News
EarthBeat
The McDougall Creek wildfire burns near homes outside the Okanagan community of West Ke

The McDougall Creek wildfire burns near homes outside the Okanagan community of West Kelowna, British Columbia, Aug. 18, 2023. (OSV News/Reuters/Chris Helgren)

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Pope Francis' latest plea to urgently address global warming and climate change is being hailed by Catholic ecological advocates as "a great call to action."

On Oct. 4, the pope released his apostolic exhortation "*Laudate Deum*" ("Praise God"), warning that the clock is ticking on the dangers of climate change — and both a paradigm shift and practical strategies are critically needed to avert looming disasters in nature and human society.

In the exhortation, which follows his 2015 encyclical "*Laudato Si*': On Care for Our Common Home," Francis said "the world in which we live is collapsing and may be nearing the breaking point" due to climate change, "one of the principal challenges facing society and the global community."

With the global average temperature rapidly rising to greenhouse gas emissions, extreme weather and dramatic climate shifts have impacted millions, particularly the impoverished, said the pope, who also lamented an international inertia in reining in emissions.

Tomás Insua, executive director of the Laudato Si' Movement, gestures during a news confere

Tomás Insua, executive director of the Laudato Si' Movement, gestures during a news conference at the Vatican May 25, 2023, to present Pope Francis' message for the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

The new exhortation is "timely," said Tomás Insua, co-founder and executive director of the nonprofit Laudato Si' Movement, which works through close to 900 member organizations in 115 countries to foster a Catholic approach to the care of the environment.

Insua, who is based in Rome, told OSV News that the pope's message underscores how "it's a deeply Christian thing to be concerned for God's beloved creation (and) … deeply rooted in this very biblical love of creation."

"*Laudate Deum*" relies on "stark language" to convey the grave impact of global warming on weather and climate, said Dan Misleh, founder of the Catholic Climate Covenant, a Washington-based nonprofit that works with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops on ecological awareness and advocacy.

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Dan Misleh is the founder and executive director of Catholic Climate Covenant. "*Laudate Deum*" relies on "stark language" to convey the grave impact of global warming on weather and climate, said Misleh. (OSV News/courtesy Dan Misleh)

"My thoughts are that Pope Francis is heartbroken," Misleh told OSV News. "He wrote '*Laudato Si*'' eight years ago. And here we are in 2023 … and he's saying, 'We just need to do more. We have no more excuses for inaction.'"

The direct tone of "*Laudate Deum*" speaks to people — among them, Catholics — who reject scientific evidence supporting global warming, said both Insua and Misleh.

"The pope is reminding us that what the scientists are telling us is really a crisis," said Insua. "One of the misleading things about (the term) 'climate change' is that 'change' is a word that is neutral. It could be positive or negative. … By using the word 'crisis' instead of just mere 'change,' (Pope Francis) is reminding us that this change is actually very harmful. It's our most vulnerable, the poorest of our brothers and sisters, and our children and grandchildren who pay the costs (of global warming) most (of all). So we have to take it seriously."

Bishop Joseph J. Tyson of Yakima, Washington, episcopal moderator for Catholic Climate Covenant, told OSV News he knows firsthand the impact of climate change.

During a pastoral visit two years ago to a parish in that state, he witnessed "the entire town … encircled by flames" from field fires sparked due to lack of rainfall. The blazes displaced some 15 parish families, even as "waves of smoke" drifted from Canada from other fires, creating hazardous working conditions for nearby fieldworkers harvesting fruits.

Like Francis, Tyson decried "the lack of progress by our society, including our church, in addressing this crisis.

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"Our excuse can’t be a lack of knowledge, since so many in the scientific community have been warning us of an impending 'climate crisis,'" he said. "Nor should our response be apathy — current and future generations have little patience for inaction. Financial costs and inconvenience are also off the table — practical energy efficiency and renewable energy efforts often save money and make our buildings healthier and better performing."

In an Oct. 4 reflection published by the Trenton Monitor, Bishop David M. O'Connell of Trenton, New Jersey, predicted that some faithful would balk at "*Laudate Deum*," and stressed that "the Holy Father’s call for all people, especially people of faith, to be stewards of our 'common home' is not a negligible part of our faith and morality."

"If the believer ignores responsibility for the world in which we live, the resources it provides and the people with whom we share them, what can we possibly expect from those who do not believe?" said O'Connell. "If we show no regard or respect for the divine plan for creation, what can we say of human plans, human possibilities,

human hopes for a sustainable future?"

He noted that as an apostolic exhortation, "*Laudate Deum*" is "a magisterial document that ranks third in importance of papal teachings after apostolic constitutions and encyclicals."

Francis' insights align with previous papal calls from St. John Paul II and St. Paul VI for "the importance of our dialogue between faith and science," which is "a longstanding Catholic tradition," and for environmental stewardship, said Insua.

"I pray that the Holy Father’s vigilant attention to the threats to our “common home” — which fundamentally includes every human life — falls upon fertile ground, converting our hearts and inspiring us all to do whatever we can to make a positive difference," said O'Connell.

Water flows through the Rio Grande Gorge in Taos, N.M., Nov. 25, 2020. (OSV News/Bob Rolle

Water flows through the Rio Grande Gorge in Taos, N.M., Nov. 25, 2020. (OSV News/Bob Roller)

That transformation will require increased pastoral formation on care for creation, said Misleh.

"I think part of (the problem) is that it's not being preached in churches," he said. "There's not a lot of good catechesis for the Catholic faithful on these issues. They see this as a distraction or a secondary part of … how to act in their faith. They're more concerned about other issues."

Misleh and Insua both highlighted the new exhortation's emphasis on the need to understand humanity's rightful role in creation.

"It's a little bit paradoxical that (the pope's) message here is addressed to all people of goodwill, and the very title of the document is 'Praise God' (in Latin)," said Insua. "Pope Francis is engaging with all people of goodwill, but he's doing it from a Christian perspective. And in the choice of the title, (he is) putting God squarely in the middle as the point of reference for all of our environmental concern. All these questions are to be firmly grounded in God and reminding ourselves that we are creatures."

Misleh agreed, saying that as in "*Laudato Si*'," Francis pointed to "three relationships that we need to pay attention to: our relationship with God, our relationship with each other and our relationship with creation. And what Pope Francis is saying is that when any of those three relationships are not tended to, the other two suffer."

Misleh said the new exhortation's call was prophetic, evoking the words of the Lord, spoken through Moses, to the ancient Israelites as recorded in Deuteronomy 30:19: "I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live."