

A man walks past the place where his house once stood in El Bosque, Mexico, Nov. 7, 2022, amid rising sea levels that are destroying homes built on the shoreline and forcing villagers to relocate. (OSV News/Gustavo Graf, Reuters)

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The poor and vulnerable must be front and center when it comes to climate change policies, said two leading bishops of the Catholic Church in the U.S. and the head of the U.S. church's international humanitarian agency, in a statement issued ahead of the United Nations' annual gathering on climate concerns.

COP 29 will take place Nov. 11-22 in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan. Named for the "Conference of the Parties" that signed the original 1992 U.N. climate agreement, the COP gatherings are held under the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change, or UNFCCC, which entered into force in 1994 and now counts 198 parties (representing 197 countries plus the European Union).

"The impact of climate change policies on the poor and vulnerable must be placed foremost in the minds and hearts of the leaders and influencers gathering at next week's conference," Metropolitan Archbishop Borys A. Gudziak of the Ukrainian Catholic Archeparchy of Philadelphia, chair of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development; Bishop A. Elias Zaidan of the Maronite Eparchy of Our Lady of Lebanon, chair of the USCCB's Committee on International Justice and Peace; and Sean Callahan, president and CEO of Catholic Relief Services, said in a joint statement Nov. 8.

"Pope Francis has underscored the care for our earth in his encyclical Laudato Si', and also emphasized care for the poor and outcast," they said. "As leaders gather next week for COP 29, it is our prayer that this be a priority at the center of deliberations on climate change."

Key priorities for COP 29 include "securing a new goal on climate finance, ensuring every country has the means to take much stronger climate action, slashing greenhouse gas emissions and building resilient communities," according to the UNFCCC's website.

In addition, the meeting will assess countries' national climate plans to ensure they are "economy-wide," focus on phasing out fossil fuels, and ensure the world stays on track to limit global warming — the long-term heating of Earth's surface due to human activities causing climate change — to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) above pre-industrial levels, in compliance with the 2015 Paris Agreement.

Simon Stiell, UNFCCC executive secretary, said in an Oct. 8 video posted to the U.N. Climate Change YouTube channel that COP 29 "is a vital moment for the world," adding that "this transition must leave no one behind."

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COP 29's work towards a new finance goal — formally known as the "new collective quantified goal on climate finance," or NCQG — must be shaped by "the needs of poor people and countries," said the statement by Gudziak, Zaidan and Callahan.

"Sadly, loans to address climate policy have accounted for too much of climate finance," they said. "This needs to be avoided moving forward."

Their statement emphasized, "Because of the blessings God has bestowed, the United States bears a special responsibility to shape these discussions to serve the entire human family."

At the same time, they said that hammering out such financing should balance ambition with standards of accountability and transparency to prioritize the most vulnerable, while also affording the greatest impact.

"The poor and vulnerable suffer the brunt of intensifying disasters, which is why adopting effective adaptation investment strategies is a matter of justice," their statement continued. "While resources and proven technologies to withstand many natural and man-made disasters already exist, sadly these are often a privilege for the wealthy."

The adaptation required to address these climate challenges "benefits developed and developing nations alike," saving lives and protecting ecosystems, said Gudziak, Zaidan and Callahan's statement. Failing to do so, they emphasized, has in many instances proven more costly than "the costs of building resilience."

"May COP29 contribute to the health and healing of our common future," they said.

This story appears in the **COP29 Azerbaijan** feature series. View the full series.