News
EarthBeat



Solar panels are seen on the campus of St. Meinrad Archabbey and its seminary in Spencer County, Indiana, Sept. 11, 2021. (CNS/Courtesy of Saint Meinrad Archabbey via The Criterion)



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Kicking off a conference aiming to ramp up action by the U.S. Catholic Church in response to Pope Francis' landmark encyclical on ecology, Christiana Figueres, the United Nations official who brokered the Paris Agreement, proposed a way to do just that: Commit to net-zero carbon emissions by 2040.

The challenge from Figueres, the Costa Rican diplomat who served as executive secretary of the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change from 2010-2016, including the 2015 adoption of the Paris accord, came June 14 during an opening virtual keynote address and conversation viewed by 600 attendees, at the start of the third and final edition of the "Laudato Si' and the U.S. Catholic Church" conference, co-hosted by the Catholic Climate Covenant and Creighton University.

The goal of the biennial conference series has been to animate more and more parts of the Catholic Church in the United States to respond to Francis' fervent and frequent calls within and since his 2015 encyclical "*Laudato Si', on Care for our Common Home*" for ecological conversion and rapid action for the world to change course in the face of mounting socio-environmental threats, especially climate change and biodiversity loss.

In 2021, Francis and the Vatican unveiled a pathway for Catholics to do their part with the Laudato Si' Action Platform, which asks for church institutions at all levels to produce seven-year plans to become more sustainable and ecologically conscious in their ministries, education and work.



Christiana Figueres, executive secretary of the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change, addresses the audience during a presentation on Pope Francis' encyclical on the environment June 30, 2015, at U.N. headquarters in New York City. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

During the hourlong conversation with Dan Misleh, founder of Catholic Climate Covenant, Figueres called the encyclical a historical marker in the 2,000-year-history

of the Roman Catholic Church and said she was personally moved by the pope's calls for humanity to act in solidarity and to heal its relationship with the rest of nature.

In discussing the Climate Pledge — where her organization, Global Optimism, and Amazon have teamed up to secure signatures so far from 400-plus companies to implement decarbonization plans in line with Paris Agreement goals — she said that the U.S. church faces "a no-brainer" in markedly improving energy efficiency, an area where the country is lacking as a whole.

"Let me say, I believe that the U.S. Catholic Church can, and should, commit to zero emissions by 2040 as an institution. And that each individual citizen can commit to being zero carbon by 2030," she said. "And we all have to do it. It's both individual and collective."

When Misleh noted that the U.S. church alone owns upwards of 100,000 buildings, Figueres enthusiastically replied, "Hey, great potential."

Achieving carbon neutrality is one of the numerous goals put forward by the Laudato Si' Action Platform, which in 18 months has seen nearly 1,700 U.S.-based Catholic institutions and individuals register among nearly 7,500 total enrollees worldwide.

> 'I believe that the U.S. Catholic Church should commit to zero emissions by 2040 as an institution.'
> —Christiana Figueres

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Earlier this month, the Catholic Church in South Korea committed to carbon neutrality during a conference of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Korea that outlined a path for parishes and dioceses to achieve net-zero emissions. In Ireland, bishops have committed the church to restore 30% of parish lands to nature by 2030.

The pope has repeatedly stated that nations who powered industrialization by burning fossil fuels — the primary driver of climate change that releases heat-

trapping greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere — bear a greater responsibility, or "ecological debt," to not only find solutions to limit accelerating heating and its impacts, but also to assist countries and communities on the frontlines of a warming world. The U.S. is the largest historical source of total greenhouse gas emissions, roughly 20% since 1850, and second in present-day emissions behind China.

Under the Paris Agreement, nations committed to limit average global temperature rise to "well below" 2 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) and to strive to hold it to 1.5 C (3.6 F), the latter a safer level of warming, climate scientists and experts say, that exposes millions fewer people to dangerous climate impacts like far more devastating droughts, wildfires, floods and extreme storms. To meet that target, scientists have stated global emissions need to be roughly halved in the next seven years, and to reach net-zero emissions by 2050. Already, temperatures have risen an average of 1.1 C, and on track to breach 1.5 C within the 2030s.

Figueres, co-author of the 2020 book *The Future We Chose: Surviving the Climate Crisis*, laid out the dire threats that climate change poses and the consequences of not acting fast enough to rapidly bring down emissions levels. If the world continues to burn fossil fuels at its current rate, she said, "we will go through a portal that guarantees that we, our children, our grandchildren and generations after that will live in a world of constant physical destruction and human misery that we cannot even imagine. And that is no exaggeration, that is scientific fact."

Related: Catholic resolve for sweeping climate action intensifies after latest UN report

Figueres noted that several insurance companies have already stopped providing coverage in California and other parts of the U.S. threatened with more extreme weather. Ahead of the 2015 COP21 climate summit in Paris, heads of major insurance companies warned her that if temperatures reach 2 C warming, "we will be in a systemically uninsurable world." The challenge today is not to solve climate change, but to limit its worst impacts, which will affect everyone, but disproportionately impact poor and marginalized communities.

