

Glenmary: Let's care for creation by reducing our use of plastic.

Plastic pollution is everywhere.

Plastic pollution has reached every corner of the globe, smothering our oceans, contaminating communities, and threatening whole ecosystems around the world. It's not just the plastic we can see; tiny particles of plastic called microplastics are showing up in our water, in our food, and in the air we breathe.

We need to use less plastic.

This isn't a waste management problem. There is simply too much plastic being created and nowhere for it to end up except in landfills, in the environment, or being burned. Despite this mounting crisis, the plastics industry plans to keep producing more plastic each year, investing billions to expand production capacity. Meanwhile, the United Nations estimates that by 2050, there will be more plastic than fish by weight in the ocean. And we're learning how plastic contributes to global warming when it degrades in the environment.

Plastic pollutes at every step.

Plastic harms people and the planet from production to disposal. Plastics are treated as a product that appears from nowhere and goes to nowhere; few of us think about where our plastic comes from or where it ends up after we throw it "away." Yet plastic causes serious problems at every stage of its life.

Plastic begins as fossil fuels like oil and natural gas; the health and climate impacts of oil and gas extraction and transportation are part of plastic's lifecycle. These fossil fuels are then converted into the chemical ingredients for plastic at plants that release toxic emissions into the communities in which they are built — resulting in higher rates of asthma and cancer.

Many of the plastics we interact with include other chemical additives or coatings. These additives can leach out of plastic and into humans, causing more health consequences. Whether on land or in the ocean, plastic pollution threatens the stability and biodiversity of whole ecosystems, from the top to the bottom of the food chain.

"God will ask us if we have cultivated and cared for the world that He created, for the benefit of all and for future generations... What will be our answer?"

-Pope Leo XIV

What about recycling?

A small percentage of plastic gets recycled; only 9% of the plastic ever created has been recycled (Science Advances). There are hundreds of varieties of plastic, each with different properties and recycling value. Some types of plastic are easier to recycle into other usable products; they command a higher value on the recycling market and are more likely to be captured and recycled.

Other products have such little value that it isn't economically feasible to recycle them. This can be a result of the type of plastic used, the size and shape of the product itself, and the conditions of the global recycling market. Plastics with low or no recycling value end up in landfills, in the environment, or being burned.

Some products, particularly certain food packaging, are made from multi-layer plastic: Plastic is bonded to other materials like foil or cardboard. Many hot beverage cups aren't recyclable or compostable due to a thin layer of plastic coating on the paper. Plastic bonded to another material to create multi-layer plastic can almost never be recycled.

Let's focus on single-use plastic.

Start with water bottles, beverage cups, and meal items. While plastic is a remarkably useful material, too much plastic is used just once. Identifying and eliminating these single-use, low-value plastics is the first step to ending plastic pollution.

Over 60 million plastic water bottles are thrown away in the U.S. every day. (National Geographic) It takes these bottles over 450 years to decompose into smaller pieces of plastic. (World Wildlife Federation) There is no assurance that bottled water is safer than tap water. And an estimated 25 percent of water sold in a plastic bottle is just tap water — sometimes further treated, sometimes not. (Natural Resources Defense Council)

Yes, it might cost more for some items. And it will be less convenient.

As an incentive to choose more environmentally sustainable options, JPIC will:

- Provide each Glenmary mission \$250 to help your parish make the switch
- Share research on the most affordable alternatives to plastic
- Offer education and listening sessions to help missions engage in creation care

The global Laudato Si Movement works for Ecological Conversion: To encourage a change of heart in the Catholic faithful and motivate a more passionate concern for our common home. This is our hope for Glenmary. How can JPIC help you and your mission answer this call?

For more information: laudatosimovement.org;
catholicclimatecovenant.org; storyofstuff.org; breakfreefromplastic.org

“Living our vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience.”

—Pope Francis, Laudato Si’