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Delegates walk past a screen Nov. 1 during the U.N. Climate Change Conference, COP26, in G

Delegates walk past a screen Nov. 1 during the U.N. Climate Change Conference, COP26, in Glasgow, Scotland. (CNS/Reuters/Yves Herman)



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The long-anticipated Laudato Si' Action Platform officially launched Nov. 14, paving the way for any Catholic institution, large or small, across the globe to enroll in a multi-year, Vatican-backed process toward sustainability in the spirit of Pope Francis' landmark encyclical on care for creation.

Already, more than 4,000 church organizations and bodies — including the Jesuits and the Salesian Sisters, the Pontifical Gregorian University and 80 Catholic colleges worldwide, the California bishops' conference and upwards of 1,000 families — have committed to the ambitious initiative to put integral ecology into practice in their lives and work.

The Vatican hopes that number will only grow in coming months as the start of a full-fledged response from the Catholic Church to turn the pope's prophetic words in his 2015 encyclical, "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home," into actions that can help stave off catastrophic global warming.

In doing so, it aims to spark a cultural shift away from exploitation of the planet and its resources to a focus on preservation for the sake of present and future generations during a decade scientists say is critical to rein in greenhouse gas emissions.

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The enrollment period for the first cohort of the Laudato Si' Action Platform opened Nov. 14, the World Day of the Poor, and remains open until April 22, Earth Day. Future enrollment periods will follow each year. The platform is open to all sectors of the church, which can join through the platform website. Participants enroll in seven categories: families; parishes and dioceses; religious orders; educational institutions; health care facilities; lay-led organizations; and economic entities.

For each, the action platform, conceived by the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, outlines seven categories of Laudato Si' goals — such as responding to the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor, ecological economics or adopting simple lifestyles — and identifies specific actions within each.

Action steps include using renewable energy, reducing consumption of meat and single-use items; fostering ecological education and spirituality; advocating for sustainable development; and following ethical investment guidelines, including divestment from fossil fuels.

After the angelus prayer Sunday, Francis told the crowd in St. Peter's Square that registration had opened for the Laudato Si' Action Platform, saying "I invite all people of good will to exercise active citizenship for the care of the common home."

In a May video encouraging Catholics to join the action platform, the pope said there was a need for "a new ecological approach, which transforms our way of living in the world, our lifestyles, our relationship with the Earth's resources, and in general, the way we look at people and live our life."

Platform sends message after COP26

The idea of the platform dates to 2018, following a major report from the United Nations' top climate science body that sketched out the differences between planetary warming of 1.5 and 2 degrees Celsius — the temperature threshold goals stated in the Paris Agreement — and stated that global emissions would have to be halved by 2030 to keep the 1.5 target in sight.

That temperature goal has been the central focus of COP26, the U.N. climate summit in Glasgow, Scotland, which began Oct. 31 and was to end Nov. 12, but extended to Nov. 13.

The Laudato Si' Action Platform's launch coming on the heels of COP26 sends a symbolic message that the global church is ready to do its part to take action on climate change, said Salesian Fr. Joshtrom Kureethadam, coordinator of the dicastery's ecology and creation sector.

A student holds a poster at St. Conval's Primary School while learning about climate change a

A student holds a poster at St. Conval's Primary School while learning about climate change ahead the U.N. Climate Change Conference, COP26. (CNS/Reuters/Russell Cheyne)

He told EarthBeat in an email that the Vatican hopes that thousands more Catholic communities will be encouraged to join the grassroots action platform "so that we can create the critical mass needed for societal transformation."

"This is the (only) action decade that we have to heal and restore our common home and bequeath a livable garden planet to our children and future generations," he said.

When the platform was announced in May, individuals and groups were encouraged to make initial commitments. With the Nov. 14 official opening of the enrollment period, the platform's website provided planning guides and other resources.

The dicastery has outlined a roadmap for the seven-year process, with the first year spent on preparation and planning, the next five focusing on actions to achieve the goals, and the final year a sabbatical "to praise and thank God."

More than 4,200 preregistered

According to data from the dicastery, more than 4,200 entities had preregistered before the enrollment period officially opened. More than a third of those signed up in the past month, during a dicastery-led 40-day period of prayer accompanied by a media campaign. That period came after the launch date, initially set for Oct. 4, the feast of St. Francis of Assisi, was pushed back to mid-November.

