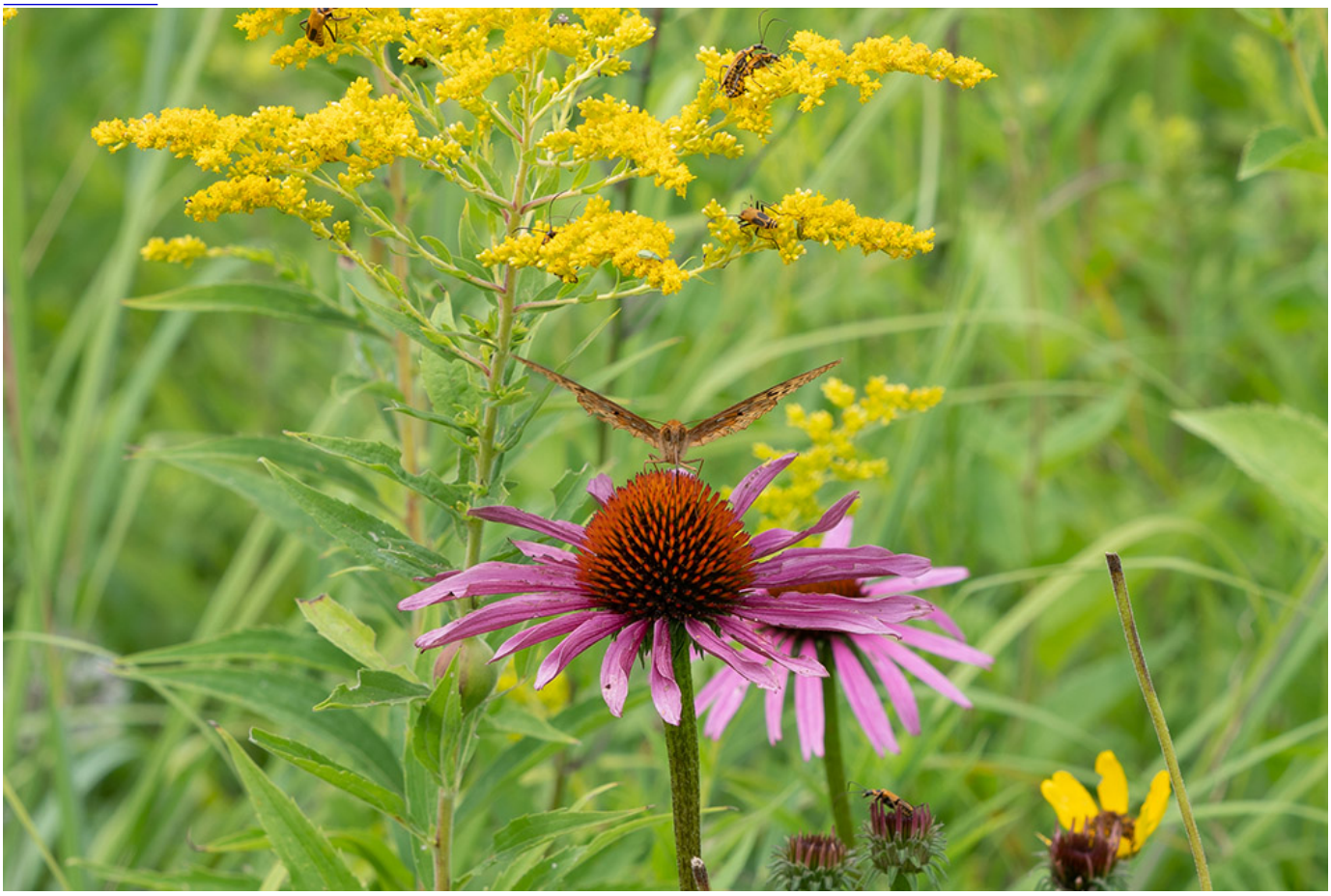
News
EarthBeat



On Jan. 10, 2022, the Congregation of Sisters of St. Agnes signed a conservation easement document, in partnership with Glacial Lakes Conservancy, protecting 237 acres of land for native flora and fauna at their motherouse in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, in perpetuity. The congregation was honored as a Laudato Si' Champion at the "Laudato Si' and the U.S. Catholic Church" conference on July 27, 2023. (Congregation of the Sisters of St. Agnes)



by Brian Roewe

NCR environment correspondent

View Author Profile

broewe@ncronline.org
Follow on Twitter at @brianroewe

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A coastal diocese. A major health care system. A Wisconsin congregation of women religious. A 94-year-old priest, a grandmother and an all-boys high school.

