Opinion
EarthBeat



Members of the Laudato Si' Movement Timor-Leste Youth Organization attend a youth gathering with Pope Francis in the capital of Dili during his visit to the island nation Sept. 11. (Isaura Baptista Barros)

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Pope Francis' visit to Southeast Asia has made news around the world and in the U.S., where it has been described as a "pivot to Asia" for the Catholic Church.

From my home in Timor-Leste, one of the island nations on the pope's itinerary, his visit is seen as something much deeper than a strategic pivot. For us, this is an opportunity to let the Holy Father know that Catholics in Southeast Asia, particularly young Timorese, stand together for integral ecology.

A delegation of youth Catholic environmentalists, of which I was a part, sought to demonstrate that to the pope during a meeting he held with young people of our country Sept. 11, his last event in Timor-Leste before heading to Singapore.

Being in the same space as Pope Francis, we wanted to show him that the seeds he planted in his encyclical "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home" are growing strong.



Isaura Baptista Barros, right, attends the gathering between Pope Francis and young people of Timor-Leste in the island nations capital city of Dili on Sept. 11. (Photo

Courtesy of Laudato Si' Movement Timor-Leste)

That begins with an awareness of the environmental challenges our island nation faces.

Like many countries in Southeast Asia, Timor-Leste is in the crosshairs of the planetary catastrophe posed by human-driven climate change.

Our nation is among a group of islands in the cyclone belt, and much of our land is covered in steep mountains. As a changing climate increases the risk of stronger cyclones, these mountains become funnels that channel rainfall from these more extreme storms into tremendous flash floods.

Flooding — our country's most frequent weather-related disaster — sweeps away homes and costs people their lives, as was the case in April 2021 in our capital city of Dili, when the worst floods in 50 years killed dozens of people, destroyed more than 4,000 homes and impacted tens of thousands more households.

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Beyond the immediate loss of life, climate disasters can also have long-lasting impacts that affect generations.

Timor-Leste is one of the world's least developed countries, one where roughly two-thirds of the population make a living from farming. Almost all of our farmers lack insurance, and a flooded field can mean the loss of income that would cover kids' school fees or help start a business.

In addition, our farmers typically do not have extensive farming equipment, and they are heavily dependent on the natural cycles of rain and sun to grow their crops. As climate change wreaks havoc on these natural cycles, crops fail and people grow hungry.

At the same time, Timor-Leste has incredible strengths.

Young people make up 70% of the population. Literacy and school enrollment are growing by leaps and bounds among the younger generation, and the government recognizes that young people's skills are key to a sustainable economy. National

media outlets and organizations like Rotary Youth are featuring stories of young Timorese leadership on the climate crisis.

I know firsthand that young people's leadership matters.

I serve as the co-founder and national coordinator of the Laudato Si' Movement Timor-Leste youth organization, which reaches communities across the country. We organize events to raise awareness of the planetary crisis, train parishioners to take action locally, and bring people together to protect our common home. The impact of our work led us to be appointed to the youth constituency for the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the U.N. body that oversees the Paris Agreement on climate change.

As young leaders of a climate movement, we have all experienced the climate crisis. But experience alone wasn't enough to spark action. We also needed hope.

Many of us young Timorese have found hope in our faith, and in the messages of Francis in particular.



Pope Francis gestures during a meeting with young people at a convention center in Dili, Timor-Leste, Sept. 11. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Countless friends and fellow activists were deeply touched by the pope's 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si*'. In that papal teaching document, we saw the depth of the connections between ourselves, creation and the Creator. We saw that healing those relationships could be the foundation for a new way of living on the Earth.

When we heard that Pope Francis planned to visit Timor-Leste, we knew that we had to show him that young Catholics support him.

Before his visit, we launched "One Tree for the Pope" — a campaign that encourages people to plant a tree in honor of the Holy Father's leadership. This campaign coincides with the Season of Creation that is celebrated around the world throughout the month of September. The theme for this year's season is that action is the first fruits of hope, and we certainly see that the hope we found in our faith is bearing fruit in action.

During our encounter with Francis, he shared a profound message that deeply resonated with me.

He emphasized that true freedom is not merely the ability to act according to our desires, but rather the freedom to take responsibility. One of our core responsibilities is to care for our common home.

The young people of Timor-Leste, he said, must promote reconciliation, say no to hatred, and embrace love and service. He urged us young people to be brothers and sisters to one another. Our parents endured hardship for this nation's freedom, and while we now enjoy the freedom to pursue our own desires, it is crucial to use that freedom for good.

I always cry when I hear the pope speak, because his message is so powerful and encouraging. The Holy Father calls on all of us to live in respect, harmony and peace with nature, here in Timor-Leste and around the world.

This story appears in the **Francis in Asia and Oceania** feature series. View the full series.