News
EarthBeat



Attendees during the "Laudato Si': Protecting our Common Home, Building our Common Church" conference at the University of San Diego on Feb. 22-23 (EarthBeat photo/Christopher White)



by Christopher White

Former Vatican Correspondent (2021-2025)

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

San Diego — February 27, 2024
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Nearly a decade after Pope Francis released his landmark encyclical *Laudato Si'*, calling for urgent action to combat global climate change, some 80 bishops, theologians and Catholic leaders gathered for a two-day conference to reckon with what was described as the failure of the U.S. church to implement the pope's environmental teachings.

During the opening session on Feb 22, the stakes were made clear when one archbishop said that it was long overdue for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to make the issue a national priority. At present, environmental concerns are not a part of the conference's current strategic plan.

The archbishop's remarks were met with sustained applause and were later echoed by other prelates, including a comment from one participant that they thought the U.S. bishops' had "outsourced" care for creation to outside groups or entities, rather than prioritizing the issue as a conference.

The ecclesial gathering, "*Laudato Si'*: Protecting Our Common Home, Building Our Common Church," took place at the University of San Diego on Feb. 22-23. It was organized by Boston College, Fordham University, Loyola University Chicago and Sacred Heart University. (NCR political columnist Michael Sean Winters serves as a fellow at Sacred Heart University and was involved in the conference's planning.)

The conference took place under the "Chatham House Rule," meaning that those taking part in the discussions were free to talk about them in public, but without identifying who made any particular comment. The rule is intended to encourage open and frank conversations.

The previous two "The Way Forward" conferences in 2022 and 2023, which have sought to promote Francis' papacy and priorities, have focused on synodality and the broader resistance to the pope in certain quarters of the U.S. church.

Michael Murphy, director of the Hank Center for the Catholic Intellectual Heritage at Loyola University Chicago and conference co-organizer, told NCR that the first two gatherings were "classic discourse, dialogical and [focused on] ideas-sharing."

> '*Laudato Si*' brought hope and spirit. There was energy and then it stalled. We're trying to figure that out and get the energy back.'
>
> Tweet this

"This conference has a different kind of urgency," he said. "It's hard for humans to act in the midst of a slowly unfolding problem. This one takes the church into not only the public square, but also the cosmic square."

Just days before conference participants arrived, Southern California was battered with unusually heavy rain where an "atmospheric river event" caused mudslides, resulting in loss of property and some people getting displaced from their homes.

The recent weather conditions — combined with conference start date on the Catholic feast of the Chair of St. Peter — both served as a symbolic backdrop of the looming environmental challenges confronting the world and the pope's call for urgent action.

"The reception of *Laudato Si*' has not been as robust," said Murphy of the situation in the U.S. church. "It's such a landmark and sea-changing encyclical, and we need to investigate why it hasn't been received."

One panelist commented during the event that the 2015 release of the encyclical marked a "hinge moment" in the life of the U.S., prompting near unprecedented backlash by certain conservative Catholics in American public life.

Citing essays in publications such as First Things and interviews with the likes of Republican Catholic politicians Rick Santorum and Jeb Bush that have been critical of Francis, the panelist said that *Laudato Si*' fueled the dissent against the pope in this country and changed the way it became acceptable to speak against him.

During the two-day conference, multiple speakers lamented this apparent reality, noting the theological richness of the encyclical. One speaker summarized: "There's something there for everyone."

Advertisement

"It's absolutely a conservative document. It's absolutely a progressive document. It's a very Catholic document," Murphy said to NCR.

Among the other ideas that emerged during the gathering were:

- A return to the document to help bridge divides between conservative and progressive Catholics in the U.S. church;
- Better utilizing the church's liturgy to promote creation care;
- Using synodality to promote integral ecology;
- Deepening the ties between the U.S. bishops' conference and the Episcopal Conference of Latin America (known as CELAM), which has prioritized environmental action.

During another panel discussion, moderated by this reporter, university leaders, community activists and parish coordinators offered presentations on how attendees might be able to jumpstart *Laudato-Si*'-related projects in their home dioceses and institutions.

At the conference's conclusion, Christina Bagaglio Slentz, who serves as associate director for creation care in the San Diego Diocese, observed that the bishops present were focused in particular on evangelization and retention of young people in the church.

"Everyone understands how much credibility comes forth by our acting on the environment for the youth," she told NCR.

In discussing the future of the church, Slentz also noted, "Statistically, Latino Catholics have more concern for the environment."

"Our discussion of the felt experience of Latinos in terms of environmental impact really speaks to the way that the climate crisis and our use of resources unevenly impacts the marginalized," she said.

"I think that there was an aha moment in which we came to recognize that our marginalized communities really have a sense of the problem that might make them the best to lead us or help us understand the crisis in a better way in the United

States," Slentz continued.

Also attending the conference were four cardinals, including the pope's ambassador to the U.S., Cardinal Christophe Pierre; six archbishops; and some 20 other bishops. Two Vatican officials attended: Xavière Sr. Nathalie Becquart, who serves as the No. 2 official at the synod office, and Emilce Cuda, secretary of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America.

Representatives from leading Catholic environmental advocacy organizations, along with two dozen theologians and church leaders were also present.

"*Laudato Si*' brought hope and spirit," said Murphy of the encyclical. "There was energy and then it stalled. We're trying to figure that out and get the energy back."

A version of this story appeared in the **March 15-28, 2024** print issue under the headline: US church failing on pope's climate goals, bishops say at private conference.