All were among those honored as Laudato Si' Champions within the U.S. Catholic Church for their varied and extensive ecological efforts and actions on climate change in response to Pope Francis' landmark encyclical on ecology, "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home."

The 13 award winners included the San Diego Diocese; Loyola University Chicago; Providence Health, headquartered in Renton, Washington; and the Congregation of Sisters of St. Agnes of Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, alongside parishes, schools and everyday Catholics.

The awards were presented July 27 during the closing session 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.

> 'I believe hope is the pivot point that moves us away from despair and into action.'
>
> —Christina Slentz
>
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For many in attendance, the evening provided an oasis of hope and inspiration amid a summer of extreme heat — which scientists have said is exacerbated by rising

global temperatures — as Covenant staff described the winners' work around climate change and ecological degradation in their communities.

In the years since *Laudato Si'* was issued in June 2015, and even before, there has been a prevailing sentiment among U.S. Catholics engaged in environmental work that the church in the U.S. has overlooked and under-prioritized ecological issues and Catholic teaching on care for creation, all as threats from climate change have moved from prospective to present. But for at least one night, the multitude of efforts at all levels of the church enjoyed the spotlight.

A committee of Covenant staff selected winners in 10 categories that mirror the seven groupings within the Vatican's Laudato Si' Action Platform, a multiyear initiative providing Catholic institutions at all levels a road map for putting Francis' encyclical into action. The awards categories were: health care, universities, schools, organizations, religious orders, businesses, dioceses, parishes, families and individuals.



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)

The San Diego Diocese, under the leadership of Cardinal Robert McElroy and Fr. Emmet Ferrell, was recognized for its "comprehensive approach to environmental stewardship" and its commitment to sustainability. Sixty-two parishes have installed solar power and the diocese has formulated an action plan for Catholic schools, churches and families to take part in the Laudato Si' Action Platform.

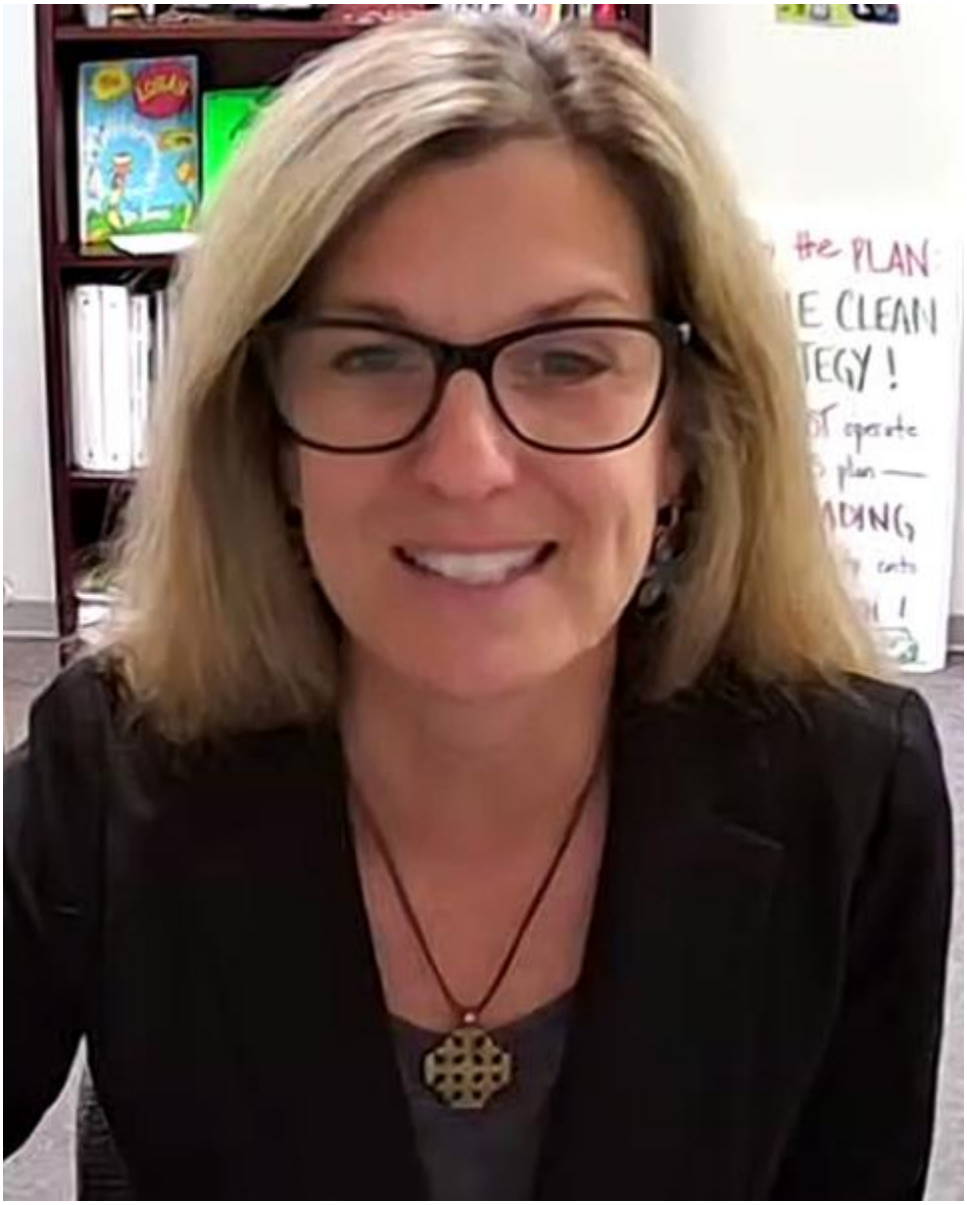
The diocese is also pursuing fossil fuel divestment — making it the first to publicly do so in the U.S.

