News
EarthBeat



A giraffe walks through the Singita Grumeti Game Reserve in Tanzania Oct. 7, 2018. (OSV News/Reuters/Baz Ratner)

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NAIROBI, Kenya — October 16, 2023

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When Pope Francis released his apostolic exhortation *Laudate Deum* Oct. 4, its message echoed loudly across Africa, where millions of ordinary people are victims of the global climate crisis.

Priests, women religious and bishops on the continent continue to care for communities battered by droughts, famine, floods and storms.

"This is real," Fr. Gerard Matolo, a priest in Nairobi's newly erected Wote Catholic Diocese, told OSV News in a telephone interview. "My congregants often tell me how the rains in the 1980s used to be enough to sustain a harvest, but now we are going year after year without any due to poor rains."

"We have to give food aid to people who often come to our parish offices. It's usually for a few and most needy. They are also in serious need of water," he said a day after the papal exhortation was issued. "There is some borehole water, but it has too much fluoride. That's why most children in my parish have brown teeth," a condition called fluorosis, which is caused by overexposure to fluoride.

> 'Despite our small contribution to a big problem, we bear a disproportionate burden in terms of real-time impact.'
> —Fr. Edward Obi
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Laudate Deum, released on the feast of St. Francis of Assisi stresses that time is running out and that irreversible damages to the planet have already occurred. It also notes that climate change is real, cannot be denied and has been caused by human action. Among other messages, it observes that progress on limiting greenhouse gas emissions, pollution, deforestation and soil erosion has been slow.

Climate change "is a global social issue and one intimately related to the dignity of human life," *Laudate Deum* said, adding that "the African bishops stated that climate change makes manifest 'a tragic and striking example of structural sin.' "

The situation could really be called "tragic" in the Horn of Africa, the region that is still recovering from a severe drought — the worst in 40 years — that continued to unfold in 2023. Until the arrival of the rains, the drought had displaced an estimated 1 million people and left millions of others on the brink of famine.

Scientists blamed the situation on rising temperatures, which, accordingly, had disrupted weather patterns in Kenya, Ethiopia and Somalia, resulting in a fifth consecutive rain season failure.



People stand in a damaged road as a powerful storm and heavy rainfall flooded hit Shahhat city, Libya, Sept. 11. Mediterranean storm Daniel killed thousands of people in the North African country. (OSV News/Reuters/Omar Jarhman)

On Sept. 10, the opposite unfolded in Libya, a country in North Africa, where devastating floods resulted from the Mediterranean storm Daniel. The storm and flood killed thousands of people, with the initial death toll placed at over 10,000, but later revised to nearly 4,000, with almost 9,000 still missing, according to news reports.

On Oct. 8, flooding in Cameroon killed 27 people in the country's capital.

As COP28, the U.N. Climate Change Conference will convene in the United Arab Emirates Nov. 30, bishops in Africa, under the Symposium of Episcopal Conference in Africa and Madagascar, said in an Oct. 12 statement that as the leaders of Catholic communities in Africa, they ask COP28's leaders "to recognize their moral duty and commit to urgently taking ambitious action to protect our common home and the most vulnerable."

The bishops celebrated and welcomed Pope Francis' new climate exhortation "that illustrates the global social issues of climate change and echoes the obvious nature of climate change impacts." They referred in particular to the 13th point of the exhortation: "It is not possible to conceal the correlation between these global climate phenomena and the accelerated increase in greenhouse gas emissions."

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"We must move beyond the mentality of appearing to be concerned but not having the courage needed to produce substantial changes," the African bishops said.

"I think the document is very timely, coming hot on the heels of extreme weather events that have devastated communities across the world, from Hawaii in the U.S. to Libya in Africa," said Allen Ottaro, the founder and executive director of the Catholic Youth Network for Sustainability in Africa.



Pope Francis greets the crowd Feb. 5, 2023, as he arrives to celebrate Mass at the John Garang Mausoleum in Juba, South Sudan. In *Laudate Deum*, Francis cites African bishops who have said that climate change makes manifest "a tragic and striking example of structural sin." (CNS/Paul Haring)

Ottaro said the question about Africa posed in the document — "How can we forget that Africa, home to more than half of the world's poorest people, is responsible for a minimal portion of historic emissions?" — echoed the African bishops' position that the continent suffers the most, despite contributing the least to the problem.

"This is a very important point that was also raised at the Africa Climate Week and Summit (Sept. 4-6 in Nairobi), but also reinforces the need for climate justice, particularly for the global south which urgently needs support for adaptation," Ottaro said.

He hoped *Laudate Deum* would reenergize church leaders in Africa to effectively address the ecological crisis, and the demand for more accountability, particularly from the Global North.

"We have seen the continued exploitation of Africa's natural resources, in the name of renewable energy where the African people themselves hardly benefit," said

Ottaro, as he highlighted the conflict in Eastern Congo, which fueled a scramble for mineral resources.



A file photo shows a Zimbabwean man walking through his drought-affected corn field outside Harare Jan. 20, 2016. (CNS/Reuters/Philimon Bulawayo)

According to Fr. Edward Obi, a specialist in the ethics of natural resource management in Nigeria's Niger Delta region, *Laudate Deum* is a shocking yet timely reminder that the world as we know it is in grave peril on account of the recalcitrance of world leaders on the climate change phenomenon.

"Eight years after his persuasive, yet urgent, invitation to change from 'an undifferentiated and one-dimensional (technological) paradigm' and, ultimately, allow ourselves to be converted to a new relationship with the cosmos, the pope finds it necessary to issue this dire warning that 'we may be nearing a breaking point,'" said the priest in a communication sent to OSV News.

For Obi, climate change is an unfolding existential calamity for sub-Saharan Africa.

"Just think of the fact that this region contributes only 2-3% to global warming from all human and industrial activities, while the U.S. is unabashed at about 30% of global total. Yet, despite our small contribution to a big problem, we bear a disproportionate burden in terms of real-time impact," he said.

To highlight the point, Obi noted that the total available water in the large basins of the Niger, Lake Chad and Senegal had decreased by 70% and overall temperature rise in the region is headed toward 2 degrees Celsius.

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At the same time, Ashley Kitisya, the fossil free campaigner at Laudato Si' Movement Africa, said with the repercussions of climate change, leaders must expeditiously accelerate actions and relentlessly pursue the phasing out of fossil fuels.

"The frenzied pursuit of oil and gas across my continent, at the cost of disenfranchised people, mirrors the very concern highlighted by *Laudate Deum*. Despite the abundant potential for renewable energy, it is disheartening that fossil fuels continue to account for 80% of the world's energy supply," said Kitisya.

"These decisions we make hold not only the fate of nature but also the very prosperity and survival of the human race in their balance," she said.

Catholic Relief Services — the international relief and development agency of the U.S. Catholic Church — said that Laudate Deum was a rallying cry of Pope Francis for the crucial policy work needed to change course.

"He invites leaders everywhere to rise above self-interest and imagine a future shaped by the common good. With COP28 on the horizon, world leaders must heed this call. They must listen to developing countries, which are pushing for an operationalized Loss and Damage Fund," said the agency in a statement on Oct. 4.

"They must abandon fossil fuels and invest in a green energy transition. And they must provide more financial support for communities to respond to the effects of climate change," it added.