Despite those forecasts, the self-described "stubborn optimist" maintained a more upbeat and hopeful outlook for the majority of the event. She pointed to "exponential" growth in renewable energy capacity, which has surpassed projections, along with rising investments in renewables, and she expressed her conviction that

addressing climate change can change the world in profound and positive ways.

"We know that addressing climate is the right thing to do. We know that it is the moral thing to do. All we have to do is read *Laudato Si*' or listen to any of His Holiness' speeches on nature, environment or climate change, and we have a very, very clear line on what we ought to be doing. So that is not under question at all," said Figueres, a student of the teachings of the late Buddhist monk and mindfulness teacher Thich Nhất Hạnh.

"What I would like to add to that, without minimizing at all but placing it side by side, is that addressing climate change is not only the right thing to do, it's the smart thing to do," she said.



A file photo shows trees reflected in a pond along a trail in Acadia National Park in Bar Harbor, Maine. (OSV News/CNS file, Bob Roller)

Renewables are increasingly cheaper, more efficient and less polluting than fossil fuels, she said, and far more widely accessible — rather than being under control of a handful of countries — which increases energy independence. Still, Figueres acknowledged the challenges with justly procuring the necessary minerals and materials for clean energy technologies, and expressed optimism that a combination of technological improvements and social shifts toward restoring right relationship with the rest of the created world will help. For the U.S. in particular, she said, major investments in renewables, like the Inflation Reduction Act's historic billions in funding for clean energy, will allow it to keep its economic and technological advantages, and with it its global standing, against China, Europe and others.

Together, Figueres said she believes those facts are "compelling enough to invite a mindset shift" from thinking of addressing climate change as simply a burden or sacrifice "to understanding that addressing climate change could be a very interesting opportunity given to our human society to do better than what we did last century."

The keynote conversation with Figueres was the first of nine virtual evening discussions of the "Laudato Si' and U.S. Catholic Church" conference that will take place over the next seven weeks. It will conclude July 27 with a first-ever awards ceremony to recognize "Laudato Si' champions" across the U.S. So far, more than 2,200 people have registered; registration remains open. Past sessions are accessible on the Catholic Climate Covenant YouTube channel.

The first iteration of the conference was held in 2019 at the Creighton University campus in Omaha, Nebraska, with the second held virtually in 2021 due to the coronavirus pandemic. The series will conclude this year. Organizers said future conferences may be planned, though likely with a different name.

The all-online sessions at this year's conference will each highlight one of the seven thematic Laudato Si' goals that are part of the Vatican's Laudato Si' Action Platform. Organizers hope to motivate more Catholic parishes, dioceses, schools, institutions, religious congregations, businesses and families to enroll in the platform. The Covenant is coordinating U.S. participation through its We Are All Part of God's Plan(et) campaign.

The platform's Laudato Si' goals are: response to the cry of the poor; ecological economics; adoption of sustainable lifestyles; ecological education; ecological

spirituality; community resilience and empowerment; and response to the cry of the earth.



Solar panels in New York City are seen atop the Bishop Thomas V. Daily Residence in the Prospect Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn, N.Y., June 10, 2021. (CNS/The Tablet/Bill Miller)

To date, nearly 1,700 U.S. Catholic institutions and individuals have enrolled in the Laudato Si' Action Platform, roughly one-fifth of the roughly 7,500 total registrations, according to data provided by LSAP organizers. The bulk, around 950, are families, while 219 religious communities and congregations have also signed up, as have 13 Catholic hospitals, eight businesses and 117 groups and organizations.

Seventeen of the 195 U.S. dioceses have so far enrolled, including four archdioceses: Atlanta, Chicago, Cincinnati, Indianapolis. Registered dioceses include

Albany, New York; Arlington, Virginia; Davenport and Dubuque, in Iowa; Worcester, Massachusetts; and in California, Fresno, Sacramento, San Bernadino, San Diego and San Jose.

A total of 162 U.S. Catholic parishes and 132 Catholic schools have also enrolled, small slivers of the 16,429 parishes and 5,925 Catholic elementary and secondary schools in the country. However, 30% of Catholic universities have signed up, with 66 of the 220 higher ed institutions.

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A common topic through the keynote conversation was identifying ways to invite more people, Catholic or otherwise, to acknowledge and respond to the crises climate change poses. Figueres suggested trying to meet people through what's important to them. If it's the wallet, "then energy efficiency is your best friend," she said.

She said addressing climate change will require all people, of all ages, to contribute how they can, whether that's through policy work, technological advancements, finance, communications, nonviolent direct actions or other means.

"For the generation before me, it was too early. For the generation after me, it's going to be too late," Figueres said. "The generation that needs to change the direction is our generation, for heaven's sakes. Our generation. We need to stand up to our responsibility. We need to understand that there is a moral imperative, that there is a technological imperative, that there's an economic imperative, that all these imperatives are actually aligned and we need to make those decisions."

And do it with hope, she added, even in the face of challenges, barriers and problems.

"Honestly, we can only face climate change with optimism, because if we face it with apathy or with defeatism, we've lost," she said.