource use; alternative fuel and energy sources; alternative transportation options; sustainably grown local foods for staff and patients; safe alternatives to bottled water; and robust recycling options and reduced waste incineration.^{14,15}

Conclusion

As of April 9, 2022, there are 497 million confirmed COVID-19 cases and 6.17 million deaths.¹⁶ Nurses and other healthcare providers are deeply connected and interrelated now and forever, and all must recognize our professional commitments to those who are poor and vulnerable. Scientific strategies for COVID-19 recovery and other future healthcare emergencies will only work to our collective advancement if we actualize integral ecology in our local communities, states, countries, and international governance structures to build resilient staffs, organizations, and multisector collaborations that serve the weakest and most vulnerable. For the 20th consecutive year, nurses lead *Gallup's* Honesty and Ethics List with an 81% approval rating and eclipse physicians by 14 points.¹⁷ This is a powerful and visible sign of the social covenant that nurses hold with the American public and must not be broken.¹⁸ As John Fitzgerald Kennedy solemnly acknowledged on January 9, 1961, "For of those to whom much is given, much is required."¹⁹ May nurses and nurse leaders continue to rise to the challenge of serving the least among us and each other as we rebuild our profession and healthcare system for stronger,

more equitable, and climate resilient institutions and workplaces.

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