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EarthBeat



El Yunque National Forest, a rainforest in Puerto Rico, pictured in 2012 (CNS/Octavio Duran)



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Festivities to mark the five-year anniversary of Pope Francis' landmark encyclical on the environment begin this weekend, just not how anyone originally anticipated.

With the planet still grappling with the coronavirus pandemic, a more subdued, mostly digital Laudato Si' Week kicks off May 16 and runs through May 24. The nine-day Vatican-sponsored event will commemorate the pope's 2015 social encyclical "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home" — the first papal letter focused entirely on the Catholic Church's teachings on the environment and human ecology.

In early March, Francis invited the world's 1.2 billion Catholics to take part in Laudato Si' Week, saying, "I renew my urgent call to respond to the ecological crisis. The cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor cannot continue."

The theme for the week is "everything is connected," a central message in the encyclical made all the clearer as the novel coronavirus has raised dramatic consequences for all aspects of life around the world.

Originally, organizers envisioned the week as a mass mobilization of Catholics at the start of what scientists have said is a critical decade for addressing climate change. But instead of calls for increased environmental protections coming from throngs assembled in St. Peter's Square or gathered in plazas and parishes elsewhere around the globe, most of the celebrating will take place online, as was the case in April for the 50th Earth Day.

"It has not been easy to adapt, but we did it," said Tomás Insua, executive director and founder of the Global Catholic Climate Movement, one of the week's main organizers.

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Laudato Si' Week is sponsored by the Vatican's Dicastery for the Promotion of Integral Human Development, which is led by Cardinal Peter Turkson. More than 100 Catholic organizations worldwide have signed on as partners, among them numerous religious orders, chapters of Caritas Internationalis, development agencies and bishops' conferences.

The website for Laudato Si' Week lists the official events, as well as numerous ones planned by partner groups. Many require online registration, and some will be livestreamed on the Global Catholic Climate Movement Facebook page.

The week's main programs kick off with Insua leading a two-day online retreat May 16-17. It ends on May 24 with a global day of prayer at noon around the world, with all using a shared prayer for the anniversary.

Francis signed his first encyclical, an authoritative papal letter, on May 24, 2015. It was released to the public on June 18 that year.

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On May 18, former United Nations climate chief Christiana Figueres will join Fr. Augusto Zampini, adjunct secretary with the dicastery, for a look at the impact of *Laudato Si*' so far and its continuing relevance to today's ecological and health crises. Figueres served as executive secretary of the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change during negotiations at the COP 21 climate summit in 2015 that resulted in the Paris Agreement — the global pact to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and limit temperature rise as low as 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit).

Other speakers include Mary Evelyn Tucker, head of the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology, and Yeb Sano, a former Philippines climate negotiator and now executive director of Greenpeace Southeast Asia.

The online trainings, webinars and workshops throughout the week will focus on eco-spirituality, sustainability, advocacy and social action. The themes are all action-oriented, Insua told EarthBeat, offering participants case studies of successful creation care initiatives along with tips on how to replicate them.

Organizers hope lessons learned during the week can be put into action later this year during the Season of Creation (Sept. 1-Oct. 4), when parishes might have reopened and in-person gatherings are more possible.

The pandemic hasn't altered just the schedule of Laudato Si' Week but also some of its subject matter.

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A Vatican reflection guide on the coronavirus applies lessons from the encyclical to the current health crisis, returning to its interconnectedness of so many social issues. The guide outlines similarities between the pandemic and the ecological crisis, for instance its global reach, the exposure of underlying societal injustices and the need for a united effort to find solutions.

"Laudato Si' Week helps us reshape the world that will arise after the pandemic has passed. The present crisis is an opportunity to start anew, and to make sure that the world that arises after this crisis has passed is sustainable and just," the guide says.

Outside official events, many parishes, religious congregations and dioceses have organized their own online activities.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, one of the official Laudato Si' Week partners, produced a series of study guides, liturgical resources and homily helps to assist pastors, parishes and families reflect on the encyclical as well as *Querida Amazonia*, Francis' apostolic exhortation on the Amazon synod. Daily email reflections will offer ways to pray, learn and act on caring for creation.

In addition, the conference produced a postcard that calls Catholics to care for creation and invites them to learn more "how the climate crisis is a profound moral issue greatly affecting the poor and vulnerable."