The vast majority of registrants, more than 75%, were located in North America, Europe and South America. The leading sectors were families (31%), religious communities (23%) and lay organizations (13%).

Among the religious orders that have committed are the Society of Jesus and the Salesian Sisters of St. John Bosco, the largest men's and women's religious orders in the church.

Within the U.S., more than 160 congregations, provinces and monasteries have identified an "LSAP Promoter" to facilitate their community's journey.



A rosary is draped over a sign marking a conservation easement on the property of the Maryknoll Sisters in Ossining, New York. (NCR photo/Chris Herlinger)

Sr. Ann Scholz, associate director for social mission with the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and a member of the Vatican's religious orders platform working group, said the congregations that have committed so far range from groups with fewer than 50 members to others surpassing 500.

"In a very real sense, religious have been on this journey toward the realization of God's dream for our common home for a very long time. It is a gift to be able to join others in this amazing 'integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature,'" she said in an email, quoting from the encyclical.

"I think what we seek is really nothing less than a conversion of heart and the transformation of society," Scholz added.

The presidents of 80 Catholic universities worldwide have signed letters of intent to Cardinal Peter Turkson, head of the integral human development dicastery.

In addition to Rome's Pontifical Gregorian University, another seven Catholic colleges in Europe, 13 in the Philippines, 13 in Latin America and seven in Africa intend to participate. U.S. participants include 30 universities, including the Catholic University of America and Georgetown University, in the nation's capital; DePaul University in Chicago, the largest U.S. Catholic school; Loras College in Dubuque, Iowa; St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas; and Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington.

Michael Schuck, a theologian at Loyola University Chicago, which also committed, and coordinator of the university sector working group, said there's been "a lot of enthusiasm "about the platform among Catholic schools. He added it was great that the first university to sign up was Hekima University College in Nairobi, Kenya.

17 US dioceses sign on early

Worldwide, 159 dioceses — 17 of them, including the Chicago Archdiocese, in the U.S. — registered before the enrollment period opened.

In a letter to Catholics in the Windy City, Cardinal Blase Cupich described the platform as a means to "vivify *Laudato Si*'." He invited Chicago-area parishes and their pastoral councils to discern creating their own Laudato Si' plans through the platform.

"The Platform is a concrete way for all of us, united in Christ, to integrate the teachings of *Laudato Si*' throughout our parishes," Cupich wrote, adding that it is "a tangible way to witness to our faith as we renew our local Church and care for our common home."

California's 24 bishops and two archbishops, including Archbishop José Gomez of Los Angeles, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, voted unanimously at their annual meeting in October to support the action platform within their dioceses and parishes. A statewide kickoff was planned in parishes on Nov. 14, with the California Catholic Conference organizing materials for homilies, prayers, music and bulletin announcements.

"There is an environmental crisis that we are in, especially here in California," as climate change has fueled historic droughts, said retired Auxilary Bishop Gerald Wilkerson of the Los Angeles Archdiocese, who chairs the state conference's environmental stewardship committee. "And I think that helped the bishops to say that well, it's not just here that we need to be concerned about. We need to move this into the folks in the pews and we all need to be repsonsible for what we call our common home."

The inclusion of the California Catholic bishops is notable after a study indicated that the vast majority of the U.S. episcopacy have not responded to or promoted *Laudato Si*' in the six years since its release.

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>
> —Sr. Ann Scholz
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José Aguto, executive director of Catholic Climate Covenant, which is facilitating the U.S. rollout of the Laudato Si' Action Platform, said interest so far has been "inspiring" and called the initiative "a tangible platform [for people] to feel like they are contributing to the solution."

The Covenant has created a special campaign, We're All Part of God's Plan(et), to raise awareness about the platform and provide U.S.-specific resources, tools and

experts to help parishes, schools and others implement the platform's goals.

Aguto said the platform signals that the global church is committed to addressing climate change and environmental challenges. That message, he added, is more important in the wake of COP26 for people, especially teens and young adults, who may be disappointed by its outcomes.

"We the church need to be providing genuine hope to young people, both within the church and beyond the church, that we are going to care for our common home and strive for a meaningful, viable, ecologically healthy, sustainable future for present and future generations," he told EarthBeat.

More than anything, Aguto said, "we're delighted that this is finally happening."

This story appears in the **COP26 Glasgow** and **Laudato Si' Action Platform** feature series.
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