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Pope Francis meets with Arouna Kandé, a climate refugee from Senegal, in a scene from "The Letter: A Message for Our Earth," a new documentary based upon the pope's 2015 ecology encyclical "Laudato Si', on Care for Our Common Home." (Courtesy of Laudato Si' Movement)



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October 4, 2022
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Pope Francis' groundbreaking teaching document on ecology, creation and climate change that he addressed to the entire world is coming to a computer, phone or smart TV screen near you.

"The Letter: A Message for Our Earth" is a new documentary about the pope's 2015 encyclical, or papal letter, "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home." The film, a joint project of Off the Fence Productions (behind the Oscar-winning documentary "My Octopus Teacher") and the Laudato Si' Movement, will hold its premiere at the Vatican Oct. 4, the feast day of St. Francis of Assisi, patron saint of ecology. Beginning that evening, it will be available on YouTube free to watch.

The release of the film — previewed during the COP26 United Nations climate summit — was timed with the Vatican's formal entry into the Paris Agreement. The Vatican, which collaborated on the documentary, invited church leaders, scientists and ambassadors to the Holy See to the premiere, the latter also attending a high-level meeting where Vatican officials called for increased actions on climate change.

"The environmental crisis is not an issue for Catholics alone. It affects everyone, now and future generations," Cardinal Michael Czerny, head of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, said in a statement. "This film is a clarion cry to people everywhere: We have to act together, and we have to do so now."

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More than four years in the making, "The Letter" follows the story of five people, each representing groups often marginalized in international environmental deliberations, on their way to Rome for a meeting with the pope to discuss *Laudato Si*' and the growing global threats of climate change and rapid biodiversity loss.

They include Arouna Kandé, a climate refugee in Senegal; Cacique Dadá, an environmental defender and leader of the Maró Indigenous territory in the Brazilian Amazon; Ridhima Pandey, a youth climate activist from India; and Greg Asner and Robin Martin, biologists studying coral reefs in Hawaii.



Filmmaker Nicolas Brown (Provided photo)

The film features exclusive footage from their encounter with Francis, whose words serve as a spiritual guide alongside the personal stories and scientific findings throughout the documentary. After their papal meeting, the group then travels to Assisi, the home of St. Francis, whose "Canticle of the Creatures" provided the name to the pope's encyclical.

Behind the lens capturing their stories was Nicolas Brown, an award-winning filmmaker who has made more than a dozen documentaries on climate change and the environment, including "The Serengeti Rules," National Geographic's "Pandas: The Journey Home" and "Climate Chaos" with famed naturalist Sir David Attenborough.

"Our original vision was, 'Can faith and science together somehow unite to save the planet?' And that was a real great foundation for me for starting the project and coming on board," he told EarthBeat in a wide-ranging interview ahead of "The Letter" premiere.

Brown, the writer and director, shared the vision for the film, his amazement upon reading the encyclical for the first time, and the journey that transformed *Laudato Si*' from 40,000 words on paper to a 90-minute visual expedition into its ecological messages and the lives impacted by environmental destruction on a rapidly warming planet.

The interview below has been excerpted and edited for length and clarity.

Official Trailer for "The Letter: A Message for Our Earth"; beginning the evening of Oct. 4, the film will be available on YouTube free to watch. (YouTube Originals)

EarthBeat: **How did you come to be a part of this film project? What drew you to this papal document as a subject for a documentary?**

Brown: The idea was to do kind of a "Before the Flood" but with the pope instead of Leonardo DiCaprio. That was the idea. And initially when I was approached, I have to say I wasn't that keen because I'm not Catholic. I'm not even that religious myself, although I suppose I call myself spiritual — and more so since making this film, by quite a bit. But I was worried that it would be like a promotional video for the Catholic Church.

Until I was approached about [the film], I hadn't even read the *Laudato Si*'. And I read it and was just so amazed that Pope Francis seems to have intuited the moment to reach a handshake toward the science community toward saving our planet.

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What struck you once you did read *Laudato Si'*? And how did that start to influence the vision you had for the documentary?

When I first read the document, I have to say I was completely amazed by it. It took me completely by surprise. I was raised in the evangelical tradition myself, and it was in a fairly conservative part of Colorado, where the tradition was somewhat hostile to science. … And so I wasn't prepared for such an accepted role of science [in *Laudato Si'*]. That's what immediately struck me.

I think that it was the first time that slowly my prejudice started to crumble a little bit. I felt that in my bubble to some degree if someone was particularly religious, we might just write them off as someone who wouldn't be necessarily that interested in a very complicated science issue. But then to suddenly realize that at heart, protecting climate change and biodiversity loss, because of the components involved, it's a moral issue as much as a technocratic one. Now I'm of the opinion that there's no way that we in the science community could ever solve the climate issue without the help of moral leadership.

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> —Nicolas Brown
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The other thing that immediately struck me [about the encyclical] is that there was no story, so it was going to be an impossible task to figure out how to turn it into a movie.

I made a film prior to this where I had four characters who met around a science issue, it's called "The Serengeti Rules." And I thought that it might be an idea then to bring four people from different walks of life … people who are disenfranchised in some way from the process [of decision-making around climate change]. So we came up with the idea then of the voice of the wildlife, voice of the poor, voice of the youth and voice of the Indigenous. Let's tell these stories and use the pope's megaphone that he has to air these stories, to give them the time of day to understand who they are as people so that we can start to think of the climate

change problem and the biodiversity problem less in terms of statistics and more in terms of human beings.

