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Pope Francis welcomes Sultan al-Jaber, the president-designate of the 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference, known as COP28, to the Vatican Oct. 11. COP28 is set to open Nov. 30 in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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Pope Francis said during a Nov. 1 interview with Italian television network RAI that he will attend the United Nations' COP28 climate change conference in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, becoming the first pontiff to ever address such a high-level summit.

The Dec. 1-3 trip will mark Francis' second visit to the United Arab Emirates and will take place less than two months after the release of *Laudate Deum*, an 11-page letter on the environment where the pope specifically called for world leaders to join in collective action at the summit to stave off climate catastrophes.

While the pope used the letter to praise the headway that has been made in annual U.N. climate summits, he warned that progress is not happening quickly enough and that past agreements have lacked the necessary monitoring and enforcement mechanisms.

The decision by Francis to attend COP28, which runs Nov. 30-Dec.12, is the latest in a series of moves by the Vatican in the past year to more seriously engage international deliberations on climate change.

In October 2022, the Holy See formally joined both the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change — the body that oversees the annual climate summits — and the Paris Agreement, the landmark deal where nations committed to slashing heat-trapping greenhouse gas emissions in order to limit average global temperature rise to "well below" 2 degrees Celsius, and strive to hold it to 1.5 C.

Exactly one year after the Holy See's entry into the Paris accord, Francis issued *Laudate Deum*. And now he is poised to become the first pope to attend a U.N. climate summit.

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Since the beginning of his pontificate in 2013, climate change has been among Francis' top priorities. In 2015, he released "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home," a landmark encyclical on the environment, which endorsed the scientific consensus on the need for global efforts to confront climate change and warned that humanity was creating a world of "debris, desolation and filth."

The release of that document was timed to build support for the historic Paris climate meeting that same year. Reflecting back on that moment, Christiana Figueres, the former executive secretary of the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change who led adoption of the Paris Agreement, told EarthBeat that Francis is "one of the strongest [leaders] in the world, if not the strongest" on environmental concerns.

Ahead of the 2021 gathering in Glasgow, Scotland, Francis joined other religious leaders to issue an unprecedented joint appeal to world leaders to act quickly and substantially on climate change, while also pledging to do the same within their faith communities.

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That year, Francis had signaled his desire to attend the COP26 meeting, though in the end, the Holy See's delegation was led by Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin. In the past, Parolin and other Vatican officials have delivered statements on behalf of the pope, who as the head of the Holy See is able to speak during the opening days as part of the high-level summit where heads of state deliver addresses and announce new commitments.

Francis last visited Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates in 2019, becoming the first pontiff to ever celebrate a Mass on the Arabian Peninsula. In 2022, he returned to the region to participate in an interreligious festival sponsored by Bahrain, and earlier this year, the Vatican announced that it had entered into diplomatic relations with neighboring Oman.

His return visit to the UAE will mark the 86-year-old pope's 45th trip abroad since his election in 2013.

In June, U.S. climate envoy John Kerry visited the pope at the Vatican, and afterward told reporters that he considers Francis a key ally in the lead-up to the COP28 meeting.

At the time, Kerry said the pope had expressed an openness to attending the summit in person. Kerry noted that, in recent years, both the Holy See and Francis have had a "remarkable leverage" on climate discussions. The pope "has constantly been an outspoken and engaged advocate on this issue."

"He believes it very deeply," said Kerry. "He's very troubled by where we are and where we are not, where we should be."

[NCR environment correspondent Brian Roewe contributed to this report.]

This story appears in the **COP28 Dubai** feature series. View the full series.