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San Diego Bishop Robert McElroy attends the opening Mass of the Synod of Bishops for the Amazon celebrated by Pope Francis in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Oct. 6, 2019. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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When Pope Francis presents Bishop Robert McElroy with his red hat on Saturday, Aug. 27, officially making him a cardinal in the Catholic Church, he will elevate one of the top supporters of the themes of his pontificate in the U.S., including on environmental issues and the message of the pope's landmark encyclical "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home."

Appointed bishop of San Diego two months before Francis issued in June 2015 the first papal teaching document dedicated to ecological concerns, McElroy has been among the most outspoken in addressing climate change and environmental justice, but also transforming the encyclical's words into actions.

"Among the bishops, he's one of our best leaders on *Laudato Si*'," said Dan Misleh, founder of the Catholic Climate Covenant. "He certainly has spoken a lot about it, but within the Diocese of San Diego they've also acted quite a bit on it."

More than half of parishes in San Diego have installed solar panels, and the diocese recently joined the Vatican's Laudato Si' Action Platform initiative. It was also among the few dioceses to sign onto a letter to Congress in early August urging passage of legislation to substantially address climate change, which lawmakers ultimately did with the $300-plus billion in climate investments signed into law as part of the Inflation Reduction Act.

For his part, McElroy has advocated a stronger embrace of *Laudato Si*' within the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, and has described the environment as a "core life issue" alongside abortion in Catholic teaching.

"It'd be very important for the church at all levels in the United States to begin making clear where the truth of science points us [on climate change]," he told NCR in an interview in April 2021.



(Unsplash/Frank McKenna)

'Rescue our bruised planet'

In June 2019, Catholic Climate Covenant held its first of three conferences on "*Laudato Si*' and the U.S. Catholic Church" at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska. It selected McElroy to deliver the opening keynote address.

"We had already known that he was speaking out fairly forcefully and positively about *Laudato Si*' and the need to care for creation. So it was sort of a natural fit for us," Misleh said.

McElroy based the speech on John Milton's epic poem "Paradise Lost" and said *Laudato Si*' offers a path forward from the estrangement humans have from God, one another and the created world.

"The encyclical is a call to arms for those who would rescue our bruised planet from the forces that deplete and destroy it," he said. "But *Laudato Si*' is so much more than this. For in its delineation of an integral human ecology, it emphasizes that the

illnesses that plague our world on so many levels are interrelated, and that progress in any one dimension requires attending to the wholeness of the human person and the human family just as it attends to the wholeness of our planet Earth."

To confront the environmental crisis, McElroy proposed the U.S. church be part of an interfaith movement to bring about a broad ecological conversion, for Catholic schools and parishes to "become centers of truth-telling about the threats to God's creation which are indisputably rising in our world," and to empower young people "as the prophetic voice of environmental justice in our nation."

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Rather than depart after delivering his speech, McElroy continued to attend the remainder of the three-day Catholic climate conference, sitting and dining among fellow attendees and participating in breakout sessions focused on ways to integrate principles from *Laudato Si*' into areas like advocacy, energy management, liturgy and young adult ministry.

In October that year, McElroy was one of three U.S. prelates, and personally selected by Francis, to attend the special Synod of Bishops on the Amazon. During the three-week gathering, he said that humanity's relationship with nature needs to be "one of intimacy, sacredness, giftedness and care," and the church can play a role in presenting the Amazon rainforest as "God's most vital and beautiful garden on our planet" that must be protected.

When he returned to San Diego later that month, McElroy joined noted climate scientist Veerabhadran Ramanathan, a recently retired professor at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography at the University of California San Diego and member of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, for an event billed as a new alliance between faith and science on climate change.

"I've been very impressed with his mastery of both *Laudato Si*' and issues of climate change, particularly on the climate justice issue," Ramanathan told EarthBeat.

