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Children in Ivory Coast were among the thousands who participated in tree-planting efforts as part of the 2023 Run4Unity organized by Teens4Unity, the youth branch of the Focolare Movement, a lay Catholic movement. (Bertin Kufunda)



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A midday rain was falling on the first Sunday in May at Lake Aiguebelette, in the Alps of Southern France, as children, teens and a few parents prepared to race along the trails around the scenic Alpine landscape.

The estimated 200 participants — going by foot, roller skates, scooters and bikes — sought to log as many kilometers as they could in a pseudo-walkathon where their collective distance, in all 493 kilometers, was converted into 950 trees to be planted in countries like Uganda, Nicaragua and the Philippines.

A knee injury kept Louisianne Cardoso Tour, an 18-year-old college student, from running, so instead she played the role of emcee and urged the racers to keep going even amid wet and soggy conditions.

"I had the microphone, I was like, 'Go go, go faster,' and encouraging people," she said.



Teens and children pick up trash in Sitio Bakal, a field outside Quezon City, Philippines, as part of a local Run4Unity event. (Fralynn Ibanez Manalo)

Earlier that same day, eight time zones away, Therese Lenguaje, 16, joined 150 people in Quezon City, Philippines, for a 30-minute walk to Sitio Bakal, an open field where they picked up trash. Later, they planted 50 seedlings, including 30 native Atis and Guyabano fruit trees.

The activities, each beginning around 11 a.m. local time on May 7, were part of a global "eco-relay" for the annual Run4Unity that this year emphasized ecological conservation in the face of climate change by inviting groups to exchange their kilometers and minutes for newly planted trees — an initiative that drew support from the Vatican.

First held in 2005, the Run4Unity is organized by Teens4Unity, the youth branch of the Focolare Movement, a lay Catholic movement founded in Italy during World War

II that works to bring peace and unity in the world.



Teens and families from Uganda were among the thousands who participated in tree-planting efforts as part of the 2023 Run4Unity organized by Teens4Unity, the youth branch of the Focolare Movement, a lay Catholic movement. (Herve Nzeyimana)

The last two iterations of the Run4Unity, aimed at and organized by middle school and high school students, have carried the theme of "People, Planet and Our Ecological Conversion." Where in 2022 groups took part in park and beach cleanups, they took that a step further this year by encouraging participants to plant trees for every kilometer or mile they ran or minute of exercise or activity.

Planting trees was a means "to promote the ecological conversion, this integral ecology that Pope Francis is talking about. Caring for the planet and for the people who are our brothers and sisters who live in it," Ana Paula Panzarini, a member of the Run4Unity committee and communications official with the Focolare Movement, told EarthBeat.



Teens help plan tree saplings in Sitio Bakal, a field outside Quezon City, Philippines, as part of a local Run4Unity event. (Fralynn Ibanez Manalo)

The Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, along with its Laudato Si' Action Platform, were co-sponsors of the 2023 unity runs. The action platform — an effort to mobilize all corners of the Catholic Church to respond to Francis' 2015 encyclical "Laudato Si', on Care for Our Common Home" — invited its more than 1,000 enrolled Catholic schools to host runs in their communities.

The Run4Unity sends a message to the world of its participants' commitment to the pope's invitation to care for all humanity and the planet, the dicastery told EarthBeat.

John Mundell, director of the Laudato Si' Action Platform, said in a statement that ensuring a healthy, livable future for the planet requires people uniting across faiths,

cultures and generations to "commit ourselves to concrete actions that safeguard the natural environment and care for the most vulnerable among us."



Children in Pará, Brazil, in the Amazon rainforest, lead a walk as part of the 2023 Run4Unity. Later, the 60-plus participants planted a banana tree. (Lore Cabral)

"Young people are leading the way through events like Run4Unity," he said.

Having young people plant trees in their community while their peers do the same in theirs fosters a sense of climate solidarity, Panzarini said, in taking steps to

safeguard the Earth and limit the impacts of climate change, whether experienced in their own region or another part of the world.

Lenguaje, a young Catholic who was participating in her first Run4Unity, said that climate change is having many negative impacts in the Philippines, as warmer temperatures have led to drought-fueled water shortages and health issues like heat strokes.

Cardoso Tour sees climate change in warmer winters in the Alps, and a link between her Catholic faith and creation care in the golden rule: "We want to love each other and do to others what we would want the other to do for us. And I think it's the same thing with the planet — like we treat others with kindness, and we treat the planet with kindness, too."