And so that was our aim then, that these people would no longer become statistics but would become real people, and we'd really understand some of the human dimensions of the issues facing us that I think the pope is really trying to point toward. So in a way I think we're telling *Laudato Si*' but through the eyes of the people who live it on the front lines.



Cacique Odair "Dadá" Borari is a leader of the Novo Lugar community of the Borarí people, in Para, Brazil. As an environmental defender he has worked to combat illegal logging in the Amazon. (Courtesy of Laudato Si' Movement)

Toward the end of the film, there's a powerful moment with Arouna from Senegal. What was it like witnessing and capturing that, and what did it add to the film?

As happens with documentary, you come up with an idea and usually the idea is only half-baked and not really that great in reality. But what happens is always reality takes over.

And in the case of climate change now, I think on any given day you're going to be able to open the newspaper and find some evidence of severe climate change. And it just so happened that the day we met the pope, some events happened to one of our characters, Arouna from Senegal, that were fairly life-changing for him. Most people are not aware that Senegal is the lowest-lying country in Africa, and therefore sea level rise is already impacting them dramatically. And there are whole communities, I've been there several times now, there's a climate refugee center there that's been in operation for four years where over 3,000 people have been displaced because of climate change already.

Arouna's story is one of those stories where we didn't anticipate it, but the fact that it happened kind of made the film. … And it was at that point then — we stumbled upon it — but we realized that the true meeting wasn't really for them to meet the pope. The true meeting was for them to meet each other. And so the ending of the film really becomes about a union of people who were once strangers, whose stories were once strange to each other, who through a dialogue suddenly became close friends, family even, and allies for each other in the way that the world needs to come together [to respond to climate change].

And it's I think indicative of breaking down these bubbles and these barriers, which is kind of what the film is meant to be about, what I think the *Laudato Si*' is meant to be about.



Arouna Kandé, a climate refugee from Senegal, is among the main protagonists in the new documentary "The Letter: A Message for Our Earth." (Courtesy of Laudato Si' Movement)

At the beginning of "The Letter," it states Francis' message in *Laudato Si'* is even more crucial for today than when it was first issued. Why do you think that is?

I think the urgency is not going to go away, because as I said, the reality is outstripping us. It's outstripping even the science, but it's certainly outstripping the financial markets and it's outstripping the public, in that it's happening quicker than we thought. The poles are melting quicker. Oceans are rising quicker. And we're seeing the results on a daily basis now whereby people's lives are being torn asunder. And it's not just in Africa, although I would say that it's very clear that the Global South is paying a heavier price.

It's amazing to have someone as powerful as the pope speaking about this. And I'm hoping it's going to embolden a lot more people, too. The film was meant to be, in some respects, a reboot of the document.

Every atom of carbon dioxide that's going up into our upper atmosphere, it stays up there for average of 200 years. So we still have like two centuries of warming to go on top of what we've created already. So this urgency is not going to go away for a couple of centuries. Fortunately, the church thinks in centuries.

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Given that Pope Francis addressed his encyclical to all people, what was the importance of making this documentary accessible on YouTube for people to watch at no cost?

That one was a real confusion for me at first because I'm very, very used to — and I think that my whole industry is totally geared toward — awards, red carpets, festivals and making money out of making a film. And so this was a very counterintuitive approach.

This whole project, if I'm honest, is about reaching outside of that bubble [of people who are already concerned about environmental issues]. And for that, YouTube becomes this amazing powerful platform. My dream is that this film is watched in Africa, in Latin America, in churches and little communities far away from the big cinemas, and reaches people who wouldn't have otherwise been able to watch or maybe wouldn't have been interested if it weren't for the fact that the pope's in it.



Cardinal Raniero Cantalamessa, preacher of the papal household, reads St. Francis of Assisi's "Canticle of the Creatures" in a scene from the documentary "The Letter: A Message for Our Earth." The 1224 prayer poem provided the name of Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical on ecology "Laudato Si', on Care for Our Common Home." (Courtesy of Laudato Si' Movement)

You've spoken of hope throughout our conversation. What do you hope viewers take away from this film?

I hope that people become interested and fascinated with their own spiritual dimension to which they can make decisions about the environment. [Papal preacher Cardinal Raniero] Cantalamessa has some very powerful messages toward the end of the film, where he talks about his own experience as a Franciscan, where by his owning nothing allows him to own everything in a sense. And there are messages of freedom that come with compassion and kindness that are more compelling, I think, than the capitalist argument, which is to accumulate and to buy and have and hold and possess and desire.

My greatest hope is that people understand that the climate crisis and the biodiversity crisis are the greatest existential threats ever faced by humanity, and it will take a completely unified human response across the world to combat them. These are big, big, almost surreally big problems posed that will affect all future generations, not just the current ones. And from a pure philosophical point of view, to condemn all future generations to a lesser life just so that we can have some short-term comfort is incredibly morally objectionable.

So I'm hoping that people will start to look more into the moral dimensions of these issues, and *Laudato Si*' being a moral document, the pope himself being a moral leader. I think that it's recognized that science in the end is just a tool, and it's the moral behavior and conscience of individuals, it's their ability to engender their own compassion for the other and their ability to perhaps see creation as a responsibility, not something that's to be plundered. And it's those kinds of deeper messages that I hope people will start to think about [through the film], all of which I think are really hopeful.

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