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Susana Réfega speaks during a video message on the Laudato Si' Movement's YouTube page. Her appointment as executive director was announced Dec. 12, just hours after the COP28 United Nations climate conference spilled past its scheduled conclusion. (NCR screen grab/YouTube)



by Brian Roewe

NCR environment correspondent

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broewe@ncronline.org
Follow on Twitter at @brianroewe

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Laudato Si' Movement has named Susana Réfega as the new leader of the global network of 900-plus Catholic organizations working to elevate ecological spirituality and action on climate change throughout the church.

Réfega's appointment as executive director of the lay-led Laudato Si' Movement was announced Dec. 12, just hours after the COP28 United Nations climate conference spilled past its scheduled conclusion. She will begin in the new position starting Jan. 8.

"It is with great joy and a deep sense of service and responsibility that I am joining each and every one of you in this beautiful movement of prayer and action of committed care for our common home," Réfega said in a video message on the movement's YouTube page.

She said that Pope Francis through his recent apostolic exhortation *Laudate Deum* "is urging each one of us for a renewed call for action, as we face as a human family an increasingly urgent climate crisis."

"And that is why — together with LSM's Secretariat team, each one of Laudato Si animators spread across all continents, other organizations and people of goodwill — I'm embracing this mission with enthusiasm and hope to care for the creation and to achieve climate justice," Réfega said.

The Portuguese Catholic comes with experience in academia and the international development sector.

From 2009-2021, Réfega was executive director of Fundação Fé e Cooperação (Faith and Cooperation Foundation), the overseas development organization of the

Portuguese bishops' conference and a member of CIDSE, the coalition of mainly European-based Catholic social justice organizations. She served on the CIDSE board of directors for three years, as well as a three-year stint as board president of the Portuguese National NGO Platform.

More recently, Réfega, who holds a Ph.D. in biology, has worked in research and academic positions, including as a visiting professor at the Catholic University of Portugal and the Lisbon School of Economics and Management. She is fluent in five languages.

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"[Réfega] comes to Laudato Si' Movement with a wealth of experience in leadership of Catholic organizations and broader leadership of civil society," Lorna Gold, board president of Laudato Si' Movement, told EarthBeat.

She added the board is "excited about what Susana's leadership also as a woman within the Catholic Church will bring to this next phase" of the global Catholic environmental organization.

"She is very committed to ecological justice and throughout her life has really strived to be a leader in this area," Gold said.

Réfega succeeds Tomás Insua, who has served as Laudato Si' Movement's lone executive director since he co-founded the network in 2015 during Pope Francis' visit to the Philippines and ahead of the release later that year of Francis' encyclical "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home."

Originally called the Global Catholic Climate Movement, the organization rebranded as Laudato Si' Movement in 2021.

Laudato Si Movement counts 967 member organizations, and it has established more than 40 national chapters, 200 Laudato Si' Circles prayer and action groups, and has trained more than 11,000 Laudato Si' animators to lead grassroots efforts inspired by the encyclical in their communities around environmental justice and climate change. Its secretariat has a staff of nearly 70 people, and four cardinals serve on its advisory council.



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

Laudato Si' Movement has played a leading role in the Catholic Church's responses to the pope's clarion calls for the church to do its part in addressing socio-environmental challenges facing the world — paramountly, climate change — that he issued in *Laudato Si'*, as well as his recent follow-up, *Laudate Deum*.

The movement assisted the Vatican in developing the Laudato Si' Action Platform, a seven-year program that offers Catholics and institutions at every level of the church a comprehensive road map to implement sustainable practices and cultivate an "ecological conversion" the pope says is necessary. Through a coordinated campaign, it has also been a main driver behind Catholic institutions divesting their finances from the fossil fuel industry, with more than 350 publicly making the move to date.

In October 2022, it helped produce and release "The Letter," a documentary film about Francis' ecological encyclical, which has been viewed 8.7 million times on YouTube.

The Catholic environmental network has also organized ecologically focused spiritual celebrations, notably during Lent and the Season of Creation, and has led advocacy campaigns for climate action, including a letter from Catholic institutions to the COP28 president calling for the nearly 200 nations at the international summit to fully phase out the use of fossil fuels.



Pope Francis poses for a photo with leaders of the Laudato Si' Movement in the library of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican Nov. 6. From left to right: Tomás Insua, Lorna Gold, Pope Francis, Jesuit Father Xavier Jeyaraj and Cardinal Michael Czerny, prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. (CNS/Vatican Media)

With headquarters based in Rome, Laudato Si' Movement has worked closely with the Vatican, especially the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. Its leadership has met several times with the pope, including most recently in November ahead of the pope's scheduled trip to COP28 in Dubai.

In February, the Argentine-born Insua announced his plans to step down as executive director, partly in response to a June 2021 Vatican decree regarding term limits for ecclesial movements. He will remain in LSM working on the Assisi Project that is creating Laudato Si'-inspired experiences in the Italian hometown of Francis of Assisi, patron saint of ecology. Programming is set to begin in April 2024.

"Leadership renewal is always healthy," Insua said in a February letter announcing his departure from leadership. "I'm very confident and excited about how the [LSM] Secretariat will keep evolving and maturing, to better support the movement to accomplish our bold mission."

Josianne Gauthier, CIDSE secretary general, called his successor Réfega "a strong leader, an experienced manager, a woman of faith and integrity, and a friend." Gauthier told EarthBeat that Réfega's experience working in the Global South would position her as a "bridge maker" to strengthen collective work within the church.

"At CIDSE, we celebrate this nomination and look forward to working closely with Susana and her new team to see how best we can support and complement each other in our respective missions for integral ecology," she said.