***Laudato Si*' in San Diego**

Within his home diocese, McElroy has led and supported numerous green initiatives in the spirit of integral ecology that Francis outlines in his encyclical.

Shortly after *Laudato Si*' was issued, he encouraged churches in San Diego to explore the possibility of installing solar panels. So far, 58 of the 97 parishes have done so, as have two high schools and the pastoral center, which draws 80% of its electricity from solar panels. In addition, roughly 10% of parishes have established and active creation care teams, and the diocese is planning to promote them at more parishes as pandemic-related restrictions on in-person gatherings have eased.



Parishioners at St. Didacus Church and School in the Normal Heights neighborhood of San Diego participated in a tree planting on Feb. 24 through a program led by the San Diego Diocese's creation care ministry. (Courtesy of Emmet Farrell)

In July, the diocese became one of the few in the U.S. to have a full-time position on environmental concerns in its chancery when it hired Christina Bagaglio Slentz as associate director of creation care in its Office of Life, Peace and Justice.

Slentz expected she would be starting a new ministry from the ground up but quickly realized many initiatives were well underway. Around the pastoral center, there were separate bins for compost and recycling, refillable water stations and charging stations for electric vehicles.

"Some of the work I thought I would have to do has really been done, and I think that very much reflects where his position is on creation care," she told EarthBeat. "It is already pervasive throughout our building."

Much of the prior work on living out *Laudato Si*' in San Diego has been led by Fr. Emmet Farrell, who along with a team of lay volunteers launched a creation care ministry in 2017 that has focused on establishing creation care teams within parishes and raising awareness about church teaching on the environment.



The Mission Basilica San Diego de Alcala in San Diego is seen in 2015. (CNS/Nancy Wiechec)

One of their major projects was to develop a *Laudato Si'* action plan for the diocese, which they based on a similar document created by the Atlanta Archdiocese, then under Archbishop Wilton Gregory, who is now cardinal of Washington, D.C.

The San Diego document provides background on church teaching on creation, along with basic science on climate change. More than that, it maps a path for the diocese's implementation of the Laudato Si' Action Platform through steps to take on a personal, parish and societal level, from pastors preaching on creation themes, to ways to reduce food, water and plastic waste, to programs to assist people lacking energy or clean water access. The creation care ministry team also plans to present achievement awards, of silver, gold and green, to recognize the work of parishes.

In the action plan's introduction, McElroy called it a "direct response" to Francis' invitation for Catholic institutions at all levels to take part in the Laudato Si' Action Platform, a seven-year initiative outlining a series of actions and steps to move the global church toward sustainability in the spirit of integral ecology.

"We as the Catholic community of San Diego and Imperial Counties must adopt a radical new commitment to such goals if we as a planet are to survive meaningfully and hand on a life-giving existence to the coming generations," said McElroy, who invited every Catholic and parish "to see the call to save the earth as God speaking directly to us in the depths of our soul."

A signal to pay attention

Farrell, a retired priest who serves as creation care spiritual advisor for the diocese, told EarthBeat that McElroy has been extremely supportive of their efforts to amplify the church's history of ecological and justice concerns from the start, and offered encouragement when they faced difficulties making inroads within parishes.

"It's very important to us as we go out into the grassroots and parishes to know that the bishop is in approval of what we're doing," he said.



San Diego Bishop Robert McElroy celebrates a bilingual Mass for Earth Week at St. James Church in Solana Beach, California, April 17, 2021. (CNS/The Southern Cross/John Gastaldo)

McElroy has demonstrated his support, too, by celebrating Masses around Earth Day, lending support to a carbon tax and dividend, and attending tree plantings and a ceremony for *Laudato Si'* fellows at the University of San Diego.

Maureen Day, an associate professor of religion and society at University of San Diego's Franciscan School of Theology and one of the recipients, said the ministry of presence is a way for bishops to demonstrate the importance they see in issues like climate change.

