

Pope's encyclical calls for ecological conversion, speaker says

Cardinal Ritter Birthplace Foundation board chairman David Hock, left, New Albany sculptor Guy Tedesco and speaker Kyle Kramer pose with Tedesco's bonded bronze bust of Cardinal Joseph E. Ritter at the organization's fifth annual Irish coffee lecture on March 16 in New Albany. (Photo by Patricia Happel Cornwell)



By Patricia Happel Cornwell (Special to The Criterion)

NEW ALBANY—Nearly 50 people braved frigid temperatures to hear Kyle Kramer, executive director of the Passionist Earth and Spirit Center in Louisville, discuss Pope Francis's encyclical on the environment, "Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home," at the [Cardinal Ritter House](#) in New Albany on March 16.

The occasion was the fifth annual Irish coffee lecture sponsored by the Cardinal Ritter Birthplace Foundation.

Joseph E. Ritter (1892-1967) is the only native Hoosier ever to become a cardinal. He was noted for desegregating Catholic schools in the archdioceses of Indianapolis and St. Louis before it became federal law through *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. The home at 1218 E. Oak St. where he was born was saved from demolition in 2001, and purchased by the Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana in 2002.

Renovated and expanded to include a community room and a small museum about the cardinal's life, it now serves as a neighborhood center. Its primary tenant is the southern Indiana regional office of Home of the Innocents, a Louisville agency that serves children and families.

Kramer, a member of [Holy Family Parish](#) in New Albany, and his family spent 15 years as organic farmers in Spencer County in southwestern Indiana before moving to New Salisbury (near New Albany). He is the author of *A Time to Plant: Life Lessons in Work, Prayer and Dirt* (Ave Maria Press, 2010). He is also a columnist for *St. Anthony Messenger* magazine and a "climate ambassador" for the Catholic Climate Covenant.

"Laudato Si' is first and foremost a sociological encyclical, not just an environmental encyclical," Kramer said. "I like to call Pope Francis a 'conservative tree-hugger,' but he also 'hugs' God's Spirit in all of creation, across boundaries, just like Cardinal Ritter. The springboard for his theology is always a pastoral and pragmatic one. There is nothing new here. Pope Francis's themes have been in Catholic social teaching for centuries."

Kramer discussed the key components of the encyclical, which led up to the conclusion that "we are called to ecological conversion."

He said the pope points out that pollution and climate change cause great suffering to the poor, whom Kramer called “the ‘bottom billion,’ those who are the most affected, but the least responsible for what is being done to the planet. Insomuch as you heal the planet, you heal people.”

“Pope Francis is also concerned about loss of biodiversity,” he added. “The tropical rain forest is the lungs of the planet. When you turn that habitat into a monoculture of soybeans or corn to feed cattle in other countries—animals that did not evolve to eat those things—you lose other species. From the tree frogs to the fungi, everything gives glory to God, just by being what they are.”

Kramer said many environmentalists think humans are “a scourge upon the Earth,” but that the pope does not think so. He cited three social conditions that isolate humans from nature: anthropomorphism, individualism and consumerism, in which a person only values things in relation to human life and oneself.

“This is what I want you to remember: We don’t have a social crisis over here and an environmental crisis over there,” Kramer said. “We have one crisis. Planetary and social health are inseparable. The question Pope Francis asks is, if these things hold together, what would a flourishing planet look like? We would have an economy that serves and heals human life, a healthy relationship with others, a concern for the common good.

“We need to redefine what we mean by progress,” he continued. “Our economy, as it stands, relies on infinite growth, but that can’t be sustained. What went wrong in our stewardship of the Earth? We fell in love with power ever since we fell in love with agriculture 12,000 years ago, and in the 1700s with fossil fuels. The digging stick became the bulldozer. We created a new idol. Anything we’re not willing to let go of is our golden calf.

“But maybe,” he added, “progress really looks like more time with family, more time to spend in nature or to volunteer in the community.”

Kramer noted that the pope’s encyclical offers practical steps that can be taken now to live a more “moderate lifestyle, in which less is more.” The pope urges recycling, saving water, reducing use of paper and plastic, turning off lights, taking public transportation, only cooking what one can eat so as not to waste food, and other measures.

“In a moderate lifestyle,” Kramer said, “it’s about freedom from consumption, not freedom to consume. I drove here in an electric car. I bought it to be the ‘green hipster,’ but now I love it.”

He added, “If you forget everything else on this list of steps—plant trees.”

Before the lecture, Ritter Birthplace Foundation board member Ray Day gave an update on the group’s activities. In mid-March, the center hosted a group of eighth-graders from [Cardinal Ritter Jr./Sr. High School](#) in Indianapolis, who visited the Ritter House as part of a pilgrimage tracing their school’s namesake from Indiana to St. Louis.

Board members also recently transported the bonded bronze version of sculptor Guy Tedesco’s bust of the cardinal to Indianapolis to show it to other Ritter High School students and to personnel at the Indiana State Museum, where they hope to have a

display created about the cardinal's life. A solid bronze version of the bust will eventually be cast and kept at the Ritter House.

Tedesco described the latest artistic project at the center, a sculpture group of the cardinal and several children, which is slated to be installed on the property. A model of the grouping was displayed during the Irish coffee event.

"The glass blocks create a very real barrier," Tedesco said, "and the cardinal is pushing it over. The blocks all have words on them, negative words on one side and positive words on the other side. The symbolic 'wall' will probably never be completely gone, but the children are turning those blocks into a path. In 100 years, this will be as powerful a statement about us as it is about the work that Cardinal Ritter did in his day."

Day said a long-planned rose garden at the Ritter House will come to fruition this summer. A half-wall has been built to enclose a small courtyard, and stone pavers have been laid, leaving a central area and four corner plots where rose bushes will be planted. The project will be a memorial to the cardinal's hobby of growing roses and a place for prayer and reflection.

The pope's encyclical can be downloaded free online at the USCCB or Vatican's websites or purchased at major book stores.

Information about the Cardinal Ritter House and the Cardinal Ritter Birthplace Foundation is available at cardinalritterhouse.org.

(Patricia Happel Cornwell is a freelance writer and a member of St. Joseph Parish in Corydon.) †