News
EarthBeat
From left, Luisa-Marie Neubauer, a German climate activist; Jonathan Safran Foer, writer; Gio

From left, Luisa-Marie Neubauer, a German climate activist; Jonathan Safran Foer, writer; Giorgio Parisi, winner of the 2021 Nobel Prize in Physics; and Matteo Bruni, director of the Vatican press office, speak at a conference about Pope Francis' document on the climate crisis "Laudate Deum" ("Praise God") in the Vatican Gardens Oct. 5, 2023. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

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Vatican City — October 5, 2023
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Atop one of the highest hills in the Vatican Gardens, surrounded by green lawns, rose trellises, butterflies and green parrots, a panel of activists and a Nobel-prize winning physicist gathered to offer their insights on the importance of Pope Francis' latest document on the climate crisis.

Since the document, "*Laudate Deum*" ("Praise God"), was dedicated to "people of goodwill," the Vatican invited a variety of "people of goodwill" to respond to the apostolic exhortation, which was released Oct. 4, said Matteo Bruni, director of the Vatican press office.

"What does it mean to be a person of goodwill if not to make ethical choices?" Jonathan Safran Foer, a U.S. novelist who has also written on "ethical eating" and food's connection to the climate crisis, told those gathered for the outdoor event Oct. 5.

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"What is ecological grace if not the sum of daily, hourly decisions, to take a bit less than our hands can hold, to eat other than what we might crave in any given moment, to create limits for ourselves so that we might be able to share in this bounty," he said. The sum of these daily changes "will not be the deprivation some have told us to fear, but the overcoming of a global catastrophe and our most valuable gift to the future."

The son of Holocaust survivors born in Poland, Safran Foer raccounted the paralyzing shock U.S. Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter experienced in 1943 after hearing horrifying reports from Jan Karski, a Polish-resistance soldier, about Germany's invasion, rampage and extermination camps in Poland.

While the judge understood the truthfulness of Karski's testimony, he was "unable to believe," he said, "unable to wake up, understand and perceive."

A similar kind of perturbed inertia is seen today by people who accept the scientific facts of the climate crisis and its link to human activity, but are unable to believe, to "shake our collective conscience and render us willing to make small sacrifices in the present to avoid cataclysmic ones in the future," Safran Foer said.

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Jonathan Safran Foer, a writer, speaks at a conference about Pope Francis' document on the climate crisis "*Laudate Deum*" ("Praise God") in the Vatican Gardens Oct. 5, 2023. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Without acting and changing one's behaviors "in meaningful ways, then we reveal ourselves to be just another variety of denier," he added.

Vandana Shiva, an Indian scientist and environmental activist, highlighted the importance of biodiversity, vegetation and healthy soil enriched, not with

petrochemicals, but by a symbiotic network between fungi and plant roots.

"The same system that is leading to greenhouse gas emissions is also leading to hunger and chronic diseases because we are connected, and the health of the planet and our health is one health," she said via video linkup from India. Fifty percent of greenhouse gasses come from the industrial food and farming system, she said.

Caring for the earth and the soil is the key to "growing food, making healthier plants, increasing photosynthesis and therefore increasing both the healing of the earth as well as providing food to all," she said.

Shiva agreed with Francis' critique of technology as the "cure-all" and debunked claims lab-grown meats are a solution to the climate crisis, saying research shows such foods require more energy, resources and land than livestock.

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"We need to work with the lilies in the field. We need to work with this beautiful universe of which we are a part," she said. "The solutions are in front of us. The solutions are caring for the earth and caring for each other."

Giorgio Parisi, Nobel Prize winner in physics in 2021, said it may seem strange to see so much scientific evidence in a papal document, but, quoting the pope's explanation, he felt "obliged to make these clarifications, which may appear obvious, because of certain dismissive and scarcely reasonable opinions that I encounter, even within the Catholic Church."

But, the great advantage of the pope's document over the usual reports and papers written by leading scientists, he said, is that it is written in a way that is "clear, organized and very readable for everyone."

Luisa-Marie Neubauer, leader of "Fridays for Future" in Germany, spoke about what led her to become a young climate activist.

"Just as my parents took care of me, I thought our governments would take care of the big problems in the world," and she believed "that if the economy grew, step by step everyone in the world would prosper. Today I call it a fairy tale."

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When she realized not everyone in the world was benefiting from the economy and leaders were not tackling the big issues, she said, "I started acting, and luckily, I wasn't alone." Today the youth-led movement, begun by Greta Thunberg in 2018, has more than 14 million supporters, according to its website. It seeks to put pressure on policymakers to listen to climate scientists and take immediate action to limit global warming.

Some people talk about government inaction, Neubauer said, but "governments everywhere are acting," it's just that too many of them promote projects and investments in expanded fossil fuel exploration and extraction.

She also warned against an "escalating climate of repression and criminalization" of non-violent actions or initiatives by activists.

"I used to be scared of failing in the climate crisis, now I am scared people won't even try," she said.

But the "silver lining," she said, is "*Laudate Deum*," which says: "Civil society and climate activists must be protected (and) the upcoming climate conference must prove its willingness to deliver" and end dependency on fossil fuels.

"We need institutions, leaders, people of all ages, we need you to become activists," she said, thanking Francis for having "shown how this is done."

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Meanwhile, the Laudato Si' Movement, a network promoting a Catholic approach to caring for creation, hosted an online event Oct. 4 that saw 12,000 people from around the world log in live across multiple platforms.

The event featured a number of experts in science, policy and theology, as well as activists to discuss the pope's new document and highlight practical actions.

Franciscan Fr. Daniel P. Horan, a theologian and director of the center for spirituality at Saint Mary's College in Notre Dame, Indiana, reminded Catholics, including church leaders, that "*Laudato Si*'" and "*Laudate Deum*" are part of the church's moral teaching.

Even though there might not be a lot of emphasis on actively studying and living out these texts, "there really should be," he said. "This is the exercise of the ordinary magisterium of Pope Francis."

He encouraged people to help their parishes share the pope's teachings and reduce the church's carbon footprints.

"Every little bit helps and cultural change is how we get there," he said.

Read this next: In 'Laudate Deum,' Pope Francis presents a compelling climate crisis apologia