"It just signals to other people that this is something we need to be paying attention to and that it's not to be taken lightly," she said.

While San Diego and California have a reputation as environmentally conscious, Slentz said that having a bishop who openly connects climate and environmental justice to matters of faith — whether how extreme heat in the region affects people

unequally or the connections between global warming and migration — is helpful in reaching those who are not yet on board with actions to address climate change.

"By Cardinal-designate McElroy's giving voice to this, he highlights the inequity and the environmental injustice that is part of the climate change crisis. So I think it is important," she said.

The steps taken so far by the San Diego Diocese has established itself as a leader in the U.S. church, Misleh said. And it's been recognized locally, too, with the San Diego chapter of the Sierra Club presenting in 2017 the diocese with its FEAT Award.

Richard Miller, the chapter director, told EarthBeat in an email that few at that time in the environmental movement viewed religious figures as environmental leaders. But he called McElroy "an environmental leader for San Diegans" and said the diocese has led in educating and advocating for protecting creation.



The Mission Beach boardwalk is seen at sunset in San Diego Oct. 10, 2020. (CNS/Nancy Wiechec)

Addressing fellow bishops

Among his fellow bishops, McElroy has been a regular advocate at bishops' meetings to make the environment a higher priority.

"The cardinal-elect uses his brilliant intellect and his skill as a teacher to help the bishops' conference see the moral implications of *Laudato Si*' and how they are vital to a fully pro-life vision in the church," said Bishop John Stowe of Lexington, Kentucky, another U.S. episcopal leader on *Laudato Si*'.

As bishops debated in November 2015 whether to reissue or rewrite their quadrennial document on voting, McElroy urged they scrap the old statement and fashion one that centers poverty and the environment.

"If I understand Pope Francis correctly, the issue of poverty, particularly global poverty, with all of its victimization of men and women across the world, and children, the global poverty and degradation of the Earth, which threaten the whole of our humanity, that these two issues lie at the very center and core of Catholic social teaching as priorities for us in every public policy position," he said at the meeting.

As the church marked the five-year anniversary of Laudato Si' in May 2020, McElroy in a panel discussion hosted by the bishops' conference disagreed with the idea that it can take decades for the teachings of a papal document like an encyclical to be fully integrated into the social and ecclesiological fabric of the church.

"We don't have 40 years left on the climate question if we're not attentive to it as a global community. So my concern is that we're not reaching out with that level of intensity," he said.



The creation care ministry of the San Diego Diocese has led a number of environmental initiatives, including tree plantings at parishes and schools, inspired by Pope Francis' encyclical, "Laduato Si', on Care for Our Common Home." (Courtesy of Emmet Farrell)

Earlier that year, in a major speech on voting ahead of the 2020 election, McElroy also pushed back against debates about whether abortion or climate change should be prioritized above other issues for voters. Instead, he called them both "core life issues in Catholic teaching," adding "The death toll from abortion is more immediate, but the long-term death toll from unchecked climate change is larger and threatens the very future of humanity."

At the state level, McElroy joined with other California bishops in issuing a pastoral statement applying *Laudato Si*' to the local environmental realities and challenges of the Golden State. And as president of the California Catholic Conference, he has supported the development of a curriculum on creation for fourth-, seventh- and 11th-grade students that is being piloted now and is expected to roll out for the 2023-24 academic year.

Stowe said he prayed that in becoming a cardinal McElroy's voice "will receive greater attention … [which] is a clear echo of all that Pope Francis teaches rendered in an American idiom."

Day added that by McElroy joining previous cardinal appointments, such as Gregory and Blase Cupich of Chicago, Francis is demonstrating the ministry and issues, including the environment, that he seeks for the U.S. church to move toward.

"I would hope that the other bishops would recognize that this is not just a new title … but actually a recognition by the pope that this person is moving in the direction that we all need to go as church," she said.

This story appears in the **Consistory 2022** feature series. View the full series.
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