"Their achievements serve as an inspiration to other dioceses and communities, highlighting the power of faith-based environmental action," the judges stated, calling McElroy "a powerful national voice" for climate action at local, national and international levels.

Related: Cardinal-designate McElroy has long commitment to Laudato Si', environment

In accepting the award, Christina Slentz, the diocese's associate director for creation care, called it "a great honor" but added, "We have much work to do."

She noted that temperatures in Southern California's Imperial Valley have reached 120 degrees Fahrenheit, sea rise has eroded a portion of the main train line between San Diego and Los Angeles, and pollution and environmental destruction threaten urban areas and drive migration.



Christina Bagaglio Slentz, associate director for creation care in the San Diego Diocese (NCR screenshot)

"We all know challenges abound worldwide. But we are people of faith, and we have hope. I believe hope is the pivot point that moves us away from despair and into action," Slentz said.

In a prerecorded message from a field at the motherhouse of the Sisters of St. Agnes — winners in the religious order category — Sr. Peg Spindler, a member of the congregation's general council, said, "This award reassures us that we are on the right path."

An 880-panel solar installation generates half the energy needed at the motherhouse, and its St. Agnes Convent campus is fully powered by a separate 538-panel offsite community solar project with Alliant Energy. In January 2022, the sisters preserved 237 acres through a conservation easement that protects forests, prairie, wetlands, farm fields and nature trails in perpetuity.

The Sisters of St. Agnes weren't the only winners from Wisconsin.

In the parish category, the six-member Creation Keepers team at the cluster of St. Catherine of Alexandria and St. Joan of Arc in Nashotah, was recognized for a multitude of projects at the parishes and elementary school, including expanded recycling, using biodegradable containers and harvesting 500 pounds of organic produce for local food pantries from their Garden of Eatin'.



Ector Olivares, environmental justice program manager for Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Stockton, California (NCR screenshot)

Brenna Cussen Anglada and Eric Anglada of Cuba City, Wisconsin, were honored in the family category for their work with the St. Isidore Catholic Worker Farm and Agronomic University.

The Industrial Commons in Morganton, North Carolina, won in the business category, while the Environmental Justice Program for Catholic Charities in the Diocese of Stockton, California — the only program of its kind in the U.S. — was honored among organizations.

Ector Olivares, program manager, called the award "a true testament to the work my team does every day and their dedication to our community."

Brophy College Preparatory in Phoenix won among schools on the back of its ecological justice plan, student climate coalition and its Native American Club that has backed efforts to protect the Oak Flat sacred site from becoming a copper mine.

Winner of the university category, Loyola University Chicago has led numerous education and action initiatives through its School of Environmental Sustainability — like fossil fuel divestment and powering four campuses fully with renewable sources — and its role in helping 100-plus universities in 38 countries join the Laudato Si' Action Platform.



In the 3,100-square-foot "ecodome" greenhouse, students at Loyola University Chicago's School of Environmental Sustainability grow lettuce, rhubarb and other produce using a variety of aquaponics techniques. (NCR photo/Brian Roewe)

Nancy Tuchman, founding dean of the School of Environmental Sustainability, said the university's 2025-35 climate action plan will work to fully decarbonize the Jesuit school, having already slashed its greenhouse gas emissions by 70%.

Another winner, Providence Health & Services, has made its own pledge to become carbon negative by 2030. In two decades of work on environmental sustainability, the hospital system based in Washington state has been a leader in the health sector on climate change, and powers its 24 facilities in Washington and Oregon with renewable energy.