Young people gather for a climate change rally in New York City Sept. 20, 2019. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

"Grounded in our Catholic Tradition, now is the time to protect the earth for our children and grandchildren," the card reads.

The conference will hold two virtual roundtables of bishops who will discuss how the encyclical has been received and implemented in the U.S. church.

The first will take place May 20 at 2 p.m., eastern, and include Archbishop Paul Coakley, chair of the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, San Diego Bishop Robert McElroy and Los Angeles Auxiliary Bishop Robert Barron. Marianne Comfort, justice coordinator for the Sisters of Mercy, will serve as moderator. A second roundtable in Spanish will take place June 18. Bishops for that panel have not been confirmed. The roundtables will be live streamed on the U.S. bishops' conference environment webpage.

Later this summer, the bishops' conference will launch a *Laudato Si*' advocates program to train young Catholics to share the encyclical's message and promote protection of the environment. Before coronavirus lockdowns, bishops' conference staff had planned to use the *Laudato Si*' anniversary as occasion for policy briefings with congressional lawmakers on environmental issues — including a dinner in April with the bipartisan Senate Climate Solutions Caucus — all of which were canceled.

The Catholic Climate Covenant designed its Earth Day program for use during Laudato Si' Week as well. Along with that, it has asked Catholics, and particularly students and young adults, to join its Hope for Creation social media campaign by submitting prayers, writings, art and videos "that lift up our love and hope for God's great creation."

Last month, the Sisters of Mercy launched the Mercy Earth Challenge, a so-called "year-long marathon of change" in lifestyle habits, like reducing waste and living more simply as a way to celebrate the *Laudato Si*' anniversary. Each week of the challenge, the sisters highlight a passage from the encyclical and provide an action step that people can take.

In the San Diego Diocese, theologian Maureen Day will lead a reflection Saturday on the California bishops' pastoral statement on the encyclical. It has also planned four online training sessions to assist parishes in forming creation care teams.

The International Union of Superiors General, the umbrella group of women religious representing 450,000 Catholic sisters around the world, will lead an online prayer service on Tuesday, in English in Spanish, on the theme of "everything is connected in the web of life."

Laudato Si' Generation, the youth branch of Global Catholic Climate Movement, will hold an online workshop May 21 on how to compost at home. They'll also participate later in the month in the Café Laudato Si' conversations that take place on the Movement's Spanish-language Facebook page.



The Sisters of St. Francis of the Holy Cross in Green Bay, Wisconsin, use solar energy. Their panels are pictured Aug. 28, 2019. (CNS/The Compass/Sam Lucero)

The Franciscan Action Network will hold a webinar May 19 where executive director Stephen Schneck will examine Franciscan themes within the encyclical and the "theology of action" that emerges from it.

As with the main Laudato Si' Week programs, many Catholics have made connections with the encyclical's urgent call for an ecological conversion with the circumstances raised by the pandemic.

The Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns this week released its policy guide on climate change, part of a series on faithful voting ahead of the 2020 U.S. presidential election. In it, they highlight the global consequences brought by climate change, quoting Figueres, the former U.N. climate chief, saying, "Some people used to think that they would be immune to global crises like climate change unfolding 'on the other side of the world.' [With the COVID-19 crisis,] I think that bubble has burst."

In Canada, Catholics have prepared a public letter to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to mark the *Laudato Si*' anniversary by urging the country to devise its post-pandemic recovery through a just transition to a low-carbon economy.

"In light of this anniversary, as a community of faithful Catholics, we are taking a pledge to shape our individual and community choices with care for all Creation. We are urging the Canadian government to join this commitment and take immediate concrete actions to flatten the curve of global warming and move towards a just and sustainable future," reads the letter organized by the Joint Ecology Ministry, a coalition of religious communities.

Leah Watkiss, ministry director for social justice, peace and creation care for the Sisters of St. Joseph of Toronto, told EarthBeat her community felt it was important as Catholics to make the appeal now, as the deadly pandemic unfolds amid major milestones for *Laudato Si*' and Earth Day.

"Things that we would have said were impossible a few months ago are happening every day," Watkiss said. "… Anything is possible. So it's our responsibility as citizens of Earth to ask the question 'What comes next and how can we work toward this?' "

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This story appears in the **Laudato Si' at Five** feature series. View the full series.