According to the Focolare Movement's preliminary data, as of May 12, thousands of participants in 60 countries joined more than 170 Run4Unity events, and together traversed nearly 6,700 kilometers (4,163 miles), recorded more than 12,000 minutes of exercise, and planted 2,000 trees and counting.



A boy in New Delhi takes part in a local Run4Unity event. (Aileen Tang)

Local Focolare groups raised money or partnered with organizations to cover the cost of tree plantings. In some places, like Kenya, they planted trees themselves. Others, like the community in the French Alps, teamed with environmental organizations based in different countries to plant trees there.

The Focolare Movement reached out to Plant for the Planet to help its groups understand which trees to plant and where best to plant them.

While a few events took place around Earth Day, including a tree planting and eco-workshops in Rome, and others the weekend of May 13-14, the main day was May 7, where an eco-relay had Focolare groups in different countries connecting and passing a "virtual baton" to one another across time zones as one event was ending and another was about to begin.



Members of Teens4Unity, the youth branch of the lay Catholic-led Focolare Movement, plant a holm oak tree in Rome on Earth Day (April 22) ahead of the

Run4Unity on May 7, which this year carried a theme of "People, Planet and Our Ecological Conversion." (Courtesy of Focolare Movement)

The 2023 Run4Unity began in Fiji, where the sun first rises. The island nation is also a symbolic setting of the tolls of climate change. There, teens played games at the Pacific Regional Seminary of St. Peter Claver in the Suva Archdiocese, where Margaret Karram, president of the Focolare Movement, helped them plant two trees: a native sandalwood and a citrus tree, which require each other in order to produce fruit.

The decision to plant those specific trees sends a message "to the whole world that we need each other," Panzarini said.

"We all need to do our part in order to reach the goal of this climate justice for all," she told EarthBeat.

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Around noon local time, the participants in Fiji paused the games and tree planting for the "timeout for peace," where they were joined by video with fellow teens in Nagasaki, Japan, to pray together for peace and virtually "pass" the baton to the next time zone.

At the Heba Kosha Community Center in Nagasaki, site of the second atomic bomb dropped by the U.S. on Japan, teens rang peace bells after their run, calling attention to the immense destruction nuclear weapons pose both to people and nature.

From there, the "virtual baton" moved across the global map, making stops in Indonesia, Lebanon, Benin, Slovakia, El Salvador and Colombia.



As part of the 2023 Run4Unity on May 7, organized by the youth branch of the lay Catholic-led Focolare Movement, teens in Uzhhorod, Ukraine, cleaned up trash around the Church of the Nativity of Mary and held a picnic. (Courtesy of Focolare Movement)

In war-torn Ukraine, Run4Unity participants cleaned up trash around the Church of the Nativity of Mary, in the southwestern city of Uzhhorod, and connected with a group in Italy who did fundraising activities for Ukrainian refugees.

Teens in Seoul, South Korea, staged their run through Haneul Park, a hilltop escape of silver grassfields once known as the world's tallest trash mountain. It was converted from a landfill to a park by city leaders ahead of the 2002 World Cup.

In New Delhi, Adiba Ali, an 18-year-old Muslim student, joined about 50 other people in a 5-kilometer walk in Connaught Place Central Park and raised enough funds to plant 60 trees.

Ali told EarthBeat that the day gave her hope.

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"We are living on this planet and have duties and responsibilities to fulfill towards the earth and the nature. This planet is giving so much to us and we must do something in return as well for this planet, for our Mother Earth," she said in an email.

While organizers suggested groups plant a tree for every minute or kilometer, the decision on how best to respond was left to participants. Some chose to do just that, while others opted for more symbolic approaches.

For instance, in the Italian town of Tivoli, the Focolare group decided to plant a single olive tree. In Tanzania, teens planted 200 avocado trees. In the small village of Manaus in the Brazilian Amazon, 2,700 teens installed a "peace cube" in the city square as a sign of their commitment to live for peace.



Teens in Manaus, Brazil, in the Amazon Basin, collaborated with the city to install a "peace cube" as part of the local 2023 Run4Unity. (Courtesy of Focolare Movement)

Some, like a group of older-aged supporters in southern Brazil, opted to donate to Plant for the Planet and pray for the younger participants around the globe. Similarly, a group of Catholic sisters in Rome celebrated Mass for Run4Unity participants around the world, and then went on a walk themselves.

At the end of their Run4Unity at Lake Aiguebelette, Focolare members played games and danced in the rain. Cardoso Tour said it was a day of fun, but more than that, a sign of hope that "young people are invested in changing the world."

"That's really the reason why I participate in the Run4Unity," she said. "Because I think I want to be someone that brings hope."

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