Related: Do no harm: Catholic hospitals confront their own carbon footprints

In addition, four individuals were honored: Fr. James Flynn, a 94-year-old retired priest in the Archdiocese of Louisville, Kentucky, who designed a Laudato Si'

educational program; Congregation of Notre Dame Sr. Kathleen Deignan, founder of the Thomas Berry Forum and the Deignan Institute for Earth and Spirit at Iona University in New Rochelle, New York; Herman Barahona, an environmental justice advocate in Sacramento, California; and Mary Meyers, who has championed *Laudato Si'* through initiatives at St. Jude Catholic Church in New Lenox, Illinois.

At one point in the ceremony, Covenant executive director José Aguto commented, "The inspiration just keeps spiraling up. This is just such a blessing."



Molly Hemstreet and Bob Carswell of The Industrial Commons showcase a pair of socks made from yarn recycled from old socks as part of the Second Cuts Project. Based in North Carolina, The Industrial Commons was honored as a Laudato Si' Champion in business during the "Laudato Si' and the U.S. Catholic Church" conference on July 27. (NCR screenshot)

Full descriptions of all the honorees are available on the Catholic Climate Covenant website.

The awards ceremony marked the closing of the "*Laudato Si*' and the U.S. Catholic Church" conference series. Begun in 2019, with roughly 200 people attending at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska, it sought to animate and mobilize Catholics in the U.S. to a more emphatic reception and response to Francis' encyclical.

The COVID-19 pandemic shifted the second iteration of the conference in 2021 from a college campus to virtual spaces, a format organizers opted to continue this year as a way for more people to attend, with more than 3,000 people registering for the nine total sessions held over seven weeks. Individual sessions saw 300 to 600 people tuning in, while others later watched recordings.



Brenna and Eric Anglada of the St. Isidore Catholic Worker Farm and Agronomic University in Cuba City, Wisconsin (NCR screenshot)

This year's conference focused on the seven goals of the Laudato Si' Action Platform, four years after an early version was first previewed at the 2019 gathering. In the opening keynote, Christiana Figueres, the former United Nations top official on climate change and key architect of the 2015 Paris Agreement, proposed that the U.S. church commit to reaching net-zero carbon emissions by 2040.

Dan DiLeo, a theologian at Creighton and consultant with the Covenant, said Figueres' challenge was the highlight of the conference.

"If the church is going to live its own teaching, it's going to require a conversion, and it's on the part of many who work in the institutional church," he said.

DiLeo told EarthBeat that the diversity of award winners and speakers across the three conferences — a mix of theologians, activists, educators, religious and bishops, including McElroy and Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich — reaffirmed the Second Vatican Council's vision of the church not as the magisterial institution, but the people of God.

"We've tried to lift up the voices of the people of God who have consistently been doing this work in ways that is commensurate with the church's own teaching," he said.



Holly Cerveny, left, and Ellen Heitman, right, accept the Laudato Si' Champion award for parishes on behalf of St. Catherine of Alexandria/St. Joan of Arc Cluster Parish in Nashotah, Wisconsin, during the "Laudato Si' and the U.S. Catholic Church" conference on July 27. (NCR screenshot)

Asked if the conference series has achieved its goal of more deeply integrating Laudato Si' into the life of the U.S. church, Covenant founder Dan Misleh said, "It certainly has raised the profile of the issue" and engaged more Catholics in *Laudato Si'*, though still not enough.

"There are so many things that the church can do, and that it has the resources to do, but there are too many dioceses that haven't stepped up on this and really need to," he said. He added that bishops should view climate change not only as a moral concern but a pastoral one.

DiLeo said that the U.S. hierarchy's response to *Laudato Si'* and climate change to date "is incommensurate with the bishops' responsibility" and what science states is necessary.

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"This is going to require parish councils and investment managers and bishops to reimagine how they are assessing potential projects, from committing to net-zero, to divestment, to all the concrete actions that the church is consistently calling for," he said.

DiLeo likened the three conferences to the parable of the sower from the Gospel of Matthew, in that they've tilled the soil "so that the seed of *Laudato Si'* can begin to grow in more places, and to grow deeper roots."

Deignan, who took part in the first Earth Day, used her acceptance speech to "summon all the Laudato Si' Champions waiting in the wings," urging that they "let creation care be your great work as it has been mine for these many, many decades."

Editor's note: *EarthBeat received an honorable mention in the "Organization" category of the U.S. Laudato Si' Champions Awards.*

A version of this story appeared in the **Aug 18-31, 2023** print issue under the headline: Catholic climate conference spotlights ‘Laudato Si’ Champions’ of US church.