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Tomás Insua, executive director of Laudato Si' Movement, poses with his family during the premiere of the documentary film "The Letter" Oct. 4, 2022, at the Vatican. (Laudato Si' Movement)



by Brian Roewe

NCR environment correspondent

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broewe@ncronline.org

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February 23, 2023
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The leader and co-founder of the Laudato Si' Movement, the international network of Catholic groups that's been a driving force in the global church for faith-based responses to climate change and ecological justice, will step down as executive director later this year.

Tomás Insua announced his forthcoming departure from the secretariat (central office) of Laudato Si' Movement, a collective of 900-plus member organizations worldwide, in a letter published Feb. 18 on the network's website. He will remain part of the Catholic lay-led movement, though in other capacities.

Insua, 35, was among the co-founders of the Global Catholic Climate Movement (since rebranded in 2021), which formed months before Pope Francis issued his landmark 2015 encyclical, "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home," as an effort to promote reflection and action on its ecological message among the world's 1.3 billion Catholics.

The announcement follows the movement's annual board meeting, held in January in Assisi, Italy — its first in-person gathering since the COVID-19 pandemic began.

"After much prayer and discernment about what this evolution means for me personally, and after many conversations with the Board since 2019, the time is now ripe for me to transition," he wrote in his letter.

In an interview with EarthBeat, Insua said his discussions with the board were in part influenced by earlier conversations with his mentor and former professor at Harvard Kennedy School, Marshall Ganz, a veteran organizer who worked with Cesar Chavez

in the United Farm Workers and stressed the importance for successful movements to distribute leadership and avoid "the trap of overreliance on a few leaders."

As Insua contemplated his future, Laudato Si' Movement in July initiated a synodal process to examine its governance and leadership structures, including consideration of a June 2021 Vatican decree on term limits for ecclesial movements. He said that process helped affirm his feeling that the time was right to leave his post.



Tomás Insua, executive director of Laudato Si' Movement, speaks at a Vatican event for the premiere of the documentary film "The Letter," on Pope Francis' encyclical "Laudato Si', on Care for Our Common Home," on Oct. 4, 2022. (Laudato Si' Movement)

"I'm really thrilled with this transition," said Insua, adding that the presence of "many great leaders" in the movement helped him step aside "with peace of mind."

The Argentine-born Insua said he plans to exit as executive director in mid-2023, and will remain in the movement but in new ways. That includes work on establishing its new Laudato Si' Center in Assisi — the birthplace of St. Francis of Assisi, patron saint of ecology and namesake of Pope Francis — as well as continued work around the ecumenical Season of Creation (Sept. 1–Oct. 4) through a position at the Laudato Si' Research Institute at the University of Oxford's Campion Hall.

He added that while he is leaving leadership within Laudato Si' Movement, "I'm definitely not leaving the movement," just taking on a different, more local role.

"Leadership renewal is always healthy," he said in his letter. "I'm very confident and excited about how the Secretariat will keep evolving and maturing, to better support the movement to accomplish our bold mission."

Details on the search for a new executive director will be revealed in March, with the hope of completing the process before the summer.

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Lorna Gold, board chair of Laudato Si' Movement, told EarthBeat the discussions around leadership came as the movement experienced a period of rapid growth, sparked in part by the October release of the documentary "The Letter" about Francis' encyclical, which has garnered 8.3 million views on YouTube and been screened at parishes, schools and during global environmental summits.

Along with its 967 member organizations, Laudato Si' Movement has established more than 40 national chapters, 200 Laudato Si' Circles prayer and action groups, and has trained more than 11,000 Laudato Si' animators to lead local efforts around the encyclical's message in their communities. Its secretariat has a staff of nearly 70

people, and four cardinals serve on its advisory council.

"It is absolutely crucial that LSM cultivates leadership at all levels within the movement right now," Gold said in an email.

She added that Insua's contributions to the movement have been "truly inspirational." She recalled in one of the movement's first actions, Insua organized a group for a small party in St. Peter's Square on the day in June 2015 when *Laudato Si'* was issued, "because he wanted to ensure Pope Francis felt it was being received."

"Being [Laudato Si' Movement executive director] has never been a job for Tomás … but his life commitment to serve the Church and live *Laudato Si'*," Gold said.



Pope Francis accepts the gift of a handmade "Abraham's tent" during his general audience in the Paul VI hall Sept. 1, 2021, at the Vatican. The gift was given by members of the Laudato Si' Movement. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Under Insua's leadership, Laudato Si' Movement has sought to infuse the church's ecological teaching into the liturgical calendar, from Lenten fasts to a fuller Catholic embrace of the Season of Creation, to promoting *Laudato Si'* through weeklong celebrations, petitions, climate marches and strikes, and screenings of "The Letter" documentary.

Insua was also a key figure behind the campaign to push Catholic institutions to divest their financial holdings from the fossil fuel industry, with approximately 300 publicly making the move to date. Laudato Si' Movement has also worked closely with the Vatican's integral human development office in establishing the Laudato Si' Action Platform to further engage Catholics at all levels of the church to act on the encyclical by pursuing ecological conversion and sustainability initiatives.

"No one save Francis has done more to build a global Catholic consensus that the climate crisis is the moral question of our time," environmental author and activist Bill McKibben, founder of the grassroots climate groups 350.org and Third Act, told EarthBeat.

In January 2015, ahead of Francis' papal visit to the Philippines, including the typhoon-ravaged town of Tacloban, the Global Catholic Climate Movement officially launched. At the time, it included 19 founding organizations. Among its co-founders was Insua, then a 27-year-old Fulbright scholar at the Harvard Kennedy School living in Boston.



Pope Francis greets 16-year-old Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg, with Tomás Insua by her side, during his general audience in St. Peter's Square April 17, 2019, at the Vatican. (CNS/Reuters/Yara Nardi)

In 2017, Insua helped establish the movement's headquarters in Rome, in the Trastevere neighborhood, and made inroads at the Vatican, especially within the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. He played a part in arranging a memorable intergenerational meeting in 2019 between two climate champions, Swedish youth activist Greta Thunberg and the pope. Insua has been part of several other meetings with Francis, who he knew first as his archbishop back in Buenos Aires.

During Pentecost in 2025, Laudato Si' Movement is planning to hold its first global assembly, in Assisi, to mark the encyclical's 10th anniversary and 800 years since

St. Francis penned his "Canticle of the Creatures," along with its own decade of work on climate action and ecological conversion.

Looking back on his time leading the movement, Insua told EarthBeat he is proudest of its decentralized nature, which he hopes can now strengthen even more.

"It fills me with joy to know that thousands of leaders are animating their organizations and local communities to live *Laudato Si*' across the world, ranging from small rural villages in the Global South to large urban centers in the Global North, in all kinds of creative ways," he said.

As Laudato Si' Movement looks forward with new leadership, Gold said it is important that it retains Insua's "ability to dream big." After the board was established in 2017, Insua predicted they could reach as many as 10 million Catholics with the encyclical. When asked how, he replied they would make a movie with the pope in it.

"I think the 'can do' attitude of Tomás, and his sense of urgency on the climate crisis, has been a major part of the success of LSM in these early years."